

# Exploring Waldorf education as a practice through case narratives: a framework for empirical research

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of this article is to provide a framework for empirical research into the practice of Waldorf education with a particular emphasis on its Bildung-related aspects and to outline some of its potential contributions. Conceptually it rests on a biographical and empirical case narrative approach to Bildung in connection with MacIntyre's concept of a practice. It represents a combination of the auto/biographical approach of narrative inquiry with research into enacted and experienced curricula through extreme and paradigmatic narrative cases. The two cases presented are auto/biographical and are used to clarify and explore the implications of the argument. The conclusion highlights a number of ways in which the collection and interpretation of this kind of cases can contribute: exploring "conceptual environments", for practice development, in teacher education, making Waldorf education more accessible to "outsiders" and considering ways in which the tension between education for Bildung and effective training can be reconciled.

*Keywords:* Practice, Bildung, Narrative inquiry, Curriculum

## Introduction

Waldorf education as a practice is now close to 100 years old and yet, *as a practice*, comparatively opaque and devoid of a documented history. This is in no way an isolated dilemma, Shulman (2004/1987) remarked 30 years ago that education in general is devoid of a history of practice, especially one documenting what he called "the wisdom of practice". This, he claimed, is largely because such a history would have to be a collection of case narratives from practice and about practice. There have been some attempts at publishing case-books after Shulman's initial assertions in 1987 (eg. Shulman & Colbert 1988, 1987) but these have, as far as can be determined, a) not been cases from Waldorf schools and b) not been cases explicitly focusing on matters of Bildung.<sup>1</sup> The latter is important since a more general (subject) didactical focus is not as pressing an issue given that such matters can more easily be formalized in handbooks and theoretical manuals. They are also open to various observational and participatory studies whereas Bildung is a process that is both more personal and inward as well as more dynamic and hard to plan for (making it very time consuming to study through such methods).

Briefly put, Bildung is understood here as a biographical process that includes ethical and aesthetic formation or cultivation, development of individual autonomy, a coherence of personality and a wide as well as deep understanding within different fields of knowing. All of these matters have been, at one time or other,

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1. In a previous article for RoSE (Tyson 2015a) I approached the subject more from the point of view of phronesis or practical wisdom. Space prevents a treatment of both Bildung and phronesis here, suffice it to say that practical wisdom can be thought of as at the center of Bildung (cf. Tyson 2018 for a more extensive treatment).

covered by the Bildung-tradition (Klafki 2000; Rittelmeyer 2012). However, from an empirical standpoint, ie. from the point of view of what is enacted and experienced in a practice, the question of Bildung can also be posed as: what has emerged as unusually meaningful? Or: when did you feel most alive? Or: what has been especially enriching and memorable? Generally speaking almost all answers to these questions will be answers that are covered by the concept of Bildung *or* the answers are positioned to sometimes expand on the concept by indicating new forms of Bildung-experience than those hitherto considered in the abstract. Unfortunately, for the most part, Bildung has remained a matter for philosophical reflection and little has been done in the form of empirical research. An important exception, *Bildungsgangdidaktik* (Terhart 2009; Trautmann 2004), is also quite close to the perspective developed in the following although, to my knowledge, it has not been explored in a Waldorf educational context. A few decades ago Gessler (1988) also did a pioneering study of the biographical impact that the curriculum at the Hibernia school had on its students and several of the biographical narratives published in it could function as case narratives in the present context as discussed in Tyson (2015b).

The position taken here is that Waldorf education is a practice with an unusually intense focus on education for Bildung, a focus that is reflected in the formal curriculum. However, as the brief indications above suggest, there is an absence of research into the enacted and experienced aspects of it which is where the formal intentions can become visible. The absence of a systematic collection of case narratives is all the more damaging because it a) deprives us of a comparative tool where the conceptual basis is shared with the general academic and non-academic world (Bildung being a widely used concept albeit with many meanings) and b) deprives us of a tool for systematic educational development from a variety of perspectives as will be considered further below.

The aim of this article is to provide a framework for empirical research into the practice of Waldorf education with a particular emphasis on its Bildung-related aspects and to outline some of its potential contributions.

### **Waldorf education is a pedagogy of Bildung.**

An important aspect in discussing Waldorf pedagogy and the Waldorf curriculum is finding a conceptual bridge between its sources in anthroposophy and a description of it that is open to a general audience of pedagogical science without thereby simply bracketing everything but the most general and accessible statements by Steiner. I think Bildung is a concept rich enough to at least achieve this in part when considered from an empirical standpoint, ie. as a practice.

The main emphasis of Waldorf education has always been education towards autonomy/freedom (cf. eg. Ashley 2009; Carlgren 2016). Thus there is continuity between one of the core elements in the Bildung-tradition and the aims of Waldorf education. Even if there are conceptual differences between earlier ideas of autonomy in the Bildung-tradition and Steiner's and thus differences in the formal aspects of Bildung, the issue here is how these are enacted in practice. In other words, when we describe Waldorf education as an education for freedom, how is this enacted and experienced? Something similar can be said about the emphasis on the views on education as an art and the role of the aesthetic in all lessons at Waldorf schools in connection with the aesthetic Bildung tradition that developed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (eg. Schiller 2010 [1795]). How is this aesthetic education enacted and experienced? Bildung as a concept can therefore function as a way of understanding the Waldorf curriculum as formal or intended curriculum (see further below).

As stated above, all of the elements in the Bildung-tradition are connected to the biographical development of the human being and receive their meaning through it. Goethe recognized this, writing what is generally considered one of the first Bildung-novels *Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship* (1795-96). This biographical approach, although originating in fiction, is where the philosophical tradition of Bildung can be brought over into empirical inquiry. The concept of Bildung is transformed in such empirical inquiry-processes into questions about the meaningfulness, richness or wisdom of a biographical experience with an emphasis on descriptions of events. Although this is the focus here, there is nothing to prevent other concepts to be set at

the center of inquiry. For instance, it seems equally possible to ask class teachers to narrate cases of unusual richness and expressiveness from their experiences with the, in Waldorf education, much discussed 9-year crisis (so-called Rubicon), again with an emphasis on events and processes. Or any main lesson block such as chemistry, history, etc. All such narratives are narratives of Waldorf education as practice, and although by emphasizing the unusually rich or wise (ie. excellent) it is clear that it doesn't reflect average practice, it is far more important to discover that practice which represents an ideal for its practitioners. It would be surprising if there was full agreement on what constitutes such an ideal given that the decision regarding what story to tell rests with the teller but that is only beneficial since it would rather indicate sectarianism if all Waldorf teachers and students expressed exactly the same view on excellence. This brings me to the next section, what is a practice?

## Waldorf education as a practice

The main argument, of relevance to the present approach is that Waldorf education can be understood as a practice in MacIntyre's (2011) sense although he denies that education is a practice in itself (cf. Cooke & Carr 2014 for a more extensive discussion on this point). He characterizes the concept of a practice as follows (MacIntyre 2011, p. 218f.):

By "a practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. Tic-tac-toe is not an example of a practice in this sense, nor is throwing a football with skill; but the game of football is, and so is chess. Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. So are the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.

This in turn means that participation in a practice also entails participation in a range of goods and virtues (ie. practices are distinctly normative) that constitute the ways in which the practice contributes to human flourishing (or, in the case of education, to *Bildung*). These goods and virtues can be articulated narratively when practitioners are asked to describe actions and experiences that represent unusually wise or rich examples of their practice (as they view it). This emphasis on the unusually wise or rich means that what is progressively outlined are the moments when the practice reaches its current imaginative limits. This, then, has the potential to feed back into practice thereby turning the current limits into a new basis out of which further, more imaginative, actions can be envisioned. In this, the approach runs parallel to Steiner's (2013) argument in *The Philosophy of Freedom* that moral action depends on moral imagination and that the exercise of moral imagination holds the potential of reaching new moral ideas (cf. also Röscher 2013). What Steiner, to my knowledge, didn't call for, was a systematic collecting of narrative cases of unusually imaginative moral action in order to drive the development of moral imagination through more extensive reflection and awareness. The absence of a (systematic) case literature on moral imagination means that as morally imaginative people pass away so does their personal excellence and experience. It is comparable to a situation where new poets would have almost no access to earlier poetry or architects to earlier architecture. There are, to be sure, general cases of moral imagination such as those of Jesus or Buddha, but equivalent cases are largely lacking in vocational practices, especially when it comes down to every day work. This lack is present also with regards to actions rich in pedagogical imagination. Given the emphasis in Waldorf education on the aesthetic and imagination, on education as an art, this would seem to be even more pronounced, as mentioned above, when wise and experienced teachers retire taking their repertoire of cases with them (perhaps passing some stories on to younger teachers that they know but this is still not a systematic dissemination of case narratives and it remains local rather than actively shared across institutions and cultures).

The idea of a practice as MacIntyre has outlined it functions as the conceptual bridge between the idea of *Bildung* as the aim of (Waldorf) education and cases as an expression of how it has been enacted. It is

coherent with the normative character of *Bildung* as well as with the emphasis on unusually rich narratives. It also clarifies what the empirical research documenting cases is actually engaged in thereby making it easier to understand how we can move from philosophy to empirical research and why this is desirable. Having reached this point a closer look at some research fields that have contributed to the approach is warranted.

## **Narrative inquiry and curriculum studies**

Proceeding from a general understanding of Waldorf education as a practice it is now time to discuss how this is related to narrative inquiry and curriculum studies. The former because case narratives that focus on auto/biographical accounts draw, in a general sense, from narrative inquiry as research tradition. The latter because in the field of curriculum studies one common distinction is between intended or formal curricula and enacted as well as experienced curricula (Billett 2011). It is the potential of exploring Waldorf education as an enacted and experienced curriculum through case narratives that makes it possible to consider a documentation of practice as valid.

There has been a long tradition within narrative inquiry related to the study of teacher's lives, personal practical knowledge and teacher lore (eg. Clandinin & Connelly 1986, 1995, 2000; Jalongo & Isenberg 1995; McEwan & Egan 1995; Schubert & Ayers 1992). Some of this has been in connection with Shulman's ideas of pedagogical content knowledge bringing it close to research in curriculum studies (eg. Gudmundsdottir 1991, 1995). However, for the most part, there has been little focus on narratives of actions and so much of the literature is equally or more concerned with teacher's reflections, judgments and general thoughts on education. Similarly I know of no approach in narrative inquiry where there has been a clear interest in unusual excellence which makes sense given that narrative inquiry is rooted in life history research where it would be strange to discount those aspects of a life that were not unusually rich. Nonetheless, the present approach owes much both theoretically and methodologically to earlier work in narrative inquiry (in particular Bruner 1997, 2004; Freeman 1997, 1999, 2003, 2007). Beyond the general interest in the biographical as a source of practical knowledge, earlier studies in narrative inquiry have been critical for outlining the various issues with using narratives as a source of data.

Griffiths & Macleod (2008) call attention the risks of narratives turning into anecdotes, meaning a narrative is handled gratuitously and superficially, often to make a general point. Generalization from single, or a few, cases has caused untold misery in the past and present and is difficult to remedy. The present approach's focus on what has been unusually enriching or excellent together with an interest in collecting several narratives that express excellence in practice in different ways helps. A single narrative can easily become a limitation to one's imagination by appearing as "the best practice" and this is difficult to get at other than by presenting a group of cases related to the same issue but dealing with it in very different ways. This would help create real pluralism in practice counteracting our tendency to look for total and singular solutions.

Schön (1983, 1987) and Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) have also called attention to the tendency of beginners in a field to interpret narratives and rules literally and rigidly. From an entirely different perspective the poet Coleridge (among others) made an important distinction between imagination and fancy (Barfield 2014). Fancy means being arbitrary in ones interpretations where imagination retains a certain fidelity towards the meaning of a story. This polarity of rigid literalness and flights of fancy needs to be brought to awareness. Perhaps the focus on pluralism mentioned above can help one move away from literalness and rigidity. Perhaps the arbitrariness of interpretations can be countered by a more extensive move to make the principles and ideas immanent to a case explicit.

Gallagher (2013) has pointed out that any practice which is mostly embodied and disseminated through stories and repetition has a tendency to be conservative. This again indicates the need for reflection on the kinds of case narratives one is interested in. If one's interest is on narratives in general it is likely that they will lean towards repeating that which is normal leading to a conservatism that is rooted in a lack of comparative reflection. By focusing on the unusually rich or excellent this is partly countered.

Finally, an issue that can appear confusing is the truth-value of this kind of case narrative. It is generally agreed among scholars in narrative inquiry that stories cannot naively be taken to represent actual events (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Moon 2010; Roth 2005). From one perspective this is not an issue at all since the practice-orientation is not really concerned with what has occurred but rather with the cases as representations of an ideal practice for future reference. The emphasis on actions and details in this methodology is easy to understand as a desire to document events and of course every measure should be taken to ensure that the cases are told in honesty and with fidelity to what occurred. Still, the central point with the action-emphasis is that the cases can enrich future practice through such detail. It is important then, to bear in mind that although the contents of the cases point to an event or life that has largely occurred, the meaning of them is reestablished in future practice. One also needs to bear in mind that unless there are significant reasons to assume otherwise, cases are far from complete fabrications and can be understood as at least approximations of actual practice.

Moving on to the question of curriculum studies, there are several ways of distinguishing kinds of curriculum study (Billett 2011). The one of interest here is that between intended or formal curriculum, enacted curriculum and experienced curriculum. The first, considered briefly in previous sections, is inquiry into written curricula where educational intentions, principles or ideas are set out and transformed into contents and structures. Studies in enacted curricula focus on how teachers take these formal guidelines and enact them in practice, ie. what is then actually done. Finally, studies in experienced curricula focus on what students experience as they are subject to the actions and interventions of teachers. This is a simple division but it clarifies the relationships between Waldorf education as a formal curriculum and what the teachers actually do in practice as well as what the students experience from this. Unless there is research on all three levels our understanding of the Waldorf curricula (it would be counterfactual to imply that there is one homogeneous Waldorf curriculum, cf. eg. Fintelmann 1990) is limited. A further distinction that neither Billett nor anyone else involved in curriculum studies (apart, perhaps, from those engaged in *Bildungsgangdidaktik*) seems to have made is between subject didactics or content knowledge and *Bildungsdidactics*. Not particularly surprising given that most English-speaking research is conducted within a conceptual framework of curriculum studies, pedagogical content knowledge and liberal education rather than *Bildung* and didactics. The absence of this has meant that most research focusing on enacted curricula, eg. lesson and learning studies, have been about subject didactics without really discussing the differences between an excellent mathematics lesson devoid of any overt *Bildung* affordances and an excellent one where these were at the center of a teachers' attention. Presumably it has also shaped the research design of many studies since subject didactics can be studied through filming and participation whereas *Bildung*-didactics is more amenable to be studied through narrative approaches or mixed methods where these are included.

### Case narratives as methodology

The research design is adapted largely from Flyvbjerg (2001, 2006) and his discussion of various forms of case study research from the perspective of phronetic social science where the aim of research is less about testable theory and more about increasing practical wisdom. Among the case study forms, he enumerates two that are of special importance here, what he calls extreme and paradigmatic cases. These correspond to the focus on unusually rich, successful and wise narratives that is central to this kind of inquiry. The cases presented below are extreme in that they represent unusually rich events in the lives of those telling their stories. If they are paradigmatic, ie. unique in their capacity to bring insight, is something that is less straightforward but where an indication is the comparative fecundity of a case in enriching theorizing. This focus on unusual richness, excellence, etc. thereby runs through this kind of approach in several ways.

1. Methodologically in order to ensure extreme cases
2. In order to counter several weaknesses of narrative research
3. In order to allow for systematic development of practice through the expansion of one's imaginative horizon



#### 4. In order to ensure that the cases can be used for comparative analysis and other aims of inquiry

The documentation of cases can rest on interviews and on auto/biographical writing which can be done in a number of different ways. Focus group conversations, having students interview their teachers, reading auto/biographical literature, written assignments given at education courses at the university level etc. are all possible sources of extreme and paradigmatic cases. What has proven to be important to bear in mind when doing this kind of research is to ensure that those who are sharing their stories talk about actions, about details in their experiences and what they and others did and said. Most of us are not born storytellers and tend to forget this otherwise, turning instead to our judgments and generalizations. It is also important, on the part of the researcher, to develop *Bildung* as a sensitizing concept through at least basic studies in its conceptual history because it works to identify the narrative cases as cases of this kind rather than other kinds of practical knowledge.

There are ethical issues to this kind of inquiry of course. These are mitigated somewhat by the focus on unusual richness and success so that those who are part of the cases are usually not portrayed in a way that reflects negatively on them. Still, standard procedure needs to be followed where those participating with their stories are given the possibility to withhold them. Furthermore, the researcher has to bear in mind that it is an exercise in practical wisdom (in connection with the goods and virtues of the practice of educational research) to judge when a narrative might be sensitive to publish. Therefore consideration has to be given not just to the person who has told the story but also to the other participants in it who have not been asked about their inclusion.

### Examples of case narratives

In the two case narratives below I have opted to present experiences from my own biography. The predominant reason is that as both a former Waldorf student and a Waldorf teacher I hold cases of experienced and enacted curricula respectively. Furthermore it has allowed me to choose and then write them for the purpose of clearly illustrating the argument. The purpose of presenting these narratives is mainly in conceptual development, to clarify the previous argument and to explore as widely as possible what this kind of inquiry can achieve. Given the nature of this kind of inquiry it is almost impossible to do more than this in the article format since it would require more space than available to present a larger number and variety of cases. This means that they do not cover all possible kinds or relevant cases such as case narratives that relay conversations (eg. Tyson 2018).

#### *Diana*

This took place several years ago before I had taken up work teaching bookbinding but when I was a regular visitor to the bookbindery at the Waldorf school. The bookbinding teacher, Wolfgang, for whom I had apprenticed years earlier, taught the courses and also engaged in a lot of supportive craftwork with students who had various degrees of problems. One day before lunch he pulled me aside and said that we would receive a girl from 9<sup>th</sup> grade (ie. 15-16 years old) who had just got back from the hospital from a suicide attempt. Later on that day I sat with a student from 12<sup>th</sup> grade (ie. 18-19 years old) at the table where we drink tea in the bookbindery and discussed a full-leather binding project we were doing. He wasn't paying much attention to my insistence that it was important to consider the kind and color of paper one chose for a particular element in the book and finally I blurted out that this sort of thing is a matter of life or death for a bookbinder not thinking much about the girl who was sitting there as well (students like to hang out in the workshop by the tea-table so it wasn't as such a surprise that someone I didn't know was sitting there). I remember she looked up at me suddenly and asked what I meant by that. My response was that this can't really be explained, but I would be happy to bind a full-leather book with her if she wished so that she could experience it for herself. Only at this point (if I remember correctly) did I notice the bandages on her lower arms and felt very insensitive for having spoken the way I did previously. But perhaps that was necessary to get her interested and so my lack of attention was maybe a good thing this time.

We ended up binding a book together (see photo below), *The Well* [Källan], by the author Walter Ljungquist (1961). My aim in binding something as exclusive as this, with full-leather covers, edge gildings, embossing and other complex details was to open the door to the most expansive aesthetic experience that I could imagine based in the craft I know. It was also to aim for the highest skill thereby impacting the student with a strong sense of being capable and able also to achieve something so beautiful that it would be almost impossible to disregard it. These aims grew, as far as I can tell, out of a combination of experiencing the craft, conversations with Wolfgang and the reading of Waldorf educational literature as well as Schiller's aesthetic letters (this can be understood as the intended curriculum behind the task).

During that work we didn't speak much about her life-situation, I had the experience I've had several times before and after of students engaging with the practical work with a furor as if their life depended on it. She also proved to be very skilled. As the process went on, although I can't remember any specific instances anymore (wishing here that I had kept some kind of diary), I am sure that, in time, she spontaneously came to speak of her life, which is usually what happens when there is no pressure to do so and a basic trust establishes itself. In any case, later on I remember several times when she turned to me with issues she sometimes hadn't talked to anyone of before. I mention this here because I don't want it to appear as if the work alone was all-important, it was the beginning and the end of the process but the conversations we had were also an integral part of the meaning our work together came to have.

I've spoken to her recently, looking back at that process and what took place later together and she doesn't remember much from that period. My experience at the time was that we initially reached a kind of precarious balance because the work returned a measure of biographical coherence and integrity to her (it took some months to bind the book, I think we were done sometime during early spring). She told me in the recent conversation that it and further work gave her the sense that she was actually good at something and that the workshop became a place where she could go that was safe and that provided a haven from all the chaos at home and elsewhere. So on the one hand I think, and she agrees, that this work and the work that followed, saved her life through the connection it established to a place and the people there. On the other, it became increasingly clear later in 10<sup>th</sup> grade (when I had taken over the work in the bookbindery as Wolfgang's successor) that there was much beyond the biographical level that we were not able to reach through that kind of work and where the various instances she was also involved with, psychologist, medication, etc. were not sufficient. So for the first three years that I worked in the bookbindery I was witness to a struggle where I was happy that the previous relationship had been established providing some kind of fundamental trust in life. She spent a significant portion of her years in 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the workshop. But I was also deeply unhappy that there wasn't more that could be done. During that time I would not have been surprised if she hadn't survived the prolonged crisis. She was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder and with the help of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and some medication is now living a life of quite striking biographical integrity. This is the book she bound in ninth grade including the decoration she made that we embossed on the cover (I have excluded a description here of everything that goes into binding a full-leather book, suffice it to say that traditionally this was part of completing the Master-test and so the students achieved something extremely complex with my help):



This case represents an unusually rich experience from my teaching practice and one where my pedagogical imagination achieved something that can be called a temporary ideal. Temporary because, of course, it is only an ideal until one can imagine something richer. The main Bildung-affordance that the case describes or hints at is the development of a biographical integrity and sense of meaning that was strong enough to carry across such a prolonged crisis. There are several such narratives I know of from my own practice as bookbinding teacher and from the practice of my colleagues (one reported in my previous RoSE article, Tyson 2015a). They all have in common that this existential Bildung-process, achieving a measure of biographical coherence and meaningfulness, was afforded by a comparable freedom from curricular constraints and the relative richness of the workshop environment. As such they represent one end of a spectrum so to speak.

The other end is represented by narratives of Bildung-affordances and Bildung-experiences that take place as part of a curriculum. I have chosen the following case from my school-days as a Waldorf-student in Sweden because it at once describes a Bildung-experience (ie. an experienced rather than enacted curriculum as is the case with the previous narrative) and how a teacher created a Bildung-affordance within the context of the regular Waldorf-curriculum. It is easy to consider some of the more obvious contents such as the play in 12<sup>th</sup> grade or some of the main lessons such as Parzival. I remember that story made such an impression I wanted to reproduce it in my main lesson book in poetic form, something that exceeded my capacity and so I finally retold it in prose and turned in perhaps the, in my own eyes, most disappointing work of my upper secondary years. Furthermore, my school days are now more than 20 years removed and my memory for episodes was never especially good to begin with, which makes it hard to go from remembering an experience vaguely to a reasonably detailed description of the actions of the teacher involved. It makes sense here for a school to make it a matter of practice to ask the students as they get older perhaps once per semester what they remember that was unusually enriching or that made them feel unusually alive. At least from time to time narratives will emerge that are worthwhile documenting which, cumulatively, might provide a qualitative source-material for the kind of Bildung-experiences a curriculum tends to afford.

## Encounters with a crafts-curriculum

Looking back, most of the Bildung-experiences I can remember distinctly are connected to tasks, the actions of my teachers are less clear to me in retrospect. For instance, the practice of making main lesson books combined with my time in the bookbindery from 8<sup>th</sup> grade onward led to me making a series of actual books in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, most of which I still have and where each one represents a deep and abiding joy at discovering a field of inquiry and providing it with a suitable aesthetic and practical frame. So many things that make up the curriculum of a Waldorf school come together in this, the main lesson as a way of presenting a theme, the main lesson book as a way of individually working with the subject and the affordances of the various craft-workshops (in this case the bookbindery). This is a classic example of the Bildung-oriented character of the Waldorf curriculum, an orientation that often intersects well with subject teaching.

Rather than picking a specific element from the curriculum such as a main lesson block or a traditional task I can take the opportunity here to make a further distinction in outlining the case. A curriculum can afford Bildung in two ways, as a support for interests already present in which case it acts as a spark for an already unfolding activity to grow even more or as a more active intervention in the biography of a person where it would be difficult to see how significant biographical trajectories would have been possible without it. For instance, I always loved reading and had learnt how shortly before coming to school. I can still remember the triumph and amazement that I had as a six-year old when I first realized I could read a short children's verse in a book at my grandmother's apartment that I had found fascinating. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade (I think it was then, could have been a year or two earlier) we had a main lesson period in literature and I was upset at the time that the focus was solely on European writing. My teacher, whom I had great respect for, probably defended it well enough, at least I don't remember being angry with him but it resulted in me going to the library and borrowing a fairly extensive volume on the history of Chinese literature which I proceeded to read and then discuss in a very long main lesson book. I remember further the literature block in 11<sup>th</sup> grade



where we read excerpts from Balzac, Flaubert and Zola and where my curiosity prompted me to read several books by them. When we got to Dostoyevsky I had one of the great reading experiences of my life. We were given *Crime and Punishment* to read and I had read perhaps the first 50 or so pages when I sat down one afternoon to really get into it. It didn't take long before I was completely and utterly immersed in the story, I couldn't put it down until finally, sometime early the next morning, with tears streaming down my face, I had finished it.

This is an example of a curriculum meeting an already living drive for experience and knowledge and stimulating it further. I think even a bad literature curriculum and poor teaching could not have prevented that interest from emerging and growing in me. On the other hand, this same interest made of me a comparatively inward and intellectual child and there was no immediate connection to craft-work. On the contrary, when we made buttering-knives in what I think was 6<sup>th</sup> grade I was unable to translate my mental representation of one into an actual one. Instead, the one I made looked almost like an inverted buttering-knife and it took at least a year or two before I saw it one day in the kitchen drawer and, in a flash of insight, I could suddenly see that its form was wrong compared to the other, standard, ones next to it. I note this because it indicates that at the very least there was no given talent or interest for crafts present in my early life, especially when it came to the sense of sculptural form. Perhaps this was also a contributing reason for my enjoying bookbinding initially, as a craft most of its basic elements require precision, care, etc. but not much sculptural activity other than in the kind of decorations we made for the books. That aspect of the craft also took Wolfgang, the same bookbinding teacher mentioned in the previous case, the longest to get me to engage seriously with. I remember I made five larger books in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and I was so uneager to draw and then sculpt any decorations that it took some serious haggling between us which ended up in me agreeing to make a really thorough five-pointed star on one book and not being required to make anything in particular for the others. I probably thought I had got the better of the deal but I still recall the work it took to make the star and then to ensure that the various crossings were properly woven. I was also very proud of the result and learned a lot from the technical work it entailed which probably contributed significantly in increasing my self-confidence in later years at school when engaging with the same kind of task. Wolfgang's action here is significant also because he chose a decorative task that was given, a star, but that still contained extensive aesthetic element. The increase in skill then led to an increase self-confidence and creativity.

The central issue here is that the curriculum at Waldorf schools contains a significant amount of craft work in several materials and our school had particularly well endowed workshops. This has two aspects to it of importance for my continued biography. First, it afforded me the experience of bookbinding, something I might never even have considered as a human activity given its relative scarcity today. If that had not occurred I would probably not have trained as a bookbinding-apprentice after my school-days, a training that has been more important for the rest of my biography than any other educational activity or acquisition of knowledge that I have been a part of. The one exception might be my encounter with anthroposophy but even there I am not entirely sure (this is a typical judgment-statement that really warrants some examples from the research perspective being developed here, however, that would distract from the main case narrative and also go beyond the confines of an article). Second, but first in that it happened before I came into contact with bookbinding, my teachers intervened in my regular daily schedule in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and sent me to the smithy for six weeks, two hours per day between 10 and 12. This was part of the same practice described in the previous case where the school would provide additional crafts as a kind of support to students who for all kinds of reasons were not really capable of enjoying the regular curriculum. This, to exemplify, ranges from students like *Diana* with serious problems to less severe issues such as boredom with the regular lessons. I think the main reason for me being sent there was the latter, I was quick to comprehend the intellectual contents of what we were learning and would then proceed to disturb my class-mates.

It took some intense convincing from my mother and teachers for me to agree to even try going to the smithy initially. I think I even shed a few tears when I walked down the hill the first time to the metal workshop. It took a few weeks at least, but then something shifted and from that point on I was rather inseparable from the workshops. I can't recall the full process from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I know I had repeated periods of extended crafts, probably at least once every semester, but the extent to which I myself asked for it

or it was suggested to me is something I'm not sure of. I know my early teenage years were difficult in many ways, something accentuated by the divorce of my parents in 8th grade, in any case I ended up doing a lot of work in the smithy initially. It seems probable that I had at least some time in the bookbinding before I, in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade spent time making a series of hooks in iron used for a particular traditional bookbinding technique. I remember Wolfgang showing me one and then how I first had to make the hook part (I probably made at least ten or so). After that I had to use a lathe to make one end of it round so that we could finally use another tool to make threads in it so it turned into a screw. That lathe was a formative experience for me. A huge machine that spun the iron and where I took a blade that was mounted in the machine and by touching the spinning piece could remove the metal until it reached the requisite diameter. The little shards of iron that were removed were hot and sharp and often hit me on the hands so the work hurt (without actually wounding) and it required all the self-control I had to remain with it and not give up. If it hadn't been for the bookbinding teacher who really needed it and whom I didn't want to disappoint I probably wouldn't have persevered. It is the first time I remember repeatedly returning to something that caused me significant physical discomfort and even anxiety or fear and enduring it. A clear exercise in will or self-discipline I think. It would probably be a serious exaggeration to credit this particular experience with being the sole reason I have, at least since I was 15 or 16, never really backed down from an activity that seemed necessary even though it required significant work, effort and discomfort or where it was unclear what benefit I would receive from it. At least I cannot remember regretting not having done something because I thought to myself, "no that's something I can't do or I don't have the courage to try". That experience was the first of several that I can recall, in school and afterwards during my apprenticeship, that had a similar character.

The encounter with the craft of bookbinding was gradual in the way I came to experience its importance. Initially, it was certainly more the teacher-student (or master-apprentice) relationship that was central to me. However, by the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade I remember I was certain that this was something I wanted to learn as a profession after school. All of this is not to say that the other crafts didn't play a role during my school-days. I made a jacket in 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade that I wore for some time and generally participated in what was offered with interest. It all culminated in my 12<sup>th</sup> grade project where the centerpiece was a harp I built, but that is a rather long story in itself. This aspect of the Waldorf curriculum, that over 12 years it exposes students to most significant fields of human knowledge and activity is perhaps obvious in an abstract sense. But the auto/biographical case I have briefly recounted suggests some potentials in exploring experienced curricula. First in the most general sense of asking former students about situations where the enacted curriculum intersected with their biography to provide them with something they did not already have an interest in. Second in a more specific sense of asking former Waldorf students who have become (Waldorf) teachers about their experiences of the curriculum. This more focused inquiry would engage with those who have experienced the curriculum together with an interest in pedagogy where training and teaching experience helps put the experiences of one's own school-days in context. Perhaps a systematic inquiry in this direction would reveal patterns in the Waldorf curriculum that are inaccessible at the present or that can only be considered as possibilities. A comparative study with similar biographical inquiries into the experienced curricula of other pedagogies could also speak even more explicitly to the specific elements in the Waldorf curriculum that are unique. Or perhaps the kind of biographical interventions that I have experienced are neither more frequent among Waldorf students nor qualitatively different from what students experience at any other school. In that case Waldorf pedagogy as an explicitly Bildung-oriented pedagogy is perhaps less successful in practice than one might hope.

### **Conclusion: How can the collection of this kind of narrative contribute?**

Thus far there have been some scattered remarks above regarding the potential contributions of this kind of inquiry. Here I will turn to a more focused discussion.

First, there is a potential to do extensive comparative explorations of Bildung-related case narratives from different "conceptual environments". With this I mean that Waldorf education is based in anthroposophy as a conceptual environment. Catholic education in a certain form of Christianity. Much education perhaps

in no coherent anthropology (suggesting a foundational lack of *Bildung* in its curricula). The quality of narratives from these different conceptual environments can tell us much more about the actual value of each regarding their affordances of *Bildung*. Such investigation would allow educational researchers a way into Waldorf education that does not presuppose an adoption of the world view in which it is embedded without, therefore, driving it into full relativism. In effect, *Bildung* functions as the normative basis for comparison and evaluation without therefore being a priori locked into any specific framework because it is the narrator who decides what counts as flourishing. It is then possible to place several narratives next to each other and then to begin discussing their relative richness. This also allows for pluralism in that there is room for differences in the evaluation of narratives while still making room for comparative discussion.

Second, single narratives such as that of *Diane* cannot tell us much about the wider practice from which it stems. The brief mention that there are more narratives like it would have to be substantiated. It *can* provide practitioners with valuable suggestions for developing their practice. It can also be used, especially in connection with the indications in the second case, as a template for an innovative approach to the use of crafts in a curriculum, something that any single narrative can do if it is rich enough. Furthermore it is possible to read it as part of different practices. It can be understood as part of a craft-oriented educational practice or as (potential) part of a holistic therapeutic practice. Depending on one's understanding at the moment it can then be put together with further narratives that give it context as one or the other. At the stage of exploration, as mentioned in the introduction to the narratives, it suggests further, more systematic, inquiry in at least these two directions.

Third, as mentioned previously, we know comparatively little of the richness of Waldorf-educational practice especially when considered from the perspective of unusual excellence and pluralism. It could be an important contribution from research to document main lesson periods and other contents and tasks as they are practiced in different but equally rich ways. Not least in teacher education would it be a benefit to have case collections, at least of some of the more important main lesson periods that demonstrate widely differing approaches to the subject. Preferably as different as it is possible to imagine. It is a limitation on practice when we only have access to a few ways of imagining it, something that the lack of casebooks implies. This is not really changed by teacher students visiting different teachers and observing them in action because that speaks to another level of didactical skill (disregarding the whole issue of how to ensure that all teacher students visit excellent teachers). Understanding how to afford *Bildung* and the different ways that this can be achieved within a given task generally requires a more comprehensive view, one possible to attain through narratives.

Fourth, the same case collections could also be used to make elements of Waldorf education more available to other educational practices. There should be no serious reason why the practice for example of teaching the alphabet by telling a story for each letter isn't more integrated in schools generally given its value as a combination of aesthetic *Bildung* and subject teaching in a way that enriches the children engaged with it.

Fifth, there is a tension between subject education and education for *Bildung* where subject didactics easily become focused on the most *effective* way to teach a subject thereby clashing with a *Bildung*-oriented perspective that seeks to allow for surprises, creativity, etc. in education (cf. Dunne 1993 for an extended treatment). The cases presented do not highlight it particularly but it has been a persistent theme in many of the other case narratives I have collected. Here the potential lies in narratives that demonstrate imaginative ways of dealing with this tension in a productive way. Rather than publishing yet another critique of the neoliberal striving for efficiency, one more evisceration of what PISA does to capacities for affording *Bildung* in education, what is urgently needed are collections of cases where excellence in balancing this tension was achieved in one way or other. Such cases can provide teachers with ways of imagining how to balance the necessary training-aspects of what they do with a will to afford *Bildung* together with this. If these cases existed it would also be easier to defend established practice against changes that would make such actions more difficult without providing anything in return. As it stands practitioners often have a hard time articulating why changes to the organization of their practice would be negative because a significant part of that articulation would need to be case narratives. Although this point is made in general it is perhaps even more relevant for Waldorf education in particular since such case collections would constitute a powerful

argument for how Waldorf schools deal with this, in effect demonstrating how an emphasis on Bildung can coexist with one on subject teaching. It would also do much to clarify the value of Bildung for the biographical development of the individual.

To summarize: The inauguration of Waldorf education occurred without any specific practice in place (but of course connected to various established educational traditions). The pioneering teachers had to make do mainly with the principles of Waldorf education using their imagination to conceive of the practice. Now we have almost a century of such practice to look back on. Today there are thousands of people who have lived the practice of Waldorf education as students and teachers. What were their Bildung-experiences and experiences of excellence?

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