

# **<sup>1</sup>Perception Vignettes – A Phenomenological Method in (Waldorf) Pedagogical Training**

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**ABSTRACT.** Perception vignettes emerge from a phenomenological-reflective method rooted in phenomenology. They are applied in the training and practice of educators, childcare providers, teachers, and curative teachers to perceive the uniqueness of an individual, be it a child, adolescent, or adult, through specific moments and occurrences. This newly developed methodology encompasses phenomenological observation and description, along with three phases of reflection. In the bachelor's program, we emphasize phenomenological work, productive exercises, and corresponding activities. In the master's program, we delve deeper into reflections to gain insights into one's own attitude and approach, as well as to develop a comprehensive and individualized diagnostic understanding. This article introduces the theoretical foundations, methods, and applications of working with perception vignettes (continuously numbered as PV).

## **Introduction**

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"You're so mean to me"

The children in the third grade have taken their seats, and almost all their school supplies and personal belongings are safely stowed away in their school bags. One girl is still playing with a small, self-made paper cat. The teacher stands at the front, scanning her gaze from child to child, waiting for everyone to be ready for the start of the class. She notices that one girl is still playing with something in her hands and turns towards her with a stern expression. "Cara, please put it away," she says clearly and kindly. "No, the animal has to stay outside," Cara responds firmly. "Cara!" The teacher calls out with a slightly raised voice. "You're so mean to me," Cara replies, putting the paper cat into her school bag, muttering something to herself, and sitting down with her back straight. (PV 1; Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 115)

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This perception vignette describes a classroom scene that likely occurs countless times in a similar manner. A surprising and unpredictable moment deviates from the planned course of the lesson. The student Cara is engaged with her paper cat, something other than what the teacher expects from her. This leads to a brief dialogue in which Cara initially resists the teacher's request but eventually complies with her instructions. Such events that disrupt a familiar routine or draw attention through unexpected behaviour can serve as

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1. Translation: Nur Erdem

occasions for writing perception vignettes. As „linguistic recreations“ (Schwarz, 2020, p. 56), they capture affecting moments that are immediately experienced with meaning, and their nuances of significance are elucidated through reflection. Perception vignettes, like vignettes, anecdotes, or memory pictures, are narrative short texts used as phenomenological descriptions in pedagogical training and research (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 134ff.). Our definition is as follows:

“Perception vignettes originate from a phenomenological method that encompasses practical observations, descriptions, reflection steps, and professional pedagogical applications.” (Ibid., p. 119)

Inspired by the vignette and anecdote research conducted by the VignA network, since 2019, at the Institute for Waldorf Education, Inclusion, and Interculturality of Alanus University in Mannheim, we have been developing perception vignettes as a method for phenomenological observation, description, and reflection. Vignette work, which is specifically applied in the „learning-oriented“ exploration and understanding of educational processes within the VignA network (Agostini et al., 2018; Schratz et al., 2012), aligns itself with Husserl’s phenomenology as an „exploration“ through which things are not known as what they are but „how they appear to human senses and, in cognition, perception, understanding, become conscious“ (Peterlini, 2020, p. 122). This quality of phenomenological observation and recognition applies equally to the work with perception vignettes. They explore, through a narrative storytelling approach focused on the ‚how,‘ the external presence as well as the internal processes by which a phenomenon can only be felt, sensed, imagined, and ultimately become the subject of observation and research.

We employ the use of perception vignettes in both bachelor’s and master’s programs in Waldorf and curative education. These vignettes serve various purposes, including bringing special moments in pedagogical work with children, adolescents, or adults to the forefront, facilitating diagnostic and reflection work that is sensitive to one’s approach, and contributing to various research projects. As narrative short texts, perception vignettes can be written in either the first- or third-person perspective, that is, in the form of „I“ or as an observer. What is crucial is that they convey both external events and inner emotions, feelings, imaginings, and thoughts without containing assumptions or anticipate interpretations. Levels of sensory experience and their connection to specialized knowledge are explored in subsequent multi-phase reflection work. Depending on the research or work objectives, this reflection can serve not as a categorizing tool, but rather as a means of understanding the unique characteristics and needs, meaning comprehending diagnostics, as well as fostering pedagogical attitudes and actions. The following sections are dedicated to the methodology of perception vignettes, their placement within *philosophical* and *educational phenomenology* (Chapter 2), their emergence through *wonder, perception, and observation* of pedagogical moments (Chapters 3 and 4), including *exercises in phenomenological perception* (Chapter 5), the *creative writing process* (Chapter 6), and the *phases of reflection* (Chapter 7). Additionally, we provide an outlook on *professionalization and research* (Chapter 8).

We are aware that this text format can only be considered as an operationalizable educational and research method when it is integrated into the pedagogical practice, where individuals are perceived and observed, and when it is coupled with the practiced methods of phenomenological perception, observation, description, and reflection processes. This method provides insights not only into the observed individuals but also into the educators and researchers closely involved in the action or perceiving it. Reflection, interpretation, and evaluation are integral to the methodological approach, or they are parts thereof. Because perception vignettes would have no further significance than that of literary texts if they were not integrated into a process regarding their generation and processing, aiming to gain deeper insights into anthropology, developmental psychology, diagnostics, or „child observation“ or „child conferences“ (Wiehl, 2019, p. 178ff.; Barth, 2020, p. 163ff.), as well as pedagogical attitude and action development based on specific individual situations. It is essential to justify this phenomenological process of knowledge acquisition as the basis for a needs- and development-oriented pedagogy.

## Positioning in Pedagogical Phenomenology

Phenomenology as a method of research and understanding is gaining increasing significance in pedagogy, educational science, philosophy, and other disciplines. In particular, the epistemological methods of philosophical phenomenology and their developments by thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and their further elaborations by scholars like Aron Gurwitsch, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricœur, László Tengely, Bernhard Waldenfels, and other phenomenologists have been continually adapted for various approaches to phenomenological research for over a century (Brinkmann, 2019), and they are regularly updated and explored (Alloa et al., 2023). A comprehensive collection of source texts in pedagogical phenomenology and numerous studies attest to its relevance for methodologies that, unlike ethnography-based „participant observation“ which pursues a specific research question (Brinkmann, 2015, p. 531), begin with the capacity for wonder, allowing one to engage in perceptive interaction with the world (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 86ff.). Wonder, open perception, and attentive observation, as seen in „observational participation“ or „participatory experience“ (Brinkmann, 2015, p. 531) and as found in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle (Matuschek, 2017, p. 17ff.), are at the foundation of phenomenological perception and cognition. Therefore, these capacities for open engagement with all senses play a pivotal role in the phenomenological work with perception vignettes, explicitly practiced as fundamental approaches to affecting moments in the field of pedagogical action or in other contexts (Chapter 3).

„Thus, phenomenology is a method that allows us to rediscover the sense horizons and situations concealed or obliterated by the natural, objectifying attitude. It accomplishes this without leaving the realm of experience or consciousness, even when the heterogeneity of other forms of existence underscores the limits of our ability to fully comprehend them.“ (ibid.)

This ability of a lateral approach in the process of phenomenological perception, viewing from different perspectives while being bodily present and actively engaged in the unfolding events, forms the foundation for exploring and understanding an anthropology and developmental psychology grounded in the lifeworld and an education-oriented towards individual human being and becoming. It involves experiencing the other, participating in their expressions, actions, and needs through bodily „coexistence,“ which „reveals itself as its own mode of being alongside other beings within the world. If existence exists at all, it has the mode of being-with-one-another“ (Heidegger, 2006, p. 125). In „being-with-one-another,“ that is, in shared presence, the other and their distinctiveness can only be sensually, emotionally, and mentally experienced. For in perceiving the other, „all meaning“ emerges, and their face is revealed (Lévinas, 2013, p. 220f.). „The wonder of the face comes from elsewhere, from where it comes and where it also already withdraws“ (ibid., p. 227). In the face of the *other* – representative of the givenness itself – *one* intuits the meaningfulness.

In phenomenological perception, the sensuously appearing reveals itself as a „givenness“ (Marion, 2015, p. 44), which owes its expression to external events, actions, and utterances but is not limited to them. According to Marion, „givenness“ means that we encounter „the phenomena of things in their very first originality, so to speak, at their moment of birth, where they reveal themselves as themselves and from themselves unconditionally“ (ibid., p. 29). Through open perception, initial wonder, and attentive observation of phenomena that capture our attention, the emotional and mental co-experience unfolds. The perceiving subject actively participates in this co-experiential awareness. Because „human perception [...] is not a solitary relationship of a subject to its world. It always already contains the possible presence and possible perspectives of others“ (Fuchs, 2020, p. 160). In the sense of Husserl (2016, p. 18), it includes, in addition to all external phenomena, the immediately arising feelings, ideas, and thoughts – the inner experiences triggered by sensation and the emerging memories of past experiences. The bodily grounding of all dimensions of experience is among the central prerequisites of phenomenological work and research, which are not only linked to an open attitude but also to the bodily presence of the observing person. Without this presence, a purely phenomenal givenness would not be noticeable; it would not enter consciousness but remain conjecture, imagination, or fiction. The real presence of the perceiving and observing subject in pedagogical work or any other life situation is a condition for the phenomenological exploration of the lifeworld.

## Wonder as an Open Attitude in the Pedagogical Field

Wonder is „triggered by moments that transcend the boundaries of the ordinary towards the unexpected“ (Gess, 2019, p. 15). The preceding perception vignette (PV 1) encapsulates such a moment of affectation for the observing and describing person. It doesn't capture the course of the lesson but rather a scene that appears as a disruption or irritation, simultaneously standing out as an element that arouses wonder by deviating from the usual, the planned, and the expected. While the teacher is about to begin the lesson with the entire class and demands the attention and concentration of all, one child does not conform to the expected course of action but plays with its paper cat. The incident could be overlooked but comes into the focus of the teacher, who, with her stern expression and the instruction, „Cara, please put it away,“ contributes to the exposure of the child's playing – which may be inconsequential from another perspective, but possibly not for the class and the lesson's progress. The situation escalates as Cara quickly retorts, „No, the animal must stay outside.“ It further intensifies when the teacher admonishingly calls „Cara,“ and Cara responds with the words, „You're so mean to me.“ It becomes clear that this attention-grabbing moment, depending on one's attitude and identification with either the teacher or Cara, is perceived as a negative transgression or as imaginative and self-confident responsiveness on the part of the child.

Simply being surprised by such small disruptions depends on the ability to wonder. The ability to wonder means dedicating oneself in a devoted, open contemplation to the surrounding world, other people, their actions, and expressions. In wonder, one opens their eyes to the unexpected, which can evoke feelings of admiration or astonishment. Wonder happens because „it is an act that I don't initiate, but I am still present as if I were awakening“ (Meyer-Drawe, 2011, p. 199). However, in the pedagogical context, wonder is less of a Platonic wonder in anticipation of a revelation from the world of ideas; rather, it corresponds more to Aristotle's sense of wonder at the beginning of the pursuit of knowledge (Matuschek, 2017, p. 19ff.).

In the perceptual field of an observing person, that which is given to attentive wonder or astonishment stands out from a background or „horizon“ (Waldenfels, 2018, p. 68). The phenomenological concept of „horizon“ represents „everything that is co-experienced when something is experienced as such“ (ibid.). When something unusual or surprising emerges from the determinate background, it can trigger curiosity and interest. At the same time, attention operates in the „dual play of catching attention and paying attention“ (Breyer, 2011, p. 138): „One who pays attention responds to something that enters into the horizon of the given as a point of attraction, a question, or an *actio* that demands a *reactio* [...], and, temporally as well as relationally, anticipates the response“ (ibid., p. 138f.). For example, during a walk in nature, one's gaze may wander to the edge of a forest where something indistinct is moving and follows the unknown. Only with prolonged focus does the initially blurry silhouette become increasingly distinct from the shimmering treetops, revealing a person riding a bicycle with a dog running behind (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 34). The phenomenological gaze drifts along the „horizon“ with questions and searches and eventually focuses on what is striking. Once noticed as something special, it is integrated into one's own network of concepts and beliefs due to previous experiences with similar phenomena and gradually moves into awareness, accompanied by questions, emotions, ideas, and thoughts. The outward gaze or the noticing of external phenomena and the accompanying inner sensations are interconnected as the „*inner* and *outer horizons* of perception“ (Breyer, 2011, p. 136).

For working with perception vignettes, wonder is a key to accessing the world, engaging with other people, and living beings, becoming aware of their uniqueness and characteristics, and experiencing their behaviours and actions. Special moments draw the attention and interest of an observing person, presenting themselves in their consciousness as a „givenness“ while simultaneously standing out from a general background or „horizon.“ This emergence of a phenomenon before another is due to subjective experience because only the observing individual can be affected, touched, or intrigued by a specific event; another person may not notice it at all. Turning one's attention in wonder toward an object or person is subject to the decision and sensitivity of the perceiving subject, who wishes to dedicate themselves to the „being with“ (Heidegger, 2006, p. 118) or being present in the phenomenal givenness.

## Exercises in Phenomenological Perception

In Exercise and learning an open attitude towards events in the pedagogical field, it is important to train oneself in perceiving with all senses and in focused observation. Unlike wonder, which is always accompanied by feelings and sensations, perceiving is an open, empathetic, and non-judgmental turning towards an event with all senses. The transitions between pure sensory perceptions, where only distinct impressions—through hearing, seeing, touching, etc.—are taken in, and wonder are fluid. Because the state of pure perception, which reveals a world of the given yet distinct from each other, is hard to maintain. In every moment of devoted perception, feelings, ideas, and thoughts arise, which play a role and simultaneously direct perception towards both external and internal aspects. Being able to distinguish between the dimensions of external and internal perception content clarifies that there are no external events that enter consciousness without internal, psychological, and mental processes taking place. All sensory perceptions are accompanied by sensations that are perceptible as such but also constitute the moment of being affected.

Wonder leads to focused observation before a phenomenon; it directs consciousness towards events that stand out from the ordinary and thus become meaningful in a special way for personal experience, as with Cara and her teacher (PV 1) or the fly caught with the glasses case (PV 2). In attentive observation, the scene crystallizes and is subsequently recorded in phenomenological description. The focus of observational activity is thus directed from within, through an emotional and mental relationship to the event and its intuited meaningfulness.

In everyday experience, these processes tend to occur rather unconsciously. However, they can be experienced more consciously and utilized for training in phenomenological observation and description through specific exercises, such as those developed by Rudolf Steiner for the „practical training of thinking“ (1909/2009; Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 71ff). This set of exercises includes methods that are, on the one hand, understood as „a propaedeutic approach to a research methodology,“ and, on the other hand, as „training in (Waldorf) pedagogical methods of inquiry“ (Wiehl & Barth, 2021, p.197f). These exercises focus on practicing phenomenological and non-judgmental observation, precise recall of details, intuitive understanding based on facts, and living and creative thinking (Steiner, 1909/2009, p. 15ff; 1986, p. 261ff).

When observing a person or an event and attempting to remember all the details of their outward appearance, there are usually some memory gaps and unexplainable impressions left even with very careful recollection. For accurate observation and visualization, which are prerequisites for subsequent phenomenological writing, one should observe a person as precisely as possible, imagine how they will be at the next encounter, and assess and correct this when meeting them again (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 75f). Through repeated practice, Steiner suggests that „trust in the inner necessity of things and events“ is developed, and individuals can become aware of the active forces of thought (ibid). This phenomenological exercise is adapted to everyone’s capabilities. Through practice, skills for phenomenological perception, attentive observation, and judgment-sensitive recognition can be developed. Further exercise suggestions can be found in the publication on „Perception Vignettes“ (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 71ff) as well as in the „Exercise Manual“ (Barth & Wiehl, 2023a, p. 16f).

## Phenomenological and Creative Writing

We have been developing the method of perception vignettes for four years within the context of the practical teaching phases of the bachelor’s program. Students are tasked with regularly writing a perception vignette, presenting it in the accompanying seminar, and subsequently engaging with anthropological and pedagogical questions. Perception vignettes are created spontaneously or consciously guided through a creative process that unfolds in four phases (Wallas, 1926/2014, p. 38ff):

- 1) The „preparation“ phase involves perceiving, marveling, and attentively observing in the pedagogical field.

- 2) The second phase of „incubation“ or forgetting usually occurs naturally with time intervals since the event.
- 3) In the third phase of „illumination,“ a related flash of insight or idea occurs when the initial event is brought back to consciousness. Ideally, this is experienced as a condensed mental image of the perceived phenomenon and its meaningfulness.
- 4) Finally, the processing or „verification“ of the phenomenon or the related insight is carried out in a phenomenologically descriptive perception vignette (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 126).

This process of perceiving, remembering, insight, and processing results in a linguistic recreation of the initial phenomenon, which, through the perception vignette, is made readily available for further considerations and reflections, as demonstrated in the following example:

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„Is the result correct?“

You could do math all day if it weren't for those worksheets to fill out. Today, we changed our method. We sat down on the floor. When I started working on my homework, you were very interested and eager. I asked you to pick out the task and explain it to me. You chose, and I wrote it down. „How should I proceed?“ „What do I do now?“ „What does that yield?“ „Is the result correct?“ Together, we made a great team.

It was the first time you weren't distracted, got up, or changed the topic. Just before we reached the halfway point of the tasks, you needed a break on your terms. You didn't want to wait until the halfway point. But when you came back, you had a snack and asked if we could continue without discussing it. At the end, there was a high-five and praise. Writing down what we had worked on was no longer a problem for you. (PV 3; Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 142)

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A perception vignette captures impressions obtained from a subjective standpoint. It's about experiencing, not interpreting or judging actions and expressions. They are often described in the first person, such as the math task (PV 3), or from an observational perspective, like the scene with Cara (PV 1). These short texts are linguistic re-creations of events perceived and experienced in educational practice or other life situations. As Waldenfels aptly puts it: „And because we cannot assume that things are in themselves in a clear and definitive way, what they are, the process of determining contains moments of creation“ (Waldenfels, 2018, p. 63). Things or the originally perceived phenomena can be revisited and re-experienced through perception vignettes. When read and discussed in the seminar, surprising insights often emerge. What might be going on in a child's mind who, instead of solving fractions, catches a fly (PV 2), or who can focus on math tasks (PV 3)?

## Phases of Reflection for a Pedagogical Approach and Understanding Diagnosis

The importance of reflection, which can serve as a „source of knowledge“ for the future through a „turning back“ to something that has already happened, is emphasized in pedagogical professionalization. In the three phases of reflection with perception vignettes, known as the reflection spiral (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 189ff), the focus is primarily on understanding a situation, a person, their starting points, needs, and potentials, as well as on the development of a professional attitude and action orientation. The reflection processes with students require guidance and a safe space for them to express themselves both personally and in relation to criteria or specific subject matters. In our seminars and training sessions, we recommend journaling for this purpose, a method of guided writing that we owe to Claus Otto Scharmer (2022) and which supports phenomenological practice and the phases of reflection; specific exercise suggestions can be found in the „Exercise Manual“ (Barth & Wiehl, 2023a).

Existing perception vignettes are initially spontaneously reflected upon by the author or another person. The first, spontaneous reflection unlocks the content of the perception vignette and makes thoughts and

feelings triggered by it conscious (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, pp. 189ff.). There is also an exchange among students or researchers to gain perspectives for the selection of specialist texts related to anthropological, developmental, or (special) educational topics. The following example from a student's pedagogical practice with a child of about nine years old describes a challenging situation that raises many questions:

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#### October Swim

It's cold and it has started to rain. The Rhine flows past us like a silver-green ribbon. Pebbles and small shells crunch under my feet. „So,“ I say, „now we really should go home.“ - „No,“ Mira shouts. She stands a few steps away from the shore, swirling the water with a stick. The water doesn't even reach halfway up her riding boots. „Yes,“ I reply, „it's getting dark and cold. Come on now!“ - „I'm not cold at all!“ she retorts and angrily splashes her stick into the water, causing it to spray. Her pants get wet. I look at her sternly. She meets my gaze and says in a challenging tone, „Otherwise, I'll drown in the Rhine!“ - „Oh no,“ I reply firmly, „you certainly won't do that. So, let's go!“ I walk a few steps away from the shore. „Catch me!“ With big, splashing leaps, she dances around, the cold water now running down into her boots from above, her pants and jacket completely soaked. „I won't do that, otherwise you'll be much faster than me,“ I say with determination as she comes closer to me and then escapes again. It's still raining, and the world is getting greyer and greyer. (PV 4; Wiehl & Barth, 2023, p. 76).

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In journaling, the first spontaneous reflection takes place. Then, we determine the topic areas that emerge from the exchange about the spontaneous reflections, such as the developmental specifics of nine-year-old children, challenging or problematic behavior, and the uncertainty of responsible adults. This could be followed by reading some excerpts from texts like „Schwierige Kinder gibt es nicht“ (Köhler, 2007), „Schülerjahre“ (Largo & Beglinger, 2010), „Herausforderndes Verhalten“ (Hejskov Elvén, 2017; Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2020), or the Low Arousal approach (McDonnell, 2010) to gain insights into understanding Mira's behavior for the second, *criteria-guided* reflection. For example, we know from the Low Arousal approach that people who behave conspicuously or disruptively would behave differently if they encountered conditions and approaches that were suitable for them. The insights gained in this way are incorporated into the third, *attitude-oriented reflection* and into the *understanding diagnosis* (Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, pp. 147ff. and pp. 206ff.). A student's reflection after several months of experience with perception vignettes reflects these processes:

„From [perception] vignette to [perception] vignette, it became easier for me to understand the concept of [perception] vignette diaries and not only to become more imaginative in the writing process but also to observe and reflect on the gained experiences with my child in social work support in a different way. The main difference between vignettes and diary entries is that [perception] vignettes do not provide summaries but rather reflect and illustrate small insights from momentary experiences with the child in a creative and imaginative way. [...] The behaviour of the child in social work reflects the work of the educator. This behaviour became very clear to me when working with the child. Therefore, I had to be conscious and confident about my pedagogical attitude and approach.“ (Wiehl & Barth, 2021, p. 207)

During the reflection work, questions often arise concerning self-development and professionalization as educators. We have particularly adapted the canon of so-called „side exercises,“ originally developed by Rudolf Steiner (2022) for esoteric training, after being confronted with considerations at training sessions and scientific conferences about how the phenomenological and reflective work with perception vignettes could be reconnected to concrete educational concerns and professionalization (detailed in Barth & Wiehl, 2023b, p. 163ff.).

## Perception Vignettes as a Tool for Professionalization and Research. Outlook

The method of perception vignettes, through personal engagement, cultivates open, initially unguided perception, which evolves into attentive-focused observation, differentiated reflection, and potentially into scientific work. We continuously test this through supervised internships, bachelor's, master's, and research

projects, each dedicated to an educational field where perception vignettes are written, thematically reflected upon, and analysed to gain insights into individual persons, their needs, and the necessary support. We also see perspectives for a scientific application of this phenomenological methodology in participatory research with people with disabilities who may communicate little or not at all verbally but can express themselves through other means. Our focus is on insights based on phenomenological perception and description, as well as the triple reflection process.

Encountering a child, adolescent, or another person in their true being with all immediacy and authenticity creates opportunities to reconsider one's own opinions, (pre)judgments, and assessments of others, as well as possibilities for shaping a development- and inclusion-oriented pedagogy. The method of perception vignettes opens four gates of recognition for the attainment of pedagogical professionalism: Initially, the focus is on *becoming attentive* to a special moment with a person and *phenomenologically describing* it. Depending on the intention of the pedagogical studies, the three-phase reflection process is directed towards the development of *pedagogical and ethical attitudes* and the *readjustment of actions and approaches*, or more specifically towards recognizing the development and needs of a person in terms of understanding diagnostics.

The phenomenological-reflective method of perception vignettes accompanies gestures of mindfulness and appreciation towards the uniqueness and individuality of individual children, adolescents, and adults. These gestures can, in the sense of „learning as experience“ (Meyer-Drawe, 2003), motivate self-development, especially in pedagogical fields of action.



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