Help for a Suffering Child

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"The mind is harder to tame than a monkey."
Bhima, in the Mahabharata

Henning Köhler, in Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depresssed Children (2001), speaks of the need for a developmental psychology, still in its infancy, which transcends materialistic one-sidedness. This article may provide some useful data. I hope that it will give heart to teachers working with suffering children. The child I describe here was not cured of his difficulties, but he made progress, and he benefited enormously from his time in a Steiner/Waldorf school.

David (not his real name) joined Class 1 three months into the school year, at the beginning of the second term. He was 6½ years old and had already spent a year in a mainstream school. David's mother took hope that he would be happier in our school than in the school he had been attending, where he had been subjected to teasing.

Medication

David had been diagnosed as suffering from ADHD and was taking Ritalin. His mother suspected that he might also be suffering from Asperger syndrome. She told me that she herself had been medicated for hyperactivity as an adolescent, that she had disliked the medication intensely, and that she was hoping to reduce the level of David's medication. I had worked with a few hyperactive children, some under medication and some not. My observation had been that the medication did seem to have the effect of reducing the spark, the alertness, the interest in life, the gleam in the eye of the children taking it. I had never taught the same child with and without medication. I asked that she consult with me regularly and keep me informed of any changes to David's medication.

Towards the end of David's first term with us, His mother reported that he was much happier and easier to manage than he had been and that she had been able to reduce his medication from three times to once a day. Thereafter, David's mother did not consistently communicate to me the level or frequency of his medication. There were periods when his medication was irregular, and gradually I surmised that without medication David could not function in the classroom. When David was at his best he was receiving medication daily, and this did not interfere with his "spark" or his interest in his school work or in the children around him. When he was without his medication, he could not focus on his work, and his behaviour became socially inappropriate.

The School's Resources

The school had the services of a school psychologist, available for assessment but not for ongoing counselling or therapy. David was assessed by the psychologist in Term 2 of Class 3, and it was confirmed that he did suffer from Asperger's syndrome.

The school provided Learning Support lessons to children in need of academic support. David attended Learning Support lessons twice a week during Class 3 for help with his reading and handwriting.

There was no one in the school with specific responsibility for pastoral care or support regarding behavioural issues. When behaviour could not be controlled in a classroom, the only recourse was to attempt to contact the child's parents and have the child retrieved from school. On a few occasions David's mother had to collect him, and at one point the school had to stipulate that if David had not received his medication he could not attend school.

There were three other hyperactive boys in David's class, another boy with significant emotional disturbances, several children with learning difficulties, and for David's first two years, a girl inclined to tantrums. Though David worked best in quiet surroundings with one-on-one attention, he did not get as much of either as he would have liked.

There was no curative Eurythmy. The Eurythmy teacher was sometimes of the view that David and one or two others in the class should not have been in the class. They disrupted lessons, and it was doubtful whether they participated with sufficient focus to gain significant ben-

efit themselves. David was the subject of a Child Study and the focus of regular reflection and meditation.

David in Class

David presented at school with ADHD and Asperger syndrome. He was very easily distracted from his tasks. He had a limited attention span. He was excitable and could easily be lead into misbehaviour. He talked incessantly, either reciting what he had heard of microbiology or astrophysics or telling long detailed stories of his own experiences, often leavened with confusions or misunderstandings. He had a lack of understanding of social space and would lean in on the other children until there was physical contact. He found the subtleties of social rules or the rules of games somewhat difficult. Games could come to a stop because he did not know what was allowed, but he would then accept the explanation with good grace. His feelings were easily hurt, and he was extremely upset if he witnessed an injury to an insect. On occasion, when he saw that another child was upset, he would attempt to comfort the child. He loved the exchange of greetings and was hurt if his greetings were not returned. Yet he did not always return the greetings or farewells of others. Although he was consistently instructed to refer to the other children by name, it took him three months to learn the names of his classmates, something most children would accomplish in a couple of days.

David also suffered from auditory processing difficulties and from problems with vision, not completely compensated by thick corrective lenses. He suffered from lack of fine motor coordination, affecting his handwriting and his ability to play the recorder and the lyre. His writing was often illegible (though I did learn to decipher it). Copying from the board was difficult, and when he could not be seated in the front row, I provided him with the texts at his desk. From class two, when the children were beginning to learn running writing, he was given the option of using guidelines. At the end of Class 3 handwriting was still a difficulty for David.

The children learned to play the recorder in Class 1, and in Term 4 they began to play the lyre. David found both of the instruments difficult, but he was diligent. Unless he had completely lost his focus, he would join in with the class and make his best effort. He had a good ear for music and always knew whether the instrument was in tune. Through his own talent and effort and with the encouragement of his classmates, David learned to play the lyre and the recorder passably well.

In Class 1, David learned to knit. He could control the needles. At first his stitches often lacked tension, but they came together. His more persistent difficulty was that once he started, he just kept going, rather than stopping and turning back at the end of a row. Crochet was good for him. Each stitch is more defined, and this seemed to bring David to a greater consciousness of what he was doing. David usually focused well in craft and took great pleasure in completing his projects.

David suffered difficulties with gross motor coordination, making it a challenge for him to walk the balance beam, step the balance poles or skip rope. He was slightly pigeon toed, and he ran with a loping gait, leaning slightly to the right. At least once a week the class went for a walk around the block, the walks evolving into "Follow the Leader." The course included various obstacles, including climbing through the fork of a tree and balancing up to 100 metres along a row of log traffic barriers. The best balancers, naturally, set the standard, and the social atmosphere in the class was very positive, with plenty of encouragement and congratulations and virtually no mockery when anyone fell. The only coaching needed was for patience when one of the quicker children was coming up behind one who was more hesitant. Week by week David improved in skill until he could walk the whole 100 metres with only occasional stumbles. David's agility gradually improved, and by

the time he was nine or so, he was quite adept at twisting and snaking movements, and he often avoided capture in chasing games.

Skipping rope was difficult for David. We skipped rope as a class at least once a week in Class 2. David took on the project with a will, and it seemed to require a concentration of will forces for him to make his legs do what he wanted. His success was modest by comparison with some of the children, but it was warmly acknowledged and applauded.

When David entered the class he did not know left from right, and for him to pass a beanbag in a figure of eight around his legs, I had to guide his hands. We practiced our counting and our tables in strongly rhythmic fashion. Eurythmy lessons were beneficial to David's spatial orientation, though the progress was slow. David was in some respects not completely grounded, and Eurythmy lessons often encouraged his ungroundedness. I suspect that he would have benefited from his own program of curative Eurythmy. Our only digging opportunity was in Class 3, when we spent a couple of weeks converting an old driveway into a small field for the sowing of wheat and barley. It was hard, gravely work in uninviting dirt. David was willing to have a go, but it was more the thing for the ones who enjoyed working their muscles.

Out of doors, where there was plenty of space, David's social interactions were usually fairly easy. Occasionally he was subjected to teasing by older children, and at one point he was subjected to teasing and pushing by a particular boy with a history of emotional difficulties Indoors, his constant talking and his invasion of others' social space were sometimes difficult for the children to avoid. I rearranged the seating once or twice a term, because some children could not sit next to him, and no child could sit next to him indefinitely. David leaned into and touched the other children, he talked incessantly, and he picked his nose, eating the findings or depositing them where they might be found by others. When the children sat in a circle, as they did for story time, they usually sat in age order, so for one lesson a day, the same two boys sat beside him. One of these, with a great reservoir of kindness, continued to coach David, almost without complaint. The other would regularly complain of David's intrusions, and occasionally would get into squabbles with him. The extent of David's intrusions seemed to vary with the regularity of his medication.

David was forgiven minor intrusions, because the class appreciated and enjoyed his good humour and his contributions to the story telling. Throughout Class 1 and Class 2, I would tell each story or fairytale on three successive days. On the fourth day the children would tell segments in turn around the circle. From the fifth day, one child would tell the story while the others acted the various parts, and this would continue until all the children who were willing had told the story and acted the major parts.

David enacted and retold the stories with great talent and energy. He had a very good memory and great enthusiasm, but beyond that, he would improvise, elaborating actions and dia-

logue, always in keeping with the character or the intent of the story. It seems to suggest a particular social awareness in the imaginary world that was often so specifically lacking in the real world. In his play with puppets he would have particular ideas for the story line and how the puppet characters should interact. For a time there was one other child who would accept his detailed direction and share his imagination.

By Class 3 we were moving through longer stories, with less regular enactment by the children and with less repetition. David seemed to loose some of his memory and his enthusiasm for the retelling and acting out of the stories.

When David arrived in the school, 6½ years old, his drawings were monochrome line drawings and stick figures. Though David was coached to fill out his figures and to add colour, they largely retained their line-drawing character through most of Class 3. The drawings were always connected with the story or the imagination provided by the teacher, and they usually also revealed a very significant input from David's own thoughts and feelings.

During the final term of Class 3, I presented a series of drawing lessons based on the Eurythmic gestures for the vowel sounds. The children spoke the sound and made the gesture before drawing a person who was making the gesture. During these lessons there was a profound development in David's drawings. They seemed also signal a positive shift in David's self image.

During the last term of Class 3, David's mother wrote me that he would be leaving the school at the end of the year. When I spoke with her, she explained

that her parents, who paid the school fees and were retired school teachers, believed that he would get better academic training in a mainstream school. It was certainly true that David had struggled to learn his tables, and both his reading and his mathematical calculations suffered from difficulties in focusing and maintaining attention. I had always wondered why his narrative memory was so much better than his memory for mathematical facts.

There were other factors which probably contributed to the decision, but neither his mother nor his grandparents discussed the decision with me. I was very sad to see him go, as I could not imagine that he would be as well cared for in another school. David did not want to leave, and his mother told him that he could visit our school. At first he thought that this meant visit regularly. When this was clarified, he was distraught. If fact, we never saw him again.

I conclude by quoting from his last report, written before I knew that he was leaving:

"On the whole, David has made steady progress this year. He is more discriminating in his conversation and more receptive to and understanding of social instruction. There are days and even weeks when he finds it extremely difficult to focus, to listen or to stop talking, but his difficult periods are not worse than they were in the past, and some of his most annoying habits have largely been left behind."

"The class as a whole has reached a new level of development, in which the children are more individually conscious and more critical of others than they were when they were younger. This means that some of the children are less tolerant of David's eccentricities than they were in the past. At the same time, the children are more capable of giving David specific positive and negative feedback than they were before. I am confident that David and the class can continue to grow together."

References

Köhler , H. (2001) Working with Nervous , Anxious and Depressed Children, A Spiritual Perspective to Guide Parents. AWSNA publications.

(with the editors' thanks and appreciation to the mother of the child described , who gave her permission for us to publish)

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CRISIS IN THE KINDERGARTEN - LETTER FROM JOAN ALMON FROM THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD (April 2009)

P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD 20741, Tel/Fax 301-779-1033; www.allianceforchildhood.org

Dear Friends,

Our major new report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*, is now posted on our web site. It summarizes the findings of three Alliance-sponsored studies of what is happening to open-ended play in public kindergartens and puts them in the larger context of what we know about young children's real needs.

The findings are alarming. Kindergarten playtime is increasingly rare. Most of the teachers surveyed said they were spending 2 to 3 hours per day teaching and testing children in literacy and math skills. Standardized testing and test prep, practices that most child development experts reject as inappropriate and harmful, are daily activities in most of the classrooms studied.

Teachers in Los Angeles mainly use curricula that require them to follow scripts for hours each day, despite research showing poor long-term results for this approach. In general, didactic early education is much less effective than play-based methods are. Yet the academic drills and tests are winning out.

At the same time, kindergarten retention and serious behavioral problems are on the rise. Crisis in the Kindergarten argues that current methods are putting children's long-term health and school success at risk. We call for a new focus on child-initiated play and experiential learning in early education, avoiding the extremes of the chaotic laissez-faire classroom on the one hand and didactic, joyless instruction on the other.

Our work is provoking passionate responses. David Elkind called the research findings "heartbreaking." Deborah Meier called the report "a careful account of what's actually happening in early childhood classrooms," and added, "The news is frightening."

Crisis in the Kindergarten is online at www.allianceforchildhood.org, along with an 8-page summary, a one-page flier, and press releases. Printed copies of the report are also available for $16 postpaid; order at our web site or by calling the Alliance.

What's next? We are now actively reaching out to news media, policymakers, parents, and educators, to get the report into the hands of those who need it. You can help. Spread the word to your friends, at your school, and through organizations you work with. Contact your local news outlets. Write an op-ed or post a blog entry.

And please contribute to our special fund for outreach for the report. We'd like to raise $25,000, which will enable us to distribute and promote the report intensively to media, professional organizations, and state and federal policymakers. Your gifts, large or small, will help immensely. You can make your tax-deductible donation by mail or online at our secure web site: www.allianceforchildhood.org.

We will keep you posted as our early childhood campaign develops.

With warm regards,

Joan Almon, Executive Director