

A Contemplative and Reflective Format for Early Childhood Study

• Laurie Clark

*It will indeed come to be for us a necessity
That we observe the children day by day
And also exercise in ourselves day by day
Control of our own thought and feelings.
Every child has a subtle perception
Of whether the person looking after him*
Or teaching him is inwardly equipped in her soul.
The child's well-being depends to a great extent
On what is growing and developing in the inner soul
Of the person in charge.
Develop your keenness of observation;
Nurture the powers of your inner Being;
Develop vitality of thinking;
Depth of feeling, strength of willing.*
—Herbert Hahn

*Replace the words “him” and “her” with “her” and “his” as appropriate.

This verse is an amazing one to contemplate when beginning to look into the world of child study. It is so very interesting that Herbert Hahn would emphasize that the child’s well being depends upon the inner striving of the teacher. It is true that when we try to understand and contemplate the child, we are immediately faced with the question of whether we can find the mood of soul that is needed so that genuine perceptions can be born in us and give us the possibility to accompany the child on his or her journey—the child who is, as Henning Kohler so eloquently states, “the guest looking for the way.”

What do we need to overcome in ourselves in order to come closer to the child? How can we develop the selflessness that is necessary to begin to recognize the original intentions of the child? Original intentions have to do with the essence of the will in each individual child and the resolve to incarnate and integrate the heavenly into the earthly with the help of higher powers. The original intentions that we all carry shine above

each one of us as a star guiding us on our way. The Three Kings followed the most radiant star to find the Christmas child and bring their sacramental offerings. Rudolf Steiner stated in a lecture on the three Magi, “To be led by a star means nothing else than to see the soul itself as a star.” How can we find in ourselves the sacramental reflection in order to be led towards recognition of the child’s star? What gifts will we have to offer?

Some of the first questions that the teacher may ask herself upon meeting a child are “Who are you? What do you bring? How can I be of service to you?” This is the initial moment when a different type of hearing is required. A non-judgmental objectivity is required, and an offering of attention with reverence needs to open in the heart of the teacher. All naming and psychologizing of symptoms and behaviors must be laid aside in the mind and soul of the teacher so that the inspiration waiting to be heard behind all of this can be recognized. An awakening capacity of pure listening is planted as a seed in the heart of the educator. When there is utter attention and deep interest from the teacher, the possibility that leads towards the sacred door is opened into the destiny of the other. This is done as if trying to listen to what the angel of the child could be revealing to us at this initial, profound moment.

After this initial gesture of listening has taken place, then a picturing of the child can be developed. Often the children who come to us have obstacles on their life path and are calling to the teacher for their unconditional help. Observing a child and sharing these studies in a group process with those who also hold concern and interest can weave together a picture. When sharing the picture of the child with a group of teachers who are willing to work in this way we may be able to create conversations that may lead to an opening that leads to a healing response. A complete physical description of the child is

a helpful place to begin. Often when observing a child in this way details are noticed that serve our understanding of the child. In Lecture Ten of *Education for Special Needs*, Rudolf Steiner indicates that through the intensive study of the physical configuration of the body, characteristics of soul are revealed. The importance of taking deep interest in the physical description of the child with an absolute “devotion to little things” is enthusiastically emphasized by Steiner. He says, “We must not omit to cultivate this interest in very little things. The tip of the ear, the paring of a finger nail, a single human hair should be every bit as interesting to us as Saturn, Sun and Moon.” Each detail of the child is an important aspect in the unfolding of the study. Can we observe in such a way that after we watch the child move, we can imitate the movement, feel it in our own body, and begin to sense and experience what it feels like to be that child? Looking from the outside and observing the child, and then bringing what is seen into one’s own experience, may guide us to an insightful understanding and lead toward therapeutic steps. Paying special attention to the behaviors that occur at particular times, to play, transitions, speech, and social relationships, reveals various aspects that help to gain a wider perspective.

If the teacher is able to have a conversation with the parents, then there is more information that can add to a comprehensive view of the child. It is always interesting to know as much as possible about the sleeping and waking life of the child. These two thresholds hold many mysteries and give hints about the constitution of the child. Is the child a restless and a light sleeper, or does she sleep so soundly that she is hard to waken? Is she chirping like a little bird and happy in the morning ready for breakfast upon waking, or edgy, nervous, and unable to eat until later? The kind of sleep a child has or does not have deeply affects how her day is lived out. Nutrition is also a key factor in the behavior and energy of the child and can be of significant importance. Another area of observation that is important to pay close attention to is the four foundational senses. The realm of the senses is too comprehensive to explore in this brief article but is well worth the effort to gain a basic understanding

in consideration of the child. The pregnancy and birth as well as the developmental milestones in the child’s life are also important parts of the study to consider.

After this kind of study and observation in one session of child study, it is advisable to continue with a second session in a few days or a week at the most. The picture can then be taken into our sleep life and be woven into a deeper transformed understanding. “Sleep is the little brother of death,” it is said, and if we can bring our thoughts of the child into sleep with us into the spiritual world, asking for inspiration from the child’s angel on behalf of the child, we again are striving towards another kind of hearing. To create a “hallowed” space in ourselves, a sort of inner manger where the birth of the child’s being can find the way to us, creates a kind of reversal in the inner life of the teacher. The teacher can let go of the information that has been gathered about the child, stop thinking about it, and open toward the echo that lives out of the world of sleep. As described in the first step, there is a gesture from the teacher of attentive listening upon meeting the child, with an awareness and hope that the angel of the child may reveal a picture as a seed planted. Impressions and inspirations that arise out of sleep then may be a flowering of this seed that can be received as a kind of heart offering laid out for the child.

The second session can begin with sharing impressions and imaginations of the child that came out of this work in sleep life. Then the biography and developmental milestones of the child can be studied. The reason the biographical information is not shared before this time is that it sometimes tends to color the picture of the child so strongly in our minds that it may affect the open-mindedness needed during the descriptive study and the sleep work. It may cause us to jump to conclusions too soon before receiving and penetrating our observations. Assessments or screenings that have been done can be presented along with the child’s drawings. Then the many threads that have been gathered are woven together into a tapestry that may have the possibility of leading the teacher to what Henning Kohler calls true “inner accompaniment.”

Suggestions and ideas are discussed, but it is

realized that there are no definite solutions. It remains a continual process as the teacher stands by the child in a revived and renewed approach. Sometimes, there are no suggestions or ideas, but that is not the determining factor to success in a child study of this kind. Perhaps success lies in the inner effort of those involved in the study to stretch their own being to make room to really try to know the child, and out of this a new understanding can arise.

Perhaps the purpose of the child study is to offer unconditional love to the child. Through our own endeavor to change and transform ourselves and our capacities, the “star” of the child begins to shine inside of us. It is through this activity of grace that we gaze back at the child with “different” eyes that allow the child the mobility and flexibility to move and change.

References

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