

## The case for illuminative practitioner research in Steiner Education

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**ABSTRACT.** This theoretical paper explores the possibilities of using illuminative practitioner research in Steiner/Waldorf pedagogy. Waldorf schools' claim to autonomy rests on the assumption that the school leadership bases its accountability for the quality of the education on evaluation, reflective practices and systematic inquiry. In particular, the pedagogy should be based on on-going reflection in and on practice using Steiner's foundational theory. There is some evidence that this activity is relatively weak in many schools due to the fact that many teachers feel inadequately prepared for conducting reliable practitioner research using Waldorf theory. Furthermore, academic research into Waldorf pedagogy generally does not use Waldorf theory, which it considers unscientific. It is argued that research in education is most coherent and valid when the epistemology, theoretical perspective and methods align within the research design. That means teachers need a research method is needed that aligns with an anthroposophical perspective. It is suggested here that illuminative practitioner research using a Gadamerian or human scientific (van Manen) hermeneutic and phenomenological approach, can be used with Waldorf theoretical perspectives and contemplative methods to provide a scientifically valid way of researching Waldorf practice. This would need to be introduced in initial Waldorf teacher education and supported by researchers at a regional level.

*Keywords:* Illuminative practitioner research, research in Steiner education

**ABSTRAKT.** Dieser theoretische Aufsatz untersucht die Perspektiven für eine verstehende Praxisforschung (illuminative practitioner research, abgekürzt als IPR) in der Waldorfpädagogik. Der Autonomieanspruch der Waldorfschulen basiert auf der Reflexion und Erforschung der pädagogischen Praxis mit Hilfe der geisteswissenschaftlichen Anthropologie (Menschenkunde nach Rudolf Steiner). Diese Aktivitäten sind aber in Schulen oft schwach vertreten. Viele Lehrkräfte fühlen sich zu wenig vorbereitet für diese Arbeit. Die Erziehungswissenschaft hält die anthroposophische Menschenkunde für unwissenschaftlich. Pädagogische Forschung ist um so kohärenter und gültiger, je mehr die erkenntnistheoretische Basis, die theoretischen Perspektiven und die Forschungsmethodik im Forschungskonzept übereinstimmen. Das bedeutet im Waldorfkontext, Lehrkräfte brauchen eine gültige Forschungsmethodik, die mit anthroposophischen Perspektiven kompatibel ist. Es wird hier vorgeschlagen, dass IPR diese Aufgabe erfüllen könnte. IPR hat einen hermeneutischen und phänomenologischen Ansatz (z.B. nach Gadamer und van Manen) und kann die Menschenkunde berücksichtigen und kontemplativen Methoden einbeziehen. Diese Forschungsmethode müsste in der Lehrerbildung angelegt werden und durch ausgebildete Forscher regional unterstützt werden.

## Introduction

It is my view that after almost 100 years of Steiner/Waldorf pedagogy there are grounds to celebrate the considerable achievements of the Waldorf movement. In this article I use the terms *Steiner pedagogy or education* practiced by *Waldorf* teachers in *Waldorf* schools using a *Waldorf* curriculum. This choice of terms distinguishes between the foundational theory created by Rudolf Steiner and its application in certain types of school. Such an anniversary, however, also provides the opportunity to review current practice and reflect on areas of that could be better in terms of the movement's own expectations. One of the fields that remains distinctly under-developed is systematic and founded practitioner research that uses Steiner's *foundational pedagogical theory*, or what in German is called *Menschenkunde*. Rawson (2014) makes the case that the Waldorf school model explicitly depends on collegial reflection and research of practice to develop the pedagogy including curriculum and to support its claim to school autonomy (Götte, 2006). What little evidence there is (Rawson, 2014), suggests that many Waldorf teachers feel ill-equipped to research their practice whilst recognising how important this is. Dahlin (Dahlin, 2017) suggests that until recently there have been very few people within the Waldorf movement "with a proficient research competence in the field of educational science" (2017, p. 6). In this paper I outline a possible approach for Waldorf practitioners seeking ways of researching Waldorf practice in systematic and scientifically valid ways.

The aim in this paper and a subsequent paper is to ground and warrant a method of illuminative practitioner research that is scientifically valid, uses Waldorf theory and enables Waldorf teachers to effectively reflect on and modify their practice. Practitioner research has a commitment to systematic questioning of one's own teaching as professional development, pupil's learning and development, questioning the explicit and 'hidden' curriculum and developing curriculum (Stenhouse 1975, 1984). The assumption being made is that it strengthens the validity of the research when the epistemology, methodology and theoretical stance align. For the purposes of developing Waldorf pedagogy, it would therefore be meaningful, if these research assumptions aligned with Steiner's foundational pedagogical theory (*Menschenkunde*). This is currently not the case with most research on Steiner education. The point of grounding such a method is that in future practitioners can use this method without having to fully argue and justify the method. They can refer to an article such as this and the academic discourse that is prompted by it. This has so far been lacking in research in Steiner education. This paper outlines the context and need for such an approach and makes the case for a *Waldorf* illuminative practitioner research using contemplative practices and Steiner's foundational theory. A second paper outlines an epistemology for such research practice.

## Looking back and looking forward

The Waldorf movement has achieved a great deal, as the publicity material surrounding the Waldorf 100 celebrations makes clear. The central question is whether current practice is still adequate for its pedagogical purpose or whether some consistent process of renewal is accompanying this. I use the term *practice* to refer to what teachers do, how they do it and why they do it and thus take the view that there is no meaningful practice without theory. The source of Waldorf practice is Steiner's anthroposophical pedagogy, which claims to be of universal validity. Whether that claim is justified or not is not my concern here. What clearly is not universal and fixed for all time, is the implementation of these pedagogical ideas in local, culturally situated practice. The conditions that pertained in 1919 in Stuttgart were historically contingent. That means that in each specific place and time, Waldorf pedagogy has to be realized under different conditions, which means that existing models of practice are only conditionally useful for responding to actual pedagogical challenges. Practice has to be continuously developed on the basis reflexion of practice in relation to the generative principles of the pedagogy in the particular context. Clearly what is needed is a research-based approach to address this.

Waldorf schools are challenged by all kinds of external pressures, for example to conform to standardized state curricula and testing regimes, centralized exams, demands for professionalization and accountability, the regulation of teacher education and school inspections by the state authorities. Sometimes schools have

to deal with accusations of racism in Steiner's work (Dahlin, 2017). The pressures to conform to state requirements and exams raises serious questions about the continuing 'Waldorf' quality of the teaching. This applies, for example, to second language teaching because the Waldorf approach being significantly different from that in most other schools, requires teachers to undergo a specific learning process and develop a range of new skills through artistic work (Lutzker, 2016). This problem is compounded by the fact that in some Waldorf schools the teachers have not had an adequate or indeed any Waldorf training, so that the discerning observer might well ask, "what is actually *Waldorf* here, apart from some outer forms?" Just what makes a lesson 'Waldorf' is a slippery notion. Experienced practitioners may recognize it when they see it, but when pressed to define what it is that they recognize, they find it is a slippery and elusive notion because they usually judge it in terms of the tradition they themselves belong to.

In many countries the lack of consistent and qualified Waldorf teacher education exacerbates this problem. Waldorf teachers are often reliant on external mentors and their particular 'take' on Waldorf pedagogy. Tradition and taken-for-granted values are stronger factors than critical reflexion. The primary 'measure' of quality seems to be the 'market', that is, the number of parents who entrust their children to the schools. In order to establish a sound basis for development there would need to be ongoing internal and some level of external evaluation based on inquiry using Waldorf criteria.

As Boland (Boland, 2015, 2017) and Rawson (Rawson, 2017d) have pointed out, despite the fact that Waldorf schools have been founded outside of Germany since 1924, there is still no consensus as to how curriculum should be developed locally in different cultures. Indeed, the notion of finding equivalent teaching material (stories, songs, literature etc.) is problematical because it implies a standard that models in other cultures should try to reproduce as closely as possible. Eurocentric and latterly Anglo-centric Waldorf models of curriculum continue to dominate and there is little awareness for issues of post-colonialism with Waldorf discourse. These are all issues that require the ability to read and understand complex pedagogical situations using a firm grasp of Waldorf theory. In other words, they require a reliable, systematic and valid method of practitioner researcher that is compatible with Waldorf practice.

I think it would be fair to say that the Waldorf movement is driven by a social and educational reformist spirit that is fundamentally optimistic, even in its most socially and financially established school movements. People still become Waldorf teachers by vocation rather than as a sound career move. Critical reflection undoubtedly exists at the local level but there is little critical public discourse and few self-critical publications within the Waldorf community. The Waldorf movement is perhaps more used to fending off criticism and pressure from outside than it is to critical self-reflection. Critique can be seen as disloyalty to a good cause that already has to deal with lack of acceptance. Furthermore, as Dahlin (2017) notes, most Waldorf secondary literature can be described as *immanent hermeneutics*, "that addresses itself to those who are already in tune with the underlying ways of thinking" (2017, p.6). As an experienced 'insider' with a lot of international experience within the Waldorf movement, I sense that Waldorf educators want to *affirm* rather than *question* their core values, principles and practice whilst recognizing the need to adapt their pedagogy to the rapidly changing social, economic, ecological and geopolitical conditions under which children and young people grow up today.

### *Research on Waldorf without Waldorf theory*

Steiner pedagogy is based on an anthroposophical anthropology. However, this generative theory, as presented by Steiner in his lectures and writings is not generally considered usable for research purposes in its original form because of its explicit reference to a spiritual dimension and has therefore been labelled esoteric and unscientific (Schieren, 2016). Schieren's (2016) review of research on Waldorf practice concludes that the current academic view is that, whilst the outcomes of practice may be laudable, the theoretical basis of Steiner pedagogy is *indiskutabel*, that is, unworthy of discussion. As Dahlin (2017, p. 5) points out, "many academic researchers therefore hesitate to get involved in studies in Waldorf schools, because it may hamper their future careers".

However, as Dahlin (2017) also discusses, dismissing Steiner as ‘unscientific’ overlooks the paradigm shift in social science that has led many researchers to recognize that there is no one definite form of knowledge and that science is as much a reflection of historical contingency as the wider culture. Some social and human scientists challenge the view that there is a single universal reality and scientific method of reaching it. One such group points out that alternative conceptions of key concepts such as health, illness, even life and death enrich our understanding. They write, “to understand death, for example, as merely the termination of biological functioning would be an enormous impoverishment of human existence. The point is not to abandon medical science, but to understand it as a cultural tradition- one among many” (Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004).

In this sense Steiner’s (Steiner, 1983) claim that his spiritual science be accepted as a science, can be taken seriously, without necessarily falling into a relativist trap of having to accept any theory as scientific. Majorek (Majorek, 2010) makes the case that Steiner’s criteria for objectivity are rigorous, more so than that often applied in some mainstream science. Dahlin (Dahlin, 2013) himself discusses Steiner alongside philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty, Levinas and Deleuze, and Welburn (Welburn 2004) positions Steiner alongside post-modernist thinkers in his radically relationist ontology and epistemology, particularly in his view that the knowledge creating process is one that changes both the knower and the known.

Schneider (Schneider, 1982) has argued that Steiner’s pedagogy can only be understood in terms of his theory of knowledge and his account of the relationship of the human being to the world. There are now a range of accounts of Steiner’s epistemology and methodology (da Veiga, 2016; Gabriel, 2014; Heusser & Weinzirl 2014 ; Schieren, 2011; Sijmons 2008) that show it to be a productive, participatory activity, very much in line with some current epistemologies (though naturally not without its differences). These accounts at least show that the judgement that Waldorf theory is *indiskutabel* reflects a very narrow, and in the current academic climate, actually untenable judgement that verges on *unscientific* prejudice. One can sympathize with young academics not wanting to spoil their careers, but careers have also been made by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions. In my view, it is only a matter of time until Steiner becomes as academically interesting and important as Dewey or Vygotsky.

Scientific prejudices only explain why academic researchers do not use Steiner’s theory. This does not account for the lack of practitioner research in Waldorf schools. My experience suggests that individuals, often working in teacher education, have worked intensively with Steiner’s ideas. But, this has rarely developed into the basis for collegial practitioner research in schools, as Steiner envisaged (Gladstone, 1997; Steiner, 2004). Traditions of practitioner research only developed in the 1970s in mainstream education, and then mostly in the UK and somewhat later in the US, and to some extent in Austria and Switzerland, but hardly at all in Germany (Altrichter & Posch 2007). This has obviously limited developments in the Waldorf movement since very few Waldorf teachers had any experience of practitioner research. Practitioner research has only very recently been taught in Waldorf teacher education, and not all programmes include this even today.

The term research has a range of everyday meanings in Waldorf discourse. It can refer to activities such as teachers informing themselves about what others, including Steiner, have written or said and reflecting on this. It can mean people writing what they think about a given topic, or talking to others with the aim of gaining better understanding. It can mean observing children and reflecting on experiences and it can refer to reading and thinking about what Steiner said or wrote and comparing this with their experiences. Research may include meditation or contemplation and applying ways of seeing and thinking that Steiner suggested, to understand phenomena. Indeed, all these activities can be aspects of research but do not qualify as research as such, not in the sense that would generally be understood in educational science. As Elliot and Lukes (Elliott & Lukes, 2008) point out, there is a difference between reflective practitioners who merely think about their practice and people who “construct situational knowledge equivalent to academic knowledge...the way they do research in fact constitutes practical philosophy (a disciplined inquiry into knowledge)” (2008, p.110). Understanding the Waldorf approach is challenging enough and I imagine many teachers first have to focus on this task before taking other ideas on board.

Academic research outcomes are often inaccessible to Waldorf teachers, not least because of the language in which it is often reported. Teachers may look to digests of research for affirmation of Waldorf practice, as a kind of ‘cherry picking’. This selective approach does not necessarily deepen understanding. There is also little evidence that the outcomes of empirical research specifically into Waldorf practice that asks questions or even is critical, prompts practitioners to reflect systematically on their practice. There has been, for example, detailed research on the experience of pupils of the class teacher system (Barz, Liebenwein, & Randoll, 2012; Helsper et al., 2007; Idel, 2007, 2013) but, as Zdrazil (Zdrazil, 2017) notes, the complexity and indefinite nature of the outcomes of these studies have thus far had little impact on the Waldorf-internal discourse about the class-teacher principle.

Though traditional concepts of Waldorf teacher education involve engaging with the theory first, developing abilities through artistic work then learning about practice (H. Schiller, 2000), some programmes are locating teacher education more and more in practice. This is in my view a good step. However, simply participating is insufficient to understand practice. Guided participation supported by reflexion is necessary and these are the foundations of practitioner research. The challenge it would seem is to show that that researching practice using Steiner’s foundational theory is the best way to understand the practice. If Waldorf teachers are to research their practice, they need reliable and valid methods that they can readily follow, that fit into busy professional life and which use Waldorf theory. In what follows I will show how IPR can be a research methodology suited to Waldorf practice. Following this discussion, I will look at how Waldorf theory can be used, and finally how contemplative practice can be included.

### *Alignment within a research design*

As Crotty (1998) has pointed out, in order to conduct social science research, including education research, it is advisable to have an alignment of research methods, methodology, theoretical perspectives and epistemology. That means, the methods of collecting and analysing data are appropriate to the research methodology or strategy (e.g. how the researcher goes about finding out what she believes can be known) and that the theory used (i.e. the possible explanations for the phenomena) aligns with the ontological assumptions made about the nature of reality, the understandings of human nature and the relationship of human beings to society and the world. Epistemology refers to how we think we know about this, what the relationship is between the researcher and what can be known and what knowledge interests the researcher has. (I discuss issues of epistemology in the second paper.) It would make sense for Waldorf practitioners researching their practice to use theory, methodology and an epistemology that aligns with their practice and the ideas and assumptions that inform this, in other words with anthroposophical pedagogical anthropology.

### *Pedagogy as art, skilled craft and science*

Research is an integral part of pedagogical practice. Pedagogy, as I use the term in this article, is the systematic understanding of the relationship between teaching and learning. It is never innocent (Bruner, 1996) and always reflects the assumptions of teachers and the changing social and cultural context (Nind, Curtin, & Hall, 2016). As Alexander (Alexander, 2001) defines it, pedagogy,

encompasses both the act of teaching and its contingent theories and debates—about, for example, the character of culture and society, the purposes of education, the nature of childhood and learning and the structure of knowledge. Pedagogy is the domain of discourse with which one needs to engage if one is to make sense of the act of teaching—for discourse and act are interdependent, and there can be no teaching without pedagogy or pedagogy without teaching (Alexander, 2001, p. 513).

I follow Nind *et al.* (2016) in recognizing three modes of pedagogical practice; pedagogy as art, as craft and as science. As art, pedagogy involves intuition, understanding and responding with pedagogical tact (van Manen, 2015) to the pupils as people developing within a community of learners. The art of pedagogy is also about creativity, imagination and finding a dynamic balance between the *how* of learning (methods and modes of teaching and learning) and the *what*, the content (curriculum), and the *who*, the persons

involved. It is about relationships and is therefore relational and situated, because these aspects cannot be generalized. Because Waldorf pedagogy is not just about facilitating the learning of disciplinary knowledge and the competences associated with these, but is primarily concerned with enabling the development of the individuality. The art of educating, according to Steiner,

should be built upon a real sympathy with the child's nature, that it should be built up in the widest sense on knowledge of the growing child... If as teachers we can enter into the child's unfolding, out of this understanding will arise the insight into how we need to act. In this respect, as teachers we must become artists. Just as it is impossible for an artist to pick up a book on aesthetics and then paint or carve according to the principles the writer has laid down, it should also be quite impossible for a teacher to use an "educational guide" in order to teach. What the teacher does need is insight into what the child really is and is becoming step by step through the stages of childhood (2007, 7).

Pedagogy as a skilled craft is about understanding how to organize learning situations to optimize the learning experience and to be able to assess both the process and the outcomes. It is about the *practice* of pedagogy, that is, "doing, making, being and becoming, in communities of practice" (Nind, *et al.* 2016, 52). Pedagogy as science is about research and theory-informed practice, and involves the systematic observation of, reflection on and experimentation in practice. In the lecture just cited above, Steiner insists that pedagogy should be an art, not a science, though the process of understanding the emergent person, and other processes in education that Steiner is referring to, does require a systematic schooling of attention to lived experience, a theory to interpret what we see, ways of understanding and having an ethical position towards the people we are trying to understand.

Today this would be called research or disciplined inquiry into knowledge. Simply observing children, however closely, is not enough. We need ideas to interpret what we see, and methods that help us explore what we think we see, actually means and we need to be sure of the status of the knowledge we generate. It would be naïve to imagine that just by observing something as indescribably complex as a human being, the nature of the developing child in general or the particular child in our study, is revealed to us. Can we be sure that an individual pupil study, as practiced in Waldorf schools, based on observations and descriptions of the child, really reveals the being of the child (and what do we mean by that?) and is not a reflection of our assumptions (e.g. about the general nature of the developing child or of this particular child), our pre-understandings and expectations (e.g. of developmental phases, temperaments and types), our ways of seeing and talking (e.g. the way we talk about children in this particular college of teachers) about what we think we see (e.g. symptoms of invisible processes)? If I am honest, as a Waldorf teacher, I can't be sure. This is what pedagogy as science involves. The science that Steiner didn't want, was the positivistic, statistical science based on generalized laws of development and learning promoted by followers of Herbert Spencer, who Steiner (2007) strongly criticizes in the same lecture. The pedagogical science that Steiner is referring to is interpretive (hermeneutic), phenomenological and is based on insightful understanding of experience.

### *Using theory*

In order to interpret and understand pedagogical phenomena we observe, we need concepts. In fact, certain concepts direct our attention towards the phenomenon in the first place. If I have never heard the term 'Rubicon' in the sense of how children between the ages of nine and twelve engage in identity work, by among other things challenging authority, building cliques and peer groups, becoming insecure, I might not notice how this developmental phenomenon. The conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) of Rubicon that Steiner suggested, makes the phenomenon 'visible'. Steiner's foundational theory offers many such conceptual metaphors, such as the polarity between sympathy and antipathy, imagination and mental image, the dynamic between sleeping and waking. Such theory can be used to organize our observations and offer an explanation of what we experience. Simply put theory means a possible explanation for a certain phenomenon. Theory can also be used to gather pieces of data together into a coherent conceptual framework, thus providing new ways of seeing things and opens up the possible existence of new phenomena (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). As Hitchcock and Hughes put it, "theory is seen as being concerned

with the development of systematic construction of knowledge of the social world. In doing this it employs the use of concepts, systems, models, structures, beliefs, ideas...in order to make statements about types of actions, events or activities, so as to make analyses of causes, consequences and process “ (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995 p.20).

As Sfard (Sfard 2009) explains, conceptual metaphors can work as theory and be catalysts for new knowledge. Their advantage is that the original concepts that we borrow to use as metaphors are more familiar to us than the phenomenon we are studying. She gives the example of Plutarch’s metaphor, *the mind is a fire to be kindled, not a vessel to be filled*. Through the familiar images, we are able to come to a new understanding of education through this metaphor. We could then, for example, use this metaphor to investigate student experiences of learning to see if their lived experiences can better be described as lighting a fire or as filling a bucket. In her earlier work, Sfard (Sfard, 1998) explored the distinctions between the metaphors, learning as acquisition and learning as participation. Each of these metaphors implies a very different epistemology, ontology and would lead to quite different methods of teaching and assessing learning. Learning as acquisition implies that knowledge exists in the world in a complete form that the learner can acquire and add to her store of knowledge, which is a positivist view of knowledge. Learning as acquisition means having and possessing knowledge, which can therefore be transferred and, of course measured. The acquisition metaphor implies an isolated individual who gets and keeps knowledge in her head. The metaphor of learning as participation means that we learn not by getting something but by participating in processes with others in ways through which knowledge comes about. It is about being and becoming rather than having. Whilst the acquisition metaphor “stresses the individual mind and what goes ‘into it’, the participation metaphor shifts the focus to the evolving bonds between the individual and others. While AM emphasizes the inward movement of the object known as knowledge, PM gives prominence to the aspect of mutuality characteristic of the whole-part relation. Indeed, PM makes salient the dialectic nature of learning interaction. The whole and the parts affect and inform each other” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6).

Steiner did not use the term theory but rather referred to a perspective (Anschauung) on the facts. The social sciences today tend to use theoretical perspectives as ways of seeing and thinking, rather than theories as hypotheses. Understandings of science were no doubt different in the early part of the last century. I return below to how Waldorf theory can be used in this sense.

### *Illuminative practitioner research*

IPR is closely related to participatory action research- abbreviated to PAR (Bergold & Thomas, 2012) and action research- abbreviated to AR (McNiff 2013) As the name suggests, the focus of AR is primary changing practice through informed action and PAR emphasizes the democratic participation of all involved, and is especially relevant in social settings in which the people whose life-world is being researched can participate in ‘safe and communicative spaces’ (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). AR seeks to bring about change in practice using a systematic and iterative research method typically involving research cycles of planning, acting, observing (or collecting data), reviewing and analysing and then entering the next cycle (McNiff 2013; Noffke & Somekh, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). If the focus of PAR and AR are primarily on bringing about change, then the focus of IPR is more on understanding as a prelude to change. PAR, AR and IPR all involve practitioners researching their practice whilst being involved in the area being researched. IPR can also be used innovate, to evaluate practice and as a form of continuing professional development and can thus be used as form of quality development and accountability, however, its primary focus is on developing understanding through individual case studies with the aim of supporting teachers to become more capable of practical deliberation or practical wisdom, in the sense of Aristotle’s(Aristotle, 2009) notion of *phronesis* (Elliott and Lukes, 2008).

### *The origins and principles of action research and illuminative practitioner research*

There is a strong tradition of IPR in the English-speaking world (McNiff & Whitehead 2010) and in Scandinavia, notably in the fields of education, social work and nursing (Heikkinen, Huttunen, Syrjälä, & Pesonen 2012; Kajamaa 2012). In the German-speaking world, where it is represented by the work of Altrichter and Posch (2008), and Moser (Moser 2008), it is less well established, though it is growing (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Within the Waldorf community there is a modest but significant tradition. Over 100 Waldorf teachers in the UK, in the Netherlands, Germany and Switzerland participated from (2003 until 2010) on the Plymouth University International Masters programme (IMP), which was a practice-based programme in which experienced and practicing Waldorf teachers conducted research across Waldorf practice, including a number of master theses on Eurythmy. Several of these students went on to complete doctorates based on practitioner research. Some guidelines for practitioner research in Waldorf settings were formulated during that programme (Rawson & Stöckli, 2007). There is considerable literature on the various forms of practitioner research (Altrichter & Posch 2007; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff 2013), so it is not the purpose of this paper to explain methods and procedures.

The origins of action research are generally considered to go back to the German American scholar Kurt Lewin (1890 to 1947), who is best known for his work in gestalt-psychology and in the fields of social psychology and organisational development. Lewin was a student of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (see Hodkinson et al, 2007, Ferrare and Apple, 2015) and was closely associated with the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (Somekh & Nissen 2011). Both of these connections influenced his relational approach. Lewin's first publication on action research (*Action Research and Minority Problems*, 1946) reported on a project involving a range of actions taken to integrate Native Americans more effectively into mainstream society. This involved a research cycle of planning, action and fact-finding about the outcomes. Since then, a number of theories of action research have been developed using this cyclic and iterative approach of planning, doing, reviewing (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). What is particularly interesting about Lewin's approach is that he believed that social settings could only be understood as a whole 'field', in which the parts only make sense in terms of the context, as in hermeneutics (Lewin, (1948)1997). This approach emphasizes the dynamic relationships between the people in a particular field, rather than looking at individuals themselves and seeking psychological or behaviourist causes 'within them'. The focus is rather on what comes to expression through the interactions. Behaviour, he thought, was the result of the interaction between the person and her environment. Lewin makes the point that change in one element, or the introduction of something new into a situation, changes everything in the social field. Field theory has been influential in ecological understandings of development and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gibson, 1986) and in the sociology of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). What all these approaches have in common is the search to understand behaviour holistically in context, as opposed to being internal to the person, as behaviourist or constructivist approaches do.

In education the action research tradition found its strongest proponents in Lawrence Stenhouse and John Elliot. As they saw it, AR had the dual function of making the familiar 'strange' and thus awakening practitioners to new meanings and tensions in their existing practice and of enabling and empowering practitioners to emancipate themselves from external experts (Hendricks 2002). Stenhouse was involved in curriculum research and was convinced that teachers were better positioned to development curriculum at the local, school-based level. He opposed outcomes-based curricula, stating that "knowledge cannot be reduced to behaviours. In particular, it cannot be expressed in terms of pre-specified performances, for it is a function of knowledge...that it does not determine behaviour but liberates it" (Stenhouse, 1985, p. 77). He saw curriculum as a diagnostic and experimental tool to support teachers by providing a framework for trying out and evaluating. Waldorf teachers may recognize this position. Stenhouse was also critical of education research based on a positivist paradigm of statistical generalizations based on random samples. He said that learning was too complex a process, with too many specific factors and contextual variables to be reduced to general theories. He also felt that academic theories were often incomprehensible to most teachers, yet "it is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the classroom by understanding it" (cited in Hendricks, 2002, p. 121).

Stenhouse saw the core methods of practitioner research as case studies, including participant observations and historical interviews (i.e. delving into the background of the situation and how it came about). He felt that it was particularly important that researchers write up detailed descriptive accounts of their research, partly by way of validation by other researchers but also to build up a body of case-based knowledge. He felt that teacher practitioner researcher was positioned between psychological and sociological research, in what he called *pedagogy as research*. Stenhouse (1975) argued that the primary aim of practitioner research is for teachers to understand their own classrooms better, rather than constructing generalizations. Theory has the primary task of systematically structuring the teacher's understanding of her pedagogical experiences. This involves working with concepts that can be carefully related to other concepts to capture and express understanding. The adequacy of such concepts need only be provisional. However, Stenhouse was keen to emphasize that each classroom should not be an island separated from the practice of colleagues and teachers should report their work, so that "a common vocabulary of concepts and a syntax of theory needs to be developed. The first level of this needs to be the development of a general and common theoretical language" (cited in Hendricks, 2002).

Stenhouse died before he was able to develop concrete methods for practitioner research. Others have developed an epistemology and methodology for AR and PAR as well as for IPR (Elliott, 1984; Elliott 2007; Elliott, 2009; Kemmis 2001; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon 2014; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Noffke & Somekh, 2013) In particular Elliott has established the research value of the case study as an 'illuminative evaluation' of a specific situation that can also illustrate universal principles. He argued that through comparison across similar cases, retrospective generalizations can be constructed that give expression to similarities without dispensing with their particularities. He saw this as a support for professional judgement, somewhat in the way legal judgements take precedent in similar cases into account.

For Stenhouse the insight gained by the researchers is more important than the identifying general laws. Elliott and Lukes (2008) argue that the case study can demonstrate situational understanding and practical knowledge in the sense of Aristotle's *phronesis*, based on the direct experience of the practitioner, combining intellectual and emotional modes of reflexion. The case study can transcend the boundaries between science and art reminiscent of Dewey's (Dewey, 1934) notion of art as experience, which drew closely on Schiller's work (Løvlie & Standish, 2002; F. Schiller, 1965). Elliott follows Stenhouse in favouring illuminative practitioner research to ethnographic research derived from social anthropology because the latter tends to use theory outside "the literacy of the [teacher as] actor", in other words, "theoretical insights should be expressed in the vernacular, non-technical language of participants if they are to inform judgment. They may build out and extend this language but in terms whose meanings are continuous with and fit into the network of meanings it consists of" (Elliott and Lukes, 2008, 94). In Waldorf contexts this would mean research makes use of the language the teachers use in discussing their practice.

Elliott and Lukes develop Stenhouse's idea further by building on Gadamer's (Gadamer, 2013) hermeneutic notion of understanding as the fusion of past and present horizons by the researcher, in which the frame or horizon of the data meet and transform the horizon of the researchers' existing understandings. Gadamer uses the word 'prejudice' in its original legal sense, which refers to the evidence available to the court at the outset of proceedings. In research the researcher's prejudices are the sum of her understandings before engaging with the object of inquiry. In contrast to other phenomenological approaches, Gadamer dismisses the notion of 'bracketing out' pre-understandings, partly because this is never really possible but also because the research questions we have start from our pre-understandings and are therefore the starting point for inquiry.

### *The validity of IPR*

Stenhouse insisted that the validity of the case study depends on the quality and transparency of the research report, so that others can put themselves in the position of the researchers and assess the descriptions of the case and the conclusions. In particular, the research report should review the history of the context being studied. The voices of participants should, wherever possible, be captured in the report, speaking

for themselves, as it were. The generalising value of the particular case study depends on the quality of the data collection and the report, which should artistically give expression to the situation being studied, thus allowing others to have rich experiences. As in Dewey's notion of art as a form of knowing, the form and content of the research report should be creatively expressed to awaken meaning in the reader, which cannot necessarily be reduced to words. Both Dewey (1938) and Gadamer thought that artistic images (either in word or pictorial form) convey meaning without stating what that meaning is. Its purpose is formative (Gadamer uses the term *bildend*). Elliot and Lukes emphasize that the research report can open the mind of the reader to a familiar situation in the classroom in ways that enable them to transform their prejudices. One can well imagine that Waldorf teachers would be able to write such evocative reports, which could be published in teacher journals as stimulus for other teachers.

Most authors agree that the validity of IPR depends not only on the quality of the observations, the plausibility of the interpretations, the credibility of the findings, the moral and ethical values of the research and the transparency and descriptive qualities of the report but also on the research interest and how this plays into the research design. Foreman-Peck and Murray (Foreman-Peck & Murray 2008), drawing on Habermas (Habermas 1986) theory of knowledge interests, identify that IPR can have three different functions:

1. The first is professional learning, which corresponds to Habermas' technical interest. This mode tends to use positivist epistemological assumptions and seeks causal explanations for phenomena and predictive generalizations. It is used to solve specific problems in practice.
2. The second mode is practical philosophy (*phronesis*), which uses an interpretivist or hermeneutic methodology and constructionist epistemology. It is concerned with uncovering and reconstructing meanings and aims to gain a deeper understanding of experience in order to make the researcher more experienced in Gadamer's sense of *Bildung*.
3. The third mode is critical social science, in which the research interest is in identifying and changing false consciousness using dialectic reasoning, with the aim of identifying critical propositions (e.g. exams foster defensive modes of learning) concerning emancipation that empirical research can then test against the evidence. The epistemology is also constructionist (and de-constructionist).

The first mode is typical of much action research promoted in organisational development. The second is akin to illuminative research and lends itself to professional development and the third is likely to support change and innovation (by demonstrating the need for change and the benefits of having changed). The second mode is probably closest to the needs of Waldorf teachers.

Heikkinen et al (2012) have drawn up five key principles of validation for IPR that have been tried and tested over many years. Good research should reflect the following qualities; historical continuity, reflexivity, dialectics, workability and evocativeness.

1. The principle of historical continuity shows how the action or situation has evolved and the description of it should show coherent narrative employment (Polkinghorne, 1988).
2. The principle of reflexivity requires that the researchers' relationships to the object of research should be interrogated and stated, both at the outset and at the end of the research process, in the sense of Gadamer's horizons. The researchers should also declare their ontological and epistemological assumptions about knowledge and reality. The researchers should be transparent about their materials and methods.
3. The principle of dialectics refers to the extent to which the researchers' insights are developed in dialogue with others and the extent to which the voices of all participants are heard and taken into account, and how different interpretations are reported. The narrative of the research should represent the protagonists in an authentic and genuine way.
4. The principle of workability and ethics refers to the extent to which the research project succeeds in creating workable practices and the extent to which the outcomes generate critical discussion and

whether the research brought about fruitful results. The ethical aspect points to awareness of the effects of the research on the people involved and on the whole context, ensuring that people participate with informed consent, that their anonymity is protected as much as possible, that no one is harmed psychologically or otherwise disadvantaged and that their values and rights are respected. The research should be judged in terms of how it empowers people “to believe in their capabilities and possibilities to act and thereby to encourage new practices and action” (2012, 8).

5. The principle of evocativeness asks to what extent the research narrative evokes thoughts, feelings and actions in the readers of the report. The research narrative should be evocative, aesthetic and, like art, give expression to the essence of the situation. This includes presenting the research in an artistic way.

Following Kvale (1995) the validity of IPR that uses a constructionist research paradigm (such as hermeneutic and phenomenological research) depends on:

- examining the relative credibility of claims and the craftsmanship of the research,
- the meaningfulness and coherence of the arguments,
- and the pragmatic usefulness of the knowledge claims.

None of these criteria present Waldorf practitioners with unsurmountable difficulties, though new forms would need to be developed.

### *Using contemplative practice*

Steiner (Steiner, 1982) recommended that teachers should use a method that he called meditatively acquired knowledge of the human being, based on the cycle of studying Waldorf theory (*Menschenkunde*), meditating that theory, and remembering theory in practice. The first cycle of activity - studying, can be interpreted as engaging in a hermeneutic process of understanding the ideas in text form. The first step to understanding is empathic understanding. The reader engages with the ideas in the context of the text and its language, to the point at which one can express the ideas in one's own words. The second cycle is dialogical understanding, by relating the parts to the whole and the whole to the parts and by exploring meaning in dialogue with the text and with other readers. Once the work of interpreting the text has become 'saturated', the third cycle of understanding involves a transactional process in which the reader asks herself, how has the work with the text changed me and what new horizon of understanding have I reached?

The second part of Steiner's approach is contemplation or meditation, using key thoughts or phrases from the text, or self-formulated questions and allowing these to be the focus of one's attention for a given short period of time, followed by an equal period of focused attention on the open mind. Zajonc (2009) has described this approach in what he calls contemplative inquiry and Rawson (Rawson, 2007; Rawson, 2010a, 2010b, 2012) has shown how the contemplation process can be applied within practitioner research. Meditation involves a similar process to the role of forgetting in Waldorf learning theory (Rawson, 2017c), since both involve making unconscious connections to relationships and qualities in their non-material state, because the I, as spiritual core of the human being, is unconsciously embedded in the nexus of relationships and meditation is a process that attaches a conscious question to the participatory process. Meditation, like forgetting, is a form of unconscious yet intentional movement towards the object of our interest.

Essentially contemplation can be used at each reflective stage of the typical iterative practitioner research cycle. By focusing in a contemplative way on the issues involved, a deeper inner connection to the research process can come about and the researcher is able to draw on intuitive insights. These of course have to be critically reflected on, perhaps in dialogue with a colleague or using a journal. One can use non-verbal and artistic processes of reflection in order to draw closer to tacit understandings. The researcher can start by contemplating the research question and her own pre-understandings. Choosing a research design and considering research ethics can also be founded on contemplation. When it comes to analysing the data, the process of constructing themes also has an intuitive aspect. In each situation, journal notes should be taken and all intuitive insights interrogated retrospectively in a critical way.



In his Theory U, Scharmer (2009) explores the nature of intuitively apprehending the ‘future as it emerges’, using, among others, phenomenological arguments and notions of distributed cognition, as well as drawing on Steiner’s epistemology. As I discuss in a subsequent paper, Steiner’s theory of knowledge posits the possibility of the mind incrementally expanding its consciousness of the wider context of life as we perceive and understand it. Knowledge is essentially a participatory form of consciousness of the meaning of an expanding set of relationships and connections between phenomena. The bigger the context that we can apprehend in thinking, the more we can understand what is emerging, and the processes of becoming. Research involves exploring and understanding the history of situations in as much as this can be re-constructed and interpreted but it is also about predicating consequences of situations as they emerge, in other words, a research consciousness spans a simultaneity of past and emergent future in an on-going present (Schad 2015) based on being-in-the-world.

### *Using Waldorf theory*

To return to the question as to how teachers can use Waldorf foundational theory to research and understand pedagogical practice, I suggest there are several approaches. Kiersch (Kiersch, 2010) has recommended a hermeneutic approach to Steiner’s texts, which means interpreting them in a systematic way that uses the hermeneutic circle of iteratively relating the whole to the parts. Rittelmeyer (Rittelmeyer, 1990, 2010) has also suggested that researchers should treat Steiner’s ideas as heuristic concepts, as “suggestions for experimental attitudes to knowledge” (1990, p. 65) and gave the example of Steiner’s theory of temperaments. Each of the four temperaments is a metaphor for the way a child relates to the various supersensible bodies, described in anthroposophy. Rittelmeyer uses this example to explore how an idea of Steiner’s, for which there is no empirical evidence in the normal scientific sense, can be used. One way he shows, which was clearly Steiner’s intention, is to direct the teacher’s attention to the actual phenomenon, rather than relying on traditional views. A second method is to compare Steiner’s temperament theory with other psychological models of types. Such a study can lead to a series of further research questions that would need to be clarified both theoretically and through empirical study.

Schieren (Schieren, 2008) has suggested that Steiner's ideas can be used as *blicklenkende Begriffe*, that is, as concepts that direct the researcher's view of human phenomena. Göschel (Göschel, 2012) has outlined how anthroposophical ideas can be used in individual case studies of children in therapeutic settings. He speaks of the ideas from Steiner's anthroposophical anthropology as directing the view of the researchers in ways that are metaphorically like a legend (in the sense of a key used, for example, to explain a map) that enables educators/therapists to decipher the active formative processes immanent in individual form in the perceptible bodily appearance of the child. He describes this as a phenomenological approach enhanced by anthroposophical anthropology. He also uses the conceptual metaphor of biographical mythos in a transdisciplinary approach involving hermeneutics, phenomenology, narrative and image theory as well as contemplative methods. Mouawad (Mouawad 2013) has used Steiner's notion of seven life-processes, as developed by van Houten (van Houten, 1993), in a piece of empirical research using participative appreciative reflective inquiry methods (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) to look at the professional development of teachers in a special education school in Lebanon. Participative appreciative inquiry involves cooperative, experiential work among participants in a research group and aims to enable the participants to reflect on their experiences in a positive, humanitarian and optimistic way.

These academic studies, which by definition also fulfil rigorous academic criteria- show how anthroposophical theory and contemplative methods can be included as conceptual metaphors, as *blicklenkender* or perspective-giving ways looking at pedagogical phenomena. Likewise, theories were used that do not conflict at the epistemological or ontological levels. They are complementary. Furthermore, new theory can be developed on the basis of existing Waldorf theory, formulating new conceptual metaphors. Rawson (Rawson, 2017b) conducted a study in three Camphill communities using social learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the conceptual metaphor of learning through participation (Rogoff, 1995, 2014) and mapping these onto anthroposophical social pedagogy theory (Grimm & Kaschubowski 2008). Rawson also used hermeneutic, phenomenological and contemplative practitioner research methods and social learning and biographical learning theory in a transdisciplinary approach to explore biographical issues amongst a group of Waldorf students at the end of their time at school (Rawson, 2017a). In these two studies, Rawson sought to expand existing the learning theory used in Waldorf pedagogy by adding a participatory social dimension. The important thing in all these studies is that methods and theory were used that are compatible with Steiner's foundational theory.

## Conclusions

If Waldorf practitioners were to use IPR with Waldorf theory by conducting small-scale case studies, they would have a tool that could consolidate curriculum development and research of practice. Waldorf theory can be used as a heuristic theory to interpret the data generated about the phenomena being studied. Using the criteria referred to above would ensure that the research is valid. Contemplative approaches can be incorporated can live with, once a framework of guidelines has been drawn up and body of research reports has been published. One could envisage such research reports being published in a journal as a resource for other practitioner researchers and periodically digests of these reports could be published.

Some years ago the *Bund-Länder Kommission* in Germany funded research to look at the value of IPR for the professional development of teachers (Fichten & Meyer 2006). This concluded that it can be valuable if supported by experts and training and a community of research practice that builds up expertise and acts as a resource for schools within a region, when outcomes are dissemination through workshops, conferences and publications and if there is a code of practice covering methods, validation processes and ethical issues. In a modest way the Waldorfseminar Kiel has been offering such a resource to schools in Northern Germany for the past few years.

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