

Turning Tides: Creating Dialogue between Rudolf Steiner and 21st Century Academic Discourses

**A Brief Report on Steiner-based Academic Research in Australia in Context
Commissioned by the Rudolf Steiner Schools of Australia: An Association (RSSA)**

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Introduction

There has been no shortage of Steiner-related writing and publishing over the past eighty or so years since Steiner's death. The vast majority of this material, worldwide,¹ has been written by anthroposophists and/or Steiner/Waldorf educators and published by Steiner/Anthroposophic Presses (mostly in London and New York) and/or in-house Steiner magazines, particularly those focused on education. The primary purpose and value of the general philosophical material has been to deepen the anthroposophical impulse given by Steiner. The primary purpose and value of the pedagogical material has been to mentor new teachers into the approach, to promote Steiner education and to communicate with prospective and current parents of children in the schools. While all this material is theoretically available for the wider public to read, most of it is written with audiences in mind who are informed by anthroposophical literature and/or Steiner/Waldorf pedagogy. The language used is that which is understood by "Steiner-informed people" and more often than not no attempt is made to translate what could be called "Steiner jargon" to a mainstream audience. Unfortunately, much of this material today appears anachronistic to many academics and mainstream teachers and may serve to deter rather than facilitate dialogue between Steiner and 21st century academic discourses. Recently, the RSSA has recognised that there is an urgent need to reconstruct Steiner education in Australia and contemporise it for the 21st century. To this end it has committed itself to beginning the dialogue by commissioning this research project.

The first part of this process is to uncover what research has already been done in Australia which has attempted to make conceptual bridges between Steiner's ideas, language and understandings and the academic discourses—either in education or any other fields. There is change afoot and, particularly over the last decade, there has been an emerging interest worldwide among Steiner-experienced educators and others to begin to build conceptual bridges with the academic world by undertaking postgraduate research and/or by writing and publishing articles for refereed academic journals or scholarly books, rather than restricting dissemination of Steiner's ideas to Steiner Magazines and Presses. This academic research movement appears to be quite strong in Australia. Given our small population size, Australian Steiner-based researchers have begun to make a significant contribution to the small but growing planetary tide of academic interest in Steiner's philosophy and pedagogy.

This report contains a brief descriptive summary of the available Steiner-related Australian research. This is followed by a brief summary of what I call "kindred" contemporary educational research that I have uncovered through my own research, which attempts to create conceptual bridges between Steiner philosophy and pedagogy and the contemporary academic discourses.

1. My focus here is Anglophone publications as this is the literature I am familiar with. I would be interested to know if the situation is similar or different in other languages, for example: German, Dutch or the Scandinavian languages, to name a few.

Twenty-five Years of Steiner-related Academic Research in Australia

I have categorised the research into several sections and within each of these sections there are two broad sub-categories: research that draws substantially on Steiner's educational/pedagogical writings and research which draws on Steiner philosophy as a broader context for pedagogical understanding.

PhD Research

Over the last decade, a total of nine Steiner-related Doctorates have been completed in Australia. Six of these contribute substantially to a Steiner-based understanding of educational theory. These focused on Goethian science and education (Hoffmann, 1998), teacher education (Mazzone, 1999), the parent community (Stehlik, 2001), narrative for meaning-making (Ward, 2002) the pedagogy of imagination (Nielsen, 2003) and evolving education through evolution of consciousness (Gidley, 2008). An additional three Doctorates were completed during this time, which provide a broader context for Steiner pedagogical understanding. These were in the areas of music (Bignell, 2000), drama (Anderson, 2005) and psychotherapy (Steele, 2005).

In addition there are currently five Steiner-related Doctorates being undertaken in Australia. Two of these are being undertaken in educational areas. These are in the areas of teacher training courses in a postmodern context (Haralambous, University of Canberra) and complex technology in Steiner/Waldorf settings (Rushton, Macquarie University). Three additional Doctorates are also underway in the epistemology of Steiner (Ginges, University of Western Sydney), music informed by anthroposophy (Killian-O'Callaghan, VCA, University of Melbourne) and anthroposophical medicinal therapy (**Therkleson, Edith Cowan University**).

Masters Research

Masters research involving Steiner education appears to have begun in Australia at least twenty-five years ago with the first Masters that I have uncovered being on the educational theory and practice of Rudolf Steiner (Mullins, 1983). Then, after a gap of eight years, since 1991, another eleven educational Masters have been completed. The research themes have included holistic reading and writing (Manassen, 1991), wholistic education (Irving, 1991), music (Bignell, 1994), music education (McMurtry, 1994),

early childhood schooling (Maeder, 1995), extra lesson (Judd, 1996), youth futures and empowerment (Gidley, 1997), storytelling in African educare training (Perrow, 2001), a case study of Glenaeon (Mowday, 2004), leadership in Steiner schools (Ross, 2005) and the pedagogical imagination and eurythmy (Tatum, 2007). An additional six Masters theses have been completed which provide a broader context for Steiner pedagogical understanding. These were in the areas of Goethean theory and ecology (Hoffmann, 1994), art as a way of knowing (Lovett, 1997), anthroposophical medicinal therapy (Therkelson, 2003), colour theory (van Wilgenburg, 2004), the musical element in human consciousness (Killian-O'Callaghan, 2005) and Steiner's "philosophy of freedom" (Haralambous, 2006).

There are also currently three educational Masters projects underway including the themes of music teaching (Chodkiewicz, University of New England), evolution of consciousness and education (Klugman, La Trobe University) and movement and the foundations of thought (McKeachie, University of Canberra).

Academic Publications

Since the turn of the 21st century four academic books have been published based on Steiner-related Australian Doctoral research (Anderson, 2005; Hoffmann, 2007; Nielsen, 2004; Stehlik, 2002).

Over the last decade, there have been at least seventeen Steiner-related articles published in refereed academic journals by Australian researchers, with the majority of these being in relation to Steiner education/pedagogy (Gidley, 1998, 2007; Gidley & Hampson, 2005; Hoffmann, 1994, 2000; Molz & Gidley, 2008; Neilsen, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2007; Stehlik, 2003, 2005). Five of the articles, however, were in areas that provide a broader context for pedagogical understanding (Gidley, 2005, 2007; Hoffmann, 1996; Steele, 2004; Therkleson, 2004).

In addition, over the last twelve years, there have been at least fourteen Steiner-related academic chapters in books published by independent publishers (i.e. not self-published or Anthroposophic Presses). Again, most of these have educational themes (Gidley, 2001, 2002, 2008, 2008; Stehlik, 1996, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2008). Five of these chapters were based on research in areas of broader philosophical or spiritual-scientific research (Gidley, 2000, 2004, 2005, 2006; Hoffmann, 1998).

Papers Presented at Academic Conferences

Over the past twelve years there have also been at least eighteen research papers presented by a number of researchers at broad-based academic conferences (ie not Steiner/Waldorf or Anthroposophical conferences). As with the academic publications, most paper presentations have been in educational areas (Gidley, 1997a, 1997b, 2003, 2004, 2005; Gidley & Hampson, 2005; Haralambous, 2008; Nielsen, 2003, 2004, 2005; Perrow, 2000, 2003; Rushton, 2008; Stewart & Nielsen, 2008). Additional papers were also given on parenting (Chartres, 1996), imagination (Gidley, 2001), youth and culture (Gidley, 2003) and holistic therapy (Steele, 2006).

Summary Comments

It is interesting to note that although there have been almost thirty researchers who have undertaken postgraduate research (or are currently doing so), it appears that only a handful of these researchers have published their research in academic journals or books (Anderson; Gidley; Hoffmann; Nielsen; Stehlik; Steele; Therklason). A few more have presented their research at “non-Steiner” conferences (Gidley; Haralambous; Nielsen; Perrow; Rushton; Chartres/Steele²).

Finally, it should be noted that this report is based only on the research that has been uncovered to date and it is also highly possible that there is more Steiner-related academic research that I have not yet identified. There may also be many more publications and conference presentations by the above-mentioned researchers and others that I have not yet uncovered.

Locating “Kindred” Contemporary Educational Research Worldwide

My own research over the past few years has indicated that there have been three waves of educational reform during the 20th century. In the early 20th century, in response to the weight of scientific materialism, industrialism and secularism, there was Steiner and Maria Montessori in Europe, Alfred North Whitehead in the UK, John Dewey in the USA and Sri Aurobindo in India, all pioneering more integral, organic educational approaches that provided a counter-weight to the factory model. They emphasised imagination, aesthetics, organic thinking, practical engagement, creativity, spirituality, and other features that reflect a new movement of consciousness (Gidley, 2007a).

What I call the *second wave* was sparked by the dramatic consciousness changes that began in 1968 with the student protests in Paris, followed rapidly by the 1969 Woodstock Peace Festival in the USA, which laid foundations for a youth peace movement against the Vietnam War. These events arguably marked the beginning of various “new age” movements, including participatory politics, new forms of music, east-west spiritual-philosophical dialogues, new gender relations, post-nuclear family lifestyles and “recreational use” of chemical substances. These movements were taken up quite strongly in the Anglo countries, particularly in pockets of the US and, at least indirectly, began to shift ideas about formal education. The 1960s and 1970s saw a surge in the number of Steiner/Waldorf schools being founded outside Germany, with the number steadily increasing since this time. The 1970s to 1990s saw a broadening of alternative educational modes, including holistic education, critical pedagogy, home-schooling, futures education, and a raft of educational reforms within mainstream settings. All were critical of the formal, modernist ‘factory-model’ of mass education. Most sought to broaden education beyond the simple information-processing model based on a mechanistic view of the human being to a more holistic, creative, multifaceted, embodied and participatory approach. Yet not all honour the spiritual needs or the multi-layered nature of the developing child, as part of a consciously evolving human species—as Steiner education does.

This brings us to what I call the *third wave* approaches to evolving education. The last few decades saw a flourishing of alternative educational approaches that point to the inadequacy of the factory model of formal education. I refer to them collectively as *postformal pedagogies*.³ A preliminary scan of the literature indicates that they could be clustered under the following broad areas, while acknowledging that there are varying degrees of overlap between some of these clusters. All of these approaches could be regarded as “kindred” pedagogies to Steiner/Waldorf education, and are worth further exploration as part of contemporising Steiner education in the 21st century.

2. Chartres is Robin Steeles former name.

3. I am using the term *postformal* here as an overarching term to cover the variety of pedagogical approaches that critique the formal, factory model of schooling.

I have broadly clustered them as follows:

- Aesthetic and artistic education (Abbs, 2003; Gidley, 1998; Read, 1943; Rose & Kincheloe, 2003);
- Complexity in education (Davis, 2004; Morin, 2001);
- Critical and postcolonial pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Gatto, 1992; Giroux, 1992; Jain, Miller, & Jain, 2001)
- Environmental/ecological education (Fien, 1998; Jardine, 1998; Orr, 1994);
- Futures education (Gidley, Bateman, & Smith, 2004; Hicks, 2002; Milojevic, 2005; Slaughter, 2002);
- Holistic education (Forbes, 2003; Hart, 2001b; J. Miller, P., 2000; R. Miller, 1999, 2006; Nava, 2001; Palmer, 1998);
- Imagination and creativity in education (Egan, 1990, 1997; Neville, 1989; Nielsen, 2004, 2006; Sloan, 1992);
- Integral education (Adams, 2006; Bronson & Gangadean, 2006; Stack, 2006);
- Planetary/global education (Boulding, 1990; Gidley, 2001; Goerner, 2000; Inayatullah & Gidley, 2000; Morin, 2001; Visser, 2000);
- Postformality in education (Horn, 2001; Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Hinchey, 1999; Sinnott, 2005);
- Postmodern and poststructuralist pedagogies (Abbs, 2003; Elkind, 1997, 1998; Peters, 1998; Sloan, 1992);
- Spirituality in education (Chater, 2006; de Souza, 2006; Glazer, 1994; Pridmore, 2004; Woods, O'Neill, & Woods, 1997);
- Transformative and contemplative education (Daniels, 2002; Hart, 2001a, Zajonc, 2006);
- Wisdom in education (Arlin, 1999; Bassett, 2005; Hart, 2001b; Henderson & Kesson, 2004; Sternberg, 2001)

Because this list may at first present an overwhelming amount of new ideas and literature, I have only mentioned a few key references in each category. There is much more literature that can be accessed in each of these areas. For those who are interested I have discussed these approaches in more detail and also clustered them in a new way under four core pedagogical values: love, life, wisdom and voice/language. For more on this see my recent research (Gidley, 2007b, 2008, Forthcoming). In these papers I have shown how many of the features of Steiner education are related in some way to many of these new approaches. I also suggest that Steiner education in the 21st century could be revitalised by more engagement on the part of Steiner/Waldorf teachers with many of these approaches.

Concluding Reflections and Future Pointers

This research project is a small beginning in the process of creating a larger dialogue between Steiner education and the mainstream academic and educational discourses. Australian researchers have already shown that they can play a significant role in this process.

This RSSA research project could be viewed as a pilot stage to a larger project that is in its very early stages. Some potential later stages of this project, both within and beyond the RSSA, could include:

- more detailed review and analysis of the research included in this report;
- support of additional research into areas where little research has been done;
- extending the data base to include research undertaken in other countries;
- fostering more of a research culture within the RSSA through workshops, perhaps working towards a research focus for an annual teachers conference;
- encouraging and mentoring Steiner teachers and others to participate in broader academic research conferences in kindred areas, such as Imagination in Education, Spirituality in Education, Holistic Education, to name a few;
- mentoring of Steiner teachers and others who wish to undertake Steiner-related postgraduate academic research;
- mentoring of postgraduates who wish to publish some of their Steiner-related research in academic journals, or present at conferences;
- networking internationally with other Steiner educators doing Steiner-related academic research in education or related areas.

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