

The Child Is Not a Check List, a Deficit, or a Three-Letter Disorder

— Nancy Blanning

Each child is a wonder. Each boy or girl comes to us intent on fulfilling a unique destiny, with pre-earthly intentions that were resolved upon in the spiritual world. It is a gift that Waldorf education gives us an appreciation of the spiritual biography of the child who stands before us.

Then children are born into earthly life. They are loved and nurtured by parents who want only the best for them and are trying to ensure that they will have a happy, healthy, and satisfying life. And in time these children come to us in our classrooms. But many times we find someone “in disguise,” compared to the beautiful picture our understanding of the child’s spiritual heritage assures us to be true. We see children who are not at home in their bodies, who squiggle and wiggle and cannot find stillness when it is appropriately called for, who seem inattentive and unresponsive to speech or who are oversensitive to sounds, who are unusually sensitive to touch and fuss and fidget over a twisted sock, who have narrowed diets and refuse certain snacks, and so on. The list is long and the behaviors we see perplexing. In the social domain, these individual eccentricities can sabotage the flow of the day and strain development of the social fabric. As educators, we may be puzzled and dismayed. We sincerely want to understand the cause of such behaviors and find ways to help children move beyond them into a more harmonious relationship with the world.

Rudolf Steiner has provided us with an important window for observing children and sensing how their incarnation is proceeding. Steiner’s descriptions of the twelve senses in numerous lectures (see reference list below) give us indications of the importance of healthy development of the sensory life—especially the foundational senses of touch, life, self-movement, and balance—for what will develop later. Comfort in the body as an earthly home for this incarnation, ease of movement and coordination, directional security in space, memory, and development of social and spiritual life: all depend upon the strength and harmonious integration of these four senses in the first seven years. While Stein-

er pointed to the unquestionable importance of healthy sensory development, he did not delineate specifically what we might see if development was thwarted or uneven. Non-integrated senses may actually give conflicting information that makes the world seem scattered, unreliable, and even threatening to the child. Healthy senses confirm an integrated experience of what is seen; damaged or under-developed senses often warp and contradict one another. Our modern world in general is pushing children toward precocious intellectual development, but leaves foundational sensory and motor development neglected as unimportant. Consequently we see what the authors of *Developmental Signatures* describe as “dissociation, such as when intellectual development is not in step with physical maturity, and so forth. . . . Such dissociation can be seen as a sign of a lack of stability in the foundations of development” (*Developmental Signatures*, p. 42).

Mainstream studies of sensory integration and sensory processing have been helpful in describing particular behaviors and challenges in children that show distress and possible disturbance in development of the sensory systems. It can be so helpful to consider that a child’s constant movement in his chair during story time may indicate an under-developed balance and/or self-movement systems rather than deliberate disruption or willful inattention. Learning to carefully observe sensory development can give us clues that help us understand how a child’s incarnation is proceeding. Everything the child does is “communicating” to us, if only we have the interest, patience, and background knowledge to put the pieces together. Lists of behaviors associated with disturbed sensory life can be very helpful in this search for understanding.

But these lists are usually referred to as “red flags.” This already alerts us to the “Oh, oh, something’s wrong” picture. Collected “red flags” can create a deficit picture of the child. The DSM -IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) uses this approach. If a sufficient number of symptoms is accumulated, then the child receives a disorder classification—

ADD/ADHD, Oppositional-Defiant Disorder (ODD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and so on. This is thought to be an objective, unbiased approach. But we know the great risk is that we lose the human being in the classification achieved by adding up the numbers. We can be lured into looking at the “what’s wrong” part rather than seeing the intention of wholeness that the child brings from the spiritual world.

Whenever we interface with the scientifically- and mathematically-oriented mainstream approach to investigating the world, we enter a danger zone if we are not alert. We are ourselves products of our own education and cultural attitudes. Most of us current teachers have had a traditional academic education which encourages this approach, though we strive toward something more complete as Waldorf educators. We also have what may be seen as “check lists” within our own materials for child observation. The allure of using this as a tidy and efficient tool toward classification hangs over us as temptation. Even the space allotted on the page to place a check mark draws us toward a mechanical, detached view rather than warmed consideration of the child that would come more easily if we wrote our observations in narrative form.

Waldorf education, however, dedicates itself to honoring each child’s humanity as a whole. Whatever lists we have created are meant as guides to help us focus and organize our observations, not as tally sheets from which to draw conclusions. All the details we observe of physical and sensory development, rhythmic habits, movement, speech, gaze, social orientation, and play, colored by mood, tempo, and gesture, are facets that coalesce to reveal the wonder of the child and the pattern that he or she is striving to manifest.

We do not want to ignore or reject the helpful information the sensory integration domain provides. Learning that puzzling, disrupting, or annoying behaviors may correspond to incomplete sensory development can be a revelation. Our hearts can open to a child with understanding and compassion for his or her plight.

The mainstream world works toward a straight-line conclusion leading to a label. But Waldorf education is committed to doing something different. A more appropriate image for us is to work with the rounded curve. Imagine standing in a cathedral and gazing up at the majestic, round rose window. Light streams in through the perfect patterns of colored glass that have been carefully chosen and balanced. If we think of a child as a human rose window, sometimes the

glass blowing may have been imperfect and the pane has a slight distortion. Perhaps a portion is missing and the sunlight starkly glares through. Imperfection in the glass does not destroy the beauty but adds to its uniqueness. A missing pane can be fashioned to complete the pattern in time. The final pattern may be different from the original design, perhaps less perfect but surely more individualized and whole in its unique way. The fashioning of the window is a process striving to fulfill the ideal of the child’s earthly intention.

Developmental Signatures sums this up as follows: “Waldorf education sees an inviolable individuality in every child. This individuality exists before conception and birth and, from its past, brings a very personal destiny with it into a present earthly existence, joined with still hidden impulses for the future that gradually emerge as a guiding theme or ideal in life, in the sense of Schiller’s declaration, ‘Every individual person carries within himself, according to his disposition and purpose, a pure, ideal being, and the great task of his existence is to come into harmony with the unchangeable whole unity, in all its diversity, of that ideal’ ” (p. 19).

No matter how many “red flags” the deficit model waves at us, these are distress signals from the child. The ideal is still within, longing and striving for expression, but blocked by sensory challenges that the child cannot control or overcome without help and understanding. DSM-IV-type thinking can lead to dehumanizing or categorizing by numerical totals derived from check lists. This kind of materialistic thinking affects us subtly as well. Let us be alert to any hint of check-list mentality and use a rounded embrace instead. Around the periphery of the rose window of the child, each of the twelve senses stands with its attributes and questions. Our observations in each of these domains do not define or limit, but weave together into a new layer of color and light that encourages the ideal pattern toward its most complete expression. When we get a clearer picture of what the pattern wishes to become, we can help to polish the panes of glass so the light can shine through more warmly and clearly. ♦

References

Patzlaff, Rainer, et al. *Developmental Signatures* (Ghent, NY: AWSNA Publications, 2007).

Material by Rudolf Steiner on the twelve senses includes *Study of Man/The Foundations of Human Experience*, lecture 8; *Man as Body, Soul, and Spirit* (1909 lectures on the body); *Anthroposophy—A Fragment*; and the 1920 lecture “Man’s Twelve Senses in Their Relation to Imagination, Inspiration, Intuition.”