



Tracking the history of Waldorf education in Iceland

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M.Ed. Thesis
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School of Education Studies



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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M.Ed. Thesis in Education Studies

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Preface

In “Tracking the history of Waldorf education in Iceland”, a 30 credits Master of Education thesis, I present an exploratory study that deals with the development of Waldorf education in Iceland. Being essentially a qualitative and phenomenological enquiry, my aim has been to re-build the history behind the current Waldorf initiatives in the country. Due to the lack of written sources on this matter, the core of the data was drawn from Waldorf educators’ own accounts of their work experience with this pedagogy for more than a decade. My interest in the subject began in 2011, when I became acquainted with one of the Waldorf pre-schools operating in Reykjavik. As a pre-school teacher educated in Iceland in the early 2000s, I was surprised to realise how little I had heard about these educational initiatives. The stories I came to know not only contributed to a better understanding of the socio-cultural context in which I was working, but increased my respect and admiration for the persons who have pioneered this pedagogy in Iceland.

I want to express my deep gratitude to the participants in my research, who happily and generously shared with me their views and experiences. Without their willingness and trust, this study would not have been possible.

I am grateful to my supervisors, Ólafur Páll Jónsson and Arna Hólmfríður Jónsdóttir, for their interest and openness towards the theme of my study, which encouraged me to follow through. Also, I thank them for their comments to improve the present text. Not least, I appreciate indeed that they were accessible every time I needed to contact them, and were diligent in reading and providing feedback.

I also want to thank Gregory Barret for doing the English proofreading of the thesis, and Inga Heiða Hjörleifsdóttir for her help with the abstract.

I am deeply grateful to my children, Sunna Adriana and Danum Logi, who had much patience and understanding during the long hours I spent absorbed in my work.

Abstract

In Iceland there are two Waldorf primary schools and three pre-schools. In spite of having existed for almost two decades, this pedagogy is scarcely known locally, and there is no written information on the work done by these schools. Wishing to contribute to fill in this gap, in this study I aimed to answer the question: 'What has been the development of Waldorf education in Iceland?' To accomplish this task, I gathered information on the events that led to the creation of these educational settings, their founders' motivations to become involved with this pedagogy, and what have been the main challenges and strengths when implementing this pedagogy. Following the qualitative research tradition, I interviewed six Icelandic Waldorf educators, who have been working for more than ten years in the field. Thus, the study was essentially exploratory and empirical, privileging a phenomenological perspective. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using open coding. The first Steiner/Waldorf educative initiative occurred in 1930 when Sólheimar was founded as an orphanage for normal and disabled children. A group of Icelanders was inspired by this project, and by the anthroposophic community in Jarna (Sweden), which led in 1990 to the formation of Lækjarbotnar (Kópavogur). Their main motivation was to provide Waldorf education to their own children. In 1994, due to different views towards the future, the founding group split, leading to the creation of Sólstafir (Reykjavik). Since then, both initiatives have been providing Waldorf pedagogy from pre-school level to 10th grade. They aim to provide a holistic education, where each child is supported in her process of unfolding her capacities. Thus, the human faculties of thinking, feeling and willing are nurtured simultaneously, by integrating artistic and intellectual work, and by implementing a curriculum which is in accordance with the child's developmental stage. Social, environmental and spiritual values are cultivated in the daily rhythm, and the practice of running the school.

Ágrip

Saga Waldorf uppeldisfræðinnar á Íslandi

Á Íslandi eru tveir Waldorf grunnskólar og þrír leikskólar. Waldorf barnafræðsla (*e. Pedagogy*) er lítið þekkt menntastefna hér á landi þrátt fyrir að hafa verið starfrækt hér, í sinni núverandi mynd, í meira en tvo áratugi. Til eru litlar sem engar skriflegar upplýsingar um þá starfsemi sem fer fram og er markmið mitt hér að fylla í þá eyðu. Í þessari rannsókn leitast ég við að svara spurningunni „Hver er þróun Waldorf menntunar á Íslandi?“. Ég safnaði upplýsingum um þá atburði sem leiddu til stofnunar Waldorf skólanna, hvað fékk stofnendur þeirra til að nota þessa tilteknu menntastefnu og skoða hverjar helstu hindranir og styrkleikar í framkvæmd hennar hafa verið. Ég notaðist við eigindlegar rannsóknaraðferðir og tók viðtöl viðsex íslenska Waldorf kennara, sem allir hafa unnið samkvæmt stefnunni í meira en tíu ár. Í rannsókninni beiti ég fyrirbærafræðilegu sjónarhorni og safna gögnum sem byggja á reynslu fólks. Viðtölin voru afrituð og greind með opinni kóðun. Fyrsti staðurinn sem nýtti sér menntastefnu Steiner/Waldorf hér á Íslandi voru *Sólheimar*, stofnaðir árið 1930, en þar var rekið heimili fyrir munaðarlaus börn, bæði fötluð og ófötluð. Starfið á Sólheimum og mannspeki samfélagið Jarna í Svíþjóð veitti síðan hópi Íslendinga innblástur til þess að stofna *Lækjarbotna* (Kópavogi) árið 1990. Þeirra helsta hvatning til að hefja starið var að geta veit sínum eigin börnum Waldorf menntun. Árið 1994, vegna ágreinings um framtíðarsýn starfsins, skiptust stofnendurnir í tvær fylkingar og leiddi það til stofnunar Sólstafa í Reykjavík. Síðan þá hafa báðir þessir hópar veitt Waldorf barnafræðslu frá leikskólastigi til tíunda bekkjar í grunnskóla, hvor með sínu sniði. Markmið þeirra beggja er að veita heildræna menntun, þar sem hvert og eitt barn fær stuðning til þess að komast að því hvað í því býr. Þar eru mannlegir eiginleikar eins og hugsun, tilfinningar og vilji nærð samtímis, með því að vefja saman listræna og vitsmunalega vinnu, og hafa námskrá sem er í samræmi við þroskastig hvers barns fyrir sig. Félags-, umhverfis- og andleg gildi eru ræktuð í leik og starfi sem og í daglegum rekstri skólans.

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1 Introduction

After a decade dedicated to anthropology in my home country (Chile), in 1997 I moved to Iceland and soon I started to work at a pre-school in Reykjavík. In 1999 I initiated studies in early childhood education, but Waldorf education did not figure among the approaches taught at the Iceland University of Education (*Kennaraháskóla Íslands*), neither at the Complutense University of Madrid, where I did part of my B.Ed. studies.

In 2003, by chance, I came across a book dealing with this approach, *You Are Your Child's First Teacher*, by Rahima Baldwin Dancy, which from its first paragraph captured my attention as I felt fresh air blowing on my stagnant views:

Parents today are bombarded by contradictions when they look for advice about how to act with their children. We need not another authority or set of rules by which to raise children, but a new way of seeing and understanding the human being. If we can enlarge our understanding of child and adult development to encompass the whole human being –body, mind, emotions, and spirit— then we will be best equipped to make our own decisions based on a combination of cognitive and intuitive knowledge (Baldwin, 1989, p. ix).

The major novelties I recognized in the previous words –compared to what I was used to hear and find in my studies and workplace— were the considerations of both child and adult development; the explicit mention of ‘spirit’ as a constituent of the human being; and, the reference not only to cognitive but also to ‘intuitive’ knowledge. After reading this book my interest grew and I initiated a process of self-study, which intensified in 2007, when my children attended a Waldorf school in Santiago (Chile), and I studied and worked as a ‘Waldorf’ pre-school teacher.

In 2011 I returned to Iceland and wanted to find out if there were Waldorf schools in Reykjavík. Searching on the internet and the website of the Municipality of Reykjavík, I found two primary schools (*Sólstafir*¹ and

¹ www.waldorf.is

*Lækjarbotnar*²) and two pre-schools (*Sólstafir* in *Grundarstígur* and *Sólstafir í Höfn*). To my surprise, I learnt that the schools had been operating since 1994 and 1990 respectively: Why had I never heard before about these organizations?

In 2012 I started to work at *Sólstafir í Höfn* and wanted to know about the history of my new work place, and Waldorf education in Iceland. I found no written information on these matters, and the little that I could obtain from the schools' websites and brochures was written in Icelandic. The most valuable information that I managed to gather (that is, that gave me an idea of what had occurred) came from informal exchanges with people that had been working in the field for many years. Their stories and anecdotes did not satisfy my curiosity, and often worked as pieces of a puzzle that left me with more questions instead of allowing me to see the whole picture.

So although I thought at some point of my M.Ed. studies I would have liked to undertake an action research to support my professional development (i.e. considering my own involvement with Waldorf education, and my interest in finding out how I could improve my work) (McNiff, 2010, pp. 30,78), I also found that the question on the development of Waldorf education in Iceland became a "permanent companion", a "burning interest", that if considered it as a research question, I could "live with it" for many months (Finser, 2007, pp. 24-25).

Not least, while attending an international conference on Waldorf early childhood education in 2012³, after listening to panellists who came from a variety of countries and continents, I was surprised to find out how diverse the realization of this pedagogy was. Amongst other reasons, this was possible because the views and concepts offered by Anthroposophy –the philosophy or world view on which Waldorf education is grounded— were assessed and emphasized differently depending on the practitioners' cultural background. Thus, ideas such as karma and re-incarnation made

² <http://www.vefsmidjan.is/waldorf/skol.aspx>

³ World Early Childhood Conference "The Journey of the 'I' into Life: a final destination or a path toward freedom", April 1-5 2012, Goetheanum, Dornach (Switzerland), organized by the Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum, and the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) council. At the conference there were 1,100 participants from 54 countries.

much sense to Asian people, whereas for Africans the importance given to the adult's role model played a major part for choosing the Waldorf approach to education. Then, I realised that I had no idea what the 'hook' was that had awakened some Icelanders' interest towards embracing this pedagogy.

Qualitative research having gained its place in education as a "research mode that emphasizes description, induction, grounded theory, and the study of people's understanding" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. ix), in my study I relied on people's experience and memories to produce a veritable account of the development of Waldorf education in Iceland. This might result in a modest contribution, a version among many other possibilities, but I hope it will provide a 'starting point' for building this history.

This thesis is organized in four parts: (i) introduction, (ii) theoretical framework, (iii) research findings, and (iv) discussion. Continuing with this first section, I describe the research project, indicating the main aims and questions; I refer to the methodology and the processes I used in the data collection and analysis; ending with a discussion on the ethical issues involved in this study. In the second part, the theoretical framework, I describe the situation of Waldorf education worldwide today; I provide a glimpse into Anthroposophy, which is at the core of Waldorf education; also, I depict the view of child development that sustains this pedagogy; and, I end this part with a characterization of Waldorf education. In the third part, the main and most extensive chapter of this thesis, I present the core of my data (gathered, analysed and interpreted), where I provide information on the historical development of Waldorf education in Iceland, its educators' motivations to become involved with this pedagogy, and the strengths and difficulties they have faced in relation to the implementation of this approach. In the last section, I return to my initial research questions, which I answer in the light of the findings just described, and I suggest some implications.

1.1 The research project

I defined this study as **basic research** as the main purpose was to produce knowledge as 'an end in itself', focused on a personal intellectual interest (Finser, 2007, p. 82); and hopefully, it would "contribute to the knowledge available" (Finser, 2007, p. 49) on the history of education in Iceland. Considering how the research developed, and the many themes that emerged that could have been investigated deeper, it is fair to say that this was essentially an exploratory and empirical study.

Attending to the variety of theoretical traditions found in the qualitative inquiry, the perspective that I used in my study was phenomenology, as the central research question is to reveal “the structure and essence of experience of the phenomenon for the people” (Finser, 2007, p. 81) involved in my query.

The **research problem**⁴ –understood as the angle(s) or perspective on a situation that justify or explain ‘why to do’ a research— was informed by the need to:

- contextualize my own practice as a Waldorf pre-school teacher in Iceland;
- fill in a gap of information in the history of education in Iceland;
- provide specific information on the Waldorf approach locally; and
- search an explanation of why Waldorf education, which has being developed in the Nordic countries since its beginnings in the early 1920s, is hardly known in Iceland.

The **research aim** or purpose of my study, therefore, was to learn about the historical development of Waldorf education in Iceland, the main **research question** being ‘What has been the development of Waldorf education in Iceland?’

Other **research questions** –as focuses that reflect on the aim to be implemented in the research project— were:

- Why did initiators/teachers choose to work with this approach?
- What does/did Waldorf Education offer to these persons?
- How do they see/assess this option in the context of the ‘traditional’ or ‘mainstream’ Icelandic educational system?
- What are the strengths, facilities, and/or positive aspects of implementing Waldorf education in Iceland?
- What are the weaknesses, difficulties, and/or negative aspects of implementing Waldorf education in Iceland?

The research objectives –series pursued that collectively tackle and cover the previous questions— were:

⁴ The following description is based on the research structure suggested by Lankshear & Knobel (2004, p. 25).

- to interview Icelandic people that have worked in the educational field inspired by the Waldorf approach; and,
- to produce an account of the development of Waldorf education in Iceland, identifying key situations and landmarks.

1.2 Methodology

In this study I did **qualitative research** as my intention was to “explore a problem and develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 16), in this case, the development of Waldorf education in Iceland. This approach to research seemed to be the most appropriate as I was dealing with a ‘research problem’ in which I did not know the variables, and I needed to explore it. The literature review yielded almost no information on the phenomenon, therefore the main source of data were the participants in my research. Their accounts took the form of a text database that I analysed and interpreted. Consequently, the themes and descriptions provided in this thesis are the result of the interplay among the views expressed by the participants, the research questions mentioned above, and my insights and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2012, pp. 17-18).

The research design used was **case study** (Creswell, 2012, pp. 465-466) which is “a variation of ethnography in that the researcher provides an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g. an activity, an event, a process, or an individual) based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, 2012, p. 617). This strategy seemed pertinent as it aims to develop an in-depth understanding of a ‘case’ or bounded system” (in this case, Waldorf education in Iceland), approaching it as a “process” that has to be unveiled and described (the local development and history of this approach) (Creswell, 2012, p. 478).

1.2.1 Data collection

The data collection contemplated three sources of information: semi-structured interviews, document collection, and research journal.

In the context of this study, **semi-structured interview** is understood as a research method where the researcher asks to the informants one or more “general, open-ended questions and record their answers. The researcher then transcribes and types the data into a computer file for analysis” (Creswell, 2012, p. 217). Thus, the emphasis when interviewing is on eliciting desired information from someone, allowing the collection of a wide range of data (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 35). By using this

method, I favoured that participants could “voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2012, p. 218).

In terms of determining the sample, I applied **purposeful sampling** to select my interviewees, thus privileging those that could best help me to gather information on Waldorf education in Iceland. More specifically, I used two sampling strategies, called **critical sampling** and **snowball sampling**. The former privileges individuals and/or research site that represent the central phenomenon in dramatic terms, and the researcher can learn much about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). Snowball sampling, which refers to receiving suggestions from the interviewees to whom else to contact (Creswell, 2012, p. 209), served me to identify one of the participants.

Initially, my intention was to contact six Icelandic persons, who have been or had worked in Waldorf education in Iceland for a minimum of ten years. I should ensure to have at least two informants that were related to *Sólstafir* school, and two to *Lækjarbotnar* school. In practice, these aims were almost fully met, except for one of the participants who had foreign origin. The sample of six interviewees included:

- Two men and four women
- All were teachers (three related to each school)
- Five of them were also Waldorf parents
- Four were members of the ‘founding group’
- Four had worked in *Sólheimar*
- All of them had studied abroad Anthroposophy and some speciality (e.g. biodynamic agriculture, eurhythmy, art therapy)
- Four had studied Waldorf pedagogy
- Three had master degree
- Two had studied in an Icelandic university
- Their ages ranged between 30s and 50s

In terms of access and ‘gatekeepers’, I sent an e-mail to the Icelandic Anthroposophic Society informing about my study. Later, I made contact through e-mail and telephone with few of its members, and other people that I had met through my work at *Sólstafir í Höfn*.

Thus, I did six interviews, which length varied between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours. Two interviews occurred at my home, one in a school, and the

other three in public places (such as restaurants and coffee houses). In terms of the language used, five were conducted in English and one in Icelandic. After being transcribed, a text of approximately 52,000 words was produced. This constituted the base for the analysis, and the source from which I chose the quotations that I use through the text.

Another research method I used for gathering data was **document collection** (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 35). That is, I searched and reviewed any written document that could provide information on the topic studied. Nevertheless, the information I draw together was not useful to 'reconstruct the past' of Waldorf education in Iceland, a possibility that often is associated to this method. Still, what I found helped me to support or enhance some of the themes that emerged from the interviews. Not least, it allowed me to corroborate how little written information is available on Waldorf education in Iceland. The documents I managed to gather were:

- Information provided by the websites of the two schools;
- brochure from one of the schools, advertising its work;
- E-mails exchanged with a researcher at the Rudolf Steiner College University (RSCU) in Norway (which I refer as personal communication in the text);
- two B.A. dissertations related to Waldorf education in Iceland and/or linked to Anthroposophy (Jóhannesdóttir, 2010; and Ævarsdóttir and Sigurjónsdóttir, 2010); and one master thesis done at the RSCU⁵ (Óskarsdóttir, 2009).
- An article published in a local magazine (Gissurardóttir, 2012)
- Articles from anthroposophic institutions related to Waldorf education, retrieved from their websites (namely the Goetheanum and IASWECE).

Originally, I planned to get documents and information from the Ministry of Education and the Municipality of Reykjavik, but I realised that this would demand a research in itself, and I had a limited time to produce my thesis. Among other things, while gathering data I found that there

⁵ I heard of another MA thesis done at RSCU, by Shavana Zamar, which also informs on the work done at a Waldorf school in Iceland, dealing with artistic work. Nevertheless, I did not manage to get it.

were two municipalities involved with Waldorf schools, instead of one. I also learnt that the Icelandic educational system has undergone major changes in its administration and responsibilities since the 1990s. And the history of the Association of Independent Schools in Iceland –an entity that I had not contemplated at all, but that has been crucial for the schools in my study— could be a research topic in itself. Not least, I considered these institutions might have their own ‘insider’ view –mostly related to regulations and political struggles— making uncertain that the information obtained from them would be helpful to bring light on my research topic (e.g. by studying documents, the emphasis would not be phenomenological anymore, but historical).

As part of my data collection I kept a research **journal** (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 36; Creswell, 2012, p. 212), which was useful to record sudden ideas, data on my informants, and, sketches done in the analysis.

1.2.2 Data analysis and interpretation

At this stage of the study, I worked on ‘making sense’ of the data gathered, first by analysing it (or breaking it down), and then by interpreting it (or doing a synthesis of it). In this process, the research questions provided the guiding light and necessary focus to move towards the research aim:

Analysis is about finding what is ‘in’ the data we collect that seems to us to be significant, and *interpretation* is about saying what this ‘implies’ or ‘means’ for the question or problem underpinning our study. It involves looking for trends and tendencies, patterns and regularities in the data, as well as for what seem to be interesting or significant exceptions and variations to these trends or patterns. Researchers use analytic tools and techniques to ‘work on’ the data in order to find what is ‘in there’. Analysis is always more than description or re-description. It tells us more than what is simply ‘on the surface’ of the data (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 38).

In the analysis of the interviews I used the qualitative analytic technique called **open coding**, which involves three sequential steps: (1) breaking down data into discrete parts and applying conceptual codes to it; (2) comparing and contrasting codes, and grouping sets of similar codes into conceptual categories; and (3) identifying the properties of each category by means of analytic questions, and locating each instance of a phenomenon belonging to this category along a continuum (i.e.

dimensionalizing) the data (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 38). Thus, I defined and attached 'codes' (or 'labels') to segments of the interviews (already transformed in text form) (Creswell, 2012, p. 618); and then I produced 'themes' by adding similar codes so to recognize the major ideas in the database (Creswell, 2012, p. 629). Next, following Creswell's 'clean' and lineal description, I layered and interrelated the themes (Creswell, 2012, p. 251). In my view, this description is applicable to what one does with 'one' interview, but the analysis –and truly, the whole research process– it never follows such order. For example in this study, I was transcribing interviews while doing new ones. Thus, the understanding that one builds in relation to the research topic, leading to conclusions and 'fix images', is the result of a very dynamic and enmeshed process.

Nevertheless, current methodological texts emphasise the distinction between analysis and interpretation: to accomplish the knowledge production process –as “the completed data analysis on its own is *not* an answer to the research question or a solution to the original problem” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 369)— **interpretation** needs to be performed. According to Wolcott (2001), unlike analysis, interpretation is derived “not from ‘rigorous, agreed-upon, carefully specified procedures, but from our efforts at sense making, a human activity that includes intuition, past experience, emotion –personal attributes of human researchers that can be argued endlessly but neither proved or disproved” (p. 33). In qualitative research it means that the researcher ‘steps back’ and forms some larger meaning about the phenomenon based on personal views, comparisons with past studies, or both. In this sense, qualitative research is essentially interpretative research (Creswell, 2012, p. 257). For Lankshear and Knobel (2004), interpretations “are a kind of imposed order that involves offering sound explanations of what took place in the data” (p. 370). Michael Patton (2002, p. 480) identifies three common forms that data interpretation can take: (i) making the obvious obvious; (ii) making the obvious dubious; and (iii) making the hidden obvious:

The first form focuses on confirming what is already known about a practice or event. The second calls a taken-for-granted position or social phenomenon into question and generally includes evidence-based critiques of extant practices and assumptions. The third draws attention to previously unconsidered relationships, events, practices and the like impact on education or the population being studied (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 370).

Ultimately, there are no guarantees of the veracity of any interpretation; neither is it possible to arrive at a single 'true' interpretation in any investigation. Nevertheless, researchers should strive to make their endeavours as rigorously and honestly as possible (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p. 371; Shamoo & Resnik, 2009, p. 29).

1.2.3 Ethical issues

As it has been agreed among qualitative researchers, I followed some guidelines of ethical practice, such as informing participants of the purpose of the study, refraining from deceptive practices, sharing information with them (e.g. related to my role as researcher), being respectful of the research site, used ethical interview practices, obtained the consent from the interviewees, and I have striven to maintain confidentiality (Creswell, 2012, p. 230).

Due to the people involved in Waldorf education in Iceland constitutes a small group, I considered the most sensitive ethical aspect of my research would deal with ensuring **confidentiality** of the information received, that is, protecting "confidential communication ... and records/data that identify individual research subjects" (Shamoo & Resnik, 2009, p. 29); and ensuring the **anonymity** of my informants. Therefore, when reporting I have developed a composite picture of the group (Creswell, 2012, p. 230), and quotations are not individualized in any way, not even linked to fake names. Still, I decided that when telling the story about the creation of the first school, in order to maintain its informative value, I gave pseudonyms to some of the key actors in the process. By doing this I am still protecting their anonymity in relation to the common reader, but I know that the people who participated in this process or that are close to Waldorf education, will recognize the real person behind the fake name. So, I do hope this will not carry negative effects to the people involved, whether research informants, those mentioned in the issues described, or the researcher herself.

In relation to this latter aspect, as I am acquainted with one of the Waldorf pre-schools and I am familiar with many of the people who work in this pedagogy, I consider myself in a very sensitive position too. Not so much in the sense of privileging some informant's views in detriment of others' –as an external reader commented to me– but in the sense of proceeding with much discretion and respect for my informants' views. Although I see myself as an 'insider' to this pedagogy, I am also an 'outsider' and 'newcomer' in the context of the Icelandic Waldorf experience.

2 Theoretical framework

In this study the theory that guided my inquiry was based on the concepts and views on education and child development proposed by Anthroposophy. This philosophy being at the core of Waldorf education, I have attempted to make sense of the data obtained by establishing a dialogue between the model proposed by Waldorf education, and the views provided by the informants.

Thus, in this section I do not pursue to present an apology of Waldorf education, neither to develop at length its theoretical precepts. My intention is to describe some of the main tenets of this educational approach, which later I use to assess how they resonate or not in the Icelandic practitioners. Therefore, my ultimate aim is not to contribute to educational theory, but to shed some light on the form in which this pedagogy has been implemented in Iceland.

2.1 The context of Waldorf education

In order to introduce Waldorf education and to establish a context from which to assess what is happening in Iceland, I consider necessary to give the reader a glimpse of the status and situation of this educational approach worldwide today.

Waldorf education (also known as Steiner education, due to its initiator) started at the beginning of the Twentieth century. The first Waldorf School opened in September 1919 in Stuttgart (Germany), and it was intended to serve the children of factory workers. Today there are 1,023 Waldorf and Rudolf Steiner schools in 60 countries (Friends of Waldorf Education, 2012, p. 3). This number corresponds to the official data gathered at the Goetheanum –the main quarters of the Anthroposophic movement– but there might be differences depending on the sources. Even more, if early-childhood education settings are included, the number of Waldorf initiatives increases: according to a recent reference, there are over 2,000 Steiner-Waldorf early years centres worldwide (Campani & Lang, 2013).

At the international level there are four organizations which are in charge of looking after the progress of, and ensuring the quality of the Waldorf School Movement. These bodies are:

- 1) the **International Forum of Waldorf/Steiner Schools (Hague Circle)**, founded in 1970 as an 'administrative forum' of the European school movement, it focuses on extending the global educational movement. Thus, it is closely connected with the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum, and it bears responsibility for the world teacher conferences and the world school list.
- 2) The **Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum**, which was founded at the same time as the Anthroposophical Society in 1923 (by Rudolf Steiner), has the mission of pursuing educational research and the development of anthroposophy-inspired pedagogy (www.paedagogik-goetheanum.ch).
- 3) **Friends of Waldorf Education (FPB)**, founded in 1971, is an association of former Waldorf students. Its mission is to support legally and economically the Waldorf schools worldwide, kindergartens and teacher training facilities. It also maintains cooperation with the German Ministry of Development Cooperation, with UNESCO, and ECSWE (www.freunde-waldorf.de); and,
- 4) **the European Council of Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE)**. A charitable organization, this body was founded in 1991. It focuses on EU policy and the general European exchange of experience. National Waldorf School Associations are corporate members (www.ecswe.org) (FPB, 2012, p. 3).

As it was mentioned, in 2012 there were 1,023 Waldorf schools worldwide. Of this total, 709 (or 69.3%) were located in Europe; 199 (19.5%) in the Americas; 47 (4.6%) in Oceania; 46 (4.5%) in Asia; and 22 (2.1%) in Africa (FPB, 2012, p. 155). The countries with the highest number of Waldorf schools in the world were Germany (with 229 schools, or 22% of the total); United States of America (with 119 schools, equivalent to 11% of the total); and the Netherlands (with 85 schools, or 8%) (FPB, 2012, p. 155). The situation in the Nordic countries was described as Sweden having 45 schools; Norway, 33; Finland, 26; Denmark, 16; and Iceland had two. The detail of information reported on this latter country was:

Waldorfskólinn í Laekjarbotnum
Sudurlandsvegur, ph 10011, IS-130 Reykjavík
Tel. +354-5-874499 Fax +354-5-874470
E-mail: waldorf@simnet.is
www.waldorfskolinn.is

It offers K-12 Ft [that is, kindergarten at school, to full-time school].

Waldorfskólinn Solstafir
Sóltún 6, IS-105 Reykjavík
Tel. +354-5771110
E-mail: solstafir@waldorf.is
<http://waldorf.ismennt.is>

It offers primary school grades 1-5 [FPB does not mention that in fact there are two pre-schools operating in Reykjavik under this initiative].

Considering that there are many countries that do not have Waldorf schools at all, and the little of the Icelandic population (around 320,000 inhabitants), having two schools and three pre-schools might not be a minor record for Iceland. Nevertheless, when observing the number of schools in the other Nordic countries –and how through its history Iceland has been closely related to these neighbours— I wondered why Waldorf education has not flourished more in this country.

Being originated in Europe, Waldorf education is offered in more than 60 countries. In particular in Asia, at present it is growing rapidly, with major new areas of development. Therefore, Steiner education has become global, with an active and growing community of practice. Nevertheless, it “has barely begun to reflect critically on what this expansion means in terms of the transmission of ideas into different cultures and different settings” (Rawson, 2010, p. 27). This is not a minor issue as “the forms that a Waldorf school assumes are related to the culture, the habits of the place and time in which it originates” (Wiechert, 2012, p. 77).

Other problems detected by Rawson (2012) are: (1) the little evidence of formal self-reflective activity either on its multicultural development or on its basic principles; (2) most Waldorf-related literature is apologist in character, and there is little critical reading of Waldorf-related literature; and, (3) there are only sporadic examples of internal research activity and relatively few examples of academic discourse between practitioners and

educationalists. In this author's view, these situations can be explained due to "the disrupted relationship between theory and practice within Waldorf education, and to the academic world's reluctance to engage with the underlying philosophy of education, Steiner's anthroposophical spiritual science" (p. 27).

Still, a major claim is that Waldorf education cannot be developed, nor understood, if Anthroposophy is disregarded. In this sense, both 'outside' academic world and 'insiders' anthroposophists and Waldorf practitioners need to make an intellectual effort in order to engage with Steiner's ideas. As Rawson explains:

The Waldorf movement is based on a philosophy that is not well-known outside its own circles. Anthroposophy is complex and even for insiders, not easily accessible, and it has had a very modest academic reception. As Sijmons (2008) recently pointed out, Steiner's main philosophical work *A philosophy of freedom* (1963), is one of the best-selling philosophical works of all time but has attracted practically no professional attention. Sijmons own work being one of the first modern attempts by a non-anthroposophist to assess its contribution. Steiner's educational approach draws directly on this philosophy and on the results of Steiner's spiritual scientific research. At the heart of this philosophy is the idea that spiritual realities can be experienced in the form of intuitive knowledge (Steiner, 1963 and 1996). Thus Waldorf education cannot be taken seriously without considering its anthroposophical background, nor can it practice self-reflection unless it engages with the issue of its knowledge base and how this is generated (Rawson, 2010, p. 27).

Johannes Kiersch (2010) also acknowledges that the foundation of the Waldorf School was intended as a universal cultural impulse, "inspired by anthroposophical esotericism" (Kiersch, 2010, p. 65). He considers that currently there are the required spaces and tools to tackle areas of knowledge that have been disregarded by modern mainstream knowledge. Hence,

...on clarifying the diffuse and vague concept of 'esotericism', there now exists a hermeneutic tool that makes it much easier to bring to light and discuss without prejudice certain forms of thought embodied in a number of traditions belonging to the European intellectual history (Kiersch, 2010, p. 65).

In this author's view this means positive short term implications for 'esoteric' anthroposophy, as it allows that "traditions which have been considered unworthy of attention either from a theological or positivist standpoint", now "it would seem a way has been found of opening up a new area of research replete with riddles" (Kiersch, 2010, p. 66).

2.2 A glimpse at Anthroposophy

Anthroposophy usually is defined as a philosophy, although it can also be considered as a social movement, and a path of knowledge and self-education. Founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), an Austrian philosopher, scientist, writer and teacher, anthroposophy combines *anthropos*, the ideal of the human being, and *sophia*, wisdom, thus it refers to spiritual knowledge gained by the conscious integration of the three essential human faculties: thinking, feeling, and willing (McDermott, 2009, p. 1). Steiner himself referred to it as 'wisdom of the human being' and 'science of the spirit' (Steiner, 2009).

As a highly developed seer, he based his work on direct knowledge and perception of spiritual dimensions. He considered his proposal a modern and universal philosophy –which took and reinterpreted ancient wisdom and esoteric knowledge— accessible to anyone willing to exercise clear and unprejudiced thinking. From his spiritual investigations Steiner provided suggestions for the renewal of many activities, including education (both general and special), agriculture, medicine, economics, architecture, science, philosophy, religion and the arts (Steiner, 2009; McDermott, 2009; Wilkinson, 2001).

Steiner wrote some 30 books and delivered over 6,000 lectures across Europe. In his many published works he presented his research into the spiritual nature of the human being, the evolution of the world and humanity, and methods of personal development. Still, according to the Rudolf Steiner Archive website and other authors (e.g. Wilkinson, 2001; McDermott, 2009), there are some texts which were carefully written, which "serve as a foundation to all of the later, more advanced anthroposophical writings and lecture courses" (RSA, 2013). These books

are: *Theosophy* (GA⁶ 9) (First published in 1904), *The Philosophy of Freedom* (GA 4) (1894), *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and its attainment* (GA 293) (1904), *Christianity and Occult Mysteries of Antiquity* (GA 8) (1902), and *Occult Science. An outline* (GA 13) (1910). For those interested in Waldorf education, two basic texts are *The Study of Man* (GA 293) (first published in 1919), and *The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science* (GA 34) (1909).

One of Steiner's grounding arguments for developing anthroposophy was his critique of the limitations of the knowledge gained through the Natural Sciences, and the worldview (including human life) it presented, which he referred to as Materialism:

However wide the horizons which this natural science has opened up, however exact our vision today, above all when we gaze into the mineral kingdom whence we take the conceptions which we apply to the other kingdoms of nature, one thing we must nevertheless admit: man does not today observe himself with such nearness and intimacy as he did during earlier epochs of civilization. For that which this all-pervading natural science has brought to mankind cannot be directly applied to the innermost being of man (Steiner, 1948, p. 9).

Steiner considered 'knowledge' as the result of perceiving (through our bodily organs) and thinking (another organ of perception). As explained by Wilkinson (2001):

When our thinking is directed to a particular object then our consciousness is directed to this object. But the object need not necessarily be something belonging to the outer world. Object in this sense can be something within ourselves –our feeling, our will, the content of our ideas. Without our thinking objects would appear as pure precepts and there would be no

⁶ GA is the abbreviation for the German word *Gesamtausgabe* or Collected Works. All Steiner's works, classified and kept at the Goetheanum, have an identification number. I find this reference very helpful as due to the original language (German), the translation to different languages, and the different editions that sometimes favour new titles, the reader easily get lost in the vastness of Steiner's publications. The GA number provides a reliable reference that, in strict anthroposophic and academic referencing, should be always indicated.

cohesion. Thinking establishes a relationship. It is through thinking that man connects himself with the world but it is also through thinking that he becomes conscious of himself as something separate. It might be thought that thinking is subjective but it is only through thinking that the human being becomes aware of his own subjectivity. It must therefore have an objective quality. Thinking is therefore an organ of perception which enables us to correlate the information given by the physical organs through sense impressions. There are two aspects of thinking: the content of ideas, and the necessary inner activity which brings the ideas to consciousness (Wilkinson, 2001, pp. 217-218).

Thinking, as a human faculty and an organ of perception, needs to be cultivated or worked on. A person can become more conscious of her own doing and inner life by practicing control of feelings and thoughts, equanimity, and flexibility. In this sense, Wilkinson indicates that Anthroposophy is not an abstract science but is something to be 'lived', and something on what the person will be looking for advice. Therefore, it requires to "cultivate a certain attitude" (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 20), in particular with respect to new contents and ideas.

For example, with respect to Steiner's works –which are not an easy reading— people should not be discouraged by its difficulty as "they are written in such a way that reading them is in itself a spiritual exercise" (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 22). Therefore, studying them is essential, even if one find other people's commentaries helpful. When dealing with contents that might appear strange at first, or sound totally unfamiliar, they

...should simply be considered objectively. They should be neither accepted nor rejected but given to the mind as food for thought. If you have doubts, you may say to yourself: Does it make sense? Does it help me to understand the world in which I live? The process may be repeated the next day and the next and the day after that. One thought may live in the soul for years. With further study, other aspects will emerge and the statements will be related to other things. Digestion is essential to development. Study is rewarding in so far as the pattern of existence will become clearer (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 21).

Another approach, with some similitude to the previous one, suggests that one could ask oneself 'Which aspects of this anthropology have I already made a part of myself?' This seems a better alternative than saying 'I don't understand this or that' as one acknowledges that there is something that one has "not yet worked through" for oneself (Weichert, 2012, p. 56). According to Steiner this disposition to work with our thoughts and daily experiences strengthens our mental life, therefore, our thinking and 'knowledge production' capabilities:

We forget that it is the *soul* which exercises the faculty of cognition; and feelings are for the soul what foodstuffs are for the body ... Veneration, respect, devotion, are nourishing foodstuffs which make the soul healthy and vigorous, especially in the activity of cognition (Steiner, 2009, p. 28).

Nevertheless, this work is not easily done these days as we value and are trained to be critical, categorical, and privilege that part of our individuality which is expressed in much of our egotistic desires and impulses. Disrespect, antipathy, under-estimation of what deserves recognition, exert a paralysing, withering effect on the faculty of cognition (Steiner, 2009, p. 28), thus both adults and children are impeded to perceive the various dimensions of life:

Our civilisation tends more to criticism, judgement, condemnation, than to devotion and selfless veneration. Our children already criticise far more than they revere. But every criticism, every adverse judgment passed, dispels the powers of the soul for the attainment of higher knowledge (Steiner, 2009, p. 24).

I think these ideas are particularly at odds when confronted with many of the views that today most educational discourses tend to promote as desirable, such as 'critical thinking', competitiveness and performance, 'independent thought', and adults acting according to children's will and desires. Still, they sustain the Waldorf pedagogy and are implemented in its curriculum.

2.3 Children and child development from the standpoint of Anthroposophy

What should we (adults) ask or expect from children? What are the highlights that can guide us in our relationship with them, and help us to decide what is the 'best education' we can offer them?

Steiner's metaphor of the child/seed –mentioned in his lecture *The Education of the Child*– which is often presented as 'food for thought' in Waldorf teacher training programmes, is also very revealing of Steiner's view on the attitude with which the adult should approach the child, and the complexity that already exists in the young person:

Life in its wholeness is like a plant. The plant contains more than what it offers to external life; it also holds a future condition within its hidden depths. One who views a newly leafing plant knows very well that eventually there will also be flowers and fruit on the leaf-bearing stem. The plant already contains in its hidden depths the flowers and fruit in embryo ... Likewise, the whole of human life also contains within it the seeds of its own future; but if we are to tell anything about this future, we must first penetrate the hidden nature of the human being (Steiner, 1907, pp. 11-12).

One starting point to access this 'hidden nature' (that is, not obvious to the senses at first sight) is to understand what is being developed in each stage of the human life. If we acknowledge that the human being is constituted by more than her physical body, but also etheric forces (etheric or Life body), soul (Astral body) and spirit (the I, or Higher Self), then we need to become aware of when these various constituents are formed and come to expression in the human life. And the latter, in particular when applied to children, means that we should not see them as 'miniature adults' but assume that their developmental needs and time are different from those of the adult.

At the moment of physical birth, the child starts a physical life independent from her mother's body. But the young body will continue its formation and maturation during the years before she changes teeth. This means, according Steiner, that the other three constituents are not been 'born' yet. The etheric body is still in formation, and working very intensively in 'completing' the formation of the physical body. This is a core argument to understand why the child needs and searches physical activity and contact, explores the world, and needs rhythm and a good 'environment':

With physical birth the physical human body is exposed to the physical environment of the external world. Before birth it was surrounded by the protecting envelope of the mother's body. What the forces and fluids of the enveloping mother-body have done for it thus far, must from now on be done by the forces and benevolence of the external physical world. Before the change of teeth in the seventh year, the human body has to accomplish a task on itself that is essentially different from the tasks of any other period of life. In this period the physical organs must form themselves into definite shapes; their whole structural nature must receive particular tendencies and directions (Steiner, 1907, p. 25).

So primarily the first three years and then the remaining years before the age of seven, are the most important for the general development of the human being: during these years "a child is actually an organ of sense perception" (Steiner, 1923b, p. 101). That is, what it is localized as a sense in adult ears is spread through the entire organism of a young child. For that reason, "children do not differentiate between spirit, soul, and body. Everything that affects a child from outside is recreated within. Children imitatively recreate their entire environment within themselves" (Steiner, 1923b, p.102). Therefore, we need to look at how children learn three key activities that will grow into life-long capacities: that is, how they learn to walk, to speak, and to think (Steiner, 1923b, p. 102).

The physical environment alone works on the child in such a way that the physical organs shape themselves. Thus, it is important to look at the 'quality' of the environment, as its influence can be positive or negative in helping the organs to be formed correctly. Two "magic" words "indicate how children enter into relationship with their environment. These words are *imitation* and *example* (Steiner, 1907, p. 25):

Children imitate what happens in their physical environment, and in this process of imitation their physical organs are cast in the forms that thus become permanent. 'Physical environment' must, however, be understood in the widest sense imaginable. It includes not just what happens around children in the material sense, but everything that occurs in their environment –everything that can be perceived by their senses, that can work on the inner powers of children from the

surrounding physical space. This includes all moral and immoral actions, all wise or foolish actions that children see (Steiner, 1907, p. 25).

Therefore, the joy of children in and with their environment must be counted among the forces that build and shape the physical organs (Steiner, 1907, p. 25). This has enormous implications for what we understand is a healthy and desirable relationship between adult and child (and Steiner includes 'teachers' here), as this means that children need adults

...that look and act with happiness and, most of all, with honest unaffected love. Such a love that streams, as it were, with warmth through the physical environment of the children may be said to literally 'hatch' the forms of the physical organs. The children who live in such an atmosphere of love and warmth, and who have around them truly good examples to imitate, are living in their proper element. One should thus strictly guard against anything being done in the children's presence that they should not imitate ... For imitation belongs to the time when the physical body is developing, while the meaning speaks to the etheric (Steiner, 1907, pp. 28- 29).

The intellect, being a soul-force, only is born with puberty (that is, between 14-21 years). It is in this period of human life when the astral body is born, and Steiner emphasises that we should not try to influence it in any way externally before this time. Thus, until puberty children should be "storing in their memories the treasures of thought on which humankind has pondered; later intellectual understanding may penetrate what has already been well imprinted in memory during the earlier years" (Steiner, 1907, p. 37).

Being the astral body ready to continue its development open to the outside world, now is the right moment to approach the child with everything that opens up the world of abstract ideas, the faculty of judgement, and independent thought:

With puberty the time has arrived when human beings are ripe for the formation of their own judgements about what they have already learned. Nothing is more harmful to children than to awaken independent judgement too early. Human

beings are not in a position to judge until they have collected material for judgement and comparison in their inner life. If they form their own conclusions before doing so, their conclusions will lack foundation (Steiner, 1907, p. 41).

Thus, in terms of stages of child development, Anthroposophy proposes three major periods (of seven years each) that can be linked to the child's school life until she reaches adulthood:

0-7 years old = Formation of the Etheric body – Early years/childhood education, the period of fantasy life (Lievegoed, 2003, p. 22) – The change of teeth indicates the birth of the Etheric body.

7-14 years old = Formation of the Astral Body – Primary education, the period of imaginative life (Lievegoed, 2003, p. 22) – Sexual changes as indicative of the maturation of the Astral body.

14-21 years old = Formation of the I – Secondary education, puberty and adolescence – The formation of the I will require longer time, and much of its development will depend on a person's lifestyle and decisions (Lievegoed, 2003).

2.4 Waldorf education

In introducing main Anthroposophy themes, Wilkinson (2001) draws a parallel between the effects of education and previous lives (reincarnation), that I found the most exemplary to express the role and effect of 'formal' education in a person's life. One cannot but acknowledge that its effects are overriding:

The objection is sometimes raised that we cannot remember past incarnations. This is no argument against their existence. We do not remember our experiences in sleep, nor our early years, nor our life in the womb. There are many things in ordinary everyday life which we do not remember yet what we have become is a result of them. Life is not always formed on the basis of conscious experience. In education much is taught which is forgotten but faculties or capacities are the result (Wilkinson, 2001, p. 62).

Aware of education's great influence, Steiner considered our present civilisation as posing a major task and demand on it, that is,

How do we rise from the easy-going individual observations made by the help of experiments, statistics and all such ingenious methods, upon which all pedagogy and didactics are based today, to a pedagogy that gives equal consideration to the whole of human experience, and to the eternal in man that reveals itself only in shining through this life of experience? (Steiner, 1948, p. 20).

Here Steiner is concerned with man's triple constitution (body, soul and spirit): the Waldorf schools should respond to a conception of life, and build on the underlying methods and nature of education suggested by the 'Spiritual Science' (namely Anthroposophy), so to build upon a knowledge "that extends to the three principles or members of man's nature" (Steiner, 1948, p. 11).

And the 'method' underlying the formation of capacities and faculties that might touch and involve the whole child is based greatly in rhythm and repetition. Steiner clearly emphasises this idea in many parts, but in particular in *The Study of Man*, a 'must read' for those involved in the education of the child:

We must ask ourselves how we can have a good influence on the feeling nature of the child. This we can only achieve by introducing actions which have to be constantly repeated. You direct the impulse of the will aright, not by telling a child once what the right thing is, but by getting him to *do* something today and tomorrow and again the day after. It is not the right thing to begin by exhorting the child and giving him rules of conduct: you must lead him to do something which you think will awaken his feeling for what is right, and get him to do it repeatedly. An action of this sort must be made into a habit (Steiner, 1919, 4th Lecture, paragraph 28).

Observing the current educational system, many researches and teachers (e.g. Clouder & Rawson, 2002; Easton, 1997; Patterson & Bradley, 2000; Rawson & Masters, 2013; Wiechert, 2012, to mention a few) recognize in the Waldorf proposal a form of education and a concomitant form of teacher education, which largely acknowledges the art of the teacher, gives primacy to teacher autonomy, is based on far-reaching views on human development (both in relation to children and adults) and "dares

to ground itself in process, rather than outcome” (Oberski & McNally, 2007, p. 936).

This perspective is ultimately founded on the scientific work of the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), who dedicated 50 years of his life studying science and developing what can be called a ‘phenomenology of nature’. Rudolf Steiner edited Goethe’s scientific work, radically re-interpreting it as a significant alternative epistemology. Steiner then essentially built on the Goethean methods to come to his holistic and spiritual insights and understanding of human nature. This approach has thrived after a wide range of educational settings, such as some colleges of further education, special education, curative education, and the Steiner-Waldorf schools (Oberski & McNally, 2007, p. 936).

Based on her research and observation of Waldorf schools in the United States –as an ‘outsider’ of this pedagogy— Freda Easton (1997) identifies six key elements of Waldorf education theory and practice. In my view, they provide a practical, succinct and accurate presentation of some of the main characteristics of this approach. Thus, in section 3.3 I use these key elements to frame the description of my informants’ views on Waldorf pedagogy, and establish a base from which to assess the findings. These key elements are: (1) a theory of child development; (2) a theory of teacher self-development; (3) a core curriculum that integrates artistic and academic work; (4) a method of teaching as an art, that pays careful attention to synchronizing teaching methods with the rhythm of a child’s unfolding capacities; (4) integration of teaching and administration; and (6) building the school and the greater Waldorf community as networks of support for students, teachers, and parents (Easton, 1997, p. 88).

A theory of child development

As I have already mentioned, Waldorf education supports

- an image of the child as a threefold human being (body, soul, and spirit).
- Its aim is to educate towards holistic thinking that integrates knowledge gained from thinking, feeling and doing (Easton, 1997, p. 88).
- The individual has been born with a unique inner self that is capable of evolving toward freedom, responsibility and maturity if appropriate stimulation and nourishment are provided at each development stage.

- Developmental stages can be viewed as period of seven years: pre-school years (0-7), the elementary school (7-14), and the adolescent years (14-21).

A theory of teacher self-development

- Waldorf educators view their own self-development not only as a personal striving but as one of the most fundamental aspects of their qualifications as teachers (Easton, 1997, p. 89).
- Although our knowledge of man functions so unconsciously that we pay no attention to it, the teacher must confront the soul of the child in a much more conscious way in order to be able to unfold it (Steiner, 1948, p. 12).
- The ‘question of the teacher’ is at the core: what must really live in the children, vibrate and dwell into their hearts, wills, and lastly into their intelligence, is that which dwells in the teacher in the first place simply by virtue of what he is as he stands before the child (Steiner, 1948, p. 22).
- More important than the teacher’s knowledge, what matters is if the child can imitate him (Steiner, 1948, p. 21).
- What a man has himself learnt has significance only for children who are between puberty and the beginning of the twentieth year (Steiner, 1948, p. 22).
- The teacher’s attitude of striving and hoping is an essential aspect of her teaching. As a retired Waldorf teacher reflects:

Whenever a human being is the object of a profession (as, for example, a patient is for a physician), you can never be completely certain that the results of your work (in this case, the education itself) will actually bring about the best result. Striving, or an intense hoping, is always related to the activity of educating. Education is a path of self-education along which one is forever traveling. That is why education and teaching are only partly a matter of technique (with their accompanying certainties). In education ‘doability’ is possible only within a very narrow framework. Most of the time it’s a matter of creative-moral activity. Or, in other words: when you teach you have to be inwardly present (Wiechert, 2012, p. 44).

A core curriculum that integrates artistic and academic work

Although there are specific differences in what is taught in each year, and certainly there are major differences in what is done in the pre-school level, there are some pedagogical recommendations that are valid for every stage. Thus, in order to educate the child's thinking, feeling, and willing capacities Steiner outlined a core curriculum in which the visual, musical, and tactile arts are integrated in all subjects areas, from preschool through high school (Easton, 1997, p. 89). Some key aspects of it are:

- the curriculum must acknowledge and support the developmental stage of the child (Steiner, 1907, p. 24).
- Respect the child's developing level of consciousness, and support creativity and self-imagination.
- In each stage, honour the 'maxim' "The world is good" (0-7 years), "The World is beautiful" (7-14), and "The World is Truth" (14-21).
- Prevent early intellectualization

The latter is particularly important in the seven first years. This means, for example, if a child of five years old, following her impulse to imitate starts to play and draw letters, we should let her dwell in that activity without rushing to explain contents and meanings, or introduce writing. The process of learning to read and write should be preceded by knowing stories and rhymes, singing and dancing, and having experienced the language in many different forms. According to Steiner, to respect the 'dreamy' world of the child is of the major relevance for her healthy development, and the development of the cognitive faculties that will awake later:

Children that we train intellectually before the age of four or five take something really terrible into life: we bring them up to be materialists. The more you raise a child intellectually before the age of four or five, the more you create a materialist in later life. The brain develops so that the spirit lives within its form, but inwardly people have an intuition that everything is only material, because the brain has been taken over by intellectualism at such an early age. If you want to educate people so that they understand the spiritual, you need to present the intellectual form of what is externally spiritual as late as possible. Even though it is very necessary, particularly in modern civilization, for people to be completely

awake later in life, it is just as necessary to allow children to live in their gentle dreamy experiences as long as possible so that they grow slowly into life. They need to remain in their imaginations, in their pictorial capacities without intellectualism, as long as possible. In our modern civilization, if you allow the organism to be strengthened without intellectualism, children will later grow into the necessary intellectualism in the proper way (Steiner, 1923b, p. 113).

A method of teaching as an art that pays careful attention to synchronizing teaching

- ‘Consider the what, but consider the how even more’ is an epigram by Goethe, frequently quoted by Waldorf teachers (Easton, 1997, p. 90).
- Artistic work is integrated in all subject areas and students are involved in a broad range of artistic activities (Easton, 1997, p. 90).
- Teachers recognize beauty as critical for healthy development.
- A holistic approach to every subject, which acknowledges material and spiritual aspects.
- Subject teachers coordinate their work so a content is presented from various point of views.
- It works with rhythm and repetition
- Contents are taught in blocks of three weeks and then left to ‘sleep’, that is, to be ‘digested’ by the child.

Integration of teaching and administration

- Social life –getting along with each other— is a mighty task in a school. In collegial dealings and meetings teachers recognize each other, scrutinize their own actions, and if they “make an effort to be awake to the ebb and flow of feelings that arise” from these dealings, teachers create “a basis for inner autonomy” (Wiechert, 2012, p. 28).
- Administrative leadership is shared by the entire faculty, which selects members to a steering committee. Teachers share the responsibility for the development of the school: “The faculty meeting is the place where the development of the school as a complete entity can be discerned; it is the place where the faculty guides and motivates itself: it is the heart of the school” (Wiechert, 2012, p. 31).

Building the school and the greater Waldorf community as networks of support for students, teachers, and parents

- The school is seen as a learning community
- Each family is essentially different from each other, and such diversity is welcomed.
- Still, the parents become united “in a circle around the class” (Wiechert, 2012, p. 43).
- Parents and teachers have in common that they always want the best for their children. Whether “parents ask this of themselves, or whether they also make this demand on the rest of the world, is up to them. Teachers also always want to offer the best, through their teaching” (Wiechert, 2012, p. 43).
- Teachers want to face the child openly, taking her conditions and origins into account. This consideration “is the basis for the maxim: at some level parents are always right” (Wiechert, 2012, p. 45).
- Parents’ involvement occurs because parents are enthusiastic about what actually happens in the classroom (Wiechert, 2012, p. 46).

With this understanding of what Waldorf education is, in the next section I present the findings of my study. Together with describing the hallmarks of the development of this pedagogy in Iceland, I provide an ‘insider view’ (that is, from Waldorf Icelandic teachers) of what does it mean to work with this approach.

3 Research findings

In this chapter I present a version of the development of Waldorf education in Iceland, based on the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained from interviews with six Icelandic Waldorf teachers. I also refer to written sources that I came across while doing this project. I start by presenting a sequence of events and hallmarks that led to the creation of the various Waldorf initiatives. Then, I describe teachers' personal motivations and choices, aiming to illustrate how they became involved with this pedagogy. Next, I characterize the Waldorf curriculum and its didactics considering those aspects that were remarked, or are valued, by these local practitioners. In order to provide a better understanding of how this approach has been implemented locally, in the last part of this chapter I refer to the strengths and facilities, and the weaknesses and difficulties they have experienced in their work.

3.1 Historical development of Waldorf education in Iceland

3.1.1 The first Waldorf initiative in Iceland

When I thought of this research project, initially I was convinced that Waldorf education in Iceland had started in the early 1990s, with the creation of the school in *Lækjarbotnar* and *Sólstafir* few years later. Thus, I had the idea that locally nobody had ever heard about this pedagogy until then. But when I started to search the web, I came across NORENSE, the Nordic Research Network for Steiner Education (www.norense.net). As I wrote to them mentioning my research interest, and asking for information about Iceland, the research director of the Rudolf Steiner University College (www.rshoyskolen.no) in Norway did not hesitate to challenge my preconceptions:

The history of Waldorf pedagogy in Iceland has actually a history going back to 1930, when Sesselja Sigmundsdottir founded the *orphanage* Solheimar, that later became a curative education home (and eco-village today). The first children in Solheimar came out of poor social conditions, but *they were not retarded, and they got a regular Waldorf*

*teaching*⁷ (Personal communication with Bente Edlund, March 2013).

According to the history of *Sólheimar* (Höskuldsdóttir, 2002; Solheimar, 2013), detailed in Jónína Michaelsdóttir's book (1990), Sesselja Hreindís Sigmundsdóttir (1902-1974) founded it on the 5th of July in 1930. This was a children's home, especially for kids "who had lost their parents or had ill parents". Nevertheless, children with "mental challenges" soon arrived to live at the place, as at that time there were "not many alternatives for children with physical or mental disabilities", and their living conditions were quite precarious, being sometimes "even kept in outhouses". In 1934 it was reported that in *Sólheimar* were living "11 healthy children and eight mentally retarded", apart from those dwelling in the summer. After the Second World War nearly all the children were mentally disabled, besides those who spent the summer in the farm and Sesselja's foster children (Solheimar, 2013).

Educational instruction began in *Sólheimar* in 1931. Numerous foreign workers from Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, England and Switzerland came to participate and support this pioneering anthroposophic initiative. Most of them were highly educated professionals in areas such as gardening, music, woodcarving, visual arts, nursing, and healthcare. Sesselja herself had learnt very early about farm life and hotel management due to her parents' work. And previously founding *Sólheimar*, between 1923 and 1930 she lived abroad (in Denmark, Switzerland and Germany), working and studying. During this time she became acquainted with Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, and learnt about Waldorf pedagogy, child nursing, kindergarten management, gardening, flower cultivation, and how to handle poultry. According to Solheimar (2013), she was a pioneer in many aspects as she was "the first Icelander to study how best to care for people with mental challenges", and she made great advances in farming, being the first one to start organic horticulture (in fact, biodynamic farming) both in Iceland and in the Nordic countries. Not least, considering her ideas and work "it is only fair to say that she was the first Icelandic environmentalist"⁸ (Solheimar, 2013). The following

⁷ The italicising is mine.

⁸ I would not support this later statement due to knowledge gained from a research I did few years ago on the development of forestry in Iceland, that since the beginnings of the 1900s there were some few Icelanders who were fighting for the protection and improvement of the soil and the vegetation cover of the country.

description provided by one of my informants, illustrates how Sesselja's image and contribution has endured through the time⁹:

“She stayed in Switzerland where the Ita Wegman Clinic is, she had friends there also, doctors; and she had went where she studied, in *Sonnen-hoft*, which is like *Sólheimar*, a place for disabled children. So she had a lot of connections, always, and also with Ita Wegman, the founder of the Medical Section [of the Anthroposophic Society] ... [Sesselja] had to take children that nobody wanted them, you know, I don't think she had much of a choice ... She got kids, difficult children, children without parents. The State did not want to pay for, or did not have any foster parents, or children who were so disabled that were locked up inside. And she got through the years, always, a lot of foreign people who came to work: Waldorf teachers, priests, Eurythmy therapists, eurythmists, painters, a lot of people. [But] the only thing you hear in Iceland is: ‘There was a problem with it’. And I mean, ‘Hello!’ The only thing you hear about it, you know, when you ask specially in *Sólheimar* – at least when I was there, and I was asking about these things— it was: ‘The Germans had a problem with Sesselja because Sesselja didn't want to do everything in the German

The Icelandic Forestry Service (IFS) and the Soil Conservation Service had been operating since 1908, and the few personnel working at these institutions had to fight to put forward their pioneering views and tasks. Hákon Bjarnason (1907-1989), for instances, who was the head of the IFS between 1935 and 1977, found much resistance and had to fight to put forward his initiatives of planting trees and creating forests. Also, just few days before *Sólheimar* was founded, in June 1930 the Icelandic Forestry Association was created, which was a grassroots organization destined to the greening of the country. But as far as I know, as an inclusive educator Sesselja seems to be the unquestionable pioneer. However, her work has been disregarded or forgotten: recently I asked to an academic at the University of Iceland, specialized in inclusive education, about the origins of this approach in Iceland. And she mentioned that, at least what is taught in the academia, is that Jónína Konradssdóttir, at the pre-school *Sólborg*, was the first to start to practice inclusive education in the country, in 1994 (references on this subject can be found Traustadóttir, 2000; and, Traustadóttir, Sigurjónsdóttir, & Egilson, 2013).

⁹ In this section of the thesis I start to quote my informants' words. As I do not reference or individualized these quotations in any way, in order to inform the reader and satisfy my professional (de)formation as an anthropologist, I used the double quotation marks to indicate the nature of the text: oral spoken language.

way’, and then ‘The State had a problem with Sesselja because she didn’t want to do everything the State wanted’. Of course! Everywhere were you make something new it’s gonna be some problems. But I think so many beautiful things happened. And she was definitely not the easiest person in the world, I mean, she accomplished amazing things! ... In that time, it’s Ita Wegman, it’s Marie Steiner, Sesselja, another Russian woman. It’s just a lot of very very strong women who do things, and they do it alone. Of course they had a lot of people with them, but still, still it’s their initiative. And they do it, and set forth, and go through”.

In spite of these remarkable and visionary achievements, as Sesselja emphasized that *Sólheimar* was a home (not an institution) where disabled people shared the same rights as everyone else, her commitment to integrate children with and without disabilities sparked much controversy locally. As it is reported in Solheimar (2013), among other things, at that time it was widely held that ‘healthy’ children should not play with those with special needs. Not least, her decision of providing a diet based mostly on vegetables also fuelled hostility in her contemporaries. In 1932 the Icelandic government passed a legislation that established the Child Protection Council. Soon these authorities took a stand against *Sólheimar*, and during the following two decades often they attempted to prevent – sometimes quite severely— the intermingling of disabled and non-disabled children, contending that ‘healthy children might be psychologically or physically damaged from contact with those with disabilities’. They also ordered that the children should not only be fed on a high-vegetable diet, but much more on meat, fish and milk.

Sesselja was the director of *Sólheimar* until her death in 1974. Those who had worked with her continued with the community work, honouring the anthroposophical views and practices that originally inspired its founder. But during the 1980s major administrative changes occurred, Anthroposophy was ‘formally’ abandoned, and the image and work at *Sólheimar* was re-defined as an eco-village that provides cultural, recreational and touristic services. According to my informants, in spite of these changes between the 1970s and 1990s most Icelanders who today are acquainted with Anthroposophy, or are involved in Waldorf education, met this philosophy for the first time through *Sólheimar*, or were inspired in some way by the work done there. Not least, between 1987 and 1988 the

first Waldorf pre-school operated in *Sólheimar*, just for one year, which was created by Hrafnkell Karlsson, a curative pedagogy teacher formed in Jarna:

“Most of the people, I think I can say, got to know Anthroposophy through *Sólheimar*, or were very early in the beginning in *Sólheimar*. This is a very interesting aspect because a lot of the anthroposophy is gone away, but there is still something about the place that which helps to bring you somewhere else”.

Whether people saw a job opportunity or were searching for new experiences (such as a way of life more ecologically sound, or being able to work with disabled people), most of the initiators of Waldorf education in Iceland were in *Sólheimar* in their young adulthood period. Not only new views on education and curative (therapeutic) pedagogy were found there, but also new ways of managing the land, producing food, and organizing a social-productive community. Thus, for example, some of the people who are today producing vegetables organically in Iceland were also at some point in *Sólheimar*. An example is the farm *Skaftholt*¹⁰, which has always been a biodynamic farm, and it is the only one of its type nowadays in the country. As an informant commented, local people not only know very little about what they are doing in *Skaftholt* –which is also a community where people with special needs work and live—, but the difference between ‘organic’ and ‘biodynamic’¹¹ is simply not understood by the average Icelander. Also, my informants had the impression that many Icelanders know *Sólheimar* but “actually few know that it was an anthroposophic initiative”.

¹⁰ Skaftholt is located in Southern Iceland, in the Gnúpverja rural district, being Selfoss the closest town.

¹¹ Biodynamic agriculture is a form of agriculture based on the teachings of Rudolf Steiner. It is founded on the concept of viewing each individual farm as a living organism, which is translated into practices such as the integration of animal and crop production on mixed farms; the use of special preparations to maintain and enhance the flow of cosmic and life energies within the farm organism; the timing of planting, harvesting, and cultivation activities occur in accordance with the phases of the celestial bodies (sun, moon and outer planets); and the use of chemical fertilizers, synthetic biocides, and genetically modified seeds is completely avoided (Haden & Hillevi, 2004, p. 14).

The experience gained while in *Sólheimar* sparked their interest of moving abroad to study anthroposophy and to gain specialized knowledge in a particular area. Another consequence, very important to my research, is that the idea of creating a Waldorf school in Iceland, according to my informants' accounts, seems to have been 'shaped' in *Sólheimar*: the members of the founding group came to know each other while working there, and many important connections to other people whom later were also involved in the project, were established through it. Some of these people were working only during the summer time, as they were studying or living abroad during the rest of the year. Those who became interested in learning about Anthroposophy moved mostly to Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK). Thus, in spite of few who also went to study and work in Germany, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, the United States of America, and even Brazil, the two main formative centres for Icelanders were the anthroposophic community of Jarna (in Southern Sweden) and the Emerson College (in Forest Row, UK):

“At that time [mid 1980s] it was the idea to start a Waldorf pre-school, and I was exchanging letters with Logi in Sweden, and we met, and Freyja, so this was in the air. Birkir was abroad in the UK, and I also met him. I was also in contact with the Swedish group, with the people who was in Jarna, so I was also writing to them. So when they came back home [to Iceland] we all met, and this idea in the air continued to grow: 'We have to do something'. And then, we explored the alternatives, so to find out what were the possibilities available, how we could start”.

The group wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education asking what they needed to do in order to open a Waldorf school in Iceland. The Ministry did not know the answer, neither what was the process that it should be followed, and asked them instead to specify what were the characteristics of a Waldorf school. Birkir took the role of negotiating with the Ministry, and spoke personally with the Minister of Education. This was a rather unusual situation for the authorities as in those days the idea of 'independent' schools was almost not existent in the Icelandic educational system. The group sent a letter providing the description requested in the summer of 1989, but they got no reply.

Meanwhile, Logi and other members of the founding group produced a text where they explained the community project they had in mind,

indicating the intention of having a school, a shop for handicap people, a bakery, and houses for living. This was the dream of those who had lived in Jarna. Coming from the Southern hemisphere, I had never heard about this place, which seemed to be so familiar to those Icelanders acquainted with Rudolf Steiner's ideas. The community itself is located in the outskirts of the town of Jarna, and at present it comprises a constellation of businesses and social activities that are all in some way connected to Anthroposophy. In 2004 there were operating over 30 companies, not-for-profit foundations, primary and secondary schools, and alternative health care institutions, which provided jobs for approximately 2,000 people. One of the greatest strengths of this anthroposophic community today is not only that is a good example of a sustainable local system, but that the people who live there consciously weigh their farming practices and food purchasing decisions against ecological, social, and economic criteria (Haden & Hillevi, 2004). Formed in the late 1920s, Jarna was between the 1960s and 1990s an important educational centre of Anthroposophy and its related areas (such as architecture, biodynamic agriculture, medicine, curative pedagogy, Waldorf education, art and Eurythmy), and a point of reference in the Nordic countries for those interested in Steiner's ideas (personal communication with Gerard Bohme, a Swedish anthroposophic nurse, October 2013). The possibility of creating a community which resembled in some way the one in Jarna was at the core of some of the founders' idea of creating a Waldorf school in Iceland:

“There was a rather big group, like 15, 20 people talking about that. And then this group created a sort of brochure with the future idea of a kindergarten, school, Waldorf, and biodynamical growing of vegetables, small scale, and a biodynamic bakery ... And we had the plan that maybe we will build a big bakery at the school, where the children could help, you know, they could learn baking and everything, and they could do the packing. So everybody could be a sort of involved in everything. And it was supposed to be a protected working place for handicap people. All these things together, in an interaction, so the handicap could be active in the school. The school would be a working place, and also the bakery, and the garden. Altogether in the same place. That was the idea”.

With the project “on paper”, the founding group started to search for land and to approach the local authorities. The original idea was to get a

land near to *Ellidavatn* that belonged to the parents of one of the founders. But the authorities denied this possibility alluding it was too close to the area of water protection. However, the project was positively received in the Municipality of *Kópavogur*, and the man¹² who was the director of the Children's Service (*Barnastofan*) and also the director of the Social Department of *Kópavogur*, informed them that they were going to close a kindergarten that they had been running in *Lækjarbotnar*. Hence, the Municipality made an offer to them suggesting this place, and also a land that was located where the commercial centre *Smáralind* is today. Supported by other participants in the founding group, Logi took the offer of running a kindergarten in *Lækjarbotnar* and signed a contract with *Kópavogurbær*. The municipality owned the land and had a house, but there were no people living there.

The story of what *Lækjarbotnar* was exactly before the founding group took it over remains uncertain to me, as I heard different explanations. Definitively, it was not a residential area. Somebody mentioned that it used to be a holiday place for school children going skiing out in the countryside. Other persons indicated that the municipality had been running a pre-school there for some years, and wanted to close it down. The situation was not clear even for some of the founders, in particular because the place was far away from the city and the urbanized life, in the "middle of nothing: Why would somebody want to have a pre-school there?" In one of my informants' view, the founding group's request must have been considered quite an eccentricity:

"And I think that they [municipal authorities] thought in the beginning: "Yes, these are just some hippies who want something. Let them just try this out, and they will give up in a couple of years". I imagine that this was their thought".

3.1.2 The beginnings of *Lækjarbotnar*

Recapitulating the process so far, during the 1980s a group of Icelanders met through *Sólheimar*. Due to their work experiences and encounter with Anthroposophy, many of them moved abroad to study, namely Jarna and Emerson College. Once back in Iceland, they wanted to start a Waldorf initiative. I was never given a detailed or concise description of who were the members of the founding group, but by adding names mentioned

¹² My supervisors pointed out that this man must had been Bragi Guðbrandsson (<http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1138392/>)

through the interviews, I arrived to a list of at least 20 persons involved, most of them couples with children, and a quarter of them being foreigners. Still, in my informants' accounts prevailed the view that two of these couples had a key role in the way the first years of the school developed: Logi and Sunna, connected to Jarna; and Birkir and Freyja, to Emerson College.

“Most of the people who started the Waldorf school in *Lækjarbotnar*, they got to know each other in *Sólheimar*. They kind of found the spirit there. And that is a very interesting thing actually, that the vision of Sesselja, in *Sólheimar*, in a way was the beginning of the school in *Lækjarbotnar*”.

Nevertheless, one of my informants commented that among the members of the founding group, some knew each other even since childhood. Thus, if not life-long friendships were built at that time, I would venture that some ‘trust foundations’ must have been laid in those early years, which also contributed towards a positive attitude to work together. Birkir and Alma met when they were little children, as they lived in the same area in *Vesturbær*; and a similar situation occurred with Freyja, Logi and Loftur. The Icelanders who met in Jarna also developed strong bonds of friendship, which helped to strengthen the idea of developing Waldorf initiatives:

“There were rather many friends around us, rather many Icelanders. They were really interested in starting a Waldorf kindergarten and school in Iceland”.

However, the very key motivation for these adults was to offer their children Waldorf education, at any means. Not being available in Iceland, they realised they would have to provide it themselves. So the Waldorf school in Iceland started as most Waldorf schools in the world had started: by parents' initiative. The major implication of this step is that parents become very involved in the education of their children, often taking it in their own hands, therefore, becoming ‘teachers’ of their own children and others' children.

“Logi needed a Waldorf school for his kids, and that is how most Waldorf schools in the world started”.

“We all had small children, and we had this impulse of starting a school. Both, the kindergarten and the school”.

In spite of acquiring *Lækjarbotnar*, pedagogically the situation was still very uncertain. Firstly, the request of permission to operate as a school had been denied by the municipal authorities. Although the members of the founding group were versed in Anthroposophy, there were no officially qualified teachers among them, and only three of them had anthroposophic pedagogy formation: Freyja, Alma, and Birkir. Even more, they had done their studies abroad, hence they did not have the traditional local certification. The other members of the group had other areas of interest or professions. For example, Logi's formation was in biodynamic agriculture; Hreinn's specialization was in baking; and others were artists, eurythmists, or had been involved with health services. So far, Freyja was the only one who had experience of working in a kindergarten.

In the autumn 1990, Birkir was back in the country and went to talk with the authorities of the Ministry of Education. The person in charge of the pre-school section acknowledged Birkir's pedagogical formation, and provided him with a license to run the kindergarten. With this permission, on the 1st of December of 1990, the kindergarten started to operate with three children, Freyja being its first Waldorf pre-school teacher. And in September 1991 the primary school started as well, Birkir being the first Waldorf primary school teacher. The number of children increased rapidly, and soon the pre-school was filled up, reaching to 24 children. In 1993 there were approximately 40 children in *Lækjarbotnar*.

But not being recognized as a school meant that it had to face many inconveniences and shortcomings during the first years. Among other things, the children needed a special authorization, or kind of exemption, to be dispensed from attending 'proper' primary education. And according to one informant, the dialogue with the Ministry was paralyzed:

"The first four years we didn't have any official support. No support. And we had no official recognition. We had applied to be allowed to run the school and to be recognized as a private school. And we didn't get any answer from the Ministry of Education. For four years! And then, another government was elected, and a new Ministry of Education, and in two months we had our recognition¹³".

¹³ Although the interviewees did not refer to changes in the laws, my supervisors pointed out to me that in 1995 a new law was came in force, where the affairs attaining to the schools moved from the State to the municipalities.

The school had “literally no money”. It was getting some kind of financial support, but it was so little that the salaries were extremely low, and in some periods there were no salaries at all (specially at the beginning). So the people who were working at the school did it “more or less for free”. To function economically, these teachers had to take another job. In some cases, a couple could ‘complement’ their efforts, so while one was working in something not related to the school the other person was able to participate in the running of it.

“We did not have money to pay salaries, in a way we were underpaid ... Well, we worked in the school and then we had to work full-time outside”.

“Everybody was doing other work to be able to survive. It would have never been possible to start the school without lots of voluntary work and idealistic work from parents, and teachers, and staff. From everybody! And people were really putting a lot of effort and lots of time”.

“I was in the beginning ... There was always so much trouble, always the salary, and being without money ... And there was always so much voluntary work”.

In terms of infrastructure, they had the house that was already on the land. This was designated as the school building. Signs, roads and services (such as removing the snow from the accesses) were not provided by the municipality. People invested their own money and savings to run the school. For example, Logi bought a bus in order to provide transport to the children living in the city. Everybody had to invest in cars and petrol, in particular those who did not move to live in *Lækjarbotnar*. And those who did move into the area –the ones who had the idea of a community living in the countryside— had to invest in building their homes.

3.1.3 The Split

Operating in those conditions, soon frictions between the members of the founding group started to emerge. The differences in personality, individual interests, ways of doing things, and not least, differences in priorities and the understanding of ‘their’ Waldorf initiative, started to be evident. In spite of having been united for a while by the common aim of implementing Waldorf education in Iceland, the two ‘streams’ began to

diverge. The people participating in the school (not only the founders, but also new parents and supporters) became polarized between two different projects. As one informant explained to me, after living in Jarna, Sunna and Logi were quite fascinated by starting a school in the countryside, and living in the countryside. This was never the vision that Freyja and Birkir had; they had not dreamed of living in the countryside. Logi's passion was agriculture and he was "fascinated by the biodynamic way of producing food". Birkir's passion was to work with young people, and had a "big teacher's heart". Thus, more and more, a division started to occur as it became clear that some people "had planned to live around the school", but not necessarily to take part in its implementation:

"In 1994 we had a very big crisis because then we had very different opinions of how to do the work and things ... It was a mixture of both, personal problems and different ideas".

"[Was the lack of money the main problem?] No, no. I think it was more due to people with much 'will', people who just did things, no thinking and discussion. And there were different opinions or views on how to work. It was more like that. Yes, people were unsatisfied in the way just some did things".

"We had to put so much money into it, buy cars for example. And we felt like there was so much energy coming into building their own private houses".

At first, I could not understand why the building of houses—which was a recurrent argument I heard— was at odds with the running of the school, until I got the following explanation: because some people wanted to live in *Lækjarbotnar*, they started to build their houses and also other things, like a garage for the cars. This jeopardized the whole school project because although the founding group had mentioned to the authorities its intention of building a community around the school, they did not follow the legal requirements of getting building permission. As the building was running illegal, this created much conflict with the local authorities, who threatened to withdraw the authorization to run the school. So the conflict polarized between those who wanted to build the community, and those who wanted to have the school:

“It was very obvious that it was not a single voice and idea. Some people came with the pedagogical impulse, and some other people came with an impulse of building a society or a community. Then it was the people who wanted to do their work, and those who wanted to have a school. So there was a great dissatisfaction in the parents’ community”.

“In 1993 we had 40 children in the school. The school was going, but we didn’t have any teachers. Apart from Freyja and Birkir, nobody was going to work in the school. It was really a strange situation, and we were sending city children in the highlands”.

The conflict reached a critical point when Birkir suggested that the situation should be discussed by the whole community, and that they –the founders— should hear and consider the parents’ concerns and wishes, so to decide what to do with ‘their’ project. At that point, the location of the school had become a controversial issue. However, the Jarna stream was not willing to consider the possibility of leaving *Lækjarbotnar*, and in the spring of 1994, Logi and Sunna asked Birkir and Freyja to quit. Few weeks later, once the academic year was finished, they left. And with them, the school community split in two.

“We always have been friends, but clearly it was this: we did not see as a possibility to be out there, because it was so difficult. We had two very difficult winters, where we had to be shovelling the snow. And it was so hard life existence in a way. So we felt like leaving”.

“We left, but of course, it was hard. It was a bit like a divorce in a way ... We left mostly because of very different views about the future”.

As have attempted to show here, a variety of reasons and emphasis were mentioned in connection with the split. I am not in a position to determine the key aspects that led to it, neither to judge which project was the most legitimate or viable one. But summarizing the information I got, I recognize that among the founders predominated: (i) different views of how to do things, which affected, for example, the way they dealt with legal requirements, and how they reacted to parents’ dissatisfaction; (ii)

different views on what had to be prioritized, which led to the tension between school and community; (iii) different interests, such as 'to live in the countryside' or 'to live in the city'; (iv) disagreement on the 'best' location to have a school; and, (v) different levels of responsibility towards the initiative: some were concerned with education, and some wanted to develop their own profession. Thus, venturing a conclusion, I say that after a period of approximately seven years (between 1987-1994), where the Jarna and the Emerson streams met, tried to work together, and helped each other to realize and put in practice their own visions (whether through desired support or uneasy confrontation), due to the impossibility of entangling their 'emphases', and compromise on ways of doing things that would work for everyone's priorities, they separated and each one continued to develop by its own.

3.1.4 The beginnings of *Sólstafir*

The dismissed couple moved to the city. They did not have any clear idea of how to continue, and the possibility of starting a new Waldorf pre-school was not on their minds. Above all, they were very tired, had no money but many debts, and two small kids to look after. But then part of the parents who had also left *Lækjarbotnar* approached them, and asked them to start a Waldorf school in Reykjavik. Somebody even provided the information on a house in town that was for sale, which could well fit for the school. That was *Grundarstígur*. So they visited the house and soon they found themselves on the way to open a new Waldorf initiative, *Sólstafir*, as all the matters related to the acquisition of the property and getting the licenses from the authorities worked "pretty smooth":

"We went to speak with the owner of the house, and came out that was a friend of Birkir's grandmother. So suddenly we got the house by paying no money. In the beginning we just took the house, and we got loans, so we could renovate it, and pay everything afterwards ... And we got all the licenses and everything ... And in the 1st of August we started the kindergarten. It was just like a miracle! With the house full of children!"

"And the first days, there was a soil floor, so we had to have our boots on when we were inside, cooking the food. We did not plan to start the school at all so early, but there were lots of children knocking on the door, and we started. There were lots of parents that just heard about Waldorf in Reykjavik and they really wanted to join us".

In terms of the licenses, the Ministry of Education “was very complicated”, but the City Council supported the parents’ interests and rights and allowed them to operate as *frístundaheimili*¹⁴. And because at that time the school day was shorter, and the ‘after school home’ was longer, they could run the school with the funding they got. So together with the pre-school, they started with First, Second and Third classes. Two parents joined the staff team, and later another woman who had studied in Emerson.

As the group of children in primary education grew, they started to search for a bigger house where to move the school. In 1997 they found the house in Marargata street, which was a school day-care. The City Council bought the house, but they did not want to have a school there. After some conflicts between the authorities and the parents who had their children in this day-care centre, *Sólstafir* agreed on running a pre-school in Marargata. At the same time, the Municipality offered them a terrain in *Breiðholt*, where they could move the primary school. Thus, in 1997 *Sólstafir* started to operate in three places: two kindergartens in the centre of Reykjavik (*Grunðarstígur* and Marargata), and the primary school in *Breiðholt*.

The school consisted of portable-classrooms (or wooden houses) that could be moved. Thus, the idea was to build a more solid structure in the future. For this, they got an architect to design a school, and the Municipality was ready to give them the land besides the school for building. But as the school suffered many times different forms of vandalism –which was common in *Breiðholt* at that time— they did not take the land, neither wanted to build there. Parts of the school were burnt down twice, they had 200 windows broken, plus several break-ins. Then in 2007 the Municipality offered the land in *Sóltún*. They had visualized uniting the school and the pre-schools, and this location looked promising for building. But the economic crisis came in 2008, and their plans went into hibernation. Still, in 2011 the school moved to *Sóltún*, where they are settled today.

3.1.5 The impact of the Association of Independents Schools

All my informants mentioned spontaneously and agreed on the fact that the creation of the Association of Independents schools (*Samtök sjálfstætt starfandi skóla*) meant a positive turning point in their economic situation,

¹⁴ A place where children can stay and play after the compulsory school hours.

as well as in their pedagogic and legal status. The date of its creation was a kind of forgotten, but it had occurred sometime in the 2000s. Revising Loftur Guttormsson's (2008) history of education, the Association was officially founded in 2005, and it reunited 42 educational organizations, most of them being pre-schools. Among its members' pedagogical trends, there were followers of the Reggio Emilia approach, Montessori, Hjallastefna, and Waldorf *áhugafólk* (Guttormsson, 2008, pp. 88-92).

"I was involved in the Association of Independent Schools. And we worked together –the independent schools in Reykjavik—, and then it faded away. Then, some influences, some people, stopped it. But we, the people who were running independent schools, we started to meet. And then, I don't remember which year, then we founded *Samtök sjálfstætt skólar*".

"It was the time when the matters of the primary school (*grunnskóla*) were going from the State to the municipalities. And we were finding out how it would be for the financial support of the independent schools. And we found out that all the schools had gotten financial support by some different ways: there was no common rule for that, and it was the Icelandic way (that someone knew someone there, and then went through this or that). And yes, quite different ways!".

"Before they [authorities] treated each school differently ... Since then we have been –'we', I speak of this association— we have been getting much better terms financially".

"She [Magga Pála] founded the Association, with all the different private schools and initiatives. And after that our situation started to change, because then it became a sort of... it had an impact, politically and everything".

Thus, the rules determining the amount and the way to obtain economic support from the educational authorities were made clear. Also, to whom these schools had to respond, and what academic regulations they should follow. But equally important was the fact that these organizations gained presence and a better status in the context of the Icelandic educational system: while being recognized in their role of providing legitimate educational services, they kept the freedom to continue to implement what

it was particular to each of them. In the case of the Waldorf schools, they could carry on with their curriculum, didactics, philosophy and forms of internal administration.

3.1.6 Waldorf initiatives in 2013

At present there are two primary schools (*Lækjarbotnar* and *Sólstafir*) and three pre-schools (Ylur in *Lækjarbotnar*, *Sólstafir* in *Grundarstígur* street, and *Höfn* in Marargata street) located in the capital area, in two different municipalities (Reykjavik and *Kópavogur*). These organizations serve about 200 children per year. Of this total, 50% are in primary school level, from 1st to 10th Class; the groups being rather small, both schools have the modality of uniting two grades under the supervision of one head/class teacher. The other 50% attend pre-school level, with children from 18 months to six years old; they are divided in two or three groups, depending on their age. These organizations occupy some 40 employees, of which around the half of them have been formed in Waldorf education or related anthroposophic disciplines (e.g. Eurythmy, kirofonetik, art therapy, music therapy, curative education, handcrafts, agriculture and gardening). Among the employees there are also many who have education in other areas (e.g. tourism, urban planning, environment and development, cooking, art and design). About a quarter of them have ‘traditional’ teacher qualifications, and also a quarter is of foreign origin. This information might vary yearly, and is not exhaustive as it is built from what I got through the interviews. Nevertheless, I found it is pertinent to give a glimpse on how the staffs of these schools are constituted.

The school of *Lækjarbotnar* grew slowly after the years that followed the split. In 1995, when they became recognized as school, the economic situation improved as they started to receive more money, although still it was little to cover their expenses and salaries. However, more people, and more educated and experienced teachers joined the school. They managed to enlarge their facilities by “recycling” wooden houses of the Municipality of *Kópavogur* that had been left neglected or in state of disrepair. At present they have 70 children, of which 20 attend pre-school, and 50 are in the primary level. Recently attendance levels have risen to 18-20 pupils. My informants’ feeling was that the school was in a good moment, as it has gained stability during the last years in terms of financing, children’s attendance, and of having a staff educated in Waldorf education or anthroposophic related areas (about 14 persons in total). The location is not perceived as problematic because they are not “so far away” from the

city and isolated anymore; and even it has become an 'asset' as the school has consolidated an image of a "Waldorf 'nature' school" (also in Gissurardóttir, 2012):

"I think we are partially getting more money, and partially the school is getting bigger. We have 70 kids, but it has been much less. So we have bigger classes ... and with everything growing, we get more help from the parents and they also raise money for the school. So it's just a lot of things which come together".

"This year we have 10 children in the 1st grade, so they are alone. But next year, the 1st grade starting in September 2014 will go into that class. So we work like that: we sort two years in one class, two grades for one class teacher ... In the kindergarten there are two groups, and they are the 'young group' and the 'older group'".

In the case of *Sólstafir*, it grew very fast and it diversified in three locations. Still, in my informants' perception this is "just one" organization. The primary school has 50 children, and both pre-schools receive between 70-80 children. The pre-schools have always been filled up, and a very high percentage of the kids who enter stay there until they are six years old. In contrast, the primary school has been more challenging, the classes showing more variation from one year to the other and, although upholding the number of students, not growing either. At present, there are about 25 employees. The school participates in the national tests fashioned by the educational system, as they want to be recognized as part of the local educational community. As I mentioned earlier, the future project is to unify pre-schools and primary school in one location. Meanwhile, while the founders are more involved in the school, the pre-schools have gained more independence and autonomy to run themselves. In terms of their image and identity, *Sólstafir* is a Waldorf school "in the city" (also in Óskarsdóttir, 2009), open and accessible to the urban dwellers, thus being faithful to the spirit of the first Waldorf schools, which were created in urban/industrialized areas.

In terms of the image of Waldorf education in the context of the Icelandic community, it was generally remarked that these days they enjoy a much more positive image than when they started to operate, although this education remains unknown for many people. Thus, they perceive

there is less prejudice towards their work, but also people are better informed, or know more, about Waldorf education. In particular, as more foreign people have come to live in the country, and Icelanders have been traveling abroad, the “gap” with the whole society had decreased:

“It has changed a lot from when we started. It was really seen as a religious cult, and then there was much prejudice, you know, much more than now. Today everybody knows at least something [about Waldorf], and it makes a world of difference. You don’t need to be explaining or fighting all the time. Now [when I say I work in a Waldorf initiative] people just say ‘Oh, yes, I know this’”.

Another prejudice that has been partially overcome is the idea that Waldorf education only serves children with special needs. At some point, I imagined that Icelanders could have this image as a legacy from *Sólheimar*, but some of my informants rejected this possibility as they consider that the connection between Waldorf education and *Sólheimar* is non-existent for most local people. In contrast, they acknowledged that the reason might lie in the fact that they have always received children with problems, or who could not perform well in the mainstream schools. And people, instead of understanding the inclusive philosophy behind this, missed the universal character of this education:

“Many thought that the Waldorf school would be for children, like handicap children, or for children with really big problems, that would not manage in the common school. Quite many people thought that for a long time”.

In their view, today many parents are searching and want a “different” education for their children. This ‘difference’ is not always quite clear or conscious, nor is it directly connected to Waldorf education. But these parents sense that mainstream education does not fulfil their expectations or values. In this context, the Waldorf schools and pre-schools enrich the local universe of ‘educational alternatives’ from which to choose, and provide a concept of education that supports the child’s unfolding capacities without hindering her right to a wholesome childhood:

“Usually [new] parents knew something [about Waldorf]. Often it was that we buy our own food, organic food, for

example. That has been one of the main [attraction], and that 'Waldorf is something different' from the normal schools ... Maybe they did not know exactly what Waldorf was, but most of the people that had been with us from the beginning, were parents who had studied abroad, mixed marriages [of an Icelandic person and a foreigner]".

"[In the mainstream schools] They are always pushing the children into some form, that all have to get into it, and they must not be in another way".

This desire of a 'different' education for their children, as I mentioned earlier, was at the core of the founders' inspiration for creating Waldorf schools. Their views will become clearer in the following section, where I present their motivations to become involve with this pedagogy.

Hallmarks

1980s – *Sólheimar* (1930)

There was *Sólheimar* in the very beginning, in Iceland and in the Nordic countries. In the 1980s most of the people who started the Waldorf school in *Lækjarbotnar* got to know each other in *Sólheimar*.

1987-1988 – First Waldorf preschool in *Sólheimar* opened with four children; initiated by Hrafnkell Karlsson.

1990, December 1st – *Lækjarbotnar* started the kindergarten, with three children. Freyja was the first kindergarten teacher. It soon filled up with 24 children.

1991, September 1st – *Lækjarbotnar* started Primary school with First Class. Birkir was the first primary teacher.

1994 – Founding group split

1994, September – *Sólstafir* opened kindergarten and Primary school with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Classes, in *Grundarstígur* street, Reykjavik.

1995 – *Lækjarbotnar* got recognition as school from educational authorities.

1997 – *Sólstafir* kindergarten in Marargata opened. *Sólstafir* Primary school moved from *Grundarstígur* to *Breiðholt*.

2005 – Association of Independent Schools (*Samtök sjálfstætt starfandi skóla*) was officially founded and recognized by the local authorities.

2011 – *Sólstafir* Primary School moved to *Sóltún*, in Reykjavik.

3.2 Becoming involved with Waldorf education

3.2.1 First encounters

In my informants' view in the 1980s Iceland was not only a “small island in the middle of the ocean”, but the ‘alternative movement’ –or options in life style— was very limited. For example, at the general society level there was no concern about the diet; and there was only one store in Reykjavik which sold wholesome food (that belonged to the parents of one of the members of the founding group). Also, the possibility of buying organic and friendly environmental products (e.g. for cleaning and personal care) was not available. Philosophical, religious or spiritual views, dissenting from those offered by the traditional folklore and the Lutheran church, were rare. For example, there was a group of people involved in the Theosophical movement. In spite of *Sólheimar*, the anthroposophical society had no presence in Iceland; therefore Rudolf Steiner's ideas and Waldorf education were almost totally unknown among the Icelanders:

“There was nothing [in Iceland]. You could not buy Weleda in Iceland, you could not buy Hauschka, you could not buy any of these”.

In order to characterize my informants' life experiences that led them to know Anthroposophy, I succinctly describe their trajectory. But in order to respect confidentiality I have omitted as much personal information as possible (even gender, as I use the personal noun ‘she’ in connection to ‘person’). In short, I would remark that most of them met *Sólheimar* as they moved there due to a permanent or a summer job. After this work experience, some searched for further opportunities in Iceland, leading them to contact the local alternatives (such as the shop *Yggdrasill* in Reykjavik, and the farm *Skaftholt* in Southern Iceland); and others, decided to travel abroad. Most of them had some interest in health therapies and work with disabled or young people; interests they visualized could be developed through art, movement, music, agriculture and not least, education. At some point in their lives, all of my informants studied abroad,

and once in Iceland, they worked as Waldorf educators. Except one of them, all became Waldorf parents as well.

One of my informants went to work to *Sólheimar*, attracted by the way they were producing food. While working there, she heard about Skaftholt, which was just in its early beginning, and moved to work there. Before, she had been studying art, so decided to go to Emerson College to learn Art Therapy.

Another interviewee, who was living in Reykjavik, met a woman who was working at *Sólheimar* at that time, who suggested applying for a summer job at the community. Once at *Sólheimar*, she became interested in anthroposophy and searched for places where she could learn more. Thus she travelled in many countries in Europe, until finally deciding to stay in Emerson College and take the teacher's Waldorf qualification:

“I was seeing in *Sólheimar* how they treated handicap people, and also how was living in the social order, even though it was not anthroposophic at that time. But something happened. So I just changed my mind over that, and I decided to go and look at schools [in adult education]. I went to Sweden, I went to Germany, Switzerland, to Dornach, and I went to Emerson College. And I decided to stay in Emerson College ... and go into the education, the teachers' education ... because of the structure of education there, it was required that I would be studying for three years”.

A third informant was working in an institution for handicap people and met the man who started *Yggdrasill*, and through him she heard of Jarna and Anthroposophy. So, she moved to Sweden, and worked there with handicap children, learnt biodynamic agriculture, and became a Waldorf parent and teacher's assistant. Back in Iceland, she worked in the Waldorf school:

“In a way I got to know it [Anthroposophy] much more out of practice in this institution in Jarna, and through anthroposophic medicine and agriculture. I mean, it was more through the heart and by experience than so very intellectual, in a way. Of course, I started to study, and just because it made sense in the feeling, it worked”.

Another person left school as she was not happy there due to her problems with dyslexia. Still, she had much interest in learning something. So by chance, through a friend of her family, she heard about Emerson College and decided to go there. Few years later, she specialized in Eurythmy and other therapeutic techniques:

“I did know nothing of Steiner. I knew nothing about what kind of school was that. I just went! And they were offering this Foundation one year course, where you could experience all the things that are there”.

One of my youngest interviewees was working in a health shop in Reykjavik while studying homeopathy. By chance, she went to work in the shop of *Sólheimar*, and became interested in Sesselja’s biography. Then she discovered other local anthroposophic related initiatives, such as the bakery in *Grimsbær*, the school in *Lækjarbotnar* and the wholesome food shop *Yggdrasill*. After attending a variety of courses, like summer courses at the school, she went abroad to study Eurythmy.

The only interviewee who had heard something about anthroposophy in her youth, did while living in Sweden. Through friends she heard of Waldorf education, and later came to know the anthroposophic centre in Jarna. In her early twenties, she moved to Iceland and worked in *Sólheimar*. So she decided to go back to Sweden and learn Waldorf pedagogy, and once returned to Iceland, became a Waldorf parent and teacher:

“I heard what they were doing in the schools, and that they had no grades, no exams, and the kind of things they were doing, and I said ‘wow, you really have a great school ... I had a friend who was doing architecture inspired by Anthroposophy, and it was really a sort of out of human needs, in many ways, spiritually and physically, so I thought it was really positive”.

3.2.2 Why did Waldorf education come to be an attractive educational project?

After having provided an image of my informants’ encounters with anthroposophy, in this section I describe what they found in the experiences mentioned above that led them to become involve with Waldorf schools in Iceland. Whether approaching Anthroposophy as a philosophy, or through its related activities, my informants recognized and

valued it as: (1) a way for personal development; (2) a possibility for professional training; (3) an alternative for educating their children; (4) a possibility of community development; and (5) as an option that allowed them to integrate all their various interests and needs in one “big project”.

Personal development

Anthroposophy appears as a worldview, or philosophy of life, that provides meanings and explanations on a wide variety of phenomena related to human life. In this sense, my informants remarked how when faced with these ideas, they made sense to them not at the intellectual/abstract level, but because they could relate and assess their validity based on their own experiences and sensibility. In other words, they could see how these ‘ideas’ were alive, worked, and could be applied in their daily lives.

By acknowledging and referring explicitly to the spiritual side of life and things, more meaning and value could be found in the material/concrete life. Thus, they felt they gained insights and compromise when faced with their tasks.

For some of them this philosophy also provided them with a wholesome view of their position in the world, speaking of their connection with their environment and the realm of nature. These views, far away from being abstract ideals, could be experience and practiced in the production of food, in the way they chose to feed themselves, and the routines and exercises they wanted to perform. These ideas fully demonstrate what Wilkinson (2001) refers to Anthroposophy being “something to be lived” (p. 22), and something to which the person can look for advice:

“I felt very much like I was at home, and I was very fascinated. It’s a beautiful place [Emerson College], and I learnt so many things! I learnt absolutely a new way of looking at the world ... So I felt I got to know the world completely anew”.

“I just found my own thinking philosophy. This just suited me, I just felt at home. ‘This is my home’ ... I understand Steiner here [pointing to the heart], I always feel it in my heart, but I don’t understand many things, but I feel it”.

Professional development

A common characteristic among these teachers is that when they came to know Anthroposophy they were all in their twenties. Thus, they were in a

moment in life when they were searching and looking intensively for what they wanted to do: how they would develop professionally. And they followed through what “their hearts” pointed out to them. Not always quite conscious of where their choices and decisions would take them – thus, counting on serendipity— but with much enthusiasm and will power. They found in Anthroposophy an offer of disciplines that responded to their diverse interests and, as I said earlier, in a way that would allow them to integrate and put in practice a variety of interests. Not least, out of Iceland there was available an anthroposophic tradition, well institutionalized, that supported them in their interest of pursuing formal education, and get jobs and work experience in well-established organizations, some of them worldly re-known. Back in Iceland, by creating Waldorf schools, they created their own niche in which to continue to develop professionally. Since most of these specializations were unknown in Iceland, they could contribute with their new views and skills. Thus, before becoming teachers in the local schools, the interviewees educated themselves and worked in a variety of fields, such as sound and movement therapies, art, agriculture, and care and community work with disabled people:

“I finished *Kirofonetik* in Denmark, and we were three that decided to start to teach this in Iceland. And we have done seven courses”

“I was very young when I studied homeopathy ... and it was a lot of responsibility to take on patients so young. I had also very difficult patients with cancer. So I decided I wanted to search for something new, which was both, something that would help me to become a better therapist, ... [and] something where the patient could help herself more”.

“We dreamt about working with agriculture and working with handicap people. Then someone told me: ‘Yeah, that is the idea of Rudolf Steiner’ ‘Mm? Who is that?’ And I started to find out, and went to learn biodynamic agriculture”.

“I had some background in Anthroposophy, and I had been working in the school [abroad] as an assistant, so with this background I took the class. It was quite exciting because there was no class before in Iceland! So everything was totally new. And I was class teacher for seven years”.

In these teachers' search and endeavours I recognise what Easton (1987) refers as to the teacher's personal striving as part of their qualifications (p. 89), and to what Steiner (1948) explains is the "question of the teacher" (p. 12).

Education for own children

After coming to know Anthroposophy and Steiner's ideas on education, they wanted Waldorf education for their children. As I was told, they could not think of sending their children to the 'normal' schools. Still, only when doing the analysis I realised how important this aspect was for motivating them to create the school. Certainly, this deserves further research, because what earlier was referred as "parents today searching for something different", fully applies to the founding parents who in the early 1990s wanted to offer a 'different' education to their children. From the current findings I learnt they had embraced anthroposophic ideas on what healthy child development is, and the importance of the adult in providing the 'right' educational environment. But, in the interviews it was never discussed why their expectations were disappointed by the mainstream educational system, to the extent that they took the responsibility of taking in their hands their children's 'formal' education:

"I never wanted another school [but Waldorf]. I was completely decided. I did know that".

"We were talking about that we really wanted a Waldorf school for our children, and we were talking about having that in *Sólheimar*. But then we went back to Sweden and we put the children in a Waldorf school there".

"Yes, we knew that this [Waldorf education] was something that makes sense to us, something that we want to work with, and give to our children".

Developing community life

I have already mentioned what is referred as 'community' in the anthroposophic ambit: for example, Jarna, *Sólheimar*, Skaftholt, Emerson College, and farms hosting a diversity of institutions. Thus, in the original project defined for *Lækjarbotnar* it was not a minor or secondary issue. Even if it was not the main drive for all the founders, it certainly played a

central role in the split as it became clear that *Lækjarbotnar* wanted to be more than just the school.

But what I recognize as relevant from the stories I was told, is the idea and desire of developing a way of life where the ‘community life’ was at the core. That is, of visualizing one’s home, work, and services closely interrelated, and being provided by a group of people that are in close relations, sharing values and worldviews that sustain and ensure the continuity of the project. Even more, these are not communities that are formed through tradition, cultural identity, or ‘inevitable circumstances’, but that are created out of humans’ intentionality and will-power. In my view, these sorts of projects –community life— require not only will power, but an immense trust in other human beings:

“Those years were very exciting years because it was so new, and there was so much enthusiasm and this feeling of, yes, that in a way we were inventing the wheel, doing everything for the first time. And it was, of course, a great deal of work! And we had our children by them. We were both working at the school ... and at the same time we were also building a house, by the school. But at that time we had this energy to do all this”.

Realising and integrating diverse interests and needs

All the aspects mentioned above could be integrated in a holistic project thus serving family life, community work, learning, livelihoods that sustained them economically, and that satisfied the desire of travelling and meeting other cultures. Hence, stories about the whole family involved around the school life, in a community located in a farm, or moving abroad to develop a variety of tasks, were common:

“We went to Denmark, and the children went to Waldorf school there, and we started to study ... There is this part-time education for Waldorf teachers, and my spouse took a full-time curative pedagogy education ... I was teaching also in a Waldorf school, in a school with about 300 pupils, and there was also – in the school— there was a little school for handicap children, and there I was teaching a small class”.

“In this farm they had Waldorf education, and Waldorf curative education, and biodynamic farming, and some other different

anthroposophic institutions. And we got a house to live there, and the children went to the school there for some months ... That was a great experience!”.

This sort of initiative continues to inspire these Icelanders with new ideas and projects that could be developed locally, for example, a school for disabled children that is part of a larger school; or developing communities that combine productive work (e.g. agriculture, food processing, handcrafts), education, and the care of people with special needs.

3.3 The Waldorf/Steiner way of education

In section 2.4 I introduced Easton’s (1997) six key elements of Waldorf education theory and practice that are used for analysing and framing the information related to the work done in an educational setting. Although in the analysis I tended to search for regularities –that is, those aspects that were present in most of my informants’ accounts—, once looking at the ‘concrete’ implementation of this approach, differences among the four settings (*Lækjarbotnar*, *Sóltún*, *Grundarstígur* and *Marargata*) started to be more evident.

A good deal of these differences can be attributed to the obvious fact that the people participating in each setting –children, teachers, parents— are different, thus the groups have different qualities and needs. Also, the two educational levels covered by this pedagogy (that is, pre-school and primary level) differ greatly in their aims and ways of working; thus, comparison between primary schools seems more pertinent, for example, when referring to the implementation of the curriculum. Not least, although both schools fulfil the main characteristics of Waldorf education (Hague Circle, 2009) and their work is based in the Waldorf curriculum, they are also very different in their emphases. As the interviewees explained it, this different character rests largely in the fact that one is located in the countryside (*Lækjarbotnar*), and the other is in the city (the three locations of *Sólstafir*):

“I think the two schools in Iceland are very different, because one is in the city and the other is outside. And yes, I think all the Waldorf schools in the world are very different. They have to, in a way, find the roots in the culture where they are. But, of course, they have the curriculum in common and the way to look at the human being”.

In spite of being acknowledged that Waldorf schools are different between them (a fact mentioned in the theoretical chapter, and also by the informants), I perceived that this difference was more problematic for those who were engaged with the founding group, than for those who became involved with the schools after the split. In what it follows, I refer to Easton's aspects, starting with the commonalities, and then providing some hints in which way the initiatives differ.

3.3.1 A theory of child development

The teachers I talked with were knowledgeable of the anthroposophic understanding of the human being. Hence, they were familiarized with the image of the child as a threefold human being –body, soul, and spirit (Steiner, 1907, 1923b, 1948; Lievegoed, 2003)— and used these concepts when referring to their work or experiences.

Through anecdotes and examples, they also showed that they share the understanding that education aims towards the holistic and integral development of the human faculties of thinking, feeling, and willing (Steiner, 1919, 1996; Trostli, 1998). In particular, their interest in Waldorf education occurred because of this task, as they are critical of the educational approaches that prevail today, which stimulates intellectuality too early, or to the detriment of other dexterities that the children need.

The idea that each individual is born unique, that children have particular 'missions' and tasks to perform in life, and the need everyone has of finding her own way (the unfolding of capacities suggested by Steiner, 1907), was also referred in the interviews. Thus, they acknowledged and valued the freedom that is offered to the child, which in their view is a requisite for the unfolding to occur and discovering one's path. In the Waldorf settings the child finds the space and stimulus to take responsibility for her own work and creativeness; aspects, they believe, that will lead to responsibility towards self-education in the future.

Teachers also stressed as important for healthy child's development that they should receive appropriate stimulation and nourishment (both physically and spiritually), this 'appropriateness' being understood as the 'right age for': "Is this child ready to receive this? Is the right moment for presenting this to the child?". In this sense, although nobody explicitly talked about the developmental stages (Lievegoed, 2003; Steiner, 1907), they were aware of the differences between pre-school and primary levels.

A point of reference often mentioned to assess the educative appropriateness of respecting the child's developmental stage in the

educative process, was the feedback they had received from teachers at the secondary level, and what the Waldorf students themselves had told them once they had moved into the mainstream schools, after leaving 10th grade. Not least, Waldorf teachers' own observations have reinforced their conviction of the positivity of providing an education that nourishes the child's life forces:

“What I see in the children who graduated in the 10th grade, I see kids who are interested in life, and interested in learning more about life. They go to college, or *menntaskóli*, with some openness and curiosity. And I think if you have this as a teenager, then you can do what you want. They are doing very well. Of course, some have some problems, and there is all kind of individual things: some are stronger in the crafts, or the arts, or the intellectual. It's different from one to another”.

“We know more or less where they went and where they are, and we see young people who are very independent. And they find their way”.

“When they [Waldorf students] were asked how it was to start in *menntaskóli*, some described that it was strange to experience this class of young people where everybody was so tired of learning. But they weren't. They were ready to learn. And I think that is a very big thing to have in you back-pack when you leave *grunnskólinn*. ‘Yes, now I am ready for the next step’, ‘I want to know more about the world’”.

In the way they talked about the children in their classrooms, that have always included mixed groups of ‘normal’ kids with others ‘with special needs’ (of a wide spectrum: victims of bullying, stress, attention deficits, learning difficulties, dyslexia, social behavioural problems, handicaps, and disabled), the inclusive view and practice have always been present in their settings. Hence, the theory of child development that informs their work is pertinent to any child, that is, of a human being in a process of finding her way in her present life:

“Curative education is also education. I mean, disabled children can become educated, it’s also an education of them, so anthroposophic pedagogy (Waldorf/Steiner education) is not just for ‘non-disabled’ children”.

“My longing to work with them comes out of a respect for people as individuals ... as Steiner says ‘all people have a healthy I, but some people have some serious obstacles in life’. So teaching handicapped children is much like teaching ‘normal’ children. The difference is perhaps that you have to be even more innovative in finding ways to present the material you want to teach”.

3.3.2 A theory of teacher self-development

In the Waldorf pedagogy, the ideal is that the ‘class teacher’ stays with the same group through all the primary years. In the Icelandic context this means a period of ten years. This requirement varies depending on the length of this level; for example, in Chile it lasts eight years. At the core is the idea that the teacher should accompany the child through this formative period, coming to know her deeply and being a source of stability in her life. In the practice, likewise in other countries, in Iceland this is not always possible to accomplish.

The main class teacher works in cooperation with other ‘type’ of teachers: the specialists, who teach specific subjects, usually to more than one level. They are often educated in subjects taught in anthroposophic settings, such as Eurythmy, biodynamic gardening, handcrafts, music and instrument teaching (e.g. flute, cello, violin, piano and harp). As children reach puberty, there can also be specialized teachers in foreign languages, mathematics, chemistry, physics, and art. Not least, there might also be curative pedagogues, specialized in supporting children with learning difficulties. In general, the configuration of what is offered varies greatly from one school to another, depending on how the personnel is conformed, the financial resources of the school, and the number of children that are served. In this aspect, there are several differences between the two schools in Iceland, and the pre-schools.

But independently of the teaching area or the role a person has in the school, any Waldorf educator should view their own self-development as a personal striving, and as a way of qualifying as teacher (Steiner, 1919, 1948). Among other things, because the teacher influences the child simply

by the way she stands in front of her. I recognized in my informants their understanding and compromise with these ideas, for example, in the way they pursued formal education in anthroposophic areas, and were open to try and learn new things. The view that the teacher is a role model for the child also appeared in the interviews, emphasizing the importance of personal integrity, inner balance, and genuineness when developing educational tasks. Not least, some remarked upon the importance of freedom as a value that is at the core of what teachers do:

“I think the children perceive and imitate the teacher all the time. And the children today just read you like this [instantly]. Children are not interested in big lessons. What they want is to see you, and they see you through. They see if you are true, and that what you say is true ... And that you are true to what you are, that you are not pretending to be something else. So for them is very important that you are present here, and that you are just and fair”.

“For me teaching is not demanding ... I did [much preparation] in the beginning, but now I have done it many times. For me it's more important to *see* the children and to *meet* them”.

“The teachers have to be working out of their freedom in the impulse”.

Much of what has been previously mentioned in relation to teacher's self-development can be expressed in the metaphor of teaching as 'being a journey', that implies permanent preparation and self-education, being the own teaching experience one of the sources for reflection and learning:

“I think it is a journey for many young people that come to work with us, and I heard that afterwards, that it was a great experience to be able to work in a very different way”.

“For many years ... I could tell hundreds of stories but I did not document them. But now when I am working –I have grown up— I document everything I do”.

3.3.3 A core curriculum that integrates artistic and academic work

This aspect refers to the curriculum that is suggested for each grade and is followed worldwide, no matter where a Waldorf school is located. The value of this curriculum –and in which its universality is grounded– is that it acknowledges and supports the developmental stage of the child (Lievegoed, 2003; Steiner, 1907), providing contents that are in accordance with the child’s developing consciousness, and supportive of her creativity and self-imagination (Steiner, 1923a). Thus, each stage is associated to a ‘maxim’ that should be honoured and considered when defining and choosing contents and activities. As a whole, an aim of the Waldorf curriculum is to prevent early intellectualization.

In the interviews the content of this curriculum was not mentioned or discussed, except in two contexts: first, when describing how teachers coordinate their teaching with each other (to which I refer in the next aspect as ‘synchronicity’); and second, when explaining how this curriculum is adapted to the local reality (to which I refer below). Something similar occurred in relation to the maxims that are defined for each stage. Nevertheless, the importance of ‘cultivating’ and recognizing beauty in many ways (e.g. in the surroundings, in the preparation of the class, in the way one moves, in the presentation of contents, etc.) was mentioned as a ‘guiding precept’ in their work.

Also, the integration of artistic and academic work was referred to as the way to ensure the balanced development of thinking, willing and feeling. This way of working, in their view, is one of the unique aspects of this pedagogy:

“Everything that has to do with Waldorf education, which makes it special, is that they have Eurythmy, they have music lessons, all these things”.

“We have a lot of handcrafts, and a variety of therapies”.

For example, Eurythmy (*Hrynlist* in Icelandic) is a subject only taught in Waldorf schools. Etymologically meaning “beautiful balanced movement”, it is a therapeutic art that works ‘with’ and ‘on’ the body, through movement and sound. This has to be explained to the parents, who often are surprised or disconcerted when hearing that sports are not taught in the school:

“But we do a lot of movements, I mean, we have a mountain next door so we walk a lot, we work outside, we do all sort of different activities, we have the circles and we have the Eurythmy, where we learn all sort of coordination exercises, as a person, as a group, and do choreographic forms in the space”.

Another aspect of this integration is that it allows children to search and choose how they want to develop their tasks, that is, how they approximate and appropriate the contents that are presented to them. As one of the teachers pointed out, this ‘method’ teaches the child to take responsibility for her learning process, and become fully involved in it:

“I find that in the Waldorf school they are always pushing them to find out the way, to what they want to do, to choose a work, start it, work on it, and finish it ... So they are conscious of developing and waking-up the children’s interest, and find out ‘What do I want to work on?’ ‘What do I want to do?’ You know, they are not told ‘you have to do this’”.

Referring to the ‘local influence’ (Rawson, 2010, p. 27; Wiechert, 2012, p. 77), this can be observed, for example, in the swimming lessons that children attend from 1st to 10th grade. Both schools use the local swimming pools, and apply to teaching lessons like any other school. In the case of *Lækjarbotnar*, they had also used the facilities available in *Hveragerði*, because although it means a longer drive, it is “nicer in many ways, for example, it is easier to get better time-table”. Another form in which they are influenced, is that both schools receive all the written material that the schools in Iceland get:

“They send us everything, of course, for all levels. We have to go according to the curriculum, the Icelandic State curriculum, to a certain point. But how we do it is a different thing. We just have to make sure that a 10th grade student knows his grammar. And now they are doing some tests in some classes to see how that works, and we sit with the same book as somebody else”.

A third way in which the Waldorf curriculum is adapted to the local reality, occurs when certain contents are informed by what is available in the place where the school is located. For example, when teaching the theme of 'livelihoods' (taught in 3rd grade), in Iceland might be connected to the farm life and fishing, whereas in Norway might deal with mining and forestry.

Not least, the surroundings determine to a great extent what materials are available, for example, for developing artistic forms, handcrafts, and the decoration of the 'seasonal table' and festivals. This is so, because the use of natural materials is privileged in the Waldorf schools. Plastic and synthetic ones are avoided as much as possible:

"In the Waldorf School we have chosen to work with natural materials, so that also gives you a certain frame, what you can do, what you cannot do".

In the case of *Lækjarbotnar*, the teachers working there remarked the importance of the surroundings in the tasks they develop with the children. In this sense, being outside and letting children to explore and moved around, form part of their teaching:

"*Lækjarbotnar*, I think, has also its own ideology. It's not just the anthroposophical side of the Waldorf education. I mean, I think it's also a nature school because it's also deeply connected with the nature. And we use the nature a lot for everything we teach the children".

"We have the mountains, we still have that, it's a dangerous place, but the children learn to deal with it. And I think this is also one of the things that help them to be so self-secure. Because they know they have not being always stopped, they are just taught how to deal with dangerous things. I mean, all the children from age six had carved with sharp knives. We go into blacksmiths and work with fire. They are allowed to do a lot of things, which were normal on a farm hundred years ago. And of course this belongs too, it's a tool of Waldorf education too".

3.3.4 A method of teaching as an art that pays careful attention to synchronizing teaching

Considering the characteristics that describe this aspect (Easton, 1997), most of them were mentioned by the informants as part of the work they do with the children. That is, artistic work is integrated in all subjects areas; students are involved in a broad range of artistic activities; teachers recognize beauty as critical for healthy development; a holistic approach to every subject is implemented, acknowledging its material and spiritual dimensions; teachers coordinate their work in order to ensure that a content is presented from various point of views; they work with rhythm and repetition; and contents are taught in 'blocks' or periods that last two-three weeks.

The coordination among 'class' teachers and specialists is an essential aspect of their work. The content of the 'main class' determines what will be the main theme in the specialized areas. Still, each specialist has to be creative in the way that she enriches the content of the main class, while ensuring that the objectives of her area are also met:

"We have to let each other know at the beginning of the year what I am going to do this year, so the main class teacher informs to the 'specialists' what and when she will be teaching, so we can complement each other".

"[As an Eurythmy teacher] I have control of the basics of which I want to teach them, but I can do it in a frame that it fits the class teacher. So if they are doing geometry, I do a five star with them".

Teaching as an art implies that the teacher uses methods that take into account the individual rhythms of learning, while balancing the needs and 'speed' of the whole class. This has the positive result that children "get the opportunity to do the things according to their possibilities", without going through "the terrible pressure" that often mainstream schools put on their pupils.

As an informant pointed out, the 'art of teaching' is performed when a teacher manages to provide a "living substance" to their children; or said in another way, when a content is taught in a living way, so it transforms the child. Hoping to fairly interpret our conversation, transformation occurs when confronted with an 'educative' experience, the child experiences a

deep joy while sensing, or discovering, the interrelation between herself and her surrounding:

“I hope that the school and the teachers are offering the child a living substance”. I hope he is giving out a living substance to the child, through the curriculum. You know, you can teach math in a living way or in a death way. But I hope he is doing it in a living way”.

“I think the best class that I have been teaching recently, a class that really changes children... for life... that is when I am teaching them horse riding ... It’s really transforming”.

This is one of the reasons of why the use of computers and electronic devices are not welcomed in the classroom. Thus, if there is music is because somebody is playing an instrument or is singing. Writing and illustrations –for example, when designing a presentation or preparing a ‘book’— are performed by hand, becoming an artistic expression of the person who performs it (whether teacher or student):

“In a way, the computer is really killing so much the [development] of the hands. And it creates so much resistance, negative resistances. The children need to work with their hands and their bodies”.

3.3.5 Integration of teaching and administration

Both initiatives, *Lækjarbotnar* and *Sólstafir*, practice this form of running the schools, which among other things, demand to hold meetings weekly (Wiechert, 2012). However, the latter school has its particular way as it involves three settings that are coordinated at some point; thus, there are differences among the staff in terms of their participation in the decision making processes, usually determined by the length of time a person has been working in the organization.

Comparing my work experience at *Sólstafir*, to the way I worked in other municipal and ‘independent’ pre-schools in Reykjavik, definitely I experienced an unusual freedom in developing my tasks, and in how I related to colleagues and parents (among other things due to there being no hierarchy in these settings), in which there prevailed a tacit sense of mutual respect and trust. Thus, I found myself fully immersed in what was happening in the pre-school. Nevertheless, I also learnt that in such a work

environment it is much more difficult to remain detached or claim 'no responsibility' in relation to what is going on in the organization. Not least, every two weeks all the staff in my pre-school met. In those meetings many issues pertaining its functioning were discussed. These sessions would start with a reflection on how we were feeling. The rest of the meeting would deal with new incorporations (e.g. new children), changes in staff, repairs needed in the house, identifying needs, preparation of coming events (e.g. festivals, open house, children's graduation, trips, etc.), and discussing internal conflicts or other problematic issues. In this ambit, we all had the same right to talk. What is usually forgotten, is that when one 'has a right' immediately also 'has an obligation' (understood as a responsibility or duty), in this case, to participate, being honest and well-intentioned when emitting an opinion or judgement, and to be ready to turn compromises into action.

This is not just an abstract philosophical ideal permeating Waldorf schools. Just to illustrate with an example what I mean, in these schools extra-hour payments do not exist. People work on the basis of a ground 'fixed' salary. In *Sólstafir*, salaries are different according to age, education, and the amount of working/teaching hours. In *Lækjarbotnar* the ground salary is exactly the same for everyone, with no differences depending on the role or education, but only on the number of teaching hours. Therefore, the time teachers and other staff (e.g. cooks) dedicate to meetings, festivals and activities with children and parents out of school hours, class trips, preparation of classes and classrooms, beautifying the surroundings, etc. do not mean more money to the person. People really do their work out of own willingness and compromise. I think the aspects just mentioned need to be kept in mind to realise the high level of motivation and compromise that these teachers have with their work, and the challenges that are associated with the running of Waldorf settings.

In these organizations, the **collegium** (also referred as 'faculty' in Wiechert, 2012) is the instance where all the matters pertaining the functioning of the school are discussed and decided. Characterized by 'flat leadership' (*flatta stjórnuna*), everybody working at the setting participate in the discussion and the decisions. Most of my informants referred to this aspect as something that they appreciated, and made them feel proud of the way they were 'accomplishing' their tasks:

"One of the things that always meant very much to me about the Waldorf school was the way the school is structured, and I mean, the part of the cooperation of running the school ... We call it *flatta stjórnuna*. It is the Collegium who really decides everything, and asks".

“In the Collegium we are equals”.

“You really feel grateful with those who work with you”.

“When you are new it takes some time to get in, and some people don’t step all the way in and take responsibilities that they don’t want maybe. But we want everyone to do that. And of course, it can be very much of struggle to find out where and how to do this, so it is also efficient. Yes, having to discuss all matters in the group and taking decisions, it can be very heavy. So in the beginning it was easier, when there were not so many teachers, but as the years have passed we are more and more”.

To develop the running of the school efficiently, in the collegium the teachers define committees that have to perform a variety of tasks, and they take part in few of them depending mostly on their time and interests. Then, each committee has to define how it will accomplish the tasks that have been commended to it. Therefore, usually there is a committee in charge of the pedagogical aspects, another that take care of the finances, and other which look after the maintenance of the setting. The type and number of committees vary from one setting to another, depending on the size of the school community. So, to some extent the committees perform part of the work, but they also must bring “material” for discussion and decision making to the collegium:

“We have a lot of committees, and that range from the celebrations, like we have festivals in the year, so somebody has to take responsibility for each festival, or all of them. You can choose. And then we have committees which have to do with the school board in *Kópavogur*, you know, like really political stuff, the selection of new children, the reparations and the garden, because we have to think of everything”.

“So we have this financial committee, and a committee which takes care of pupils applying for the school, a committee that takes care of hiring teachers, and a committee that takes care of the planning of the houses and the surroundings, and all that. So there are different things. We try to do it in a way that we work the things out in the committees, but bringing it

into the Collegium to have the decision. So the decision and responsibility is in the Collegium”.

The teachers who referred to the collegium were aware that this is a system that not everybody is ready to participate in, nor that it works for everyone. Not only can conflicts of all kind can occur, but it demands much ‘generosity’ and ‘good will’ towards the educative project:

“It can give you a very nice social situation, and it can give you also a difficult social situation, because you have to learn that I take, for example, sometimes more responsibility for something, and somebody else doesn’t. But we still have the same salary. So it does not depend on how much you work, or how much you do, or where your effort is, so just everybody is allowed to be who they are, and it depends on you how much you can take on, or not. It’s a pretty special thing. And I think –I am pretty sure— that there is no other place where it is done except in *Lækjarbotnar*, at least in Iceland”.

“This cooperation, this working together in running the school can mean a lot of difficulties, which we have had ... Teachers had also been leaving and not being satisfied with how we are working”.

In the case of *Sólstafir*, each setting has its own ‘individual’ meetings every two weeks. In the weeks in between, representatives of each setting meet to discuss the situation of the whole organization. There are also other instances where the three settings meet, for example, in some festivals and the preparation of the Christmas bazaar.

This form of administration also allows teachers to enjoy much freedom, for example, in relation to make changes in their daily functioning, in deciding trips, and in the preparation of their working environment:

“[The classroom] has a lot of quality also for the teacher, which is going to be completely different for me to work there now because I did it all, and that’s the way I wanted to have it. And that is how all our classrooms are. I mean, we always have a very big influence on what kind of atmosphere they [kids] are working”.

3.3.6 The school as a community that supports students, teachers, and parents

This aspect was not discussed by my informants in the terms described in section 2.4. That is, the school being a 'learning community', where diversity is acknowledged; nor that parents are united 'around the class', and that their involvement occurs because they are 'enthusiastic' about what happens in the classroom.

When referring to 'community', sometimes it alluded to the members of the school (that is, the teachers, children and parents). In this context, the teachers interviewed were concerned with involving the parents, and acknowledged the importance of their cooperation for running the schools and developing activities with the children (e.g. like festivals). In this sense, parents' participation was perceived more 'around the school' than around a particular class.

Some of them also manifested their wish that the school would have a more active role in informing the parents, or offering courses on anthroposophic issues and Waldorf education; therefore, I recognize in this an interest in working towards developing a 'learning community'.

Involving the parents in the school was particularly emphasized by the teachers from *Lækjarbotnar*. They are essential to the maintenance of the school, and in the past they had also been in charge of the preparation of meals. Therefore, in order to ensure parents' compromise, they needed to put more emphasis in the process of admission of new children:

"We have work-weekends, where all parents are to come, it's in the contract. But I think most of them come also willingly. It is partially organized by the parents. They do also all sort of stuff we need, you know, inside the house and outside".

"We used to have parents cooking for the school, because we could not afford it [the cooker]. And now I think we are financially much better than we were five years ago".

"To have the children in main focus, you know, they are the most important thing. And if you get that feeling together, then you can really do a great school".

Not least, in these teachers' view the relation with the parents is at the core for developing a good educative job. That is, having a good relation

and fluid communication with them allows teachers to know what is going on in the child's life (specially, out of the school), and decide how they can better support her individual development:

“We put a lot of effort into the process [of admission] because we can only do a good work if we are in cooperation and if we know ourselves the situation of the child”.

“We started to be very strict on the procedure of taking in new pupils. So, we made a procedure in an attempt to try to secure that we were not taking in more than we could help. And that the class would be able to –of course there are one or two in each class who needs something extra and has some problems—, but the class have to be able to bear that, and the teachers have to be able to cope with that, without being too much”.

“I find we can really develop a very much ‘family atmosphere’, and the parents experience it immediately when they walk in. They are part of this family. And they talk a lot, and say much about them. I think we get on very well, and we get to know and follow what is going on at home, in many ways”.

Sometimes the term ‘community’ was also used to refer to the wider society (e.g. authorities, public opinion, mainstream educational system). In these cases, some teachers mentioned that to take part in the national exams and follow the regulations were important to them, so to keep a positive relation with the authorities. Another subject was the importance of making their work more visible to the whole community; in particular, in the light that many people are not aware of the options offered by the independent schools. But how much, and in which way they should advertise themselves, was not a resolved issue among my informants:

“We try to be open to the authorities, Open to the educational academia. Just to be open to it. We are not afraid of the *grunnskóla* law or the regulations. We think we can answer everything they ask us through the Waldorf”.

“We have experienced that the parents, following the tradition, send the child to the nearer school. Then they

realised after the first year that ‘Maybe this is not the school I want’, and [ask themselves] ‘Is there an alternative?’ And then they start to look. So, often the children are coming in 2nd and 3rd grade”.

“It’s good to have publicity and that people know about this alternative. But we don’t want to say ‘Hey, come here with your children! This is the best school!’ Because people have to [be clear that] this is a big decision in a way, to choose a school for your child. You have to know this is the right decision for you, that you really want this”.

Taking into account these six aspects of characterizing Waldorf education, and the aspects that were mentioned by the Icelandic educators, Waldorf schools in Iceland are working according to the educative principles and philosophy that characterize this pedagogy. Still, there is no fix model, and both schools also display many differences, both between them and in relation to any other Waldorf school in the world.

3.4 Strengths, facilities, and positive aspects

In this section I describe the strengths, facilities and positive aspects that my informants mentioned when implementing Waldorf education in Iceland. Many of these ideas have already been suggested in the themes developed in the previous sections, but in this section I continue my interpretation of the effect those issues have. Still, the words posed between quotation marks are comments or qualifications expressed by the interviewees. The following presentation is organized around two main areas that can be distinguished in the informants’ realm of practice, that is, the ‘macro society’ (i.e. the wider Icelandic community), and the ‘micro society’ (i.e. the school).

As presented by the Waldorf educators interviewed, their relation with the **macro society** dealt mostly with the educational authorities (both at the municipal or ministerial level), and the ‘public opinion’, understood as the comments and feedbacks they received through daily and informal interactions with people not working in the school. In this sense, it seemed that the lack of rules governing the implementation of independent initiatives, in its positive side, allowed much flexibility and that certain individuals in power positions could determine the outcome. Thus, Waldorf pioneers found that the municipal authorities had been “fairly open”,

showing “understanding” towards their initiatives, and ready to help them to find legal ‘formulas’ that allowed them to operate, in particular in their early beginnings. At present the perception was that the authorities in education wanted them “to be independent”, and that they continue with these “special” and “different” schools. Some of my informants considered that the people in administrative positions today are more educated, being more knowledgeable on issues related to pedagogy, and therefore better informed on what Waldorf education entails.

In relation to the public opinion, the feedback received from people working in other educational institutions who had met Waldorf students graduated from *Lækjarbotnar* and *Sólstafir*, often provided them with compliments and a positive valuation when referring to the Waldorf students’ learning interest and performance in the studies. Also, some people from the academia have showed a “genuine” interest in knowing about the Waldorf schools, in particular those related to art. Thus, the Waldorf impulse has contributed with new and stimulating ideas, locally, which is also a sort of positive recognition:

“I think the Waldorf School has brought a very strong impulse into the school system. More of an artistic stream, I think, it had quite an impact in the school system. People really look at this very small school, we have a very new way of doing things”.

There had been an increasing improvement of the image of the Waldorf schools, their educative proposal and style becoming more accepted, and thus facilitating their work. If in the beginnings they were seen as very different and ‘outside’ of the local society –therefore, threatening, strange, and at odds with many local customs— today they do not hear those critiques anymore. One of them was the image that Waldorf education was only for children with special needs. Another referred to the way in which Waldorf people’s options and lifestyle were assessed (thus, the critiques dealt not only with pedagogical aspects). Today, comments such as being “outside of this world” or a “religious sect” are very rarely found. This acceptance have been reflected in more pupils coming to the schools, and in more people showing interest in working in the Waldorf initiatives:

“You heard a lot of things about the ‘Amish’ people in *Lækjarbotnar* ... Being so old fashioned, and so many years after the internet came, we didn’t have proper internet in

Lækjarbotnar, and all kind of things. Very impulsive, wearing rubber boots and wool sweaters before they came in fashion. Now we are so much in that mood, now we are not so much different ... A lot more people know now what it matters for the environment, how you grow things, organically, all that we were talking about twenty years ago. So in that way, the gap between the 'outside world' and the school is getting smaller”.

“We are having people who come to the Waldorf to work because there is something in it ... They find something in it ... I believe in this: in the freedom”.

Considering the school life or the **micro society**, and connecting with the last quotation above, the interviewees highly valued the freedom and autonomy they have found to put in practice their ideals and views. Among other things, this has allowed them to form and strengthen their staff teams. For example, people who had worked in the schools had moved abroad to study Waldorf pedagogy or other anthroposophic disciplines, and had returned to work at the school:

“We have experienced many times that teachers that had been in the school had gone abroad, and studied, and have come back to the school. And that is of course very strengthening for the school. Yes, that people had good experiences working here”.

The diversification and strengthening of the educators' team has helped them to pursue effectively their holistic educational project, as the teachers feel better prepared to offer therapeutic support if required. And this effectiveness has been proved, so far, by knowing that the children that have left Waldorf schools in 10th grade are doing well in life, whatever path they have chosen. Thus, they believe that the way they have approached education have contributed to form kids that are “resourceful” and “have good abilities to help themselves” through different kind of situations.

The bettering of their economic/financial situation, which has improved in the last years, also has had a very positive effect in their work. For example, they have gained economic stability, which then has allowed them to project their work towards the future. In this latter sense, both organizations are thinking in the future possibilities, and having a “vision of

the future” has helped them to focus and be motivated with their present work. As one of the informants expressed:

“We worked much with the future picture of the school, ‘Where do we want to go with the school?’ And we made our vision in a way. That was not as earlier, perhaps, when we had missions as individuals. But working out what is the vision of the school –the common [vision]— we found out that we wanted a school that is not very big ... also we wanted to keep this ‘familiar’ atmosphere, where everybody knows everybody, and the small children feel secure”.

3.5 Difficulties, weaknesses, and negative aspects

Many of the difficulties, weaknesses and negative aspects that the teachers had experienced when developing their work, were related to people’s attitudes towards their work, in particular, the prejudice and ignorance they encountered in the first years. Among the weaknesses they considered are affecting them at present, are the aspects they would like to improve in their work, or that are related to the ‘internal’ situation of the schools. In this section, which follows the same considerations as the previous one (with the emphasis on the ‘difficulties’ encountered), the information has been organized around a temporal classification; that is, when the critique occurred or it affected to the interviewees (i.e. in the past, present or future).

In relation to the problems they found in **the past**, as I mentioned above related to the macro society, was the poor or negative public image the Waldorf initiative had as an educational institution, which many times meant that they had to work without any kind of local support. Not least, the lack of rules or guidelines in the educational system made very difficult to find the information on what were the procedures required to function as a school:

“In the beginning the school was very invisible in a way. It was there, out in the mountains, almost in a valley that you don’t see from the road, and at the beginning there was no even a sign by the road.”

“Some authorities had written about the school, that it was ‘beyond this world’. It was just... They felt that it was far out what we were doing there [And this ‘out of the world’ was

because of its location or pedagogically?] Like it was not a serious education”.

“At that time [there was in education] a grey area, the city and the Minister had been arguing who should give licenses for the schools and this and that”.

In relation to the micro society, for many years there was much instability in the number of pupils in the schools, every year some children left and new ones arrived. Thus, the classes were changing all the time. One of the reasons for this to occur was the weak compromise the parents had with the school and the pedagogy. This was not only frustrating, but reflected the poor valuation the society had of this pedagogy:

“It was in a way that when you could enter the school very easily, they could leave the school just as easy. We often experienced that pupils came in 4th or 5th grade with some problems, and after two years they were feeling better and they left for the ordinary school again. Yes, ‘thanks for the therapy’”.

At **present** there are many aspects that undermine or make difficult to implement Waldorf pedagogy locally. Among the public opinion still exists a negative ‘outsider’ image, and comments such as “it is a strange school” or “that it has difficult children” are heard; and, for many Icelanders, sending a child to a private/independent school is an unfamiliar or rare practice. Attending to the societal values, some teachers mentioned with concern that they perceived an intolerance in the local society towards “anything thing that is related to religion and Christianity”; this has the effect that some opt by not providing much information on the festivals that are celebrated in the Waldorf schools, unless the parents ask about it. In other cases, they have had to justify certain ‘practices’, why they do certain things (e.g. saying a thanking verse before eating, or having an image of the Sistine Madonna –the Virgin Mary holding the Jesus child— in the school):

“When I was in the school I had to stand behind my desk and say [the pray] ‘Our Father’ every morning. That was just twenty years ago, nobody would be afraid. But if you do that today you can get in troubles”.

In the case of *Lækjarbotnar*, there is still a lack of some basic services and infrastructure because the local authorities had not wanted to invest in the school. For example, they have not been able –after 23 years– to get a bus stop so to being able to use the public transport. As I corroborated, the bus that travels between Reykjavik and Selfoss is not allowed to stop in front of the road that leads to the school: “We have a high street passing by, and it is so easy to make a space for the bus to stop. And they haven’t done it. It’s forbidden for the bus to stop”.

Among the difficulties related to the micro society, it was mentioned the lack of activity or energy that they had put into publicizing or making “more visible” their work to the ‘outside’ community: “I know one thing: that we have not been publicising ourselves at all. People don’t know about us. We don’t even have a sign, so people don’t find the school”. Still, as I mentioned somewhere else, in my view they have not resolved how they want to intensify or introduce themselves towards the Icelandic community. In this sense, there is the perception among some practitioners that there are “internal obstacles” for presenting a consolidate image of Waldorf education, due to the differences between the two schools. Thus, because both initiatives have not been able to work together, some teachers believe this “send the message to the public that ‘there is a conflict’”.

Another difficulty, which affects in particular the Waldorf primary schools, is that not having educators with ‘traditional’ teacher education creates uncertainty towards their teaching role as the teachers need to present their ‘credentials’ to the Ministry every year. Also, getting new teachers is not easy, as it has been difficult “to get new people” interested in Anthroposophy. So, the educators involved in Waldorf education has remained more or less the same people since the 1990s, and I perceived in my informants’ opinions a sense that there is a lack in Iceland of Waldorf /Anthroposophic teachers. Thus, the Waldorf initiatives have been open to work with people who had not learnt about Anthroposophy. But this has not always been a good experience, as according to some ‘insiders’ practitioners, it can be very discouraging to work with people who do not know about Waldorf education but, even worse, if they do not have interest in learning about it. Even the basic requisite they demand –to be enthusiastic about working with children, in the Waldorf way– is not easily met:

“People are always coming [to work] and they know so little about Waldorf. And maybe it is a fantastic opportunity to know something in which nobody has much interest. But sometimes they don’t have any interest at all, and this I find it quite difficult”.

“The greatest challenge is really to be able to, you know, that everybody who is working with the children is enthusiastic and really burning for his or her work”.

Some people have experienced feeling drained by their jobs, leading to a sense of dissatisfaction at work. Although I did not dwell much on the source of this dissatisfaction, I understood that there were aspects in their work that needed to be addressed and worked on. For example, it was mentioned the lack of opportunities for studying and learning more about Waldorf pedagogy locally. In this sense, the organizations have been so dedicated to their teaching tasks that they may have neglected the teachers’ needs of furthering their education:

“The organization is always using all the energy that people have, but the organization itself is not ready to give and support people so they can be stronger, and be able to give even more! And sometimes I feel very unsatisfied about this, because I am always giving myself, I am always ready for it. But I miss something back”.

“I think instead of been sending one or two people from each school to courses abroad, we should get teachers from abroad, invite them to come with a certain course, here, and close the schools so everybody can attend”.

Thus, when referring to the **future** difficulties Waldorf pedagogy might face, a major concern pointed to the renewal of the anthroposophic community in Iceland; in particular, to the possibility of having teachers educated in this pedagogy, as its realization depends on the teachers’ will to embody and enact the anthroposophical worldview. Although it is desirable to have teachers educated in the mainstream education system (so to avoid doubts as to the qualifications of the staff), there is a concern that this external influence could diminish the practical integrity of the schools distinction as Waldorf in the classroom. People working in these

schools should at least have a confidence in anthroposophy so as to “be Waldorf”:

“I still think that for the future that is one of the big tasks: to renew the teachers in a way! We are those who started the school, and now we are in a way getting old, leaving. So there has to come some renewal”.

“You have to know [Anthroposophy], to be involved in Waldorf education as well. I mean, if we were to take in new teachers, with *grunnskóla menntun*, then it wouldn’t be a Waldorf school anymore”.

“We don’t have enough [Waldorf educated] people. And there is nobody studying now. And there are also the ones who live abroad and never came back”.

The students graduated from Waldorf schools –who could mean new supporters of this pedagogy— are in their early twenties. Some of the teachers interviewed commented that they see their own children and ex-students fully immerse in the process of searching and discovering new things. Some are studying, others have been travelling around the world, and others are working. The offer of alternatives is so vast –compared with how things were in their youth—, that these teachers considered that deciding what to do in the future is not such an easy task for the youth today. Also, how the former Waldorf students will “bridge” their education with whatever they choose to do in the future, is an outcome about which my informants could only speculate; and so far, they could not preview whether these kids will be involved with Waldorf education in the future or not.

4 Discussion

In the preceding section I have presented a picture of what has been the **development of Waldorf education in Iceland**. Recapitulating the hallmarks of this process, the first Steiner/Waldorf educative initiative occurred in 1930, when *Sólheimar* was founded as an orphanage for normal and disabled children. A group of Icelanders was inspired by this project, and by the anthroposophic community in Jarna (Sweden), which led in 1990 to the formation of *Lækjarbotnar (Kópavogur)*. Their main motivation was to provide Waldorf education to their own children. In 1994, due to different views towards the future, the founding group split, leading to the creation of *Sólstafir* (Reykjavik). Since then, both initiatives have been providing Waldorf pedagogy from pre-school level to 10th grade.

One of the main motivations for pursuing this study, was to produce information that could help me to **contextualize my own work** as a Waldorf pre-school teacher in Iceland. This aim was fully accomplished as I gained completely new insights into what Waldorf pedagogy means in the Icelandic context, in terms of its practice, its public image, and its relation with the local educational system. Not least, I learnt about unknown aspects of some of my colleagues' lives and endeavours. Based on my own experience, I believe that much of the information I have provided in this thesis is away from constituting the sort of themes that people, working in an Icelandic Waldorf setting, would discuss in every working-day life. I never imagined some of the prejudices and critiques that Waldorf education had faced among Icelanders, such as its educators being qualified as hippies, members of a religious sect (the Amish), or 'out of the world' lunatics. Not enough with having had to cope with these 'external' prejudices and disqualifications, they also had to bear their own 'internal' conflicts. Thus, they had needed to put as much effort in building and making operative their own educational initiatives, as they have needed for creating a space for this pedagogy in the local context. The teachers interviewed in this study are indisputable pioneers in this field, for which my respect for what they have managed to accomplish increased. If has comparing the local situation with countries where Waldorf pedagogy is well-known and institutionalized (e.g. Germany), or with countries where it is still unknown, Waldorf schools are just another option among several

educational alternatives (e.g. Chile), the path they had to follow in Iceland seems more arduous.

A second motivation referred to **filling a gap** of information in the history of education in Iceland. First, confronted with the lack of studies and writings that deal with this pedagogy, I found that Rawson's observation pointing out that Waldorf practitioners tend to be reluctant to engage with the academic main stream (Rawson, 2010, p. 27), fully applies to the Icelandic educators. Likewise, this reluctance is reflected in the little "internal research" and reflectivity (at least, as it is understood by the academic community). In this context, I consider my study as a beginning, as I have provided a rough picture of the events that led to the creation of the Waldorf initiatives in Iceland. Still, I believe this report is not only informative on this specific approach, but it provides a glimpse into the many difficulties that independent schools had to face in order to exist. So, it can well serve as a source for comparing the beginnings and struggles that other independent schools had encountered.

Considering the findings of this study, there are many aspects that deserve more in depth research. Some of them are, for example, the authorities' views on the processes related to the creation of the Waldorf schools and pre-schools, which could contribute with another point of view on this issue, and provide a more accurate picture of what were the challenges that independent initiatives were posing to the educational administration. Another potential area of research, mentioned by the teachers in the study, refers to the first generations of graduated students from Waldorf schools, in particular, how they are doing in life. Furthermore, the teachers' evaluation of their own teaching practices could provide a more subtle view on how they have been implementing the curriculum. Also, other themes to be researched could be the revision of the various subjects and methods that Waldorf performs with comparison to the educational pillars suggested in the new national curriculum of 2011. In relation to them, Waldorf schools might be seen to offer exemplary models of inclusive education, democratic practice and self-governing, sustainability education, art as a teaching method, and the development of moral and spiritual values necessary for community life. Not least, if approaching Waldorf education from the perspective of the independents schools and the impact that the Association have had on their work conditions and their public image. Studies in this area could give Waldorf educators some hints on how to integrate with the wider community. Revising local websites, I only found one dissertation (Arnardóttir, 2006) which deals with the existence of 'alternative approaches' to education –

offered at the pre-school level— being the Waldorf approach mentioned among others, such as Reggio Emilia, Hjalastefna, and High-Scope.

A third motivation for undertaking this study was to provide information on how Waldorf pedagogy is **implemented locally**, attempting to identify the aspects of this approach that resonate in the Icelandic practitioners. Thus, I found that there are two main groups, located in very different settings that influence how they construct their identity and their public images. This can be expressed in the polarity city/countryside. However, I did find that both initiatives work in accordance with the principles and aims of Waldorf/Steiner education (Hague Circle, 2009; Easton, 1997; Trostli, 1998; Wiechert, 2012). Also, I noticed that Icelandic teachers are involved and are knowledgeable of Anthroposophy, therefore Rawson's (2010) critique that educators often have difficulties in engaging with Steiner's writings, does not apply to the teachers in my study. Even more, they know about the path proposed by Steiner (2009), where he refers to attitudes and exercises to be practiced in order to develop self-awareness and strengthen the cognitive faculties. In terms of two important principles that sustain this pedagogy –imitation (Steiner, 1907, 1948) and repetition (Steiner, 1919)— teachers referred and acknowledged the former, but did not mention much in connection to the latter. They were much interested, and emphasized their motivation in developing a sense of community, providing education that respect the child's individuality, and creating an environment that support creativity, and a sense of freedom and responsibility towards others.

Particular to the Icelandic case is their interest in founding a community, which would include many services and buildings, and not just a school. Even if the Emerson stream was not ready to prioritize this project over the school in itself, they did not disregard the view of the community. And, if the decision to finish the cooperation would have not been taken –which was unilaterally determined by the Jarna stream— maybe the community project would have continued as it was originally planned. But as somebody joked, they “wanted to change the world” and felt they could, because in my view, the community project was a much bigger and complex endeavour than creating a school. The original project for *Lækjarbotnar* has never been fully implemented as it was designed. The school itself has been the sole focus of the effort. Nevertheless, the dream of diversifying and extending the work to disabled people has not being abandoned. And this is another specific aspect that belongs to the Icelandic case: the teachers' interest in working and educating this latter group of children. Examples of parents who want Waldorf education for their children and

therefore start a school, are not rare. Nevertheless, I consider these Icelandic parents were much more radical, as they were not only ready to take their children's formal education in their hands, but they also were prepared to subordinate their lives to the educative project.

All my interviewees travelled to form their selves professionally, and become knowledgeable of Anthroposophy and pedagogy. They not only became prepared in terms of specific skills related to the educative task, but they gained a rich life experience by being confronted with other cultures and languages. This provided them with a broader view of the educative task, and by observing what was being developed in other countries they also gained an insight of what they could accomplish in their homeland. Therefore, in my view it is inappropriate to consider them as 'amateurs' or 'lay people' (*áhugafólk*)¹⁵ (Guttormsson, 2008, pp. 88-92). This way of referring to Waldorf educators does not inform on the professional preparation that sustains their work, and would seem to exacerbate the misunderstanding and depreciation of the Waldorf pedagogical endeavour. Not least, the teachers in my study are far more prepared and serious about their work than many of the people I have met while working in the pre-schools of Reykjavik; yet, I have never heard anyone referring to these latter workers as 'amateurs'.

Considering the present difficulties, and although my informants did not refer to them in dramatic terms, my opinion is that Waldorf education is a pedagogy at risk of disappearing from the Icelandic context, if the renewal of Waldorf educators does not occur in the near future. At the moment, there is no young people studying to become Waldorf teachers or showing interest in Anthroposophy. Also, how the newly graduated students will "bridge" their primary education with whatever path they take in life is something that has not emerged yet. As I heard from one of this youngster, because she has always been in this trail, for her the main question is now if she wants to continue on it, or wants something different for herself. Teachers educated in the mainstream are not necessarily suited for these schools, unless they are interested in the anthroposophic worldview and had acquired some specific knowledge in Waldorf education. Not least, those who have pioneered this approach are getting old and their children are finishing school; therefore, their major motivation to get involve in the schools –to provide Waldorf education to their own children— is now a thing of the past.

¹⁵ I am grateful to my supervisor for this observation.

In relation to why Waldorf education is **hardly known** in Iceland, interpreting the information I heard through the interviews, I can point at least three reasons that could have led to this state of affairs. Nevertheless, I do not consider that I have enough data to venture a definitive conclusion on this issue. Even so, first, I see that the initiatives have been dedicated to develop their projects and their 'inside' teaching, while giving little attention to their relation with the wider community. Second, for many years (between 1990 until 2005) they had to struggle with the authorities to get financial support and the permissions to operate; therefore, their status as viable educational alternatives was only recently settled. And, third, the aftermaths of the split that could have resulted in mutual distrust and rivalries (as I believe that in spite of the sincere effort towards self-education that anthroposophists strive to, they are no less susceptible to interpersonal conflict), have weakened the practitioners' chances to project their work as two legitimate alternatives or versions of a similar worldview and pedagogy.

Among the **aspects that attracted** this group of **Icelanders** to implement Waldorf pedagogy was the perception that education, above all, forms life-long capacities and faculties (Wilkinson, 2001). Thus, the views and methods proposed by a pedagogy that focuses on process rather than outcomes (Clouder & Rawson, 2002; Easton, 1997; Oberski & McNally, 2007; Patterson & Bradley, 2000; Rawson, 2010; Wiechert, 2012) resonated in them. Based on their own observation of how these settings worked, they recognized a pedagogy that was respectful of the child's individuality, allowing her the necessary freedom to find her way. In this sense, although they referred very seldom to the mainstream educational system, in the few cases they compared Waldorf pedagogy against it, they celebrated that their approach did not pressure children to fill in a pattern of homogenization that tended to limit their balanced development. In their understanding, the latter referred to the harmonious nurturing of the three human faculties par excellence: thinking, feeling and willing (Steiner, 1907, 1923b; Lievegoed, 2003; Trostli, 1998). In this context, the theory of child development proposed by Steiner (1907), certainly when he refers to the child as involved in a process of unfolding her capacities –which is suggested in the metaphor of the seed— made much sense to them. Thus, they embraced Steiner's (1923a, 1923b, 2009) recommendation of not intellectualizing the children prematurely and taking care of the child's environment.

And, another aspect attractive to my informants was the way Waldorf schools are organized and administered (Trostli, 1998; Wiechert, 2012).

Having the possibility to put in practice democratic principles –expressed in the ‘flat leadership’ of the collegium— they saw a social space in which to enjoy autonomy and equality to decide the internal matters of the organization, while keeping their individual freedom to determine their level of involvement.

5 Conclusions

In Iceland there are two Waldorf primary schools (*Lækjarbotnar* and *Sólstafir*), and three pre-schools (Ylur in *Lækjarbotnar*, and *Sóltafir* in *Grundarstígur* street, and *Sólstafir í Höfn* in Marargata street). These anthroposophic initiatives provide education for approximately 200 children, and employ 40 persons. In spite of being present in the Icelandic educational system for 23 years, Waldorf education continues to be unknown and strange as an educational approach for most local dwellers.

Even more unknown is that the very first Steiner/Waldorf initiative occurred in 1930 when Sesselja Hreindís Sigmundsdóttir founded *Sólheimar* as an orphanage for children in difficult situation. There she imparted Waldorf education. After her death in 1974, the anthroposophic impulse declined. Still, during the 1980s, some of the Icelanders who came to know this project were deeply touched by it, to the extent that they moved abroad to learn Anthroposophy and a variety of disciplines related to it (such as biodynamic agriculture and curative pedagogy). The anthroposophic community in Jarna (Sweden) and Emerson College (United Kingdom) were the main centres that attracted Icelanders to study and live there for some years. Many of them had become parents and wanted to provide Waldorf education to their children. Hence, once back in Iceland, they founded the school in *Lækjarbotnar (Kópavogur)* in 1990. Initially they had to operate as an 'after-school home', and only one person had the 'license' to teach. In 1991 the primary school started to operate, and by 1993 there were 40 children attending the school. These were hard times for the founding members as they had no financial support from the local authorities. In 1994, due to different views towards the future, the founding group split. Part of the school community that was living Reykjavik, soon founded a new school and pre-school, *Sólstafir*. In 1997, this organization diversified as a new pre-school was started (*Sólstafir í Höfn*), and the primary school moved to a new setting in *Breiðholt*. In search for a place where to build a school that could reunite the three settings, in 2011 the primary school moved to a new location in *Sóltún*. The creation of the Association of Independent Schools in 2005 marked a turning point in the financial, pedagogical and political status of the these anthroposophic initiatives.

The Waldorf pedagogy aims to provide an education that is characterized by its holistic view of the educative process, where each child is supported in the unfolding of her capacities. This approach applies both to 'normal' children, and those who have 'special needs'. Thus, the human faculties of thinking, feeling and willing are nurtured simultaneously by integrating artistic and intellectual activities; by implementing a curriculum that is in accordance with the child's developmental stage; by synchronizing subjects around a theme; and, by imparting music and movements classes, among other teaching methods. Social, environmental and spiritual values are cultivated in the daily rhythm, and the practice of running the school.

Observing how the graduated Waldorf students have been performing in the mainstream educational system, the teachers interviewed are confident that this pedagogy offers children a process of learning that sparks their interest in self-education, and allows them to discover their particular strengths. Still, they would like to know more precisely and systematically about this issue, in order to have a better understanding of what are the challenges –both academic and personal– that these youngsters are facing.

The Waldorf initiatives differ greatly from the local schools in the way they are administered, as they use the system of the 'collegium' and the 'committees'. In these instances, which are characterized by 'flat leadership' (*flatt stjórnunna*), the direction and responsibility of running the school, as well as the performance of the many tasks related to it, are shared by all the staff members of the school. Thus, they consider that the school community is based on principles of autonomy and equality.

In this sense, Waldorf schools have highly motivated and committed teachers. They value the fact that they can integrate their diverse interests, while providing for their needs (such as personal and professional development, family life, social service and livelihood). They also see themselves as part of a wider community: the worldwide anthroposophic society. Without a doubt, they are pioneering Waldorf pedagogy in Iceland.

Parents also have an important role in the running of the school, as they participate in the repairing, beautifying, and cleaning of it. They also are very active in the preparation of festivals and the Christmas bazaar. Through the year there are many activities where the whole school community reunites. Not least, permanent cooperation between home and school is cultivated in relation to the well-being of the child, as teachers firmly believe that an aspect that influences their teaching and enables

them to do it efficiently is to know the situation of the child, outside of school.

Waldorf teachers feel they need to make their work better known, so to be recognized as a valid educational alternative by the Icelandic society. Thus they are considering how to open up more, or make their work more visible to the “outside” community. Parts of this visibility also concern their relation with the authorities and the main stream educational system. In this sense, I suggest Waldorf teachers need to involve themselves with research practices (such as Action research) and other forms of inquiry (for example, surveys that assess parents’ level of satisfaction with the school), so as to strengthen their self-reflectiveness, and have some ‘concrete material’ to show or use as a base for discussion with the wider society.

In my view, Waldorf pedagogy is at risk of disappearing from the Icelandic context, if the renewal of Waldorf educators does not occur in the near future. At present there are no people studying abroad to become Waldorf/Anthroposophic educators, neither are there teacher training programs locally. To be formed as a pedagogue in the mainstream system is not enough, as these schools –to comply to their name, and be faithful to the values and views that inspire this pedagogy— need people who are at least interested if not immersed in Anthroposophy, and have studied Waldorf education or some another area related to this worldview (for example, art, Eurythmy, music, agriculture, medicine, or some form of therapy). The Icelandic students who have graduated from these schools are quite young. Still in their early twenties, they are in the process of searching and trying out different things. Hence, at present it is unclear if they will become the bearers of the Waldorf legacy in the next years.

The principles and practices enacted in these schools show an understanding (and a form of implementation) which is in accordance with inclusive education, democratic governance, and sustainability education. Not least, their holistic approach to education and the cultivation of an image of the human being (who has to nurture her physical a spiritual life), are aspects neglected by most educative approaches today which tend to emphasize performance and competitiveness. Thus, I suggest that the local educational community can learn much from these Icelandic Waldorf initiatives, among other things, to enhance its views on pedagogy and curricular implementation. So far, the local mainstream academia has shown no interest in them: Waldorf pedagogy is hardly mentioned, by no means is taught, and the production of thesis and dissertations –whether directly related to this pedagogy or in the context of the independent

schools movement in Iceland— are almost non-existent (only Jóhannesdóttir, 2010; and Arnardóttir, 2006). A situation that clearly illustrates this lack of interest is that the few specific books on this approach that are available at the University of Iceland, are kept in the *geymsla* section (the storage) due to the little use they have. I would hope that in the near future my modest study has sparked other people's interest in researching or writing about Waldorf in Iceland. Maybe its pioneers will feel the burning need of telling their own version of the story –and thus correct possible errors, and add the many aspects unmentioned in this thesis—, or students' and scholars' interest might become awake, as this is an area totally unexplored by academic research.

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