

Beyond Myth-Busting: Understanding our evolving relationship to Rudolf Steiner’s educational work in the past, the present, and the future.

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Rudolf Steiner said many things about teaching, learning, and child development. Over time, these have informed what we call and what we have created as Waldorf or Steiner education. We have adopted some of the practices Steiner recommended and we have not adopted others. In addition, we have adopted practices about which Steiner said nothing or against which Steiner spoke specifically.

In considering our work in the present and planning our work for the future, we would do well to examine our teaching practices in light of what Steiner said, what he didn’t say, what we currently do, what we currently do not do, and what we might do—or not do—in the future. This way of looking at our work can help us move beyond an entrenched or dogmatic view. More important, it honors an educational method that is necessarily, constantly evolving, one that is alive.

Much work has been done in the past ten or fifteen years in what we may call “myth-busting,” attempting to demonstrate the ways in which what we call Waldorf education is occasionally at odds with Rudolf Steiner’s intentions for educational practice. I have written on this topic,¹ as have Susan Howard² and Christof Wiechert,³ among others.

My own interest in the topic dates, in part, to the differences in practice that I observed in moving from the Waldorf School of Garden City, which I had attended as a student and at which I taught for twelve years, to the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School, where I was a teacher and administrator for five years before moving to the Berkshire Waldorf High School. Garden City, founded in 1947, had no “math gnomes” or “circle time” because these practices evolved at other schools and somewhat later. Each school develops and carries a culture and practices that differ from those at other schools. Over time, of course, schools cross-pollinate, and I’m sure circle time and even math gnomes have found their way to some Garden City classrooms.

These two examples provide evidence of practices about which Steiner is silent, practices that have evolved since Steiner lived, but that are increasingly taken to be part of Waldorf education.

¹ Sagarin, S. (2007). “Playing ‘Steiner Says:’ Twenty Myths About Waldorf Education.” In *Research Bulletin for Waldorf Education*, Vol. XII, No. 2, Spring 2007, pp. 37-44. Wilton, NH: Research Institute for Waldorf Education.

² Howard, S. (2006). “The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education.” In *Gateways*, 51, Fall/Winter, pp. 6-12. Spring Valley, NY: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America.
<http://www.waldorfearlychildhood.org/uploads/Howard%20Article.pdf>

³ Wiechert, C. (2011). “Rethinking the Threefold Division of the Main Lesson,”
<http://www.waldorftoday.com/2011/01/rethinking-the-threefold-division-of-the-main-lesson-christof-weichert/>

I have written about them elsewhere,⁴ calling into question the use of math gnomes, and acknowledging that circle time has its use, within limits.

To assist consideration, I created the following matrix that lays out the logical possibilities for engaging with what Steiner said—or didn’t say. It includes what we do now and what we might do in the future. A plus sign (+) indicates an educational practice that Steiner advocated, something we currently practice, or something we might practice in the future. A minus sign (-) indicates an educational practice about which Steiner is silent, one we currently do not practice, or one we will not practice in the future.

Table 1. Educational Practices Based in the Work of Rudolf Steiner, Past, Present, and Future.

	Past: Steiner said... or he didn't...	Present: We do... or we don't...	Future: We will... or we will not...
1	+	+	+
2	+	+	-
3	+	-	+
4	+	-	-
5	-	-	-
6	-	-	+
7	-	+	-
8	-	+	+

Although this table may appear at first to be somewhat abstract, I believe it presents a more thoughtful and sophisticated way to think about what we do in Waldorf schools—and how it evolves—than simple references to “Steiner said,” “Steiner never said,” and so on. Instead of an adversarial conversation about what we should or shouldn’t do, it helps us situate our present practice within its origins in the past and its possibilities for the future.

This matrix and the thinking behind it are intended to be a tool for structured conversations in schools and among colleagues regarding their teaching practices. Participants don’t need to have a logical diagram in hand, they just need to be aware of and open to the possibilities laid out here.

I will consider all eight possibilities, with illustrative examples. My examples are not necessarily yours. But, as you’ll see, the thinking behind each follows a pattern that imbues it with value. Even if you disagree with my examples and conclusions, you and I can discuss where you believe I went wrong, present evidence, and arrive at a considered opinion that, with some work, takes us beyond the mere assertion of agreement or disagreement.

Each of the eight possibilities arrayed in my matrix is not equally worthy of our time. Some practices clearly derive from Steiner’s work, are central to our practice, and should continue into

⁴ Sagarin, 2007.

the future relatively unquestioned. For instance, the first row is the least problematic. Steiner recommended a practice, we employ it, and we agree to continue to employ it in the future:

Example 1.

Past: Steiner said we should teach imaginatively between the ages of 7 and 14.

Present: We are doing this. It's one of the greatest strengths of our current practice and the reason many parents send their children to us and teachers find value in their work.

Future: We should continue doing this.

Although the first row may be in some ways the least problematic, it is also likely the home of the more profound and essential aspects of what we do. Education imbued with spirituality? Developmentally appropriate education? Teaching that addresses an image of a triune human being? Education for environmental reverence and social health? We agree on these, try to practice them, and don't need a lot of conversation to agree to continue to address them in the future. The challenge here is not to question practice but to deepen it, and that's a topic for a different essay.

Row 2 asks the question, what are we doing today, based on Steiner's work, that we should not do tomorrow? If we understand Steiner to have asked for teaching that is alienating or racist, for example, and if we are currently teaching in this mode, then we should consider abandoning it. Such considerations belong in this row. Abandoning a practice recommended by Steiner is not something Waldorf schools or teachers should do lightly, but if we are honest, we must admit its possibility.

Example 2.

Past: Some of Steiner's remarks about, say, the French and the French language are incendiary, to say the least.⁵

Present: Teachers who base their attitude toward the French and the French language on Steiner's remarks would be highly and inappropriately prejudiced.

Future: Any such teachers should strongly consider altering their practice in the future. Schools that employ them may have to censure their work.

Row 3 points us toward engaging with suggestions Steiner made for teaching but that we have not made part of our practice. Nearly each time I teach a course, even one I have taught twenty or more times, I return to E. A. K. Stockmeyer's *Curriculum*⁶ to re-read the relevant section. I almost always find something new, something I don't recall reading before, something I can use to refresh my teaching and make it better and more effective. If necessary, I don't stop with Stockmeyer, but head directly for the Steiner work to which Stockmeyer refers. I believe a significant portion of our math, history, and science teaching would be improved by attention to considerations of this type. But here is an example from painting:

⁵ "The use of the French language quite certainly corrupts the soul. The soul acquires nothing more than the possibility of clichés. Those who enthusiastically speak French transfer that to other languages. The French are also ruining what maintains their dead language, namely, their blood." Steiner, R. (1998). *Faculty Meetings with Rudolf Steiner, Vol. 2*, p. 558. Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposohic Press.

⁶ Stockmeyer, E. A. K. (2001). *Rudolf Steiner's Curriculum For Waldorf Schools* (Rev. 3rd ed.). Sussex, England: Imprint. (Original work published 1965.)

Example 3:

Past: Steiner said it would have an enlivening effect to have students paint on both white and colored or tinted paper.⁷

Present: Many teachers do not do this and may not even be aware of this recommendation.

Future: We should strongly consider making it part of our practice in the future.

Steiner was wrong about some things. He was human and fallible. These simple statements may be considered heretical by some of my colleagues, but not to admit them is to insult Steiner's humanity and the possibility for the growth and development of our teaching practice. Further, not to admit to them is to add to a sectarian and isolationist view of Steiner and anthroposophy. Even if you and I are not capable of saying precisely where Steiner was incorrect, we must admit the existence of his errors. The fourth line of my matrix considers practices that Steiner may have advocated but that we do not implement and should not implement in the future.

Example 4:

Past: Steiner said, at least once, "We should always correct left-handedness."⁸

Present: Research shows that asking children to switch hands may often have deleterious consequences, and many, if not most, teachers do not attempt this.

Future: We should continue strongly to question switching children from left-handedness to right-handedness.

The fifth line considers practices that were, are, and should remain outside our practice.

Example 5:

Past: Steiner did not advocate corporal punishment.

Present: We do not indulge corporal punishment.

Future: We should not consider corporal punishment.

Row 6 is perhaps the most challenging row of all. It suggests areas of practice for which we cannot turn to Steiner, who is here silent; areas in which we currently are not practicing; but areas in which we will be called to practice in the future. To meet successfully the demands of the future that extend us beyond guidance from Steiner's words and beyond what we currently do, we will have to take the reins that Steiner (and others) have given us, so to speak. Here we may develop the imagination and intuition to deal creatively, ethically, and freely with the as-yet-unknown. This is, in fact, the area for which anthroposophy prepares us. We should face the challenges in this area with courage, with renewed commitment and vigor. We might imagine that considerations that belong in this row exist only in the future, but I believe my example shows that they are clearly already here.

Example 6:

⁷ Steiner, R. (2000). *Practical Advice for Teachers*, p. 35. Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press.

⁸ Steiner, R. (1998). *Faculty Meetings With Rudolf Steiner, Vol. 1*, p. 345. Great Barrington, MA: Anthroposophic Press.

Past: To my knowledge, although Steiner spoke about the effects of alcohol and other substances, he didn't say anything about many of the drugs, including marijuana, that our students may abuse.

Present: Beyond some prohibitive policies that seem to have more to do with our current comfort and practical considerations than with educational ideals, we too frequently don't contend with the implications of our students' drug use.

Future: We should probably develop a more insightful, thoughtful education around student drug use.

And, finally, we find the examples of "myths" that prompted my thinking about this topic, practices that have evolved since Steiner lived and that we must examine carefully to be sure they are valuable or to be sure they have not become baseless and dogmatic:

Example 7:

Past: Steiner did not say we should use "math gnomes" to teach math.

Present: We frequently use math gnomes to teach math in the early elementary grades.

Future: We should stop using math gnomes to teach math. They trivialize the elemental world and sidestep Steiner's own suggestions for math teaching.

Example 8:

Past: Steiner did not say students should gather for "circle time" in the morning.

Present: Students currently gather for circle time, which seems to have been introduced to schools, including Waldorf schools, in the late 1970s or 1980s.

Future: Students should continue to gather for circle time, as appropriate.

It would be a mistake to believe that this matrix addresses all considerations of that part of our work that is not eternal and essential. Important initial conversations revolve around where a particular practice belongs.

For me, the use of math gnomes trivializes the elemental world and introduces a distraction into a process that takes spiritual reality—the realm of mathematics—and brings it to earth in our symbolic and conceptual understanding. In addition, Steiner and many others since him have offered brilliant ideas for teaching math without the distracting use of gnomes, squirrels, or kings. I have yet to hear a cogent argument in favor of Dorothy Harrer's math gnomes and their compatriots, but I know that many teachers use them and do not change their practice. I also know that my daughter's teacher used them, judiciously, and that she is an excellent mathematician. But how much better could she have been? How much more insight could her teacher have inculcated?

On the other hand, to gather in a circle is a powerful social force. So long as work in a circle reinforces or assists learning and the purpose of the morning lesson, it is clearly a healthful practice.

To end with another, more complex example, take the prohibition on the use of black in young children's drawings and paintings. Although Steiner did not offer a prescription or prohibition with regard to the use of black in children's work, it is possible to interpret his work to justify

this prohibition. The challenge is to keep this policy healthy and relevant. If we simply adopt it without understanding it, we become dogmatists and immediately subvert our own aims to create a living method of education.

Implementing ideas dogmatically also causes all kinds of practical and cultural problems. Removing black but leaving brown and pink in a box of crayons allows those children with pink skin and brown hair to draw their likeness, while brown skinned children with black hair are stymied. This is a horror, especially in the United States, given our history of slavery and racism. Thoughtful teachers will not indulge a prohibition on black, but may healthfully choose to give children only prismatic colors (“rainbow” colors), removing not only the black but also the colors that allow any children to draw naturally colored skin or hair.

Further, as a thought experiment, imagine you have children to teach in impoverished circumstances. You have charcoal with which you may draw, and nothing else. Is it better to forego drawing altogether, or to use the charcoal even though it’s black?

Conversations along these lines, conversations that begin with research and a clear understanding of Steiner’s educational work, and that take into account current practices and their validity and efficacy, will clarify our work in schools and move us toward ever better teaching and learning.

Finally, however, these conversations can only go as deep as the persons having them are capable of going. It is incumbent on each one of us to continue our development as human beings through contemplative, reflective practice and through warm, honest relationships with each other. Only increasingly human teachers will honor Rudolf Steiner’s educational aims and honor the humanity of the students they teach.

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