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# O paradoxical pioneer! repurposing steiner education in collage and scribble

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## ABSTRACT

Steiner might be considered the prototypic pioneer from a previous century, whose alternative education vision continues to have huge international appeal and status. Yet Steiner's 'pioneering' views of education are open to interpretation via the creation of an ironic visual collage work, 'pioneer' is examined as a paradox in itself, like a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that is found on investigation, to be true. A paradoxical person therefore combines contradictory elements. Exploring examples of Steiner's global reach, such as storytelling in Steiner schools in New Zealand and the embedding of indigenous narrative knowledge in education, the danger of superficially rendering ancient cultural forms of knowledge to fit with western 'scientific' understanding is critiqued. Disrupting both what is meant by pioneer-led, 'literate' forms of communication such as educational tracts and curricula, this piece resists with the artistically pioneering and disruptive practices of scribble.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Steiner; early childhood;  
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## Introduction

Rudolf Steiner might be considered the prototypic (white male continental) pioneer from a previous century, whose alternative education vision continues to have huge international appeal and status. Yet much that informed Steiner's 'pioneering' views of education is open to diverse interpretation, and, indeed, each Steiner school or early childhood centre is independent and encouraged to be responsive to its own context.

Via the creation of an ironic visual collage work made specifically for the piece, I argue that the idea of the pioneer is itself a paradox, from the Greek 'para' (distinct from) 'doxa' (opinion), where a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement is found, on investigation, to be true, like the idea that a particle can be in two places at once. A paradoxical person therefore combines contradictory elements, like the main characters of Willa Cather's novel 'O Pioneers!' from her 'Great Plains' trilogy ([1913] 2000) detailing immigrant women's entrapment and at the same time their pioneering emancipation from patriarchy.

Exploring examples of Steiner's global reach, such as storytelling in Steiner schools in New Zealand and the embedding of indigenous narrative knowledge in education (Burnett 2015), the danger of superficially rendering ancient cultural forms of knowledge

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to fit with western 'scientific' understanding will be critiqued, including the risk of divorcing such knowledge from the original, imaginative source in which it is situated. Terms used universally and with apparent innocence in early years education – such as 'holistic' – are a case in point. As Heather Ahtone argues from an Indigenous perspective, 'the unfortunate misunderstanding for the Europeans is that their broken knowledge then interpreted our holistic knowledge as primitive and underdeveloped' (in Igloliorte and Taunton 2022, 67). Disrupting both what is meant by pioneer-led, 'literate' forms of communication such as educational tracts and curricula, this piece resists-with the artistically pioneering and disruptive practices of scribble.

According to his autobiography (1928), Rudolf Joseph Lorenz Steiner's early years growing up in the village of Pottschach in the foothills of the eastern Austrian Alps gave him an affinity with the natural beauty of the countryside and rhythms of agricultural life, combined with a fascination for the mechanical products of science and engineering, like the railways where his father worked as stationmaster. Nature and Science were to stay the topics of greatest fascination for him throughout his scholarly life. Considered a 'free thinker', Steiner's father attempted home-schooling, but Steiner did not easily engage with the transmission of knowledge, or 'what had to come to me by way of direct instruction' (Steiner and Stebbing 1928, 6), preferring to go out and watch the miller at his work. Working in cultivating the soil, tending to the orchard, planting and harvesting, the young Rudolf also had domestic chores, the influence of which can be found in Steiner curricula, including noting the rhythms of the seasons and teaching practical skills of carpentry, gardening, knitting, bread making, and so on. A later teacher passed on the love of geometry across mathematics, art and music, the languages Steiner felt 'speak of a world that is not seen' (Steiner 2006), and this fascination with pattern and the idea of 'the hands as the eyes of the rhythmic system' (Ege citing Steiner in Auer 2023, 47) anticipated neuroscience's findings almost a century later, on how the hand shapes the brain and human culture (Wilson 1999). This insight is a feature of Steiner school curricula and of art-making practices, where one thinks with the hand and the hand 'speaks' (and in collage, cuts, tears, folds, sticks, layers, frames).

Foregrounding a rich environment of oracy, song and storytelling as foundational literacy, Steiner schools choose not to teach and test phonic or early reading skills from the age of three or four (as is mainstream practice in the United Kingdom) but delay the development of formal literacy skills until what they consider an important transition to 'Class One' at the age of seven. Having already had his first powerful experience of clairvoyance (seeing the ghost of an Aunt who had died without anyone else's knowledge) by the time he was 10, the young Rudolf realised he was having difficulties with the material world, not least in reading and writing: as 'I passed rapidly over the words in reading; my mind went immediately to the concepts, the ideas, so that I got no feeling from reading for spelling or writing grammatically . . .' (Steiner and Stebbing 1928, 18). As I hope will become evident, visualisation, idea and pioneer are thus interdependent.

Over Steiner's lifetime (1861–1925) Austria, Germany – and the whole of Europe – underwent vast turmoil and change, not least in its belief systems. Radical ideas abounded: Nietzsche declared God was dead, Darwin presented evolution, Einstein developed relativity. Myers' exploration of the 'Cult of Bildung' (2004) explores how Steiner's spiritualism and Max Weber's sociology were in fact a timely, pioneering response to a breakdown of the *Bildungsideal* [ideals of self-formation] – as tools to

interrelate science, religion and culture, and thereby suggest new politics and class parameters to the German people. There are criticisms of the Steiner system as a kind of cult, or 'cultish' in its approach, not least perhaps because of a populist (unresearched) awareness of Steiner's ideas of the *occult* which feed into the values and belief system overarching Steiner-Waldorf practice. The term occult – as Steiner uses it in his extraordinarily interdisciplinary writings on the subject, did not have the slightly sinister, magical or mystical connotations it may have now, originally simply meaning 'hidden'.

Steiner's esprit was searching for a pioneering science that explored and enquired into realities otherwise hidden within our manifest sensory world, having taken his epistemology from Goethe's world view, in which 'thinking . . . is no more and no less an organ of perception than the eye or ear. Just as the eye perceives colours and the ear sounds, so thinking perceives ideas' (Steiner 2000 [1883], GA1). Steiner was the first to admit that his topic has iceberg-levels hidden to us, drawing the analogy that most of us 'perceive only ice' without any means to identify the water it comes from. How much more interesting is ice when we understand more of water's fluctuating and refracting conditions? Steiner's lectures and writing have received criticism as 'pseudoscience' or that he rehashed 'Gnostic doctrines, oriental fables and wisdom teachings' such as lotus flowers from Indian doctrines or astral bodies from medieval thought (Steiner 2011, 5), raising the tensions of the ethnocentric and racist values of the time as symbolic of the importance neither to put on a uniform nor to seek uniformity, including in Steiner's own Anthroposophical Movement.

As I have written elsewhere, collage as research method, as a 'borderlands epistemology' in deliberately incorporating nondominant modes of knowing, is 'particularly suited to a feminist, postmodern, postcolonial inquiry; one that values multiple distinctive understandings generated by different cultures and that deliberately incorporates nondominant modes of knowing and knowledge systems' (de Rijke 2023a). Thinking with collage brings the 'unthought known' (Bollas 2018) of the unconscious via metaphor to the surface. As an 'inchoate critical practice' (Vaughn 2005), collage is a provisional, non-literal, ironic, critical, transborder practice *in itself*.

The collage (Figure 1) features Steiner leading a group of pioneers in uniform (such as that worn by European schoolchildren, scouting, socialist movements and the military) up a hill of ice. The stability of the hill of ice (the idea of the pioneer, and certainly the idea of uniformed young pioneers) is in question, as if all are melting into it, or, more likely, with global warming, *it is melting*. In the collage, the pioneers all carry flags as signalling devices to designate visibly and publicly the affiliation/institution to which they belong, as ships and armies have throughout history, particularly in the business of colonisation. The buisine player (a Persian-Arabic-Turkic instrument often called a herald's trumpet, used when Europeans went to the crusades) was seen as a military target in the same way a flag or pennant was, as something to capture and bring home as a trophy. The sinking collage visually troubles the pioneer as a figure 'at the top', as emblematic of a totally individualistic knowledge formed independently as trophy, rather than that actually gained from colonial extractive practices.

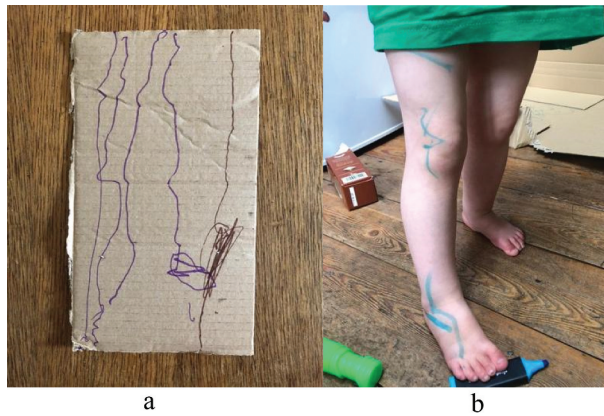
The trumpeter also has Steiner's face, but this image is younger, taken from his graduation photograph from secondary school. Steiner believed that by the age of 15 he had gained a complete understanding of the concept of time, which he considered to be the precondition of spiritual clairvoyance. Based on the premise that scribble, as an art



**Figure 1.** *O Paradoxical Pioneer!* chalk, correction fluid, photo and paper collage. Original art work - de Rijke 2023.

form championed by very young children, nature and avant-garde artists, is arguably our best visual representation of (refracted) time (de Rijke 2023b), the trumpeter blows out scribble to best communicate the looping complexity of time, unconscious communication, scattered perception, and the tangled history of the educational pioneer. There are two versions of Steiner here, and these overlappings, shifting centres and margins – can be seen as a transborder practice with epistemological implications: ‘The borders here are not really fixed. Our minds must be as ready to move as capital is, to trace its paths and to imagine alternative destinations’ (Mohanty 2003, 251). What are we to *make* of such pioneers, now? What of their non-innocence, rooted as they are in white, patriarchal, colonial, capitalist systems and histories?

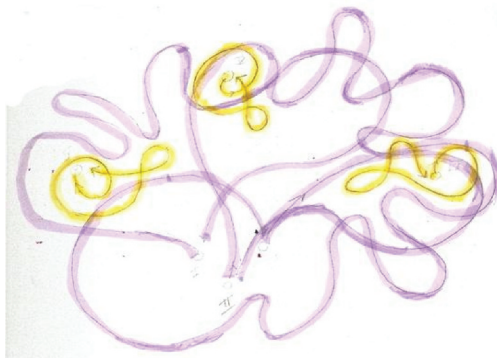
Scribble is itself a form associated with very young children (Figure 2), invariably acknowledged as a ‘phase’ which they will ‘develop/grow out of’ rather than a marginalised artform of great power and avant-garde agency. Elsewhere (de Rijke 2023b), I have associated the uniquely Steiner dance/movement/sound form of Eurythmy with everything that is most open and dynamic about scribble. Eurythmy and ‘ring’ time, highlighting the role of rhythm and musicality of language, explored in relation to Steiner’s own Eurythmy maps and verse, are linked to the ‘whole’ child’s qualities, expressive of freeflow, ‘holistic’ movement that integrates creativity, spirit and soul. This evokes the contemporary early childhood initiative *WriteDance*, where mark-making and ‘movement drawings’ allow children to progress from whole body dance moves to fine-motor movements with fluency and speed; with evidence of benefit, particularly to younger children (Beattie 2009). Steiner himself provided drawings or



**Figure 2.** (a, b) Immy's scribbles on card and on her leg (2021), with kind permission of Immy and her parents, in de Rijke (2019).

scribble forms to Eurythmies, linking them to weekly verses in series or choreographies, as below (Figure 3):

Scribble can exemplify a way of developing 'feel' in a social sense as well as the fingers; what Anna Hickey-Moody (2013) calls 'reassembling subjectivity through affect'; redefining practice as a more-than-human network via material acts of cultural resistance (Hickey-Moody and Page 2015). Using scribble technique, the proposed artwork is a means of feeling 'the childhood sprout anew'. The collage is also intended to recall Steiner's famous blackboard lectures (Steiner 1996), where his ideas were presented orally with complex chalk drawings or 'thought pictures' done swiftly and instinctively as he was speaking (Hollands 2019, 91). It could be said that Steiner pioneered the repurposing of the blackboard from its origins as a rigidly instructional educational tool to something more metaphoric; pointing at a conceptual shift where the blackboard used in arts practices uses its chalk-on-slate materiality as metaphor for art *as* education; hence, the artist Joseph Beuys' calling blackboards his 'fonds' or batteries, pronouncing, 'to be a teacher is my greatest work of art' (Hollands 2019, 94). Resisting the assumption of the blackboard as a (white European like Steiner or male artist's) conceptual modernist art



**Figure 3.** The spirit worlds are finding/the human sprout anew' (© Steiner Archive 1919 GA279.).

medium, my collage is scribbled with a combination of white ‘correction fluid’ (with which we correct writing errors) and white chalk on carbon black paper to evoke the (stereo) typical, traditional western classroom ‘chalk and talk’ instructional teaching method; a pedagogy that has been argued as fuelling the cycle of poverty and underachievement for those who cannot keep up with its didactic pace and alienated removal from the materiality of real life. Ironically, correction fluid makes the title virtually unreadable.

In the collage, I have given the trumpeting figure baby/toddler legs (cut from a nappy advertisement which makes no mention of commercial nappies being nonbiodegradable), bowed but steadfast, lifted as if dancing or learning to walk. Global baby lore has many superstitions and rituals involving legs, such as the stork carrying babies standing on one leg (Europe) hanging cockerel’s legs over the cradle (Iraq), Baba-Yaga, the child-eating witch’s house stands on chicken legs (Russia) and fairy tale characters with magically long legs, like Jack O’Legs (England) spanning heroic distances. I wanted the incongruity of younger legs to stand for the steadfastness, movement and agentic potential of the very young (Figure 4), growing like plants from richly manured soil; hence, the pile of manure features cut-out text from Steiner’s lecture ‘The Kingdom of Childhood’, 1924 in which he points out:

This will have consequences for his whole life, for plant knowledge must give him an understanding, for example, of how the soil must be treated, and of how it must be manured, made living by the manure that is put into it. The child can only gain an understanding of how to cultivate the land if he knows how the soil is really part of the plant. (1996: GA1.11. ‘The Kingdom of Childhood’. 1924)

In that there is no educational pioneer in a compost society, the trumpeter marks the rhythm and plays the tune to the uphill work of the marching pioneers, demonstrating though scribble that ‘this idea has legs’. The idea as superseding all else seems a marked characteristic of the pioneer. But is that/it a *good* idea?



Figure 4. Collage detail. Manure/compost pile with baby legs. Original artwork – de Rijke 2023.

Willa Cather's frontier novel observes that 'a pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy *the idea of things more than the things themselves*' (Cather [1913] 2000, 48 my emphasis). This calls up the paradox of needing an idea to have an idea, then abandoning the idea to put it into practice, to use force to overcome force, or the new materialist paradox of recognising adult-centredness in order to decentre the adult. The faces of all but Steiner's are blurred or obliterated in scribble, just as those who follow, collaborate with or influence the pioneer (all too often people of colour, women or children) are lost to obscurity, somehow obliterated by the great 'idea' (Figure 5).

As a whole, the collage questions the imaginary of the adult (in this case, white European male) pioneer as (perhaps not) worth blindly following, as appearing to flag a single, totalitarian message but in reality, that message is refracted, misinterpreted, altered, edited, embellished, entangled over time, full of internal contradictions and paradoxes. The most knowing individual in the face of educational pioneering movements is still the child, rich in their 'unthought known' (Bollas 2018).

Cather's 'O Pioneers!' ([1913] 2000) carries similarly conflicting pioneer imagery: recognisable colonial metaphors of 'conquering' or taming the Western Frontier, certainly, but also a great lyrical affection for the region described. This is an attachment and rootedness in land, in the ways that indigenous cultures such as Aboriginal Australians describe 'country', where the land and its natural forms are the dominant more-than-human characters and humans only its temporary guardians. Reports such as 'Indigenous knowledge for climate change adaptation' (Nakashima, Krupnik, and Rubis 2018) demonstrate how practices rooted in Indigenous communities can inform cultures less environmentally aware or rooted (such as those of the Global North). Burnett's reflection on oral storytelling in Steiner schools in New Zealand shows how using a deep-seated idea from traditional Maori culture: *Te Whāriki*,<sup>1</sup> 'a woven mat of knowledge and understanding on which all members of a community can sit', makes strong links to other archetypal myths explored in the Steiner curriculum that speak to intuitive, imaginative intelligences and the 'imponderables that sound between words' (Burnett 2015, 50).



Figure 5. Collage detail. All but Steiner's face scribbled over. Original artwork – de Rijke 2023.



Whilst this suggests an opportunity to reconfigure Steiner, the Indigenous principle of to 'look carefully'<sup>2</sup> and 'connect policies and practices of colonialism to intergenerational challenges today' (CBE 2022) remains. For example, Steiner did not just expound but grounded his theories and applied them to everyday life, as demonstrated by a 'From Earth to Planet' Q&A he gave to Goetheaneum workers in 1924 called 'From Beetroot to Buddhism' in which he explored both the spiritual significance of the moon in non-western traditions and the effects of the lunar cycle on planting vegetables. Whilst it is not within the remit of this article to explore Steiner's 'paradoxical approach to racial questions' (Staudenmaier 2008) within systemically prejudicial evolutionary theories of race, lectures such as these – whilst positive contributions to biopharming – are also suggestive of appropriative, extractivist and colonialist practices for contemporary educators to look into carefully and properly attribute such knowledges. In the collage, the living manure on which the child's bare feet dance (Figure 4) speaks of the microbial biomass of the soil where the diversity of bacterial populations in the soil increases, like Haraway's (2016) 'becoming-with' in a 'compost society'. This section of the collage aims to highlight how evolution is 'not a matter of hierarchical dominance and vertical filiation of the Same, but the outcome of lateral transformations, assimilations, digestions and ejections through which living beings materially compose and decompose, live and die together' (Timeto 2021).

Steiner's writing on 'Spiritual Ecology' (2008) is prescient about the risks to the planet in merely exploiting its riches rather than recognising its fragility, and points directly to our current devastation and challenges for the environment, from climate change and extreme weather patterns to deforestation, threats to animal species and ongoing crises in farming. Subtitled 'Reading the book of Nature and Reconnecting with the World', it spans the topics of earth, water, plants, insects and other animal beings, culture and agriculture, arguing that it is not so important to observe nature as to allow nature to develop forces of soul and spirit. His thinking (in his oral and visual lectures, his drawings and his curricula) resists the western tendency for scientific observation and domination in 'more-than-human' analogies, like that of the agency in compost, the seed or the beehive, as is foregrounded by Indigenous knowledge keepers in pedagogies for 'nourishing the learning spirit' (e.g., Battiste 2013; Kimmerer 2015). Giving hundreds of lectures over his lifetime, Steiner also gave 'Dear Children' addresses in Steiner school assemblies, where he reminded classes of children that the love of learning 'lights up their souls' as the sun does plants, as 'the soul finds its sun in people from whom it can learn something' (Steiner 1920, GA289).

The question that needs to be asked now is whether enough people are willing to take the next step, recognize that Steiner was a pioneer, accept that pioneering enterprises always run the risk of making big mistakes as well as big discoveries, and go on to correct the errors, build on the successes, and make something other than a dreary personality cult out of the work of one of the great occultists and spiritual scientists of modern times. (Greer 2023)

Much mainstream practice could benefit from a deeper consideration of the environmental and soulful practices that Steiner felt were at the heart of the young learner, not least by moving away from narrow curricula and standardised testing to supporting child-initiated creativity and free play stimulated by natural materials, allowing for the child's scribble and their dynamic, imaginative intelligences, their living process of watching,

listening, connecting, responding and doing. As pointed out in the introduction to 'Spiritual Ecology' (Barton in Steiner 2008, 5) Steiner's ecological arguments for ideas perception and 'coming alive to the world' towards a collective, 'conscious equilibrium' with nature may have – for western capitalism, ignoring the long history of Indigenous knowledge in this respect – been *too* pioneering in that they may have come too early rather than too late for us to rectify the damage already done; harm which threatens the very future of a planet we should have been custodians of and that, as carbon beings, we are literally made of. In that sense, Steiner may have died 'a lifetime ago, but he is still waiting for us to catch up' (Barton in Steiner 2008, 5). Yet, it is also worth remembering the wise words of art critic Dorothea Baer-Bogenschütz: 'There is no danger of kotowing to Steiner as a guru. He remains a human being – just that' (in Kugler 2003, 193).

## Notes

1. *Te Whāriki* is the title of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum. New Zealand Ministry of Education (2017). *Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early childhood curriculum*. Ministry of Education | Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga.
2. 'Okkakiosatoo (Oh kia kio sii toap) – 'Look Carefully' in Blackfoot' (Iikiinayookaa Marlene Yellow Horn, 2022). CBE Calgary *Indigenous Education Lifelong Learning Framework*.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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