

The Practice of Child Observation

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A commitment to the process of child study can become an important element in the spiritual training of the teacher. It can also become a source of healing for the child. In the process of child study we enter a realm where we leave behind the security of all that is sense perceptible. To accomplish this we must develop both our feeling capacity and our will forces so that we can have confidence in those aspects of our soul life. With this confidence we then step into the unknown, a crucial threshold for mankind.

Child Observation as Spiritual Discipline

The poet Walt Whitman embraces the reality of the unknown with the words, "Sail on, sail on, brave sailor/Are not these the sea of God?" Up to the time of Prince Henry the Navigator, sailors were unable to remain conscious when they had lost sight of the coastline for a certain length of time. Their fear projected monsters, sea snakes and dragons before them. Prince Henry of Portugal gave his sailors a type of spiritual training so that they could permeate their will-sphere with the thought, "I cannot become lost on the sea of God!" and in this way move beyond the limits imposed by fear. Today we must develop the spiritual faculties necessary to look down into our own souls, into the realm of fear itself, by saying to ourselves, "This, too, belongs to me!"

The Practice of Child Observation

Initially we can turn our attention to the outer appearance of the child and attempt to describe, as accurately as possible, what we perceive, and allow these impressions to "hover" without too quickly forming an opinion. We allow the impressions to guide our thinking and feeling, towards an image of the child. In the particular way that the images come to life, we can observe the will-being of the child that has created the image and begin to comprehend the mystery of how the child came to will himself into this incarnation. A support for this activity is the verse from Rudolf Steiner's *Calendar of the Soul* which corresponds to the week of the child's birthday. We can say this verse at the beginning of the child study, and again at the end. Often this is a most revealing experience.

Exercises for Strengthening Observational Faculties

If we are to have confidence in the process of child study, we will need to develop and strengthen certain faculties. Heiner Priess gave several exercises for strengthening observational faculties.

Exercise to develop the ability of Exact Description.

Someone sits with his back towards a group of colleagues. Each member of the group has pencil and paper. Before the one person, but not visible to the others, is a simple form drawing. The one person must describe that form in such a way that the others are able to reproduce it.

Exercise to develop the ability to transform Sympathy and Antipathy **Commentary on the Exercise**

We are most awakened in our experience of the child when we find ourselves in conflict with him. However we need to ask 'What is hidden in this child?' This is one task of child study. We will experience initial reactions arising from sympathy and antipathy. At this point in the process, feeling is the initial response and we experience an impression.

Feelings are a valid source of knowledge in our attempt to find the 'hidden language' within another human being. Mankind can give to the world the gift of his feelings. These do not exist in nature. However, when overwhelmed by feelings we can turn to thought-life in order to find a way through. What was hidden will then be revealed. Feelings can tell you more of a child than thought but these must be deepened feelings.

Exercise 1

An image of an elderly woman was held up before the group. The question was asked "What is your first impression? Sympathy or antipathy?" The second question was: "What kind of qualities do you find in the face?" Responses included sad, anxious, lonely, apprehensive. Then we gave the opposites: happy, carefree, loved, confident. The next question "Can we find these opposite qualities in the woman's image?" Revealingly, we could. "Where do these qualities reveal themselves? "Happy - eyes; carefree brow; loved - mouth; confident - shoulders, chest."

Through the caring activity of deepening our interest in children we are able to move beyond the first personal impressions and discover polarities. In this way we are seeking a hidden language in the child. "How does that which we have perceived speak to us?"

Exercise 2

What has the old woman just said?

Exercises to develop the ability to Enliven an Image

Commentary on the Exercises

In the first step towards a child study, the objective, disciplined description of the child yields an image that is, in a certain sense, "dead." An activity has been completed. Then it is necessary to enliven that image by certain steps in the training of our thinking. These steps include: Forming an impression from out of our own will, maintaining consciousness in an impression which is constantly moving, and maintaining consciousness against strong illusion. Heiner gave four exercises for the training of feeling as a preparation for opening up our soul life for the child.

An image of my soul

Imagine a tree in a landscape. Where does this image come from - memory or fantasy? (These arise from the feeling life.)

Working with the image

Again, imagine the tree. Now make it more beautiful. (This activity arises from our thought life.)

Exploring the realm of illusion

Could someone else make it more beautiful? How could that be? Is it possible for the tree to be more beautiful? Here we enter the realm of speculation. We need, at this point, to keep will in reserve. The image has begun to 'live' but if we venture too far in this direction we enter the realm of illusion.

Preparing for the child

Imagine a garden or a house or a tree (decide in advance.) Prepare this image for the child in question, e.g., place a toy beneath the tree. What would he like, e.g. a summer or a winter tree? Create a picture that would attract the child. Allow him to enter in his own way, e.g. skipping, hesitant, etc. A modification of this exercise can be used as a daily preparation before the children arrive or as a preparation for a child study.

Guidelines for a Child Study

Heiner Suggested these elements be included in a child study.

Soul Calendar

Read out the verse corresponding to the week of the child's birthday.

A description of the physical body

Be objective. Allow impressions to hover without too quickly forming an opinion; Height, weight, head (large or small?); Build; Proportions - head, trunk, limbs; Posture; Movement (birdlike? old man?); Control of movement; power (in grip, in walk); center of movement (waist, feet, etc.); process (machine like, fluid, abrupt); Gesture (sympathy, antipathy - how are these expressed?); Facial expression; Gaze (eyes direct or downwards? What is expressed there?); Left or right-handed.

Speech

Volume, pitch (high, low, harsh, soft); Modulation (movement); Precision; Flow (hesitant or not). Disturbances (stammer, etc.).

Nourishment

How does he eat? What does he choose? Likes, dislikes.

Thinking

Memory: Relation to time and space; Fantasy; Practical intelligence; Ability to learn (perseverance, mobility or too memory bound?); Can he relate a continuous, sequential event? How does he link experiences (because, if ..)?

Feeling

The child's connection with reality: emotional responses, enthusiasm, apathy.

Movement in the social realm

Self-feeling - the child's experience of himself; Relationships between the child and other children; between the child and adults; Where does he reveal himself - in drawing, building, movement? Fear.

Will

Are instincts healthy or not, e.g., instinct to protect himself, to eat, to keep warm? Power to do; Initiative; Concentration; "Will to live"; Assertiveness.

Biography

How is the child's will/intention expressed in her biography? How does the child step onto the 'stage' of life? What role does she choose?

History

This is not presented at the beginning of the child study as it could influence objectivity and tempt interpretation and projection.

Soul Calendar Reading

In Conclusion

Heiner discussed practical considerations. The time for a study was given as approximately 1 1/2 hours at the most and is prepared by one person. Colleagues may contribute at certain agreed point, e.g., the eurythmist sharing observations of movement or the school doctor contributing to the child's history. No attempt should be made at interruption or suggestions for remedial responses. The experience must now live with the teachers. Images will arise in the days to follow and then a review may follow. Drawings and photographs may accompany the study.

