Rudolf Steiner's Research Methods for Teachers[1]

Martyn Rawson

Several things that distinguish Waldorf education are unusual in education today. The first is the awareness that a human being is only fully understood if we take the unseen, spiritual aspect of a child's nature into account. Another is the explicit assumption that a teacher is required to research the curriculum, teaching methods, and factors that influence the learning and development of children. Further, Waldorf education is based on an epistemology and ontology that acknowledge no formal limits on knowledge of spiritual aspects of life. It is of paramount interest, therefore, that the methods by which this knowledge is generated be well-known and accessible to teachers.

A year after the founding of the Waldorf School in 1919, Rudolf Steiner, then school Director, held a course for teachers in which he added new perspectives to their reflection on their work. He described a method that, if used consistently over a period of years, leads teachers to be able to grasp quickly the essence of what needs to be done, for example, in lesson planning and in recognizing and meeting the needs of pupils. Steiner described this as "meditatively acquired knowledge of the human being."[2] This involves studying the nature of the developing human being, meditating on this study, and then "creative remembering."[3] Steiner describes the outcome of working in this way as follows:

> Now if you work at the study of the developing human like we have been doing, you experience it consciously to start with; yet if you subsequently meditate on it, an inner process of digestion goes into your soul and spirit, making a teacher and educator of you. Just as the metabolism makes you a living person, this meditative digesting of a true study of man makes you an educator. You simply encounter the child in an entirely different way when you experience the results of a real anthroposophical study of man. And if we keep returning to ideas like these, if only for five minutes a day, our whole inner life of soul will be brought into movement. We shall produce so many thoughts and feelings they will just pour out of us. If you meditate on the study of man in the evening, then the next morning you will know in a flash… what to do with this or that pupil.[4]

If we take these brief indications in terms of practitioner research methodology,[5] we can interpret them as follows. Steiner calls the first stage of this method study. If we interpret this in a wider sense it includes making observations, informing ourselves of the relevant literature, reflecting on ideas about our educational task, and engaging in discourse with colleagues, all of which Steiner saw as the regular activities of staff or faculty meetings. The teachers' meeting should be a "living university for the College of Teachers—a permanent training academy…."[6] In a wide sense I interpret study to mean what would be called, in a research process, data collection. This could include a range of research methods, such as participant observation, case or child study, interview, questionnaire, study of documents, or a relevant literature survey or review—in other words, the methods typical of qualitative or interpretive research.[7]

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Steiner calls the next stage of this method *meditation*. He uses an analogy with digestion but

does not give precise instructions. The phrase "meditate on" suggests a form of reflection and contemplation, and it suggests regular practice. The analogy with digestion, however, requires a process of repeated forgetting—we are aware of our food's taste and texture as we eat it, but then, thankfully, we are normally unconscious of it during digestion. Perhaps what Steiner meant was something along the lines of what Schmuck describes as professional self-reflection or "self-focused meditation that includes visualizing where you are, where you have been, and where you might go."[8] Steiner emphasizes the element of repeated practice.

The third stage following this meditative understanding is *creative remembering*,[9] by which I believe Steiner means the process by which practice is illuminated not only by what we have understood but by what expresses itself as intuition. It is the art of doing the right thing at the right time. Lutzker has recently discussed the literature on intuition in teaching, especially by Schön.[10] Kiersch has stressed that it is important to bear in mind that this process of creative remembering is not "the normal remembering with the help of which concrete pedagogical actions can be logically based on anthroposophical insights. What is meant here is 'receiving something inwardly' from the supersensible-spiritual realm of intuition."[11] This process of remembering is akin to "thinking observation."

Ideas, experiences, and even abilities are changed and enhanced after a period of unconsciousness.

In the process of meditatively acquired knowledge of the developing human being, which may be called the *meditative reflection* method, we recognize Steiner's epistemology in the steps by which we acquire knowledge of the world. Steiner posited two sources of generating knowledge: what we perceive of the world through our senses and what we can grasp in the form of ideas and concepts in the act of thinking. In thinking, the human being has access to universal truths. In perceiving, we construct an empirical view of the world that is necessarily subjective. The world reveals itself, according to Steiner, in the human mind, or, as he also put it, the soul. The soul is the stage upon which cosmic events unfold and in which we are not impassive observers but active co-creators, as Steiner put it in his doctoral thesis, *Truth and Science*. We change what we perceive and we are changed by the process.[12]

What is explicitly missing in Steiner's method of meditative reflection, though it is amply supported implicitly, is the need to reflect on the acts of intuition and their consequences in practice. This is crucial if this method is to meet critical standards of research.[13] Each individual teacher must engage in such reflection, for example, in reviewing lessons, and it must also occur in discourse with fellow teachers.

The whole process aims at revealing something of the being of the phenomenon and this insight provides a basis for meaningful engagement and action. The question is, what comes to expression through the data, through our perceptions, and how do we experience it? Only this question leads to a provisional idea of the being of the phenomenon.

Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry

Meditation may be an unusual form of research, but if we focus on the aspect of research that requires us to think about the phenomena that interest us, then we may agree on the importance of the quality of this thinking. Meditation may be called an enhancement of thinking processes, a concentration of focus on the phenomena, and a mental discipline. In the method described above, meditation has two essential qualities: repeated, focused contemplation and forgetting. Forgetting means "letting go" and allowing the contents of mental images and thoughts to sink out of consciousness; the focus of our attention shifts elsewhere, for example, or we fall asleep. Steiner suggested that ideas and experiences continue to be processed in the unconscious mind, and modern brain research confirms this.[14] Ideas, experiences, and even abilities are changed and enhanced after a period of unconsciousness.

In recent years there has been dialogue between brain science and meditation. A recent publication records the dialogue between promi-

nent neurologist Wolf Singer, director of the Max-Planck Institute for Neurology, Frankfurt, and Matthieu, a Buddhist monk and former molecular scientist:

> WS: It appears that you are using your intentional control system to activate internal representations, to focus your attention on these and to work with them as if you were dealing with information from outside, quite as if the attention directing cognitive abilities of the brain were being used to explore the inner world. Perhaps the ability to distinguish and to perceive these processes is increased through the focusing of attention on the inner processes in just the same way as when our attention is focused on events in the outer world. Could it be that through meditation the perception of inner states is simply sharpened?
>
> MR: …or perhaps only the meta-consciousness for a state that you want to develop further, such as empathy…
>
> WS: …with the intention of stabilizing these mental states …
>
> MR: …to maintain the state of meditation from moment to moment…
>
> WS: …to hold the focus of attention on certain inner states, which may be emotions of the contents of mental images. In principle this would mean using the same strategy as we use when we focus on a certain segment of the outer world or when we want to concentrate on a certain activity—except that most of us are less familiar with this strategy of focusing on inner states….
>
> MR: That conforms with the definition of meditation, to cultivate a certain mental state or spiritual state, without being distracted.[15]

Following this description of the effect of meditation, we can see that, with practice, it is possible to focus on inner processes, be they thoughts or feelings, or data we have collected and structured, in the same way that an empiricist focuses on the external world. This would be a kind of inner empiricism, or, as Goethe called it, *anschauende Urteilskraft*—forming a judgment through contemplation. This is what Steiner called "exact imagination," focusing our open-minded attention on mental phenomena and processes and observing how they unfold, how they reveal themselves, and how they affect us.[16]

The physicist Arthur Zajonc has recently described a method of "contemplative inquiry" that has much in common with the meditative reflection I have described.[17] Drawing on a wide range of traditions and practices—Zen Buddhism, Sufism, Jesuit meditation, the idealism of Goethe and Steiner, and the Romantic era, including Coleridge and Emerson—Zajonc has made the case that, with suitable inner preparation, a researcher can attain heightened levels of consciousness that can enhance our perceptual and cognitive abilities. In creating an inner space of stillness and focus the mind can become more receptive and clear. Indeed, the creation of the contemplative mood or consciousness, while initially turning inward, can also be a preparation for greater awareness when attention is directed into the world. As Zajonc puts it,

> In meditation we move between focused and open attention…. After a period of vivid concentration on the content of meditation, the content is released. That which is held is gone. Our attention opens. We are entirely present. An interior psychic space has been intently prepared and we remain in that space. We wait, not expecting, not hoping, but present to welcome whatever may or may not arise within infinite stillness.[18]

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Zajonc calls this process the breathing of attention or cognitive breathing. First, the meditant focuses on a content; he or she then empties the mind to create an inner space in which activities and relationship—rather than the outer

forms—can reveal themselves. This path does not lead away from the world of the senses, the world of observation and empirical experience, but rather opens the mind to the inner complexity of life. "Meditation is a schooling for experiencing life from the inside."[19]

This point has much in common with Barfield's concept of "participation." Owen Barfield, the English philosopher and linguist, has been called a prophet of the postmodern[20] by virtue of his critique of positivism, first stated in the 1920s, and his recognition of the role of language in knowledge creation. Barfield's chief concern was the loss of meaning in a materialistic age. In numerous works on language he charted the evolution of human consciousness. He characterized the consciousness of modern times as marked by the "trauma of materialism." Materialism for Barfield meant "taking material objects of perception as what is really real rather than as products of the act of perception."[21]

Intuition progressively becomes an ability, a skill we can apply to understand the world while we are working within it.

Barfield saw, in what he called the "idolatry" of perception, the habit of taking the world at face value, as something given, without further levels of meaning, and requiring no further activity on the part of the perceiver.[22] For Barfield, the act of perception was not a passive taking in of what already existed out there. Rather, perception was actively generated. In the course of cultural evolution, human beings progressively lost their ability to directly experience reality as both their understanding of the world and their language became more abstract. Thus, people lost their ability to derive meaning from their perception of the world. Metaphors began to replace direct experience. "Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can now be reached only by effort of the individual mind—this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor."[23]

Only in what Barfield termed "poetic diction"[24] do we approach a state of what he called *participation*, in which our apprehension of reality is direct. The way to overcome idolatry and the trauma of materialism is to strive toward a new form of participation through thinking. Barfield drew on the distinction between *natura naturata*—"nature natured"—and *natura naturans*—"nature naturing"—to distinguish between inert objects perceived in the world and the activities and processes that bring them into being. Through developing a new consciousness—one that we still have access to in metaphor and poetic diction—we can participate in or experience that activity directly. The trauma of modern materialism or modern positivism is in believing that the world we perceive passively as *natura naturata* is all there is. Like Goethe and Steiner, Barfield sought the activity within life through an active process of knowledge creation. For Barfield, the path to the reality within the world lay, for the modern mind, in imagination, in "poetic diction."

Like Steiner, Barfield often used the terms *consciousness* and *spirit* synonymously. Consciousness for both was a property in its own right, like energy or light. Full consciousness was, for Steiner, full awareness of all dimensions of reality, material and spiritual, outer appearance and being.

Meditative reflection is a process that shifts our awareness from external appearances to the process level of reality, to what Zajonc calls "the domain of activity and relationship in which everything is relationship and movement, everything is shifting from potential to actual and back again. And agency/being stands behind it all."[25]

To build on Zajonc's and Barfield's contributions, we can see a bridge between meditative reflection and the creation of an imaginative image or an intuition. I look into the world and perceive with my senses. I form mental images corresponding to what I experience. In meditating, I open myself to processes underlying the world I perceive. I can do this because these same processes are active within me, both as the formative forces of my body and as the formative processes of my cognition.[26]

These processes may or may not be progressively revealed to me in my thinking—meditation is not a process that can be forced. If they do reveal themselves to my mind, I can express and summarize what I now experience in the form of an image, a picture, a motif, a metaphor, or a con-

cept. That is to say, the sum of my experience is artistically integrated into an image that has a more general character than the specific instance that prompted it. This image or complex concept may have a multilayered meaning, like a picture, and it expresses something of the essence of what I see and experience. I "know" how to read the "pictures" and can interpret them, just as an anthroposophical doctor may understand his or her patient and prescribe a specific therapy or remedy. The doctor weighs evidence and forms a judgment based on a "picture" of the individual and the illness. This is what Steiner described when he said the teacher will know in a few moments what the pupils need and what the pedagogical approach should be. Intuition arises here out of the participation of the observer in the process of what is observed. Both are altered by the experience and this, too, is part of the nature of intuition. Intuition is not merely a bright idea that occurs to us; it activates our being in a more profound sense. Further, intuition progressively becomes an ability, a skill we can apply to understand the world while we are working within it.

Knowledge is not a *thing* that one can possess and give to others, but rather a process in which one may engage.

Teacher as Researcher and Learner: Knowledge in Context

Meditative reflection is essentially an enhancement of the process of learning and involves development of specific competences that teachers need in order to observe and "read" children, and to then reflect on subsequent thoughts, feelings, and actions. Such competence is not acquired quickly or during initial teacher education, but involves skills acquired through practice. In particular, practitioner research is a process of development from novice to expert.[27] Ingold calls this process *enskilment*, which he characterizes as a process of observation and reflection embedded in a context of practical engagement with the world.[28] Following the socio-cultural approach of Schön[29] and Lave and Wenger,[30] teaching as an art is skilled practice that relies for its further development on a process of knowing in practice. It also requires the kind of active reflection that Ingold calls *imagination*.[31]

Further, as Kelly says, "the process of knowing-in-practice does not reside within individuals; rather it is distributed across teachers, students, and both conceptual artifacts such as models and theories, and physical artifacts such as books and computers."[32] This perspective is both reassuring and challenging for teachers who feel alone in the classroom but who wish to conform with Steiner's view that discourse among teachers is essential, that a "living academy" should meet weekly to facilitate, we may say, knowing-in-practice.

This perspective also sheds light on the nature of meditative research, which by its nature is individual. One of the preconditions for raising meditative reflective practice to the level of research is the step to collegial discourse and the recognition that each school has a culture. This school culture is more than the sum of knowledge possessed by each member of the school, and it "pertains not to precise situations but to the particular working practices and their associated ways of knowing and thinking which define particular school circumstances."[33] Thus Kelly describes the context of teacher learning and the creation of teacher expertise. The implications of this for the meditative reflective method are that discourse among colleagues is part of the process and that understanding occurs in the context of consciousness for a specific school as a learning organization.[34]

Building on Vygotsky's social constructivist theory,[35] which sees learning as the motor of development and the creation of knowledge as essentially collaborative, Wells sees knowledge as emergent, contextual, and, above all, dialogic. He describes knowledge as

> …the enhanced understanding of the problem situation gained by the participants, on the one hand, and the representation of that understanding that is produced in the process, on the other. Furthermore, neither the participants' understanding nor the knowledge representation can be appropriated by others unless they too engage in some comparable problem solving.[36]

Knowledge in this sense is not a *thing* that one can possess and give to others, but rather a process in which one may engage. Knowledge is created as an active deed and, as Wells sees it, this process is essentially collaborative. In dialogue—which also includes self-dialogue in thinking—active partners create knowledge. Learning, as Lave and Wenger point out, is not a separate and independent activity in life but an integral part of interaction with the world and with others within a "community of practice."[37]

What Wells calls "dialogic inquiry" is not only a method of classroom knowledge-building; it is also a primary research method. Further, in contrast to conventional research methods, in which a theory is posited, tested algorithmically, and then applied—which as Ingold has shown separates the activities of knowing and of doing[38]—knowledge grows in a specific context through dialogue.

Enhancing Educational Research

Both Steiner's meditative reflective method and Zajonc's contemplative inquiry can enhance all processes in the daily or weekly cycle of teaching, including planning, acting (e.g., teaching), reviewing, studying, and discoursing. Both approaches support the process of intuition and, practiced regularly, help to sustain the development of skills that belong to teacher learning and the acquisition of expertise. To raise this activity to the status of research, the key is the quality of critical reflection after the event.

I follow Wellington's definition of educational research,[39] in which he follows Stenhouse[40] in describing research as systematic, critical, and self-critical inquiry that aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. I add Stenhouse's basic maxim, that practitioner research is aimed not only at understanding learning and teaching but improving them as well.

I am currently investigating, in a range of educational and therapeutic settings, the extent to which a method of meditative reflection can be embedded into a cycle of practitioners' learning with the aim of enhancing professional learning. Initial outcomes have established that many practitioners recognize the value of intuition in their professional judgment and are interested in exploring ways of enhancing intuitive processes through meditative work. To this end, I have developed a method that combines Steiner's meditatively acquired knowledge and Zajonc's contemplative inquiry. Participants are asked to record personal reflections on the experience as well as the outcomes of discourse with colleagues. The work is at an early stage but initial results are encouraging. I see this work and research as an important aspect not only of Waldorf education but of education in any context. To this end I am also working with colleagues outside of Waldorf education.

As da Viega points out, the "ongoing revision and evaluation of educational practice through observation and through scientific research and taking into account the anthropological, biological, and social changes which have occurred"[41] is essential to the continuing professional development of Waldorf education and its practitioners. This research should also include research into practitioner research methods, including those based on anthroposophy.

Endnotes

1. Selection from "Enhancing professional learning: embedding continuing contemplative enquiry into practitioner research" In: Dahlin, B, ed. *Research in Steiner Education*, 2009.
2. Steiner, Rudolf. 1983.
3. Steiner, 1983, p. 32.
4. Steiner, 1983, p. 25.
5. See, for example, Wellington, 2006.
6. Steiner, 1972, p. 208.
7. Wellington, 2006.
8. Schmuck, 2006, p. 19.
9. Steiner, 1983, p. 32.
10. Lutzker, 2007; Schön, 1983; see also Noddings and Shore, 1984; Copei, 1966.
11. Kiersch, 2008, p. 68.
12. See Sijmons, 2008; Schieren, 2007; Welburn, 2004.
13. See, for example, Poulson and Wallace, 2004.
14. Damasio, 2004; Edelmann, 2004.
15. Singer & Ricard, 2008, pp. 61-62. Author's translation from the German. In the last sentence MR uses the word *Geisteszustand*, which could also be translated as "spiritual state."
16. Steiner, 1963.
17. Zajonc, 2009.
18. Ibid., p. 39.
19. Ibid., p. 46.
20. Gruenler, 1998.
21. Ibid.
22. Barfield, 1957.
23. Barfield, 1928, p. 88.
24. Ibid.
25. Zajonc, 2009, p. 195.
26. Steiner, 1996.
27. Kelly, 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991.
28. Ingold, 2000, p. 416.
29. Schön, 1983.
30. Lave and Wenger, 1991.
31. Ingold, 2000, p. 418.
32. Kelly, 2006, p. 507.
33. Kelly's summary 2006; Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 507.
34. Wells, 1994 and 2000.
35. Vygotsky, 1978.
36. Wells, 1994, p. 13.
37. Lave and Wenger, 1991, cited in Wells, 2000, p. 4.
38. Ingold, 2000, p. 416.
39. Wellington, 2006.
40. Stenhouse, 1988.
41. da Viega, 2006, p. 41.

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