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

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Summary

This dissertation provides an ethnographic account of a Filipino Waldorf school, exploring how Waldorf education manifests in a Philippine setting. While the case itself is unique, it also offers insights into the globalization of Waldorf education.

The main findings of this study are as follows:

Methodological contribution: This dissertation offers a rationale for what may be called the teacher-ethnographer's view. This perspective arises from research conducted by teachers within educational settings – such as Waldorf teachers studying Waldorf education. Although this proximity to the research subject entails the risk of certain biases, it also generates rich, lived data from within and allows for the more direct initiation of improvements in educational practice.

Theoretical contribution: The dissertation advocates the use of Anna Tsing's approach to globalization. Her framework – often referred to as the ethnography of global connections – posits that globalization processes are rather concrete than abstract. Researchers should therefore focus on concrete, specific cases and examine the so-called zones of awkward engagement: sites of encounter where seemingly universal concepts acquire new local meanings. In such zones, confusion, friction, and at times brilliance may emerge. Tsing's approach also provides a rationale for choosing a traditional ethnographic research approach, as this allows for depth and specificity of insight.

In the context of Filipino Waldorf education, zones of awkward engagement include the incorporation of anthroposophical concepts into Filipino frames of reference; the classroom encounters between children of diverse backgrounds – urban and rural, wealthy and poor; and the tensions arising from Eurocentric curricular content in an Ilonggo school.

Empirical contribution: This study is among the few that examine the globalization of Waldorf education, and perhaps the only one to do so within a Philippine context. Its value also lies in the detailed empirical exploration of the aforementioned areas of friction. In the social sphere, one striking finding is the decreasing proportion of village children compared to the growing number of urban students. This may be explained by the school's ideals – such as its emphasis on holistic personal development and an alternative lifestyle featuring healthy and often vegetarian food, ecological and sustainable practices, and limited screen time and social media use – which tend to resonate more strongly with the cultural capital and expectations of urban middle-class families seeking alternative forms of education than with those of poorer rural families, for whom such ideals may feel alienating. The use of English as the main language of instruction, the presence of international visitors, and the daily stream of cars from the city intensify this sense of distance. Yet, alongside such friction, there is also brilliance: in the classroom, children play and learn together, and a sense of equality prevails.

In the cultural sphere, friction is also evident, particularly in the curriculum. While the curriculum is perceived as innovative and cosmopolitan, it also contains many Eurocentric elements, such as Grimm's fairy tales or lessons on famous European explorers. At the same time, the Waldorf emphasis on arts, movement, and creativity provides a meaningful alternative to mainstream educational approaches that focus narrowly on achievement and cognition. This, too, represents a form of awkward brilliance.

Call for localized Waldorf education: This dissertation calls for the development of contemporary and localized Waldorf education. The underlying assumption is that students learn better and experience greater well-being when they feel a sense of belonging and recognition within their educational environment. Waldorf teachers often describe this relational process as artistic teaching, since it requires a form of social artistry – crafting lessons in the moment, in dialogue with students, so that content resonates deeply with them. In practice, this proves challenging. True alignment calls on teachers to be both anthroposophists and anthropologists, so that, grounded in a deep understanding of human development, they can translate a Waldorf vision into a curriculum rooted in local culture and community.

Practical relevance: Finally, the practical relevance of this study lies in its reflective function. The mirror it offers will differ for each reader and perspective. For myself, as a developing person, teacher, and school leader within a Waldorf school, this reflection is immediate. I view this research as a call to action and continuous improvement. I deeply hope it will inspire others too in their pursuit of contemporary and culturally inclusive (Waldorf) education.