
Inclusion with the Heart through Child Study

~ Sky Melcer

B is one of the quietest, most timid, brooding-feeling-left-out children I have ever had the pleasure to know. But I did not know this right away when meeting him, as I had not yet been introduced to the book *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children* by Henning Köhler (AWSNA, 2013). This book has opened my eyes and is shedding light on behaviors I see in particular children, what they might be experiencing, and why this is happening. As soon as I read Köhler's description of brooding-feeling-left out children, my mind immediately went, "B! This is describing B to a T!"

B is the youngest of four children and is very much the baby of this big Indian family; he is doted upon. His two older siblings were also shy and reserved in nature and action, but they had much more social connection and were able to participate freely in circles and join in different types of play with friends. While B first reminded me of his reticent siblings in many ways, something deeper was sensed almost instantly, but I could not quite put my finger on it.

Whenever I met B, he would shy away from making eye contact, look away or down at the ground, and cling to mom or dad when it was time to join us each morning for school. His walk is slow, with timid feet, shoulders slumped with head down, hair falling over his eyes. His movements are typically languid, with a lot of stumbles over his steps and feet dragging sluggishly along. B is physically slender and lean. He has smooth, soft, dark skin and a tumble of dark, wavy hair that often falls over big, round, shining brown eyes. He likes to gaze out from under his hair "mask." His shoulders slump inward, contracting his body whenever attention is drawn to him.

I usually have a knack for connecting with children, drawing out a smile or making their faces light up, but not with B. My smiles were met with a straight face and lack of expression or acknowledgment as I tried to engage him. It took many weeks before I could say I even truly heard B speak at school, even with his friends. When we returned to school after COVID, I first thought this was just his taking time to get used to being at school again with friends from preschool

or known through his siblings. He was four on our return to school, with his fifth birthday coming in March. But week after week, he would be alone.

Typically arriving after classmates had, it took time to coax him into comfort and convince him to let go of his mom or dad and join us on the playground. Sometimes there were tears; but more often than not, we could find a way to get him to stay with us at school (although frequently his parents gave in and let him have a home day). When he did join, he would sit the entire time on a bench, in a corner, or sprawled in the middle of an open area. Sometimes he watched other children in their play and would get closer and closer watching, but mostly he would sit and mutter to himself and gaze up at the sky or down at his feet. When I invited him into a craft activity or tried to help him enter into a game with friends, he would turn around or walk away, shaking his head. He always pulled away from touch. Sometimes I offered my hand to him, and he would back away. If I ever tried to brush the hair from his face or lightly put a hand on his shoulder, he ducked away from my touch.

B typically stands or sits and watches during our circles, movement games, and playtime. Even when we are walking in a line for a nature walk, he often gets out of line, finds his way to the back, and takes his time following. I have not seen him participate in any movements in any of our circles. He stands still, legs together, sometimes feet crossed, and looks down. Sometimes he sneaks glances around from under his mop of hair or will watch his own hands wringing in front of him. Sometimes, even if everyone else is standing, he drops down onto the floor and splays out. He spends much time on the floor or ground, especially in our classroom. When we are inside for playtime, he will find a spot on the periphery and just lie there. He is often on his back, legs up in the air. He likes to grab his toes and wiggle his legs around. His movements remind one of an infant as he plays with his toes, feet in the air, babbling to himself. He will also spread his limbs out, sometimes like a starfish floundering around while the rest of the class is completely engaged and in their own world of play

without him. Sometimes he will scoot closer and closer to a game or friends. But when asked if he wants to join, he shakes his head and retreats again.

When I started reading and discussing the book section about the sense of motion, I found myself having my first few “Aha!” moments with B. The first thing that struck me was when Köhler was talking about mastering movement on an “unconscious level” and how “This has an effect on our overall sensing of aliveness” (Köhler, p. 83). One of the first things I noticed was B’s lack of smiling, laughing, playing, and aliveness that I see coming so freely from young children. Something seemed to click into place for me with that notion. I immediately felt the behaviors I saw in B were related to being unsure in his movement. When Köhler spoke further about young children not innately having this freedom of self through movement yet having to “integrat[e] into the world’s movement patterns,” my gut-sensing knew that this was tied directly to what I saw in B—underdevelopment of movement patterns and some retained reflexes perhaps (p. 91).

With further study, B more fully fit Köhler’s picture of an anxious and broody-feeling-left-out child. Descriptors included “antisocial and shy of contact,” “sitting alone...but not really absorbed in what they are doing,” “standing there forlornly or run in the wrong direction,” and especially “their bodily posture makes one think of the sad knight in the story book.” Each strengthened the sensing that B was showing underdevelopment of his sense of self-movement (p. 97). As well, when Köhler said, “Liveliness and grace in social situations, the ability to communicate and converse, are not gifts that some individuals are born with, and others lack; the first and basic prerequisite for acquiring them is the orientational security provided by the sense of motion,” I immediately thought of B’s hesitance to interact with his classmates (p.92). And again, this description of “Children who brood or are easily alarmed, who tend to be timid and nonjoiners, lack adequate imitative capacities,” I again thought of our friend, B (p. 98).

I am so grateful that not only did the book and discussions evolve around recognizing specific characteristics of these anxious, timid, broody-feeling-left-out children, but also focused on ways to support, care for, and encourage them to overcome some of these limitations and challenges. I think the first insight into these behaviors that opened up a new way of looking was reading that “Anxious, timid

children have special need of protection. More than other children, they feel deserted when they part from their guardian angels and feel helplessly abandoned to life’s dangers” (Köhler, p. 100). I could see how essential this need is for B. When I recognized those tendencies were living within him, I realized I needed to provide more security and comfort during school.

So that was the first thing I shifted within myself when working with B. I immediately knew I needed to be more attentive and show B that even if he was not participating directly, he was still an essential part of our class, liked, included, and cared for. I needed to be his guardian angel there and share my warmth with him. As well, hearing that brooding children “are helped by being involved in easily understood series of practical actions or simple steps in doing or creating something, getting them first to take on one particular step in the production while merely observing what preceded and what follows it,” began to open some incredible doors for our work together (p. 101).

This was the advice I chose to start with and use to support B. Instead of having my older students help with a task, I began to ask B to assist me. I would do the first part, then have B help with something he was capable of. Then he would watch and “help” me finish. I would warmly and gently encourage him along the way and thank him for his very fine help. The more I did this, the more I started seeing little glimpses of change in him. After providing different instances where B could be my successful helper with others witnessing, he even started vocally requesting to help or participate. Eventually, right before our winter Spiral of Light, B came up to me out of nowhere and ASKED ME if he could be the first one to walk the Spiral and light the candle! This made my heart explode with pride for him. I honored his request, and he started our spiral and walked it so well—yet still very slowly. From there, he became more vocal around his classmates and me.

When I noticed him drawing closer to other children in their play, I started sitting very close by and helping the other children engage B instead of asking B if he wanted to join. I immediately started seeing a spark of joy in B when I assisted his friends to include him in a game. One day I heard some friends talking about bravery. B and I were standing right there, so I said: “You know who is so very brave? Your friend B, who walked our Spiral of Light first and lit the way for each of you!” B’s face broke into a radiant smile.

His friends immediately came and stood around B and started asking him questions and then expressing that they didn't know what to play next. So, I offered, "Why don't you ask B what he might like to play?" And B chimed in with, "Well, I have an idea for a game. I play it at home all of the time." And they all listened to him and went off to eagerly play his game. It was one of the only times I had ever seen B interacting with his peers. He was engaged, smiling, and stayed with the group for longer than I expected.

This book was benevolently sent to me at the perfect time. Everything learned was applicable, impactful, and pertinent. It's humbling to realize that one can observe so much about a child yet be missing the link that ties observations together with what is healing and will support the child to grow and develop their full potential. I had random pieces of a puzzle that would never have fit together without this guidance. Eyes are now more open to approach children presenting these behaviors and to recognize the many diverse causes of what could be the underlying challenge. I would not

have homed in as quickly to B's need for movement support and the other methods offered without this book's guidance. Yet once seen, everything I knew fit together into a complete picture. Seeing B as he has become versus his first few months in school is like night and day. Our school's student support team will also bring healthy movement for B to imitate and work toward. His future looks bright. ♦

Sky Melcer is a Sunbridge graduate who has worked in early childhood education for 14 years. Fluent in American Sign Language and proficient in Spanish, she has enjoyed bringing other languages, cultural experiences, and inclusion into the kindergarten classroom during her seven years of classroom experience. A product of Waldorf education, Sky encountered the work of Henning Köhler in her Sunbridge program. She is now completing a degree in EC Education, and in her free time, she enjoys photography and swimming with her dog, Beans.
