

# The young child's journey of 'the will': A synthesis of child-centered and inclusive principles in international Waldorf early childhood education

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## Abstract

Within the education academic arena, there is almost no established research on the alternative Waldorf (or Steiner) education movement in the US or UK. This primary research investigates Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of early childhood Waldorf education, and its child-centered and inclusive core. Ten kindergarten teachers in the US and UK educating children ages three through seven were interviewed on their values and practices, and on intrinsic notions of inclusion, which are scrutinized according to Lani Florian's inclusive pedagogy. Contrasting interpretation among practitioners on educating diverse learners emerge. US and UK Waldorf education appear situationally different, and yet the underlying educational ethos fundamentally remains the same. An anthroposophical understanding of the human being, and 'the will' of the kindergarten child who learns through imitation and play, underlies this far-sighted, holistic basis. Recommendation is for Waldorf early childhood studies to enhance transnational networks among themselves, and to make connections with broader academic educational clusters, in particular those on inclusion.

## Keywords

child-centered education, Lani Florian, inclusion, play, Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf early childhood curriculum, Waldorf kindergarten

## Introduction

Waldorf education, referred to as 'Steiner education' in the UK, is an 'alternative' approach in that it is seldom foregrounded, or even escapes attention altogether, in the United States and United Kingdom lay societies. Waldorf education appears to remain a global field of minority academic interest, and yet it presents an established pattern of development and practice, of over a 100 years old. The philosopher and educationalist, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) (Dahlin, 2018), was interested

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in the educator connecting with the individual child and appreciating their whole person. In order successfully to facilitate three central aspects of human development, and ‘soul functions’ of practical skill, emotional engagement and intellectual stimulation, otherwise known as will, feeling and thinking (Attfield and Attfield, 2019; Dahlin, 2018), each characteristically affiliates with an individual educational age group. This meant that Steiner’s focus was on the method of educational delivery, rather than on prescribing specific disciplines (Goldshmidt, 2017; Sobo, 2014).

More specifically, in the phase of early childhood, children aged three through seven were not required to learn to read and write, but to acquire diverse, and longer-term foundational skills of concentration, patience, independence and memory, and ‘to develop their hands’; all through ‘imitation and example’, and *play*, in the course of a child-centered path of development (Steiner, 1996[1907]: 19). The kindergarten child’s imitation is of the teacher who is a role model to the class; the teacher creates a safe and calm, ‘held’ environment in which children can play and learn. Play is seen as central to all young children’s learning, as they respond to their experiences creatively through their imagination (Suggate and Suggate, 2019). The article assesses how this balance of child-centered education might be achieved. The research also tests and evaluates a concurrent practice of characteristic Waldorf inclusionary educational principles, through a broader investigation of varying interpretations of practices for diverse learners within academic education circles. It begins with Florian’s (1998: 13) assessment of the value of inclusive principles of almost 25 years ago:

. . . there is a universality to the underlying human rights philosophy of inclusion which suggests that the concept is destined to persist. . . The study of the education of pupils with learning difficulties is rightfully placed in a context of inclusion.

A discussion on the history of Waldorf kindergarten education follows.

## Waldorf early childhood history and philosophy of education

Anthroposophy was founded by Steiner in 1902 (Hasler, 2010), after Steiner moved beyond a commitment to theosophy, an inclusive religion attempting to achieve ‘divine wisdom’ (see Suggate and Suggate, 2019). Anthroposophy was, rather, the philosophical and spiritual foundation for ‘human wisdom’ endeavour; and its education meant valuing child development. One may consider the context of the time, as well as of current Western society, where a spiritual aspect held, and remains, an underlying presence in education (Goldshmidt, 2017). Goldshmidt (2017: 349) describes anthroposophy as ‘an educational approach based on a spiritual outlook’; although it is universally, and *deliberately, never taught* in the curriculum. Steiner borrowed the concept of the ‘kindergarten’, from Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852); it is German for ‘a garden for children’ and based on the value of play in early childhood, as ‘free expression of what is in the child’s soul’ (Bruce, 2015: 27). Waldorf kindergartens were established by a German student of Steiner, Elisabeth Grunelius in 1926. Grunelius subsequently founded Waldorf kindergartens across North America and Europe (Nicol and Taplin, 2018).

Waldorf education was to be multi-dimensional; embroidered into its fabric are many overlapping ‘threefold’ constituents. One dimension is three chronological age periods of education, of early childhood, grade school, and high school. The Waldorf kindergarten fits into a larger whole of three parts, and to ‘our body as the physical foundation of our soul life’ (Aeppli, 2016: 22); situated within the ‘threefold human organism’ (McAllen, 2013). The first phase which occurs in the kindergarten, is the ‘metabolic activity’ or ‘body’ of *the will*. ‘The will’ for the child aged three through seven is interpreted as a child’s subconscious evolutionary path to growth and

achievement. A further fundamental consideration is the ‘threefold human order’, describing the educational dispositions of children in their ‘three stages of consciousness of waking, dreaming, and sleeping’ (Aeppli, 2016: 24; Dahlin, 2018). The sleeping stage of consciousness is integral to the kindergarten child, indicating the nature of subconscious development through sponge-like absorption, and the young child learning through imitation of the teacher and (worthy) example of their ‘goodness’. Steiner described the four early childhood ‘lower senses’, also known as ‘the four *will senses*’ (Suggate and Suggate, 2019). These are the senses of life, balance, touch, and movement (see Aeppli, 2016). These perceptions are advanced experientially, and help to develop the etheric body (discussed below). These notions will be explored further in this article.

## Diverse learning and inclusive pedagogy

Chadwell et al. (2020) discuss young children’s learning differences, and the significance of these for their future lives. Prominent categories from an individual deficit perspective, are conditions such as autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit disorders and sensory disorders (see Booth and Ainscow, 2017). Booth and Ainscow (2017: 44) explain a useful educational label for young children as their having a ‘barrier to learning and participation’; the provision is identified, rather than the child. An inclusive approach is introduced thus:

Rather than only accommodating learner differences, (one) focuses on extending what is available to everybody. This focus on learning as a shared activity is a subtle but important shift in thinking about individual differences between learners (Florian, 2012: 277).

A laterally minded curriculum which values learning skills holistically, engages flexibly with individual children, and makes learning and teaching accountable, demonstrates visionary steps towards meaningful inclusion (Florian et al., 2017). Greenstein (2016: 9) concurs: ‘inclusive education is not a “one size fits all” provision, but adjusts the material environment, (and) mutually (re)defines pedagogies and cultures in the classroom’. Opponent educationalists have argued that ‘the ideal of inclusion has been carried too far and has to be reconsidered’ (Greenstein, 2016: 8); from this perspective it is possible to be *too inclusive*. This can occur where public or private schools are obliged to accept children with an identification of support need, so that classes may be continually interrupted; however it may also be down to a narrow, static understanding of inclusive education (Florian, 2012). Chadwell et al. (2020) observe that where schools are fundamentally clear as to how to implement inclusive pedagogy, success can be demonstrated. However their research finds that educators are insufficiently trained to teach the full range of children in early childhood.

Rhoad-Drogalis et al. (2018: 462) propose early childhood education techniques where teachers ‘boost children’s active engagement’, where their engagement is identified to have been neglected. Integration can be interpreted in several ways; it can be construed as the older system of special provision, additional to the learning and teaching of typical children. Whether and how this can be appropriately considered as part of an inclusionary framework in practice is debated further (Booth and Ainscow, 2017). This paper attempts to assess concurrently poignant aspects of Waldorf early childhood education and Florian’s inclusive principles. This leads one to question how far integrationary and inclusive principles correspond with Waldorf kindergarten education.

## The holistic dimensions of the international Waldorf kindergarten

Steiner’s fourfold structure of human life implies that the kindergarten child develops aspects of their physical body and ‘etheric body’ (or vitality), which later lead toward their ‘astral

body' (or soul capacity) throughout the later stage of grades and high school, and ultimately to their ego (or mature personality). The physical focus is the child's 'mineral' development of their limbs and movement, and the 'etheric' aspects or formative 'plant' life-force are about their inner growth. The early childhood education of the Waldorf kindergarten is based on these corresponding dimensions, which manifest from teacher imitation through play, and amount to children's 'doing' and experiencing their path of the will. Steiner (1996[1907]) wrote that 3 through 7-year-old children unconsciously develop their etheric forces of 'ideas, habits and memory'. The Waldorf kindergarten nurtures the child's etheric body, which in turn nurtures the physical body and growth of the body's organs (Avison and Rawson, 2014; Bruce, 2015).

Waldorf kindergarten education encompasses a further practical dimension of threefold constituents, which support the growth of the etheric body, of rhythm, repetition and reverence. Rhythm means replicating the natural physiological movement of inhaling, and exhaling; and replicating the rhythm of plants, and more broadly of the seasons. Teacher and child take turns at leading at alternate points in the day (Nicol and Taplin, 2018). Teacher-led parts are oral storytelling (Lenhart et al., 2020), mealtimes, guided work activities, and ring time (Nicol, 2016), which in turn influence children's play. Child-led creative indoor, and outdoor play is a profoundly important activity of early childhood which allows the child to explore their world in a safe environment; it kindles the imagination and entices collaboration with fellow children (Manassakis, 2020; Sobo, 2014). The second aspect, repetition, provides intrinsic discipline, regulation and stability. The kindergarten is tightly 'held' according to purposeful, and repeated daily, weekly, and yearly routines. In psychology terms this 'conscious discipline' effectively develops skills of 'executive function' (Anderson et al., 2020; Suggate and Suggate, 2019). In a holistic way, rhythm, repetition and reverence work towards developing the will senses, which in turn help to develop the child's inner growth of problem-solving, inhibitory control and working memory.

Reverence means that the kindergarten teacher respects each individual child, which requires an in-depth knowledge of their character and tendencies. White (2020) stresses the pivotal importance of the early childhood teacher-child relationship in supporting young children's social and emotional stability. The teacher is a principled role-model for children to imitate, helping children to hold each other in regard, and also to revere nature and to nurture their environment. Children's creative play allows children of different ages the space to recreate social activities and model relationships, and care for each other (Dahlin, 2018; Nicol and Taplin, 2018). Imitation through example is a core part of the kindergarten:

Children do not learn by instruction or admonition, but through imitation. . . the physical foundations will be laid for a healthy moral sense if children see moral actions in their environment (Steiner, 1996[1907]: 19).

Baron et al. (2020: 66) claim that the connection between 'make-believe play activities and children's self-regulation development' is yet to be explored in the education academic arena. Yet Baron et al fail to acknowledge Waldorf early childhood education, where among other aspects, Steiner did indeed write about this connection of 'make-believe play' or experiential, collaborative and creative play through imitation, resulting in 'self-regulation' as well as in self-confidence and self-esteem (Nicol, 2016): Here, 'play is viewed as an activity through which important physical, intellectual and emotional development can occur' (Suggate and Suggate, 2019: 82).

Inclusive principles in the Waldorf kindergarten have traditionally been variously practised, with an intention of enabling all children to develop their physical and etheric bodies (Sobo, 2014).

The Waldorf kindergarten purposefully observes progress based on targets, and barriers to learning; children are required to be ‘school-ready’ by age seven (Blanning, 2013; Nicol, 2016). Support needs are identified and addressed to varying extents, sometimes through Waldorf class-wide methods, for example curative eurythmy (see Suggate and Suggate, 2019), or individual techniques of remedial work (see McAllen, 2013). The purpose of this article is to assess both the extent to which Waldorf kindergarten teachers believe they are able to provide sufficiently for a wide range of children, as well as to explore the extent that Florian and others’ like-minded principles coincide with this 100-year-old education movement.

## Methods

Qualitative, empirical research is neither panoramic nor snap-shot; instead it requires a small cluster of relevant participants, producing an extensive data set. Participants are carefully listened to in their open reflections guided by exploratory questions. Such analytical research is interpretivist in its requiring researcher interpretation, testing of the data, and rigorous scrutiny of one’s research project (Bartels and Wagenaar, 2018). The ‘intersubjective’ researcher (Biesta, 2020) acknowledges their co-production of the data with fellow interview participants. Interviews allowed participant educators the space to reflect on time-honoured practices and explore notions novel to themselves. In considering Dewey’s philosophy, Biesta (2020: 129) says that a ‘transactional theory of knowledge’ can be applied in intersubjective educational research, for example, in the direction of lesser-known education systems; alternative educational rationales may be considered for application to less alternative practices, with their adherents either offering their values transferably, or else transporting elements of these to mainstream systems; the results are interpreted in ways reflecting this methodological acknowledgement of a transactional theory of knowledge.

University ethical approval was secured, for a project respecting participants’ reputation, their continued consent and confidentiality, and recognizing practices of integrity, as well as researcher scrutiny (Bryman, 2012). Participant validation was fully gained, meaning that the research findings authentically and fairly represent participants’ perspectives (Connor et al., 2018). Receiving the investment of research funding is a gratifying endorsement; with a peripheral personal interest in the Waldorf movement, my intention remained academically objective in highlighting the presence of a unique minority education community and in exploring its endeavours, while bringing international perspectives together to examine views accountably.

The Covid pandemic dictated the method of online interviews, unintentionally producing widened possibilities of interviewing internationally. Interview participants were secured through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling; 10 Waldorf kindergarten teachers and advisory staff from different schools were interviewed, of whom four were American, and six were British. Many were long-standing teachers and teacher-trainers. Community characteristics are not specifically represented or in these circumstances relevant, as fee-paying schools such as these largely exclude the majority who do not have access to such education. However certain local characteristics are discussed by participants. Close-knit Waldorf communities meant that every effort was required to make sure participants and their data were non-identifiable to fellow educators. Accordingly, participants are identified by country, rather than by individual pseudonym. Interviews were audio recorded, non-digitally coded and analysed. The data of participants’ views were tested with those of colleagues’ views, as well as against the surrounding literature and theory. Findings were tested for bias and ‘trustworthiness’ of research (see Bartels and Wagenaar, 2018; Bryman, 2012), and the results of these are presented below.

## Findings

### *The development of habits, memory and ideas*

A few participants explained the journey through kindergarten as contractions of inbreath and outbreath, as teacher-led and child-led, alongside the three 'Rs' of rhythm, repetition and reverence. (UK): 'Children go from being at the center of their world, to controlling their impulsive or self-centric behaviours'. This occurs through long and short-term structured markers of rhythm. This (US): 'reassures the children with a sense of security' (see Nicol, 2016). Two teachers explained the significance of reverence in relation to nature, and to teacher-child relationships. (US): 'In the fall, we bring the fruits in of the earth; we go to a raspberry farm, bring the fruit back and make jam'. And (UK): 'if the child is at the center of what you are doing, they develop a sense of awe and wonder for the world, and for each other'. Both American and British participants assessed reverential kindergarten communities with mixed age children, where in both, five-year-olds become the older and wiser 'golden knights' (US), and 'star children' (UK), and help the younger children (see Blanning, 2013). The third 'R' is for repetition, and is a principle similarly shared across both countries; 'conscious discipline', is seemingly applied in a Waldorf setting. The benefits are 'reducing students' stress and increasing their sense of safety in the classroom' (Anderson et al., 2020: 24). Waldorf educators view this as 'conscious *unconscious* discipline' (Suggate and Suggate, 2019). (UK):

Unquestioned, repeated activity becomes self-regulation. We never ask children to put coats on, we say "we *always* put on our coats". It is an unconscious aid to discipline.

Dahlin (2018: 64) wrote about the working process of child imitation of the teacher, which replaces instruction: 'The impressions made by the actions, gestures and tone of voice of the adults around are absorbed by the child's senses and penetrate deep into the organism'. In referring to 'synchronic', or immediate imitation, a teacher reflected that all of their movements have to be consciously considered. (UK): 'The child imitates our purposefulness, and our busyness, but with their play. If you are quietly busy, they find it easier to play. 'An example of 'deferred' imitation is where (UK): 'you see a child who is playing being a busy mother with a baby on their hip, and stirring a pot' (see Nicol and Taplin, 2018: 35).

The planned environment allows children to have (child-led) space afforded to them to replicate their own surroundings, largely through play. It is only in a quiet, stable and homely environment that the concentration required allows for such self-exploration and experiential activity. Sobo (2014: 19) explains that overall, with enough play, children can develop their 'will forces (and) can ultimately achieve numeracy, literacy, the capacity for creative thinking, the ability to exercise informed judgement, and self-actualization in adulthood'. (UK): 'When the child is playing, you don't want to interrupt it. We see their play as quite a sacred place. It is called the "dream consciousness"'. But this is 'only possible when children are not forced to wake up to the outside world but are allowed to live in this dreaming quality when they play' (Blanning, 2013: 66). Another participant described the intrinsic basis of play. (UK): 'Free play is not directed by someone else to see an outcome, but it is allowing children to explore their own thoughts'. The teacher tacitly holds the environment, by subtly observing each child's play, interaction and interest. Children also play with ambiguous, natural materials 'that they make complete with their own inner pictures' (Dahlin, 2018: 94; Manassakis, 2020). One participant reflected on such (US): 'open-ended natural toys which are not fixed or formed; there is room for the child's imagination to place into it'. Another example is the baby that a child sews during kindergarten; for them a face would be restrictive (Steiner, 1996[1907]). (US): 'Children associate toys with their own emotions, their own sensibilities about what they want this toy to represent'.



Kindergarten teachers emphasized the way in which stories are presented to children. (US): ‘We do not read these from a book, we learn them and tell stories face to face’. Lenhart et al. (2020: 339) discuss the compelling nature of oral storytelling, where no book or script is used. This encourages appropriate behaviour, deep concentration and an unfolding of shared identity and values. It enables children to ‘acquire early literacy skills, of vocabulary knowledge. . . . Gestures and eye contact help children to focus on important story aspects’. Stories are also carefully chosen (US): ‘in such a way that they reflect back human life’. And (US):

a fairy tale has archetypal images and morality that lives deep within every human being’s soul. The children like to hear it over again, and then they want to *do* it. They will act it out for days and days.

Stagg Peterson et al. (2020) similarly observe how ‘dramatic play’ enables a sphere for children to experiment with different characters, (US): ‘no matter the gender of the child or the part’, and to observe their own social interactions. Another teacher explained their established choice of stories relating to their surrounding regional community. (US): ‘Steiner said “create the heart and soul of the curriculum through your own understanding”; stories from the Native American culture hold special relevance for us’. This aspect of oral storytelling provides meaningful opportunities to impart traditional stories of one’s regional and other indigenous communities, as an intrinsic element of kindergarten. The style and content reportedly develops a deep engagement by children, entailing absorption, patience and memory, and so assisting their empathy and sense of wonder.

Participants commented on the academic nature of the Waldorf kindergarten, and the foundational building of core pedagogical competences. These are (UK): ‘empathy and imagination, as well as academic skills of learning how to learn’ (see Rhoad-Drogalis et al., 2018). Teachers explained an inherent connection between the will senses and intellect (Suggate and Suggate, 2019). (US): ‘Being able to have that sense of spatial orientation is what we need before we can do reading, writing and math’. Another element of preparation for reading is where children (US): ‘*put on* the characters from a story through free, imaginative play’. Here, children use the child-led autonomous space they are afforded through which they can process the curriculum and actively learn. This is according to the developmental stage of the child, and their thinking in images, rather than in abstract intellectual thoughts (see Manassakis, 2020; Suggate and Suggate, 2019).

Participants highlighted the presence of the academic subjects of music, botany, geography and history in the Waldorf kindergarten. (UK): ‘Children grind wheat to make bread, sew, knit and weave; they learn to understand the history of the everyday’. In Waldorf kindergarten education, the child’s ‘will’ develops unconsciously in their inner growth of ideas, habits and memory, supporting their physical stability and spatial awareness. Contractions of inward teacher-led and outward child-led breaths support the complex and multiple layered facets of rhythm, repetition and reverence, as well as the space for teacher-led activities, imitation, and child-led free play. Overall this amounts to academic preparation and advancement for formal (grade) school, and forms a basis for inclusion for all children.

## Differently able children and inclusion

Participants were asked about their standpoint in relation to receiving children with additional needs. One participant prudently remarked (UK): ‘we don’t have the facilities to support children with extreme behavioural needs, we have to consider the class’. Another British teacher reported unfair governmental pressure of having to evidence extreme instability in order to justify a child’s exclusion (see EYFS, 2020). A further participant portrayed an alternative view. (UK): ‘Teacher / parent relationships are critical; if there is mutual openness, then *every* situation and *every child*

can be supported'. Another report bridged both perspectives. (US): 'In 40 years I've only asked two children to leave. Both cases were because I couldn't keep the children safe' (see Booth and Ainscow, 2017).

Teachers reflected upon how to understand presenting children according to Steiner's guidance (Steiner, 1996[1907]). (US): 'You need to know the archetype of development, plus the individual child you see'. One teacher contended that the reason in large part for children's additional needs are within the parameters of the will senses. (US): 'Most of the time learning needs stem from sensory integration issues' (see Aeppli, 2016). A teacher questioned mainstream medical perspectives of looking for a 'pathogenic problem' and looking to identify limitation. In contrast the Waldorf approach is the opposite. (US): 'The focus becomes the "salutogenesis" instead of "pathogenesis"'; a positive focus of a child's wellbeing and capacity takes prominence (see Mittelmark and Bull, 2013).

Correspondingly, a teacher's view demonstrated the flexible nature of kindergarten. (UK): 'We can accommodate more in early years than the rest of the school; a child with autism for example can present well in self-initiated play'. And equally, (UK): 'Downs children bring genuine love as a quality to the world. And that is the best gift ever for a kindergarten'. A participant considered limits to managing children with additional needs. (US): 'The greatest limit of all is the individual teacher, really not knowing themselves. Children come alive to you once you understand what you're seeing' (see Sobo, 2014).

Florian et al. (2017: 14) advocate the practice of inclusive education with an emphasis on teacher responsibility, rather than seeing 'problems of learners', and so avoiding 'integration' of working with a child individually. Participants discussed inclusion as a central aspect of Waldorf early childhood education. (UK): 'I've had children with all sorts of special needs. We've been doing inclusive practice all along'. For them, this works by incorporating the requirements of differently able children into the whole class. An American teacher described their inclusively incorporated 'extra lesson' (see McAllen, 2013). (US): 'It concentrates on movement and sensory health. We have developed ways of bringing it into the entire class'. Teachers discussed inclusive kindergarten principles. (UK): 'The idea is to find an activity that everyone can benefit from, that has the essence of the curriculum' (see Florian, 2012). An example of this is in early childhood storytelling, where homemade felted woollen puppets are used by the teacher to support the bringing to life of characters. Lenhart et al. (2020: 339) find that 'oral language typically consists of less complex lexical structures than written texts'. Moreover it allows 'flexibility to adapt language to the audience, and may thus enhance interest and comprehension' (Lenhart et al., 2020: 339). The kindergarten teacher, who is familiar with their children's cognitive and language abilities, can adapt their wording and emphasis accordingly.

However, in addition to employing a strategy of inclusion, US schools provide individual support of integration, by a Waldorf (American) remedial teacher. (US): 'It's ok to work differently with individual children, some children need that'. Rhoad-Drogalis et al. (2018: 450) support this notion of individual 'early intervention (for) children experiencing difficulties'. Represented US and UK Waldorf sample kindergartens vary in their implementation of inclusive practices, and whether to incorporate an additional layer of integratory support. Some teachers hold concerns over the notion that children develop at different rates and indicated that children with learning differences might be left without a structured plan for their future path. (UK): 'There can be a misguided inclusive approach where we say "let's just let them grow, they are very young"'. However, this issue can generate an opposite view (see Florian, 2012; see Dahlin, 2018). Another teacher affirmed that from the inherent, guided structures of being held in this sphere, (US):



I have seen children develop and really surprise us. Change takes time, and one has to be really patient. So much can be accomplished by the end of kindergarten.

As well as math and literacy knowledge, educationalists consider other skills of communication, social-emotional and physical skills as central to young children's future potential (Bruce, 2015). Participants were asked about the ending of kindergarten, and 'school readiness', with a possible transition into grade school for a child reaching age seven. One participant highlighted the holistic picture that appears from the assessment, (UK): 'we view the child's emotional, social, and cognitive (positions), their ability to self-regulate, and what support they will need during and after transition'. Another reported its purpose, (UK): 'it's whether children are ready to receive abstract learning'. Accordingly, this can be the moment when a school decides whether a child is eligible to continue in the Waldorf educational system. (US): 'A child may progress with the remedial teacher, but we are clear that we cannot guarantee they will be accepted into the first grade'. In contrast, one teacher expressed absolute opposition to this notion. (UK): 'I struggle immensely with this idea of "school readiness". . . we should be asking for "*teacher readiness*"'. Another view supported this idea, (US): 'rather than having a checklist, the grades teacher should ask the early childhood teacher, "what do I need to know about this child?"' An occasional option for some schools is to delay a child transitioning to the grades, however this is viewed as a problematic balancing act. (US):

Most children will be 6½ when they join first grade, but others might be 7¼. Their biological clock will carry them to puberty ahead of their peers; socially it is a hard question.

One teacher summarized their perception of colleagues' flawed understanding in construing the outcomes of the school readiness assessment. (UK): 'I think some teachers make the mistake of interpreting adult abstract meanings into testing for school readiness'; teachers could impose their own meaning by over-interpreting a presenting child's position (see Blanning, 2013).

Florian's (2012) principles broadly oppose the value of implementing integration as a provision alongside inclusion, unlike those of some Waldorf kindergarten practices (see McAllen, 2013; see Rhoad-Drogalis et al., 2018). And yet without considering Steiner, Florian (2012: 276) directs educators towards their learning supposedly to consider a core Steiner principle of 'head, heart and hands'; yet referring solely to Shulman (2005) These examples are inadvertently illustrative of how Waldorf early childhood pedagogy may not have embraced broad ranging external current debate to invite their own inner reflection, or indeed to challenge others' inclinations, but are also suggestive of how unsuccessful Waldorf education studies have been at widespread dissemination. (UK): 'The difficulty is defining the Steiner principles, which are spiritual soul qualities. It is the deeper anthroposophical understanding of the child and child development' which perhaps remain unfamiliar in the wider educational sphere.

Waldorf kindergarten education aims to accept and embrace children with additional learning needs wherever possible, and equally to develop their whole person. Teachers reflected on the need to have a deep knowledge of anthroposophical study to understand the whole child and conveyed that differently able children bring benefit to their class. The 'school readiness' assessment highlighted polemic educator perspectives of the continued path of differently able children into the grades. This highlights the benefit of space for debate in such issues. Florian failing to fully endeavour to convey Waldorf values indicates a need for Waldorf educators to disseminate their knowledge more widely than to already interested parties.

## The worth of Waldorf early childhood education

Teachers deliberated upon the reasons for Waldorf early childhood education remaining as a minority pedagogy. One reflected (UK): ‘a hundred years ago esoteric ideas were much more mainstream’ (see Goldshmidt, 2017). One teacher claimed that Waldorf is the world’s largest private school movement. Others concurred, (US): ‘I think it is exploding in China of all places’. And, (UK): ‘in Scandinavian countries kindergartens are fully funded’. An American teacher observed a growth of Waldorf schools in selected states along the west coast of the US, thus contrasting with a British teacher’s observation of the lack of spread of Waldorf education in the UK. Teachers pointed out the exclusivity of fee-paying schools, but also a tendency to protect the status quo. (US): ‘Fees are strangulatingly high for the average family’ and (UK): ‘it keeps itself in its own little world, there can be a preciousness about it’ (see Suggate and Suggate, 2019; see Sobo, 2014). Teachers commented on the high demand for the previous UK (free) Steiner academies, and for US (free) public charter Waldorf schools, although both reportedly had and have to dilute their values somewhat in fulfilling external demands.

One teacher indicated contradictory wishes of potential Waldorf parents, resulting in a sometimes-unresolvable dilemma. (UK):

Kindergarten attracts left-leaning parents interested in organic food, natural childhood, and ecological thinking, but you’re asking them to go against all their values and pay for education; there is a mismatch in values that is quite difficult to deal with.

Other difficulties which prevent kindergarten accessibility were reported. American teachers have to be both state and Waldorf trained, thus demanding a significant investment on the part of the teacher. Other teachers reported that localized ‘word-of-mouth’ is a successful mode of marketing, providing movement validity. (US): ‘Then a family is much more likely to enter into it with more interest and less scepticism’. A participant suggested the reason for societal ignorance about this different mode of education. The formal testing of most early childhood settings accentuates an alternative system that is conspicuous in its difference. (UK): ‘A system that wraps the child in a protective goodness and beauty is going to look extreme; actually what it’s doing is very simple’. Teachers conveyed what they considered to be the crucial significance of Waldorf early childhood education. (UK): ‘We need kindergartens because we are closing down children’s worlds so early in this race to be reading and writing by three years old’. A second teacher used an analogy to illustrate the same point. (UK): ‘A sunflower grows quickly, it reaches the top but then will just crumble’ (see Avison and Rawson, 2014; see White, 2020).

Others reviewed their overall feeling about the essence of what they provide. (US): ‘Waldorf is a humanizing education; kids are academically sharp, but also creative, and they are interested in the world and in problem solving’. The central importance of Waldorf early childhood education was seen to be one of enabler. (US): ‘Children live in this imaginative sphere, and we work out of that; instead of *teaching* about life, we *do* life’. Kindergarten teachers see child development through the child’s subconscious path of the will, and physical body as the basis of a later meta-physical life stage (Aeppli, 2016). (UK): ‘It is the physical activity that makes their brain work’. And (US): ‘We have a deep picture of development, to include their physical body, emotional soul body, and spirit’. The whole process enables an environment of respect, which avoids judgement (see Nicol, 2016). (US): ‘All children are free to explore how to interact with one another with the guidance of teachers. They learn to love one another and develop deep connections’. Rather than fitting in with a majority individualized system, here, a social sense of community is established in the classroom.

Waldorf early childhood education remains a minority in the US and UK, partly due to its elitist nature of normally being private education, but also perhaps due to a perceived insular mindedness of students of anthroposophy. In comparison to mainstream systems, Waldorf early childhood education does not provide 'evidence' of its productivity, or of its wisdom. Waldorf education is however arguably successful in producing independently minded, rounded young people with a social concern. Kindergarten contributes to this first step, allowing young children to experience life in a child-centered protected environment, and in so doing, unconsciously developing their will.

## Discussion

Waldorf kindergarten education is explored in this paper in order to draw attention to the sphere of this relatively unknown, holistic education, that avoids a fixed and narrow learning of reading, writing, math and science for children aged three through seven. Instead, Waldorf early childhood education follows 100-year-old lectures of Rudolf Steiner in a modern 21st-century context. It is led by the original understanding of the development of the human being, of the child's etheric 'plant' life-force of core learning, supporting the physical 'mineral' strengthening body, within a protective environment which invites young children to absorb life experientially, through imitation and play, and to develop their 'will'. The paper has highlighted that children who are differently able are welcomed inclusively and flexibly as far as possible in such a setting. All participants demonstrate universal commitment to the fundamental anthroposophical concepts of class-collaborative child-centered early childhood education, but with country and cultural specific adaptability.

Combinations of individual integration and whole class inclusion are adopted by schools; one American school offers an additional, adjacent integratory one-to-one programme. Other schools implement whole class curative activities, or (in Britain) class physical activities designed to assist a particular child. One American school's activities involve acrobatic equipment for class energy release. Participant educators offer meaningful inclusion in Waldorf early childhood education, in proactively considering the individual development of the child, and of the whole class. An internally contentious notion is of children being allowed to develop at their natural pace throughout kindergarten, versus the decision to introduce formal intervention relating to learning difference. There are also contrasting expectations of the appropriate continuation of children into grade school, depending on the extent of commitment to inclusive pedagogy. One Waldorf value clearly coincides with one of Florian's; diverse abilities and characters, as well as mixed ages of children, invite a meaningful 'normal' community of difference, as well as of stability, where shared achievements and responsibilities are celebrated. The methodological transactional theory of knowledge allows for scrutiny of a minority education movement, and a platform to engage in debate, and perhaps to influence adjacent educative systems.

The author faced simultaneous opportunities and limitations in terms of securing contacts for participants. The pandemic and online working allowed this project to take place, and yet other prospective participants were otherwise engaged in supporting their colleagues.

## Conclusion

The Waldorf kindergarten movement lends itself to modern debate on inclusion, in applying 100-year-old principles that are fundamentally inclusive. This is feasible according to the central holistic philosophy of education that recognizes the natural development of children, in insightfully nourishing its students throughout their first stage of learning. All children in the Waldorf kindergarten are supported to unconsciously develop their will, as a basis to advance their own

journey further. This paper has explored and contested the early childhood education approach of Rudolf Steiner, and the multiple, intellectual dimensions of spiritual philosophy that inform its outlook and modern practices. The paper has also assessed Florian's study of educational inclusion as a framework to assess the modern international relevance of Waldorf early childhood inclusive education in a small sample of schools in the US and UK. Academic debate around inclusive pedagogy has an active, growing audience; the Waldorf early childhood movement less so. The academic Waldorf community could join established debate on a range of current educational issues in order to broadcast their presence, engage with others' systems, and to influence the conversation.

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