

# **Perceptual Vignettes** *Practice manual*

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#### **Preface**

Dear students, colleagues and friends of working with perceptual vignettes, With this practice manual we would like to give you some ideas for working with this wonderful and elementary phenomenological and reflective method and for trying it in your own sphere of work.

As a methodology, perceptual vignettes have evolved from the work with our students at the Institute for Waldorf Education, Inclusion and Intercultural Studies at Alanus University in Mannheim, Germany. In work placement periods with children, young people and adults, students and researchers practise perceiving, describing and reflecting on special moments. This process aims to motivate them to develop a professional pedagogical attitude and gain insights that support a non-categorizing, sympathetic approach to diagnosis.

This Practice Manual is intended as a supplement to our publication *Perceptual Vignettes. Phenomenological Reflective Thinking and Professional Attitude. A Study and Practice Guide*, on which the texts in this companion volume are based.

We would welcome your feedback and your examples and experiences of working with perceptual vignettes.

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### **Perceptual vignettes**

Perceptual vignettes arise from perceiving and taking notice in special, affective moments that we share with children, young people and adults. The term 'perceptual vignette' derives from 'perception' as the capacity to turn to the world openly with all our senses, and 'vignette', a diminutive of the French word 'vigne' which means 'vine'. Perceptual vignettes are short descriptive texts that capture our perception of specific phenomena. Our definition:

Perceptual vignettes are the result of a phenomenological method that includes observations in practice, descriptions, stages of reflection and professional application in a pedagogical context.

Imagine you are in a classroom, kindergarten group or residential home for adults with support needs. You may be there as a teacher or researcher and you suddenly notice something special, disturbing or astonishing. Your attention is drawn to this special event, you look at and listen to it carefully and it stays in your mind. Then you get out a piece of paper or your diary and jot down a few notes describing your perception to discuss it later with colleagues. Before this collegial consultation, you take a moment to write the event down in full sentences. We give you two examples of perceptual vignettes from working with children (numbered as PV):



### Perceptual vignettes Examples



It has been raining. On the way to Joe's carer, we walk along a hedge. Because of the rain, countless snails have appeared and can be seen near the hedge on a low wall. I point them out to Ariana who responds with immediate enthusiasm. We see big snails but also many little baby snails. For Ariana, all the little snails are children and the big ones are parents. So, she picks up all the little snails she can find and puts them with the big snail, saying 'There you are, back with your mummy' (PV 1; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 98).

#### 'You're so mean to me'

The class 3 children have gone to their places and have put almost all their school things and personal belongings into their school bags. One girl continues to play with a little cat she has made from paper. The teacher is standing in the front, looking from one child to the next and waiting for everyone to be ready to start the lesson together. She notices that one girl is still playing with something she is holding in her hand. She gives the girl a stern look. 'Cara, put that away please,' she says in a clear and friendly voice. 'No, the animal needs to be outside,' Cara replies firmly. 'Cara!' the teacher calls, her voice slightly raised. 'You're so mean to me,' Cara says, puts the paper cat into her bag, mutters something under her breath and sits upright on her chair (PV 2; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 106).

In the subsequent discussion with your colleagues or in the seminar at university you read the perceptual vignette out loud.

Then you ask your listeners to write down their initial impressions and/or present them to the group for discussion. We call this phase 'spontaneous reflection'. After a feedback round that may cast light



on the situation in question, your colleagues or students are given specialized texts that address questions arising from the spontaneous reflection. Bearing in mind what they have read in the specialized texts, they then write a second, *criteria-guided reflection*. In conversation about this reflection new ways of looking at the situation arise. These insights are written down by each colleague or student individually in a third reflection which forms the basis for reconsidering and giving a new direction to their own pedagogical attitude, offering starting points for a sympathetic diagnostic approach.

Use situations from your work or from daily life in your family, among friends, on journeys or in pedagogical institutions for writing perceptual vignettes. Write them always in the present tense and use direct speech, as if the event was taking place in this moment. This will enable you to view people and events in a new light and understand them from ever new perspectives.

We also encourage you to use the adapted exercises by Rudolf Steiner for the training of perception, observation and thinking (Journaling 6) as well as the exercises that support the development of a professional pedagogical attitude (Journaling 11). These exercises have the advantage that they can be adapted to individual needs and fields of work.

We locate the work with perceptual vignettes in the field of pedagogical phenomenology. At the same time, it serves as a journey of self-education and self-development towards an innovative and future-oriented pedagogical professionalization.



### Journaling – a way to active self-development

This practice manual shows ways of familiarizing oneself with the method of perceptual vignettes and trying them out in practice. We recommend you read the introduction to each exercise, take notes and experiment with the suggested exercises. Regular journaling — a directed writing method — helps you to gather and reflect on experiences with these exercises and the perceptual vignettes and activate learning and developmental processes that promote a pedagogical attitude and sympathetic approach to diagnosis. We owe this journaling method to Claus Otto Scharmer (2022) who developed it as part of his Theory U.

It is important to not only absorb and discuss the theory of perceptual vignettes but to experiment with and examine it. Make use of daily opportunities; look out for things you notice that inspire you to engage with them. Note your impressions down. We will introduce you step by step to the fields of work and exercises. We invite you to try the method in seminars, share and discuss the results with others and document the perceptual vignettes and reflections in a journal. We would appreciate it if you would send your feedback by email as we are in the process of developing further applications and research formats.





Collect and describe special, affective moments in daily life.



### Phenomenological perception – Open intentional turning to phenomena with all senses

We experience the world around us with all our senses, mentally absorbing its phenomena. In everyday life, perception only tends to become conscious when we have specific questions, while it is a key aspect in philosophy, phenomenology, psychology and neurobiology. The following five qualities of perceptions – inspired by Claus Otto Scharmer's basic ways of listening (2022, p. 43) – are important for our method: 1. perceiving is purely turning towards something or someone; 2. perceiving is an objective, distinguishing activity; 3. perceiving in its deeper meaning is empathetic; 4. perceiving contains moments of discovery and creativity; 5. perceiving occurs in an emerging future field. Perception is preceded by knowledge and cognition and can be called 'the dawn of knowledge' (Engel 2019, p. 46). Read the following perceptual vignette:

#### Kindergarten

Camila is standing on the carpet; she is playing 'kindergarten'. 'Mummy, you sit here, Tanya, you sit over there.' She starts with the circle game they are doing in kindergarten at lunch time. She knows most of the verses by heart, if she forgets the words she simply skips a line. The lunchtime circle always ends with the 'drop of gold', the oil that one child is always allowed to give out. So she stands up and gives each of the two of us a 'drop of gold' and then finishes the lunchtime circle (PV 3; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 176)

### **Perceptual exercise**

Place an object or something you found in nature before you or look with an open mind at what is going on in a kindergarten group.

Describe what you perceive.



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#### Wonder or disturbance

The capacity for wonder is indeed wonderful because it opens our mind to surprises, special and stirring experiences in the world we share with others and above all in our interactions with others. Wonder means perceiving others and otherness with curiosity and interest but without association or judgement. Regaining this capacity, which children have naturally, is prerequisite to developing a bias-sensitive attitude. In the phenomenological work with perceptual vignettes, the capacity for wonder helps us to notice affective moments in an encounter or occurrence. Let yourself be inspired by the following perceptual vignette:

#### **Incredible**

Incredible. I stand before you today and it seems to me that you have taken a giant step forward in your development. You take my hand, leading me through the flat, pointing things out to me, and you want to look at a book with me. Your joy is tangible, it warms my heart to see how the smallest things delight you and how your face lights up. The sounds you produce are much clearer and louder now; you want to speak all the time and you copy my words. You also show me clearly when you want to do something differently. The sofa is your playground. You crawl around, laughing so happily. You can even show me now where your nose is, your eyes, your mouth, ears, tummy and bottom. Diligently you explore everything and everything affects you directly (PV 4; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 83)

### Wonder

Pay attention to special and surprising moments you experience with a child, young person or adult; describe these moments in a perceptual vignette.





## Attentive intentional observation

As soon as we take notice of a phenomenon, perception becomes observation. As observers, we attend to a particular event or object from our own perspective. Observation is viewed as a basic method of empiric research, capturing data by means of 'participating observation'. Our methodology, in contrast, works with 'observing participation' (Brinkmann 2015, p. 531). Observational processes are characterized by five qualities: 1. observing is attentive perception in an indeterminate context; 2. observing directs the gaze to something determinate; 3. observing kindles interest; 4. observing serves the exploration of meaning; 5. observing results in knowledge. We therefore compare the capacity of observation with the sun striving towards the zenith. The following perceptual vignette reflects this:

#### The fly

You are sitting next to me as the class teacher explains fractions. A fly is buzzing around in front of you while we are all busy doing maths together. Very carefully and skilfully you pull out your glasses case. You slowly open it as your eyes keep following the fly and you try to catch it with the case. There — you caught it! Calmly you bend your head over the case and slowly open it. The fly is sitting on the cloth that you carefully hold between your fingers as you pull it out and place it on the table. The little creature is still sitting on it. In deep concentration you look at the fly, observing it until it flies away (PV 5; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 99)

### **Observation**

Let your gaze wander in nature or across a group of children. Pay attention to what is most noticeable to you and what remains more peripheral. Describe the phenomena in a perceptual vignette.





# **Experiencing atmosphere** as initial perception

Whatever situation we are in, known or unknown, we always sense an atmosphere, the more so, if it differs from our own mood at the time we enter a new context or meet a new group of people. Atmospheres are effective in all situations, relationships, behaviours and particularly in education. We ourselves contribute to and change the atmosphere around us in every moment, in positive or negative ways. Study the atmospheric quality in the following perceptual vignette:

#### **Christmas baking in September**

We are making biscuits with Irina, as you wished. The sun is shining on this mild September day. You asked to make cut-out biscuits and I suggest cookies. You don't seem particularly keen on this at first but accept my proposal. Sugar pearls are rolling all over the floor, flour flurries around the kitchen, there is icing sugar all over the hob. You want to crack open the eggs. You carry the egg you just opened at the other end of the kitchen towards the bowl, but ... it lands in the butter, calling a cheeky smile to your face. After a moment's thought I ask you: 'Say, Dana, do you know how Pipi Longstocking makes pancakes?' 'Sure, she makes them on the bare floor, cracks the eggs into a pan, shell and all, and one of them lands on her head.' I have to smile at your abrupt answer and ask, 'And do you know what she uses to stir the batter?' You think briefly and reply, 'Yes, with a brush.' After this conversation, there is no more flour flying around the room, no egg landing on the floor and the wild autumnal Christmas baking settles into tranquil activity (PV 6; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 52f.)

### **Experiencing atmosphere**

Write a perceptual vignette about a pleasant or unpleasant atmosphere or mood you experienced with a person. Pay particular attention to the adjectives.



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## Practising perception and observation

Phenomenological perception and attentive observation can be developed by using exercises suggested by Rudolf Steiner (2010) (details in Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 71ff.). The examples can be used individually and developed further to suit other life and work contexts. Try these elementary exercises using journaling.

exercise 1: from perception to attentive observation	observe something daily for a few minutes, if possible, at the same time and place
exercise 2: attentive observation and examining one's expectations	observe closely, imagine and remember a situation; observe even more closely in repetition
exercise 3: examination of causes and avoiding preconceptions	observe a challenging situation in everyday life and note down assumed causes of behaviours
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exercise 4: conscious directing of thoughts and resourcefulness	take time- 5 to 10 minutes- to reflect on something paticular
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### **Perception and observation**

Experiment with the exercises and invent your own variants.
Write down your experiences with your daily practice.



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# The four-stage creative writing process

'And since we cannot assume that the things are in themselves explicitly and finally what they are, the process of defining implies elements of creation' (Waldenfels 2018a, p. 63). Perceptual vignettes are re-creations because they emerge after an event and bring the perceived phenomena to life again through verbalization. If we want them to be the result of conscious practice rather than spontaneous creations, Graham Wallas' creativity model (1926/2014) can provide helpful guidelines:

- 1) Observation ('preparation') in the pedagogical situation corresponds to phenomenological perception, wonder and attentive observation
- 2) Incubation or forgetting because time passes after the event or there is a night in between could endanger the phenomenological work but always happens naturally when we let go of something and take it up in a new way after a certain time
- 3) Insight ('illumination') appears as a mental flash or intuition or, ideally, as a condensed thought image of the perceived phenomenon and its meaning
- **4)** Processing ('verification') of the 'illumination' takes place in the perceptual vignette that describes the event phenomenologically.

Let yourself be inspired by the perceptual vignettes in this practice manual (Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 103ff.)



# **Collecting notes for perceptual vignettes**



Use your notes to recall the special moments and turn them into perceptual vignettes.



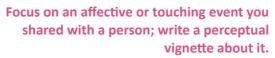

## Writing (1): affective moments

Perceptual vignettes are spontaneously written texts. We use sketches and notes, hand- or machine-written first drafts or polished versions to capture, condense or enlarge affective, touching or bewildering moments. If these short narrative texts reveal something relevant and meaningful, they contribute to the phenomenological examination of pedagogical observations, events and actions. Read the following perceptual vignette and look out for similarly affective or provocative events in your own field of experience:

#### **Bathing in October**

It is cold and has started to rain, the river we walk along is a silver-green ribbon. Pebbles and small shells crunch beneath my feet. 'Right', I say, 'time to go home'. 'No,' calls Mira, who is standing a few steps from the shore, wildly stirring the water with a stick. The water doesn't reach halfway up her riding boots. 'Yes,' I reply, 'it's getting dark and it's cold. Come along!' 'I'm not cold!' she calls back and wildly hits the water with the stick, making it splash in all directions. Her trousers are getting wet. I give her a stern look. She holds my gaze and says provocatively, 'or I'll drown myself in the river!' 'No way,' I say firmly, 'you certainly won't do that. Let's go!' I walk a few steps away from the shore. 'Catch me!' She is dancing around, jumping, splashing; the cold water is now running into her boots, her trousers and jacket are soaked. 'That I won't do, you are much faster than me anyway,' I say firmly as she comes closer to me and then slips away again. The rain continues and the world looks ever more grey. A child, splashing through the water with big steps, her clothes drenched and a young adult who is following her on the shore (PV 7; Wiehl & Barth 2024, p. 72f.).

### Writing a perceptual vignette (1)







# Writing (2): I/you perspective

Perceptual vignettes can be written from an I-perspective and address someone personally, even if that means that the observer refers to their own actions, feelings and thoughts. All inner and outer phenomena that show themselves as sensations can be objects of perception (Vetter 2020, p. 410).

#### Tuesday, 26 January 2021

I explain to you that I would like to read you a perceptual vignette. A story about you and me. I have the impression that you don't really understand but I get my laptop and consider which one to read to you. I choose yesterday's hoping that you it is easier for you to remember. Suddenly you are very excited and you're laughing nervously; it seems as if you know that something different and unusual is about to happen. Your mobile phone rings and distracts you immediately. Julia asks you to turn the volume down. We focus again, I slowly read the perceptual vignette and you concentrate, turning quiet, laughing briefly and softly from time to time. I finish and wait for your response. You're smiling at me. 'How is it for you, hearing this?' I ask carefully. 'Good,' you say softly. 'Hm', I'm thinking, 'do you understand that I read about you? A story about you?' You seem uncertain. 'Yes,' and you laugh. 'Do you want me to read another one or was it enough?' I look at you. 'Was it enough,' you reply. We prepare for the second felting session of the day and you seem to have forgotten everything. [...] (PV 8; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 179).

### Writing a perceptual vignette (2)

Write a perceptual vignette about a special moment shared with a child, using the I/you perspective, as if you were addressing the child.





# Writing (3) The observer's perspective

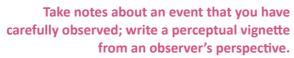
When we become aware of a phenomenon and begin to observe and explore it without being involved ourselves, we perceive above all the outer event and the appearance of other people. With 'observing participation' (Brinkmann 2015, p. 531) we can detect moods, behaviours, utterances and overtones, as the following perceptual vignette illustrates:

#### **Equilibrium**

Aaron – too (?) tall for the chair he's sitting on. The hood of his jumper is pulled over his head, his hands almost covered by the sleeves. He is balancing on the back legs of his chair, finds an equilibrium, the chair is rocking very gently forward and backward, while Aaron's fingers move super quickly on the desk to hold the balance: his whole body is upright, extremely tense, diagonal to the teacher; he looks at her and at the table which he needs for his subtle balancing. The chair is poised on the tips of the back legs; Aaron's feet rest on the wood between the chair legs. Subtle balancing movements keep Aaron upright, he looks at the teacher, gently holding his balance with his fingers. Calmly the second teacher approaches from behind, gently touches Aaron's back and pushes him forward with this chair so that the chair comes to rest on its four legs. Aaron's upper body slowly slumps forward onto the table, he places his right arm bent on the desk, lays his head on it, his whole body goes limp and he remains still in this position. Aaron closes his eyes (PV 9; Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 207).



# Schreiben einer Writing a perceptual vignette (3)







# Mindfulness and attitude exercises inspired by Rudolf Steiner

Mindfulness exercises are popular and effective in self- and professional development. We adapted Steiner's 'supplementary exercises' and 'evening review' (2019, 2010) for our methodology and developed them further to be used for attitudinal development (details with examples in Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 160). We invite you to try the exercises and use journaling to describe your experiences and compose your own example.

Exercises	Effect on attitudinal development	
(1) concentration in thinking and ideation	being able to observe and consciously engage with something	
(2) initiative and will activity	acting objectively and with presence of mind	
(3) equanimity	equanimity and empathy	
(4) impartiality and positivity	empathetic openness for what is positive, good and beautiful	
(5) open-mindedness	bias-sensitive and impartial engaging; trust in possible development and success	
(6) inner equilibrium	inner balance and self-regulation	
(7) evening review and mor- ning preview	mental hygiene through reflection and encouragement through ideas for solutions	

# Developing professional pedagogical attitude



Develop your own mindfulness exercise; try it out and write down your experiences with it.



# Spontaneous reflection (1)

A simple spontaneous reflection describes what shows itself, what happens, as well as the impressions and assumptions that light up during the first reading or exchange in the group. It reveals anthropological, psychological or pedagogical questions that could be developed in a further phase of reflection. Read the following spontaneous reflection on the perceptual vignette 'Snails on the wall' (PV 1):

'Observation turns into a kind of role play because Ariana sees the little snails as "babies" and the big ones as "parents". This attribution of relationships is presumably based on her perception of her own family or other people. She acts this out and mirrors it in her activity of moving the snails around. The size ratio of the snails plays an important part in this. The "idea for playing" comes from the student because she points out to Ariana that there are a lot of snails on the wall. In the process of observing and playing, it becomes apparent that she develops a sense of a mutual connection and relationship. The learning process is noticeable in Ariana's concern that the "baby snails" be reunited with the "mummy snail". As she explains her action, she carefully places the little snails with the big snails. Her actions also show that she has developed a sense of familial relations and of belonging. Through her actions she develops a kind of responsibility for the snails. Based on her reactions and statements I estimate her developmental age at around four to six years' (Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 174)



### **Spontaneous reflection (1)**

Use your own perceptual vignette or one of the examples printed in this practice manual to reflect spontaneously on what reveals itself to you and what you deduce from that.






# Criteria-guided and subject-related reflection (2)

For criteria-guided or subject-related reflection you need to consult specialized texts on aspects that light up for you, so that you can assess your first impressions and judgements.



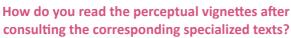
#### **Giant pink leather boots**

I'm walking up the stairs. Suddenly I see you sitting on the carpet, pulling on your neighbour's giant pink boots. You are out of breath with the effort of putting on these massive things. They not only cover your ankles but your entire legs. I am somehow reminded of a clown act. You have managed and you're beaming at me. I disappear in the kitchen for a moment. When I come back, you are sitting on the stairs with a book upside-down in your lap. It seems as if you were actually reading; like a little grown-up you are sitting there. Merely your somewhat clumsy hands that quickly turn the pages and the fact that the book is the wrong way up in your lap add something comical (PV 10).

- a) In relation to this perceptual vignette about the eighteen-month-old reading girl read, for instance, Wiehl, Angelika (2020): The child's imitative capacity. In: Wiehl, Angelika & Auer, Wolfgang.-M. (Ed.): Understanding Child Developement. Rudolf Steiner's Essential Principles for Waldorf Education. New York: WECAN, pp. 49-70; include the specialized knowledge in your second reflection.
- b) In relation to the perceptual vignette 'Equilibrium' (PV 9) read specialized texts on chair-rocking or classroom design (see recommended reading). Apply this knowledge to the statements in the perceptual vignette (examples in Barth & Wiehl 2024, p. 207ff.)

### Criteria-guided reflection (2)

a) on 'Giant pink leather boots'b) on 'Equilibrium'





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# Attitude-orienting reflection (3)

As well as practical experience and self- and external reflection, the development of a professional pedagogical attitude requires critical friends who are willing to give feedback. We understand attitude as a movement that relates to something and reflection as a mental process that prepares the future. While subject-specific reflection enables us to develop a differentiated understanding of a person or situation, the third reflection calls our awareness to our own thinking and judgement. Read the following extracts from Reflection (3) about the perceptual vignette 'Equilibrium' (PV 9):

'My perception has changed in the process ... I realized that every child learns differently and needs to be addressed and encouraged differently. The world is rarely as it seems at first glance. I was reminded again that I must not judge prematurely and that I should include all dimensions if possible.'

'By consulting the specialized literature, more ways of interpreting the situation emerged, when I become more aware of certain developmental conditions, particularly regarding the connection of movement and attention, I can observe in more detail what is actually happening and act more wisely as a result.'

'I started off thinking that the teacher had found a good way of calming a restless student and saved him from a "dangerous" situation. In the course of the morning I considered that there might be reasons why the boy is rocking on his chair, that it is an inner urge, totally normal and healthy and not based on bad intentions. This helped me understand and made me consider how one can respond positively as a teacher in such situations and help meeting the urge for movement in a way that everyone benefits from it.'

### **Attitude-orienting reflection (3)**

Reflect on your attitude and how it changed.

What changes were caused by the second phase of reflection?

How do you now see the way Aaron's chair-rocking was dealt with?





# Reflecting on the work process

We have tested and developed the phenomenological way of working with perceptual vignettes with students of Waldorf Education, trainee and experienced educators, day-care workers and teachers as well as with many colleagues during scientific conferences.

Given today's challenges we consider three aspects to be particularly important: to perceive and support other people's developmental and learning needs; to enable them in an empathetic way to find access and participation in areas that are important to them; and finally, to appreciate them as individuals with special characteristics, dispositions and gifts so that ways towards a peaceable future can be prepared together.

The feedback we received from many people is immensely valuable for our work. Here are a few questions for you to take with you for your reflection on working with perceptual vignettes:

- (1) Do you feel increased sensibility for what is individual and special in others?
- (2) Do you deal more consciously with affective moments or behaviours?
- (3) Do you recognize motives for your self-development and for changing your attitude towards children, young people and adults, when you read your journals?
- (4) How do you activate self-development and professionalization in yourself?





# Reflecting on experiences with perceptual vignettes



# Developing a professional pedagogical attitude and capacities for inclusive education. Outlook

The work with perceptual vignettes has become essential to us because it helps us inspire students and young researchers to use phenomenological methods and enable them to activate professionalization processes in themselves with regard to pedagogical attitude, pedagogical practice and diagnostic approach.

Every child, young person and adult wants to be seen as they are, with their current needs and life intentions. Perceptual vignettes recreate individual events and bring to light developmental opportunities in summaries and journal entries. Working with perceptual vignettes therefore helps people not only to develop an eye for, but to deeply experience what is special and individual about a person.

It has become apparent that the intensive reflective work with perceptual vignettes creates a space where students and other users become aware of their own preconceptions (habitus and beliefs) and can have trustful conversations about them. This safe space and sufficient time for conversation are necessary for dealing sensitively with thinking patterns and pedagogical belief systems so that a professional pedagogical attitude can be developed in the context of inclusion and participation.

We believe that writing perceptual vignettes and working with them in three phases of reflection can lastingly enhance professionalization regarding the pedagogical practice and sympathetic diagnostic skills.

We are looking forward to much feedback from you about your experimenting and practising with perceptual vignettes.

#### Literatur

#### Further reading for reflection on chair rocking

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With this exercise manual we would like to give you suggestions to dedicate yourself to this wonderful and elementary phenomenological and reflexive method and to try it out in your field of work.

It is intended as a supplement to our publication "Perception Vignettes. Phenomenological-reflexive thinking and professional attitude. Study and workbook", on which the present texts and exercises are based.

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