
The Possibility of an Unbiased History of Steiner/Waldorf Education?

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AND PIETER VERSTRAETE

- Miriam Gebhardt, *Rudolf Steiner – Ein moderner Prophet* (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2011), 364 pp., €22,99 (hb), ISBN 9783421044730.
- Sylva Liebenwein, Heiner Barz and Randoll Dirk, *Bildungserfahrungen an Waldorfschulen: Empirische Studie zu Schulqualität und Lernerfahrungen* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2012), 256 pp., €37,37 (pb), ISBN 9783531185088.
- Rod Parker-Rees, ed., *Meeting the child in Steiner kindergartens: an exploration of beliefs, values and practices* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 152 pp., £25,99 (pb), ISBN 9780415603928.
- Stephen K. Sagarin, *The Story of Waldorf Education in the United States. Past, Present, and Future* (Hemdon: Steiner Books, 2011), 220 pp., \$20 (pb), ISBN 9780880106566.
- Heiner Ullrich, *Rudolf Steiner – Leben und Lehre* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2011), 266 pp., €19,95 (hb), ISBN 9783406612053.
- Helmut Zander, *Rudolf Steiner. Die Biografie* (München: Piper Verlag, 2011), 536 pp., €24,95 (hb), ISBN 9783492054485.

In many respects, and certainly with regard to his educational ideas, Rudolf Steiner was a child of his time. Trust in the natural goodness of the child that became more and more central, belief in an evolutionist development of both individuals and humanity as a whole, the emphasis on a holistic education realised through a community of teachers, parents and children; all of these were ideas that Steiner shared with other key figures of the progressive education movement, which began

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in the late nineteenth century. In line with the existing historiography on progressive education (*Reformpädagogik*) in general, historical research on the figure of Steiner, and particularly on the development of the schools and the educational system named after him,¹ is characterised by paying considerable attention to the years of foundation in the interwar period on the one hand and to current practices on the other, in that way largely neglecting the developments during the second half of the twentieth century.

One of the attempts of educational historians studying progressive educationalists of the interwar period has been to demythologise the actual views, realisations and heritage of the ‘pioneers of the New Education Fellowship’, as Aldophe Ferrière, the propagandist par excellence of the progressive education movement, characterised them.² Indeed, some of these pioneers, Ovide Decroly and Maria Montessori in particular, attracted a group of loyal disciples who created and controlled the historiographical image of their hero up to the end of the twentieth century. This canonisation resulted in the gradual replacement of the cult of the child – which these pioneers actually advocated – with the cult of the pioneer. Or, in other words, the child-centred approach was replaced at least to some extent by an approach in which the hero stood at the centre of attention.³

Although Steiner was not a member of the New Education Fellowship and thus not considered one of the pioneers, the historiography on his life and legacy has also been dominated by a conflict between adherents and critics, to the extent that Heiner Ullrich states in his biography that ‘both the anthroposophic appreciation of Steiner and the criticism from a non-anthroposophic perspective suffer from a profusion of consternation and partisanship’ (Ullrich, 175).⁴ Mythologising and/or biased literature from an anthroposophic angle⁵ is opposed to defamatory pamphlets, which approach the topic from a theoretical perspective and/or as a party concerned.⁶ Therefore, one of the recurring questions in the (mainly German) reviews of the three Steiner biographies published on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of his birthday in 2011 (Gebhardt, Ullrich and Zander) was to what extent their authors had

¹ Or named after the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart for whose workers’ children Steiner established the first school. In the literature the terms ‘Steiner education’ and ‘Waldorf education’ are used interchangeably. Except for in the title, we have chosen to use consistently the term ‘Waldorf education’ when writing about Steiner’s educational ideas and/or achievements.

² Jürgen Oelkers, *Reformpädagogik. Eine kritische Dogmengeschichte* (Weinheim/München: Juventa, 1996) and Marc Depaeppe, Frank Simon and Angelo Van Gorp, ‘The canonization of Ovide Decroly as a “saint” of the New Education’, *History of Education Quarterly*, 43, 2 (2003), 224–49.

³ Angelo Van Gorp, *Tussen mythe en wetenschap. Ovide Decroly (1871–1932)* (Leuven: Acco, 2005).

⁴ The German quotations are translated by the authors.

⁵ See, for example, Frans Carlgren, *Erziehung zur Freiheit. Die Pädagogik Rudolf Steiners* (Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2009). The central idea of anthroposophy, as founded by Steiner, is the postulation of the existence of an objective, intellectually comprehensible spiritual world that is accessible by direct experience through inner development.

⁶ See Jan Dirk Imelman and P.B.H. van Hoek, *Hoe vrij is de Vrije School? Een analyse van de antroposofische pedagogiek* (Nijkerk: Intro, 1983) or Paul-Albert Wagemann and Martina Kayser, *Wie frei ist die Waldorfschule?* (München: Heyne, 1996).

succeeded in presenting an unbiased story.⁷ Yet in any case the publishing house of the German Anthroposophic Society, the *Verlag Freies Geistesleben*, had played it safe by countering these three externally written biographies in advance, by republishing the official biography.⁸ Ullrich criticises this biography because Christophe Lindenberg focuses too much on the continuity in Steiner's ideas, strengthening in that way the mythologisation of the guru's views.

One of the main explanations for why it might be difficult to write an unbiased history of Waldorf education and why, in contrast to the case of many other progressive educationalists, a real demythologisation of the ideas and figure of Steiner has not been realised yet, is probably the combination of the impressively wide spread of Waldorf educational initiatives (and thus the interests that are at stake) on the one hand,⁹ and the strict supervision over and preservation of these initiatives (and over and of the heritage left by Steiner in general) by accreditation bodies and anthroposophic societies on the other. Whereas a school can transform itself from one day to the other, for instance, into a Freinet school, this is absolutely not the case for Waldorf schools. In order to receive the permission to call itself a Steiner or Waldorfschool, the school has to pass a procedure of recognition. As a result, and somewhat unavoidably, some kind of polarisation emerges. One belongs to the camp of adherents or critics, and not only with regard to education, but also with regard to what concerns other anthroposophically inspired fields, such as medicine or agriculture.

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Apparently for Miriam Gebhardt, writing an unbiased story was not her first concern, otherwise why would she open her book with the sentence: 'Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, could speak with the dead'. (Gebhardt, 9). There are definitely more careful ways to start a biography on such a contested figure. Her tendency for commitment reveals itself more explicitly in her analysis of the ways in which anthroposophic ideas permeated society, particularly by way of anthroposophic medicine, the development of a dedicated education system and the rise of biodynamic agriculture. In this regard Gebhardt does not confine herself to a description, she clearly judges and even condemns some of Steiner's specific ideas. For instance, she denounces the 'dogma . . . that all technically prefabricated objects and didactically invented toys would be harmful' (Gebhardt, 286), but without fully contemplating the origin and the underlying convictions of this idea. It remains a

⁷ The bulk of other books published on this occasion confirms the general historiographic trend – a focus on the figure of Steiner and current anthroposophic practices.

⁸ Christophe Lindenberg, *Rudolf Steiner – Eine Biographie. Taschenbuchausgabe, Sonderausgabe zum 150. Geburtstag Rudolf Steiners* (Stuttgart: Verlag Freies Geistesleben, 2011).

⁹ More than 1,000 independent Waldorf schools, 2,000 kindergartens and 650 centres for special education located in sixty different countries all over the world, together with an even larger number of non-recognised Waldorf-based schools, academies and homeschooling environments. See *Waldorf World List* (Berlin: Freunde der Erziehungskunst Rudolf Steiners / Dornach: Pädagogische Sektion am Goetheanum / Stuttgart: Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2013).

bit unclear what Gebhardt actually wants to achieve with such a committed way of writing, since it does not really contribute to the scientific character of the book. This is all the more problematic because, according to other scholars, some dogmas with which she openly disagrees have to be interpreted much less strictly than Gebhardt implies. She reads Steiner's stages of child development as extremely fixed periods of seven years, whereas Stephen Sagarin, Rod Parker-Rees and Helmut Zander nuance this to a large extent by pointing to Steiner's call also to take into account the individual development of each child.

This tension between the individual development of the child (resulting from the wish to put the child at the centre) and the common development of children (resulting from the outcomes of the scientific child-study movement, dominated by figures such as Stanley Hall) is present in the thinking of all key figures in the progressive education movement, although Gebhardt unfortunately does not point this out. Her argumentation could have been bolstered by connecting her findings to existing research within the history of education, particularly the tendency of demythologisation mentioned above, because that is exactly what she is trying to do. According to Steiner himself, he grew up in a poor domestic environment and a cultural no man's land, an image that was adopted by his followers without question, Gebhardt asserts. She continues, 'as a result, according to his adherents, the spiritual experiences of the boy and young man had to have come directly from the spirit world, from where else indeed'. (Gebhardt, 36). Nevertheless, only twenty pages further in she points to Steiner's activity as librarian at the *Technische Universität* in Vienna and thus his opportunity to acquaint himself with the existing scientific literature. The impression that her primary aim is to criticise the figure of Steiner and his followers could have been tempered in passages like this if she instead explicitly used this argument to counter the allegation of the supernatural origin of his knowledge.

But indeed, it seems a conflict between Gebhardt and the subject of her study was unavoidable. Her main ambition is to place Steiner within the context of his time, in order to explain his views and to show that these were often far less original than he wished to imply. Steiner himself, according to Gebhardt at least, continuously wanted to present himself as the prophet preaching his original, supernatural understanding of the cosmos. And although the literature and primary sources (in almost all cases quoted after existing research) are rather limited, still she manages fairly well to connect Steiner's views to the social context of anti-industrialism, anti-materialism, occultism, vegetarianism and other reform movements at the fin de siècle. Certainly in cities like Vienna and Munich large circles of the bourgeoisie shared the conviction that there existed more between heaven and earth. Specific to the anthroposophic approach was the idea that everyone could come into contact with this supernatural world, with sufficient physical (ascetic) and moral efforts. Ullrich, however, indicates that this democratic viewpoint was already visible in theosophy, meaning that Steiner was not exceptionally unique or creative in this regard either. Steiner clearly incorporated this existing theosophical principle into anthroposophy. The democratic character of this view permits Gebhardt to explain

the growing popularity of anthroposophy as a social movement and of Steiner himself – a self-anointed guru who managed to keep an increasingly large audience enthralled through his spoken word.

That Steiner did not use these public lectures to propagate anti-Semitic opinions, but rather even did the contrary, is a conclusion that Gebhardt shares with the other biographers, Ullrich and Zander. All of them explicitly give short shrift to the long dominant idea of Steiner as an anti-Semite. Ullrich illustrates this by pointing to the fact that a large number of the members of the anthroposophic society were Jews. On the whole he characterises Steiner's position towards Jews as nuanced, ambivalent and complex.

Ullrich continues the demythologisation of the figure of Steiner in the same non-explicit manner as Gebhardt, firstly through emphasising the discontinuity in his personal views and life and secondly by pointing to the continuity between existing progressive movements in the society and Steiner's own achievements, echoing Gebhardt's attempts to put Steiner in the context of his time. According to Ullrich's biography, three phases can be distinguished in Steiner's life: a pre-theosophical, a theosophical and a post-theosophical phase. These phases reveal ruptures in Steiner's thinking and personal experiences, but also continuities in his philosophical concepts. In discussing some of these ideas, Ullrich clearly pays attention to the underlying thinking and philosophical background of Steiner's views, in doing so offering a much more impartial description than Gebhardt. Ullrich also tries to fulfil his aim of being critical but not polemic by basing his work on an extensive body of primary sources and secondary literature.

However, for Ullrich too, Steiner is no supernatural genius but rather somebody who struggled with the dominant paradigms of his time – industrialism, materialism and positivism. After a conflict with Anne Besant, president of the theosophical society, he founded his own association. Without choosing a side, Ullrich gives multiple explanations for the cause of this conflict. In every respect Ullrich emphasises that the anthroposophic society did not emerge from nowhere and was strongly inspired by theosophy: 'Rudolf Steiner's further development of theosophy did not only consist of putting a stronger emphasis on its scientific claims and connecting the doctrine of Blavatsky with his own spiritual reading of Christ, he also applied the doctrine to current social questions and found new aesthetic forms for mediating and making oneself familiar with "Occult Science" (*Geheimwissenschaft*).'¹⁰ (Ullrich, 59). Throughout the book, Ullrich always tries to put Steiner's impact in perspective. For example, while on the one hand the influence of anthroposophy on biodynamic agriculture is somewhat self-evident, on the other hand it must 'at the same time be seen in the context of existing agricultural countermovements' (Ullrich, 94). Even 'curative education' (*Heilpädagogik*)¹⁰ 'no longer originates from Rudolf Steiner himself; it was developed to a much larger extent by his religiously inspired disciple Karl König (1902–1963)' (Ullrich, 233).

¹⁰ This involves communities where people with and without disabilities live together in the spirit of anthroposophy.

In the first three chapters, Ullrich gives a description of Steiner's life and thinking. The leap from these chronologically structured chapters to the fourth one in which he links the ideas of Waldorf education to the current situation in Germany is regrettable. As in the existing historiography on progressive education, here again the evolution of Waldorf education during the second half of the twentieth century is completely left aside.

Although the title of Zander's biography of Rudolf Steiner seems to suggest the opposite, it can be considered a successful attempt to demythologise some of the aspects that would later become untouchable. Zander's *Die Biografie* indeed sets out to offer a balanced perspective on the life and work of Steiner. Although the biography does not place the educational anthroposophic programme of Steiner at its centre, it cannot be denied that the kaleidoscopic focus offered by the author hugely contributes to a better and nuanced understanding of where Steiner's educational ideas came from and how these were reinterpreted in strange and divergent ways afterwards. This becomes especially clear in chapter 22, 'Waldorf education. Pedagogy with an occult heartbeat'.

Two elements in particular demonstrate how Zander tries to counter some of the existing Steiner myths and replace them with a nuanced and more realistic understanding of where Waldorf education came from and what its core characteristics were. First of all, Zander deconstructs the dichotomist presentation of Waldorf education as opposed to the existing German official education programmes. Traditionally the latter programmes were presented as having enormously negative consequences for the development of the child, whereas Waldorf education then could be considered a kind of cure for all the educational wrongs that were brought about in the previous decades. At the very beginning of the chapter, however, Zander notes that 'how bad the public schools were in reality and how much of the Waldorf school could actually be traced back to the "state school" is more complex than Steiner would have liked to admit'. (Zander, 369).

By deconstructing the traditional and self-fulfilling discourses of those who considered themselves natural inheritors of Steiner's intellectual baggage, Zander successfully replaces the biased views on Waldorf education – and its history – with a colourful picture that is not afraid also to show the more dark nuances that can be found in Steiner's colour palette. One of them for sure is the notion of 'authority'. By highlighting the complex relationship between Steiner's educational ideas and the progressive education movement that existed around 1900, Zander reminds us of the fact that educational programmes do not emerge out of the blue nor simply imitate what preceded them. Each reform built itself upon past developments and integrated some of the previous elements into its own corpus. Many of the accents from the progressive education movement could be found in Steiner's educational methods and curriculum – for example his emphasis on art, hand labour and gardening. However, there was one major difference between the two educational traditions: its belief – or disbelief – that education should be organised 'from the child itself' (*vom Kinde aus*). In contrast to writers such as Ellen Key, Steiner completely disagreed with this educational point of view and emphasised the authority of the teacher as fundamental for good educational practice. At one particular moment he mentioned, for instance,

that one had to ‘recognise that in the school one had to give orders’ (Zander, 384). By revealing the central place occupied by authority in Steiner’s initial educational ideas and programme for the first Waldorf school, Zander clearly shows that there is a different approach to be taken with regard to the history of Waldorf education than the obfuscating and mythologised perspective that can be found in many of the existing biographical publications.

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The number of scientific biographies on Steiner contrasts sharply with the almost complete lack of studies on the history of his achievements with regard to education. Of course, some more renowned schools offer their own historical overview, mostly written by insiders and of a rather celebratory kind,¹¹ then there is the popular brochure printed in many different languages *Waldorf: the Story behind the Name*, written by the current director of the Waldorf Foundation, Hansjörg Hofrichter,¹² and finally there are the published doctoral dissertations of Ida Oberman¹³ and Sagarin, both former Waldorf school pupils and current Waldorf (high) school teachers, comprising the only scientific publications in this field.

In the first, historical part of his book, Sagarin continues from Oberman’s central thesis by distinguishing different generations in the development of Waldorf education in the United States, but completes this picture by adding a fourth stage, beginning in the early 1990s. The first generation of ‘Europeans’ (from 1928 to the Second World War) strove for ‘purity’ (as Oberman formulated it), by holding on as much as possible to the original model that Steiner had himself introduced in the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart. From the end of the War until the 1960s, a generation of ‘Americans’ tried to ‘accommodate’ this so-called dogmatic European approach into a more American way of dealing with Waldorf education principles. Such an approach was characterised by the leading figures themselves as more superficial and consisted of the advice to remove some spiritual or esoteric references. Sagarin gives the impression of having taken this larger analysis from Oberman and only enlivening it with some nice anecdotes. By quoting extensively from his (albeit limited) body of source material, he depicts the personal conflicts that accompanied this Americanisation convincingly.

In line with other reform movements of the 1960s,¹⁴ the third generation of ‘alternatives’ wanted to reopen themselves to spirituality. All new schools in this

¹¹ James S. Hamre, *Continuity and change: 100 years—Waldorf College (1903–2003)* (Iowa: Waldorf College, 2002). The addendum on ‘Waldorf Pioneers’, which contains twelve brief biographical sketches of deceased persons for whom buildings have been named, is revealing in this connection.

¹² Hansjörg Hofrichter, *Waldorf: The Story Behind the Name* (Stuttgart: Pädagogische Forschungsstelle beim Bund der Freien Waldorfschulen, 2002).

¹³ Ida Oberman, *Fidelity and Flexibility in Waldorf Education, 1919–1998* (Stanford: Stanford University, School of Education, 1998).

¹⁴ Tom De Coster, Frank Simon and Marc Depaepe, ‘Alternative education in Flanders, 1960–2000: transformation of knowledge in a neo-liberal context’, *Paedagogica Historica. International Journal of the History of Education*, 45, 4–5 (2009), 645–71.

period were founded by engaged anthroposophists who were convinced that the school's direction should be in the hands of a college of teachers and not of a head of school, just as Steiner had intended. Although Gebhardt asserts that this idea was one of the strict regulations of Waldorf education, according to Sagarin and Ullrich, it cannot be located in Steiner's work. In Sagarin's interpretation, the point for Steiner was not the method, but the outcome, in other words a school direction based on knowledge and accompanied by freedom. This is only one of many examples of Sagarin's open and flexible way of dealing with Steiner's educational heritage. Therefore, Sagarin himself clearly belongs to the fourth generation of 'social missionaries', who do not shrink from emphasising the social mission of Waldorf education and, as result, try to introduce Waldorf methods into traditional public education, instead of reserving them to elite private schools.

Of course, because they are part of the national education system, these public schools must search for a balance between strict adherence to Steiner's words and the demands of particular situations. Yet Sagarin argues that this is actually the case for both public and private schools. All of them have to make compromises, of an economic kind in private schools – through their financial support, parents have the power to influence decisions in the school – and of a political kind in public schools – making peace with uncomfortable standards and assessments. Just like Sagarin does himself in the second part of his book, all the schools have to undertake the following assessment: what are, according to their interpretation, the essential characteristics of Waldorf education which they want to introduce in their own daily practice? After shattering twenty-two myths about Waldorf education, Sagarin distinguishes five essentials: 1) what teachers provide, more important than any knowledge, is a pathway or method for discovering ideas and ideals, 2) in this process they recognise the development of children in specific stages, 3) pay equal importance to tacit, aesthetic and thinking knowledge, 4) teach their pupils to live with others in solidarity and 5) foster reverence for life and for the world.

What is absolutely missing in Sagarin's book (and thus also in current research with regard to this topic in general) is a clear link between the two parts of his narrative. In the first part he discusses the changing opinions of some central figures in American Waldorf schools, without really paying attention to the schools themselves (with the exception of the fourth generation). In the latter part, he jumps immediately from Steiner's original ideas (without himself developing these extensively) to their interpretation in current educational practice. In this interpretation, Sagarin is self-deprecating. Steiner is depicted as the hero and 'it may be many years, many generations, before we can begin to approach Steiner as an equal . . . in insight and understanding' (Sagarin, 181–2). How the transition of these ideas from the 1920s to the current day took place is completely ignored. A helpful methodological approach here would have been Foucault's genealogy of the present, focusing not so much on the question 'what is Waldorf education?', but rather on issues like 'how did it develop?' and 'how these ideas have been re-interpreted by different generations?'. That such an approach is missing is in itself not surprising since any

kind of methodological or theoretical background in Sagarin's descriptive overview is completely absent.

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However, in the second part of his book, Sagarin neatly connects to another field of research with regard to Waldorf education, which is very popular indeed, namely the implementation of Steiner's educational ideas (or at least a specific interpretation of them) in proper Waldorf schools and/or increasingly also in traditional (public) schools. The study of Sylvia Liebenwein, Heiner Barz and Dirk Randoll is an illustration of this kind of implementation research. The starting point is explicitly what the impact of Waldorf education is on students and in what way Waldorf education can form an alternative to traditional education so that students are better prepared to function in our complex society. In contrast to Sagarin's study, their book starts with a well-founded research design. In the introduction the authors state that the relevance of their research lies in the uniqueness of this research design. They underline the necessity of good qualitative and quantitative research to overcome the ideologically coloured discussions. The study is interwoven with numerous quotes from students and parents, which enlivens the study. Despite this, however, the vision of teachers or other school staff is unfortunately not taken into account throughout the piece.

The authors conclude that Waldorf education constitutes a viable alternative to the norms advocated by PISA and UNESCO as being important to modern educational systems. In contrast to their peers in traditional schools, Waldorf students enjoy going to school and learn in a more creative and independent way, which results in a favourable attitude towards lifelong learning. The more open and individual relationship with their teachers allows the students to acquaint themselves with their own strengths. However, the outcomes of the study are linked neither to the founder Steiner nor to the underlying concepts of Waldorf education. Again, the main focus is on 'what' Waldorf education is now, instead of 'how' it grew and transformed.

As mentioned before, one of the characteristics of the current educational system that, according to all the publications reviewed in this article, can be aligned with the Waldorf model only with difficulty is the continuously growing pressure for assessment and accountability. It is for this reason that the starting question of Rod Parker-Rees's project and publication of the same name is in what way Steiner kindergartens deal with the 'early learning goals' that early years provision had to address after they were introduced by the UK government in 2007. One of the most distinctive features of Steiner kindergartens, Parker-Rees argues, 'is the concern to allow young children to continue in their "dreamy", "unawakened", or unmediated engagement with their environment' (Parker-Rees, 3), what is very similar to the first essential of Sagarin. Teachers and children are simply living together, with the curriculum taken from the environment. In her chapter, Mary Jane Drummond, retired lecturer at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, makes clear that this involves a learning process for the teacher as well – not to instruct, stimulate and direct children, but rather to trust them and allow them to be.

By giving children the time to learn before being taught (by imitating the teacher who is really absorbed by his/her task and so encourages the natural curiosity of children), a slower-paced atmosphere is created in which the teachers also take the time to really get 'to know their children and not just what facts they know' (Parker-Rees, 53). A whole-child approach in which physical, intellectual, social and emotional factors are taken into consideration (see here Sagarin's third essential) determines a child's readiness to pass to class one, rather than merely intellectual capacities, which is too often the case in traditional education, according to the authors. By referring to Steiner's own advice about how teachers can train themselves in 'reading the book of the child' (consisting of learning to observe open-mindedly, intuition and contemplation), the authors jump from Steiner's original ideas to their interpretation in current educational practice, just like Sagarin and Ullrich.

On the one hand, the authors do well to seek out the background of some of Steiner's opinions. For instance, in contrast to Gebhardt, they do not dismiss Steiner's guideline to use natural and incomplete toys as dogma, but try to explain, in line with Steiner himself, that 'unformed shapes lend themselves to the child's imagination to transform into whatever is needed at the moment' (Parker-Rees, 15) – although too often such statements are insufficiently proven. On the other hand, however, again the authors only superficially address questions concerning how this interpretation of Steiner's educational views came into being and how their philosophical background fits within Steiner's entire worldview. Concerning the specific features of Waldorf education, again the question is more 'what' than 'how'. Steiner teachers are given the floor regularly (what makes the book very pleasant to read) and admit that in this regard they do not hold on to the Steiner traditions too strictly, but rather interpret them in a flexible way and use them as a basis for leaving the children to their own devices. That they themselves comprise part of a tradition which over the past century has sought to deal with Steiner's educational heritage is completely ignored.

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To address this deficiency, multi-country research is needed that focuses on the historical development of the daily school practice in Waldorf schools, projects that should be linked to studies within the field of the history of education that have shifted the attention from the macro and meso level of educational action to the micro level. By starting from the reality on the classroom floor, historical educationalists such as Larry Cuban, David Tyack and William Tobin have brought pedagogical historiography back to its essence: to study how people raised and educated their children in the past.¹⁵ In their conclusions, they prove the resistance of the field to renewal and the large degree of continuity in (teacher-oriented) education. An

¹⁵ Larry Cuban, *How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms, 1880–1990* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993) and David Tyack and William Tobin, 'The grammar of schooling: why it has been so hard to change?', *American Educational Research Journal*, 31 (1994): 435–79.

obvious question is whether and to what extent this image of a dominant and slowly evolving 'grammar of schooling' also applies to Waldorf education.

At the same time, such studies offer a clear insight into the circular development of Waldorf education from being an alternative school system in the 1920s (connected to similar initiatives within the movement of progressive education), over a rather closed body of specific schools (strictly controlled by accreditation bodies like the Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship or the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, AWSNA), to a school system that again tries to present itself as a fully fledged alternative to increasing neoliberal thinking within current, traditional education. Without willing to sell Steiner's ideas, this is also what the people involved in the 'Meeting the child' project realise, namely one must indicate to what extent and in what way Steiner kindergartens can function as an alternative. Of course, as Sagarin demonstrates, this increasing openness is not always smooth (witness his own disagreement with the AWSNA about which schools can be considered Waldorf schools), but is now also visible within Waldorf educational institutes themselves. Bo Dahlin of the Rudolf Steiner University College in Oslo, for instance, defends Waldorf schools as a clear alternative for citizenship education.¹⁶ According to his research, students of Waldorf schools more frequently express interest and engagement in social and moral questions than their peers within Swedish mainstream schools, a conclusion that certainly demands further research.

¹⁶ Bo Dahlin, 'A state-independent education for citizenship? Comparing beliefs and values related to civic and moral issues among students in Swedish mainstream and Steiner Waldorf schools', *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion and Education*, 31, 2 (2010), 165–80.