Globalization of Waldorf education: an ethnographic case study from the Philippines

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This dissertation contributes to educational ethnographic knowledge by examining an underexplored phenomenon: the ethnography of global connections[1] with respect to an educational approach, in this case Waldorf education. Focusing on the emergence of Waldorf education in the Philippines, it uses an ethnographic case study to trace how this educational approach 'travels' and is reconstituted in a new local setting. The study especially investigates the extent to which Waldorf education can be made locally meaningful, and where frictions arise in that process.

[1] The term 'ethnography of global connections' as well as other terms in the introduction, i.e. 'frictions' and 'zones of awkward engagement' were introduced by Anna Tsing (2005)

What emerges is a contradictory picture of a school with ambitious ideals and a strong identity that can, at the same time, feel alienating to those outside it because of zones of awkward engagement produced by these global–local encounters. This awkwardness surfaces in the school's ideological underpinnings and curriculum, which are continually renegotiated – in a complex and dynamic process – in search of new engaged forms of Waldorf education that may ultimately enrich and diversify the Philippine educational landscape.

Before examining how Waldorf education emerged in the Philippines, I will briefly define what Waldorf education is. Waldorf education is education based on the original pedagogic and didactic ideas – as well as the anthroposophical worldview – of its founder, the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner.[2] Offering a single, fixed definition is difficult because, as I will argue, concepts that appear universal are always locally reformulated and revalidated. Nevertheless, as a starting point, the following aspects can be considered typical of Waldorf schools (from Sagarin 2011, 184-196):

1. Waldorf pedagogy is development-oriented, focusing on developing human beings.
2. Waldorf didactics strive for a balance between learning by head, heart, and hands.
3. At the basis of Waldorf education is a social ideology, striving for social health and reverence for the world, including the natural environment.

Waldorf education has long been a 'Western' phenomenon, with schools predominantly in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. Since the turn of the century, Waldorf education has been introduced in an increasing number of countries in the Global South (Boland 2015, Göbel 2019, Rawson 2021, Stehlik 2019),[3] including in Latin America, Africa, and, particularly, Asia (Johnson 2014, Kurz 2011).[4] The Philippines is one of the countries where Waldorf education is relatively new within the local educational landscape.[5]

A central question for Waldorf pioneers worldwide is how to integrate the philosophy and practices of Waldorf education into local educational systems and cultural contexts. European aspects of the Waldorf system do not self-evidently blend into non-European sociocultural, political, religious, geographic, and climatological contexts. For example, the seasonal festivals celebrated in Waldorf schools are mostly rooted in European folk traditions – some with pre-Christian, pagan origins – as well as in Christian feast days, such as St John's Day (24 June) or Michaelmas (29 September). The curriculum

[2] In the extensive body of literature by Rudolf Steiner on Waldorf education, *Study of Man: General Education Course* (2004) is generally considered the most comprehensive standard work.

[3] Current numbers worldwide: 1283 Waldorf schools, 1987 Waldorf kindergartens (Waldorf World List, 2024).

[4] In Asia, there are 88 Waldorf schools and 181 Waldorf kindergartens (Waldorf World List, 2024, which is >50% increase compared to the Waldorf List 2014).

[5] Manila Waldorf School, "How it all started", school website visited 29 May 2024, https://www.manilawaldorfschool.edu.ph/how-it-all-started

also reflects and is influenced by processes in nature in the Northern hemisphere and draws on ecliptic rhythms and symbolic patterns of light and darkness, associated with outward and inward movement, or the 'breathing of the earth' (Hoffmann 2016). Another example of the European orientation within the Waldorf curriculum is the incorporation of European mythology, such as the Norse myths of the *Edda* (Boland 2015, Fong 2017, Sagarin 2017). Moreover, Waldorf education is typically associated with a particular lifestyle that encompasses specific notions and habits related to food and health, as well as spiritual elements, such as the belief in reincarnation. In certain contexts, this lifestyle is so pronounced that it can be described as a 'culture in its own right' or 'an international Waldorf subculture'.

While awareness of the need for inclusive[6] and localized[7] Waldorf education, i.e. Waldorf education where all students can feel at home, has increased extensively within international Waldorf networks in recent years,[8] discussions on this issue have tended to focus on the curriculum rather than on foundational anthroposophical principles. These anthroposophical principles are often incorrectly characterized as value-free and universal and are therefore less likely to be questioned. Yet these foundational principles raise the complex question of what, ultimately, binds Waldorf schools together. How much can schools differ from each other while still forming an international educational movement? This question underscores the need to address these underlying principles as well, since they are likely to have locally and culturally different manifestations – or, in other words, to engage differently with the new localities where they are introduced. After all, these ideas originated in a specific place and time, namely Central Europe around the turn of the 20th century. This was a highly ideologically charged and turbulent era with, among other things, large-scale industrialization in Europe and the dramatic events surrounding the First World War. Even at the inception of Waldorf education, these ideas did not develop in isolation but were influenced by broader intellectual and cultural movements of their time. Anthroposophy, the underlying philosophy of Waldorf education, emerged

6 Inclusive education is an approach where all students, regardless of differences in abilities or cultural backgrounds, learn together, providing them with equal chances. Inclusive education is also sometimes referred to as adaptive education, education in which individual needs of all students are taken in to account.

7 Localized education is an approach where the curriculum and teaching methods are tailored to reflect and incorporate the specific cultural, social, and economic context of the local community. In the context of this research, localization of Waldorf education can have different scales and can mean different things, including Asianization, Filipinization, localization to the local context of the island of Panay or the province of Iloilo (Ilonggo culture), or the rural village community of Libongcogon (as opposed to the city culture).

8 This is witnessed in (international) conferences and publications related to Waldorf education, but also in adjusted guidelines for the Waldorf curriculum provided by the International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education (Hague Circle, 2016), which now state: "(The curriculum) is continuously being developed taking account of the geographical and cultural location, the political as well as general and global lines of development of the time […] the use of Rudolf Steiner's specifications for lessons which relate, for example, more to western cultural values could be supplemented or replaced by cultural content of corresponding value as long as the educational effect is maintained."

from Theosophy, a spiritual movement that sought to unite all world religions. It was also strongly inspired by Asian spiritual notions such as karma and reincarnation. Just as they do today, these 'travelling' concepts and ideas took shape within a new local setting. In fact, Waldorf education – as well as anthroposophy – is continually evolving with changing times and contexts. Stakeholders in international networks constantly redefine what these changes mean and how they continue to constitute Waldorf education (or how and why they do not). This study makes these dynamics especially visible. Precisely these ongoing redefinitions make it compelling from an anthropological perspective to evaluate how Waldorf education is adapted in new local settings, such as in the Philippines.

Research Outline

The main objective of this dissertation is to evaluate the question of how Waldorf education, through networks of global connections, has been introduced to a new locality in the Philippines. The research assesses how seemingly Eurocentric elements are negotiated and applied in the school under study and how this type of education is received by direct outsiders. Later in this introduction – *under structure of this dissertation* – I will explain how specific sub-questions are addressed in the various chapters. Before doing so, I first describe *the field*, making note of important sociographic and contextual information, followed by the *theoretical approaches* that are relevant for analysing the research outcomes, and finally the *research methodology*, describing how the research was done, including a reflection on my own role as a researcher.

The Field

The Philippines is a good example of an Asian country where Waldorf education has established a firm foothold in recent years. Since the first Waldorf School opened in Manila in 1994, a growing number of Waldorf initiatives have emerged across the country. Most started as kindergartens but have gradually expanded into private primary and secondary schools.[9]

One such school is the Gamot Cogon School. It opened in 2005 and is located in a rural area in central Philippines and forms the case study for this dissertation. Although it is a private school, it explicitly aims to include underprivileged and poor children alongside pupils from relatively wealthy, middle-class families. The school is located in a small rural community on the central island of Panay, attracting students not only from the village itself and the surrounding communities but also from the nearby city of Iloilo. The diversity of the student population is thus twofold: firstly, there are notable socioeconomic differences, and secondly, there is a distinction between urban and rural children. However, these two categories largely overlap. This diversity in the student

[9] See Chapter 3.

population as well as the location of the school means that this school exemplifies – perhaps even more than other Waldorf schools in the Philippines – the social ideology formulated by Rudolf Steiner (2018) in the aftermath of the First World War. These ideals, regarded within international Waldorf networks as fundamental to Waldorf education, have been reinterpreted for a contemporary Philippine setting by one of its pioneers, Nicanor Perlas (1999). The underlying idea is that one of the main objectives of Waldorf education is to provide good education to underprivileged children. Most other Waldorf schools in the Philippines are located in urban areas and draw their student population primarily from a relatively wealthy and highly educated urban middle class. This is more in line with a trend seen in other Asian countries, where the emergence of alternative forms of education goes hand in hand with an upcoming conscious and critical middle class searching for meaning beyond materialism and looking for alternatives to the traditional educational system.[10]

In the absence of a national Waldorf school association in the Philippines, the school under study is monitored by the international Waldorf community. Mentors from Europe are sent by the Pedagogical Section of the Goetheanum[11] to the school to assess and advise on its adherence to international Waldorf guidelines (International Forum for Steiner Waldorf Education/ Hague Circle 2016). As a result, the school regularly receives international guests and is officially recognized and administrated as a Waldorf school.[12] Besides European mentors, the school also functions within an Asian Waldorf network, mainly through international Waldorf conferences, such as the biannual Asian Waldorf Teachers Conference.[13] Within such networks, it is articulated that many Waldorf schools in the region face similar challenges and dilemmas, such as difficult interactions with authorities, problems regarding financing and facilities, and finding, training, and keeping teachers.

The Philippines forms an interesting locality for this study, because it is historically characterized by 'an eclectic mix of influences and institutions' (Symaco 2013, 192). Waldorf education is not unique in its quest for new local identities. To some extent, this is true for Filipino culture and identity as a whole (Zialcita 2005). The Philippines can be characterized as a country with a rich diversity of ethnic minorities, languages, and cultures. Moreover, abundant external influences have played their part in enriching and transforming cultural practices. As a former colony of Spain and the United States, cultural hybridities with Spanish and American influences have emerged. Moreover, the country has a strong international orientation and an appreciation for many foreign elements, partly due to a rich migration history (Tyner 2009). Migration is also prevalent in the local environment of the school under study. Many people leave the island of Panay and the province of Iloilo to find work elsewhere in the world, for example in global shipping or as domestic helpers or nannies, particularly in the Middle East. Processes of localization and

[10] Such an example is provided by Johnson (2014) in a Chinese context.

[11] Seat of the General Anthroposophical Society, in Dornach, Switzerland. https://www.goetheanum-paedagogik.ch/en/

[12] see Waldorf List 2024 for all officially recognized Waldorf schools.

[13] https://www.anthroposophie.ch/en/education/news/article/waldorf-education-on-the-move-in-asia.html

enculturation are ubiquitous in Filipino society. Sometimes, external influences become so Filipinized and culturally appropriated that they are exported as 'typically Filipino' to other countries, such as the United States, where a large Filipino community exists. Examples include the Iglesia ni Cristo, a Filipino religious organization (Reed 2001), and Jollibee, a Filipino fast-food chain (Dumlao-Abadilla 2017). These examples, though vastly different in nature, illustrate processes of cultural appropriation and enculturation. Each originated from foreign influences but has become deeply integrated into Filipino culture and is now recognized internationally as 'typically Filipino phenomena'. The Iglesia ni Cristo, initially a product of American Christian missions in the Philippines, now operates as a Filipino-centric religious organization with localized practices and rituals, actively sending out missionaries worldwide. With over 7,000 congregations globally, the church has a presence on every continent (Reed 2001). Similarly, Jollibee has also travelled from the Philippines to other places, with this fast-food chain found in over 30 countries. While fried chicken, burgers, and fries are on the menu, as in many American-style fast-food restaurants, there is a distinctly Filipino twist to the Jollibee menu, offering dishes such as *pancit palabok, adobo rice*, or sweetened spaghetti alongside its burgers (Dumlao-Abadilla 2017).

The Philippine education system has also been shaped by successive external influences that have been repeatedly internalized. Mass education was introduced under American rule, along with the English as the main educational language. The current system is primarily shaped by the Department of Education and is partly aligned with international trends in education. Although there is a general mandate for compulsory education in the Philippines, with 13 years of education provided prior to tertiary education (the so-called K12 system),[14] there are many structural problems, including a lack of resources, well-trained teachers, and good facilities (Durban and Catalan 2012). As a result, dropout rates remain relatively high, as does the illiteracy rate (Termes, Edwards, and Verger 2020). The current education system in the Philippines continues to struggle to compete internationally, as reflected in global assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Schleicher 2019; Trinidad 2018). Nevertheless, within the region, the system is comparable to that of neighbouring countries with an emphasis on competitiveness, striving for excellence, and a cognitive approach aimed at creating skilled manpower to achieve optimal economic growth for the nation (Reyes 2015; Symaco 2013). These characteristics seem difficult to reconcile with educational attitudes that promote individual development in the broadest sense, as does the aim of alternative educational philosophies such as Waldorf education (Rawson 2019). There is a distinction between private and public education in the Philippines, which traditionally has a relatively large sector of private educational institutions, with private education placing a greater emphasis on individual development (Termes, Edwards, and Verger 2020). Although Waldorf education brings a unique approach in certain respects, its preferred and practiced methods also share notable similarities with those found in other Philippine private schools.[15]

[14] Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines, "K to 12 Basic Education Curriculum", https://www.deped.gov.ph/k-to-12/about/k-to-12-basic-education-curriculum/.

[15] See Chapter 6.

Theoretical Approaches

This dissertation draws extensively on the groundbreaking work of anthropologist Anna Tsing and, in doing so, contributes to a vivid academic debate amongst educational scientists about globalization processes in education – whether trends and policies in education do in fact globalize, and if so, how. I will first outline general approaches to globalization within the educational sciences before turning to Anna Tsing's specific perspective. After discussing her approach, known as the 'ethnography of global connections' (Tsing 2005), I will examine the importance of localized curricula, both from a social-psychological and a sociological/anthropological viewpoint. Finally, I will consider a more emic approach to the globalization of Waldorf education. How do stakeholders within Waldorf education themselves view the trend of the international spread of Waldorf education?

Globalization in education

First, I will address the theoretical perspective of globalization in education, which I have used to outline general globalization theory in education. This is important because the case study of this dissertation can be seen as the result of a globalization process. After all, an educational concept – Waldorf education – is being introduced in an increasing number of contexts worldwide, including the Philippines, and is continually reshaped through international flows and networks.

Appadurai's authoritative globalization theory (1996), which emphasizes the complexity of interconnected global cultural flows and interactions and their impact on local contexts, conceptualized through a framework of 'scapes' (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes) has been translated to the field of educational studies by Rizvi and Lingard (2010), who introduced the concept of 'eduscapes'. Spring (2015, 7-13) subsequently distinguished three theoretical perspectives that have been especially influential in shaping the field of global eduscapes. The first perspective is based on World Culture Theory and points at a growing uniformity within the field of education due to globalized discourses. This perspective emphasizes homogenization in education over time, witnessed in globalized school models and policies, instructional strategies, and school assessments by international agents such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) through its Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) through Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). The second perspective originates from the World System Approach and considers the hegemonic Western position in education not only as a cause of growing uniformity, but also as a source of the constant reproduction and even amplification of social inequalities. The third perspective, coined by Spring as the Culturalist Approach (2015, 11-3), emphasizes cultural diversity and local uniqueness within education. From this perspective, globalization is understood as a dynamic process that is perceived, adopted, and resisted in many ways. The educational anthropologist Anderson-Levitt (2003) is the key representative of this third perspective, which stresses the personal

experiences of local stakeholders in relation to globalization processes, as well as the cultural diversity within education. Her perspective focuses more on heterogenization, including the globalization of competing ideas in education and alternative educational approaches (Spring 2015, 14-26).

In conclusion, we can say that globalization in education – within so-called *eduscapes* – can be interpreted in multiple ways, leading either to homogenization or to heterogenization. In the case of Waldorf education, one could argue that its globalization, on the one hand, leads to a diversification of the local educational landscape in the regions where it is introduced, while, on the other hand, its international growth can itself be seen as the result of broader globalization processes. Given the first perspective, the international spread of Waldorf education does not necessarily lead to homogenization. As educational trends globalize, so too do educational alternatives. The question, then, is whether homogenizing processes also occur within Waldorf education: are Waldorf schools worldwide becoming increasingly similar as this educational model is embedded in global networks? If so, might this homogenization reflect a form of education that is dominated by Western ideas, carrying a sense of neo-colonization or Eurocentrism? Or are trends of homogenization overstated, with most Waldorf schools worldwide remaining distinctive because of their specific settings and student populations, where cultural, societal, and geographical adaptations are always needed to make this educational concept work? Consequently, it becomes crucial to ask to what extent Filipino Waldorf education differs from Waldorf education elsewhere? In other words, whether there is also heterogenization within the Waldorf school educational approach? And if so, how far can this heterogenization go? How long can we continue to speak of cohesion within this educational movement? How much commonality is needed for a shared identity?

Ethnography of global connections

Having outlined a general perspective on globalization theories in education, I now turn to a specific approach, as well as a critique of globalization theory, namely Anna Tsing's (2005) ethnography of global connections. I chose this perspective because, in my view, Tsing convincingly demonstrates that general theories of globalization are often too coarse and abstract. For a genuine understanding of globalization processes, it is essential to accept that each process is unique and often highly chaotic and illogical. Tsing's approach legitimizes this study's focus on an in-depth examination of a single case – one Waldorf school in the Philippines.

The anthropologist Anna Tsing, whose work centres not so much on education but primarily on environmental issues, has strongly criticized the aforementioned perspectives and grand theories on globalization for their high level of abstraction and simplified narratives. She argues that they present globalization too much as an autonomous process or superstructure (Gluck and Tsing, 2009, Tsing 2000, Tsing 2005), turning it into what she calls "globalist fantasies" (Tsing 2000, 69). In response, Tsing offers a more practical conceptual framework to better account for the unpredictable, complex, and messy practice of globalization (Tsing 2005). Globalization – or global connections as Tsing terms it – is about more than social structures or global forces; it is about real encounters,

networks, ideas, and actions, which often result in unanticipated outcomes (Tsing 2005). She suggests that to understand processes of global connections, we must trace concrete trajectories of particular globalizing projects (Tsing 2000, 85). The emergence of Waldorf education in the Philippines can be perceived as one such concrete trajectory, in which certain knowledge is presented as cosmopolitan and universally applicable, but is, in fact, locally charged with meaning. Tsing's term global connections emphasizes the interconnectedness of global and local scales (Tsing 2005, 55-77), showing how local practices are influenced by and contribute to global processes. This viewpoint challenges the notion of globalization as a one-way imposition of global forces on local cultures, instead highlighting the dynamic and reciprocal relations between the local and the global. Tsing also introduces the idea of 'friction' (also the title of Tsing's 2005 book), which occurs in so-called 'zones of awkward engagement' (Tsing 2005, XI). These frictions create new possibilities and constraints, highlighting the complexity and unpredictability of global connections. They demonstrate how global ideas and practices are transformed and reinterpreted in different local settings and create so-called engaged universals. The term 'engaged universals' (Tsing 2005, 8) underscores the importance of examining how seemingly universal concepts are interpreted, negotiated, and contested in various localities. Such concepts might therefore be understood as 'locals dressed up as universals'. These engaged universals do not have fixed meanings, since they are brought to life and made meaningful through their application in particular local settings. The meaning and implementation of these universals are negotiated through interactions between global discourses and local practices. This interaction is not straightforward; it involves adaptation, reinterpretation, and sometimes resistance. They are shaped by the cultural, political, and economic realities of the places where they are engaged. The concept of engaged universals contributes to broader theoretical discussions about globalization, suggesting that the global and the local are mutually constitutive rather than oppositional.

An important realization in these global–local interactions is that relationships are unequal and power dynamics are at play (Ferguson 2006). Because Tsing emphasizes that every situation is specific, she also draws on classical anthropological insights regarding research methods, where participant observation in case studies and thick description of the research data are integral parts of the methodology (see methodology). Following Tsing, this study applies an ethnography of global connections to understand the specificities of unique localities and trajectories of globalizing projects, in this case in education.

The importance of localized curricula

Next, I want to emphasize the importance of localized curricula. I selected this perspective because, in my opinion, researchers should not merely act as passive describers of social phenomena; their academic insights should also aim to contribute to societal improvements. In this case study, it is essential to address the importance of inclusive curricula and pupils' sense of school belonging as outcomes of localized curricula.
From both socio-psychological and educational–sociological viewpoints, there is ample theoretical support for the value of localized curricula. Observations from the field serve not only as research descriptions but also as a basis for recommendations for the school under study (see the discussion section at the end of this dissertation).

If we delve deeper into the experiences of stakeholders within the concrete trajectory of globalizing Waldorf education – focusing on how Waldorf education is locally interpreted and adapted in the Philippines – essentially a process of enculturation or localization – it becomes crucial to examine the extent to which the school is able to create a place where students feel at home and can learn effectively. This is closely related to the social-psychological concept of school belonging (Goodenow 1993, 80), "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment", as well as to the concepts of inclusiveness and localization of the curriculum (i.a. Ekins 2017, Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011, Ladson-Billings 1994).

School belonging is widely regarded as an important foundation for students' academic achievement, general development, and well-being. In pluriform cultural settings, it may be even more important than other recognized predictors of educational outcomes, such as linguistic background, socioeconomic status, or even IQ (see i.a. Baysu et al. 2022, Konings et al. 2023, and De Leersnyder et al. 2022).[16] This contention is substantiated by a meta-analysis of more than 80 studies (Korpershoek et al. 2020). Moreover, the aforementioned studies make clear that the approach a school takes to foster a sense of school belonging matters (Konings et al. 2023, De Leersnyder et al. 2022). Aiming for equality through assimilation into a dominant school culture that does not align with students' home cultures is counterproductive, as is a colourblind approach that neglects cultural differences. A pluralistic approach is needed, where ideas arising from global interactions and dominant cultural perspectives are enculturated in such a way that there is room and appreciation for diversity and local interpretation. Furthermore, in an ideal situation, school belonging is not only related to a school environment that positively acknowledges students' home backgrounds, but also in a connection to contemporary youth culture (El Hadioui 2015). This entanglement of school, home, and youth cultures should be expressed in an inclusive, localized, and non-colonized curriculum (see Chapter 4).

Alongside the socio-psychological factor of school belonging, structural determinants also play a role in discussions concerning equitable educational opportunities. Classical sociological theories of education underscore the importance of a school curriculum and school culture that aligns well with its locality and is grounded in the social norms and values of a school community, as well as those of the broader society.

For example, from a functionalist perspective (as articulated by Durkheim, among others, see Ballantine 2017, 18-21), schools contribute to social stability by reinforcing the social order (Parsons 1937). A sense of togetherness and belonging is promoted by the teaching of shared cultural values, norms and practices, as well as a common history. Moreover, by imparting knowledge and skills, schools stimulate good citizenship and help to create an educated workforce that serves society, reflecting meritocratic principles: "Those who work hard and achieve good results will advance!" These principles are reflected in many current-day educational practices and policies in the Philippines and elsewhere, such as

[16] Although their research is grounded in data from Dutch and Belgium settings, the theoretical basis of their ideas is assumed to have a broad applicability.

the formulation of a national curriculum or uniform educational quality standards. From this perspective, a curriculum and school culture that do not accommodate a certain level of school belonging leads to problems.

From critical theoretical perspectives as well (Ballantine 2017, 21-24), it is considered highly problematic when school curricula and cultures do not align with the social and cultural backgrounds of students. Critical educational theorists have stressed that education reproduces inequalities and amplifies class differences in society, because curricula are aimed at a dominant majority or elite group (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Collins 1979). Eurocentrism in a curriculum can exacerbate these issues (Amin and Moore 1989). In Western countries, Eurocentric curricula have been linked to existing inequalities between ethnic groups in multicultural societies (Banks 2016). Such curricula reconfirm cultural differences and – often unintentionally – marginalize minority groups. In settings in the Global South, Eurocentric curricula also exist, often representing a form of colonized curricula,[17] sometimes referred to as hidden curricula (Snyder 1970), which reconfirm the status quo in society, including hegemonic (capitalist) values (Apple 1979, 1982). According to critical theorists, meritocracy is a myth (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). In reality, an elite benefits from the education system (Collins 1979).

One author articulates these ideas particularly well is Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 2010), who develops them through the concept of cultural capital. An ostensibly value-neutral and personal concept like 'taste', for example, understood as part of that cultural capital, in practice serves primarily to produce *distinction* and class reproduction (Bourdieu 2010). Breaking this cycle requires a pluralistic cultural approach that takes into account cultural diversity within the school, foregrounds local identities, and situates them in relation to dominant cultural perspectives, including those reproduced through international networks.

In conclusion, it can be stated that localized and inclusive curricula are likely to foster a sense of school belonging, which is beneficial for students' academic achievements and well-being, as well as for equal chances of success.

An emic perspective

Finally, I chose to highlight several emic perspectives. This decision was driven not only by my own position as an insider – as a Waldorf teacher – but also by the need to capture the complexity of the research material. From an outsider's perspective, issues such as formulating a localized curriculum may seem straightforward, yet insider views reveal the complexities involved. For example, curriculum adaptations may be perceived as compromising the Waldorf identity (Oberman, 2008). Conversely, deliberately choosing not to adapt to the school's social context, or even to protect children from that context,

[17] This term has its origins in the critical pedagogy of Freire (1970) and the work of Fanon (1961), among others, although they do not use the term literally. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o discusses the term literally in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), which examines how colonial power structures impact language and education.

can also be a conscious strategy in children's upbringing (Biesta 2022). Overall, insiders' perspectives – internally formulated theoretical perspectives – provide a distinct view that closely aligns with the lived experiences of the informants in this study, making them essential for a thorough understanding of the subject matter.

In addition to the above theoretical approaches to global connections and localized curricula, the relevant processes and products can also be examined from a more 'emic perspective', from within an international Waldorf network, from what one could call 'the international Waldorf movement'. The distinction between emic (subjective, insider perspective) and etic (objective, outsider perspective) has deep roots in anthropology (Headland et al. 1990). At Leiden University, for example, P.E. de Josselin de Jong, was already emphasizing the importance of incorporating an insider's view in the 1950s, as shown in his article *Visie der Participanten op hun Cultuur* (1956).[18] Today, the distinction is viewed more as a spectrum than a dichotomy, based on the assumption that researchers themselves operate within a particular cultural frame and are therefore, in some sense, subjective and part of their own cultural biases. Nonetheless, it is still generally accepted that both viewpoints – emic and etic – are necessary for a thorough analysis: emic insights offer depth into cultural practices, while etic perspectives provide analytical distance, allowing for cross-cultural comparisons. This dual approach enables a comprehensive understanding of complex cultural realities (Headland et al. 1990). Moreover, within an emic perspective, one can also distinguish between descriptive, operational, and ideal models for cultural analysis (Goodenough 1964). The descriptive model captures how cultural realities are perceived and interpreted from within the culture, the operational model focuses on human action, and the ideal model addresses the normative aspect of culture, or, in other words, how people think things ought to be. This tripartite division is interesting to consider in the context of this study: How do stakeholders in Waldorf education view the current situation of globalizing Waldorf education? How do they interpret it? What are their ideals, and what actions are they taking to realize those ideals?

In the following section, I will discuss ideas that were formulated within the Waldorf community about processes of globalization in Waldorf education, focusing in particular on insiders' viewpoints – so-called emic perspectives.

Firstly, I want to introduce the ideas of Oberman (2008, 270) and Boland (2015, 197-8), who are both part of the international Waldorf movement. They have proposed a typology of Waldorf schools characterized by varying degrees of curriculum flexibility.[19] This typology consists of three categories: purist, accommodationist, and evolutionist schools. These categories correspond with major currents within the anthroposophical movement since the death of Rudolf Steiner in 1925. The first category of purist schools adheres to a curriculum that remains largely unchanged over time and space, closely

[18] Later translated into English as *The Participants' Views*.

[19] See the popular book of Avison and Rawson (2014), which was mainly directed to an Anglo-Saxon public, for a topical impression of what Waldorf education could look like in practice.

resembling the curriculum of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart in 1919.[20] This category corresponds with the opinion of Marie Steiner-von Sivers, Steiner's wife, who wanted to preserve his legacy. The second category of accommodationist schools adapts original principles to fit the societal, political, and cultural contexts of the specific time and place in which schools are situated. This category resembles the practical approach of many schools, as proposed by the German Waldorf teacher Hermann von Baravalle, who was involved in the establishment of Waldorf education in the United States in the first half of the 20th century (Sagarin 2011). The final category, evolutionist schools, promotes the continuous development of the school, allowing it to take on new forms as its social and cultural setting changes. This category corresponds with the view of Ita Wegman, mistress of Steiner and co-founder of anthroposophical medicine, who advocated for the continual development of anthroposophy.

This typology is reminiscent of Bourdieu's concept of doxa, which overlaps and moves between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (Bourdieu 1977). It can also be related to the more theosophical term dogma. It raises the question of the extent to which there is a prevailing doxa or dogma within Waldorf schools. In other words, which implicit beliefs are deeply rooted in the collective consciousness within a Waldorf community and which prescribed core principles must be present for a school to be considered a Waldorf school? In this context, it is also interesting to look at the identity and profiling of Waldorf schools. To what extent do Philippine Waldorf schools identify as Filipino, and to what extent do they position themselves rather as part of an international movement?

Secondly, I would like to briefly focus on the notion of world-centred education, a term coined by Gert Biesta (2022). Strictly speaking, Biesta does not offer a full emic perspective, since he is an educational philosopher whose ideas extend far beyond the Waldorf community. On the other hand, Biesta is an open sympathizer of Waldorf education, and his work is often cited in Waldorf schools to provide for the contemporary language it offers to explain ideals and principles of Waldorf education. Biesta is mainly known for his tripartite division regarding the goals of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. Within Waldorf networks, this division is often compared to the threefold Waldorf ideals of thinking, feeling, and willing. In his book *World-Centred Education: A View for the Present* (2022), Biesta offers a clear perspective on the dilemma of how far a school should adapt to the society it is situated in. Interestingly, Biesta adopts a different position from the one that I have sketched above, suggesting that the localization of curricula is important. He argues that schools should be careful about conforming too closely to the societies in which they are situated, since they are also responsible for carrying the ideals that will shape the societies of the future. In this mirrored line of thought, which I offer here as a nuance to the above approaches, it can be concluded that it is not schools that have to adapt to society, but rather society that, in a sense, should conform to schools by allowing them to function as protected practice spaces for students. Ideally, according to Biesta, the school does not fully admit the world

[20] See Stockmeyer's account (2015) for a more 'traditional' or 'original' image of the Waldorf curriculum. Stockmeyer was a teacher at the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart, Germany.

but provides subtle openings to it. In this process, in which the school is a place for practice, students gradually become aware of themselves and can then choose how they want to manifest themselves in the world. Biesta argues that schools are allowed to be 'stubborn' towards society by protecting students from its influences so that they can later learn to function well within it and, eventually, participate in society as mature, self-conscious, creative, and autonomous individuals capable of changing society in positive ways.

Methodology

Ethnographic case study

The overarching research method of this study is the *ethnographic case study* (i.a. Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Van Maanen 2011). The method positions the research as being qualitative, inductive, explorative, interpretative, and descriptive. This method is considered most appropriate for effectuating Tsing's (2005) *ethnography of global connections* and for achieving the research objectives of this study, namely to gain insight into the emergence of Waldorf education in the Philippines as a concrete trajectory within the broader project of globalizing Waldorf education.

Ethnographic case studies have a long tradition in anthropology (i.a. Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, Van Maanen 2011). Where anthropologists traditionally adopted a holistic style of ethnographic inquiry, this eventually led to methodological problems when less isolated communities were studied and urban anthropology was introduced (Eriksen 1995, 236). In response, anthropologists of the Manchester School developed the method of ethnographic case study research (i.a. Fortes 1945; Gluckman 1940). Since then, this method has been extended to all major subfields in the discipline, including education (i.a. Woods 1986). The method is deemed naturalistic rather than rationalistic (Lincoln and Guba 1985), because it involves an in-depth, long-term investigation of a particular social setting or group, in this case a Waldorf school in a rural Philippine setting. Today, the long-term approach of this research method is under pressure due to a lack of time and resources for many researchers, including myself. I have combined this research with an intense teacher's job and a busy family life. Although some scholars have called for a more pragmatic, short-term approach in ethnographic research (i.a. Vidrola-Padros 2020), the general credo still applies: the longer, the better. The method makes use of a broad range of ethnographic techniques, including in-depth interviews and the classic anthropological method of participant observation (Agar 1980; Spradley 1980). An ethnographic case study is a particularly good method for the in-depth understanding of one specific case. It allows us to gain insight into the dynamics and complexities of the case, including the social interactions and cultural practices within the school, while situating these within broader societal structures and global connections. By extending the analysis beyond the immediate fieldwork site, it is possible to connect the specific and local observations and experiences of the school under study with larger social theories, as well as broader trends and typical phenomena. Ultimately, this provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of emerging Waldorf education in the Philippines, in connection with a network of global interactions. The inductive and explorative character of this research

method involves the processing of field notes according to the method of *thick description* (Geertz 1973); in other words, providing a detailed account of social actions, meanings, and observations within their context.

In ethnographic case studies, generalizability and researchers' reflexivity are major concerns. A common criticism of ethnographic case studies is the allegedly limited potential for generalizability, due to the complex data sets and challenging replicability. Because this method focuses on a detailed study of a specific group or context, the findings are often difficult to generalize to other groups or contexts. This contrasts with the contextual depth that is provided: although the findings are not easily generalizable, the method offers deep insights into specific social settings that are valuable for understanding complex social phenomena. Additionally, although empirical generalization might be difficult, theoretical generalization is possible: researchers can use the results to develop broader theories and refine existing ones, which allows for indirect generalization to other contexts.

Reflexivity and positionality are also important considerations in ethnographic case studies. Close and prolonged interaction with the study group can lead to researcher bias, whereby the researcher's own beliefs, values, or personal connections influence the interpretation of data. Reflexivity is therefore crucial. Researchers can apply reflexive practices, such as continually evaluating their own biases and influence on the research, seeking feedback and peer review, and being self-critical and transparently reporting their position and perspectives (Davies 2008).[21]

As part of the overarching ethnographic research method, various types of data have been collected and analysed in multiple ways during four periods of fieldwork, in 2017, 2018 (2x) and 2020:

1. *Participant observation* (Agar 1980, Spradley 1980), by hanging around in and around the school, in the teachers' lounge, the classrooms, and the school yard, while chatting with teachers, students, parents, supporting staff, and casual passers-by. Partly participating, partly observing. In many ways and during many events: while teaching, being in a teachers' meeting, supervising class outings and camps, joining school-related events, participating in anthroposophical study groups, going to the barangay fiesta, dancing, eating, and singing karaoke at birthday parties, stroll in the nearby shopping mall, observing daily village life in front of a sari sari shop, improvising in the local drama club, cycling through the rice fields, just walking through the village (barangay), visiting the neighbouring public school, shop and chat at the local market, participate in conferences, etc.
2. *A desk study of relevant documents*, including the school's mission statement, school policies, curriculum plans, minutes of meetings, student reports and students' work.
3. *Class observations:* I visited classes from most year levels and observed most teachers

[21] See below for my own reflections on positionality.

to obtain a broad impression of the educational practice in the school. Often, I just sat in the back of the classroom, observing and making notes.

4. *In-depth interviews* with members of the school community, including teachers, support staff, parents, and students. I also conducted interviews with key informants, including the school director and leading persons within the Philippine Waldorf movement as well as representatives of other schools, especially of the nearby public school.
5. *Focus group discussions* with teachers and students at the school, as well as at the nearby public school, on issues that need deeper understanding, especially issues requiring clarity regarding how certain arguments relate to each other.
6. *Questionnaires* were used for Chapters 5 and 6, as well as a standardized test on spelling (Schonell test) to explicitly and quantitatively compare Waldorf educational results with those of a public school nearby.[22]

Positionality of the researcher

I now want to address my position as a researcher. As both a Waldorf school teacher and an anthropologist, it may seem logical, given my personal biography, for me to focus on this research topic, approaching it almost as an auto-ethnographic project (Ellis et al. 2011). However, this dual role also raises questions. Can I write impartially about Waldorf education when I am also a proponent of its underlying philosophy? How do I guard against blind spots? It is indeed challenging to avoid the suspicion of partiality in such a position (See also Dhondt et al. 2015). Interestingly, I have faced accusations from opposite ends of the spectrum. I have been labelled, on the one hand, a cold scientist lacking passion for Waldorf education, and, on the other, someone engaged not in scholarship but in propaganda. This contradictory criticism was directed at the same text, which is now Chapter 4 of this dissertation. I have been seen as either too critical or not critical enough. In Chapter 2, I discuss the dilemmas of conducting research in a familiar context. While my positionality can raise questions and may come with certain challenges, I argue in Chapter 2 that becoming a teacher-ethnographer in a familiar educational setting is an asset.

I can wholeheartedly say that I am enthusiastic about my work as a Waldorf school teacher and see much value in Waldorf education, both in my own teaching environment in the Netherlands and in the Philippines. I have also learned a great deal from the pioneering spirit in the Philippines, which has been a source of inspiration for me. At the

[22] This quantitative research technique is the odd one out in the list. I chose it because it makes triangulation of data possible and it provides a benchmark for comparison with the nearby public school. Moreover, it fits the multidisciplinary nature of this research, since it was carried out under the supervision of two academic institutes with different academic traditions. The qualitative ethnographic approach fits into the tradition of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, the institute where I was trained and supervised by Prof Gerard Persoon and Dr Sabine Luning, whereas the use of quantitative methods, as seen in Chapters 5 and 6, is more common in the Institute of Education and Child Studies. My supervisor there, Prof Paul Vedder, became co-author of these chapters and assisted me with the quantitative data analysis.

same time, this research has allowed me to highlight significant challenges facing Waldorf education today. Although I have avoided excessive use of quotes from Rudolf Steiner in this dissertation, I will include one now:

'We must be aware of the great tasks we face. We must not be mere pedagogues; we must be people who live with the culture, who stand in the midst of the culture of our time. We must have a lively interest in everything that is happening in our time, otherwise, we will be poor teachers for this school. We must not only devote ourselves to our special task area. We will only be good teachers if we have a lively interest in everything that is happening in the world. It is precisely this interest in the world that can give us the enthusiasm we need for our school and for our work. This requires a flexible mind and dedication to our task.'

Rudolf Steiner in *Study of Man: General Education Course,* 20 August, 1919.[23]

On this point, I strongly agree with Rudolf Steiner. The interest in our time and world has ultimately driven the formation of this research. In Waldorf schools, as elsewhere, we must be careful not to become rigid but to move with the times and meaningfully connect with our students to bring them into contact with the world.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation provides a comprehensive view of emerging Waldorf education in the Philippines through a case study of a Waldorf school in Central Philippines. Divided into seven chapters, it aims to present a rich and diverse portrait of the school under study. Chapters 2 to 6 were each previously published as an article in an academic journal or book and correspond to important sub-domains – or research questions – related to the main research objective. With the exception of a few minor corrections, these chapters are identical to the original publications. Intermezzos are included between the chapters. These intermezzos are intended as ethnographic enrichments – small vignettes from the field – each providing a glimpse of an aspect of the research, both visually and verbally, in the form of photographs and short stories.

The second chapter contributes to the methodological foundation of this research as it provides the rationale for doing ethnographic research in a Philippine Waldorf school. It can be read as a justification of the overall research approach. Why would a teacher want to conduct ethnographic research in a school, especially as a Waldorf educator in a familiar environment? The chapter explores issues of positionality and dilemmas

[23] For this quote I used the Dutch version of Steiner's Study of Man: General Education Course: R. Steiner (2010). Algemene Menskunde als Basis voor de Pedagogie. 4th ed. Zeist: Vrij Geestesleven. The quote can be found on pages 15-16 in the introduction lecture, held on the eve of the first Waldorf teacher course on 20 August, 1919. I translated it from Dutch. This lecture has not been included in the English translation of the course.

faced by educational ethnographers, ultimately supporting the argument that teacher-ethnographers bring a unique perspective to educational research due to their grounded, insider view and close engagement with stakeholders.

Note: Although this chapter has a reflective character – especially in relation to Chapter 4 – and therefore could well have been placed at the end of the dissertation, I have chosen to begin with it, as it also sets out a condition that forms an important premise for all the chapters that follow.

The third chapter delves into the following question: What defining stories, views, and experiences related to the emergence and early dissemination of Philippine Waldorf education are conveyed by key actors? Through biographical narratives of three school founders, this chapter tells the history of Philippine Waldorf education from within. The protagonists' narratives illuminate the meanings they attributed to life events and the pivotal actions and encounters in establishing Waldorf schools. Following Anna Tsing's (2005) proposed method, the chapter traces concrete trajectories of globalizing projects and analyses zones of awkward engagement. It also examines differences among various Waldorf schools in the Philippines, linking them to school missions and underlying anthroposophical principles, reflecting engaged founders' ideals.

The fourth chapter tackles the question: How, in a globalizing context, are the educational ideals and practices of Waldorf education adapted in a local Philippine educational setting and, as part of that process, how does the staff of one particular school deal with Eurocentrism in the curriculum? It investigates the extent and manner in which the curriculum of the studied Waldorf school, which mainly aims for personal development, reflects Eurocentrism. One example discussed is a series of history lessons on the Age of Exploration, intertwining students' developmental phases with historical figures like Magellan, 'the discoverer of the Philippines'. The chapter discusses how such Eurocentric elements are perceived as problematic by teachers within a Waldorf educational context, but it also highlights the complexities of addressing and negotiating these issues.

The fifth chapter addresses the question: What is the educational quality of Philippine Waldorf education compared to Philippine public education? What is the added value? Drawing grounded conclusions proves challenging; however, the perception of Waldorf schools as academically deficient is not supported by this research. Yet, it is also not conclusively demonstrated that Waldorf schools significantly outperform other schools, even regarding so-called soft educational goals, such as being more motivated for school and learning. The chapter concludes that while quality differences cannot be made easily, Waldorf education certainly approaches certain aspects differently and therefore it enriches the local educational landscape through diversity and providing students and parents with the choice of an alternative pedagogical approach and curricular contents.

Note: This chapter stands out from the previous ones due to its partially quantitative approach, stemming from the interdisciplinary background of this research, which, in addition to being grounded in cultural anthropology, is also rooted in the field of

pedagogical sciences. The quantitative research component responds to the research tradition of that institute, while at the same time representing an attempt to ground ethnographic knowledge quantitatively.

The sixth chapter explores the question: What is the identity and image of Philippine Waldorf education? Does the Waldorf school succeed in gaining a sustainable foothold in the Philippines and in putting its educational and social ideals into practice? The paradox emerges that urban success distances the school from its rural community, contrary to its ideal of serving that community. Like the fifth chapter, this chapter discusses Waldorf education's potential impact on the broader Philippine education landscape, indicating a limited impact despite diversifying it. Its limited popularity within the village community, stemming from a sense of alienation, means that the school largely remains an educational niche, albeit a beautiful one for those in it. This chapter, like the previous one, partly relies on quantitative data.

Finally, the seventh chapter provides for an overview and discussion of the preceding chapters.

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Visual Impressions of the Village of Libongcogon

The village of Libongcogon is home to the Gamot Cogon Waldorf School. Libongcogon is a barangay in the municipality of Zarraga, in the province of Iloilo, in the Central Philippines (the Visayas), on the island of Panay. It has approximately 1000 inhabitants (2020 census). The Gamot Cogon Waldorf School attracts students from Libongcogon and nearby barangays, from the town of Zarraga (about 4 kilometres away) and from neighbouring towns, and from Iloilo City (around 20 kilometres or a 30-minute drive away). Gamot Cogon means grassroots, alluding to the school's origin and mission: a school that emerged from this community and aims to serve it as well. Cogon refers to a local type of grass with an extensive, interconnected root system. Gamot can also refer to a medicine, an apt metaphor given the school's desire to provide education with a healing quality for individuals, as well as the community thry live in.

Figure 1 | Libongcogon, 11 January 2017. Houses in the village centre, in the main side street off Jalandoni Street, with puddles after the rain and a small sari sari shop and tricycle in front.

Figure 2 | Libongcogon, 11 January 2017. House in Jalandoni Street, the main road to Zarraga.

Figure 3 | Libongcogon, 11 January 2017. A kalabaw (water buffalo), the traditional working animal in the Philippines. Libongcogon is in an agrarian landscape of rice fields and fishponds.

Figure 4 | Libongcogon, 11 January 2017. Side road off Jalandoni Street leading to the Gamot Cogon Waldorf School. Children going to school by tricycle.

Figure 5 | Libongcogon, 11 January 2017. Jalandoni Street. Some houses are built on stilts to protect them from flood damage. Entering the village, a warning sign reads 'Flooding Area'. The nearby Jalaur River regularly floods. The school area has also been flooded several times.

Figure 6 | Aerial photo of the Gamot Cogon Waldorf School in Libongcogon, retrieved 8 November 2025, from www.gamotcogon.org. The photo shows the location of the school in relation to Libongcogon village centre.

Figure 7 | Aerial photo of Gamot Cogon Waldorf School in Libongcogon, retrieved 8 November 2025, from www.gamotcogon.org. The photo shows the heptagonal structure of the buildings, characteristic of an organic, anthroposophical architectural style. This style is also reflected in the use of natural materials and the building's harmonious integration into the natural environment.