With Stars in Their Eyes—Brain Science and Your Child's Journey toward the Self

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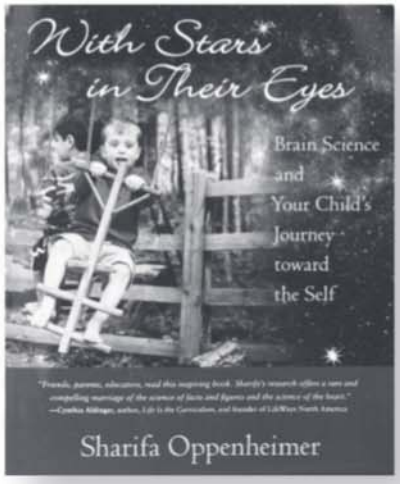
Reviewed by Nancy Blanning



With Stars in their Eyes by Sharifa Oppenheimer is a valuable new resource for Waldorf early childhood educators. The book is written primarily for parents of young children to give encouragement and practical advice to support healthy development toward true Selfhood, true individual Humanhood, which includes nourishing not only the body but also the soul and spirit. The author does this in a warm, accessible, artistic yet practical way, giving us another rich resource to recommend to parents for enriching and strengthening family life.

But this is not all that our skeptical times are asking for. People today want to see mainstream, scientific research—especially about brain development—that confirms that what we do in our early childhood classes truly does prepare the neurological foundation for future intellectual, academic development and achievement. The gift Sharifa gives to us educators is these exact research studies we have been longing to find and share with our parents and the wider community. We know from our own experience of watching the children grow and develop that the wisdom of Waldorf education is true. Now we have mainstream research that confirms what Waldorf educators have been practicing for the last one hundred years.

When people hear "brain research," ears perk up and attention warms. To competently share this confirming research well, we have first to educate ourselves in the basics of brain structure and development. Learning accurate vocabulary, which we can use with confidence, is essential. So the book kindly begins with a primer to introduce us to this topic. The explanation credits Dr. Paul MacLean, a leading brain scientist, with introducing the concept of the "triune brain." We have likely heard reference to the "reptilian brain," the "mammalian brain," and the "human brain," three different levels of brain structure. The "reptilian" part of the brain regulates the sensory-motor system, survival, and fight-or-flight regulation in the brain. It is literally the lowest part of the brain structure as part of the brain stem. Located spatially above and surrounding this lower structure is the "mammalian" or "limbic" part of the brain, which has to do with emotional life, relationships with other members of our species, herd or pack behavior, and nurturing of the young. The "human" part of the brain, the neocortex is structurally uppermost and houses our capacity for analysis, logic, verbal language, synthesis, imagery and "gestalt." And then there is the prefrontal cortex, the seat of executive functioning, of the capacity to identify and direct higher purpose, altruism, generosity, and an experience of "Oneness" (Oppenheimer, p. 10). This is identified as the "cosmic" part of the brain; a diagram in the book locates this as just behind the "the third eye" position on the forehead.

This offers a picture of a bottom-to-top arrangement called "a serial functional progression also referred to as scaffolding. This means that each stage of development depends upon the stability, efficiency, and durability of previous stages" (p. 11). A more direct way of saying this is that how well the higher-level areas will develop and elaborate depends directly upon how fully and completely the previous level has developed. What happens next depends completely upon the strength, maturity, and consolidation of what has happened before. The implication of this is that the child's development should be allowed to unfold and elaborate in its own time. When things are pushed or rushed by outside demands for which the brain is not developmentally ready (such as early academics) it means that higher-order levels of the brain will become engaged before the previous area has finished its growth. Things will be skipped and the overall integrity brain structure and function be compromised.

The book goes on to describe in more detail the sensory-motor, the limbic-relational, the neocortex-thinking, and the prefrontal-empathetic-understanding "angel lobes" systems of the brain. These discussions offer more vocabulary for describing the many attributes of human life that these discrete parts of the brain exist to house.

In our classrooms we know that direct sensory experience of the natural world, active, purposeful movement and practical work, artistic activities and stories, and play are essential, foundational experiences that children need to grow their own bodies and to begin to find their place in the world. Extensive chapters are devoted to these "essentials" and are accompanied by research material that validate that all of these grow the brain in healthy, integrated, beautifully elaborated ways. Clinical MRI studies and sociological studies also show that experiences in nature, movement, arts, stories, and play also lay the foundations for adaptability, resilience, flexibility, and creativity.

The later chapters in the book offer examples for home and family activities that can be integrated into daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms to support this wholeness of development in addition to what happens at school.

The book starts and ends with "the love connection," referring to the warmth of true interest in dedication to the welfare of the other. Committed relationship between child and parent (and other adult care-givers) lifts these suggestions out of the check-list or recipe-like approach that could arise from a clinical brain study. It counteracts our tendency to search for "quick-and-easy" answers to the question of how to grow a healthy human being. The warm, reassuring, and supporting gesture of this book makes it accessible and inviting to readers while it also maintains an objective presentation of this confirming research information. It is well worth our attention as a valuable new resource to support our work with children toward growing up strong and true. ◆