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Salutogenic Education? Movement and Whole Child Health in a Waldorf (Steiner) School

Waldorf education, an independent alternative to public schooling, aims to produce holistically healthy graduates in a formulation that rejects the conventional distinction between education and health. Also striving to bridge that divide, this article characterizes the pedagogically salutogenic techniques Waldorf teachers use in pre-kindergarten (pre-k) and lower grade classes and explicates the ethnomedical understandings underlying them. Waldorf teachers position children as budding participants in a unified field of spiritual and other forces, prioritizing whole-child activities that keep these forces healthfully motile. Their work entails a critique not only of mainstream public schooling’s ostensibly pathogenic “head-to-head” focus, but also of the biomedical approach to pediatric health. My analysis of this conjoined critique takes into account the cultural, structural, and existential realities within which Waldorf education’s salutary pedagogy is daily framed and fabricated. Further, it explores the implications for anthropology of attending to movement as a key feature of healthful human experience.

Introduction

Can education affect health directly? Yes, say teachers practicing Waldorf education, an alternative pedagogy described by insiders as “preventive medicine” and “salutogenic” (Glöckler 2002). Drawing on classroom-based fieldwork, I characterize Waldorf teachers’ perspective on education-based health production and their related focus on movement, which is broadly defined. I examine the existential, cultural, and structural factors amid which their salutary pedagogy is daily framed and fabricated.

Pedagogical salutogenesis has received little scholarly scrutiny. To be sure, correlations between education levels and health outcomes can be found; some research even compares health outcomes of people with different kinds of schooling (e.g., Alfven et al. 2006; Alm et al. 2002; Alm et al. 1999). But education is a proxy for lifestyle rather than the variable of interest (see Howard n.d.). The Western habit of segregating education and health leads researchers to overlook direct relationships that may exist between pedagogic action and health production.

In seeking to bridge these compartmentalized domains, my project contributes to conversations in medical anthropology regarding how embracing intersectionality (Inhorn and Wentzell 2012) and refusing a “medicalized” view of health (Browner 1999; Manderson and Smith-Morris 2010) can advance our thinking. Also, in exchanging the pathogenic paradigm or focus on ill-health for a salutogenic one, the work exposes resilience-related factors that pathocentric inquiry leaves unconsidered (Antonovsky 1987), here particularly in regard to the proactive management of child health.

Moreover, this work joins an emerging discussion regarding the value of prioritizing movement methodologically and analytically (e.g., as a way to bypass conventional mind–body
dualism) (Ingold 2011; Wool 2012) and our related “fixation on states” (Robertson 2011:598). Doing so can illuminate health-related experiences to which we might otherwise might remain “epistemologically blind” (p. 588). More broadly, the work—and the lifescape paradigm proposed—contributes to discussions regarding the implications of ontological perspectives for anthropology’s understanding of human experience (e.g., Biehl and Locke 2010; Latour 2013).

**Background**

Waldorf education is an independent (private) alternative to U.S. public schooling that offers a curriculum rich in the arts, heavy on experiential learning, and light on summative testing (see, e.g., Petrash 2002). It was conceived in 1919 when the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory invited Rudolf Steiner to help launch a free school for the factory’s workers’ children. The number of private Waldorf schools has increased exponentially since then and, despite the broad gap in scholarly knowledge regarding Waldorf education’s unique approach, so has the popularity of “Waldorf-inspired methods” in public charter schools (Sagarin 2011). This makes the time ripe for investigating it.

An offshoot of the progressive education movement, Waldorf education aims to develop citizens capable of active, informed, and critical civic participation. Waldorf pedagogy has its roots in anthroposophy, a holistic philosophy that Steiner developed after contemplating Goethe and Rosicrucian and Theosophist ideas. Often glossed as “the wisdom of humankind,” anthroposophy offers a path to self-development resting on the assumption that a non-material or “spiritual” universe interpenetrates and informs the material one. But Waldorf schools do not teach anthroposophy, and in my experience, parents know little about it.

Waldorf pedagogy rests on a highly elaborated ethnomedical account of and for healthful human development. Teaching, done properly within this ontogenic framework, has been cast by insiders as a healing art (e.g., Glöckler 2002). Outsiders acknowledge the health benefits of high levels of physical activity documented for Waldorf classrooms (Sobo 2013); insiders point to extra-physical aspects of movement, too, as health producing. In seeing movement as characteristic of—and salutogenic for—more than just the physical body, Waldorf educators configure a culture-specific definition of health and medicine that rejects, overtly, the mind–body split inherent in mainstream Western thinking—including anthropology.

Dualism affects profoundly the divisions we assume and impose (e.g., between education and medicine) as well as the questions we ask, the methods we apply, and the answers we come to—causing us to inadequately and sometimes falsely account for human experience (Csordas 1990; Ingold 2011; Janzen 2001; Robertson 2011; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). This complaint may be old, but it remains unresolved (see Latour 2013). Independent of Waldorf education, a number of anthropologists have proposed inspiringly that movement provides a bypass.

For example, Zoë Wool (2012) suggests that to fend off prevailing subject–object distinctions when thinking about post-traumatic stress disorder, we should “begin not with pathology and its problems, but with ontology and its possibilities” (p. 6). Working with traumatized ex-soldiers, Wool focuses on “the sensate moving soldier acting in the here and now of a home front itself transformed by a there and then of the warzone” (p. 4). In doing so, she finds that there are “whole existential, corporeal, social, and intersubjective fields, which movement makes apparent” (p. 7).
Wool does an excellent job highlighting movement’s centrality to the unfolding of a meaning-filled life and pinpointing how theorists’ (and clinicians”) penchant for mind–body dichotomizing elides this. Yet the overt concern with “flesh and the way it is seen and felt” (2012:7), and with bodily perception and reaction, inadvertently sidelines less materially anchored forms of movement. And while the focus on “the experience of being disoriented and the vertiginous … process of becoming reoriented” (Wool 2012:4) helpfully highlights the processual dimension, it underplays the importance of movement in “normal” conditions.

Tim Ingold (2011) offers a framework that accommodates and in fact relies on just such everyday movement. Citing Gibson, Hallowell, Bateson, and others, Ingold explains that knowing and skillfully living in the world entails moving. Forming useful percepts depends on moving around in the environment to engage a variety of sensations. This involves flow across the envelope of our skin: Knowing “reaches out into the environment along multiple pathways of sensory participation” (Ingold 2011:18; see also pp. 86–88, 236). Mind–body, inside–outside, subject–object distinctions are irrelevant because of how knowing and moving are conjoined. Take, for example, knowing how to surf, which demands unification of one’s movements with the sea’s (Olsson 2009:1–5).

Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), Ingold explains that we move—we actively participate—within a tangle of many “lines of flight” that may vanish into the distance as “lines of becoming”—growing, radiating, mobile lines that comprise a field of forces within which our actions emerge (2011:Ch.6). Ingold likens this field to a mat of embankment vegetation: a “meshwork” (p. 84; this term is Lefebvre’s; the vegetation mat image, Darwin’s). The meshwork consists not of “relations between” but rather relations themselves, which comprise the organisms and other entities of the meshwork. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the image of choice was the rhizome. Rhizomes are creeping rootstalks, like ginger. Rhizomes are open-ended, non-hierarchical, radiating, self-germinating, infinite entities.

As Olsson’s surfing example suggests, the rhizomatic meshwork is not merely material. It includes currents, empirically measurable and not, that move in “flows and counter-flows, winding through or amidst without beginning or end” (Ingold 2011:85). One such flow is that of the wind, which many cultures link with breath and understand as our life-force. For instance, the Khoisan explain that wind enables physical movement, including standing up (Low 2008). Like the weather that wind is part of, says Ingold, the rhizomatic meshwork’s currents surround and infuse us. We move with and through this Deleuzian lifescape.¹

Movement can thus be understood as not just material, here-to-there bodily transit, but an encounter with vital and often extra-individual processes and flows, some of which are essential to life and well-being. With its germinative, integrationist focus, the lifescape lens enables us to push past the narrowly “medicalized” and “biomedical-centric” views of medicine and health seen so often in medical anthropology (Browner 1999; Manderson and Smith-Morris 2010:6–8). It encourages us to push past the question of “what happens when health is gone” to consider how health is created and maintained daily.

Waldorf education prioritizes movement, acknowledges extra-physical forces, and self-identifies as health producing. It thus provides an excellent starting point from which to ask, empirically, where thinking about movement and health in dialog with the philosophical perspective described can take us (see Biehl and Locke 2010:348). We can investigate the lifescape paradigm’s practical expression from a critical perspective and we can ask whether the kind of materialist, objectifying, oppositional dualism that it attempts to circumvent through a focus on movement actually can, in practice, be avoided.
Methods

Research was undertaken in 2012 at a well-established, accredited U.S. Waldorf school providing pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through 12th-grade education. Housed in converted church buildings in a run-down urban neighborhood, it served 280 students (4% Asian, 3% black or African American, 9% Hispanic or Latino, 60% white, and 24% “two or more races”).

IRB-approved data collection methods included 175 hours of unobtrusive in-classroom observations in two pre-K and two kindergarten classrooms (grouped together in the analysis, following teacher recommendations, as “early childhood”) and in the classrooms of grades one through three (grouped together, again as per teachers, as the “lower grades”). Grade three provided a good stopping point due to Waldorf educators’ position that a new sub-stage of childhood begins with fourth grade. Thus, the project concerns instruction for the four-to-six (pre-K/K) and seven-to-nine year (early elementary) age range, as actualized in seven classrooms. The seven lead teachers observed had been with the school an average of five years. Four of the seven also had prior experience in other Waldorf education settings. All were certified Waldorf teachers.

To augment understanding, individual and group interviews were undertaken with 18 participants (nine support teachers, two staff members in teaching-relevant positions, and the seven lead teachers also observed). With interviewee permission, some interviews were audio recorded. However, because the school has a no-electronic-technology policy, pencil-and-paper methods were the norm.

An adapted grounded theory approach was used, with analysis occurring during and informing data collection (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Emergent themes were identified in relation to on-the-ground practices through teacher reflections on pedagogical choices and in light of my reading of Waldorf education’s literature (e.g., Steiner 2007), which enabled me to grasp efficiently certain aspects of Waldorf education that otherwise would have taken much longer to parse. My experience as a Waldorf parent and thus a real participant–observer from 2009 also informed my understanding.

That “subjects” included only teachers may be viewed as a limitation. Yet, teachers are the key pedagogical decision-makers. The present work’s narrow focus facilitates an in-depth understanding of their perspectives and of the every-day ways they actualize and maintain Waldorf education’s pediatric framework. Understanding their point of view is imperative, both in its own right and as a necessary foundation for future inquiries into end-user (student, parent) experiences and outcomes.

In regard to generalizability, many teachers in the study have worked in other Waldorf settings. The teacher training programs they went through all share a core common curriculum of material written by Steiner. Continuing education training and workshops that teachers attend draw faculty trainers and attendees from schools across the nation, and schools receive national oversight from the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America. These factors indicate the existence of a common core culture among Waldorf teachers and of nationwide cross-ties that reinforce pedagogic cohesion. Given this study’s focus on shared strategies and experiences, these factors make possible both the use of aggregated data in the findings section as well as descriptive and analytic generalizations. Teachers’ idiosyncrasies and differences of opinion do exist (Sobo 2014), but they gain expression within the shared cultural framework that this research considers.
That shared framework mitigates the impact of my inability, due to the technology ban, to collect and present numerous direct verbatim quotations. It also bears noting that, as Allison James points out in her critique of “giving voice” in social science writing by deploying quotations, quotes can overemphasize the particular opinions of particular people (2007). Moreover, a focus on quotes can distract analysts from the more important work of explicating the sociocultural and political–economic forces that give shape to words reported (pp. 264–265). Thus, the default need here to present discursive findings in aggregate and as paraphrased may, in fact, increase the validity of my representation of teachers’ shared strategies and experiences and of their generative context. Still, to ensure that no reader confuses my interpretations with teacher self-reports or classroom events, I include only teacher explanations in the findings section, saving my own scholarly analysis for the discussion.

Here, I should note that teacher narratives are themselves sometimes quite analytical. Teacher training supports this: Steiner’s and others’ anthroposophical discourse is often dense, complex, abstract, and arcane. Moreover, terms used one way by the mainstream can be used esoterically by Waldorf educators. “Development” is one such term: For Waldorf teachers, it is a whole-child process directly tied to health.

Findings

Whole-child View of Health

Teachers understand pediatric health as a whole-child process in which “incarnation”—the spiritual penetration of the material body—is unhindered. Although Ms. June and Ms. Olim preferred to explain incarnation to parents as a physiological process whereby children slowly develop fuller control of and familiarity with their physical bodies, down to fine motor movements (because, they said, parents can grasp this aspect of it more immediately), all described children as “spiritual beings” in the process of “coming down” from “heaven” or “the spiritual realm.” As one long-time teacher preschool teacher explained, “Most of what we do is to help them come down” and grow to feel “at home” in their bodies and in “this world.” Disruptions to this process, for instance, via early exposure to television or intellectualized, abstract explanations, can impede the formation of children’s organs and nervous and circulatory systems. Some of the pathogenic effects of this are not seen until decades later, teachers said.

A sign of good health is the ability to engage contentedly and productively in school activities. This does not mean that healthfully developing children never are ill. Some diseases are seen by teachers as useful paediatrically, aiding the body in extruding old, disused material as the body “remodels” itself in the process of physical maturation. Rashes, runny noses, and fevers thus arise in the service of growth and development. Also, the immune system is strengthened by bouts of childhood disease. Often, after a child has been out with a fever, he or she comes back with increased capacity to “do the work” of school or showing a step-wise gain in skills. Accordingly, the kinds of sickness that raise teachers’ concern have to do instead with injuries sustained when healthfully paced incarnation (developmental unfolding and physical growth) has been unduly interfered with. That such sickness can show itself behaviorally is in keeping with Waldorf educators’ whole-child view of health.

Teachers draw a parallel between Waldorf education and homeopathic medicine’s approach to keeping people well because of the way the curriculum meets like with like. In matching subject matter and teaching methods to children’s developmentally related needs (as
Waldorf teachers conceive these (and as shown below), children’s emergent concerns are brought to expression and their budding capacities are cultivated appropriately and healthfully.

Notably, while teachers discuss these things with adults happily, they never say to children: “We are doing this because.” That would interfere, they explain, with healthfully staged, unselfconscious ontogenetic “awakening.” We begin to see here teachers’ culturally distinct conceptualization of development: Stage-related milestones differ from those emphasized by mainstream educators and clinicians, and major ontogenetic transitions are metamorphic versus simply additive.

**Ontogenetic Stages**

In Waldorf pediatrics, children grow and develop in three major stages. Each lasts about seven years. Pre-K/K education responds to the needs of children in the first stage; elementary school is organized to meet needs generated in the second. Specific strategies are detailed in the next section; here, my focus is ethnophysiological—it is on the pediatric model underlying Waldorf education. Examples of how this is actualized on the ground will follow.

**Three Organizations.** As teachers explain, childhood’s three stages map onto the human body’s three systems or “organizations”: the head system, the chest system (also called the rhythmic system due to the rhythmic activity of the heart and lungs), and the limb system (which includes non-rhythmic, metabolic organs such as the liver and intestines and is therefore sometimes called the metabolic–limb system). Children’s head, chest, and limb systems are immature. A major task of Waldorf educators (after parents) is to ensure that the three systems have the environmental support necessary for their healthy maturation.

The three systems express the three modes of engagement that human beings use in life: thinking, feeling, and willing. These are all “soul activities” that use “soul forces.” Although most firmly at home in the chest, teachers say soul forces permeate our whole being, with willing or doing most active in the limbs, feeling or experiencing most active in the chest, and thinking most active in the head.

During different phases in the life course, different systems and therefore different soul activities dominate. This informs educators’ approaches. From birth until age six, a time when so much foundational physical growth occurs, teachers say the metabolic–limb system dominates, as does willing. From seven through 13, we are chest-rulled creatures: Feeling is our primary mode of engagement. And at puberty, our heads become mature enough for analytic thinking.

Young children do observe the world and draw conclusions. But, according to teachers, they do not (and should not, until puberty) engage in abstract logic. Children generally already have answers to questions such as “Why is the sky blue?” Teachers advise parents to rely on these answers, for instance asking back “Why is it?” or responding “I wonder?” rather than to displace children’s fluid explanations with dried facts better suited to an older child. Pushing analytic thinking before its time can, teachers say, harden and damage the organism.

**Four Bodies.** Waldorf educators learn in their training that no single standpoint can accommodate the whole of reality. Accordingly, teachers explain that another way to view ourselves is as four-fold beings. Put briefly, the four-fold self includes first the physical or material body into which we are born and through whose senses we perceive the environment. This body is quickened by an etheric body or life force, without which it goes limp and
decomposes. We also, they say, have an astral body or individual soul that interprets the material body’s sensory signals and experiences life, underwriting the three-fold organization’s willing, feeling, and thinking engagement modes. A fourth body is made up of more universal spiritual forces that endure; this body thinks also, but its thinking is pure and transcendent (sense free).

In the first stage of child growth and development, the etheric body fosters physical burgeoning with the help of astral and universal spiritual forces, which are said to move in patterned currents or streams. The physical body’s organs are brought to final form as a result of the pressures exerted when these currents permeate it, pushing and shaping its material substances. As teachers explain, human beings emerge from and exist within a field of constantly moving cosmic forces.

But human emergence is not asocially or spontaneously generated; it must be properly shepherded. In children younger than seven years, teachers nurse or work to wake the will, via the limbs, including the hands; from seven to 13, heart or chest forces (feelings) dominate pedagogic attentions; from puberty onward, thinking or the head comes to the fore (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of childhood</th>
<th>Primary physical (material body) system</th>
<th>Primary mode of engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–6 years</td>
<td>Limb-metabolic system</td>
<td>Willing (“hands”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–13 years</td>
<td>Chest-rhythmic system</td>
<td>Feeling (“heart”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–20 years</td>
<td>Head-nervous system</td>
<td>Thinking (“head”)</td>
</tr>
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Table 1. Key Stages of Childhood in Waldorf Education

**Early Childhood Teaching**

*Educating the Will through Physical (Limb) Movement.* The challenge of incarnation for young children is addressed in early childhood education’s focus on the limbs and thereby the will. Limbs—legs and arms, including hands—are said to serve as instruments through which to impose one’s will: one’s capacity to act on the world, follow through or, as one staff member said, “get off the couch.” So teachers strive to keep the limbs moving.

For instance, Ms. June and Ms. Maria engaged children’s arms and hands in actively chopping carrots for soup, sewing, and kneading bread. Children also used their whole bodies moving classroom furnishings about while in play, as when Noah and Jayden hefted and then tied a crate onto a table that was already perched on top of another table, creating a plane they could fly in. Others hauled furnishings around that day to make cars, boats, a dragon, and shops and houses. Pedro and Sophia draped large blankets on theirs as roofing and used blue and green cloths on the floor for meadow grass and water.

Children played out of doors, too, whenever possible—even in inclement weather. Props used were mainly tools (e.g., watering cans, shovels, buckets, wide paint brushes) and natural objects (e.g., stones, found bugs, bits of wood). Students engaged in sweeping the paths and gardening as well as digging, pushing wheelbarrows, and otherwise using their limbs. There was a dome-shaped climbing frame, but as a rule were children never helped to climb it: Seeing Kynan struggling, Ms. Ellis said quietly to me, “When you can get yourself up there, that’s when you should be up there.” Not helping, she explained, helps build the will: “I’m going to keep at it until I can get up there!”

The will, teachers said, needs to penetrate the body to the fingertips and toes, and productive work that engages the hands and legs, keeping them moving—digging, sanding, kneading, sweeping—is best for this. Keeping the limbs in movement likewise helps spiritualize
the body in a broader sense, say teachers, because limbs act as conduits, drawing in spiritual forces from the universal sphere or cosmos. This helps the child “incarnate” healthfully.

Also, teachers said, engaging a child in such labor imprints good habits into the child’s physical body while allowing children to fully develop proprioceptive, balance-related, and gross and fine motor skills—upon which later learning will depend. Sweeping, for example, allows children to master “crossing the vertical midline,” key to the kind of right–left integration that skillful writing (which comes later) demands. When the children in Ms. Kappadia’s class filed out to play one rainy day only to find a lake of water blocking their path because a drain had clogged, she saw this as a pediatric opportunity: She got them all brooms and set them to work clearing the water.

Proper Breathing. Early childhood teachers emphasize movement rhythmically, allowing children quiet, “inward-facing” moments or “in-breaths” (e.g., during meals or at story time) to offset their more active “out-breaths.” Use of these terms reflects teachers’ understanding that breathing connects our inner world with the outer world. It does this through an exchange of gasses; in Waldorf pedagogy, spiritual forces also infuse the blood as it passes through the lungs.

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specific gesture vocabulary or set of recommended bodily positions and segueing motions. At the school under study, a pianist accompanied the professional eurythmist who oversaw classes.

Eurythmy’s prescribed physical movements begin simply in early childhood classes and grow increasingly complex in the grades as children develop more bodily control. The movements are said to express or give form to, and facilitate the healthful physical reabsorption of, etheric forces: those that promote growth and vitality. Moving the material body or its limbs in particular directions during eurythmic sequences and using copper batons as attractors (when advanced to grade school) are also said to help the material body intercept astral and other forces. These, when absorbed, circulated, or passed through, promote healthful development.

Coordination and balance, too, are enhanced through eurythmy, as is social awareness, because classes execute movement in groups. For eurythmy to flow successfully, everyone must be in synch with each other and the music (whose live nature aids the process). Thus, when second grader Eduardo began, for his own amusement, to take irreverently long steps during one movement regimen, he not only denied himself a healthful infusion, but the circle of children he was part of lost its shape, grew arrhythmic, and disintegrated, passing away—much to the teacher’s distress.

Teaching in the Lower Grades

Academic Readiness: An Embodied Achievement. At about age seven, teachers say, when the will has penetrated and the child’s physical body is ready, rudimentary academics can begin. First-grade-ready children, they say—children entering the second major ontogenetic phase—have learned to integrate both sides of their physical bodies so that, for instance, skipping becomes possible. Or, for example, a child can pick up scissors on the side of the table opposite their dominant hand rather than first using the closer hand and then passing the scissors over to the dominant one. Such things indicate that the child now has become “organized” enough for tasks such as writing sentences on a page on one’s desk: One must be able to move one’s hand and arm back and forth across one’s midline to accomplish this without too much initial frustration.

The seven-year phasing discussed describes an average. To double-check each child’s progress and to provide teachers with information they can use in tailoring how they support each child, second grade includes a formal pediatric assessment of each child’s progress in incarnating. In a private meeting, a trained assessor asks each child to do various physical activities related to balance and proprioception, early reflexes, laterality, and the like. The assessment focuses on the body and its organization to gauge how well the child’s soul—spiritual forces have made their way into his or her material aspect.

When indicated (and this may occur outside of the second-grade assessment as well), remedial movement exercises such as balancing on a balance board or writing with one’s feet (pushing the will into the digits) are recommended. Teachers also may suggest select professionally provided interventions that fit pedagogic predispositions (e.g., craniosacral therapy, vision therapy). When such extras are suggested to augment the prophylactic, incarnation-aiding exercises that are part of everyday pedagogy, patience always is encouraged: Rushing progress can do more harm than good.

Beyond protecting against balance, mobility, and even future digestive/metabolic disorders (limbs and metabolism being one linked body system for Waldorf educators), teachers’ main aim even in remediation is to ensure that children feel at home in their bodies. This is
foundational, teachers say, to learning the fundamental skills of writing, reading, and basic math. It also readies children for developing the “feeling life,” a key ontogenetic project in the second stage of childhood.

*Mobilizing Children’s “Feeling Life.”* As children “grow into” the grades, education’s general focus shifts from the limb system to the chest system, so that a child’s “feeling life” is fostered even as writing, reading, and math begin to be taught. Healthful chest system maturation has implications not only for the individual child’s well-being but for the good of the community. One staff member said:

> As a society… we’re making education simply about the head. You know: “They have a brain, and it’s our job to maximize the brain’s capacity.” But the child is so much more than that, and if you only focus on the head, and you don’t involve the heart [feeling, chest] forces, well that’s why you have a whole generation of CEOs who rip off their companies and who steal the pensions of the 250,000 people who work there. They have no heart forces. There’s no conscience. It was never developed. We left it undeveloped [and created …] an imbalanced human being.

With poetry and age-appropriate parables, Waldorf teachers engage students in many activities to educate chest or “soul forces.” The arts are said to be particularly well suited for this, so they are central to the grade school curriculum.

“Wet-on-wet” painting provides one specific example of how teachers cultivate healthful soul activity through art. When painting on a wet page, moisture already in the paper visibly facilitates mobility in the paints, which, when in use, have a lustrous, animated quality. Wet-on-wet painting, teachers say, also sets feelings in motion, or spurs motility in the human soul, bringing a spiritual element into the classroom. In painting lessons, teachers say they give children’s chests something to work on. In this, educating feeling or chest forces is somewhat like educating willing or limb forces: The capacity for feeling—and for feeling connected to others and the world—can be enhanced and enlivened through practice. Well-developed chest forces also help protect against respiratory and circulatory disorders.

Typically, painting begins with a reverent mood. One by one, students quietly receive their wet paper, which is lifted from a soaking tub and laid carefully on a laminated board. Students take their boards back their desks; there they carefully sponge away air bubbles. With all students prepared, the teacher does a painting demonstration, generally narrating the painting process with a story meant to have pedagogic value. Afterward, the class will paint as the teacher has done, ideally in silence.

Painting is process, not product, oriented. Colors used are said to move us, causing our souls to expand or contract. Demonstration narrations seek to help children feel moved. In one observed narration, red was said to wake up on Saturday so excited that it ran to the playground, ready to play. “Red loves to be the first one out,” said the teacher, Ms. Olim, “even if others are sound asleep at home. When it’s time to wake the others up, red is the first to volunteer: ‘Let me do it, let me help!’” Ms. Olim painted a red shape on the paper as this story unfolded, then changed to using yellow: “Yellow loves being with friends more than anything. Yellow comes out when she sees red in the field. Where they touch, they bring another friend.” Orange emerged on the sample painting where the two colors met.
After washing the brush again, Ms. Olim reached for blue: “Blue loves to sleep in, stay cozy and warm and spend quality time having a cup of tea in the morning. Blue is always late getting to play and wants to hang out on the edges, just watching. Red is calling out to him ‘Come play with me! I’ll calm down a bit!’” As she said this, the blue gently reached the red and edged over it a bit, carried by the water in the paper. The moisture helped the colors to merge. “A new friend is coming along. A new friend is purple.”

This kind of witnessed narration is meant to provoke emotion. Hands-on work with the paints, teachers say, gives feelings inner immediacy and this internality is said to be magnified through the children’s quiet focus on the work. Moreover, because painting is done as a group, in which children together prepare materials and clean up, painting fosters structurally pro-social action and thereby, it is said, related feelings of connectedness and unity.

**Physical Movement.** The chest focus in the grades does not stop teachers from encouraging students to move their limbs during lessons, reinforcing the will, balance, the material body’s spiritualization, and so on. Movement also helps stem disruptions that might be attributed to attention-related disorders in other (e.g., mainstream public school) settings; classrooms have available one-legged stools for students who prefer not to sit still while at desks. Beyond this, physical movement is said to catalyze academic skill development, particularly in the way it stimulates and so enhances “memory forces.”

So, for example, students may march forward and backward doing spelling drills. They may jump rope or undertake other bodily activities (clapping, handstands) while reciting times tables. In Ms. Crenshaw’s class one day, students first worked some equations physically, for instance, taking two steps and then five to make seven steps; later they wrote the stepped-out equations on the board. The learning happened, Ms. Crenshaw said, through moving and speaking: Writing “brings it to consciousness,” helping students become aware of what they have learned as it emerges through their moving arms and hands. Some think, she lamented, that “our bodies are there to get our heads around from one meeting to another”—but Waldorf “is not a head to head education.”

Other subjects incorporate movement, too. Classes such as gardening and eurythmy are overtly physical. Morning circles also entail physical activity. During this phase in the classroom, classes move desks and chairs and form, with their bodies, one circular ring. Teachers might first lead them in unison to sing a verse with accompanying body movements (this “gets them all breathing together,” explained Ms. Kapadia, emphasizing group unity). Then a teacher might introduce, say, a beanbag activity, in which students pass beanbags in various ways to each other and around their bodies, such as from left to right hand in a rainbow arch made over the head, or in a figure eight around marching legs. Synchronized movements such as these often are choreographed so that students might intercept astral and other currents that flow in particular patterns and directions through the environment.

Teachers also say that physical skills translate into academic skills through imputed neurological channels, such that what appears to be beanbag play, for instance, facilitates sitting squarely on one’s chair by enhancing right–left integration and knowledge of one’s balance points; this, in turn, supports academic success. Similarly, the finger and hand dexterity encouraged through instruction in knitting and crocheting (“handwork”) are said to facilitate dexterous thinking. In both cases, however, academic progress signifies and depends on being healthy.
Summary: Salutogenic Education

A pediatric framework that posits three major body-based systems (limb–metabolic, chest–rhythmic, head–nervous), four aspects to the person (material or physical, etheric or life supporting, astral or soul related, and universal spiritual), and the existence of a particular ontogenetic trajectory entailing seven-year phases underlies Waldorf’s health-promoting pedagogy. In keeping with the framework, Waldorf teachers focus in early childhood on quickening the willing or limb forces and then, in lower grades, on quickening feeling or chest forces in addition. This requires the pedagogical incorporation, indoors and out, of activities that get children moving and that children are moved by. Movement, both of physical matter and of forces that permeate the physical body, is imperative pediatrically. Without it, children are not fully alive; with health so hindered, children cannot reach their full potential.

Discussion

The findings section demonstrated ethnographically movement’s salience for the cultivation of health as Waldorf teachers see it. Below, after illuminating the findings using existing critical and structural anthropological frames, I ask how the findings might, in turn, inform anthropological thinking.

Emphasis on Motility as Cultural Critique

The findings section described teachers’ salutogenic cultivation, through certain forms of movement, of first the will and then the feeling life, thus promoting healthful growth and development. Concurrently, teachers delay overtly analytic work until the teenage years. If introduced before the child’s organs have matured enough and before enough vitalized willing and feeling forces have been cultivated, analytic thinking has pathogenic effects.

Thinking, as Steiner and so Waldorf teachers see it, must retain a vital, motile quality lest it stiffen or die and fossilize, leaving us stuck, inflexible, and incapable of making meaningful connections. In this, Waldorf education strives to be the opposite of what Paulo Freire has called “banking education”—education that treats knowledge as if “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” and reduces students to “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (Freire 1996 [1970]:52, 53)."

For Freire, as once for Steiner and now for Waldorf teachers, the state’s educative approach is part of a larger deadening, dehumanizing process. But while Freire’s pedagogy was curative, intending to enliven adults and restore their well-being, Waldorf pedagogy is squarely preventive. It seeks to build healthy humans from the beginning by ensuring their life and soul forces are exercised and kept strong, so that their full potential can be realized and ill health will not befall them in adulthood.

For students predisposed to struggle, Waldorf teachers can prescribe exercises and make referrals to specialists offering teacher-endorsed treatment forms. Such intra-network referrals extend Waldorf education’s critique of mainstream schooling to encompass other forms of mainstream educational, psychological, and, ultimately, biomedical expertise—expertise that labels underperforming students as having brain-based pathologies (e.g., dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) in a way that Waldorf teachers find dangerously reductionist, materialist, and fear-mongering. Also, by diverting families from mainstream clinicians, intra-
network referrals serve the structural functions of reinforcing intra-communal connections and cohesiveness and limiting the school community’s penetration by mainstream biomedical ideas or practices.

Intra-network referrals may also support student enrollment: Families that consult external, mainstream professionals, receive conventional diagnoses, and are directed toward conventional treatment may be more likely withdraw their children. This may be particularly so for families that also receive accusatory warnings about “missed windows of opportunity” for reading and such from the clinicians consulted.

Teachers in the present study viewed families that revert to the mainstream as too impatient with Waldorf education’s techniques and as overly industrial in their approach. Expecting results fast, pushing children toward academics at what teachers see as dangerously young ages, and assuming that all children develop similarly or at the same pace and that the brain is central are, in teachers’ views, mistakes symptomatic of the broad-based cultural corrosion and materialist one-sidedness of biomedicine, which intra-network referrals stand against.

Circulatory Health Creates Social Health

Entailed in the above critique is nostalgia for an idealized pre-industrial past, characterized by a slower pace as well as more expressive ties and reciprocity—more continuous communicative and substantive flow between individuals. Such continuity and connection gains expression in (among other things) the palpable unity of class groups engaged in synchronized breathing and movement, and in the emphasis on maintaining internal–external communion through breathing and limb action.

Waldorf teachers see Waldorf education as a means for reconnecting us not only with other humans but also spiritual forces that science today denies. This is not to say that Waldorf education hates what science does accomplish; rather, they mourn what science does not do. From the Waldorf education perspective, denying spiritual reality causes unhealthful stagnation and decay in individuals and so in society. Waldorf education safeguards children preventively from the health-sapping debilitation of body, soul, and spirit engendered by the narrowly empirical, material, mechanical, asocial focus of our present “culture of positivism” (Giroux 2011:Ch. 2). It cultivates and keeps mobile (alive) and cosmically connected children’s soul and spiritual forces—generative, vivifying forces without which illness and death triumph.

The ethnographic record includes numerous accounts of ethnomedical systems that highlight circulation, whether of patently material substances like blood and milk or non-material ones like qi (chi) and wind. Health regimens that keep or get things moving, and that feed or replenish that which should be in flow (e.g., blood, inner wind, life force), abound cross-culturally. These regimens have been well linked analytically to concerns over social order, including regarding the ample and properly directed flow of social and economic support, and to concerns over balance between the social network itself and the broader environment in which it is embedded (see Erickson 2008).

Such concerns are certainly part of Waldorf education’s critique, which emphasizes the flux of cosmic forces not only into or through the individual body (e.g., when healthfully infused into the blood) but also as they connect, rhythmically, in a motion like breathing, people’s interiors to other individuals and to the environment. This rhythmic connectivity in space and over time, between individual, collective, and other self-renewing soul–spirit forces comprises
Mainstream education circumvents this, causing debilitation; infusing society at large with Waldorf school graduates can help.

Movement Resolves Cultural Contradictions

Despite self-identifying as a public good, U.S. Waldorf education is private. The focus on cultivating healthy students who move out into the world on graduating, stimulating society’s health like a shot of gamma globulin, provides teachers one way to obviate the contradiction of limited access. Other contradictions are, similarly, mediated by movement.

For instance, teachers often speak of the world as a totality and many experience it as such in practice: They experience it as enmeshed, living, moving, beings who cannot be sectioned off. This certainly resembles the lifescape paradigm from the introduction. Yet Waldorf pedagogy, and its underlying pediatric model, does entail division. Teachers highlight first the limb–metabolic system (willing); then the chest–rhythmic system (feeling); they isolate these two together as against the head–nervous system (thinking). In this, the body as a whole seems opposed to the head, both spatially, within students’ physical geography, and temporally or longitudinally, between young students and their thinking peers in higher grades.

Compartmentalization’s occurrence itself is no problem: That which is unified is not by definition uniform (as Steiner taught, after Goethe; Holdrege 1994:x). Even highly monistic cultures recognize the parts of the whole. Nevertheless, it is interesting that a philosophy that rejects overtly the Cartesian gap reduces things specifically to the body–mind dyad.

It might be that Waldorf education’s tendency to bifurcate is simply the legacy of its Western origin. But all cultures distinguish in some way the physical and metaphysical aspects of persons. Michael Lambek says this is because although we may unite body and mind (or local conceptualizations thereof) in practice (i.e., in motion; see Ingold 2011), these cannot be thought about—conceptualized, spoken of, represented—except as separate (Lambek 1998:105). Even Deleuzian philosophy entails dualisms.

This leaves us with the question of when dualism will surface in a particular discourse, and in what guise. That is, given its necessary existence, what local shape will mind–body dualism take? Will it be overtly recognized as such in a given culture? What claims will it be used to stake? What form of mediation (if any) will be used in efforts to resolve it (see Robertson 2011)? How will it fold back into itself to become something different?

Waldorf education’s holism is contradicted as teachers verbally justify particular pedagogical choices by highlighting one side or the other of mind–body relations situationally. For instance, depending on children’s age and thus developmental status, they may contrast digging (use of limbs) to painting (mobilization of feelings). They also may tailor their discourse to perceived parent preferences, for example highlighting physiological factors for parents indisposed to metaphysical explanations. But such bifurcations are temporary: The salutogenic power of movement always quickly resurfaces as a reunifying theme—and it is what is in play in practice, in the classroom, in teachers’ experience.

Teachers continually strive to encourage, hygienically, all “soul forces” toward motility and, ultimately, toward a wholesome, health-promoting unity with universal spiritual forces. In this, teachers obviate nearly instantly the binary oppositions they may make, fixing the conversation onto their central concern: the vital, motion-filled process of becoming—and so the holistic health of human kind. Notably, they do so not simply in homeostatic oscillation but rather in a zig-zagging motion comprising a trajectory or flight line (see Deleuze 1987; Ingold 2011).
Informing Our Episteme: Movement and Becoming

Well-established anthropological frames are useful for making sense of other cultures, but other cultures also can supply “critical resources for the development of our own epistemes” (Robertson 2011:598). This happened, for instance, when Deleuze and Guattari appropriated, via Bateson, the Iatmul idea that social relations are a reticulating rhizome (Jensen and Rödje 2010:21). They packaged this into their philosophy, which has inspired a number of anthropologists (e.g., Ingold 2011; Jensen and Rödje 2010; Wool 2012 (through Massumi, as cited).

Recently, João Biehl and Peter Locke engaged Deleuze and Guattari’s work to recommend an “anthropology of becoming” that focuses on potentiality. They explored how ailing individuals and collectivities “break open alternative pathways” when preferred ones are foreclosed, challenging assumed limitations and stigmatizing classifications through “desire”-driven propositional claims (Biehl and Locke 2010:318). Seen though this lens, Waldorf teachers’ focus on how movement helps children incarnate, or become human, may be interpreted as discursive evidence of the gap between Foucauldian and neo-Marxist views of people as “done to” or “done through” and people’s agentic engagement with life.

In light of Biehl and Locke’s apt reminder that careful ethnography “does not privilege Deleuze’s [and Guattari’s] knowledge over that of our field interlocutors” (Biehl and Locke 2010:347), the assumption that “desire” (or its local instantiation) is always already there waiting to traverse social strictures is problematic, however. In this case, it contradicts teachers’ own viewpoints. Sensitivity to how potentiality is mobilized to begin with in various cultural contexts, and what role movement plays in such efforts, is needed.

So is sensitivity to potentiality’s relationship to health. For Waldorf teachers, health is neither self-sustaining nor self-contained. Structural determinants aside, health requires constant invigoration, in material and extra-material terms, via various forms of bodily engagement, such as breathing, digging, painting, and eurythmy. Beyond physical activity, these forms of movement subsume embodied engagement with, and expression of, various metaphysical flows of potentiality. Bringing movement, thus broadly defined, more centrally into medical anthropology’s purview helps make visible the generative, health-promoting power of even those activities that fall beyond the conventional limits of medicine (see Low 2008). An analytic that accommodates health’s “becoming” provides another tool for those with a theoretical interest in understanding health as fluid and emergent rather than as a fixed state that people either do or do not enjoy (see Manderson and Smith-Morris 2010).

Conclusion

Insiders say that Waldorf education is salutogenic, largely because of the way that teachers mobilize movement. By taking their claim seriously, this study will, I hope, encourage further research on the health-producing capacities of pedagogy and various other conventionally non-medical practice domains. Inspection of such intersections will help offset the threat of “declining explanatory power” that the “medicalization of medical anthropology” poses (Browner 1999; Manderson and Smith-Morris 2010:12).

This research also supports a call for the broader inclusion of movement in medical anthropology: Movement actively connects us with our social and physical environments and
with culture-specific health-building forces entailed therein. Investigators focused only on physical activity may thus miss important dimensions of what movement accomplishes, experientially as well as rhetorically. More broadly, the findings have implications for the emerging “anthropology of becoming,” suggesting as they do the need for deeper awareness of movement’s vital and culturally variable role in human experience.

Notes

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1. Ingold rightly warns against the “scopic” (visual) viewpoint that neologisms like this can imply (2011:126). I use the term “lifescape,” however, for the way it references generative movement: Biologists call a stalk rising up through the ground a “scape.”

2. My parent status may be read as biasing. However, I applied established standards for maintaining critical distance in medical anthropology (Browner 1999) where, in part because we often research what we also do (nutrition, sleep, parturition), conflicts of interest are similarly of concern.

3. Steiner’s followers see the soul as a private, inner world that mediates between the body’s sense perceptions and universal spiritual or deific forces.

4. Waldorf high school graduates are three times as likely as others to major in the social or behavioral sciences in college, and four time less likely to major in business; they also “tend to choose professions involving strongly social elements” (Gerwin and Mitchell 2007:9–10).

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