

The Art of Observing Children

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Translated by Genie Sakaguchi

Is it possible to learn the art of child—or student—observation? There are two answers: yes and no. Yes, as a human being can learn everything. No, because one can never be finished with learning it. As soon as one believes one can do it, one is in a risky situation, comparable to an artist who is completely relaxed before a concert, feeling he is already able to do it. Either it is successful, or it is nothing. It is also like this in the case of a child study. One never knows whether it will be successful; one is rather tense, as when one has stage fright. Will we really be able to recognize this child in his true being and, through that, be able to help him?

Conditions for a child study

An essential feature of this art is that it takes place in a community. A colleague has a question about a student. The student doesn't respond as expected, or doesn't achieve what the teacher had hoped for him. The teacher would like to understand the student, for he realizes that without this understanding, he will not be able to reach the student, and learning will become difficult. He knows: *Education requires relationship*. So he turns to his colleagues and asks for guidance. The faculty meeting actually has no more important work than to enable these mutual discussions on pedagogical matters. What is necessary for such a conversation to be successful?

1. There must be a community, a circle *without gaps*. If a person is not interested in this work, it would be better for him to stay away. If a person cannot feel sympathy towards the student, he should stay out of the circle. For the conversation depends on the active interest of all participants; it is *the high school of interest*. Thus the parents can take part as well as colleagues who do not know the student. Through their neutral interest they can bring up important questions. It is helpful when the colleague who is presenting the student does not also have to chair the conversation.

2. A child study requires *breathing*. Once one has practiced this art for a while, one will need at least an hour. It makes a difference who belongs to the circle. The true activity lies not so much in the presentation by the colleague but rather in the quality of *listening*. Where does one perceive what light begins to bring into the darkness of the events portrayed? When do the described situations begin to speak, bringing light for understanding the child?

3. An important condition is a situation of peace in the social life. These are lofty words that one does not use or like to hear very often any more. However, they are true. A College that has been damaged from debates over structure or similar problems will not easily find itself ready for a child study—for the child study needs a certain *mood*. A conversation that consists only of reports and information will not be able to bring about such a mood.

4. At the end of the conversation, the group should strive to come to an agreement on one or more supports for the student. After eight weeks or so following the child study, the group can look back and ask the question: Have we done what we agreed to do and has it helped? If this can take place, the child study will become one of the strongest instruments to ensure the real quality of the school. In this activity, the College not only helps the child, but it also learns a very great deal. Many complain that Rudolf Steiner's *Study of Man** is just theory. But [in practicing this method of] child study, the study of man becomes really *practical*. Whoever participates in these conversations can feel them to be a *fortunate experience* [*Glückserlebnis*].

5. Basically there is no given model or protocol for a child study. In this work, the priorities are set by the child himself, as he becomes recognized. However, one can differentiate three stages. These have existed since the time of Hippocrates: *Anamnese* (medical history), *Diagnose* (diagnosis), and *Therapie* (therapy). In the case of a child study, we can speak of *description* or *characterization*, of *understanding*, and of *help or support*, which would be found through intuition, through the process of the child study.

Speaking and listening – inclusive

The class teacher or class sponsor presents the student as he experiences him, as the student presents himself. The teacher tries to describe the student's physical characteristics, features, and behavior, and shows examples of his work: in short, builds a picture of the student. This also includes a developmental picture of the student over time [*Zeitgestalt*]. The picture is expanded by other colleagues. If possible, the school doctor will bring any relevant history of the student. Those who are presenting the student practice the art of *inclusive speaking*, and the others practice the art of *inclusive listening*, listening not only with the ears, but also with the heart. The one who is presenting is furnishing building stones for discovery of the truth; he should not speak out of long pent-

up frustrations of the soul. Naturally, this part often goes on too long. Everyone has something to say, even if one says the same thing as the person who spoke before. It is the only opportunity for one to speak out of experience, but one need not know everything.

A feeling for evidence arises.

Now it becomes conspicuously quiet in the room. Who has something to say? Who is able to interpret the picture [of the child] appropriately? Here it becomes evident how far the members of a College have been able to make [Steiner's] study of the human being their own. For an interpretation or understanding arises out of this way of understanding a human being. The person who speaks merely of what he has read has a different effect than the person who has taken the study of man* into his own inner understanding. Here one must have a feeling of collegueship that is capable of recognizing the capacities of one's colleagues. Listening and holding oneself back are both necessary. A refined sense for the evidence [indications] will arise: what is coherent, what is not.

Rudolf Steiner gave many indications for such interpretations that a College should work through in its meetings. According to my view, Steiner's study of man provides everything one needs to understand even the phenomena of today. In the course of the conversation, this is also the right moment to ask oneself with empathy: How would I feel if I were described in this way? How does it feel to experience from within the urge to impetuous movement, for example? How about stuttering? Or dyslexia? Such questions can help overcome shortcomings in one's general understanding of the study of man, but they should not become an end in itself. The person who listens carefully will notice that the child, the student is gradually revealed.

The most decisive thing is the will to help.

And how do we help now? To begin with, we look for means of support among the *teachers* and the *pedagogy*. After that it can be determined whether or not specialized help is needed. What kind of *subject matter* helps with which kinds of problems? What effect does math have on a student? What about drawing or even form drawing? How does a foreign language work on a child? What about stronger intellectual demands, or perhaps a more picture-like approach? What [kind of effect does one find] with musical activities or with graphic or plastic arts? Could the child be supported with exercises that work on building the memory or though speech exercises? The possibilities are legion. Rudolf Steiner said: *Education, instruction is gentle healing*. Here the will to help has a greater effect than the correct point of view. In essence we are all helpless, and can only try to prepare ourselves to be helpful. The child study concludes with the determination of who will do what for the child. After eight or

ten weeks there should be a review, asking: Have we done what we agreed to do and has it had an effect?

Parent participation – a question of tact

Following a basic ethical feeling, one would seek, as far as possible for the parents' consent for the child study, and one would say why one believes it is advisable. *In principle there is nothing* against the parents participating in the child study, if they so wish. However the College of Teachers should ask itself whether the relationship between the parents and the school would support or allow this participation. The answer is a matter of tact, not of principle. And tact is generally healthy human understanding with feeling.

The child or student study is a quality instrument which, wisely used, has no equal.

*Translator's note: Readers familiar with Steiner's pedagogical writings will know that *Allgemeine Menschenkunde* is a specific book, published in English as *Study of Man*, also under the title *Foundations of Human Experience*. But there are other places in this article where the author refers to Steiner's *Menschenkunde*. This can mean the particular book, but it could also refer to many other instances in Steiner's writings where he expands on the nature of the human being. In these cases, I have used "study of man" with lower case letters.

About the author: Christof Wiechert is a former Head of the Pedagogical Section at the Goetheanum. His book, *Lust aufs Lehrersein (Desire to Become a Teacher)*, has recently been published by the Goetheanum Press.