

# **“Latent questions” as an anthropological paradigm for the teaching of literature in the Waldorf high school**

**Frank Steinwachs**

*Seminar für Waldorfpädagogik, Hitzacker / Deutschland*

## **Identifying the problem – what is meant by “latent questions”?**

Peter Guttenhöfer has written:

“Every age-group has its own characteristic latent questions. They form, as it were, a set of implicit guidelines for lesson content in Waldorf schools” (Guttenhöfer 1992, p. 150),

but he does not take this brief characterisation any further. In the conceptual landscape of Waldorf education, however, “latent questions” hold a firm and anthropologically well-founded place, albeit on closer inspection it is apparent, as evidenced by Guttenhöfer, that they have never received anything like full consideration as to their nature and methodological function. They are much more likely to be taken for granted (as e.g. by de Vries 2017, or Boss 2018, p. 108). On account of the special ontological character of the concept and its still indeterminate meaning it would therefore seem valuable, for the purposes of discussion and communication both inside and outside the sphere of Waldorf education, to flesh out this key notion in the anthropology of the teaching process. For the fact is that in Waldorf education, especially in the high school, “latent questions” represent an important link between the individuation processes of the students and the teachers’ mental processes in the design, conduct and review of lessons. We will begin, therefore, by attempting to develop a clearer understanding of what the term “latent questions” means as a didactic concept within the context of Waldorf education.

In connection with their discussion on how teachers acquire competence in their profession, Wenzel M. Götte, Peter Loebell and Klaus-Michael Maurer have brought the issue of “latent questions” in Waldorf education into sharp relief in the following passage:

“While command of a subject and its associated methods is important, more important still is the development of social competence and self-confident “presence”. The sign that competence is developing in this comprehensive sense is when lesson content, designed in accordance with an observed developmental phase, is presented and actively taken up by the students; when students feel that they have been met in this way, “noticed” and “acknowledged”, it is then that they are likely to be personally motivated to take the opportunity to work with the “material” they have been offered. Here Waldorf education speaks of “latent questions”; in other words, questions which for the students remain unconscious, but which touch the depths of their inner being, and the answers to which help them cope with the challenges of growing up.” (Götte/Loebell/Maurer 2009, p. 99)

Here they have formulated in modern terms Steiner’s utterances of 21st June 1922, in that they have characterised a teaching process which takes questions about the relationship of self and world broadly typical of a particular age-group (and not always capable of formulation) (Loebell 2015, p. 27 ff.) as its point of departure for age-appropriate lessons which can awaken the interest of the individual (self) in the lesson content (world). This is intended to open up the

possibility of experiencing and exploring the "world" through the lesson content, while at the same time being involved in the concrete subtleties of the actual individuation process – whether conscious or unconscious (cf. Sommer 2010, p. 35 f.). Here, in keeping with the anthropological assumptions of Waldorf education, "self" needs to be understood as part of an individuation process based upon developmental psychology and assumed to be fluid and holistic. For Waldorf education, then, the fundamental concept of learning rests upon a dynamic relationship between object of attention, stage of development, age-appropriate interest in the world and an individuation process conceived in explorative terms, the latter becoming productive when content, method and performance (methods that support the development of speaking, reading and writing) can be combined into a coherent, meaningful lesson plan. In this context meaningful should be understood as referring to an educational event which the students experience as relevant both in relation to the subject and to their individual development (cf. Zech 2016, p. 575). To have a real chance of achieving this, the concept of "latent questions" is very helpful, since strictly speaking they need to be teased out in relation to a particular learning group and its age-specific characteristics, and thus can provide concrete indications as to what a meaningful lesson might look like in design and execution. Nevertheless, this process cannot be categorised in terms of rough or theoretical anthropological assumptions. On the contrary, this fluid process must take place on the basis of an open-ended anthropological model (cf. Schieren 2015, Wagemann 2016, Göpfert, 1993, p. 64).

In 1989, in an essay entitled "Der Deutschunterricht als Antwort auf 'Latente Fragen' des Jugendlichen", Christoph Göpfert correctly pointed out that with the expanding number of Waldorf schools and the associated increase in public attention, they were under an obligation to communicate what they stand for more clearly (Göpfert 1989, p. 3 f.). His contribution here was to put forward an outline of a German literature curriculum in tune with the anthropological findings of developmental psychology by being founded squarely upon "latent questions" (Göpfert 1989, p. 4, 5 and 9) – in other words, those which Guttenhöfer designated three years later as the "leitmotifs" of this age-group, and expressions of the dynamic, age-appropriate interaction between "self" and "world". But Göpfert did not enlarge upon the concept either. Now, 30 years on, research on Waldorf education has moved much further into the public domain and is in the meantime part of an increasingly constructive and fruitful scientific debate. Upon this background it would seem appropriate to take a fresh look at the subject of "latent questions" as a didactic category and, as far as is possible within the context of an essay, to work out its conceptual ramifications, also in a subject-related sense. To this end a first step will be to consider Steiner's lecture of 21st June, 1922 where he paraphrased the phenomenon, then to set that in relation to what writers on Waldorf education have to say about it in general and in connection with the teaching of literature, and to explore the possibilities "latent questions" offer as a paradigm of how to approach the teaching of literature. Finally, how this all relates to other approaches to the teaching of literature will be considered.

### **On Steiner's presentation of the fundamental idea on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1922**

Even though Steiner did not actually use the term "latent questions", the outlines of the fundamental idea are to be found in the above-mentioned lecture (Steiner 1977, p. 73-86) which he gave to the teachers of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart. This may be regarded as one of the most important and concentrated utterances on high school methodology, and offers a wealth suggestions on how and what to teach. For this reason it would be best from the outset to consider the concept of "latent questions" in terms of how it is understood within the context of Waldorf education, since the paradigm described here only encompasses a part of what the lecture contains. From a hermeneutic point of view, however, this way of proceeding is not unproblematical, for reading Steiner's lectures today entails either applying historical criticism to the text or interpreting it from a modern perspective (cf. Kiersch 2014, p. 55 ff.). Moreover, with Steiner's lectures it is not always possible to gauge at what level of audience understanding he had pitched them, nor how this was conceived of at the time and integrated into the lecture. A further difficulty lies in the fact that Steiner did not adhere to any known or current scientific theory that could serve as a bridge to understanding what he said (Schmelzer/Deschepper 2019, p. 6 ff.). Without wishing to elaborate on how to approach Steiner's lectures, it must suffice simply to mention that the features that need to be taken into account in the process

have been dealt with elsewhere (Demisch et al. (Ed.) 2014). Here, accordingly, we will focus on relevant quotations, reflect upon and interpret them from a modern perspective and, where appropriate, incorporate them into the proposed didactic model (on the method applied here cf. Schlüter 2014).

While that which Steiner presented on 21<sup>st</sup> June, 1922 transcends the category of “latent questions”, they were nevertheless integrated into further anthropological considerations. Steiner thus makes abundantly clear that he regards “latent questions” as an anthropological category. Moreover, he characterises their expression as a developmental transformation in a psychological sense, maintaining also that they do not stand alone, but are part of a holistically conceived methodological ensemble. He begins by saying that we are concerned with a phenomenon of which the students are initially unaware:

“[...] the child finds the transition from facts to knowledge [...]”, but adolescents “go through this transition from facts to knowledge unconsciously” (Steiner 1977, p. 74).

Here the process by which class 9/10 students begin to take hold of their own faculty of judgment is described, and it is assumed to be unconscious. According to Michael M. Zech, Waldorf education sees the formation of the power of judgment as a process falling into three successive phases, albeit here (Zech 2018, p. 67) he designates “the acquisition of knowledge” as arising from “the development of the ability to form one’s own judgments and concepts within the context of a particular subject area”, naming it as the second phase of the transformation running from class 9 to class 11. Thus the process of autonomic judgment formation represents, in relation to the individual, a form of cognitive self-realisation within adolescent development (cf. Zech 2018, p. 44 ff.; Loebell 2016, p. 243 ff.). For “latent questions” this implies that they arise during a biographical phase, which is experienced by the students as a more or less conscious, often critical or idealistic relationship between “self” and “world” (cf. Steiner 1978, p. 238 ff.).

“Latent questions”, however, are not simply *there*, arising, as it were, in a vacuum. Rather they must be specifically awakened, according to Steiner. To this precept he adds a practical consideration:

All this must be brought to them in such a way that it can resound on and on within them - so that questions about nature, about the cosmos and the entire world, about the human soul, questions of history - so that riddles arise in their youthful souls.

What he is saying here is that “all this”, in other words, both lesson content and teaching method, must be planned and carried out in such a way that the content – whatever the subject – should have a noticeable effect on the students, awakening unexpressed interest in the form of “riddles”, which, although still diffuse, nonetheless create a questioning attitude that provides motivation. In contrast to so-called problem-oriented teaching the idea here is not to feed the students a concrete question or induce them to generate one, which is then answered by means of analytical procedures, but to set them on a quest. On this point Walter Hutter remarks that within the overall phase-structure of a lesson the “first contact”, i.e. the first encounter with the content should entail an “element of the unpredictable”, so as not to be in danger of predetermining an intention, motivation or meaning, but to provide space for something of the kind latent in the minds of the students to arise. With this he describes – similar to Steiner – an aesthetic teaching model, that is experience-based and inherently effective. In this way the students are indeed being steered in a certain direction by the choice of material and its associated points of emphasis, but this still leaves them the concrete possibility of developing their own questions and acting on their own initiative (cf. Soetebeer 2019). Thus the course of the lesson can take a flexible form, which the teacher must allow for and adequately facilitate in order to ensure that the students can inhabit the process in the way intended. Such processes demonstrate that the above-mentioned biographical transition-phase represents the growth of new expectations in relation to the world and to the teacher as mediator between student and world (Steiner 1977, p. 79). On this point Steiner remarks:

In life, of course, it is rather important, whether one can make conscious something that is unconscious, or not [...]. But if a student is unable to formulate a question which he experiences inwardly, the teacher must be capable of doing this himself, so that he can bring about such a formulation in class, and he must be able to satisfy the feeling that then arises in the students when the question comes to expression. (Steiner, GA 302a, 1977)

Here two processes are referred to, which can be understood as methodological requirements. Once the teacher has activated the "latent questions" through the "element of the unpredictable" (Hutter 2019, p. 56), his task is to take them from latency (unconscious) to concreteness (conscious) through the design and content of the lessons. This involves his discerning the still latent questions, consciously formulating them in his selection of material and, in the final step, the students seeking and finding answers. Steiner did not actually articulate this last step, but merely implied it. His saying that the teacher must be capable "of formulating the questions" might give the impression that teachers should formulate and provide actual questions for the students, but this is not what is meant. De facto "formulate" can only mean opening up a possible mode of approach or making an offer, the actual relevance of which will only become apparent in the way it enlivens the context of a lesson. In using this paradigm for the planning of lessons, their quality consists in the teacher finding, through observing his class and in the course of his lesson preparation, a way of making the phenomenon the vehicle for finding "latent questions" and thus rendering the lesson personally meaningful.

This establishes a student-centred lesson structure that goes beyond the maieutic dialogue by providing the possibility of individualised meaning (cf. Sommer 2010, p. 35). In their didactic reflections on the "creation of meaning" Birkmeyer, Combe, Gebhard, Knauth and Vollstedt maintain that concepts are "multi-faceted" and only arbitrarily definable. They nevertheless base their grammar of the didactics of meaning-creation soundly upon individualised biography work, detailing this in anthropological terms, in terms of socialisation and in relation to specific subjects (Birkmeyer, Combe, Gebhard, Knauth, Vollstedt 2014, p. 10). Even though they do not give an anthropological definition of what they call "biographical identity work", it can be assumed that the anthropological semantics behind it diverges from those of Waldorf education.

In sum, then, according to what Steiner presents in this lecture, "latent questions" can be assumed to be a natural aspect of human development, whereby the students go through a change in the relationship of "self" and "world" in the broadest sense. This results in an inward and outward, unconscious and conscious exploratory attitude in each individual's relation to the material and immaterial world. The teacher, by contrast, has the task of purveying "riddles", which then, in the form of "latent questions", are to become unconscious intentions towards action. The idea is that through the choice of content and the methods by which the contents are to be encountered, in other words, through the way the lessons are organised in terms of curriculum, epistemology and performance, the "latent questions" are to be transformed from unconscious to conscious questions and searches for answers; and this is to occur via the material, in other words, through the learning experience mediated by the phenomenon. In this way, according to Steiner, the age-specific needs of the students in relation to lesson content and its personal relevance can be met, and individuation supported within the context of the teaching process.

### **Attempt to create a model: "Latent questions" as a paradigm for anthropologically based lesson planning**

From what has been said so far, "latent questions" offer a fundamental paradigm for teaching in the high school. A paradigm which reflects the relationship between "self" (individual) and "world" (curriculum etc.) as constituted in anthropological terms as well as in terms of developmental psychology, which constitutively combines individuation and engagement with phenomena in the act of teaching, and should thus create a healthy dynamic between "the demands of individual development and the acquisition of skills and knowledge" (Götte, Loebell & Maurer 2009, p. 99). For this reason the teachers' work with "latent questions" in a guided way – but at the same time derived from anthropologically informed observation and read from specific individuals – depends on the assumption that the presentation of lesson content must be based upon the individual biographical needs of the students:

One of Waldorf education's main concerns is to pay attention to the motifs which indicate the direction individual lives might take, which the individuals concerned might not even be aware of, and which are addressed in many ways as the educational process unfolds. Ideally education should lead each young person

to a deeper understanding of themselves, to a basic moral-ethical orientation and to the development of motifs which generate the possibility of realising the aims prompted by their ideals. (Schieren 2015, p. 141)

This possibility of individuals “realising their aims in life” thus constitutes the basis upon which “riddles” can be awakened and transformed into “latent questions”. Envisaged in this way, however, “latent questions” only very rarely provide a sufficient basis for the planning and design of lessons. It is preferable to work with them marginally in mind and then functionally integrate them into the “methodological dance” of Waldorf education where required. In other words, applying them in isolation would not create a viable lesson structure, and so “latent questions” must be fitted into the timing and planning of lessons according to the needs of the situation.

In his 2010 essay “Schluss, Urteil, Begriff – die Qualität des Verstehens” (“Conclusion, judgement, concept – the quality of understanding”), Jost Schieren has delineated the threefold structure of the teaching process, and thus provided an epistemological basis for lesson planning as a structure. Subsequently Wilfried Sommer considered this as it specifically relates to the teaching of science (Sommer 2010). Both authors clearly underline that the intention towards the didacticization and curricular timing of high school teaching is anthropologically based, Sommer laying particular emphasis upon the causal connection between content and individuation (Sommer 2010, p. 35 f.), Schieren upon the element of method and the creation of meaning (Schieren 2010, p. 17, cf. Zech 2018, p. 43). Upon this background, in his essay on curricular organisation in Waldorf education, Florian Stille speaks of an “anthropology of the act of knowing”, laying emphasis on the fact that this epistemological process and its temporal organisation into a co-ordinate system of lesson planning should not be taken as a fixed structure, but rather as flexible and in need of further research (Stille 2011, p. 42 f.). Thus the authors just alluded to present the teaching process in situations characteristic of the student-oriented style of Waldorf education (cf. Schneider 2008, p. 33 ff.) as a form of the anthropologically based combination of the processes of knowledge acquisition and individuation, as Zech has also recently accentuated (Zech 2018, p. 47 ff.). What all these authors have in common, however, is that they integrate lesson design together with the relationship between “self” and “world” into a didactic structure, albeit without bringing the latter directly into operative connection with “latent questions”.

(To be continued)

## References

- Aristoteles (1997). *Poetik*. Translated by Manfred Fuhrmann. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Avanessian, Armen (2013). *Realismus jetzt! Spekulative Philosophie und Metaphysik für das 21. Jh.* Berlin: Merve.
- Bachmann-Medick, Doris (2004). Kulturelle Spielräume. Drama und Theater im Licht ethnologischer Ritualforschung. In: Bachmann-Medick, Doris (Ed.): *Kultur als Text. Die anthropologische Wende in der Literaturwissenschaft*. Tübingen und Basel: utb – A. Francke, p. 98-121.
- Bartoniczek, Andre & Fiechger, Hans Paul (2017). *Schiller. Kafka*. Kassel: Pädagogische Forschungsstelle Kassel.
- Birkmeyer, Jens (2015). Macht das denn Sinn? Metaphorische Fragestellung im Unterricht.  
In: Ulrich Gebhard (Ed.): *Sinn im Dialog. Zur Möglichkeit sinnkonstituierender Lernprozesse im Unterricht*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, p. 33-50.
- Birkmeyer, Jens & Combe, Arnold & Gebhard, Ulrich & Knauth, Thorsten & Vollstedt, Maike (2015). Lernen und Sinn. Zehn Grundsätze zur Bedeutung der Sinnkategorie in schulischen Bildungsprozessen  
In: Ulrich Gebhard (Ed.): *Sinn im Dialog. Zur Möglichkeit sinnkonstituierender Lernprozesse im Unterricht*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2015, p. 9-32.
- Boss, Günther (2018). *Individuationswege*. 2 Bde. Kassel: Pädagogische Forschungsstelle Kassel.
- Bredella, Lothar & Halles, Wolfgang (2007). Einleitung: Literaturunterricht, Kompetenzen und Bildung.  
In: Bredella, Lothar und Hallet, Wolfgang (Hrsg.): *Literaturunterricht, Kompetenzen und Bildung*. Trier: LIT, p. 1-9.
- Bredella, Lothar (2007). Bildung als Interaktion zwischen literarischen Texten und Leser/Innen. Zur Begründung der rezeptionsästhetischen Literaturdidaktik. In: Hallet, Wolfgang & Nünning, Ansgar (Ed.): *Neue Ansätze und Konzepte der Literatur- und Kulturdidaktik*. Trier: LIT, S. 49-68.
- Demisch, Ernst-Christian & Greschka-Ebding, Christa & Kiersch, Johannes & Schlüter, Martin & Stocker, Martin (Ed.) (2014). *Steiner neu lesen. Perspektiven für den Umgang mit Grundlagentexten der Waldorfpädagogik*. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang.
- Dewey, John (1916). *Kunst als Erfahrung*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Edelmann, Thomas, *Gefährdungen. Streitbare literaturdidaktische Entwürfe für die Oberstufe*. Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag.
- Fiechter, Hans Paul (1995) *Lyrik Lesen. Grundlagen einer praktischen Poetik*. Stuttgart: Freies Geistesleben.
- Fiechter, Hans Paul & Schumacher, Rita (2014). *POETIK. Drei Wege*. Kassel: Pädagogische Forschungsstelle Kassel.
- Geisenhanslüke, Achim (2015). *Die Wahrheit in der Literatur*. Paderborn: W. Fink.
- Gerner, Volker (2007) *Das Eigene und das Andere. Eine Theorie der Deutschdidaktik am Beispiel des identitätsorientierten Unterrichtes*. Marburg: Tectum.
- Göpfert, Christoph (1989). Widersprüchliche Welt - Suche nach dem Selbst. Deutschunterricht in der 10. Klasse als Antwort auf „latente“ Fragen des Jugendlichen. In: *Erziehungskunst* 7/1989, p. 548-555.
- Göpfert, Christoph (Hrsg.) (1993). *Jugend und Literatur. Anregungen zum Deutschunterricht*. Stuttgart: Freies Geistesleben.
- Götte, Wenzel M. & Loebell, Peter & Maurer, Klaus Michael (2009). *Entwicklungsaufgaben und Kompetenzen. Zum Bildungsauftrag der Waldorfschulen*. Stuttgart: Freies Geistesleben.
- Guttenhöfer, Peter (1992). Deutschunterricht. In: Leber S. (Ed.): *Die Pädagogik der Waldorfschule und ihre Grundlagen*. Darmstadt: WBG.
- Halász, László (1993). *Dem Leser auf der Spur. Literarisches Lesen als Forschendes Entdecken*. Wiesbaden: Vieweg+Teubner.
- Huber, Florian (2008). *Durch Lesen sich selbst verstehen. Zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Identitätsbildung*. Bielefeld: [transcript].
- Hutter, Walter (2019). *Zur Methodik des Oberstufenunterrichtes an Waldorfschulen*. Oberhausen: Athena & Verlag am Goetheanum.