Waldorf education has been part of the Dutch educational system for nearly a century. Major changes on the level of organization and practices within Waldorf schools and changes in society’s perception of what constitutes good education have given rise to the need for an ongoing dialogue on the meaning and purposes of Waldorf education in contemporary society. The research program Values and Value of Waldorf Education was founded in 2014 as a joint initiative with the University of Applied Sciences, Leiden, and Waldorf education organizations throughout the Netherlands, to work towards this process. The program brings together researchers and practitioners engaged in collaborative research that aims to:

1. Build knowledge and understanding of purposes and practices in contemporary Waldorf education.
2. Explore and evaluate innovative practices in Waldorf education.
3. Contribute to the professional development of present and future educators in Waldorf schools.

This chapter provides a description of how teachers, teacher trainers, and trained researchers conduct mixed-method projects with an emphasis on qualitative action research. One of the studies is described in more detail to provide an example of how the research projects contribute towards each of the three program aims. The chapter starts by describing some of the developments in Dutch Waldorf schools in particular, and in Dutch society in general, that lead up to the program.

Transitions of Waldorf Education in the Netherlands

The initiative for the program Values and Value of Waldorf Education arose from two heartfelt wishes within the movement of Waldorf schools in the Netherlands. The first was to strengthen the quality of children’s everyday educational experiences in Waldorf schools; the second was to strengthen the voice and position of Waldorf education in the ongoing national debate regarding purpose and quality of education in and for contemporary and future societies. Both wishes and the urgency that is felt to work on their realization in practice are related to substantial, perhaps even fundamental, changes that occurred in the practices and perceptions of Waldorf education in the Netherlands over the past two decades.

Waldorf schools have been part of Dutch society for nearly a century. Over this time, these schools have experienced the freedom they need to offer the education they value. Waldorf schools...
Aziza Mayo

are based on the educational philosophy developed by the Austrian founder of the anthroposophical movement, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). The development of individual children through pedagogical and educational experiences is approached from the assumption that this individual development is directly linked with the development of society and mankind as a whole. Waldorf pedagogy, didactics, and curriculum are aimed at helping students to develop into beings who are willing and able to contribute towards a just, peaceful, and sustainable society:

- by intentionally shaping their participation in the economic realm of society from the perspective of fraternity;
- by becoming knowledgeable and active in the social realm from the perspective of equality;
- and by engaging in cultural and spiritual realms from the perspective of inner freedom.

(Steiner, 1996)

As such, Waldorf education is ‘world-centered’, in the sense that it is “focused on our worldly existence, that is our existence in, with and for the world” (Biesta, 2012, p. 94).

In Waldorf education, both learning and teaching are understood as creative processes in which intellectual, social, practical, and artistic development are integrated and balanced to afford children the opportunity to unfold their human potential and their humanity to its fullest. These processes are tailored to meet the natural receptivity and needs of children for them to choose and realize their individual paths through life as free, morally responsible beings. During early childhood, education focuses on physical and playful exploration of self and world. Elementary education has a strong focus on developing artistic expression and social capacities and children are encouraged to explore the world through conscious imagination. As the rational, abstract power of the intellect emerges, adolescents focus on ethics, social responsibility, and mastery of complex and rigorous subject matter (Pope Edwards, 2002).

In many respects, educational experiences in Dutch Waldorf schools throughout the twentieth century were similar to those in the initial years of Dutch Waldorf education. Principles for teaching, curriculum content, school traditions, and materials used in classes and furnishings underwent only a few changes. However, shared understandings, values, expectations, practices, and traditions in Dutch society where education was taking place were changing considerably due to, for instance, technological innovation and changing needs of children growing up in this society. These changes influenced society’s definition of good education. Towards the end of the century, the quality of education was defined by the extent to which it contributed to the economic progress of society. From this perspective, good education coaches students in the process of obtaining specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes which allow them to qualify for participation in the economy as (young) adults (Dutch Educational Council, 2013). This includes qualifications for specific professions and more general qualifications such as literacy; both types of qualifications create a pathway to earning a decent salary and social status. Cognitive knowledge and skills play a lead role in this qualification process and standardized, quantifiable tests and exam results are used to evaluate educational quality.

While this perception of good education was far too limited for Waldorf educators, it did raise questions regarding the changes that might be needed to meet the evolving needs of children and society. After all, Waldorf schools fully intend to offer educational experiences that help children find and shape a meaningful way to participate in current and future societies; this implies that they need to be prepared appropriately for active participation in society’s institutions, practices, and traditions. The question of change became even more urgent as government assessments showed that math and literacy development stayed behind in Waldorf schools and some schools were, albeit temporarily, placed under close supervision by the Dutch Inspectorate of Education. An analysis of a large cohort of students in Dutch high schools in 1999 showed that while Waldorf students overall were well
developed in non-cognitive domains, they lagged behind their peers from mainstream education in math and literacy skills. It also showed these students performed poorer on tasks that required skills that were likely to serve them well in higher education or in jobs that require a person to perform under time pressure or take tests or successfully complete tests (Steenbergen, 2009).

In the year 2000, Dutch Waldorf schools made the transition into the official state system of exams and regulations. Although they still experience a high degree of freedom in what and how they teach, notable changes in these areas have taken place as a result. In primary education, the transition has resulted, for instance, in a much stronger emphasis on standardized teaching and assessment. Schools designated more time and resources to math and literacy; many schools introduced standardized teaching methods and materials for these subjects rather than have every teacher develop their own lesson plans, lesson content, and didactic methodology, and the use of standardized, government approved math and literacy assessments has become common practice in most primary schools. Math and literacy abilities of Waldorf pupils in the Netherlands are now on par with, or above, those of their peers. However, many parents, and teachers, too, worry that an important quality of Waldorf teaching—the artistic process through which teachers create their lessons—has been compromised in the process. Worries are also voiced about the reliance on standardized tests to evaluate different aspects of children’s developmental process, rather than a teacher’s holistic observations and understanding of the child.

The transition also held consequences for the educational experiences of high school students. Traditionally, all Waldorf students left school at the end of the twelfth grade with a descriptive assessment of their developmental process and resulting cognitive, artistic, social, and practical skills, knowledge and understandings on a broad range of subjects. Following the transition, students also obtain official qualifications through national examination, as an integrated part of their school trajectories. These qualifications provide entry into higher education institutes and, eventually, the labor market. Now Waldorf high school students no longer have heterogeneous year groups throughout, but are streamed into (cognitive) ability tiers, either from the start of high school or as they enter the higher grades. Furthermore, students who follow a pre-vocational track now leave high school after grade 10, while students in a general track do so after grade 11 or 12, depending on whether they aim to study at an applied or a research university. As a consequence, high school students now spend a greater amount of their time preparing for exams; typically working on narrowly defined topics and skills and strongly focused on cognitive aspects of learning. This comes at the expense of more traditional Waldorf lessons; these address broad topic fields, have an integrated approach to cognitive, artistic, and practical development, and are aimed to foster a gradual deepening of students’ understanding of self, the world, and their inherent connectedness.

Within Waldorf schools, it is acknowledged that these developments have changed community interactions and have influenced individual student learning experiences in a range of developmental domains—cognitive, artistic, social, and practical. Whether these changes are perceived to be for better or for worse depends on whom you ask. The general understanding is that these changes effectively facilitate students’ abilities to meet societal expectations. At the same time, it is also felt that these changes require educators to re-examine how their core values about children, learning, and teaching, can be ensured and brought to life within these changed learning environments. This need is felt even more strongly as an increasing number of Waldorf teachers have not been specifically trained in Waldorf pedagogics and didactics; these teachers generally have limited knowledge and understanding of the core principles of Waldorf education and of the particular image of a human being that forms its foundation (see, for instance, Pedagogical Section Council, 2017 for a description of these principles). This development is related to increased numbers of students enrolling in Waldorf schools. As Waldorf schools moved up on national rankings, more and more parents (and students) have come to see Waldorf education as a positive alternative to mainstream education.
Shifting Perspectives on Good Education

The second wish, which is to strengthen the voice and position of Waldorf education in the ongoing national debate regarding purpose, value, and quality of education, is relatively new. While the understanding within the Waldorf movement has always been that the educational experiences that are offered to children in their schools are of great value to child and society, Dutch society’s perception of Waldorf education was often skeptical or even highly critical. These days, Waldorf education is recognized by parents, as well as by educational specialists and researchers, as an example of formative education that not just qualifies or ‘schools’ children to participate in society’s institutions and practices, but that prepares them, in useful and valuable ways, for life in general. Didactical practices, such as the integrated use of rhythmic movement during math lessons that used to be regarded as outlandish and ‘typical Waldorf’, have now become regular features in many mainstream Dutch schools.

This new perception reflects a gradual shift in the way ‘good’ education is defined and regulated within our society. Over the past decade, parents, teachers, researchers, and even politicians are voicing their concerns regarding the ‘narrow’ perception of society’s purpose for education. This partly arises from a growing awareness that the educational experiences we offer children in our current school system probably do little towards preparing them for the actual requirements of our future societies. Societies are changing so rapidly that we simply no longer know or can foresee which particular qualifications, or sets of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, will be required and useful for future work and life. In addition, a need is felt to interact with each other and with the natural world in a more respectful, sustainable way. As a result, what we, as a society, see as the purpose of education, and how we define good education accordingly, is shifting towards a more holistic and perhaps more ‘human’ orientation. Yes, becoming qualified for the economic domain is an important goal, but so is, for instance, internalizing the democratic values, traditions, and norms of our society; or developing identities that incorporate the fundamental values of our humanity, such as compassion, love, and a sense of connectedness with the world.

Furthermore, educational experiences are also seen as an important experimental setting for children to discover—and practice—mature ways of expressing their individual freedom; mature in the sense that they become willing and able to consider and relate their personal wishes and needs in the light of those of others and of the world around them (Biesta, 2012). In a way, society’s perspective on education is becoming less narrowly focused on economic purposes, and, instead, becoming more broadly focused on human qualities; as such it might be seen as becoming more ‘world-centered’.

These days, the Dutch Waldorf movement actively participates in national debates on the quality of education, schools participate in national innovative educational projects, and educational researchers turn to Waldorf schools in search of effective alternative curricula and teaching. From within the Waldorf movement in the Netherlands the need is felt to develop a more contemporary vocabulary to jointly examine, evaluate, and communicate Waldorf schools’ understandings and practices in a meaningful way.

Values and Value of Waldorf Education: Research Program

At my appointment as program director, I was given the assignment to develop a program that will inspire, fuel, expand, and deepen the ongoing dialogue about what we consider ‘good education’ for present and future generations. This dialogue needs to be an ongoing and integrated part of the profession of the (Waldorf) educators and of their professional development. The same goes for other professionals within the field of education, such as school leaders, educational researchers, or governmental officials who develop educational policy and assess and enforce schools’ compliance with state instituted educational goals, rules, and regulations.

To this purpose, we develop activities that 1) help build knowledge and understanding of purposes and practices in contemporary Waldorf education; 2) explore and evaluate innovative practices in
Waldorf education; and 3) contribute to professional development of (future) educators in Waldorf schools. Program activities include, for instance, lectures, workshops, (re)development of teacher training courses, dialogue sessions, and publications. However, the core of our program consists of collaborative research activities of what is known as the ‘Knowledge Circle’. Such Knowledge Circles are a common practice at Dutch universities of applied sciences. Headed by a professor (e.g., program director), these circles bring together practitioners from within a particular work field and/or trained researchers to collaboratively explore emerging themes of interest through applied research activities.

As a program director, I have identified and positioned the current theme of the Knowledge Circle as the development of children’s sense of autonomy, in communion with others and the world, as a core value of contemporary Dutch Waldorf education. I have developed theoretical frames and methodological approaches that integrated anthroposophical and scientific understandings from which the (practitioner) researchers have designed their individual research projects. Furthermore, I supervise the research projects and design the collaborative work sessions of the Knowledge Circle. These activities allow me to synthesize findings from different projects and to reflect on how these understandings and practices might transfer to other work settings within the respective work fields.

To form our Knowledge Circle, a call went out to practitioners who worked in Waldorf education or who had a special interest and/or expertise regarding Waldorf education. The call explained the theme, objectives, and the methodological orientation of the research program, and invited practitioners to formulate a research question regarding an issue they encountered during their work as educational practitioners related to the theme. Our circle currently includes a primary school teacher, two secondary school teachers, a school psychologist, two teacher trainers, and a former secondary teacher who now works for the national Waldorf movement in Flanders, Belgium. These circle members were selected from 70 applications; they have earned at least a relevant Masters degree from an applied or research university. They are relieved from regular (educational) assignments for one day a week in order to work on their research project. Every five weeks, our circle meets for a collaborative work session for a full afternoon. Depending on their needs, members can work either individually or in collaboration with the program director or with their fellow research practitioners on designated research days between these sessions.

Each circle member has developed a project regarding an issue or question he or she personally encountered in their educational practice, but that they understood to be relevant for other practitioners as well. Current projects focus on teaching intellectually gifted children; the value of main lessons for students and teachers; perceptions of artistic learning and teaching; purposeful and meaningful assessment of teaching and learning; aspired images of adulthood held by teachers and students in contemporary Waldorf schools; and realities of adulthood for former Waldorf students. Our circle members conduct most of their research projects within the schools and educational contexts in which they work as practitioners. We regard their research as action research, in the sense that “action research combines a substantive act with a research procedure; it is action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding, while engaged in a process of improvement and reform” (Hopkins, 2002, p. 42). In our projects, this ‘substantive act’ typically takes the form of a cumulative dialogue within an educational setting that is primed by a thoroughly thought-out set of interview questions, posed by the practitioner researcher, regarding specific practices or understandings within that educational community.

The Knowledge Circle is now moving into its third year. I explicitly set up our Knowledge Circle sessions as a learning opportunity through which we can develop a (shared) understanding of practical and conceptual issues that will help us to contribute to improvement and reform of educational practice. Circle members take on the role of critical friend in each other’s projects. These sessions offer an opportunity to collaboratively explore theoretical, methodological, and process related questions that arise over the course of each project and to develop skills to tackle these. For instance, conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews was part of the methodology of every project. For some researchers, this was a new experience. During several sessions throughout the
previous two years, we specifically worked on designing interview questions, conducting interviews, and analyzing interview data. During these sessions, we would use texts from research handbooks for preparatory reading; sometimes sessions would start with a short lecture; topics would then be explored through dialogue and in a more hands-on way, for instance by practicing interviews and offering each other feedback on skills and content.

As a part of each circle session, we also engage in dialogue to explore theoretical questions, interpretations, and understandings that arise over the course of the projects. During these dialogues, each participant contributes understandings from a range of sources. Professional understandings refer to the often implicit and intuitive practical knowledge that each of us has developed through our professional interactions in educational settings. We use them to give meaning to our professional actions in practice; sometimes these understandings have developed into a personal theory of practice. However, these understandings or theories have not been verified or evaluated in a methodologically sound and rigorous (scientific) way. Personal understandings refer to our individual values and our life experiences in general; they constitute our personal belief systems and shape the way we give meaning to life and our being in general. Scientific understandings are also included in these dialogues. For example, these scientific understandings are based on the best and most up-to-date empirical evidence, as well as established theoretical concepts, models, and theories that are not (yet) necessarily validated through empirical research; they present helpful perspectives or offer alternative explanations for what is observed and experienced in our research practice.

Finally, anthroposophical understandings are derived from the works of Rudolf Steiner, but also work from authors who reflect on Steiner’s theories, concepts, and understandings, or interpret these from a contemporary perspective. During this process, we build on pre-existing knowledge, we readjust existing knowledge, and we give meaning to newly gained information and experiences. Through this process, each circle member develops a personal, unique understanding of the educational reality we participate in. As we move through multiple cycles in which we question, criticize, and put to the test new knowledge and understandings, we also develop ‘co-owned’ and ‘co-authored’ temporary shared bodies of knowledge and understanding.

Since the Knowledge Circle began, projects have proceeded through multiple cycles in which research questions and understandings are formulated, explored in theory and in practice, tested in practice, and evaluated with fellow researchers and practitioners. During the first year, researchers focused on designing their projects and collecting data. As part of this process they checked the perceived relevance of the issue among a broad group of educational practitioners. Primary stakeholders were identified and plans developed to ensure that project findings would eventually reach them. Researchers created overviews of existing knowledge, understandings, and practices from different perspectives (i.e., general scientific and Waldorf specific). They used these explorations to develop workable research questions, research plans, and instruments for data collection. Data were collected from (scientific) literature, school documents, (semi-) standardized questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations.

During the second year, circle members focused on analyzing data, on checking validity of findings, descriptions, and understandings with stakeholders, and on developing ‘products’ that allowed them to share project findings with stakeholders. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. However, collected data were mostly qualitative and we used a grounded theory approach for analyses. In each project, we looked for themes that emerged from descriptions of practice and perceptions of the participants as they were expressed in the interviews (see, for instance, Birks & Mills, 2011 for a practical guide). In some projects, we applied an adaptation of grounded theory in which these data were also analyzed using a ‘top-down’ approach. Coding categories were created based on evidence, concepts, and theories derived from literature reviews and educational practices. Findings derived through both approaches were compared and differences explored, for instance through additional interviews, observations, or further literature reviews. Understandings that developed in each new phase of the project were used to re-evaluate previous understandings.
and to readjust plans for following steps and phases (for a more detailed description of this kind of mixed-method approach see, for instance, Siraj & Mayo, 2014).

During the second year, each circle session focused on a particular research project. The researcher of this project would provide in advance a written, up to date text describing the project, listing questions or topic(s) he/she would like the group to focus their written and oral feedback on. During the sessions, the researcher presented the project and (initial) findings and understandings. They received detailed written feedback on the texts they provided; feedback on their presentation came by way of an image or metaphor describing qualities of the research process as observed by the critical friends—often these were images derived from the natural world. After this, all the questions, ideas, and suggestions that arose through the reading and the presentation were collected and the presenting researcher chose which of these the following dialogue session would focus on. Sometimes the dialogue was aimed at developing understanding of particular theoretical concepts; at other times its focus was more practical, such as solving methodological puzzles or the collaborative interpretation of data.

As we have now entered the third and final year of this particular Knowledge Circle, our meetings focus on formulating and communicating findings and practical implications for teachers and teacher training that follow from our research findings. We illustrate our recommendations with examples obtained through our research activities and with sets of questions that practitioners might use to explore how the findings and recommendations might be relevant and applied in their educational settings. By doing so, we aim to help educational practitioners to further develop their sense of agency regarding finding ways to transform theoretical understandings from research into actual practices.

An Example of Practitioner Research: Teaching Intellectually Gifted Children in Waldorf Schools

Saskia is a former Waldorf primary school teacher who now works as a school psychologist at a training and advisory institute for Waldorf schools. She found that over the past few years more and more schools started asking for advice and training on how to teach cognitively gifted children in kindergarten and primary Waldorf classrooms. Teachers indicate that they struggle to offer these children teaching experiences that are challenging enough to keep them fully engaged and to learn new things, without always having to separate them from class lessons and the communal learning experiences they offer. Traditionally, in Waldorf schools, literacy and numeracy skills are not taught explicitly until first grade. In kindergarten, children encounter numeracy and literacy concepts only implicitly as they participate in activities that are part of everyday life, such as baking bread or washing up activities, or through oral storytelling and singing.

However, as teachers find that increasing numbers of older kindergartners are highly motivated to develop, for instance, their reading and writing skills, kindergarten classes now typically offer one (half) day a week in which the elder children engage in explicit 'learning’ activities. Once in first grade, many of these highly motivated children are well advanced in their math and literacy skills and show a seemingly insatiable thirst for knowledge; they engage with new learning tasks with strong task orientation and great creativity. Teachers face the task of finding ways to help these children develop a healthy and balanced way of engaging with cognitive, artistic, practical, and social aspects of learning and being. Designing learning experiences that allow these children to develop the will to work through difficulties and to become engaged in new processes is also a particular challenge. This not only requires specific understandings of how gifted children learn and develop, but also pedagogical sensitivity to unravel their individual developmental challenges, as well as inventiveness and creativity to develop appropriate practices, contents, and experiences for these individual children and the class they are part of. Despite their efforts to meet the needs of these children, teachers and parents find that, over time, many of these children seem to lose their intrinsic motivation for learning; they develop a negative attitude towards school and learning. Some develop performance anxiety, and many no longer develop and perform according to their (cognitive) abilities.
Saskia’s aim for her research project is to provide class teachers and remedial teachers with tools and understandings that will help them to create wholesome educational experiences for gifted children that are in accordance with intentions and understandings of Waldorf education. Saskia approached her project from several angles. She conducted an ongoing literature review to develop an overview of what is known from empirical scientific studies about gifted children and their educational needs. She analyzed literature on Waldorf practices and theory in order to provide an overview of core teaching principles and understandings that might have specific implications for the understanding of, and teaching practices for, gifted children. Saskia also developed a questionnaire that was filled out by 52 out of the 70 Dutch Waldorf primary schools. Analysis of the data allowed her to develop an understanding 1) of how giftedness was generally perceived and approached in Dutch Waldorf schools; 2) of teaching practices aimed at gifted children; 3) the difficulties and challenges schools encountered in this process of teaching gifted children; 4) of successful factors in this process; 5) and of what schools perceived as ‘good’ practices. In the analyses, descriptive statistics were used and a grounded theory approach was applied in order to see what themes emerged from the open-ended questionnaire data. The collection of good practices was expanded during Saskia’s observations in classrooms and during her training sessions with teachers. Examples were analyzed to understand to what extent they reflect scientific findings and Waldorf understandings of what constitutes appropriate practice in the teaching of gifted children. Examples of practices that were considered ‘good’ from both mainstream and Waldorf perspectives were further explored through in-depth interviews with teachers.

Saskia’s research has given her a deeper understanding of what teachers need with regard to specific knowledge and skills to further develop their ability to create good practices in teaching gifted children. In the training courses for individual teachers or school teams, Saskia and her colleagues have incorporated the understandings she developed through the analyses of the literature, questionnaire data, observations, and interviews. Examples of good practices she encountered are now also part of the courses and are used to help teachers to design special projects or extended learning activities together with the gifted children, rather than for them. As a result, projects revolve around topics for which children show intrinsic motivation. However, rather than just using these projects to meet the child’s need for cognitive challenge, projects also include activities that encourage children to engage and persevere in activities that they find more challenging or less interesting; they include opportunities to develop understanding, skills, and a relationship with the subjects through artistic and practical activities as well, and children are invited to share their projects with the class.

Saskia intends to explore the teaching and learning of gifted children more specifically from the point of view of these children themselves. Her encounters with gifted children have particularly sparked her interest to further investigate the need for autonomy of gifted children. Together with a remedial teacher from a Waldorf school, she is developing a self-assessment instrument for teachers to help them develop their understanding of how their classroom practices support the needs of gifted children.

Final remarks

Within the program Values and Value of Waldorf Education, research activities are conceived and practiced as a means to develop a shared, evolving body of understanding of educational processes, teaching, and child development in the context of Waldorf education. During the research process, Knowledge Circle members and program director collaboratively and individually explore, examine, and extend personal perceptions, experiences, pre-existing knowledge, and intuitions, as well as perceptions of other individuals or groups. Building this shared body of knowledge and practice is a cyclic and iterative process in which they move back and forth between abstract understandings and actual practice in schools and classrooms. Action research offers a way to treat abstract and practical knowledge, understandings, and experiences not as separate entities, but rather as different viewing points to observe children, ourselves, and our world. As it is, the program’s practice of collaborative
participation in educational action research contributes to the professional development of both educational practitioners and researchers. The collaborative research activities of the Knowledge Circle deepen both our shared and individual understanding of the educational realities we are part of. They also deepen our understanding of how each of us may further contribute towards educational realities that will help children find their way towards becoming “free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and meaning to their lives” (Steiner, 1972, p. 23).

References


