

## Bridging the abyss: Working with different knowledges in teacher education

*Neil Boland, February 2026*

Steiner teacher education takes place within two different knowledge worlds. One is materialist, scientific, measurable – a world recognised and legitimised by modern institutions. The other is spiritual, intuitive, experiential and typically marginalised or rendered invisible. Steiner teacher educators and their students continually navigate both, without necessarily having the language to describe the tensions this creates.

### **The abyss between ways of knowing**

To illustrate this, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos offers the metaphor of an abyss (2007).



On one side stands the dominant Western worldview, which has long determined what can count as ‘real’ knowledge. It accepts empirical evidence, scientific validation and measurable outcomes. Much of the publicly visible material on Steiner education – curricula, books on best practice, teacher resources and so on – belongs to this side.

Across the abyss lie spiritual insight, intuition, Indigenous and local knowledges, religious experience and subjective perception, among others. These forms of knowing have traditionally not just been undervalued; they have been treated as irrational, delusional, or plain non-existent. This dynamic helps explain why Steiner education is typically evaluated only by the criteria recognised on the dominant side of the abyss.

However, already in the 1970s, the French philosopher Michel Foucault noted that an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (1980) was underway: ways of knowing that have been dismissed or suppressed were beginning to reassert their legitimacy. This can be seen in the growing acceptance of Indigenous knowledges – at least from where I write in New Zealand.

## **The experience of student teachers**

Many entering Steiner teacher education feel attracted to it but cannot always explain why. They may value the work while at the same time doubt its validity because it cannot be articulated in mainstream terms. Such responses reflect the epistemic hierarchy into which they have been socialised. A key task of Steiner teacher education, then, is helping student teachers become bilingual in these two knowledge systems – able to live, work and think confidently in both epistemological worlds. This requires not collapsing the two into one, nor forcing a choice between them, but learning to hold the tension creatively.

Foucault's work on "technologies of the self" can help frame what Steiner education requires of teachers. He highlights the difference between what he calls philosophy on the one hand, and spirituality on the other. This is expressed in non-anthroposophical language but identifies these two bodies of knowledge clearly.

First, philosophy:

[T]he philosopher ... can recognise the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through this activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and *without him having to change or alter his being as subject*.  
(1981-2/2005, p. 17, italics added)

And then spirituality:

I think we would call "spirituality" the search, practice, and experience through which *the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth*. (p. 15)

For Foucault, accessing 'truth' is not simply a matter of receiving information. It demands a transformation of the knower – through practices of self-development, inner discipline and moral cultivation. Truth becomes available only when the subject has prepared and transformed themselves inwardly. This gives us language – undoubtedly non-anthroposophical, yet resonant nonetheless – to articulate one of Steiner's central insights: educators must continually work on those "necessary transformations" themselves. Knowledge alone is insufficient. Inner development is a professional responsibility.

## **What Steiner teacher education can offer**

Steiner teacher education provides student teachers with both outer and inner tools:

- Outer tools: understanding of child development, curricula and methodologies, appropriate resources, pedagogical practices.

- Inner tools: imagination, cultivation of stillness, moral intuition, inner development through artistic practice, self-observation and the continued development of capacities for spiritual research.

If we take Foucault's image of an insurrection of subjugated knowledges, do we see ourselves as part of that insurrection? Can we frame Rudolf Steiner as someone who showed profound epistemic courage to speak out when and how he did, as someone who continually crossed the abyss and treated spiritual perception as rigorous inquiry? This might open up new ways of interpreting his contribution today.

In asking "who is the self who teaches?" Parker Palmer (2017) echoes what Steiner expressed through his pedagogical law: that the inner life of the educator affects the learner. This applies not only to children but to student teachers as well. Their development depends less on what we say and more on who we are. We cannot guide others in inner development unless we practise it ourselves. Walking this path is also part of our professional role.

### **Conclusion: Becoming bridges**

If we take Santos seriously, the abyss is still with us. If we take Foucault seriously, knowledge is never neutral, it is always an expression of power. If we take Steiner seriously, knowing is an act of transformation.

Steiner teacher educators stand with one foot on either side of the abyss. Our work is to help student teachers become bilingual in both kinds of knowledge, able to navigate both worlds with clarity, confidence and imagination – not through defensiveness or dogma, but through lived experience.

The world needs educators capable of bridging inner and outer knowledge. As Steiner teacher educators, we are those bridges.

## References

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