

What did he feel was important?

Presentation for the ITEF meeting by Jon McAlice, September 25, 2025

Over the course of the last few months, we have turned our attention to what Rudolf Steiner had to say about teacher education. What did he feel was important? It is possible, of course to think of Steiner's ideas as hopelessly outdated. There is a certain justification to this. The world has changed radically since he was alive. His insights into child development and children's pedagogical needs developed in a life-world context that no longer exists today. In as much as what he had to say about education relates explicitly to the developmental conditions of his time, it is outdated. I don't believe anyone would argue this. This is both true for his thoughts on the education of children as well as those concerning adult education. One has to wonder today, for instance, whether it is pedagogically conducive to group children by age.

What, however, has met the test of time are his thoughts on crafting educational spaces out of insight into the learning needs of the child or young person. These are as we know rooted in an anticipatory understanding of human development, one that is focused on an intuitive understanding of the individual human being in the act of becoming.

I'd like to focus on this latter aspect of Rudolf Steiner's work. It gives us the foundation to transform education in ways that free it from the strictures of the past and allows us to create educational forms that are resonant with the needs of the children and young people today. By focusing on the challenge of engaging students in developing the capacity to grasp what is in the process of becoming, we can, I think, gain a new sense of what teacher education in the context of an anthroposophical pedagogy is asked to do.

Rudolf Steiner only spoke twice at length about teacher education although his lectures to the teachers are rich with indications of what one has to develop within oneself to master the art of education he portrayed. The first time is in August of 1919 shortly before the beginning of the first teachers' course. In the context of a series of lectures about the social import of education, he asks how teacher education can be transformed in the future? His answer: a prospective teacher must become permeated by the reality of our connection with the supersensible worlds. "Every child should stand before the soul of the teacher as a question posed by the supersensible world to the sense world."

On the surface these two statements leave much to be desired. They contain more questions than answers. How did Rudolf Steiner intend us to understand what it means to be permeated by the reality of our connection to the supersensible worlds? What does it mean to see a child, each child, as a question posed by the supersensible world to the sense world? The first is of course a question that we as teacher educators must take seriously. Only if we are permeated by this reality will we be able to find appropriate ways to enable our students to discover and make this reality their own.

The second can be a guiding light for shaping teacher education. We could have the goal that teachers completing a program have learned to meet children as riddles asking to be solved through the process of learning. It is an inner attitude rather than a body of knowledge or a set of skills. And we could imagine that everything we do over the course of a teacher education program revolves around the awakening and cultivation of this attitude. I venture to say that the acquisition of a sense of respect for the question each child poses is contingent on Steiner's first statement. Only through a transformation of how we understand our connection with the spiritual reality of the world can we become aware of the riddles it poses.

I'd like to try to clarify this with an example out of our work here at The Nature Institute. Students often arrive with a great deal of acquired knowledge. This quite often stands in the way and doesn't allow them to engage with deeply with what is right in front of them. Professors are often the most challenging. They know what they see before they begin to look. Too help them overcome this we lead them quite intentionally into situations in which what they think they know is of little help. For instance, we will give each participant a plant and ask them to look at it, at first on their own and in silence. Be attentive to what you can discover. How does it look? How are the colors? How does it feel? Smell? Taste? How is this plant which you are holding in your hands at this moment? After a while, participants pair up and share with one what they have noticed. We ask them to try and confine themselves to what can be perceived and to leave all theorizing and the questioning aside. Be attentive to what is. We then often take this another step in the large circle. We begin with the roots, moving around the circle and describe the plant from the roots to the flower. And here we ask people to steer clear of any "because" statements. "The leaf is slightly yellow because it didn't get enough light."

It doesn't have to be plants. We work with a variety of phenomena – color, light, shadows are a wonderful field. But before entering into any questioning, we ask students to practice the art of articulating what they perceive in this moment, in this context. And we gently help them to "bracket" any associative thinking or causal explanations. We don't negate them, just set them aside for the moment. What students experience is how much there is to see—and here I am using "see" as a stand-in for all the senses. And some, when we move around the circle, are surprised by how much they overlooked.

This is a practice which we return to repeatedly. And we ask students to take it up as a practice. To spend a short time each day with something in the world just taking it in, in all the richness of its appearance.

Only after we have practiced the art of seeing, sensing, do we begin to think the things together – to develop a conceptual understanding of how the various details relate to one another. And again, we challenge ourselves to work with what the plant or the phenomenal context has to show us. Can we articulate the lawfulness that comes into appearance through our engagement with the presence of what we are working with?

How do we engage students in the practice of permeating themselves with the reality of their connection with the spiritual that is present in the world? We engage them in the exercise of a knowledge practice through which they are able to internalize what lives in the world as lawfulness and meaning. The feedback we get from students is that this practicing makes the world more interesting and alive for them. Instead of being content with superficial explanations, they find themselves being drawn into the world and discover new questions in every encounter. One wrote recently that “you taught us so little and yet we learned to see so much.”

The intentional shift from a knowledge practice that is based on having the right ideas about the world to one through which our ideas are rooted in the experienced world brings about a shift in how we place ourselves in relation to the world. One aspect of this is that the relationship becomes more intimate and respectful. We begin to experience the world as a riddle to be solved through our participation. It seems to me that this is the inner attitude that is reflected in the second part of Steiner’s answer to the question: How will teacher education need to be transformed? The solution to the riddle the child presents lies in the way we place ourselves in relation to the child.

The second time Rudolf Steiner spoke on the topic of teacher education was in Bern, Switzerland on April 15, 1924. Here he describes how we can intensify this shift in knowledge practice through engaging in the arts of sculpture, music, and language. He doesn’t speak of these as adjunct courses that students should take in addition to what they are learning about education, but as steps towards the embodiment of an intuitive understanding that can serve as a source of constant educational renewal. In this context, it is also clear that he envisions students doing these arts in sequence in relation to a shared question, thus seeing the same question through sense-based conceptualization, then through the activity of bringing something into form, then within the qualitative realm of inwardly experienced musicality and finally in the realm of the word. It is interesting that this way of working has yet to be taken up seriously in any teacher education program, although, with the exception of the first teacher’s course, it is the only description we have of what Rudolf Steiner thought was necessary. It is possible that by experimenting with ways to bring this approach to life, we might discover new aspects of adult education and new possibilities in adult education. This could become a shared research project among us or among those programs and colleagues that are interested.

Turning back to Rudolf Steiner’s descriptions or suggestions, although we don’t find many explicit thoughts on teacher education, we do have a wealth of comments concerning teacher development. These are spread throughout his lectures. They begin with his exhortations at the end of the first teachers’ course and continue through his final lectures. Although they vary widely, what they have in common is that they all focus on the acquisition of capacities rather than knowledge, specifically they focus more on the craft of teaching rather than the knowledge about teaching. They place the “how” of being with children and young people in the foreground. I don’t know how many of you have ever tried to acquire a new capacity, not just to learn about doing something but to learn to do it. Those who have, know that it is not possible to grow capacities merely by hearing about them. You must do it over and over again. The development of capacities requires practice.