

From Resistance to Compromise

The encounter between Steiner pedagogy and an educational reform

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the tensions that arise between educational reforms and established pedagogical traditions. The case is the Norwegian Steiner Schools' encounter with the national educational reform known as Reform 97, which included lowering the school starting age from seven to six. Reform 97 affected both the values and the practices of Steiner education. The article traces developments from the late 1980s, when the reform process began, to contemporary practice. It is a narrative of resistance, internal tensions, and the gradual movement toward compromise. The findings highlight the significant role that value orientations play in both the preservation and the further development of educational practice – a theme that carries broader relevance beyond this specific context.

Keywords: Steinerpedagogy, Education values, Education reform, pedagogy for first graders.

ABSTRACT. Dieser Artikel untersucht Herausforderungen im Zusammenhang mit den Spannungen zwischen Bildungsreformen und pädagogischer Praxis. Ein Beispiel hierfür ist die Auseinandersetzung der norwegischen Waldorfschule mit der Bildungsreform „Reform 97“. Ein zentrales Element dieser Reform war die Herabsetzung des Schuleintrittsalters von sieben auf sechs Jahre. Die Reform 97 beeinflusste das bestehende Bildungssystem der Waldorfschulen, seine Werte und seine Praxis. Der Artikel beschreibt den Prozess von Ende der 1980er Jahre, als der Reformprozess begann, bis zur heutigen Praxis. Es ist eine Geschichte von Widerstand, interne Spannungen und den Weg zu einem Kompromiss. Die Ergebnisse beleuchten die Bedeutung von Werten als Grundlage für die Erhaltung und Weiterentwicklung der Bildungspraxis. Ein Thema, das auch im weiteren Bildungskontext relevant ist.

Keywords: Steinerpädagogik, Werte, Bildungsreform, Pädagogik 6 Jahre alt.

Introduction

School reforms and educational change processes are often marked by tensions between, on the one hand, political intentions and bureaucratic implementation and, on the other, value based pedagogical traditions

(Roos & Trippestad, 2015). This was also the case in 1997, when Reform 97 was introduced in Norway, lowering the school starting age from seven to six and extending primary schooling to a ten-year programme (Haug, 2015; Slagstad, 2017; Bjørnstad et al., 2024).

Reluctance to enrolling six year olds as school pupils was central to the resistance against Reform 97. Critics feared that this age group's specific needs were at stake within the school framework and practices, especially that opportunities for free play, both indoors and outdoors, would diminish (Bjørnstad et al., 2024, p. 38). The Steiner pedagogical community was a prominent voice in this resistance. The encounter between the value base of Steiner education and the political justifications for restructuring early education in Reform 97 exemplifies the tensions between differing value systems in reform processes.

This article investigates which values the Norwegian Steiner pedagogical community¹ sought to safeguard in response to Reform 97, how these values were communicated in the struggle against the reform, and the extent to which they have been preserved in Steiner educational practice in first grade since 1997. These issues are explored through three research questions, which also reflect the study's historical perspective:

- How did the Steiner pedagogical community work and argue in its opposition to lowering the school starting age?
- How did the community work internally to implement Reform 97, and what challenges arose during this process?
- How can the Steiner schools' approach to challenging Reform 97 contribute to a broader understanding of tensions between different actors involved in the implementation of educational reforms?

As the third question suggests, this study has relevance beyond the Steiner educational context. All educational practices are value based, and these values frequently come into conflict with the political ambitions behind educational reforms. The Steiner school movement serves as a useful case because Steiner education tends to maintain a relatively homogeneous set of values across educational contexts - such as kindergartens and schools - and across historical periods. While mainstream educational institutions also operate with strong values, these are often more heterogeneous both historically and institutionally. Our assumption is that Steiner education's internally consistent value base provided the movement with a unified voice in the debate on Reform 97, thereby strengthening the analytical clarity of this study.

The purpose of the article is not to defend Steiner pedagogical positions or to claim that they are superior to others. Rather, the aim is to examine how these value positions were mobilized by Steiner educators during different phases of the Reform 97 process. Accordingly, the Steiner pedagogical foundations presented here reflect the views of those who participated in the resistance and do not necessarily represent contemporary Waldorf-Steiner educational thinking, which in many areas has become more nuanced and research based (Dahlin, 2017; Schieren, 2023; Tyson, 2025).

The following sections outline the theoretical perspectives employed including a brief presentation of key values and principles in Waldorf Steiner education regarding school starting age, and a description of the methodological approach. This is followed by the main analysis, addressing the first two research questions through three phases of Reform 97. Finally, the third research question is discussed, and suggestions for further research are offered.

Theoretical perspectives and research context

To analyse how the process leading up to Reform 97 triggered resistance and protest within the Norwegian Steiner movement, we draw on the theory of *Orders of Worth* developed by French sociologists Laurent Thévenot and Luc Boltanski (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Their framework, situated within French pragmatic sociology and the sociology of engagement, sheds light on how value systems are articulated in

1. In this article the terms Steiner pedagogy and Steiner schools and kindergarten are used when the Norwegian context is described. In other contexts, the terms Waldorf or Waldorf-Steiner are used.

reform processes and how tensions between them arise. In *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, Thévenot and Boltanski challenge perspectives grounded in the reproduction of power structures, such as those advanced by Bourdieu and Foucault (Kvamme, 2024, p. 84). Emphasizing an actor oriented approach, they identify justification regimes in which “actions must be justified in terms of the common good” (Kvamme, 2024, p. 95) for criticism, compromise, or agreement to occur (Kvamme, 2024, p. 107).

Thévenot and Boltanski describe six orders of worth within these justification regimes: the inspirational, domestic, civil, market, public opinion, and industrial orders. Each order is characterized by its own criteria for justification—for example, modes of evaluation, forms of relevant information, types of relationships, and forms of human qualification (Hansen, 2016).

Although the theory is more complex than the aspects presented here, these elements provide a fruitful lens for analysing the tensions between Steiner pedagogy and Reform 97. They also help illuminate how actors, depending on contextual and structural conditions, draw on different orders of worth in their arguments. While Thévenot has argued that individuals cannot act within multiple regimes simultaneously, actors in practice may nonetheless draw on several orders of worth (Haugseth, 2019).

We interpret the educational policy rationales behind Reform 97 primarily as expressions of what Thévenot and Boltanski term the *industrial* order of worth, in which productivity, efficiency, measurable criteria, and statistical indicators are central. Relationships are framed as functional, and qualification is tied to expertise and professional competence. Reform 97 was also influenced by the *civil* order of worth, reflecting concerns for the common good and ideals of equality. Policymakers argued that the reform would contribute to full kindergarten coverage, offering younger children access to stimulating developmental environments and enabling greater participation of women in the labour market. However, as we show later, it was the industrial order of worth that was emphasized and challenged within Steiner pedagogical discourse, arguably to sharpen the perceived dichotomy between the reform’s political logic and the value base of the school movement.

The Steiner community’s struggle against lowering the school starting age and the values articulated in this process can be understood as expressions of the *inspirational* order of worth, rooted in the ideals of Steiner education. Practical experiences arising from the pedagogical tradition may also be interpreted through the *domestic* order of worth. Central assessment criteria in the inspirational order include anti conformism and creativity; relevant information is conveyed emotionally, and qualification is tied to creativity and ingenuity. In the domestic order of worth, esteem and reputation function as key evaluative criteria, information is transmitted orally and anecdotally, relationships are based on trust, and qualification rests on authority (Kvamme, 2024).

Recently, the concept of *orders of worth* has been applied in educational research. Ingunn Vines Kvamme uses the concept to show how increased state control and values associated with the industrial order have placed pressure on the kindergarten’s fundamental worths (Kvamme, 2024, p. 18). Ove Skarpenes and Kari Mette Walmann Hidle apply the same framework to examine how pupils in Norwegian compulsory schools are exposed to conflicting orders of worth. While content and pedagogical methods aim to promote individualization—legitimized by an inspirational order—assessment schemes are grounded in standardization and thus reflect an industrial order. These tensions are experienced as challenging by pupils (Skarpenes & Hidle, 2024).

The ideological and historical background of Steiner pedagogy

Rudolf Steiner’s booklet *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy* (first published in 1907) constitutes the earliest formulation of Steiner’s educational ideas (Steiner, 2006). Here, Steiner outlines his understanding of child development during both kindergarten and school age and discusses corresponding didactic implications. He describes development in seven year phases: the first covering early childhood and the second the primary school years. The transition between these two periods marks, in Steiner’s view, a profound shift in the child’s way of perceiving and being in the world, necessitating distinct pedagogical

approaches.

Following the establishment of the first Waldorf Steiner school in 1919, Steiner further elaborated on the relationship between pedagogy and child development (Steiner, 2008; Steiner, 2011). In the first seven year period, children engage with the world primarily through physical and sensory experience, making the physical environment and the educator's presence as a role model central to healthy development. In the second seven year period, encompassing early school years, children relate to the world emotionally through the soul. Educators are therefore expected to present the world through imaginative, emotionally rich stories as a basis for cognitive engagement.

One of Steiner's most distinctive claims is that the life forces children invest in physically engaging with the world during the first seven years are the same forces later needed for cognitive work in school. If academic demands are introduced before the child has completed this embodied developmental work, Steiner warns of potential weaknesses in later development. Consequently, in Steiner education, lowering the school starting age has long been seen as problematic because it disrupts what is considered a natural developmental sequence and may hinder healthy maturation, both physically and spiritually (Steiner, 2006; Steiner, 2008).

In the past decade, Steiner's model of strict seven year stages—particularly his views on school readiness—has been increasingly questioned. Scholars such as Christian Rittelmeyer, Peter Loebell, and Walter Riethmüller have re-examined Waldorf Steiner developmental theory in light of contemporary psychological and educational research (Rittelmeyer, 2023; Loebell, 2023; Riethmüller, 2023). They argue that rigid stage based understandings risk overlooking individual, cultural, and social variation. Further research and discussion in this field are essential for the ongoing development and legitimation of Waldorf Steiner pedagogy and the curricula for the schools.

During the new millennium, many Waldorf-Steiner teacher education institutions have undergone academisation, leading to an increase in research activity (Schieren, ed., 2023; Tyson, 2025). However, there is still a lack in research-based studies on how the Waldorf-Steiner educational community have responded to educational reforms in general and in particular on Steiner pedagogical practices for first graders brought about by Reform 97 in Norway (Stabel, Østergaard, Stabel & Nome, 2025).

Methods

This study is situated within a hermeneutic research tradition and employs qualitative content analysis of texts (Nilssen, 2014). By alternating between broad, exploratory reading and close reading of selected documents, the study gains both breadth and depth. Quotations were selected with the aim of highlighting key perspectives on how the Steiner educational community responded to proposals to lower the school starting age and to the implementation and subsequent development of Reform 97.

The authors hold insider positions, and the preconceptions associated with such positions form part of the methodological reflection (Kjelstadli, 2007; Knutsen, 2009; Holmes, 2020). Proximity to the field brings both advantages and challenges: it offers access and contextual insight but also requires heightened reflexivity when analysing material from a field to which one is emotionally and professionally connected. Through critical reflection, transparency, and accountability, these challenges have been addressed.

Through systematic analysis, a narrative—one version of the story of the Steiner educational community's encounter with Reform 97—has been constructed. While the intention is to present a truthful account, other narratives are always possible (Kjelstadli, 2007). The presentation follows the research questions and thus has a chronological structure.

Written sources include published texts and archival material from the Steiner School Association and the Steiner Kindergarten Association. Newspaper articles have also been used. Texts conveying experiences

from practice are drawn from both internal and public journals and books. The report *Frameworks, Space and Time* (Rammer, rom og organisering av tiden i Steinerskolens førsteklasse²) based on two surveys among Steiner school principals and first grade teachers, is also included (Stabel & Østergaard, 2023).

As part of the study's introductory phase, five semi structured qualitative research interviews were conducted. They were transcribed using Autotekst, and all informants have been anonymised. The study is approved by SIKT (<https://sikt.no/tjenester/personverntjenester-forskning/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-personopplysninger>). The five informants were selected because they worked with six year old children both before and after the introduction of Reform 97. The interviews focused on how the pedagogues experienced the plans to lower the school starting age and how they and their colleagues perceived the challenges posed to Steiner educational values. The semi structured interview guide allowed for unplanned follow up questions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015), providing deeper insights into the pedagogues' perspectives. These personal accounts complement the written material and offer valuable knowledge about practitioners' experiences. Due to space limitations, only selected examples are included in this study.

The background of Reform 97

The background of Reform 97 is complex, but it was primarily legitimized through socio economic priorities and values (Engelsen, 2003; Karlsen, 2006), which can be interpreted as reflecting an industrial order of worth (Haugseth, 2019, p. 443). Among the most influential factors were the OECD's evaluations of the Norwegian and other Western education systems in the late 1980s. The conclusion that educational institutions needed to become more efficient formed a fundamental premise of education policy throughout the decade. This view appears clearly in an official report whose introduction states: "The challenge for Norwegian knowledge policy is that the country does not obtain sufficient competence from the talents of its population" (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet, 1988, p. 7).

Plans to lower the school starting age and extend compulsory schooling from nine to ten years were also tied to broader societal goals of increasing productivity and profitability. Higher employment, particularly among women, was a key objective. If both parents were expected to work, greater kindergarten capacity was needed for children under the age of three. By moving six year olds from kindergarten into the school system, these aims could be met. Defenders of Reform 97 also argued that lowering the school starting age would promote equal opportunities, a perspective that can be associated with a civil order of worth.

Although many agreed that six year olds needed an educational provision prior to formal schooling and several organizational models had already been tested (Haug, 1994), there was widespread concern that including this age group within the school framework would lead to overly school like content and forms of work (Bjørnstad et al., 2024, pp. 34–35; Grødem, 1994).

Before the reform was passed in Parliament, opposition parties negotiated a compromise: they would support Reform 97 on the condition that the content of first grade be based on preschool pedagogy (Haug, 1994; Bjørnstad et al., 2024). This premise was incorporated into the final proposal voted on in Parliament, resulting in broad approval of the reform even among those initially opposed.

Nine years later, the reform Knowledge Promotion 2006 (Kunnskapsløftet 06) was introduced (Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2006), further strengthening a results oriented education policy through the formulation of explicit learning objectives from first grade onward. After this reform, first grade became even more school like than originally intended (Bjørnstad et al., 2024).

The Steiner schools' resistance against Reform 97

The Association of Steiner Schools in Norway (Forbundet Steinerskolene i Norge) is the umbrella organization for all Norwegian Steiner schools. In autumn 1988, it received a letter from the Ministry of Church and

2. Citations from texts and titles in Norwegian, have been translated to English by the authors, Norwegian titles are put in brackets.

Education outlining plans to lower the school starting age from seven to six. Based on the available sources, this was the first official indication given to Steiner schools about the proposed change. The letter caused considerable concern within the Steiner educational community.

On behalf of the Association, child psychiatrist and school doctor Stein Schage responded. He argued that the values underpinning the reform did not sufficiently consider children's educational and social needs. Although acknowledging that schools must adapt to societal changes, he wrote: "When it comes to educational measures required for today's children, we have reached conclusions that contradict the Ministry's ideas" (Schage, 1988, p. 1). Schage contended that the Ministry's proposal, based on increasing "stimulation and teaching" for six year olds, would not help achieve the goal of making full use of schooling. He questioned whether the Ministry believed that children and schools could be compared "with a system where increased input results in increased output."

Schage referred to the Steiner educational tradition, in which play is considered the central mode of learning during early childhood, and where formal instruction in letters and numbers is deliberately postponed until after age seven. Instead, learning should occur "through imagination and movement" (Schage, 1988, p. 1). His argument drew on the long standing tradition of Steiner practice and on the school's authority as a state approved alternative (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet, 1985). The tone of the letter was sober and non emotional; Schage relied on professional expertise and practical experience rather than Steiner's underlying conceptual framework. The letter is an early example of tensions between the values underpinning the reform and the values behind Steiner pedagogy.

Early in the resistance efforts, the Association established a working group, later named the Working Group for Six Year Olds, comprising representatives from Steiner kindergartens and schools (Sundt, 1991). The group coordinated internal and external initiatives, including mapping existing provision for first graders (Heilevang & Sundt, 1993). A part time position was created to support the work (Sundt & Nome, 1992).

In spring 1992, the group organized a major public conference in Oslo attended by many, including several members of the Parliamentary Church and Education Committee. A newspaper covered the event (Haugstad & Rødland, 1992). The aim was to present a broad spectrum of arguments showing why six year olds should not start school and to demonstrate potential harm. Arguments from neuropsychology suggested that early school entry could impede brain development (Bergstrøm, 1992). Values associated with inspirational and domestic orders of worth were also mobilized at the meeting.

The anthology *Amputated childhood. About starting school for 6-year-olds* (Amputert barndom. Om skolestart for 6 åringene), compiled by Steiner school teacher Marianne Sevåg Vestly in 1992, collected contributions from different professions drawing on varied orders of worth (Vestly, 1992). Titles such as "Respect Childhood" (Bjørkvold, 1992), "In Defence of Childhood" (Mathisen, 1992), and "Children – Do We Have Time and Space for Them?" (Svarstad Haugland, 1992) express emotional engagement and highlight what was at stake. These can be read as reflecting an inspirational order of worth (Kvamme, 2024, p. 95).

Contributors such as James K. Uphoff and June Gilmore warned that premature school entry placed children at risk of academic failure (Uphoff & Gilmore, 1992). Neuroscientist Matti Bergstrøm similarly warned that early schooling could impair brain development (Bergstrøm, 1992). These contributions drew on professional expertise and thus reflect an industrial order of worth.

The volume also contained arguments grounded in Steiner pedagogy. Freya Jaffke appealed directly to Steiner's authority (Jaffke, 1992), while Inger Brochmann drew on pedagogical experience and used rhetorical and emotional appeals (Brochmann, 1992). Her argumentation, emphasizing trust in long standing practice, reflects a domestic order of worth.

In a white paper to the Parliament in 1993 (Stortingsmelding No. 40 (1992–93)), a formal proposal to lowering the school starting age in Norway was put on the table. The Steiner School Association issued a detailed statement outlining its critique against the proposal. It argued that the concept of school readiness had not been addressed, that the Ministry conflated maturation and habituation, and that evidence

from psychology, neuroscience, and experimental preschool programs contradicted the reform's premises (Steinerskolene i Norge, 1994). The Association predicted an increase in learning difficulties, need for special education, school fatigue, and reduced creativity, and expressed particular concern for boys' development. These arguments relied on professional expertise and could be seen as an expression of an industrial order of worth. The statement more or less accepted the reform's main objective and the political intentions behind it but strongly challenged the means of achieving the objective.

Despite extensive efforts, the resistance failed and the reform was passed in the Parliament. However, some compromises were reached. The proposal that was adopted stated that kindergarten educational practice and free play should be a core content in first grade. The Steiner schools shifted focus from opposing the change to securing approval for a distinct provision in first grade. A new framework plan (Heilevang, 1995), was approved by the ministry shortly before implementation (Det kongelige Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 1997). The plan clearly reflects a preschool educational approach grounded in inspirational and domestic orders of worth, drawing primarily on long standing pedagogical practice. The most important feature was an intention to locate first grade in Steiner kindergartens, in age mixed groups.

From common struggle to internal tensions

A united Steiner educational movement (kindergarten and school) had secured the possibility of locating first grade in kindergarten. In the first years after the introduction of Reform 97, this was the most common practice. Twenty-eight years later, only two Steiner schools still have first graders in kindergarten (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2025). This shift has been challenging in many respects and has also generated internal tensions.

One reason was linked to the broad, outward-facing consensus communicated by the Steiner educational community ahead of the reform: the ideal solution was said to keep first-graders within the frame of the kindergartens, both pedagogical and practical. But even before the introduction of Reform 97, some Steiner schools already enrolled six-year-olds in age-homogeneous preschool groups (Informants No. 1, 3, 4). This was not communicated publicly during the struggle against the reform, perhaps since the intention was to appear outwardly united.

One informant recalls the difficulty of raising experiences from those working with age-homogeneous groups in internal seminars:

"I just remember the first time I was at a meeting like that ... we thought, oh no, we've sinned, but we weren't aware of it... I was almost a bit stunned, because it was very polarized" (Informant No. 1, p. 9, p. 4).

The informant adds that the lack of interest in this approach was interpreted as implying that those who had done so "were not fully up to date, anthroposophically. A little bit like that... to put it gently, right—you don't really know what you're doing" (Informant No. 1, p. 9). These statements reflect internal tensions between what might be called ideological hardliners and those who appeared more pragmatic. It seems obvious that argumentation based on an inspirational and a domestic order of worth could in some cases appear authoritarian and judgmental. Those who organised their work different from the ideal, experienced them self as sinners.

Gradually more Steiner schools began organizing first-graders in age-homogeneous groups. The main driver was often financial. It was more expensive for schools to pay kindergartens for locating first grade pupils, than to establish their own first grade groups on the school premises. Some schools also experienced declining enrolment, perhaps because parents grew uncertain about sending their first graders to kindergarten. This threatened to weaken the school's economic situation (Nome, 2000; Nome, 2001). These changes could be interpreted as grounded more in an industrial order of worth than in traditional educational values. From the perspective of an industrial order of worth, what a united Steiner educational movement had fought for, now appeared inappropriate.

As more schools chose to establish age-homogeneous groups located on the school premises, many

expressed concerns about the content in first grade. They feared that the content would be shaped by the school's way of working and thinking (Nome, 1997; Hovland & Sand, undated). The campaign against Reform 97 showed that teachers in Steiner schools and pedagogues in Steiner kindergartens shared the basic pedagogical ideas and "had a common tradition and history and spoke the same educational language" (Nome, 2001, p. 39). When the reform was implemented however, clear differences between the Steiner kindergarten tradition and the Steiner school tradition was displayed. There were differences in content, methods, and the educator's role across the first and second seven-year periods. In addition, the structures and the physical environment in the two institutions differed. The link between the physical environment and the possibility for children's healthy growth and development are often pointed out by Steiner (Steiner, 1919; Steiner, 2006). From a Steiner kindergarten perspective, the new first grade did not belong within the school structure and how to work with children in the first seven-year period was unknown territory to many schoolteachers. As one informant put it:

"...we felt it was important for them to experience that there were qualities that changed along the way. That this is worthy of imitation that the awareness of how you talk and move and handle tools and everything like that was very important with the youngest children, and then it changes upwards" (Informant No. 4, p. 7).

For understandable reasons, those familiar with kindergarten practice was a minority in school staff meetings, and it could be difficult to find time and space to raise questions about the specific needs of the youngest pupils. To avoid tensions caused by this potential lack of visibility, close cooperation between the first-grade teachers and the school leadership was important (Informants No. 1, 3, 4). The potential lack of visibility also raised questions about where first grade teachers should be organizationally located. The Steiner Kindergarten Association argued that those working with first graders in the schools should be members of the Kindergarten Association, and be given access to support, internal meetings and seminars along with the other Steiner kindergarten pedagogues (Hofstad, 2005). This is still current practice. Consequently, first grade teachers had a professional affiliation in two contexts, both as members of the staff in the schools, and as members of the kindergarten association. This is explainable within Steiner educational thinking, yet it also created potential for tensions between professions in day-to-day work.

In 2001, four years after the introduction of Reform 97, some of these issues were articulated in an internal memo to a meeting of the Steiner pedagogical community:

- "Do schools devalue the importance of educational work with young children?"
- "Are kindergartens too poorly trained in administration and financial management?"
- "Are the schools ideologically unclear, too pragmatic and financially driven?"
- "Are kindergartens too dogmatic in their thinking and inflexible in relation to the wishes and needs of families in our time?" (Nome, 2001, p. 39).

In the early 2000s, the need for better collaboration between schools and kindergartens regarding first-graders occurred repeatedly in minutes from internal meetings. It took time for the professional community to find solutions, both organizationally and pedagogically. Ten years after Reform 97, there remained a need to clarify the distinctiveness of Steiner education and to improve internal collaboration. In an article, Steiner kindergarten pedagogue Astrid Sundt describes the struggle against lowering the school entrance age and the situation in 2007, where both defeats and problems are evident. Sundt criticizes the internal work, but also outlines the way forward, referring, among other things, to the development of an educational platform for first graders as a necessary and important measure (Sundt, 2007).

The sources show that the Steiner Kindergarten Association employed a mixture of inspirational and domestic orders of worth in its arguments against the schools. Many statements can be interpreted as emotionally defending a tradition that reaches back to Steiner himself. The schools' actions were, by the Kindergarten Association, interpreted as expressions of an industrial order of worth, dominated by economic arguments and the need for efficient management, according to many kindergarten professionals. What had earlier been a joint value-based struggle against an external adversary had moved into the Steiner pedagogical community. It would take time to resolve these tensions.

Compromise

Against the background of the challenges, ambiguities, and internal tensions highlighted by Nome, Sundt, and others, the Steiner School Association and the Steiner Kindergarten Association intensified efforts to formulate joint guidelines for work with first grade. These were completed and published in 2008 (Lobben Røed, Alsos, & Nome, 2008) and constitute a concrete example of how the Steiner educational community sought to meet the requirements of the educational authorities while ensuring the quality and distinctiveness of provision for six-year-olds. The work can be interpreted as a compromise between the previously promoted ideal solution and what was possible within the new framework.

The guidelines aimed to clarify the distribution of responsibilities between school administrations and early childhood educators working with first graders to reduce the potential for problems and ambiguity (Lobben Røed, Alsos, & Nome, 2008). The document describes the legal basis for first grade services; collaborative routines if first grade is located in kindergarten and if it's organized as age-homogeneous groups; staffing requirements; and practical arrangements for indoor and outdoor spaces. A key motivation was concern that provision for first graders varied too much across schools and was not sufficiently clear as an educational alternative (Lobben Røed, Alsos, & Nome, 2008, p. 1). There is a clear intention to "set a minimum standard for how first grade should be organized in our schools" (p. 1). First grade should not adopt established school didactics: "the second grade's learning objectives and working methods should not be moved down." Preferably, first grade should have its own rooms and outdoor areas (Lobben Røed, Alsos, & Nome, 2008, p. 3). The guidelines also establish clear routines for collaboration on pedagogy, finance, and administration between the first-grade teacher and the school's principal and board. Although different organizational frameworks are made possible, the guidelines convey clear Steiner pedagogical values, norms, and intentions for the new first grade program.

The Steiner Kindergarten Association initiated internal work to strengthen knowledge of Steiner pedagogy's conceptual basis and values, especially the child's development prior to school entry. This is reflected in minutes from internal meetings and in articles in the Steiner kindergarten educators' magazine, *The Seasonal Letter* (Årstidsbrevet) (Lobben Røed, 2005; Sundt, 2009; Howard, 2009; Barkved, 2009). *The booklet The Six-Year-Old and Steiner Pedagogy in Practice* (Seksåringen og Steinerpedagogikk i praksis) contains many suggestions for shaping the program in accordance with key Steiner educational values (Lobben Røed, 2013). This indicates that it was necessary to clarify the profile and content of first grade.

Over time, the educational field appears to have gradually accepted the opponent's industrial order of worth, primarily in relation to the administrative and legal framework as a necessity if practice were to continue. Within the limits of this framework, Steiner pedagogical practice for six-year-olds was further developed and articulated. This process can be seen as a compromise between different orders of worth: both industrial-, inspirational- and domestic values.

In 2022, two surveys were conducted aimed to map both administrative aspects and the content of the educational program in first grade in Norwegian Steiner schools. The responses were summarized in a research report (Stabel & Østergaard, 2023) and show that the program for six-year-olds has a clear profile. In most Steiner schools, first graders are organized in age-homogeneous groups. A few schools still offer first grade integrated in age mixed groups in kindergartens. Regardless of location, the schools are financially and legally responsible. The teachers working with these groups have backgrounds in early childhood education. The groups are typically located on school grounds but are generally sheltered from the indoor and outdoor spaces used by the other classes. The areas are designed in line with kindergarten educational principles, as is the organization of the day. In most cases, a pedagogue is responsible for this year only and thus becomes a kind of specialist in pedagogy for this age, unlike the rest of the school where most teachers remain with a class for several years. In a few cases, the first grade teacher follows the group into primary school.

Free play is central: on average, just over an hour is set aside each day for indoor play and almost an hour and a half for outdoor play. A wide range of regular activities is used, such as eurythmy, hiking, wood crafts, weaving, felting, and painting. In addition, children participate in tasks with adults, including cooking, maintenance, gardening, and animal care. The program includes a daily assembly where children

and adults talk and reflect on current events. Storytelling is a regular feature, as are singing and music. There is no formal teaching of reading, writing, or arithmetic; numeracy and language development are nurtured through other activities. Digital toys or tools are not part of the first-grade program. At several schools, first graders participate in some whole-school activities, especially in the spring semester, which helps them become accustomed to being with the older pupils (Stabel & Østergaard, 2023; Stabel, 2024).

The report shows that the Steiner program for first graders has adapted to important requirements from Reform 97, primarily in organizational terms, though pedagogical changes are also visible. The first year in Steiner schools now appears to be a transitional year between kindergarten and school (Stabel & Østergaard, 2023, p. 16). The first year at school is clearly part of the school curriculum; the children are called pupils, and the pedagogue is called a teacher (Steinerskoleforbundet, 2021). Despite these changes, it remains a significant educational alternative in which central values from the Steiner tradition have been preserved.

Final discussion

How can the way the Steiner school movement challenged Reform 97 contribute to understanding how different actors operate when educational reforms are developed and implemented? Our findings confirm what other researchers have shown (Roos & Trippestad, 2015; Haug, 2015; Slagstad, 2017; Bjørnstad et al., 2024): that tensions exist between the political field and the field of educational practice. Viewed through the analytical lenses of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006; see also Hansen, 2016), the reason appears to be that the two fields are governed by different orders of worth, and the development of an educational reform may be interpreted as a clash of values.

We found that the political field primarily acted on the basis of industrial and civil orders of worth. The industrial order of worth highlights the need for effectiveness and economic sustainability, while the civil order of worth emphasizes equality and fair distribution of goods (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Hansen, 2016). With respect to Reform 97, the industrial order of worth emphasized more effective learning outcomes by starting formal education one year earlier and, additionally, provided access to kindergarten for thousands of children under three years of age at low cost. The civil order of worth emphasized how increased kindergarten provision could reduce social inequality, both because more children, regardless of family background, were given better opportunities for learning and development, and because more women gained opportunities to enter the labour market.

The field of educational practice, in our case the Steiner school movement, seemed to interpret the political field as dominated by industrial values and consequently adopted a contrary set of values in challenging the reform. The arguments were based on inspirational and domestic orders of worth. These implied emotionally and idealistically driven statements about a good childhood and the value of free, unregulated play on the one hand, and, on the other, statements expressing trust in traditions and authorities that did not seem to be acknowledged by the political field.

The Steiner school movement may place greater emphasis on domestic values than other educational practices, given the confidence derived from a century-long history (Jaffke, 1992; Brochmann, 1992). However, we find similarities in the way representatives of the kindergarten movement sometimes invoke authorities and traditions reaching back to Fröbel when arguing against reforms perceived as driven mainly by industrial values (Leirpoll, 2025). Arguing on the basis of a domestic order of worth is thus not solely a Steiner educational phenomenon, which strengthens the general relevance of this study.

We find that the field of practice tended to ignore the possibility that the reform was driven by the civil order of worth, likely to sharpen the dichotomy between the two fields. We also find that some arguments from the field of practice could be interpreted as an acceptance of the industrial value of effectiveness, for instance, when neuroscience was used by Steiner school representatives to demonstrate free play as an effective mode of learning (Steinerskolene i Norge, 1994). It seems that the field of practice, over time, to some extent accepted the reform's main objective and the political intentions behind it, while still actively challenging its content, that is, the means of achieving the objective.

Such acknowledgement perhaps made compromises possible and contributed to establishing kindergarten educational practice as core content in first grade when Reform 97 was implemented. For the Steiner school movement, the compromise was permission to locate first grade in Steiner kindergartens.

However, the initial dichotomy, the clash of values, appeared to move within the field of practice once the reform was adopted. The united front against the political field fragmented during implementation. Within Steiner education, the kindergarten movement seemed to interpret the school movement and school administrators as driven solely by cold industrial values as first class was brought into the schools, partly for economic reasons. Kindergarten representatives consequently positioned themselves in opposition, driven more by ideals and, in their view, being more faithful to tradition.

As with Reform 97 overall, the internal dispute ended in compromise. The kindergarten movement acknowledged the need for administratively and economically sustainable practice, and the school movement acknowledged that the content of first grade should continue to be dominated by free play and kindergarten traditions.

We assume that our findings indicate a pattern in how politically driven educational reforms are challenged. The dispute tends to create clear, dichotomous value positions between the political initiative and the field of practice, where each highlights the other's most contrary values. When reforms are adopted and implemented, the united front within the field of practice tends to fragment, and the clash of values reappears among different actors within practice. Nevertheless, compromises are possible in both phases. They can be reached if the two fields acknowledge each other's main objectives and shift from disputing the objectives to disputing the best means of achieving them.

Our assumption has been that the seemingly homogeneous set of values within the Steiner educational movement made it possible to display these processes clearly. However, more research on educational reforms involving other actors is needed to confirm our findings.

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