



Ulrike Barth
Angelika Wiehl

Perceptual Vignettes. Phenomenological Reflective Thinking and Professional Attitude

A Study and Practice Guide

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Angelika Wiehl

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Phenomenological Reflective
Thinking and Professional
Attitude

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Preface to the English edition

Perceptual vignettes are short phenomenological descriptions which capture individual perceptions of affective events. They direct our attention to inconspicuous or surprising occurrences in daily pedagogical situations, asking us to change our perspective and keep reorientating our attitudes and actions. Since the publication of the German original, the underlying methodology has been applied increasingly in teacher education, practical teaching and research.

We hope that this methodology will be used internationally, facilitating a new approach to individuality and diversity, and that its users will draw from their own experiences to support sustainable developments and changes in the children, young people and adults entrusted to them.

We are grateful to Margot Saar for her sympathetic and profound translating of this complex subject-matter into English. We also thank all sponsors of this English edition, in particular the Anthroposophic Council for Inclusive Social Development, the German Waldorf School Association's Education Research Centre and Waldorf Foundation for funding the professional translation and the Emil Molt Foundation for making the open access publication possible.

We wish to make the phenomenological work with perceptual vignettes available for the practice and research in education worldwide and are very interested in an exchange with you on this methodology in order to develop it further.

Ulrike Barth and Angelika Wiehl, Juli 2024

1 Perceptual vignettes in teacher education.

Introduction

Whenever we interact with others, we express a mood and display an attitude, although we may not necessarily be conscious of this. Presence, actions and personal expressions impact the social atmosphere in multiple ways in general life situations and in education in particular. This means two things for pedagogical encounters with children, young people and adults: it points to opportunities for influencing and shaping situations and it underlines the need for awareness and responsibility. Both in teacher education and in the pedagogical practice of teachers and educators, developing sensibility for human relationships and developing a professional pedagogical attitude are immensely important. When we carefully attend to and participate in the needs and situations of others, we enhance and unfold our capacity to act in ways that do justice to each person and situation. Professional attitude and pedagogical actions are rooted in a complex of individual competences, life and professional experience, self-reflection and professional training and development. Various theories and concepts exist as to how we can reflectively engage with our own role as future or practising teachers. Although this is often not made explicit, they imply that the recognition and understanding of children, young people and adults – for whom suitable and supportive developmental and learning situations need to be created – are central aspects of professionalism in education. The methodology underlying the work with perceptual vignettes aims to devote perceptive attention to every person and to reflect on the experiences gained in this process.

Perceptual vignettes are descriptive texts that capture phenomena perceived in the encounter with a child, young person or adult. We locate our method in the context of pedagogical phenomenology, which provides both a theoretical framework and aspects for its application in the pedagogical practice. Future and current teachers practise the phenomenological perception and observation of special moments they experience with a person or a group of people and record these in short descriptive texts, which we decided to call ‘perceptual vignettes’. Perceptual vignettes condense and enlarge the observed moments and form the basis of a series of subsequent reflective phases. Working practically with perceptual vignettes requires three levels of reflection, starting with spontaneous and immediate reflection which calls awareness to ways of acting, feeling and thinking that

become apparent in the perceptual vignette. In the second phase of reflection, the students and teachers derive a deeper pedagogical understanding from the special moments experienced by consulting scientific knowledge in disciplines such as anthropology, developmental psychology, sociology and others. This phase, which is guided by certain criteria and oriented to the content of the perceptual vignette, is followed by a third phase that focuses on self-development and may prompt changes of attitude and behaviour or result in new diagnostic insights. Together, the three modes of working – the phenomenological *perception and observation* of a person in a pedagogical context, the *writing down* of observed phenomena in the form of perceptual vignettes and the *phases of reflection* – add up to a method that is suited to both teacher education and the pedagogical practice.

The authors developed their phenomenological method over a period of four years, working with the students and lecturers at the Institute for Waldorf Education, Inclusion and Intercultural Studies of Alanus University in Mannheim, Germany, and with the research team of the VignA Network. This monograph is the first full account of the results of this collaboration. Work on the perceptual vignettes was initially inspired at a colloquium on pedagogical phenomenology organized in 2019 by Malte Brinkmann at Humboldt University in Berlin, at which Michael Schratz was also present. Following an in-depth study of the methodology of vignettes (Schratz 2009; Schratz et al. 2012; Agostini et al. 2018; Agostini 2019b among others), which was new to us, we introduced the work with (perceptual) vignettes to the Bachelor course at Alanus University's Institute for Waldorf Education, Inclusion and Intercultural Studies in Mannheim. This course includes a three-year practical placement, during which the students work for one to three hours per week with a child, young person or adult with special support needs. This practical work experience is accompanied by seminars which offer the opportunity to discuss pedagogical and anthropological questions arising from the practical work, to work on phenomenological descriptions of children, young persons and adults and, for students from year 2 onwards, to record their weekly observations of affective moments in the form of perceptual vignettes and talk about them.

The first task given to the students was to replace the conventional documentation and guided observations with descriptions of moments encountered in the pedagogical practice that caught their interest. We initially suggested that students write the kind of vignettes used by VignA Network for their lesson research. But the students brought various kinds of texts to the seminars, including poetry or anecdotes that were written from a first- or third-person perspective, usually from the point of view of the pedagogical practitioner and that included references to their personal feelings. Not many of these contributions met the ideal of the VignA vignettes, although many descriptions referred to moving, unexpected or perplexing moments arising from personal experiences in the pedagogical context.

The authors realized that they would have to explore what the students brought to the seminars without changing these texts. This marked the beginning of a journey through phenomenology to find ways of categorizing and precisely formulating what was expected of the students.

Although this was not originally intended, the students ended up also using the writing of perceptual vignettes for their written reflections on their work experience blocks in schools, day care centres and other organizations. In the subsequent Master's programme we asked them to reflect on perceptual vignettes under specific criteria. On the basis of the collected reflections we developed a structured process consisting of a three-stage reflective spiral: spontaneous reflection, criteria-guided reflection and attitude- and action-sensitive reflection. Eventually a number of Bachelor and Master theses were written on questions of (special needs) education and developmental psychology in which a series of perceptual vignettes were evaluated and reflected on under various premises. Thanks to these working processes of the past four years we were not only able to collect many perceptual vignettes, reflections and positive feedback from students regarding our method, but we also received many interested and critical comments at scientific conferences and colloquia where we presented individual aspects of our methodology, above all at the events organized by the VignA Network, Birgit Engel's research colloquia on art teaching, conferences on inclusion and scientific colloquia on pedagogical reflection, attitudinal development and professionalization. Our colleagues there made us aware of methodological possibilities and areas of application, facilitated a number of publications and helped us to clearly identify early on in our work with the perceptual vignettes how they differ from vignettes, anecdotes, memory pictures and other phenomenological descriptions. It was not possible to adapt our students' ways of writing and their successful practice to the existing tried-and-tested formats. Their particular qualities and the perceptual sensitivity for special moments in the pedagogical practice expressed in them showed us that they constituted a separate kind of text for which a suitable designation needed to be found. These considerations led to the conception of the term *perceptual vignette* for a method that has since been anchored in the guidelines for scientific working at our Institute and that is presented here in depth for the first time.

Our monograph is intended as a study and practice guide that covers both the theoretical foundations and the practical application of perceptual vignettes and includes theme-based exercises on perception, writing and reflection. We provide examples of perceptual vignettes to explain theoretical considerations and illustrate the diversity of our methodology. Part I is devoted to the origin and development of perceptual vignettes. We locate our method in the context of pedagogical phenomenology inasmuch as we use certain key elements of phenomenology to

provide structure and orientation (chapter 2). This is followed by a detailed discussion, illustrated by examples, of atmosphere as the first object of perception that is crucial for the entire process, and of the transition from open perception to attentive and focused observation (chapter 3). We look at wonder as the initiator of perceptual activity. The students' oral descriptions and written perceptual vignettes have shown time and again that it was their capacity for wonder which enabled them to open up to affective and meaningful phenomena (chapter 4). To find ways of adequately verbalizing and writing about observed phenomena, we follow Graham Wallas' (1926/2014) four stages of creative writing and demonstrate how this method, which underlies every creative process, evolves naturally and how it can be used for practice (chapter 5).

Part II deals with the practical application of perceptual vignettes. As well as self-reflection, the development of a professional pedagogical attitude requires a capacity for perception and observation that is subject to continuous scrutiny. In the field of education, professionalization is an ongoing process of self-development and innovation (chapter 6) that requires intensive reflection. We collected many examples of experiences, above all in our seminars for Master students, that we were able to gradually develop into a structured method. The three phases of reflection evolved with the spontaneous, criteria-guided and attitude- and action-sensitive engagement with the content of perceptual vignettes (chapter 7). This method constitutes an expansion of the phenomenological work which starts with the perception of a phenomenon and its exploration in preparation for writing about it. However, only reflection can yield the pedagogical potential that is required to do justice to the growing individualization in all areas of development and learning. It is also apparent in the sensitive observations of children, young people and adults captured in the perceptual vignettes that expert knowledge of anthropology and developmental psychology is required for a deeper understanding. Finally, the reflection phases used in working with perceptual vignettes can enhance diagnostic competence, not in the sense of providing diagnostic guidelines but as elementary exercises for practising the open and value-oriented perception of special, conspicuous or inconspicuous moments (chapter 8).

Since one of the intentions of this practice guide is to initiate learning processes in the fields of self-development and practical teaching, each chapter contains exercises and examples of *journaling* – a guided writing method developed by Otto Scharmer (Scharmer & Käufer 2014; Schneider 2017) as part of his Theory U concept to activate learning and practising. It is important to us that this practice guide is not only read but used as a basis for experimentation and research; the *journaling* exercises merely provide inspiration for this. Write your own perceptual vignettes, in your family, among friends or on journeys; they can teach you to see and understand yourself, others and the world from ever new perspectives.

In two chapters (3.4 and 6.6) we also include exercises given by Rudolf Steiner which we adapted to our working context as an enriching path of self-education and self-development. They add a new and future-oriented dimension to the fundamental exercises for pedagogical professionalization.

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Perceptual vignettes are the result of a phenomenological method applied in pedagogical practice and research. This method includes perception, description and phases of reflection and supports the development of a professional inclusive attitude and diagnostic competence. The process-based way of working with perceptual vignettes asks us to defer ideal-typical patterns, categorizations of all kinds, judgements and prognoses and to look more closely at each person's situation. The book is intended as a study and practice guide and includes theoretical foundations and the practical application of the method as well as theme-based exercises in perception, writing and reflection.

The editors



Ulrike Barth, PhD, professor for transformativ and inclusive pedagogy at the Institute for Waldorf Education, Inclusion and Intercultural Studies of Alanus University, Mannheim, Germany.



Angelika Wiehl, PhD, lecturer in education studies and Waldorf Education at the Institute for Waldorf Education, Inclusion and Intercultural Studies of Alanus University, Mannheim, Germany.

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