

# Teaching, a Praxis of Intersubjectivity

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper suggests a research approach to the praxis of teaching in which epistemological stances as well as methodological research design place themselves close to the teacher's pedagogical doings in the classroom. The research project, also an ongoing PhD project, rests upon an assumption that the pedagogical legacy of Rudolf Steiner is to be found today in the teaching ethics behind norms and values voiced in the teacher's daily praxis. The paper will look at the success of Waldorf education, its long-term persistence and recent years' international expansion as the "history-making" of pedagogical doings (Kemmis, 2010). The assumption is that it is a culture of educational praxis of interactive pedagogical ethics that ensures the relevance of Waldorf education today. This history and culture of educational practice are summoned in the "mythology" of good pedagogical praxis. The research design is drawn on principles from the tradition of Stimulated Recall Interviews. The research focus is on the participating teachers' understanding of the principles behind micro-decisions and teacher-pupil interactions. Preliminary results indicate teaching praxis as creating and renegotiating pedagogical values and beliefs creating the professional myths of good pedagogy.

*Keywords:* Teaching praxis, educational values, micro-decisions, pedagogical myths, Stimulated Recall Interviews.

## Introduction

This presentation will elaborate a suggestion for understanding the developmental principles and impetus behind the duration, long-time survival and success of Waldorf education in the world. In this paper I will argue that in order to understand the teaching culture of Waldorf pedagogy as it appears today, the good results reported, the good name it represents and expansion in recent years we have to look into the educational praxis of Waldorf schools rather than understand its teaching as applied theory or even as practicing the pedagogical instructions given by Rudolf Steiner. This approach entails consequences for research methodologies and opens up noteworthy possibilities for studies of classroom interaction.

This paper is also an excerpt from an ongoing PhD project carried out at Åbo Academy University in Finland. The ideas behind the research project rest upon an assumption that the pedagogical objectives and thoughts that stem from Rudolf Steiner have persisted until today and been transmitted mainly through a culture of teaching praxis traditions within the community of Waldorf schools. Waldorf education today is one of the most viable branches of the educational reform movement from the beginning of twentieth century (Ullrich, 1994). Its teaching praxis traditions have persisted and remained viable and have proven themselves to be relevant in different cultures and countries all over the world.

This shift towards praxis is also a shift from seeing education and pedagogy as conceptual systems and teaching as applied pedagogical knowledge and theories. Instead, focus is on the individual teacher and the interactivity that occurs between teacher, pupil and class. This interactivity consists of a huge number of micro-decisions, standpoints and attitudes that the teacher carries out or takes from his or her personal professional knowledge. This perspective also entails a view regarding the teacher's professional knowledge not as individual properties of "knowledge 'in the heads' of the individual practitioner" (Kemmis, 2005, p. 1), but as knowledge that belongs to and is situated within a pedagogical culture of Waldorf teachers and schools. The praxis view also takes a standpoint against the idea that a teacher's professional knowledge is constructed from a set of competencies that are definable, separately trainable and externally verifiable.

A shift towards praxis opens for a more detailed kind of research regarding the teacher's professional knowledge and how it is shaped and performed in the classroom. The praxis perspective implies that the teacher's pedagogical beliefs, norms and values shape and are shaped through pupil-teacher interactions, influencing the immense number of micro-decisions that produce a classroom culture and build the teacher's professional knowledge.

## Behind the Success of Waldorf Education

Waldorf schools have established themselves in many places in the world alongside mainstream education as a notable alternative to the growing culture of competitive performance thinking and testing in schools. In Ullrich (2008), Dahlin (2007) and Barz & Randoll (2007), the teacher-pupil relations and interaction as well as the school community's values and norms that embrace teacher, pupils and parents are emphasized as the root of its success. Also, the holistic approach to teaching and knowledge, containing aesthetics and moral dimensions as well as a broad and classical "Bildung tradition" is emphasized in some reports as an explanation for its successfulness over time, its persistence and its expansion (Ullrich, 1994; Woods, Martin, & Woods, 2005).

A growing number of research projects done in recent years also tell us that pupils in Waldorf schools seem to value and appreciate their teaching to a larger extent than in the compared mainstream schools. We can likewise see that pupils in Waldorf schools generally have better relationships with their teachers than in the compared mainstream schools. It also appears that the development of democratic values among Waldorf pupils is more in depth and it is likely that, to a comparably larger extent, they encompass humanistic as well as ethical views on human beings, nature and society (Barz & Randoll, 2007; Dahlin, Liljeröth, & Nobel, 2006; Ullrich, 1994; Woods, Martin, & Woods, 2005).

The recent decades' expansion and increasing number of Waldorf schools that have been established in Africa, the Middle East and Asia also indicate that Waldorf education, one hundred years after its inauguration, seems to still meet current societal needs, have relevance, and have a startling ability to adapt and adjust itself to different cultures all over the world. The rationale behind this later expansion somehow contradicts the conclusion in some educational studies that the success of Waldorf education is related to its ability to exercise selective attraction towards well-educated, middle-class families. In the case of the recent decades' expansion outside the Europe, USA and Oceania, it seems to be a deep human ethos that inspires Waldorf teachers to create an inclusive and therapeutic pedagogy as well as to include local traditions in an educational approach to teaching in areas of the world which have been less touched by advantages resulting from knowledge, culture and meaningful everyday life. A vast number of these school initiatives have been brought about through close collaboration with and financial support from different UN agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF and UNHCR. The organization "Die Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners" founded 1971 is an important actor in these collaborations. The quotation below expresses how the characters of these school projects are experienced:

The educational projects it carries out as regards open education and in disadvantaged environments are regarded as important in the current world context. Its actions and cooperation correspond to the orientations of UNESCO's next Medium-Term Strategy (UNESCO, 2001).

This success of Waldorf schools and its resilience over time also raise a question that could simply be expressed as: *What is it that Waldorf teachers do in their teaching that brings about these successful results?*

The crucial word in this question is “do”. The word “do” points to a notion that the differences with mainstream education are made through the Waldorf teacher’s teaching practice, i.e., in what the Waldorf teacher does in in their classroom.

### **Professional Praxis -Pedagogical “History-making-ness”**

The idea of comprehending the knowledge that informs human acting as emerging from sources different from the human thinking has a long history. Its philosophical traditions can be traced back to Aristotle’s three categories of knowledge: *episteme* (theoretical knowledge), *techne* (technical knowledge) and *phronesis* (knowledge of praxis) (Nilsson, 2009). From the early twentieth century, critique emerged regarding the positivistic supremacy of a rational, language-based, conceptual view of knowledge (Johannessen, 1999). From out of this critique came a number of rather disparate concepts such as “tacit knowledge” (Janik, 1996; Johannessen, 1999; Molander, 1996; Polany, 2009), “personal knowledge” (Molander, 1996; Polanyi, 1962) and “professional knowledge” (Dormer, 1994; Janik, 1996; Schön, 1987). These concepts are overlapping, complementing and sometimes contradicting each other (Rolf, 1991).

Kemmis (2005; 2010) describes this shift and emphasizes the difficulties that this change in conditions approaching praxis entails. Praxis knowledge is not organized in a generalized system of concepts and hierarchies but is instead contextualized in a milieu and settings as well as in specific social structures surrounding practice. Human cognition tends to make praxis into “objects of our thoughts”, leading to a detachment from the actual doings into “discourse about it.”

Janik (1996) also argues in line with Kemmis that every attempt to articulate a theory of praxis that could be understood separately from and independently of its conduct risks being meaningless or even absurd (p. 21).

This view of praxis knowledge as closely linked with individual professional conduct has been articulated strongly by Michel Polany in his books “Personal Knowledge” (1958) and “The Tacit Dimension” (1966). Polany’s statement that “we recognize that we believe more than we can prove, and know more than we can say” (Polany, 2009) opens up for an alternative aspect of praxis knowledge and even for science to be understood as a purely rational, formal, logical and mainly language-based discipline. Tacit knowledge, according to Polanyi, is a “subsidiary awareness of particulars” (Polany, 1962), which also points beyond an accumulated, generalized and discursive comprehension of professional acting. This view of professional praxis and the nature of praxis knowledge is then later further developed by Dormer (1994), Molander (1996), Janik (1996) and Kemmis (2010). Kemmis (2005) maintains that the traditions of tacit knowledge and professional knowledge have developed as a merging side stream to the dominant rationalistic view of educational research.

Kemmis (2010) makes the case for a praxis approach in educational research in which the rationale behind teaching praxis should be understood as inherent within professional collective conduct and as ongoing history-making. Kemmis sees the praxis perspective of education as an inside perspective rather than as a researchable phenomenon looked upon from the outside. From this perspective it is our deeds, our doings, that create history and constitute professional “knowing-doing” (ibid):

While some forms of educational research, and practice traditions of educational research, aim to grasp educational practice as a phenomenon, from the standpoint of the outside observer, what they grasp instead is an object constructed by external theory and methodology. Those forms of educational research do not grasp the ‘happeningness’ and the ‘history-making-ness’ of individual or collective praxis from within (Kemmis, 2010, p. 25).

Janik (1996) as well as Molander (1996) suggest that professional collective praxis should be understood from “its internal good” or its “inherent ethical-in-doing”. A professional praxis tradition therefore carries within itself examples, stories, and myths constituting the profession’s “good conduct”.

## The mythologization of practical knowledge

Views on professional praxis from Molander (1996) and Janik (1996) suggest that praxis in itself carries norms, traditions and values concerning the attentiveness and sense of implicit virtues of professional action. Molander (1996) uses the concepts of “myths” and “mythological” for this kind of knowledge in order to contradict the rational view of knowledge, which is there described as de-mythologized or enlightened. Molander (1996) and Janik (1996) instead argue for an apprehension of “the implicit good” that is inherent within every professional action in its field of profession. In every purposeful interaction and doing, there is a possibility of accomplishing the right, the ethical and the good (Molander, 1996). This implies that within teaching itself, implicit in the doing of teaching, the knowledge and ethics of the teaching profession are to be found. Janik (1996) delineates this type of practical knowing as a “mythology” and therefore it is conveyed through anecdotes and stories (p. 46). Shulman also (2004) uses the concept of “myth” to summarize the nature of the collective accumulated professional knowledge of teachers:

Those myths, I would argue, or their case equivalents, - pedagogical parables - would be equally important in the socialization of teachers into their general professional obligations as well as into the special ethos of particular schools or districts as organisations (Shulman, 2004, p. 208f).

For Shulman, as well as for Molander, Dormer and Janik, criteria for discerning and distinguishing good praxis from bad, examples of good conduct from that which is avoidable, are created through interpreting conduct in relation to professional myths. Tacit knowledge, as pointed out earlier, strongly rejects external validation (Polany, 2009). Corrections of practice are instead induced from repeated action and reflection (Dormer, 1994; Schön, 1987). Practical professional knowledge is conveyed from master to new members of the community of professionals through examples rather than generalized concepts (Dormer, 1994, Janik, 1996). From the good example, the professional myths consolidate good performance in praxis.

## Teachers’ ethics, values and beliefs

The framework for interpreting and reviewing good examples, maintaining the myths of good praxis, is done through an informal framework of values, beliefs and ethics. Molander (1996) and Buehl & Fives (2009) argue that doing good praxis is for the practitioner to adhere to internal ethics in the profession. The use of the concept of “teacher beliefs” as a rationale for teachers teaching has been established in educational research since the 1980s (Fives & Buehl, 2012):

...to establish a clear psychological construct, beliefs, that could serve as an explanatory and predictive mechanism for explaining differences in teachers’ practices (Fives & Buehl, 2012, p. 471).

The beliefs and professional ethics, it is argued, are understood as implicit in the making of minor decisions, in the intunement of human interaction in the classroom and in striving for professional virtue and excellence. This view of teaching praxis, as professional or personal knowledge, is not driven by rational or theoretical considerations, but instead by collective and personal beliefs and shared norms and values within the community of teachers.

Korthagen (2004) suggests that this framework of professional ethics, values and beliefs is also constituted by and constitutes the individual teacher’s “mission”. Korthagen describes this level of mission as the inner core of the teacher’s individual commitment or as the “spiritual level”:

We will refer to it as the level of mission in that, according to various authors, this level is concerned with such highly personal questions as to what end the teacher wants to do his or her work, or even what he or she sees as his or her personal calling in the world (Korthagen, 2004, p. 85).

This indicates that the correspondence between Waldorf ideas, its educational principles and its teaching praxis is not a linear and fully rational link. Instead it runs through the complex web of norms, values and beliefs created and maintained in the myths constituting the tradition of Waldorf teaching praxis. The theoretical framework of Waldorf education, such as the spiritual anthropology outlined in “The Foundations of Human Experience”, (GA 293) is from this perspective not seen as providing the teacher

with pedagogical instructions or explanations. Instead the content in the pedagogical legacy of Rudolf Steiner is here understood as providing an inner structure to the teacher's professional myths, beliefs and values that guide the individual teacher in micro decision-making, in the classroom interaction of everyday teaching.

## Exploring the Doing-ness of Teaching

Thus far in this paper we have argued that the teacher's praxis knowledge cannot be apprehended through discursive inquiries employing onlooking methodologies. Is, then, from what has been said here, the tacit and personal knowledge of teaching out of reach for the researcher? Janik (1996) suggests a close-to-profession and participatory approach and methodology for these kinds of inquiries (in contrast to "onlooking"). The principle that the research conducted should first of all be relevant for the participating practitioner is then fundamental. Janik suggests a research approach called "*The Hermeneutics of Collective Reflection*" (p. 33) which aligns with these principles. The praxis researcher's aim and purpose can therefore not be strictly analytical. The main object of researching praxis, from this view, is not to extract theories but to facilitate a qualitative deepening of praxis knowledge among the practitioners (ibid).

Among educational researchers today, acknowledging that teachers' beliefs, norms and values play a key role in teaching is widespread (Buehl & Fives, 2009). Research into the nature of these professional aspects also shows that they are unlikely to change from information, efforts to implement steering document or rational deliberations. Instead, they are shaped by and developed through informal means such as personal teaching experiences and through discussions among practicing teachers (ibid).

Schön's *Reflective Practitioner* from 1983 became a starting point for more systematic research concerning professionals "thinking in action. The principle of professional and collective reflections as means for developing professional praxis has increased tremendously since. Schön's (1983) two concepts "thinking on action" and "thinking in action" also emphasize professional reflection accentuating the understanding of the values, personal knowledge and beliefs that are engaged in performing professional actions.

## Approaching Teachers' Norms and Values in Stimulated Recall Interviews

The empirical material used in this research project was gathered through filming a group of four experienced Waldorf teachers reflecting on their own teaching practice from filmed lessons. In each reflection session, selected short video sequences are dealt with in which the interaction between teacher and class or pupil takes unexpected or problematic turns. The rationale for this selection is that in these situations - that is, in the teacher's pedagogical interactions - the teacher's beliefs, norms and values are likely to come to expression (Meijer, Verloop, & Beijaard, 2001; Nespors, 1985). Viewing these situations and discussing them together in the group of teachers, the intention is to reveal and make explicit their ethical deliberations as well as the underlying values that constitute the teacher's pedagogical praxis knowledge (Buehl & Fives, 2009; Nespors, 1985; Theobald, 2008; Rowe, 2009). The research design is aligned with the routines and set up in the research tradition of Stimulated Recall Interviews (SRI) (Dempsey, 2010; Haglund, 2003; Reitano, 2006; Rowe, 2009). The research project encompasses seven SRI sessions carried out over a period of eight months. The filmed sessions are transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

The analysis process focuses on short sequences in the teachers' dialogue in which elements of significance are the dialogue's smallest blocks. Analysis strategies are built on "concentration of meaning" (Bryman, 2008) and thematic structures of "sub-discourses" of the research question that are "internally bound together by a coherent topical trajectory and/or a common activity" (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009, p. 800).

The analysis and discussion is then carried out within three different thematic perspectives. These perspectives are enunciated through abduktive reading and reasoning of selected works from Rudolf Steiner's educational lectures and transcripts from the SRI sessions. Those tentative themes are: the teacher as an authority representing knowledge; the teacher's understanding of the pupil's uniqueness and individual response; and the teacher's view on learning as a means for individualization, emancipation and freedom.

Tentative results indicate that the participating teachers' praxis knowledge is constituted through countless decision-in-action made in every lesson. The teachers' beliefs, values and personal ethics and mission underpin the judgmental capacity in these pedagogical interactions. The analyses also suggest that the teachers' acting and decision-making are not solely informed or controlled by a set of norms, beliefs and values. Teaching activity, pedagogical interactivity, instead *creates* educational and human values and educational interactive ethics.

## Conclusion

In sum, I suggest that viewing Waldorf education as a (soon) one-hundred-year-old continuous educational praxis can elucidate how original pedagogical intention has developed, deepened and re-contextualized itself throughout its history of pedagogical praxis. In this view, in Waldorf school classrooms all over the world, the pedagogical visions, principles and ideas have from their beginning in 1919 been subject to continuous renegotiation in terms of their culture, norms, values and ethics: The making of teacher's professional teaching knowledge. The profession of teaching is then regarded as a living culture, a praxis of human interaction in which renegotiation of interaction, interrelations, ethics, human values and beliefs creates professional knowledge and history of pedagogical practice. This renegotiation is done through the history of innumerable individual teachers in their intersubjective teaching practice; in tacit intuitive pedagogical actions; in the countless interactive micro- decisions that are made every day; in the doing of pedagogy; and in the creating of pedagogical history and its living, viable myths of good teaching praxis.

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