

## L4) Introduction to Steiner's Views on Research and Education: Research, Epistemology and Inner Practice. By Dr Robert Rose

Like his views on education, Steiner's position on the nature of all knowledge, and therefore education research, has some significant differences. In his day, as today, the understanding of knowledge was conditioned by the science and philosophy of the time. Steiner attempted to transcend the barriers erected by this science and the philosophy that underlay it. To do this, he expanded the conception of **Observation** and **Thinking** to provide a view of **Knowledge (Epistemology)** that enabled education research to be carried out in relation to the **inner** as well as the **outer** dimensions of the human being and the World. This has a direct impact on the understanding and practice of his educational principles.

## Steiner on the Nature of Knowledge

One of the prominent views of his time was that of **empiricism** and which was sometimes coupled with what has been called the “**mechanical world view**”. This was particularly prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still plays a significant role today in modern science as well as in education such as in behaviourist approaches. This view considers something to be knowledge **only** if it could be verified by the senses. If you read *Hard Times*, by Charles Dickens, you will find a couple of characters there who represent an extreme version of the mechanical world view, particularly in the conversation between a government officer, Mr Gradgrind (the school master) and the little school girl Sissy Jupe:

“Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, root out everything else... Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of fact and calculations... With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to... Thomas Gradgrind now presented Thomas Gradgrind to the little pitchers before him, who were to become so full of facts... He seemed a galvanising apparatus, too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away.” Dickens, C (1854/1969): *Hard Times*, Penguin Press, p. 47/48. **You might want to go and read chapter 2 of Dickens’ “Hard Times”: “Murdering the Innocents”.**

In terms of our discussion here, empiricism, when taken to an extreme, will lead to a form of education that is only interested in **outer** observable results. The **inner** aspect of children's learning and education is not part of its remit or "mind frame". Empiricism had a number of different forms, it reached a kind of nadir in a view called Logical Positivism in the 1920's. Logical Positivism advocated the "verifiability criterion" as the principle defining characteristic of science in which anything that could not be verified with the five senses was considered not to be scientific. Which means that inner observations, or introspection, was not accepted as a scientific approach to knowledge.

In the context of education, this means that knowledge of the inner nature of the human being would essentially not be possible and therefore should not be considered in the education process. Such a view would see Steiner's position on education as incompatible with science due to the fact that the inner nature of the human being, what Steiner called the soul and the spirit, is not accessible to the five outer senses, only through inner observation. What this would mean is that the inner lives of children and teachers would not be within the remit of education or education research. Consequently, a form of education that strictly adhered to the empiricist – behaviourist philosophy would not take into account the thought, feelings and will capacities of children in the education process. In contrast, Steiner / Waldorf Education, due to its extended view of knowledge and research, as we will see, explores the relationship between the inner "soul states" of children in relationship to that of their peers as well as the teachers and parents. Of course, the outer observable aspects of the children are also significant.



Interestingly, Logical Positivism, or similar philosophies, is in a minority position now due to the fact that its theoretical convictions are in contradiction to the great majority of science today. A great deal of modern science is currently more akin to what is called “metaphysical realism” which is the conviction that there are existent things which are beyond sense-perception. Examples of this can be frequently found in modern physics. Empiricism, however, still plays a vital role in the corroboration of metaphysical theories. This is a complex topic which will consider briefly at another point. For now, however, it may be suggested that Steiner’s views on the soul and spirit may also be seen as metaphysical theories that can also be corroborated through the senses as well as through inner observation which we will discuss shortly.

Steiner’s views on the nature of knowledge and the type of education that followed from it are very different from extreme Empiricism or Logical Positivism. He was not against empiricism as a whole, but wanted to extend it to realms other than the purely sense-perceptible. Most of his key ideas on this question can be found in his early works “A Theory of Knowledge” and “The Philosophy of Freedom”. Copies of these are included in the Learning Materials. In essence, Steiner extended the concept of “observation” to include that of inner states. What follows in the next slide is only the briefest synopsis of these books.

**For Steiner , the unity of thinking and observation is the defining principle of knowledge, in whatever field of study:**

## **Observation**



Intentionally becoming conscious of: Colours, Sounds, etc,  
Thinking, Feeling, Willing  
The "I".

## **Thinking**



Thinking about observations  
Thinking about thinking  
Thinking about Feeling  
Thinking about Will/Actions

**Knowledge**

In this slide are some core quotes on Steiner's views on knowledge:


- 1) “***Observation and Thinking*** are the two points of departure for all spiritual striving of man in so far as he is conscious of such striving”. Steiner, R (1894): The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity, chapter 3, paragraph 4
- 2) “The act of knowledge is the synthesis of perception and concept. Only a percept and concept together constitute the whole thing”. Steiner, R (1894): The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity, chapter 5, paragraph 21)
- 3) “The only way to grasp reality is the **empirical method** with **idealistic results**”. Steiner, R (1888): Goethean Science, Mercury Press p. 92.
- 4) “ordinary empiricism and rationalism are... transitional stages to the highest scientific method... And this occurs with ***rational empiricism***” Steiner, R (1888): Goethean Science, Mercury Press, p. 143.

A closer examination of these quotes would show that Steiner took the idea of empiricism and extended it to those realms beyond ordinary sense perception. For Steiner, not only was it possible to have knowledge of, or research, outer realities such as forms, colours and sounds, etc, it is also possible to research inner realities such as our own thinking, feeling, willing and something he called our “I”, the kernel of our being. As we will see in later modules, this will become important when we look at the significance of child development and self-development for the teacher in education. **Primarily, this is because without inner self observation as represented here, the teacher’s own self-development would be impossible.** Consequently, as we see in module 3, helping the children’s self development would either be impossible or circumstantial.

It might at this point be thought that Steiner was at odds with the science of his time and also with science of today. The next quote shows this not to be the case, he simply thought that a science based only on sense perception could not enable human beings to understand our deepest nature and hence could not be sufficient for an education that related to the whole of our being, both inner and outer:



“To begin with, let us look at what science has brought in its wake more recently. At this point, to avoid any misunderstanding, let me state clearly that anthroposophical spiritual science - as I shall represent it here - must in no way be thought of as opposing the spirit of modern science, whose triumphant and important successes the exponents of spiritual science fully recognize. Precisely because it wishes to enter without prejudice into the spirit of natural science, anthroposophical spiritual science must go beyond its confines and objectives. Natural science, with its scrupulous, specialized disciplines, provides exact, reliable information about much in our human environment. But, when a human soul asks about its deepest, eternal being, it receives no answer from natural science, least of all when science searches in all honesty and without prejudice.” Steiner, R (1995): Waldorf Education and Anthroposophy 1, Anthroposophic Press, p. 2.



The next slides show how Steiner extended the concept of empirical science or research even further. As the original text shows, Steiner wanted to develop human knowledge, research, to include both inner and outer realities of the human being and whole world.

## Steiner's Extended Empiricism: Empiricism of physical, soul and spirit

As the following quote shows, Steiner tried to extend empiricism to have three, rather than one, mode of observation:

“It seems obvious that because of the essential differences between these three worlds [the physical, soul and spiritual], a clear understanding of them and of man's share in them can only be obtained by **three different modes of observation**”. Steiner, R (1904): Theosophy, Rudolf Steiner Press, chapter 1.

For Steiner then, there is a **physical / body mode** of observation (as in standard empiricism), a **soul mode** and a **spiritual mode**.

If you read the original text, Steiner uses his extended empiricism to found a world view on a threefold understanding in terms of what exists (what philosophers call the ontological / existential perspective) as well as how we can know this (the epistemological / knowledge perspective). For him, everything that exists has these three elements: body, soul and spirit. In his early work “Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy”, he applies these principles to the understanding of the development of the child and of a way of teaching and learning that is derived from this. In the next couple of slides, there are a few indications as to how he sometimes reformulated these ideas following on from those of Wolfgang Johann Goethe’s (1749 to 1832):



# Diversity of Methods based on Openness to the Diversity of Being

“The unity of the activity of intellectual forces lies in the nature of Goethe; the temporary form of that activity is determined by the object concerned. Goethe borrowed his manner of observation from the external world instead of obtruding his own upon the world.”

Steiner, R (1886): Theory of Knowledge Implicit in Goethe’s World Conception, Preliminary Questions, paragraph 8.

For Steiner, then, the aim of research was to find a “method” that comes from the “Being itself” and should not be projected upon it. He saw in his time how the “mechanical explanation”, derived from the unified empiricist-mechanical world view, was creeping into society and education as a universal principle. For him, this mode of research was a projection of a **presupposed** mechanical mode of explanation that is not applicable across **all** levels of reality, especially to children’s learning. The Sissy Jupe story is an example of how mechanical explanation was thought, by Dickens, to have influenced education. For Steiner, the empirical-mechanical approach excludes the inner dimensions of human beings and is merely a projection of purely outer mechanical reality. For the Steiner / Waldorf teacher, the diversity of research methods includes, at the very least, a mode of knowing that is inclusive of the observation of inner and outer realities and / or theories thereof. The corroboration of the theories consists in their being unified with inner and outer observation in the process of education research and implementation in practice. **As we will see, these three modes of knowledge as well as others, play a central role throughout the ideas and practice of Steiner / Waldorf education. We can now put this together with the relevant slide from L2:**

TYPE OF BODY / FORCE		PHENOMENA / EXPLANATORY PRINCIPLE	Research Method
<b>Spirit</b>	Spirit Body	The “I” “substance” in terms of higher ideals such as truth and goodness.	<b>Inner Observation and Thinking</b>
	Life Spirit	The “I” metamorphoses or “grows” through higher ideals.	
	Spirit Self and “I”/Ego	Active Inner Agent and Power of Self Transformation. The “I” individualises itself through ideals.	
<b>Soul</b>	Spiritual / Consciousness Soul	The Inner awareness of the “I”/Spirit-Self and the power of thought as applied to the spirit.	<b>Inner Observation and Thinking</b>
	Intellectual Soul	The power of thought as applied to sense-perception.	
	Sentient Soul	Feeling, Desire and Will Impulse in themselves	
<b>Body</b>	Soul / Astral Body	Foundation of Feeling, Desire, Perception and Will Impulse in the Body.	<b>Outer Observation and Thinking</b>
	Life Body	Growth, Life, Metamorphosis, Propagation, Habit.	
	Physical Body	Mineral / Physical Substances and Forces	

## Exercise

You might like to try a couple of exercises.

- 1) Try to think of an assumption you have concerning child development and/or education. It could be quite small. See if you could apply the epoché to this and see where it leads. You may wish to write this down and do similar exercises throughout your studies. Are there any consequences that follow on from the “suspension of conviction”? I would be interested to see what you come up with.
- 2) By what means would you test out your ideas about how a child develops?



## Review and Preview:

Following on from the three general types of knowing/research just indicated, the next slide gives a brief outline of the seven more specialised types of research methods that Steiner developed and which appear again in different forms throughout his philosophical books and lectures on education. We will return to these in more detail in the next module where we will deepen our understanding of the more specialised areas of research methods and how they impact on the curriculum he recommended. The slide indicates the first type that we have considered in this module: “Pure Knowledge” in so far as it includes:

- 1) An “openminded” form of knowledge free of presuppositions and**
- 2) An extended mode of knowledge / epistemology to involve bodily, soul and spiritual modes of observation.**

In module 2, more of the research methods (going clockwise in the image below) will be introduced and expanded on and their connection to Steiner / Waldorf Education indicated. For now, you may wish to consider how the methods change around the circle, going from 1 to 7; there is a kind of metamorphosis between the different methods, somewhat like how a plant grows, changes and develops in a season. You may wish to note down what you think the metamorphosis is:



The seven major  
types of research  
methods according  
to the works of  
Dr Rudolf Steiner.

