

A High School Course in Child Study

An elective course called "Child Study" was first offered to the seniors of the Rudolf Steiner School, New York, in September 1970. A variety of factors contributed to the idea for such a course, but the major impetus was derived from a Kindergarten teacher's class report to the faculty. In this report she spoke of the interest, the concern, the willingness of the children's parents, but also—with the loss of the instinctive wisdom of past ages to guide us—of their confusion and sometimes utter helplessness in recognizing and responding to the real needs of their children. This, despite (or because of) the plethora of information available on child development.

The Child Study course, therefore, was initiated to focus directly on preparation for caring for young children and for the immense responsibilities entailed. Its aim is to learn to "read the child." Direct experience and careful observation are stressed. Through such "reading," awareness is heightened, and progressively deeper insights into the nature of the child emerge, so that the students, whether as future parents, aunts, teachers, social workers, or in any other capacity, can meet the child not as an animal, nor as a machine, nor as miniature adult, but as a unique developing human being.

While the course is purposely flexible, with content varying considerably from year to year according to the composition of the class, the schedule arrangements, etc., certain aspects of the work have come to be part of it every year. These include a broad view of child development through the three basic "seven-year" periods, and then special concentration on the all-important first phase of the child's life, when so much good, or so much harm, can be done. The question constantly before us is, "How can we create that environment in which the child can flourish?" In very specific terms, we deal with such fundamentals as feeding and

clothing the child, his play and his toys, the role of sleep and preparing the child for sleep, the rhythms, the colors, music, activities in the child's surroundings, how to answer his questions, etc. We seek the answers to our own questions about the child in the child himself as we come to know "where he is" in his physical, emotional, social and mental development. We come to recognize the awesome responsibility of the adults to make every gesture, every tone, every attitude worthy of imitation—of that all-absorbing imitation which is characteristic of infancy and early childhood.

We also regularly include a study of fairy tales. Many fairy tales are read, several are discussed in detail, and each student prepares at least one fairy tale to tell to the Kindergarten children. A study of temperaments, of how to work with them and not against them, has received enthusiastic response (naturally the students first try to determine their own temperaments). In this connection our curative eurythmist and a teacher of form drawing have conducted lively lessons in which the students do the exercises and experience their impact. It has been particularly valuable, as part of the course, to scan the highlights of our curriculum through all the school years, showing how both method and subject matter arise out of "reading the child." Toward the end of the course we step over the boundary, outwardly marked by the change of teeth, into first grade, emphasizing when and how reading can be introduced. Some students bring their own first grade "notebooks" to be viewed through new eyes with fond recollections and delight.

The support and participation of many—class teachers, eurythmy teachers, handwork teachers, the school doctor, the school nurse—have provided vital elements of the course. Last year's class had the special joy of a surprise lesson with their former class teacher, who led them back to their early first grade days and their struggles with straight and curved lines. Above all, the Kindergarten teachers who welcome the students into their classes to observe, who guide them into participation in the Kindergarten activities,

who meet with them to answer questions and to discuss the children or special topics, carry a major responsibility for the work. Frequently, they have arranged lessons in which the seniors are "Kindergarten children" for an afternoon of painting or working with beeswax or crayons, living into the experience as completely as possible. (The seniors have never washed the paint rags as well as the Kindergarten children!) In late spring the kindergarten teachers have sometimes arranged a display of the children's drawings and paintings from the very first weeks of school and on through winter and spring; and the students, now more adept at "reading," are able to discern secrets which would not have revealed themselves earlier to their eyes.

Each student usually carries out a long term observation of one child and writes as thorough and accurate a description of that child as he or she can. While each student spends at least one period and two or three full mornings in the course of the year working with the Kindergarten children, we wish there could be more time available for this essential experience. The "full mornings" are possible thanks to the support of their high school teachers who excuse the child study students from classes. Baby-sitting by some of the students provides additional experience.

Special projects by individual students or the whole class have included the making of dolls and toys and children's books, the making of puppets and the performing of puppet plays, and last year the class prepared a gift for all the younger children of the school—the fairy tale of "Little Red Cap" in eurythmy! During their visit to the Harlemville Farm*, the Child Study students have been graciously received into the work of the Kindergarten classes there, expe-

* Reference is to the work in Harlemville, N.Y. (some 120 miles north of New York City), which comprises a biodynamically-run farm, a hostel program, and the Hawthorne Valley School with Kindertartens and grades 1-12. Classes from the City, from Grade 3 upwards, spend a week or ten days there regularly each year. The Kindergarten classes referred to in this paragraph are precisely those of the Hawthorne Valley School.

riencing a different group of children in a different setting. One student spent a year after graduation as a Kindergarten helper at the Farm school. On several occasions, Child Study students have accompanied younger classes on their farm trips, serving as assistants to the class teacher.

Besides the primary purpose stated, the Child Study course (which would be more accurately titled "An Introduction to Child Study") helps seniors to put their past school experiences into new perspectives, forms a working link between the high school and the elementary school, and allows an opportunity for those seniors who have completed their language and math requirements to engage in a different kind of work. It is clearly a "culmination" fitting to the twelfth grade curriculum. History, art and science are all intimately connected in it. It is yet another approach to a knowledge of the human being.

(1978)

—Nanette Grimm