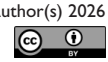
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Article

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Practical belief and ritualized order in the Waldorf school

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Abstract

Based on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork at a well-established Waldorf school in Sweden, this article explores the production of practical belief through the lens of ritual theory. The school in focus is a socially dense environment in which an incarnated orientation is cultivated through boundary work and shared ritual forms. The article examines how pupils, through ritualized practice, incorporate the school's aesthetic and moral order in ways that not only enable them to act in accordance with the educational programme, but also allow them to perceive meaning and purpose in doing so. While order is incorporated through the rituals, by the flesh, the lived body also serves as a mediator for new inscriptions of meaning, sometimes challenging the traditional Waldorf instruction. Thus, rituals not only reinforce and stabilize order but also disturb it.

Keywords

ritual, belief, body, meaning, education, Waldorf school

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Introduction

Waldorf schools are rooted in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy[1] and in the German reform-pedagogical *Bildung* ideals. The pedagogy was intended to allow a 'grand metaphysical narrative' (Dahlin, 2017: 140) to form the basis of a practically oriented teaching model, allowing a spiritually open and ethically sensitive education with liberating aspirations. Today, the schools are reputed for emphasizing a holistic approach, prioritizing character-building elements and for their aspiration to foster ethical and creative abilities (French, 2024; Lejon, 1997; Rawson, 2024). While the esoteric origins are contested, even among Waldorf teachers and families (Tyson, 2025),[2] the schools have

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established a stable niche in many parts of the world.[3] This recognition presents a sociological puzzle: how is it that a school model grounded in a spiritual worldview, emerging from the esoteric movements of the early 20th century, continues to offer an education that is both trusted and reaffirmed by well-educated families, many of whom are openly critical of Steiner's ideas?

Elsewhere, I argue that contemporary Waldorf schools in the Swedish context have undergone a shift, partly as a result of stricter regulations requiring alignment with the national curriculum. In this process, the esoteric legacy has been reframed into a pedagogical format that resonates with culturally oriented middle-class families who may have little or no faith in anthroposophy. Angels and astral bodies do not front the schools. Instead, what attracts parents and pupils is a collectively organized individualism that promises personal growth and creativity within an aesthetically cultivated environment (Törnqvist, 2026). In the present article, I offer an additional prism, focusing on the formative aspects of Waldorf schooling. How is it that pupils are able to perform in accordance with a pedagogical programme that diverges from mainstream schooling and that includes school subjects whose meaning they may find difficult to grasp?

Grounded in a year-long ethnographic fieldwork at a well-established Waldorf school in Stockholm, Sweden, this article addresses how rituals, a characteristic feature of Waldorf schools, assist in enabling meaning and validating social order. The article examines how the pupils, through ritualized practice, incorporate the aesthetic and moral order in ways that not only enable them to act in line with the educational programme, but also allow them to perceive sense and meaning in doing so.

This semi-secluded school form, characterized by a socially selective recruitment dynamic, is an intriguing empirical case for exploring both the reproductive and destabilizing potential of rituals and, by extension, how a practical belief grounded in ritualized practice assists in enacting order. By bringing ritual theory into dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu's practice theory, the article proposes an analytical lens through which order and meaning are approached as emerging from embodied, ritualized engagement. This framework attends to the social processes that the educational programme both relies upon and actively generates. By focusing on rituals, a feature shared by other educational institutions, the analysis offers insights that are transferable beyond the Waldorf context. The focus on social processes provides a critical distance from the, at times, exotified tropes of Waldorf as essentially distinct and *other*.

The power of rituals

From Durkheim's (1965[1912]) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and onwards, sociologists have approached the topic of belief in critical opposition to discourses focusing on dogma and authenticity. Belief has been addressed not primarily as a quality originating from within the individual and transmitted outwards, but as a social phenomenon collectively produced and lived, often in association with power–knowledge regimes. In his early studies of Kabylian culture, and elsewhere, Bourdieu (1993[1966], 1998) points to belief as an inherent dimension of social order that reflects a practical sense of the world, emerging through a 'quasi-bodily involvement' and 'immanence in the world' that 'govern speech and action' (Bourdieu, 1990: 66). Belief is conceptualized as a

practical *sense* of the world, underpinning actions and ways of being without necessarily involving rational decision making. 'Practical belief', Bourdieu (1990: 68, 66; see Strand and Lizardo, 2015: 62) claims, 'is not a "state of mind" [. . .] but rather a state of the body' that represents a 'collective belief in the game and its fetishes' amounting to an embodied 'consensual validation'. Hence, a body wash, rather than a brain wash.

Ritual theory provides a framework for addressing such embodied engagement with the world. Sacred or secular, rituals are 'embedded within the dynamics of the body defined within a symbolically structured environment' (Bell, 2009[1992]: 93) and engage the participants primarily on a bodily, emotional and often multi-sensory level, rather than through mere intellectual or cognitive means. As Victor Turner (1982: 86, emphasis in original) argues in his seminal work, rituals are the 'generative and regenerative processes' that allow people to '*live through*' sacred symbols, myths and framings. The power of rituals lies not only in how symbolic dimensions materialize but also in how they steer participants' orientation and actions. A ritual is a repetitive and formalized practice that, through ritual scripts, instructs participants to perform, thereby generating a situated behaviour pattern over time. The 'circular production of a ritualized body [. . .] produces ritualized practices' (Bell, 2009[1992]: 93). In addition, rituals include interactive components that direct participants' attention towards others, either physically present or symbolically represented. Thereby, the ritual enables, or even imposes, a bodily adaption. Or, with reference to Douglas (1997[1966]): rituals bring order.

Rituals also function as forms of soft power by producing and reinforcing group solidarity. When people are gathered and set in joint motion, feelings of animated vividness and unity emerge. Rituals emotionalize the common and generate what Durkheim (1965[1912]: 285) describes as a 'collective effervescence', thereby shaping behaviour and loyalty without coercion. In addition, by producing a sense of group membership, rituals emotionalize interaction in ways that form into a repetitive logic. In his work on interaction ritual chains and emotional energy, Randal Collins (2004: 42) argues that successful rituals infuse the participants with an 'emotional energy' that pulls them back to the situation, thereby forming a chain of interaction rituals:

> [O]ccasions that combine a high degree of mutual focus of attention [. . .] together with a high degree of emotional entrainment [. . .] result in feelings of membership [. . .] giving [individual participants] feelings of confidence, enthusiasm, and desire for action in what they consider a morally proper path.

When the emotional intensity increases, 'commitment to shared ritualized practices and beliefs about the collective event' is enhanced, and group membership is strengthened (Knottnerus, 2014: 318). Rituals thus invite participants to enact the symbolic order while, thereby, p(l)aying back to the order by energizing a sense of shared meaning.

Ritual analysis of a Waldorf school

While rituals are, by certain scholars, defined as set apart from everyday life, 'put[ing] us in contact with ideas [. . .] that are larger than we, that enrich our lives by their largeness' (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 131), they are also part of regulatory, mundane settings, such

as schools. The collective ritualistic enforcement present in schools challenges the notion of ritual practices as ideally based and grounded in voluntariness. In fact, the present study suggests that rituals may assist schools in producing a sense of willingness.

In a Waldorf setting, rituals engage pupils in acting in accordance with an educational programme that, in a Swedish context, is debated. One example of a practice that is frequently subject to external preconceptions and negative judgement is *eurythmy* – a movement art originating in anthroposophy and taught in Waldorf schools to promote the holistic integration of bodily, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Ritualizing a disputed school subject, such as eurythmy, is a way to naturalize it by transforming it into a bodily habit.

While rituals may be consciously or unconsciously used as a strategy of social control, the bodily involvement opens up also for destabilizing practices. In contrast to the Bourdieusian and Durkheimian focus mainly on reproductive and cohesive aspects, this article explores aspects related also to agency and how acting in line with the ritualized script may generate multiple meanings. The obligation to engage in a school subject such as eurythmy implies that pupils are compelled to form a relationship with the subject. This may involve sense-making processes integrating both narratives grounded in Waldorf discourses and frameworks rooted in the pupils' own lived experience. The performative sequencing of rituals thus involves, not only 'rules or rubrics', but also lived enactment and some degree of improvisation (Turner, 1982: 80, 79, 82; see also Alexander, 2004: 528, 527). The school rituals not only 'body wash' pupils, but also shape critical and potentially destabilizing approaches to the rituals and to the school.

Reframing eurythmy, rather than reproducing the subject through traditional Waldorf definitions, does not, however, weaken the ritual's transformative power. On the contrary, it may potentially strengthen it.[4] When pupils make the rituals meaningful, on a personal level, and in ways that distance them from traditional discourses, the rituals are energized, in Collins' sense, and thus avoid becoming mechanical and empty routines. Exploring this interplay, the article examines stabilizing and destabilizing dynamics of the school rituals.

A tendency within ritual theory is to overtheorize (micro-)situational aspects. This risks downplaying the significance of societal structures such as formative aspects related to social class. While the school in focus for this article is free of charge,[5] the recruitment dynamic resembles those observed in countries with fee-based Waldorf educations (see Levi and Seidl, 2023). The school primarily harbours the children of highly educated and culturally oriented middle-class parents, of which almost half have themselves undertaken a Waldorf education (Törnqvist, 2026; see also Dahlin et al., 2004). Although this article does not undertake an analysis of how family background shapes pupils' engagement with the rituals, I wish to acknowledge that structural conditions influence the varying likelihood of entering a partly ritualized school form and acquiring dispositions that facilitate engagement with its rituals.

In sum, the present article advances a contextualized account of ritual power, attentive to both its stabilizing and destabilizing dynamics. In the *first* empirical section, I explore the Waldorf school's social, symbolic and sensorial boundaries, focusing on ritualized ceremonies as temporal markers. In the *second* section, I examine how ritual elements such as synchronization support pupils in aligning their behaviour with the school's

expectations. In the *third* section, I analyse how experience-based dissociation enables alternative interpretations, both disrupting and reaffirming the existing symbolic order.

Method

This article is based on a year-long ethnographic fieldwork at one of the oldest and largest Waldorf schools in Sweden, located in the capital, Stockholm. In line with the holistic Waldorf curriculum, the school constitutes both a *grundskola* (primary and lower-secondary school) and a *gymnasium* (upper-secondary school) and enrols approximately 800 pupils. The fieldwork was carried out in the early 2020s and spanned five periods, encompassing a full school year. The study consists of participant observations in all types of school-related activities, such as classroom teaching, seasonal ceremonies and everyday chit-chats during breaks and lunches. Strategic sites and groupings were selected to maximize observational depth. Throughout the year, I spent the majority of classroom time with one secondary class. This allowed me to engage in deeper conversations with the pupils and the teacher, as well as to observe potential shifts over time. The upper-secondary school choir served as another strategic site, offering access to an embodied aesthetic process and a platform to interact with the pupils and the teacher in a more casual way.

As a complement to the daily conversations and observations, the study includes recorded interviews with 22 upper-secondary pupils and three former pupils (alumni), 18 teachers and management staff, and 14 parents. The interviews were semi-structured and, in the case of parents and teachers, conducted individually (with a few exceptions), whereas the pupil interviews were partly conducted in groups, aiming at creating a more comfortable situation that would allow for a natural conversation dynamic. While diverging somewhat between the informant groups, the interviews covered topics such as experiences and views on the school, themes related to formation and knowledge production, and the informants' social background.

Ethnographic fieldwork requires access. It is not only the researcher who chooses the school; the researcher and the project must also be chosen, or at least accepted. To pave the way for the study, active outreach work was conducted in the form of meetings and conversations with teachers and leadership staff at other Waldorf schools. Thanks to recommendations, I was granted an initial meeting with the principal who expressed interest in the study and approved permission for my research presence at the school. Guided by teachers, pupils and parents, the study gradually unfolded and expanded, with one contact leading to another.

My interaction with Waldorf schools, prior to the fieldwork, was limited. I have neither attended a Waldorf school myself nor chosen one for my own children. Still, value- and class-based affinities may have facilitated the fieldwork. Statistically speaking, my academic background and cultural interests made me fairly typical of the school's parents. I continuously reflected on this resonance, partly by securing that the data analysis, underpinned by a coding of interview transcripts and fieldnotes, was guided by the project's critical theoretical perspectives (see Törnqvist, 2026 for an elaborated discussion on the research project's methodology).

The project received clearance from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority and implemented measures to ensure confidentiality, informed consent and proper use, with the aim of protecting the integrity and well-being of the participants. Consent and the terms of conditions for the participants (such as the right to withdraw at any time) have been addressed in different ways. In the class I shadowed throughout the school year, parents were informed about the study via a letter. They were given the opportunity to decline their child's participation and also the option to sign up for a parent interview. Information about the project was also shared with the entire school, partly through weekly newsletters. I also presented the project at a parent meeting (with parents of children in an entire grade). Additionally, I introduced the project when visiting classes and when meeting new people at the school. When teachers announced my presence in the classroom, my role at times became so pronounced that it bordered on the humorous. 'This is Maria from Uppsala University, she is visiting us today.' On occasion, students joked and said: 'Or is she from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate?' When appropriate, I also reminded people of my role as a researcher, particularly during sensitive conversations and situations. In addition, all interviews began with an introduction during which participants were informed about the project and the terms of their participation.

Ritualized belonging

Waldorf is clearly more than an alternative teaching style. The educational programme represents a worldview, an aesthetical-ethical order rooted in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical movement. The distinctive wall colours, supposed to transmit balance and energy in accordance with Goethe's colour theory, the refined watercolour technique forming the iconic wet-on-wet paintings and the avoidance of digital technology, not only aspire to foster certain forms of knowledges and competences, but are also marks of a spiritually infused symbolic order, distinguishing the sacred from the profane and the polluted from the pure (Douglas, 1997[1966]; see Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Ideally, everything has its place and meaning; from the welcoming handshake and the joint recitation of the morning verse to the structuring of lessons and ceremonial festivities.

The school where I conducted fieldwork is situated in a demarcated space, on top of a hill, in a green pocket of an otherwise busy part of a predominantly middle-class Stockholm suburb. The anthroposophical architecture together with the old-fashioned classrooms with desks facing traditional blackboards, further accentuates the school's distance from other schools in the area. Upon entering the main building, the visitor is embraced by additional boundary markers: the cafe's home-brewed chai tea and the pickled beets in the lunch cantina form into a multi-sensorial interface that confirms a world distinct from other worlds.

Similar to other schools offering exclusive educational programmes, such as elite institutions characterized by delineated membership (see Khan, 2011), Waldorf schools carve out identity and belonging through ritualized practices with varying degrees of formalization.[6] A focused everyday interaction that affirms group membership (Goffman, 1967) is noticeable in ordinary lessons and everyday life at school. The school day is organized in a fashion that intensifies a joint attention, partly through small-scale everyday rituals, such as the morning handshake and the morning verse. A more pronounced

ritualized boundary marker is the seasonal ceremonies. These annually recurring events bring old traditions to life in vivid form and spark community by directing focus and energy towards iconic Waldorf traditions, myths and artefacts.

The early autumn festivity Michaelmas gathers the entire school in the aula to honour the archangel Michael, a symbol of good prevailing over the evil. At Michaelmas the third-year pupils are invited to engage in a rite of passage in the shape of a ritualized stage drama, witnessed and validated by the entire school. Each year, new generations of pupils assume the same roles, lines and costumes as pupils before them, thereby enacting, by the flesh, the symbolic Waldorf order and what it is to be a Waldorf pupil.

Another important ceremony is the early summer celebration. During the year of my fieldwork, it took place on a warm June day, a few days before the school closed for the summer vacation. The afternoon included, among other things, the traditional hat parade (displaying the pupils' own crafted hats), concerts featuring iconic Waldorf artefacts such as pentatonic flutes, and a staged eurythmy choreography using copper rods as laser blades, performed to the live accompaniment of the Star Wars theme. At the end of the ceremony, the pupils and teachers performed a secretly rehearsed flash mob to celebrate the outgoing principal. To the final note of Abba's 'Super Trouper', the school erupted in excited applause and laughter.

Conducting eurythmy on stage or displaying crafted hats in front of the entire school, the pupils not only incarnate Waldorf and perform in line with the symbolic order, they also become symbols for the school. Moreover, the festivity transforms the school itself to a sacred object, a unifying totem that synchronizes time and space. The festive rituals not only 'draw the individual body to its order [and] coordinate attention and focus' (Törnqvist et al., 2025: 4), but also shape time into 'an ordered series of eternal re-beginnings and repetitions' (Bell, 2009[1997]: 102).

In addition, the vibrant ambiance fuelling the festivity, exploding to the tunes of the flash mob, echoes Collins' (2004: 42) description of an emotional energy that guides action in accordance with 'a morally proper path'. For a moment, the collective arousal of the festivity appears to erase doubts regarding Steiner and what others may perceive as 'odd Waldorf stuff', such as pentatonic flutes and a school subject such as eurythmy. Transforming the pupils and teachers into a crowd that seems to be 'moved by a common passion', the ceremony makes them 'bec[ome] susceptible to feelings and actions of which [they were] incapable on [their] own' (Durkheim, 1965[1912]: 157). '[E]very festival', writes Durkheim (1965[1912]: 285), 'even one purely secular in origin, has certain features of the religious ceremony, for it always has the effect of bringing individuals together, setting the masses in motion, and so inducing that state of effervescence.' The summer ceremonial thereby displays how rituals hold the capacity of 'generat[ing] group emotions that are linked to symbols [and that] form the basis for beliefs' (Summers-Effler, 2006: 135).

However, not all seasonal ceremonies evoke the same sense of energy. During the Michaelmas celebration, for instance, I observed a group of disengaged upper-secondary students. One of them, Joel, commented afterwards that he had 'been through so many ceremonies that they all blur together'. To genuinely generate enthusiasm, the ceremonial form alone is not sufficient. With Collins' terminology, rituals need to be energized.

The seemingly spontaneous yet carefully rehearsed flash mob represented an element that, according to the pupils, revitalized the ceremony and, we may add, reaffirmed the Waldorf ethos by partly diverging from the traditional Waldorf script. The sense of uniqueness and a moment set apart from everyday school life made the annually recurring festivity become something more than mere routine. As we were leaving the assembly hall, I asked a small circle of friends about the festivity. 'The flash mob was really cool and something I will always remember', said upper-secondary student Elin. 'This is why we love our school', her classmate Sally added. 'It is a great feeling when everyone is gathered. You won't find this vibe elsewhere.'

To sum up, temporal-spatial ritual markers such as the early summer ceremony generate not only shared representations of a contested school form, but potentially also an emotionalized *feel* for the representations and the community being celebrated. Entering the festive ritual, '[t]he totem of the clan is also the totem of each member' (Durkheim, 1965[1912]: 88). The social world of Waldorf, materialized in artefacts and ritualized practices, not only generates a sense of effervescence but plausibly also amplifies and extends the social energy into a morally grounded sense of belonging. Following Durkheim, the uniquely designed assembly hall, with its iconic architecture inspired by the Dornach legacy, reflects and contributes not to a connection with the spirits, but to a social proximity in the name of Waldorf.

Learning by the body

One of my first days of fieldwork, I joined a group of teenagers on their way to their eurythmy lesson. Some of the girls giggled as they described the soft-coloured costumes worn when the iconic Waldorf subject is performed at the monthly school festivals. 'Like goddesses', one of them said as we strolled towards the blue-painted building. 'Or just lunatics', interjected another, making a funny face. A few metres in front of us were a group of boys, engaged in playful boxing. Their black hoodies were pulled up in the slightly chilly September breeze. In many ways, they embodied the stereotype of male teenagers who are not easily attracted by femininely coded contexts. Boys who want to be boys. In the Waldorf world of pastel colours, Isadora Duncan-style veils and home-knitted beanies, their protest was all the more visible. Yet they too moved down the slope and turned towards the building where the lesson would be held.

Inside the hall, a rose-shimmering ceiling hovered high above us and a skilled pianist warmed up with a classical piece behind a glossy grand piano. When the teacher, a committed eurythmist in his 30s, picked up a basket of white socks with plastic heels, the music stopped. 'Whose is whose?' he asked in a high-pitched voice, pulling out pairs for the pupils to acclaim. For a second, I held my breath and glanced at the boys. Now, I thought, here it comes; this is when one of them will turn away and leave, or at least put on a little show to demonstrate resistance. Nothing happened, no offended faces or muttering comments, no grumbling at all. Instead, they, just like the others, reached out to grab their socks, pulled them on and then sauntered out onto the wooden floor, ready to form wide circles with their classmates.

The Waldorf motto, to learn by the body, reflects a body-centred educational programme that entails artistic dimensions and crafts and aspires to foster full personalities

along the notion that '[w]hat is "learned by the body" is not something that one has, like knowledge [. . .], but something that one is' (Bourdieu, 1990: 73; see also Törnqvist, 2024). At the school where I conducted fieldwork, eurythmy is practised through a semi-formalized procedure in which bodily repetition of geometric movements forms into a situated behaviour pattern. Iconic objects, such as the eurythmy socks, are markers of a symbolic passage. In addition, a bodily synchronization is supported by the live music, performed at all eurythmy classes at the school. Like the metronome in Garfinkel's (2002) seminal experiment, the melodic rhythm assists the pupils in moving along the beat. They, literally, add to and reinforce the joint rhythm with their feet (see also Foucault, 1977, on the military drill installing young men into the ritualized script of becoming a soldier). Thereby, the lesson installs pupils into a formalized scheme of action. Over the years, such joint coordination transforms into a bodily habit, performed instinctively and without conscious deliberation.

In other words, the pupils in the scene above execute the sweeping movements, not because they necessarily believe in Steiner's (1923) original vision of eurythmy as adding a 'spiritual impulse' to 'human development', but because the ritualistic underpinning allows them to enact a contested school subject without reflecting and taking an active stance. In fact, few of the children who start the school at age seven (first grade) have well-developed views on the meaning of a subject such as eurythmy. Instead, they learn to perform the geometric movements through the ritualized repetition. Whether or not they grew up within Waldorf circles, many years of engaging with the school subject constitutes a 'slow process[es] of co-option and initiation'; a potential 'second birth' (Bourdieu, 1990: 68).[7] Everyday cultivation nurtures a practical sense of the world that makes the symbolic Waldorf order sensible, or even 'full of sense' (Bourdieu, 1990: 68). Over time, eurythmy becomes an internalized habit, one among many other habits. Ritualization assists in (re)producing dispositions that enable a bodily, but not necessarily cognitive or reflexive, validation of what the pupils themselves often describe as an 'odd' school subject.

Another example of a temporally and spatially demarcated situation, structured by a sequenced, ritualized scheme of action that both reflects and recedes Steiner's legacy, is the so-called morning verse. In the school where I conducted fieldwork the spiritually tuned verse is widely used and marks the start of the school day. At the teacher's invitation, the pupils in the class that I observed stand up and start chanting:

> I look into the world, in which the sun is shining, in which the stars are sparkling, in which the stones repose; The living plants are growing, the feeling beasts are living, and human beings, ensouled, give dwelling to the spirit.

The ritualistic element of this iconic Waldorf tradition enables what Arnold van Gennep ([1909]1960: 13; see Turner, 1982: 80) in his classic piece *The Rites of Passage* describes as 'transitions from one situation to another and […] one […] social world to another'. The joint chanting transforms a group of children into Waldorf pupils who will perform lessons and other school activities together. As the upper-secondary pupil Vide explains: 'You get a moment together. Now it's us, the people in this classroom who are doing school.'

Most of the pupils I met had been enrolled in a Waldorf education throughout their entire school careers and a majority had also attended a Waldorf kindergarten. They reported that the iconic elements, such as the morning verse, were so deeply incorporated that they had become unreflective aspects of daily life at school. For many, their first encounter with the verse lay so far back in time that they no longer remembered it. 'We learned it by heart before we understood what it meant. I haven't really reflected on it, I think', tells upper-secondary student Björn. 'It's so ingrained in our heads that we don't think about what it means', adds his classmate Noelle. Reciting the verse does not, however, necessarily evoke an involuntary spirituality, indoctrinating the pupils with an anthroposophical message, as critics sometimes claim. Rather, the ritualized form helps to normalize the verse by smoothing away the overtly spiritual content.

Two upper-secondary students, Joy and Inez, who completed their primary education in a municipal school, offer a perspective on how the Waldorf education may be perceived by those who were not familiarized with it from an early age. They put words to an initial unease when first participating in a joint verse recitation and when first facing an eurythmy class. Their experiences provide insights into how the ritualized form first terrified them but then helped them overcome their initial sense of estrangement.

Inez: When I started here, I just thought: what the hell is this? I thought it was a cult. Honestly, I thought it was a cult. There's something crazy about standing in the classroom and everyone just: 'I look into the world. . .'

Joy: These are crazy people, they're going to kill me, this is such a sacrifice. . . Haha! . . . I remember the first eurythmy class, we were jumping in different choreographies, it was so weird. What is this? And then all of a sudden . . . I don't understand what happened . . . I simply joined the others. They know what to do, they've done it before. You kind of get carried away.

Inez: When I started [at the school] it was a bit like, everyone did it [eurythmy], and you sort of went along with it . . . In the beginning it was kind of a strange thing. What are we doing?

Joy: Then it became a normal thing, you get used to it. We haven't murdered anyone yet. Ha ha!

Joy's and Inez's shifting perception of their new school and an iconic subject like eurythmy testifies to the transformative capacity of the ritual. Installing themselves into the joint rhythm, aligning with their classmates' ways of chanting (morning verse) and moving across the room (eurythmy), they were 'carried away'. The morning verse and the eurythmy classes are now 'normal thing[s]'. As they explain, it is simply 'easier' and 'more fun' to do what everyone else does, even in a school in which conforming to others may imply acting against the norms of the outside world.

The fact that many pupils, especially newcomers, like Joy and Inez, often do not fully understand their school but learn to appreciate it, reinforces Durkheim's point that symbolic orders carry social worlds, and vice versa. In their unifying capacity, the collective school rituals exert a subtle pressure on the pupils to act in accordance with others and

with the order. To sum up, the rituals assist in shaping a dispositional sensibility that aligns with the ethos of the school, thereby constituting a gentle form of manipulation that assists newcomers in overcoming doubt and discomfort.

Contested meaning

The fact that the legacy of Steiner is difficult to fully grasp for the pupils generates various strategies for navigating it. Living with school subjects and traditions that are contested outside of Waldorf circles and that, for some pupils, evoked an initial estrangement, prompts interpretative reframing exercises. One way that pupils engage in re-narrating their education, is by using frameworks that make more sense to them. Eurythmy, for instance, is often framed far beyond Steiner's original statements. Instead, the pupils approach it as an expression of physical exercise, a meditative moment or a beneficial break from regular school work.

Separating their experiences from the Steinerian origin, the pupils position themselves as autonomous, and not members of a 'cult'. Simultaneously, however, they provide meaning and legitimacy to a contested school element. Thus, the re-narrating exercises are not necessarily means to distance themselves from Waldorf, but rather to line up with the school by emphasizing a discourse on meaningfulness, advocated by the school itself. Ideally, and according to the Waldorf programme, learning should be pursued, not as means for other goals (i.e. grades for college admission), but as an end in itself and as a response to inner motivation. Pupils are encouraged to sense meaning and, as follows, also to create a sense of meaning when engaging in iconic school subjects such as eurythmy.

The pupils' re-narrating practices are validated also by ongoing institutional renegotiations. The morning verse, for instance, has been reformulated several times. Some teachers use a version with a religious terminology whereas most teachers I meet are using a modernized version where words such as 'God' had been replaced with profane images. According to the teachers, this serves to make the verse more accessible and meaningful to the pupils. 'Spirit', says teacher Eliah one day when we are glancing through the morning verse together. 'What does it really mean for the students? Doesn't it sound rather strange today?'

The flirtation with Star Wars during the eurythmy performance at the summer festivity (when copper sticks were used as laser blades), is another example of how an 'odd' school subject is provided new meaning through cultural references that are vivid to new generations of Waldorf pupils. Similarly, the flash mob in which the entire school performed a joint choreography to Abba's 'Super Trouper' demonstrates how a form that bears certain resonance with eurythmy, is renegotiated to create a joint school experience aligned with the pupils' cultural references. The flash mob synchronized the bodily energy in the aula and directed the attention to the celebration of the outgoing principal. Incorporating elements of digital pop-culture and other aspects of the pupils' life worlds, assist, rather than evoke, the energizing of iconic Waldorf traditions and the school as such.

Conclusion

Although Waldorf schools represent an unconventional element within the Swedish educational landscape, they nonetheless raise questions that may be asked of other learning

institutions. How do children come to perform according to expectations? How is the arbitrariness of school subjects naturalized? What made the group of noisy high school boys let themselves go on the wooden floor in the pink-painted eurythmy hall, and how come children in public schools, who care little for mathematics, carry out their algebra? What social forces make pupils follow instructions and perform, sometimes against their own will and ability? To paraphrase Georg Simmel, we are justified in asking how schools, at all, are possible.

The answer proposed in this article is that a practical belief grounded in ritualized collective practice may, under certain conditions, assist schools in enacting adaptation. In the symbolically and socially dense community where I conducted fieldwork, the soft power of rituals is amplified and makes 'the profits of regularity' more easily transform into bodily habits through a 'conduct that conforms universally' (Bourdieu, (2003[1998]: 142). Drawing on Bourdieu (1990: 77), the partly ritualized education in the Waldorf school can thus be addressed as a 'symbolic manipulation of body experience'. In addition, the emotionalizing capacity of ritualized school elements fuels a form of group solidarity that assists pupils in participating in schoolwork and overcoming hesitance when encountering a new school subject. Together, this results not only in aligned performances but may also cultivate dispositions that, from within, enable a validation of the school.

Revisiting the notion of incorporated history, the ritual's capacity to produce order is entangled also with the pupils' class-based domestic inheritance. Educational performance is deeply embedded within the socio-economic structures of society. Processes of adaptation reveal not only the transformative power of collective school rituals but also their stratified and reproductive dynamics. As noted earlier, the school in focus of this article is socially niched, with a recruitment characterized by an overrepresentation of highly educated parents in cultural professions, of which nearly half are former Waldorf pupils. It is therefore likely that the children are more receptive to the ritualistic embedding and are dispositioned towards an overall ease with school performances in general.

As demonstrated, however, the rituals not only serve a stabilizing function, reproducing family and school values, but also constitute a site for new meaning to emerge. The fact that a contested school subject such as eurythmy is rendered sensible to new generations of pupils, partly through the ritual script, makes it a target for new interpretations, potentially pushing its meaning and significance. This implies that the body is not simply 'locking' pupils up, incarnating order through the flesh, but that the bodily experience both contains and stimulates agency. The lived body mediates meaning and connects experiences from different spheres of life, thereby generating inscriptions that diverge from the traditional Waldorf discourses. When pupils strive to make sense of their everyday life in an extraordinary school, they reframe and invent narratives that make more sense to them and thereby both validate and destabilize the meaning of Waldorf.

In sum, the century-old pedagogical programme is sustained through everyday school rituals that make the symbolic order come alive in the shape of new generations of pupils 'walk[ing] and talk[ing]' Waldorf. This does not, however, in any simple manner imply a reinforcement of traditions. The examples discussed in this article demonstrate that collective rituals function not only as instruments of social ordering, but also point to

disruptions that partly reshape what it means to be a Waldorf pupil. The rituals assist pupils in internalizing the school, but not merely as a set of unreflected and regulatory habits. Ritualistic elements also evoke reflexive and refraining exercises. The case of Waldorf thereby underscores the need for a contextualized theorization of ritual power that addresses its complexity as a social force, encompassing both stabilizing and destabilizing dynamics.

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Notes

1. Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) was an Austrian philosopher and esoteric thinker who founded the anthroposophical movement. Anthroposophy, closely related to theosophy, seeks to bridge the gap between science and spirituality and encompasses a range of practical applications, including Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture and anthroposophical medicine.
2. The anthroposophical heritage, comporting ideas of reincarnation and proto-psychologist temperament theory, remains a critical area, also within the Waldorf movement itself (see Tyson, 2025). While Waldorf schools are at times described as 'impressive practice', they are often also portrayed as constrained by 'dubious theory' (Ulrich, 2024: 22).
3. The first Waldorf school was established in Stuttgart 1919, for the children of the workers in Emil Molt's cigar factory Waldorf-Astoria. Today, there are 1283 Waldorf schools in the world, spread over 71 countries (according to the Waldorf World List 2024, see Hoffmann and Buch, 2024). In Sweden there are 38 primary Waldorf schools (age 7 to 15), and eight upper-secondary schools.
4. In 'A lecture on Eurythmy', Steiner (1923) claims: 'within the Anthroposophical Movement there is a firm conviction that a spiritual impulse of this kind must now, at the present time, enter once more into human evolution. [. . .] It will increasingly be realised that this particular form of art has been given to the world in Eurythmy. It is the task of Anthroposophy to bring a greater depth, a wider vision and a more living spirit into the other forms of art. But the art of Eurythmy could only grow up out of the soul of Anthroposophy; could only receive its inspiration through a purely Anthroposophical conception.' Since 2011, eurythmy is a national

school subject in upper-secondary education (in compulsory school it is offered as an elective subject) and is described in the Swedish National Agency for Education's upper-secondary curriculum (GY11) as an 'artistic [subject] by its very nature' that 'forms the basis for further development of multimodal artistic expression'.

5. The Swedish educational landscape is characterized by a voucher model, implying that each pupil is allocated a budget, which goes to the school that the pupil attends. This implies that, with a few exceptions, both municipal and private schools are free of fees.
6. In his theology courses, Steiner emphasized the importance of the structure of the cult for the community of the congregation. The ritual form and the drama of the ceremony were intended to reflect the encounter between the human and the divine, but according to Steiner, they also carried a potential for strengthening the group (Lejon, 1997: 115–116). For a discussion of rituals as a characteristic feature of Waldorf schools and preschools, see Frödén (2012) and Dahlin et al. (2002: 88).
7. To a varying degree the ritualized aesthetical-ethical order is present already in the home of the pupils. A significant portion of the parents in the school where I conducted fieldwork have themselves undertaken a Waldorf education: 43% were former Waldorf pupils; 63% of those parents undertook their education at this very school (Törnqvist, 2026). While the integration between home and school offers a deeper habituation in line with Paul Claudel's saying: 'connaître, c'est naître avec' – 'to know, is to be born with' (Bourdieu, 1990: 67, 66), interview accounts with pupils and parents partly underscore the formative role of the domestic inheritance in shaping a value orientation that affirms the school context.

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