

What Is a Child Observation? [Child Study*]

by Anna Seydel

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The following article is a conversation between Anna Seydel and a writer from the journal Erziehungskunst. (EK).

Interviewer: Even those who seldom read *Erziehungskunst* will probably be aware that child observation has been practiced in Waldorf schools for quite some time. What actually is a child study?

Anna Seydel: A group of people who would like to turn their attention towards the being of a child in order to understand him. One starts by sharing impressions one has of the child with each other. As a rule the group takes up children who have developmental delays or disturbances, or who have a negative effect on the class work. These are the outer causes, to begin with. The group can also consider children who do not exhibit such noticeable problems. Through working together to look at the child, the teachers clear up their personal perspectives, animosities, and reservations. All possible points of view are brought together, creating a common picture through conversation.

Interviewer: Basically, every teacher works to achieve such an understanding of the children and tries to adjust his pedagogical work accordingly. Why would a child study be necessary in addition to this?

AS: To begin with, because as a general rule development no longer proceeds without problems. The outer conditions of growing up have become, to some extent, dramatically more complicated. Family relationships have also become more complicated, as well as the relationship of the teacher to himself, with the children, and with parents and colleagues. This can lead to a point where a class teacher becomes convinced that he can no longer carry a child in his class, even when other teachers and the parents might see the child quite differently. The child study offers the chance to raise observations of the child to a new level and to enliven, illuminate, and clarify the approach to the child.

Interviewer: How would one imagine a child observation?

AS: There are many forms. For example, a class teacher can describe the child to his colleagues in a faculty meeting. It is much better, however, when the other teachers can observe the child for themselves. This can happen in a classroom, with other teachers sitting in on a class, or the child can be observed on the playground. One way that has been particularly fruitful is to invite a group of students to report on something or perform something for the circle of teachers. Then each teacher has the opportunity to observe the child who will be the subject of the child study, and to see him along with students of the same age. Again and again it is astonishing to see with what liveliness, accuracy, and diversity are the perceptions brought together, often even surprising the class teacher.

Interviewer: So it starts with observation?

AS: Yes. This is followed by the attempt to put oneself in the child's shoes, to feel one's way into what one has observed in the child. Not immediately to come to interpretations or judgments, but rather to bring oneself into alignment with the child.

Interviewer: To go back to observation: What exactly is observed?

AS: Some people see more of the outer aspects of the child: the face, the head, the hands, the arms, the form and posture of the body, in other words, everything through which the child expresses himself through his body. Then there are the more habitual aspects: how a child acts, whether he participates, what kind of tendencies the child has, and which temperament. Next is the field of the soul: how the child relates to the world through his thinking, his feeling, and his will activities, how he relates to other people and to other living beings. This is also expressed in his movements and his entire demeanor. Lastly there is the realm of the will, of intentionality. For example, how does the child approach certain tasks? How does the child follow a train of thought, or on his own plan and carry out his work, step by step? A further aspect is the destiny of the child. There are significant events in one's biography that can have an effect on the rest of one's life. Details of the child's birth should also be included in these.

Interviewer: It's not only a matter of describing what one has observed, but other knowledge about the child is brought into the picture?

AS: Yes. Here the report from the parents can be a great help for the process. But it should be about what is real, not about assumptions, speculations, interpretations, or theories, but rather about observations and perceptions.

Interviewer: What is the aim of gathering all these observations and facts?

AS: That in them and through them, one can comprehend the being of the child, that which brings the elements all together. For it is the soul-spiritual being of the child that brings forth these outer factual details. Every single detail of the outer child is an expression of its being. Goethe spoke of “finding a concise point” from which the being of a phenomenon reveals the idea within the sense-perceptible interrelationship [combination, coherence].

Interviewer: When one has found this point, does one then use it to try to explain the child’s characteristics and behavior?

AS: No, it is rather that one finds something through which one can instinctively feel one’s way into the child. For example, one attempts to experience inwardly how it feels when one always sits with an open mouth dreaming off into the distance. Then one notices that something always emerges. This “something” is what brings one into connection with the child. One need not understand it right away. The important thing is that the teacher or the therapist must feel the condition of the child within himself.

Interviewer: So it has to do with empathy?

AS: Yes! It has to do with the experience that I can feel the child in myself, because I have something in myself that I myself can recognize, and thus I can recognize it again in the child. I can say to myself: “I recognize you, for I am you!” Through this the child tells me who he is. Insofar as I recognize the child, he comes into my understanding, into my view. He “becomes” that which I see in him. And in my perceiving, the child finally recognizes himself, feels himself to be perceived, and comes to himself.

Interviewer: Now that one has this empathy with the child, does one go further, to find measures to take or decisions to make about how to work with the child?

AS: Not right away. First, interest streams towards the child, then the child begins to express himself in me. Now I answer back, and this answer is a soul-answer, in which I bring a balance to that which I have perceived as weaknesses in the child. This answer has the intention of bringing about equilibrium for healing. One feels, for example, that a child needs more structure, or some other kind of encouragement. That is, to begin with, only an answer in the feelings. Then in conversations with colleagues, one can gradually try to find what is the actual situation. What does it mean that a child isolates himself from his surroundings? The decisive question is not what measures [need to be taken]. What is more important is the fact that the adults have turned their attention towards the child, and through their mindfulness, they awaken interest

and warmth for the child. When a person meets a child after a child study, he instinctively meets him with a different inner attitude. If the child appears slack and dejected, or even hopeless, the adult would bring an inner gesture of encouragement, of uprightness towards the child. He doesn't say, "Have a little more courage," but rather in his attitude he brings encouragement and hope towards the child.

Interviewer: Apart from any therapeutic measures, then, the fact that one has directed one's consciousness towards the child has meaning?

AS: Yes. The most effective therapeutic resource that we have is the child observation itself. One does not have to ponder too long to figure out what needs to be done concretely; that happens almost automatically. One slips, so to speak [out of one's own instincts], into a therapeutic countermeasure for a perceived weakness. One can also discover many possibilities for therapeutic measures among various subjects being taught. For example, I was able to help an asthmatic child by playing the recorder with him every day, thereby helping him to breathe out more easily. After a few years he overcame his asthma.

Interviewer: How does one accompany the child further? Is there a specific period of time after which one looks at the child anew and speaks of him again?

AS: It is naturally meaningful, after a certain time, to speak in the circle in which the child has been observed, to see what has changed. And perhaps again after a year or so it would be helpful. But one can also have the experience that a child has been the subject of a child study in the second grade and then in the following years does not need further conversations. Through the child study, and the way that the teachers work with him afterwards, the child has come into a more or less harmonious relationship with himself. And that is really the point—that the individuality of the child, the soul-spiritual aspect, comes to terms with himself.

Interviewer: Are there doubts or problems connected with the child observation? After all, one is working in a very personal and intimate manner with the child.

AS: One problem lies in the fact that often one does not speak as if the child were present. One must always be conscious that every negative judgment injures the child. It is not really about positive or negative judgments, but rather that the child begins to express himself through those who are present. Many have a problem with this process of putting oneself in the other's shoes. They say, "In this I come too near the child." Actually they are afraid to stretch themselves a bit and plunge into something that makes them uneasy. When one goes through the process of inwardly following the growth of a plant, one doesn't say, "I'm getting

too close to the plant.” [And just as in the plant study] we are trying to explore the being of the child through the gestures of his individuality.

Interviewer: Do the parents take part in the child study?

AS: If it's possible. I am in favor of the parents being present for gathering perceptions of the child. I have had many conversations with parents in smaller groups. In a faculty meeting of 50 teachers or so, it would not be very good to invite the parents. Many [faculty members] would be strained in such a situation, as the parents have a much deeper, many-layered and more intimate relationship with the child. For these reasons they are easily offended, which we would not want to happen. I would always prefer to discuss the child with the parents alone.

Interviewer: Should the parents be informed when a child observation is taking place?

AS: Absolutely! There should be no child study without letting the parents know what we want to attempt, and how we will do it. And there should be no child observation without an in-depth report to the parents afterwards.

*Translator's note: The German word *Kinderbesprechung* has been translated as “child observation” in some English-speaking Waldorf schools and “child study” in others. From the description of what is intended in a *Kinderbesprechung*, one can see that the same process is meant, whichever name it is given. I have used both interchangeably in this translation.

About the author: Anna Seydel has been a long-time class teacher and instructor at the Teachers' Seminar in München. She has recently published a book entitled *Ich bin Du – Kindererkenntnis in pädagogischer Verantwortung [I Am You – Children's Knowledge in Pedagogical Responsibility]*. Her book can be ordered from www.waldorfbuch.de.