Inclusive Waldorf schools today: what can we build on and what is necessary in the 21st century?

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In this article we deal with questions of inclusion or inclusive educational requirements in schools and pay special attention to Waldorf schools. In doing so, we are first concerned with the question of how inclusive Waldorf education is in its foundations in order to then look more closely at the situation in Waldorf schools today and explore what potential Waldorf education has. A contribution to this is the research we are doing on the methodology of perception vignettes. For four years we have been using this methodology to develop an approach of "understanding" diagnostics for our students and future Waldorf teachers, so that they can consult different perspectives in their everyday dealings with children and adolescents and learn to ask the appropriate questions.

KEYWORDS

participation, perception vignettes, diagnosis, inclusion, Waldorf schools

1 Inclusion and inclusive education

Inclusion is no homogeneous term. For about 15 years, there has been a discourse about the different definitions, statements, publications, and research projects of inclusion. There is a diffusion of concepts around the competing paradigms because the term is still not clearly defined. Even in the international context, the term inclusion is not clearly defined because none of the possible definitions is universally accepted (Grosche, 2015, p. 17). It always depends on the point of view, as the term inclusion is a multifactorial and multidimensional construct (*ibid.*, p. 20), which is used in many different and contradictory ways (*ibid.*, p. 29).

Although there are almost 50 years of experience in school practice and science with inclusive teaching and now also with inclusive schools, it remains unclear what inclusion means in the school context. Of the manifold representations and definitions, none has yet been universally accepted (*ibid.*, p. 17). Rather, an understanding of the inclusive school system depends on the approach and wording of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Ultimately, it would require political decisions to advance effective inclusive school development. Ten years after the German ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Ulf Preuss-Lausitz summarized the results of inclusion and segregation research in terms of their balance and perspectives. He states, "What is missing is an overview that presents in a comprehensible way what knowledge we have about what, which limits of the statements have to be considered, and which fields of research are still open" (Preuss-Lausitz, 2019, p. 469).

Inclusion research still lacks a concept of education that can accompany comprehensive school socialization (*ibid.*). In a restricted context, the concept of inclusion emerged as a subject of scientific inquiry. Only some independent variables (*ibid.*) have been made the content of research projects so far, neglecting to include all dimensions of heterogeneity. For an accurate and fair overview of inclusive projects, science will have to make considerable

efforts, otherwise there is a risk of a biased reception in the public (*ibid.*, p. 470).

Thus, the theoretical controversies about the term exist, and there is still no recognized certification body with interpretive authority that establishes an understanding of the term as binding and accurate (Grosche, 2015, p. 30). Therefore, the term inclusion should be defined in a temporary, reduced and singular way and used independently (*ibid.*). Conflicting paradigms reveal themselves at this point: The perspective of curative and special education is, in part, subject to varying interpretations depending on political decisions regarding which educational system can be labeled as "inclusive" and best implements the guiding principle. Thus, the differentiated German special education system is classified on the one hand as part of the inclusive school system to be realized, and on the other hand as its antipode. Currently, the third State Review on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Germany has shown that a special education school implementation is not compliant with the Convention and therefore needs to be changed (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2023).

Achieving inclusive schools thus requires a change in the system. It is not enough to have certain pillars at the center, as has been researched for the seven characteristics of good inclusive schools:

1. Inclusive schools focus on students and their educational success.
2. Inclusive teaching focuses on individual and cooperative learning.
3. Binding agreements create reliable structures for joint learning.
4. Inclusive school practice is constantly put to the test.
5. In the inclusive school, the teaching staff and school management work closely together.
6. The inclusive school cooperates with parents and external partners.
7. Attitude, competence and appropriate framework conditions form the foundation of inclusive schools (Bertelsmann, 2016, p. 13 f.)

In addition, various studies conducted in recent years have identified factors that promote inclusive learning in schools. The federal government in Germany has launched a quality initiative for inclusive teacher education with many research projects (BMBF). As a result, many universities in Germany are researching different topics of inclusive education and school concepts. Nevertheless, in almost all federal states of Germany a very differentiating and mostly divided school system with a separate special school system remains.

The considerations of Hinz (2002, p. 359) make clear which perspectives there are on integrative and inclusive practice. (Mind you, this discussion plays a role mainly in Germany, while in the international context this debate is not conducted in this way). What is important is a specific new perspective that must be reflected in organizational development: It is no longer just about "including" children with certain learning difficulties, disabilities and needs in the general school, but about all children living and learning together in the general school. This includes creating a comprehensive system for all in the theory of heterogeneous groups (different minorities and majorities) and not differentiating schooling according to impairment,

problematic situation or social background. School differentiation is mostly based on a two-group theory, which separates children and adolescents according to the criteria disabled and non-disabled, with and without special educational needs or even with and without migration history.

If all children are accepted in school at their respective place of residence—thus also all differently handicapped as well as differently gifted children—, a changed self-perception of school, concept and equipment must be developed. The expansion of special or curative education has an impact on general school education. This changes to a combined model in which school and special education join up. Within this model, special needs educators work as equal team members alongside class and subject teachers, contributing their special expertise for support. The inclusive school model thus has a systemic approach that pushes collaborative and individualized learning for all children and adolescents and is based on an individualized curriculum. Lessons are planned, implemented, and reflected upon by all participants together; problems are solved collegially as a team (Hinz, 2002, p. 359).

It will still take some time in Germany to discuss and understand this difference with regard to an integrative and non-separative, i.e., inclusive, education, although integrative school organizations have already existed for decades in individual states or cities in Germany (Preuss-Lausitz, 2005, p. 76 f.). Preuss-Lausitz believes that in both inclusive and integrative contexts, the characteristics of diversity, cooperation, school for all, community school, heterogeneity, equal opportunity, learning effectiveness, participation, peer group, etc. play an equally crucial qualitative role (Preuss-Lausitz, 2006, p. 94). Nevertheless, there are massive differences in the understanding and implementation of inclusive school concepts in the international context. For example, Italy already changed its laws in the 1960s and pushed inclusion by dissolving psychiatric and special schools, and Scandinavian countries have pursued a clearly inclusive development in terms of school policy (Barth, 2008, p. 124 ff.).

Since this article focuses on inclusive (Waldorf) school practice, it was first necessary to establish that inclusion in schools is understood and implemented very diversely in the international context. Regarding Waldorf schools, we limit ourselves to foundational aspects of the educational concept, which is implemented very similarly in general Waldorf schools, anthroposophical curative schools, and also explicitly inclusive Waldorf schools worldwide (Göbel and Reinthal, 2019; Göbel, 2019a,b). Based on this, we explain the newly developed phenomenological and reflexive methodology of perception vignettes, which serve professionalization through understanding diagnostics and development of the educational attitude.

2 Inclusion and Waldorf school

The argumentation of many Waldorf schools that they are inclusive in terms of their basic idea and their traditional practical approaches is deceptive. What Rudolf Steiner was striving for in terms of an inclusive education we can only assume or deduce from his implications concerning anthroposophical curative education work (Steiner, 1924/1995). The integrative and inclusive potential of Waldorf schools has already been explored in two dissertations (Barth, 2008; Maschke, 2018). But which Waldorf school addresses the levels

of diversity relevant to contemporary social life and the challenges that are changing society?

Independent schools such as Waldorf schools *per se* imply a selection function: Who can afford this school? Who will be admitted? If performance selection dictates the content and formats, especially in the upper grades 9–13 with regard to the different central degrees (vocational, intermediate, Abitur), inclusion cannot be the basic concept. Thus, it is clear that even Waldorf schools are not entirely free with regard to the implementation of inclusive structures and practices (Booth and Ainscow, 2019). Nevertheless, they offer a space of possibility for an inclusive education (Barth, 2008), as teachers develop their fields of action according to the social requirements for an inclusive community (Barth, 2020).

To support such processes, the research center of the Federation of German Waldorf Schools (Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen) has published the brochure about Waldorf Education and Inclusion (Waldorfpädagogik und Inklusion) since 2018. It is placed by the editors in the overall context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Women's Rights Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "It is 'not a special right' for people with disabilities, but demands to enforce in their name what other people have long been granted by other human rights treaties" (Auschra and Eichholz, 2018, p. 5). A key difference between Waldorf schools and other independently run schools is that in most Waldorf schools, both parents and teachers share responsibility for the school (Koolmann and Petersen, 2018, p. 19) or organize and lead it in a self-governing way. Thus, it is only reasonable that they be joint stakeholders in the implementation of inclusive educational concerns.

The self-governing Waldorf school intended by Steiner offers the framework for implementing inclusion, enabling a participatory, open-minded education for children and adolescents in the 21st century which at the same time promotes individual developmental needs (Section 2.1). Behind the concept of the Waldorf school as an inclusive learning space for all children and adolescents whose parents desire it lie fundamental anthropological and educational principles (Section 2.2), which are explained below, taking into account present challenges (Section 2.3).

2.1 Waldorf education

The first Waldorf School in Stuttgart was opened in 1919 as an educational institution for the children of the workers at the Waldorf Astoria factory who wanted to be guided by Rudolf Steiner's popular educational ideas and visions of a fundamentally new school education (Steiner, 1919/2019, p. 29). Rudolf Steiner's lectures, which began directly with the founding of the first Waldorf school, attest to his desire to make possible and implement a general education for all children. In an essay about the pedagogical basis of the Waldorf School he emphasizes that "principles" are assumed "based on the demands of the present" (Steiner, 1919, p. 9). "The children are to be taught to be people and for a life that meets the requirements to which every person, regardless of which of the conventional classes of society they come from, can apply themself. What the practice of contemporary life demands of people, it must be reflected in the facilities of this school" (*ibid.*). The basic idea was to found a school for the needs of the time and under the given social conditions. These principles have to be reconceptualized for every Waldorf school, in

every place, in every environment, for every social community, culture and language, in accordance with the given conditions.

In the Waldorf School, the coeducation of girls and boys in age-appropriate class communities, which was not common at the beginning of the 20th century, was introduced from the very beginning. Documents and field reports from the founding period of the Waldorf school show that all children, regardless of aptitudes or impairments, were to remain at the school and that the teachers were expected to make the appropriate effort (Steiner, 1919/2019). Thus, Steiner advocated that teachers should "[n]ot so much have the idea that the children must achieve this or that, but ask themselves, what can the children achieve according to their psychological makeup? Work entirely from within the children! One can only get into the habit of this, respectively, if one has a genuine real endeavor to get to know the child in its different variations. Every child is interesting" (Steiner, 1920–1924/2019, Vol. 1, p. 156). The ideas of Waldorf school education, already put into practice from 1919, basically fulfill the four constitutive dimensions of inclusion: recognition, participation, anti-discrimination and educational justice (Moser and Egger, 2017, 26 ff.).

Explicitly, in the conferences recorded by the teachers at the first Waldorf school (Steiner, 1920–1924/2019), there is a wealth of reflections on challenges and difficulties in everyday educational life, for which Rudolf Steiner recommended relevant or, in today's understanding, inclusive solutions. For him, it was not an option to expel students from school, but rather to understand the particular situation of each child and to adjust educational action accordingly. Even though the term professional attitude was not part of the language used at that time, Steiner repeatedly points out the corresponding necessary self-development of every teacher in the conferences. A teacher should not let themself go and overcome the "pedantic" manner and the "philistine"—today we would say: one's own obstacles and presuppositions—through the work of the "higher self" (Steiner, 1923/2019, Vol. 3, p. 22, p. 55).

Only a few months after the opening of the Waldorf School, the teaching staff established a curative class on his instructions. This decision can certainly be understood as an expression of "general educational intentions" (Frielingsdorf et al., 2013, p. 61), which give the Waldorf School's "school experiment" an "integrative character" (*ibid.*, p. 65). For the time of the first lesson between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m., parallel to the regular lessons, about ten children from grades 1 to 6 were taught across grades by Karl Schubert, an upper school teacher whom Steiner, incidentally, considered the most capable of dealing with the individual needs of these pupils* (Steiner, 1920–1924/2019, vol. 2, p. 37). The children were thus individually supported in a small group during a certain period of the day. The rest of the day, however, they learned integrated into their class communities (Frielingsdorf et al., 2013, p. 65). Thus, in the history of Waldorf education, a deciphering of inclusion and the associated potential precursor developments of current inclusive educational understandings can be found, which are controversial (e.g., Feuser, 2021), but at the same time show the conceptual openness and possibilities at Waldorf schools.

2.2 Inclusive principles of Waldorf schools

Barth (2008) and Maschke (2009, 2018) have written their respective dissertation papers on the topic of integration and inclusion

and both come to a clear conclusion: if Waldorf schools remember their origins and create appropriate frameworks for this purpose, they have very good prerequisites to be exceptional integration schools—in today's understanding, inclusion schools (Barth, 2008). Wiehl (2015) shows in her dissertation that the elementary methods recommended by Rudolf Steiner are to be aligned with the respective developmental needs and tasks and that there is consequently an anthropologically based learning and teaching instead of a performance or result oriented methodology. Rawson (2021) sees Steiner's educational anthropology as grounding "generative principles" such as soul economy, block teaching, spirited instructional design. The scientific works mentioned are examples of how differentiated Waldorf education implements ideal-typical and at the same time individual approaches to educational action.

Following this and based on the educational work of Rudolf Steiner and the standards of integrative and inclusive teaching, the strengths and weaknesses of Waldorf education for an inclusive organizational concept and the implementation of inclusive teaching will be elaborated.

For decades, Waldorf schools have handed down content and methods that have proven themselves in practice. Guiding principle are often the ideas and dogmas passed on from teacher to teacher, either personally or today via websites. However, they cannot be the basis for a scientific work about the inclusive potential of Waldorf education. One can examine Steiner's educational work and how he worked with the teaching staff in the conferences (Steiner, 1920–1924/2019); what he actually said to the teachers, about their teaching, about the students or even about requirements to do justice to all children. Of course, it must be examined whether Steiner's ideas can be considered inclusive. Precisely because the term inclusion did not yet exist, we must come to an understanding about its meaning in principle and especially in Waldorf education. Since inclusion is a young field of work in Waldorf schools and work is done with very different knowledge of inclusive education and inclusive possibilities for action, there are few current findings about it. To this extent, in the following we take up seven specifically Waldorf educational themes as principles that can be used to demonstrate the intentions of inclusive Waldorf education for an inclusive school as a place for development and the unfolding of potential.

2.2.1 Image of man and development potential

Waldorf schools can be considered inclusion-sensitive schools in the sense mentioned above because their basic structures provide for factors. These initially create the basis for a school for all children without further measures, since the image of man within Waldorf education applies to the community as a social place of living and learning and to teaching as a support for human development. Among the important foundations developed in the educational conferences of Waldorf schools is Steiner's (1919/2021) anthropology of human being. It includes a consideration of the human being in his spiritual, mental and physical dimensions, which form a basis for a differentiated understanding of learning with mental, psychological and bodily activities. At the same time, different learning abilities dominate at each age level, unfolding from imitation, which characterizes childhood, to independent judgment and action (Wiehl, 2015, p. 168ff.). Curriculum content (Richter, 2019) and teaching methods (Wiehl, 2015) incorporate these aspects and are therefore to be designed for the respective developmental and learning needs.

2.2.2 Block, cyclical, and rhythmically structured teaching

As an innovation for school teaching, Rudolf Steiner suggested the block principle (Wiehl, 2015, p. 233 f.) by working on a topic daily for three to four weeks in the first two school hours. This allows teachers and children to connect to a topic or task through practice and reinforcement. Block teaching can initiate common tasks in the sense of Georg Feuser (1995) by working on the topics suggested in the Waldorf school curriculum (Richter, 2019, 2020) in a similar way as in reform educational project teaching.

Epoch and project lessons offer the opportunity to learn from experience and self-acquired knowledge, especially in adolescence (Wiehl, 2015, p. 233 f.). For example, a comprehensive topic, be it a literary work, a historical event, or a scientific problem, is worked on over a longer period of time under multidimensional aspects and with different teaching and learning methods. After an introduction by the teachers, the students first take note of the contents, document them and deepen their reflections on the topic in discussions, in order to express the insights gained in a subsequent self-responsible processing, be it practical, artistic or written. This teaching principle, which is to be applied cyclically and rhythmically, is based on the inversion of Aristotelian logic; instead of starting with concepts, the first step is to perceive and understand something, followed by critical engagement, which leads to the recognition of contexts and meanings and to the formation of concepts (*ibid.*, p. 193 f.).

This especially refers to the fact that it should always be assessed as an entire process, in relation to the subject matter and the student, and particularly for the didactic design of instruction, it considers internal differentiation and diverse design possibilities as necessary.

2.2.3 Curriculum and learning on the common subject

The curriculum content of Waldorf schools (Richter, 2019, 2020) has a cyclical structure so that topics can be revisited in different grades with new emphases and thus multigrade-learning can take place. However, the curriculum, which has been continuously developed for Waldorf schools based on Steiner's suggestions, is not a fixed one. Basically, there are suggestions for topics that are taken up according to age. The freedom of choice as well as the deeper penetration of the children's developmental age and learning needs are crucial for the teachers' lesson design (Wiehl, 2019). However, many things today need to be fundamentally rethought and reexamined (Steinwachs, 2019).

The curriculum of Waldorf schools thus offers an interesting opportunity, which is also listed as a necessity in the Index for (Index für Inklusion, German Version). Traditional curricula have been designed in subject-oriented ways. Tony Booth's and Mel Ainscow's call for an inclusive school system is to move away from this and to embrace a topic orientation within the curricula in line with the Sustainable Goals 2030 (UNESCO, n.d.). The Index for Inclusion calls for curricula to be restructured and implemented based on specific future-relevant and current topics (such as food, water, migration, etc. Booth and Ainscow, 2019, from p. 146ff.).

Particularly in dealing with the learning content, aspects surface that can be seen as cornerstones of inclusive Waldorf education: The curriculum suggestions (Richter, 2019, 2020) are cross-school form. They are grounded in general statements by Steiner for a Waldorf school curriculum (von Heydebrand, 2023) that applies to all children

regardless of their level of development and learning abilities. Thus, there is no specially designated curriculum for Waldorf special schools or anthroposophical curative schools. Everything is taught to all, the only question is how. In contrast, in the general school context (at least in Germany) there is a different curriculum for children with a so-called mental disability.

2.2.4 Understanding of achievement, individualization and differentiation

Waldorf schools are community schools, often with an affiliated kindergarten, so that children from the age of two up to the age of 18/19 can remain at one institution. They grow together over the years and are allowed to develop; there is no retention in a grade due to unmet performance. The student community stays together. Teachers do not give grades in the usual sense, but write meaningful development reports over the years. In the meantime, developmental discussions with parents and students (depending on age) have become common at the end of the school year in some Waldorf schools (Wiehl, 2021, p. 272 f.). As there is no assessment of performance by grades and no forced selection, the class community remains a social community throughout the twelve years of schooling.

This conceptual orientation of the Waldorf school also means that there are no transitional problems, which means that there is no need to change schools for secondary education—in most federal states in Germany, for example, this is already necessary after four years of primary school. At the same time, this concep is a great challenge to personalization, individualization and differentiation within the lessons. The envisaged freedom for teaching and instructional situations thus requires work within the team of teachers and in multiprofessional teams, all of which, however, draw on a explicit fundamental knowledge related to child development and learning as well as relational and resonance knowledge (Rosa and Endres, 2016; Rosa, 2018). The recognition of each child's starting point in learning and the resulting Waldorf educational approach across various levels—particularly through art, aesthetics, theater, craftsmanship, and movement—results in an educational, lifeworld-based promotion that takes place for all children according to their developmental needs (Barth, 2020).

To adequately educate all children, teachers at Waldorf schools require, in addition to knowledge of child development and child learning, appropriate forms of learning and documentation. The foundations for their instruction are practice-based research and reflection (Section 3).

2.2.5 All-day school and teamwork

Designing the Waldorf school as an all-day social and living space is a current challenge, as starting from 2026, all children in Germany will have the right to an all-day school place. There are already some proven concepts, such as Waldorf schools with vocational training (Hibernia School), which, beyond the traditional subject curriculum and the commonly offered school qualifications (intermediate certificates and high school diplomas or "Abitur"), integrate practical training from the 11th grade onwards. This differentiation allows young people to stay at one school location and within a class community longer than what most public schools typically offer. Crucial, as seen in newer concepts like the action-based educational Waldorf Schools, is not the expansion of the traditional subject curriculum but the realization of a rhythmic school day, along with

providing children with reliable educational care. In grades 1 to 8, ideally, they are taught daily in the first two school hours by a class teacher who is responsible for all class-related matters beyond instruction, including parent involvement, and monitoring the individual learning journey of each child. In grades 9 to 12/13 (up to high school graduation in Germany), subject teachers take on responsibilities for organizational and educational matters within the class. Thanks to the planned eight-year period of the class teacher and the four to five-year class supervision, there is personal continuity in guiding the children and adolescents. This so-called class teacher principle can also be viewed critically (Idel, 2007), but in the early days of Waldorf education it was already envisaged for teachers to support each other in their duties and possibly co-teach in teams (Steiner, 1920–1924/2019, Vols. 1–3).

2.2.6 Professionalization: attitude and self-development

A central concern of Waldorf education is the professionalization of teachers through self-development. In their studies, Randoll (2013) and Peters (2016) demonstrate how Waldorf teachers connect the competencies mentioned by Steiner with their professional success and resilience. The competencies of "imagination and creativity," "inner truthfulness," "social responsibility," "initiative," "positivity," "world interest (contemporaneity)," and "conscious handling of compromises" are supplemented by "the fundamental requirement of an educational attitude in which the educator should form a spiritual view of the 'becoming of the human being'" (Peters, 2016, p. 644). According to the respondents, "Waldorf-related competencies of 'initiative and self-responsibility' and 'imagination and enthusiasm' […] are related to professional achievement experience,' while 'subject expertise' exhibits similar links to resilience as the two competencies 'initiative and self-responsibility' and 'imagination and enthusiasm,' which may be somewhat surprising but certainly underscores the importance of subject expertise for Waldorf school teachers" (*ibid.*, p. 656). Contrary to expectations, "spiritual orientation shows only a weaker correlation" (*ibid.*).

These results are interesting in that we suggest ways to encourage self-development based on educational experiences with the methodology of perception vignettes outlined hereinafter. However, the methodology does not use a competency concept as a starting point but encourages the deciphering of individual potential abilities for attitude development through the practice of phenomenological perception, description, and reflection of phenomena (Section 3); the mentioned competencies are thus meant to be individually unfolded through educational practice.

2.2.7 Complex thinking and social responsibility

In his educational work, Steiner frequently refers to his "Philosophy of Freedom," first published in 1894 and later revised in 1918/2021 (Steiner, 1918/2021). In this work, alongside engaging with contemporary philosophies, Steiner provides a fundamental study of perception and thinking. It leads to "ethical individualism," which is based on intuitions derived from thinking itself and to be implemented in practical life through moral imagination and technique. Steiner envisions the development of such vibrant and life-oriented thinking for education (Wiehl, 2022), as it serves as a source of individual cognitive capability and social responsibility. Links can be found between those philosophers whose thoughts relate to contemporary

challenges (climate, migration, technologization) with this radical epistemological foundation. On one hand, it involves acknowledging risks (Dufourmantelle, 2019) and dealing with uncertainties (Morin, 2023), as: "One must learn to navigate through the archipelagoes of certainties in the ocean of uncertainties." ("Il faut apprendre à naviguer dans un océan d'incertitudes à travers des archipels de certitudes.") (*ibid.*, p. 16). On the other hand, it is about addressing fundamental human tasks through a life-oriented, "continental" (Glissant, 2013, p. 34), and complex-thinking approach (Morin, 1999, p. 39ff.) that comprehends complex relationships.

In 1999, social philosopher Edgar Morin (1999, 2001) published, on behalf of UNESCO, "Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future" (2001). They encompass recognizing errors and illusions, relevant knowledge of global issues, humanity, identity with the Earth, confronting uncertainties, mutual understanding, and an ethics of being human (*ibid.*). To acquire these insights in pedagogy, it does not require fixed curricula, performance-oriented didactics, and outcome-oriented assessments. Instead, it primarily requires the capacity for complex thinking (Morin, 2023)—a comprehensive and life-oriented thinking that can be the foundation and genesis of the seven principles of Waldorf education.

Waldorf education aims for individual and social education with the aspiration to enable holistic personal development for all students within a social community, while considering contemporary challenges (Beckel, 2022, p. 39). The central element of "inclusive practice in Waldorf schools" is anchored in a philosophy of human rights, as expressed in the concept of "Social Threefolding": The idea of freedom creates space for the realization of diverse ways of life, equality establishes the right of all to education and participation, and solidarity obliges consideration of the needs of others (Schmelzer, 2021, p. 361). The comprehensive Waldorf educational concept encompasses essential principles, by which an inclusive Waldorf concept is indeed feasible within the framework of inclusive education. It is primarily a question of shaping a Waldorf school concept with an inclusive character, where the fundamental foundation is in place (Barth, 2008). However, there are some challenges that can be identified.

2.3 Challenges for inclusive Waldorf schools

Waldorf education is frequently subject to critical examination (e.g., Barz and Randoll, 2007; Idel, 2007; Ullrich, 2015), and in doing so, crucial aspects for the implementation of inclusive Waldorf education become evident. Waldorf schools are not truly schools for everyone: In many countries around the world, they are privately funded schools, accessible only to families who can afford to pay school fees. In Germany, Waldorf schools predominantly cater to children from affluent or well-off backgrounds, often referred to as the "educated bourgeoisie" (Brater et al., 2007, pp. 243 f.). They have been and continue to be established in neighborhoods that do not explicitly reflect the diversity of society (Brater et al., 2007, pp. 244 f.). In Germany, Waldorf schools are required to be open to all children. Nevertheless, children with migration backgrounds and experiences, as well as those affected by illness and disability, are on average underrepresented at general Waldorf schools, primarily because their parents have no knowledge of this school form. However, there are

Waldorf schools worldwide that are explicitly established for children from economically disadvantaged or socially precarious backgrounds and are supported by the "Friends of Waldorf Education" (www.freunde-waldorf.de/en/; Göbel, 2019b). Behind this stands the idea of operating a Waldorf school for people in their respective environments if they wish to, regardless of their social status, religion, and culture.

Our focus here is primarily on German Waldorf schools. They too strive to create an inclusive environment and welcome all students, regardless of their social or cultural background (Adam and Schmelzer, 2019). With a holistic approach to education that goes beyond purely academic achievements and emphasizes the development of artistic, craft, and practical skills, which are firmly embedded in the curriculum, equal value is placed on nurturing the creative and emotional competencies of students. Children and adolescents are offered diverse developmental opportunities. This approach makes it possible to meet the societal challenge of individual support and integration of children from diverse social and cultural backgrounds (Schmelzer, 2019). However, the financial barrier remains, and there should be both an educational and political interest in engaging with the questions and topics of an alternative education outside the mainstream.

In Germany, there are still relatively few children with a migration background in Waldorf schools: Children and young people with migration backgrounds and from economically disadvantaged social backgrounds are underrepresented (Koolmann et al., 2018, pp. 57 ff.). The reason for this is not Waldorf education itself; rather, in the past, schools have made little effort to actively engage with children from families with limited educational backgrounds and a migrant background. Instead, they have silently accepted the fact that there are hardly any children with migration backgrounds in their student body, thereby risking imparting a perception of cultural homogeneity to the children that does not align with the reality of our diverse society (Brater et al., 2007, pp. 244 f.).

In particular, Feuser (2021) vehemently contradicts the idea that Waldorf education has an inclusive core. He asserts, "Even though it can be demonstrated that Steiner intended to create a general education for all children with the Waldorf school, practiced coeducation, and admitted children of various religious and social backgrounds, as well as those labeled as disabled, regardless of their financial status" (p. 384), the claim that the Waldorf school is an inclusive school is exaggerated. Feuser grounds this in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as the concept of inclusion contains a "societal, political, and legal dimension, which the Waldorf school, despite working in a subject-oriented manner through its educational concept and school organization, fundamentally cannot meet to this day" (Feuser 2021, p. 385). Feuser attributes this to a developmental concept of anthroposophy that thinks in stages and does not work according to today's developmental theories (*ibid.*). However, he acknowledges the Waldorf school for maintaining a structure beyond performance measurement, thus demonstrating possibilities for inclusive implementation (*ibid.*).

At this very point, we address the criticism and, based on the work with perception vignettes, develop a methodology relevant to school and education from the Waldorf educational perspective on children and adolescents. This endeavor indeed refers to Georg Feuser's critical perspective on inclusion in Waldorf schools and the handling of disabilities. He understands disability as a "process of societal and socio-cultural as well as normative construction and attribution

practices […] as a result of which a person is actively hindered in their life activities, the realization of their educational needs, and thus in their personal development" (Feuser 2021, p. 386 f.). Disability should be regarded as a "competence of a person […] in view of the individual and social conditions of their personal development […] and classified behaviors should not be considered as defective, deficient, deviant, abnormal, or pathological. They are expressions of the specific human way of appropriating themselves to people and the world and, consequently, developmentally logical" (*ibid.*). With these explanations, Feuser observes that despite his critical stance, it is the conditions that "through learning as a central function of self-organization and self-preservation, connect people with people and the world, and enable, support, endanger, or make their (survival) possible as an instinct-bound, minimally determined, and open system." In this sense, the processes are educationally organizable and shapeable. We have developed the perception vignettes precisely for this interface of cultivating a professional attitude as well as educational action in (the inclusive Waldorf) school.

3 What are perception vignettes?

Perception vignettes are a method that emerged within the context of general vignette research (Netzwerk Vignetten und Anekdotenforschung [VignA], n.d.) in collaboration with students. This method focuses on perceiving and observing with explicit appreciation when dealing with entrusted children and adolescents. Perception vignettes are based on the act of perceiving and observing the "thing itself" (Husserl, 2016) or its "givenness" (Marion, 2015). In the broadest sense, they are short phenomenological descriptions capturing an affecting moment. They are written in the present tense without assumptions, explanations, or judgments and serve to sensitize individuals to the unique events and potentials of the others.

Perceiving is seen as an open, empathetic, and unbiased engagement with all senses towards the emerging phenomenon(s). It moves from sensory perception to affecting sensations (Graumann, 1966; Reh, 2012; Brinkmann, 2017). Perception is triggered by wonder about "moments that exceed the boundaries of the ordinary toward the unexpected…" (Gess, 2019, p. 15). Afterward, perception transitions into increasingly focused attention, directing the gaze and evolving into deliberate observation. This process involves a conscious decision about the moment of observation or the scene that presents itself (Graumann, 1966; Reh, 2012; Brinkmann, 2017). Fundamental to this process is sensitivity, which trusts all sensory accesses, discovers phenomena, and allows for the extraordinary (Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 23). Perception vignettes are considered an aesthetic and educational-diagnostic medium that emerges through phenomenological exploration of being-in-the-world within a life or action field. They capture individual, affecting, and wonder-inducing moments (Gess, 2019). Something draws attention, brings something to light, and directs the focus towards others and otherness or what appears as foreign. Perception vignettes magnify special moments and condense them into language. This approach fundamentally promotes an open and respectful attitude towards special or even perplexing moments and requires appreciative participation. Perception vignettes are created in a phenomenological process. They always describe the perspective of the actors on the affecting moments. Sometimes, a

series of perception vignettes traces an experiential process that allows us to understand the change and development of an individual, group, or action field.

Perception vignettes arise from sensitive attention that must be practiced in the everyday educational field. Steiner's exercises for the "cultivation of thinking" (Steiner, 2009; Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 71ff.) are suitable for training perception, observation, and unbiased thinking. For the development of an attitude, particularly in dealing with challenging situations, the so-called supplementary exercises and the evening review are recommended (Steiner, 2019, 2022), which we also refer to as mindfulness exercises (Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 175). We have reworked these exercises for the phenomenological and reflective methodology of perception vignettes to create an accompanying empathetic experience openness.

3.1 Diagnostics as a "service"

When we take a closer look at these statements regarding Waldorf schools, we can in turn identify foundational principles for recognizing the initial state of children to implement an inclusion-sensitive education at these schools:

The transition from the family home to kindergarten and then to school can be shaped through the collaboration of parents, educators, and teachers, so that there are no disruptions for the children (Schilter, 2023). Many Waldorf kindergartens and schools have already developed concepts in the past for how the institutions can support each other, especially by accompanying children in their individual development and exchanging ideas. Observation of child development is crucial, especially at this young age. Even though non-standardized observation manuals are used by kindergartens and schools to conduct assessments of the developmental level at the beginning of school age (around 6 to 7 years in Germany), this provides a professionally important baseline for teachers to develop the teaching environment accordingly. Especially in the primary school classes, a curriculum oriented towards the sensory and motor development of children should take precedence, according to the children's development (Wiehl and Auer, 2019; Auer and Wiehl, 2021). Additional physical activities, such as those based on the work of Elfriede Hengstenberg, provide an inclusive physical education in school (Barth, 2021; Barth and Stein, 2021). In many Waldorf schools an individual child-environment analysis, the so-called "second-grade examination" according to McAllen (2020), is conducted. Understanding the individual starting points of child development and learning is crucial for a personalized teaching concept. Knowledge of how children access learning and develop is crucial for teachers to adapt their teaching preparation and choice of methods to individual children and the class community. The team of teachers, therapists, school doctors or school physicians, who ideally keep a close eye on the children in the first years, determines additional assistance. A format for individualized support is the so-called "extra lesson" according to Audrey McAllen, which has seen various international adaptations in recent years. With the concept of the "extra lesson," Audrey McAllen provided a way to understand early motor and neurological development and support children in their learning process with this approach (McAllen 2020, p. 9). It becomes evident that so-called diagnostic actions are always part of the educational day-to-day routine in the school context.

Diagnosis, understood in its original sense—diagnosis (diagnósis)—generally refers to a differentiating judgment and derives from the Greek word diá-gignóskein—to thoroughly recognize something. Since every person possesses a universe of characteristics, the claim to fully understand a personality is an excessive demand. Recognizing this is an important premise of inclusive education because only in this way can the future of learners remain open to diverse development possibilities (Zimpel, 2017, p. 41ff.).

In an inclusive sense, we could describe diagnostics as a "service" for all children: an instrument used to search for suitable educational offerings and presentations, along with adaptations of the setting for each individual child (Gebauer and Simon, 2012), "linked to a critical examination of institutions and concepts for their 'inclusion capability'" (Simon and Simon, 2013). This would be a crucial step because "experience shows that children and adolescents living and growing up under the conditions of (determining) diagnoses are often underestimated in their development possibilities. Competencies are frequently not recognized or acknowledged, or only insufficiently so. This not only leads to confusion but also to stress for those involved, which, in turn, negatively impacts the development of children and adolescents" (Ziemen, 2013, p. 23). Therefore, we need rules for the use of diagnostic categories in the inclusive field. Diagnostic findings must be perceived as provisional and revisable working hypotheses, as they always have limited applicability and only pertain to selected aspects of an individual. Teachers or the entire multi-professional team of an institution are obliged to combine their general background knowledge with their individual understanding of children and adolescents to avoid, or at least reduce, the "threat of stereotypes" through non-labeling open diagnostic models. In general, diagnostic perspectives should be oriented towards the individual within their ecosystemic environment, and the focus should be on intervention possibilities within the setting (Prengel, 2017, p. 23).

In the context of Waldorf education, diagnostics are individual-focused (Steiner, 1919/2021, 1920–1924/2019), and therapeutic diagnostics are offered to all students (Steiner, 1924/1995). The information gained about individual children or adolescents is considered a general foundation for educational planning and reflection as well as openness. They are designed from a multi-perspective standpoint as a co-constructive and dialogical process (Steiner, 1920–1924/2019; Barth, 2008; Gäch, 2008, 2013; Knoch, 2014; Wiechert, 2017) and require an appreciative attitude as a prerequisite (Göschel, 2008, 2014; Henke and Ruhrmann, 2017; Wiechert, 2017).

In general, the multi-professional team at the Waldorf school maintains regular communication with parents. Particularly following the respective series of examinations (second grade and possibly fourth and/or sixth grade examinations), a parent-teacher conference is scheduled. Parents can also be involved in pedagocical child conferences and be invited to annual development discussions to engage in a dialogue about learning processes and developmental assessments.

Teachers use team meetings, class conferences, and student conferences as opportunities to discuss individual children and the entire class, and to take appropriately modified measures. Cooperation and mutual consultation are the pillars parental involvement and cooperative work in interdisciplinary teams within Waldorf education. Networking with in-school and out-of-school support systems is the basis for the diverse resources that children need for their development. Ideally, support, assistance, and help emerge when a school doctor works within the team, and the possibilities for supporting children are diverse. These may include activities such as physical education, art, crafts, Hengstenberg work, eurythmy, music therapy, speech formation, social education intervention, and interest-based after-school groups.

"Human perception is not a solitary relationship of a subject to its world. It always contains the potential presence and possible perspectives of others" (Fuchs, 2020, p. 160). Perceiving as the starting point for developing an educational attitude has become an important topic for us in terms of Waldorf educational professionalization. How do students learn or retain a sense of wonder? How can they also allow for moments of perplexity without hastily categorizing? The appreciative gaze within education must be learned in order to allow for the existence of secrets and mysteries that are not always solvable or guessable: "And yet it is precisely what one wants to grasp in a person, their secret. One would like to get hold of what always remains elusive. And this for two reasons: firstly, precisely because, by its very nature, it is not graspable, and secondly, because it is the core inseparable from a person's development, their inner drive. Everything secret is becoming. Secret remains what conceals itself" (Dufourmantelle, 2021, p. 27).

In recent years, we have worked with perception vignettes in various courses and initiated projects and experiments. Perception vignettes and the reflective approach associated with them have become the foundation of our training, especially for developing a critical diagnostic and reflective capacity in students of (curative) education. "What a person sees depends not only on what they are looking at but also on what their visual-conceptual experience has taught them to see" (Kuhn, 2020, p 125). In other words, I only see what I know, have contemplated, or reflected upon. In this regard, we aim to introduce the writing of perception vignettes and the three-phase reflection process.

3.2 Writing perception vignettes

Writing perception vignettes is rarely accomplished *in situ*, primarily because it would alter the situation and interaction with a person. It is not the "participatory observation" applied in ethnographic social research (Brinkmann, 2015, p. 531). Within educational phenomenology, insights are gained through "observational participation" or "participatory experience" (*ibid.*). Typically, only notes are taken at the scene, or the scene is mentally retained for later recall. This process follows a course that corresponds to the four phases of creativity, as per the methodological framework provided by Wallas (1926/2014):

> "1. Preparation for writing a perception vignette: empathetically engaging with a child/person/group.
> 2. Incubation or insight: letting go of and forgetting the impressions.
> 3. Insight: remembering the perceived and observed moment.
> 4. Processing: writing the perception vignette and exchanging and reflecting in a seminar or a group" (Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 127).

The crucial aspect is that a remembered event is described as accurately as possible. Then, in its written form, it is perceived, read,

much like the original phenomenon, and subsequently reflected upon inquisitively.

3.3 The three phases of reflection

In our seminar work with students or participants in professional development, we have transitioned to reflecting on existing perception vignettes in three phases. Reflection is considered an aspect of action and execution for attitude (Christof et al., 2020, p. 55) and is seen as a key to professionalization (Kahlau, 2023, p. 51). The exploration of the topic of reflection reveals that there is no unanimous understanding of it and, above all, it is not clear how the transfer of theoretical knowledge into practical action can be achieved in such a way that the intended connections of knowledge profoundly inspire professional attitudes and lead to creative action (Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 177ff.). The three-phase reflection process we have developed, also referred to as a reflection spiral, essentially encompasses three levels of insight: initially, it involves uncovering or raising awareness of the content or statement in a perception vignette through spontaneous reflection; in a second, discipline-specific reflection, connections and references to anthropological, developmental, and other knowledge are established. Finally, in a third phase, one becomes conscious of their own attitudes and modes of action. This primarily attitude-sensitive and action-oriented reflection is intended to lead to the formation of concepts for an expanded, complex understanding of the individual(s) (Wiehl and Barth, 2021, p. 200). The development of an attitude can result from the use of phenomenological approaches and co-engagement in the context of further education and training for educators; it "can (and should) lead to increased mindfulness towards oneself and the recipients of educational action" (Brinkmann et al., 2017, p. 9).

3.4 The reflection spiral in practice

A Fly

You sit beside me, and the class teacher is explaining something about fractions. A fly is buzzing in front of you as we all work on math together. You very carefully and skillfully take out your eyeglass case. Slowly, you open it, your eyes following the fly the whole time, attempting to catch it with the case. Then, you snap it up. You tilt your head thoughtfully toward the case and open it gently. The fly is perched on your eyeglass cloth, which you delicately hold with your fingers, carefully take out, and place on the table. The little creature is still on it. You are completely absorbed, staring at the fly, and watching it for a while as it flies away. I wonder what's going on in your mind. Do not you hear how loud it is in the classroom? You are in your own world. (Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 107)

Students first read the perception vignette and write an initial spontaneous reflection on what is revealed to them in this text and how they read, interpret, or empathetically understand the situation. Subsequently, they discuss it with each other. A situation like catching a fly might be read as an example of a child's inattentive behavior, even though they are intensely focused on an activity other than math. Students consider the impact such lapses in attention to instruction

and the concentration on extracurricular activities might have on them.

In the second phase of the reflection process, students are presented with various academic texts offering diverse perspectives and knowledge transfer. In this case, the selection covers a wide range, including attention deficits and their effects, medical knowledge on the subject, challenging behavior in the classroom, and a philosophical text on attention. Students read these different texts and subsequently write another reflection related to the perception vignette. In an ensuing discussion phase, they openly present their different, sometimes new perspectives and engage in exchange.

In the third reflection phase, students deliberate this new perspective on the situation, which may either entail a change or confirmation of their initial interpretation. This phase encourages self-reflection and self-development in their (curative) educational professionalization. The focus here is on evaluating their own three-fold reflection process.

The striking aspect of this methodology is that it helps recognize and understand the uniqueness of an individual and appreciates the observed moments. Shared experiences and collaborative learning foster a professional, inclusive, and prejudice-conscious attitude development. Through the collective conversation, ideas for educational actions and support options emerge. The reflections of the students in this third and final phase often convey touching realizations: "If from the beginning, we saw distinctiveness as an asset, and if every institution was designed, built, and conceptualized in such a way that each child always had the opportunity for a variety of working, moving, and leisure options, fewer emotions would be pent up, and fewer boundaries would be imposed. As a result, a balanced overall situation would prevail." Students also describe the new perspectives that are revealed through the academic texts. Their view is inverted, broadened, and they perceive not only the one student catching a fly or the individual teacher, but also the environment, the world around them. The reflections reveal numerous possibilities and reasons for unusual or conspicuous behaviors, but the complete truth is impossible to fathom. We always see only a partial aspect, but that can reveal something essential: the child inattentive during math class actually possesses a remarkable level of attentiveness and a nimble responsiveness, allowing them to catch a fly without harming it.

Working with perception vignettes is perceived by students as a highly rewarding and generous tool for sensitizing themselves to educational experiences by putting themselves in the shoes of the observed. Students reflect that each person employs different mechanisms to interact with what is presented in a perception vignette. What's intriguing is that young individuals find very diverse solutions to educational issues and, in conversations about their reflections, they notice how differently they see, interpret, and react. For instance, one student expresses, "My perception has changed through this process. I became aware that every child learns differently and must be addressed and stimulated differently. The world is rarely as it first appears. I was reminded not to judge too hastily and to consider as many dimensions as possible." (Barth and Wiehl, 2023, p. 230).

What students learn in their work with and through perception vignettes is an increased sensitivity to the singular and distinctive. They are encouraged to think in a layered and multi-perspective manner, and they realize that effective and development-supporting education always requires fundamental insights into the individuals:

"The theory of professional action teaches us that we should alternate multiple perspectives if we want to understand children" (Prengel, 2003, p. 36). Regarding diagnostics, questions arise as to whether categorizations of children's behaviors are always necessary, or if it's also about initially connecting knowledge, wanting to understand and recognize the children, and whether these texts serve to "retrace the learning experiences of children as protocols of shared experience" (Peterlini, 2018, no page). Because they can "be a way to perceive phenomena of inclusion and exclusion and reflect on their multiplicity in terms of didactic, educational, and normative consequences. Precisely because everyone is different, observing and listening to how this diversity manifests itself with the instrument of the vignette is a way to reflect on educational action in relation to an inclusive school not with a predetermined goal, but with an open-ended approach." (*ibid.*)

4 Future visions for inclusive Waldorf schools

With the methodology of perception vignettes, we aim to demonstrate that training formats of education require concepts, content, and methods for a complex and diverse approach to educational tasks. For educators to "engage with diversity that does not fit into normative conceptions of normality, a paradigm shift is required, especially in the context of learning—it is not deviations in learning behavior that should conform to normative conceptions of normality, but rather, the conceptions of normality must expand to accommodate the existing reality in its expression and form." (Peterlini, 2018, no page).

If Waldorf schools fundamentally embraced an inclusive conceptualization, reevaluated their traditional forms in some areas, and above all, integrated anthroposophic special needs and curative schools, evolving into a new form of school, then the methodology of perception vignettes would become a building block for fostering an appreciative awareness of diversity competency (Barth and Gloystein, 2020, 2021) in the training of the next generation of Waldorf educators who think inclusively in a general sense.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

UB: Writing – original draft. AW: Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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