

Nurturing Human Growth: A Research Strategy for Waldorf Education

By Aksel Hugo This article is the result of a two-year process of shaping a research strategy accompanying the establishment of a Nordic Master Degree Programme in Waldorf Education (2004-2006). Its content grew out of dialogues within the Study Counsel of the Masters Degree Programme, but also out of dialogues with the Norwegian Association of Waldorf Schools and the Pedagogical Section of the School of Spiritual Science in Norway.

The development of Waldorf education is not conceivable without the development of a culture of research that is in touch with the core of Steiner's pedagogical impulse. What does this mean? It means that we need a research strategy for Waldorf education. And it means that this strategy must be meaningful to the public, to Waldorf teachers, to Waldorf schools and the school movement, to Waldorf teacher training institutions, and to the Pedagogical Section.

Why: The Purpose of a Research Strategy

Ultimately, we need public research in order to communicate and to have dialog regarding Steiner education in a world in which education—lifelong and flexible—has a growing focus of attention for governments and for business corporations. The survival of Steiner's impulse for a genuinely human and humane education relies on such a dialog.

The more immediate aim is to develop a culture of research and inquiry among teachers and Waldorf schools. A strong oral culture of educational practice based on dialogue, one that may be built upon, exists in schools. It needs, however, to be voiced and to be embedded in a continuous written culture of inquiry.

The aim of the Master's Degree Program is to develop the students' independent research capacity in the context of the two cultures of research mentioned above—oral and written. In addition, research activity among staff members and related to program activity is crucial. What holds true for our Nordic program, schools, and community, we believe, also holds true elsewhere.

What: The Profile of a Research Strategy

Referring to Wittgenstein's critique of how academic institutions tend to create a conceptual world that loses contact with lived experience in the field of activity it is meant to serve, the scientific committee¹ pointed to the inherent danger that the Master's Degree Program in its approach to research and education may lose contact with the culture of education, embedded in Steiner schools, that it is meant to serve. Put in simple words, there is a large danger, when establishing academic activity in Waldorf education, to create a conceptually closed world and lose contact with the "ground"—the life world of the schools—and with "heaven"—Steiner's educational impulse. It is in danger of becoming blunt, of shaping an academic profile from what is expected and commonplace.

¹ Quoted from the Scientific Evaluation Committee in their evaluation report on the Study Plans for the Master Degree Programme (NOKUT 2003).

Taking Steiner's epistemology (Steiner 1886, Steiner 1920, Steiner 2000, Kallert 1961, Kiene 1984, Hegge 1999, Barnes 2000, Schieren 2000, Welburn 2004) as a point of departure, four methodological qualities may shape the identity of a research strategy:

1. An extended concept of action

A first characteristic of our research profile is an expanded concept of Action Research. In contemporary educational research, Action Research is not so much a method as a general approach to research. The basic idea is to involve practitioners by offering cooperation between them and a team of researchers. Practitioners pose questions from their experience, questions that are often of a practical nature, such as, how can we achieve this or solve that? The researchers then transform these questions, if necessary, into questions for research; that is, what do we need to know in order to be able to achieve this or solve that? The next step is to choose the appropriate research methods, which could be anything from statistical tests to qualitative, in-depth interviews.

Our extended concept of Action Research further includes an ever-closer link between researchers and practitioners, because they will be, ideally, the same persons. The first step in this extension is to see the relevance for research of Schön's (1982) notions of *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action*.

A second step is to extend the concept of action and see that a human deed or practice is not necessarily merely outer action, bodily doing or saying something, but may include "inner attentive action" connected to soul and mind. This realization establishes a link to Steiner's *philosophy of spiritual activity* as he presents it in *Philosophy of Freedom* (Steiner 1894). The extension of the concept of practice to include also the act of moving attention embedded in all activity of sensing and thinking shows how the core of scientific activity itself is spiritual.

The realm of practice connected to spiritual life is thereby opened for inclusion in the ontology of science. A third step is, on this basis, to extend Schön's methodological concept of reflection-in-action to analyse the structure of this pure attentive activity by self-observation² (Witzenmann 1983, Hugo 1995).

2. An extended concept of observation

Building on the tradition of phenomenology, current pedagogical research extends the concept of observation in educational research to include qualitative inquiry (Schwandt 2000) and individualized research design (Robson 2000). Research connected to creative arts and therapy take this approach one step further and introduce the concept of "art-based research" (McNiff 1995). A research strategy in Waldorf education must focus on the fruitful interplay between the science and the art of education. The intimate relations between art and science is implicit and explicit in Steiner's theory of knowledge (Steiner 1886) and points to reappraisal of Goethe's scientific method (Schieren 1997) and Schiller's aesthetical framing of education (Schiller 1897, Nobel 1996).

The phenomenological critique of cognitive biased research is also becoming visible in the field of philosophy of science education (Dahlin 2001, 2005). Science education in the

² Wizenmann uses the precise term "produktiv-indikativ Methode" in order to define the quality of this extended concept of action research, where we also are "creating what is being observed" (Sardello 2000).

Waldorf Schools are building on the long phenomenological didactical tradition ranging from the lectures of Michael Faraday (Faraday 1860) to the 20th century and the works of Portman, Barfield, Bortoft, Julius, Ott, Schad, Kranich, Mackensen, Holdridge, Skaftnesmo, Rask and others.

As indicated by Ostergaard (2001) it is useful in educational action research to extend the phenomenological approach from typical observations of natural phenomena to include also observations of the learner (being a being) and of all activities (will at work) inherent in the act of teaching. Brierley (2000) takes this one step further in his didactics of geography in Waldorf Schools where soul observation of the child plays a central role, but soul observation appears entwined in the context of the teaching and learning process.

The extended concept of observation building on Goethes method does not mean that conventional quantitative methods are not also valuable. In Steiners own terms it means *soul observations* (seelische Beobachtungen nach Naturwissenschaftliche Methode). It implies an emphasis on the schooling of the senses of the educational practitioner and researcher, thereby bridging the spheres of soul and science and pointing to an extended concept of schooling.

3. An extended concept of schooling

Educational theory connected to vocational training and to education in the arts and crafts generally focuses on the schooling or training elements of mastery (Schön 1987). Building on this perspective on schooling and mastery, our research strategy for Waldorf education extends this concept to focus on the interplay among schooling of thinking, of feeling and of will. And any cognitive capacity is primarily a skill of practice, of moving attention, separated from but also embedded in the attentive movements of our emotional and bodily modes of knowing (Hugo, 1995). A cognitive capacity may hence be strengthened by a more explicit focus on complementing and entwining it with the practical, emotional and aesthetic dimensions of learning (Gardner, 1984).

An epistemological basis for such an activity-sensitized ecology of knowing is worked out by Hugo (1995). It builds a bridge between traditional concepts of schooling in education within the sports, arts and crafts, and the many exercises directed toward the schooling of the soul of the teacher or educational researcher developed by Steiner in connection with the Waldorf school (Smit 1990). In his dissertation on the German philosopher and poet Novalis, Florian Roder (1997) beautifully demonstrates the full spectrum of such an extended concept of schooling, framing Novalis's concept of universal science based on the silent power of man transforming his thinking, feeling and will life, and thereby building new organs of perceptive communication with the life of other beings. An extended schooling of the senses will build organs of increased sensitivity towards other beings, improving the senses of communication.

4. An extended concept of communication

The existentialists within educational theory, like Bollnow (1976) and Buber (1983), always emphasize the being-to-being sphere of education and learning. For them, the central phenomenon in education was the "meeting of beings" and qualities related to this meeting. Where there is no meeting between human beings there is no real communication and no real human growth. Our research strategy in Waldorf education can relate to this and to current communication theory, with a special focus on methods of qualitative research interview (Kvale 2000). It is at the same time open to the extension of the concept of communication to encompass encounters between beings in a world of uttering beings.

In Finland, professor in educational science, Simo Skinnari (2002), recently developed a phenomenology of education in which the concept of “pedagogical love” is central. Such a concept is a sensation and a revelation because the concept of love has no space or place in current, conventional educational theory. In America we see similar things happening: Building on the therapeutic traditions of Jung and Hillman, Sardello (1995) develops the concept to include a phenomenology of the soul in it’s meeting with nature and future. Similarly, in his lecture on “Love and Knowledge”, given at Columbia University in February 2005, Arthur Zajonc (2005) shows how a university course can build a bridge between the two worlds of knowledge and love.

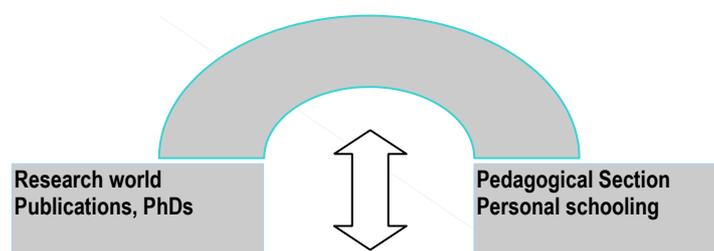
Keeping in mind that, a.) *spirit* is at work in the key activity of science—moving attention—in sensing and thinking, that b.) *soul and body* is accompanying this activity, and that, c.) we thereby build our *incarnated organs* of perception, we see how life nurtures the processes of knowing. An extended concept of communication adds to this image of outer life in magical touch with inner life by showing us the opposite gesture: The inner life of the researcher—his moods and movements of soul and spiritual attention—is in touch with outer life. In the classroom we all know the reality of this in-between of beings in attentive touch. In educational action research it needs to be acknowledged and taken into the arena of conscious, creative inquiry. It is the link from the arena of educational research to the arena of schooling personal and professional “virtues” (Sardello 2000)—because when dealing with soul “...we are dealing then with the distinctly human realm, where the creating factor is absolutely unavoidable. That is to say, investigation of soul is also soulmaking.” (Sardello 1995)

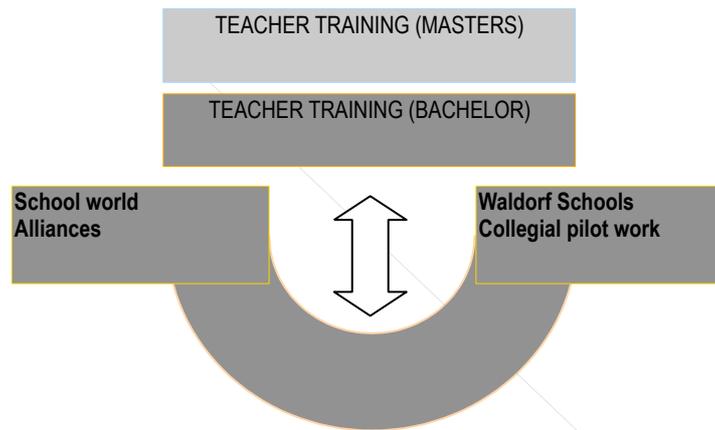
An extended concept of communication is a bridge to Steiner’s epistemology and his spiritual science. It is by this gateway we bring the self-understanding of science in touch with moral life and cosmos. In his beautiful study on information and remembrance in water, the German researcher Bernd Kröplin (2000) demonstrates how every drop of water is carrying its own biography and also how thought and inner emotions makes an imprint on images the water is showing. In a simple manner he demonstrates a bridging of the self-understanding of the science from being purely detached observation to becoming participative communication.

How: A Research Strategy for Waldorf Education

A research strategy encompasses researchers, educators, and practitioners of Waldorf education. They represent an ecology of modes of knowing that mutually support each other. The schools can only develop when the research attitude embedded in Steiner’s educational impulse foster cultures of inquiry in pedagogical, didactic, and social questions related to teaching and school development. And teacher education needs to nurture a research attitude in the development of the teachers.

The figure below illustrates how the whole ecology of “ways of knowing in education” can be reflected in an ecology of participating organs in a common research strategy. In an organism, the different ways of knowing must be differentiated and unified. They depend on each other. The image has been developed in dialogue with the different actors involved as a common foundation for a long term research strategy.





The figure illustrates how the double bridge, practical and spiritual, between spiritual science (anthroposophy) and the educational world can be built by a joint culture of practical, soulful education and soulful educational research. It also matches new policies in educational research, which demand tighter relations and interplay between the world of educational research and the world of everyday school life. Teacher education has a key position here in linking these worlds of educational research and practice, with the bachelor's level reaching more strongly into the school world and the master's level reaching more strongly up into the research world.

Who: Shared Ownership of Shared Tasks

A challenge of our time is that we learn to cultivate our own questions. Individually, they can unite what tend to fall apart in academic life, namely our personal, professional and scientific quests. Fruitfulness in research is linked to intensity and long term commitment in the way we live with questions. When we see this in our own biographies, we can also learn to see the “holding-together effect” of shared questions in forming cultures of inquiry. The key factor is shared ownership of shared tasks. A community of innovative practice has a task that it gives or chooses itself, linked to its own questions. The intensity and ecology of shared questions build the “carrying capacity” and growth structure of research culture.

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