

# **Feldenkrais Project**

## **at the Mosaik School**

(School for the Mentally Handicapped in  
Grevenbroich-Hemmerden, Germany)

**An Experience Report  
on work with the Feldenkrais Method  
in a secondary / crafts class from  
April 1997 to June 2000**

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## **1. Foreword**

Many people have contributed in realising the Feldenkrais Project described below at the School for the Mentally Handicapped in Grevenbroich-Hemmerden. Thanks above all to the school's parents' association which had the courage to make a major initial sum available as start-up financing even though further financing was not yet in sight.

Special thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Sturbeck (parents of a pupil), who with great commitment found sponsors who considered the Feldenkrais work with the mentally handicapped to be worthy of support. Our thanks here too above all to Stadtparkasse Neuss, Rheinbraun and WGZ-Bank for each making large sums available.

Many thanks also to the parents of the pupils who accompanied the work with great recognition and interest.

Sincere thanks likewise to Mrs. Förtsch, Mrs. Becker and Mr. Thome, who dispensed with gifts on their birthdays and instead asked guests to give a donation to the Feldenkrais work in the class.

The project could only be financed with the help of all such generous donators, and we are now able to look back on three years of experience and marvel at the results.

## **2. Organisational framework**

The project began in April 1997. 10 pupils took part (4 girls and 6 boys, ranging in age from 13 to 17) who all belonged to the same class. The two teachers, Mrs. Schneeweiß and Mrs. Esser, who accompanied and observed the project, had both been familiar with the Feldenkrais Method for many years through their own personal experience. Both were therefore very keen to see how their mentally handicapped pupils would react to this work. The Feldenkrais work was completely unknown to the pupils before the project began although they were accustomed to making contact with themselves and fellow pupils with the help of other physically orientated methods such as interaction games and perception exercises.

The project began with a group lesson which took place on a weekly basis, called ATM ("Awareness Through Movement") in which all pupils in the class participated. Feldenkrais teacher Mrs. Block taught the entire group while the teachers assisted the severely multi-handicapped pupils.

In addition to the group lessons, each pupil had about 1-2 individual lessons each month called FI ("Functional Integration"), given respectively by one of the Feldenkrais teachers (Mrs. Block, Mr. Theiß). Some of the lessons during the course of the project were filmed on video.

### **3. The Method**

The Feldenkrais Method was developed by the physicist Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais. He discovered a unique way of training motoric sensation and thus too the whole personality. The effects of this method, which are immediately perceptible, range from marked relaxation through increased mobility to a general improvement in the quality of life, sensibility and thinking.

For anyone with no or slight experience of the Feldenkrais Method, here is a short description of what this means to the handicapped.

Our pupils need stimulation which focuses on the individual as a whole - because they all have multiple and extensive limitations in all developmental areas: motoricity, speech, thinking, feeling etc. In addition to their actual handicap, they often have a negative self-image through their frequent experience of "I can't" or external assessment "wasn't able again" or "still can't".

This is where the Feldenkrais Method is applied! It focuses on the developmental area of motion and offers people (no matter whether child, adolescent, adult, handicapped or not) learning space by stimulating re-inquiry and re-discovery. Individual potential and abilities are the starting point, and using this basis, the Feldenkrais Method can extend the existing repertoire. Everyone knows the pleasure and perseverance experienced by a small child when he/she tries out newly learnt movements countless times and develops his/her self-image as an autonomous and competent personality.

The Feldenkrais Method aims to establish a link to this childish pleasure in learning and the accompanying sensations "I'm curious to know how it works" and "I can do something". This produces the very positive effect of feeling happy with one's body despite all the limitations. The Feldenkrais work takes this "feeling at ease with one's body" and "feeling satisfied with oneself" as the starting point for further learning.

Pupils can gain diverse experience in sensory, reasoning and perceptive terms during group and individual work. Such experience affects the nervous system and initiates maturation processes. In these maturation processes, fundamental skills develop e.g. the ability to orientate, take an interest, be patient, to concentrate, differentiate, make comparisons etc. This is experienced around the pupil's own body - regardless of the degree of their handicap - can be perceived and felt from within and can be applied to all further learning processes.

The Feldenkrais Method can be taught both in groups through verbal guidance and individual lessons by the Feldenkrais teacher through touch and movement. For the most part, no words are spoken or explanations given during individual lessons, and this makes it particularly suitable for the severely handicapped.

Feldenkrais work basically helps all those who wish to learn more about themselves and new ways of dealing with themselves.

#### **4. How group lessons work (ATM)**

The Feldenkrais Method is conveyed in groups by Awareness Through Movement (ATM). This awareness as an element of perception and movement, thought and feeling facilitates organic learning.

The Feldenkrais teacher initiates movements which he/she carefully observes through simple verbal guidance. The teacher's qualified training and experience mean that he/she is aware of the contexts which are part of a neurophysiologically harmonious movement. The teacher can initiate this through further appropriate movement suggestions which extend the pupil's movement repertoire.

Movement processes initiated in this way stimulate the pupil's nervous system through self-perception. As the central nervous system (brain) is a self-regulating organ, perceptive impressions support self-regulation of the nervous system. And this can improve its control of movements and functions.

There are no normative learning objectives in Feldenkrais work which are set externally. Work is based on the individual skills of each pupil. It is not a case of practising anything that "doesn't work" rather of extending something "that does work" so that finally movement processes which were initially impossible are easy to perform. Intellectual aptitude is not a factor, the feeling "I can" is a good precondition for the pupil to take pleasure in enhancing his/her potential.

By developing the skill of self-perception and self-awareness, the Feldenkrais teacher guides each pupil towards experiencing what he/she already can do. The Feldenkrais Method helps each pupil to enhance his/her skills in a playful way. Not through imitation or precise explanations but through movement, stimulated by the verbal suggestions of the Feldenkrais teacher. The attention developed in the process results in a changed self-image and can impact on all aspects of the pupil's development.

ATMs were initially held in the classroom, and then later in a "movement room" at the school. The participating pupils with different forms of mental handicap also included two confined to wheelchairs with very limited movement skills. They were partially assisted by both teachers in performing the suggested movements.

The first lessons were conducted sitting on school chairs and were aimed at familiarising the pupils with the new situation and the Feldenkrais teacher but also with the unaccustomed procedure of implementing verbal directions into specific movement sequences. This situation was also used to assess the individual status of each pupil's development in terms of physical orientation and physical coordination.

The condition for exploring the pupil's movements was his/her ability to name and point at specific parts of the body. Lying down, the pupils were able to experience the basic functions of bending and stretching, turning and rolling repeatedly in new situations, making everyday movements much easier and in greater variation, as well as new behaviour patterns. This gave the pupils more

joy of life and vitality, and became apparent in changes in learning and social behaviour.

## **5. How the individual lessons work (FI)**

The Feldenkrais teacher observes how a pupil moves. The teacher sees whether an idea works and whether the movement is realised skilfully or the objective can only be achieved with difficulty.

Perceptive impressions are conveyed to the pupil during individual lessons which are new for him/her, impressions which feel good and harmonise in an overall context in neurophysiological terms. The nervous system is able to process such prestructured sensations easily and in relation to already familiar perceptions. This develops a changed or new control skill, and the movement is easier to perform or is performed for the first time.

Perceptive impressions are conveyed by easy movements which the Feldenkrais teacher performs with the pupil who can take up different positions on the floor. The pupil does not need to make an effort or exert himself/herself. On the contrary, the quieter and cosier the pupil, the more intensively the perceptive impressions conveyed reach the nervous system.

"Not having to exert oneself" is a new, very profound experience for many. The feeling "I am accepted as I am" can develop. At the end of the lesson, the teacher proceeds to allow the many impressions conveyed to impact as a whole. The movements become more spatial, more connected and related to functions. Movement coordination then succeeds with a good feeling and good control which the pupil would otherwise not be able to easily realise. The ability to control a movement easily produces facilities in the nervous system which the pupil can access later. In short: if one has a feeling for how something works, it is easier to control an action, and then to succeed in doing what one wanted. Something has been learnt!

Such a fundamental stimulation of sensomotoricity affects the whole person. This results in sustained psycho-social development.

## **6. Cases**

### **6.1 Case: Sandra**

#### **6.1.1 Brief description before the Feldenkrais project began**

Sandra was 16 when the project began. She suffers from Down's syndrome.

Her speech comprehension is situation and fact-related. She expresses herself in incomplete sentences with very unclear articulation. It is not often possible to understand what she says. Sandra's head and eyes are mostly bowed. There is no eye contact when she speaks but she talks to herself a lot. Sandra is a somewhat reclusive loner with little contact to her fellow pupils but when there is

contact she tends to patronise and correct them. When asked to perform a task in class, she frequently watches first to see whether she can accomplish it. She reacts apprehensively and often refuses if something appears too difficult.

Sandra's movement behaviour demonstrates insecurity in her physical image and great anxiety in different coordination tasks. She cannot jump from small boxes, nor can she jump over obstacles.

### **6.1.2 Development during the project**

Sandra is very cautious and anxious during the first group lessons. She does not participate in a great deal but watches the others. Sometimes, she exhibits her usual pattern of withdrawal and refusal if the movement task appears too difficult. During her first individual lessons, Sandra also appears very alert and controlled; she endeavours not to make any mistakes.

After a couple of hours when she is sure that she will not be asked to do anything she finds impossible, she starts to get increasingly involved each time in the tasks. Her anxious expressions give way to greater openness and she becomes more interested. Sandra makes enormous progress in personality development and in all developmental areas during the coming months. Even colleagues from other classes notice the changes, and we are repeatedly told of Sandra's positive development. It really seems that Sandra is acquiring a completely new self-image. She now walks more upright and she looks much more alert. This means she radiates much more self-assurance and takes much more notice of events going on around her. Her bowed head and "mumbling" disappear more and more. She also learns during this time to approach others openly and to speak to them directly. This gives her much more contact with her fellow pupils and this contact is more satisfactory for both parties. There were frequently misunderstandings before because Sandra had a wholly specific, fixed and inflexible idea and view of events. The growth in her ability to communicate is enormous. It is striking to observe the fun Sandra herself is experiencing in this development, and how she really is outgrowing herself in certain situations which she previously regarded with anxiety. In the second year of the project, she is elected deputy class representative, and this also clearly shows how her fellow pupils have noticed her development. This position also includes making short speeches on all kinds of occasions. Immediately after her election, Sandra climbs on a chair and proudly thanks those who voted for her, and promises to take good care of everything. She looks at the class while she is making the "speech" and it is easy to understand; her total enthusiasm and presence is moving. At the next parents' afternoon, Sandra again gets up of her own accord to welcome the guests and to explain the proceedings. Here too her presence is calm and collected, and above all she stays with the subject on hand; she does not start to fantasise and digress or to lose contact with those present as was the case for many years. It is a very enriching experience for the teachers to watch and to participate in this process; there is reason for amazement again and again in the coming months.

Sandra rapidly loses her anxiety and physical stiffness. Her shoulders and arms become more mobile which means, for example, that she is better able to catch and throw balls with a better aim. This allows her to play a much more

satisfactory part in many group games during sports. She is now able to jump from high boxes and to spring over a flat obstacle. During a circus project week at the school, it is striking to see how Sandra practises certain techniques with determination for as long as it takes to master them (e.g. spinning plates, juggling with scarves). She has every right to be pleased with her success at the performance and enjoys all the praise. She would have given up much quicker before or would not even have confronted a new task. Sandra's growing courage is also noticed in the school's swimming pool. She now ventures into the water with a float and takes up a floating position without her feet touching the bottom. Quite a sensation for Sandra! She is also calmer if water is splashed in her face - before, she used to leave the pool in a panic. In all lessons, the teachers state that Sandra deals with anything new with greater flexibility.

She now participates in the Feldenkrais group and individual lessons in a relaxed way, often with a smile and experimental enthusiasm. Her insecurity and anxiety have disappeared. She hardly watches how the others tackle the tasks but approaches them with self-assurance, and often follows her own personal course. Sandra is learning this sense of her own needs and potential very intensively in the Feldenkrais lessons, and she is also able to transfer this increasingly to everyday situations. She expresses her own needs far more strongly and can now express herself appropriately if there is something she does not want to do.

Sandra's very positive development is also apparent in her creative work. In the past, she almost always withdrew from confronting tasks by digressing - in the same way as when she spoke - and chose a completely different task. For example, she selected beautiful colours and covered the paper with these coloured areas (see Fig. 1). Sandra was not able initially to portray an object.



Fig. 1 Sandra 18.01.1996



Her increasing physical self-assurance has obviously given Sandra greater imagination and spatial orientation, enabling her for the first time at the age of 16 to draw a human shape. This is still very delicately - almost transparently - drawn, and floats above the ground on the left edge of the picture (see Fig. 2). Her customary manner of filling the picture with coloured areas is still apparent.



Fig. 2 Sandra 20.05.1997 "Me doing Feldenkrais in class"

Fig. 3 is drawn a month later. Her love of coloured areas is still obvious but she clearly devotes the lower left-hand corner to the set topic: "Me doing Feldenkrais in class". The strokes of the human shape are already more robust and clearer.



Fig. 3 Sandra 30.04.1998 "Me doing Feldenkrais in class"

Fig. 4 is completed a year later. The topic is again identical to the last picture but the division of the picture is entirely different. The coloured areas have disappeared, and this is still the case today! And Sandra herself is in the centre of the picture. The figure is lying on a mat and the colouring of the mat corresponds to reality. For the first time, her figure also has a stomach (body), a further important differentiating feature of the human shape.



Fig. 4 Sandra 30.04.1998  
"Me lying on the mat doing Feldenkrais"

During a break in the Feldenkrais lessons, Sandra continued to find pleasure in painting. Her pictures contained more and more details and she gradually developed more symbols to represent situations and experiences in her painting. Fig. 5 is a beautiful example of how she illustrated an entire performance by the Hännischen Theatre (puppet theatre) attended by the class. She even drew two tigers in a cage (in profile!) and a great many details which had obviously impressed her during the performance. The picture reflects the attention and inner involvement with which Sandra followed the action and

later also her recollection. What a valuable new approach for communicating events for someone whose limits are restricted mentally and linguistically!



Fig. 5 Sandra 07.05.1998  
"Our visit to the Hännischen Theatre"

### 6.1.3 Individual lessons (FI) with Sandra

Feldenkrais teachers are repeatedly asked how these slight, pleasant touches and movements can produce such fundamental changes. We attempt below to give as far as possible a comprehensible and professionally sound explanatory approach to Sandra's case.

Feldenkrais work involves stimulation in the system area of sensomotricity i.e. in the systematic interplay of feeling, perceiving and moving. The stimulation of near senses which are perceived in terms of evolution, deep sensibility (proprioception), of tactile perception and sense of balance directly affects the brain, the central nervous system. Perceptive impressions, which are very clearly structured by the Feldenkrais teacher, initiate psychical elaboration processes in the brain. This occurs in a way that makes perception easier for the nervous system and the brain, and therefore leads to subsequent maturing processes in the sense of learning experiences. Results observed are more harmonious movements and more appropriate control of actions.

There are no direct objectives in Feldenkrais lessons. It is much more a case of communication between the teacher and the pupil through touch and light movements. The teacher can feel which connections are clear in the coordination of movement and which references can facilitate new experiences.

Sandra had needed the feeling of security and being looked after for a long time. The best way of conveying this to her was by hardly speaking or not speaking at all during the individual lessons. Sandra could close her eyes, she

did not need to speak or make an effort, and this meant she could be more open and perceive what she felt intensively.

Sandra was initially only supposed to lay on one side. A bent side position is mostly secure and comfortable. At the outset, Sandra felt very fixed; she was extremely alert and made every effort to fulfil supposed expectations. By touching her on the back and moving the individual vertebral bodies in relation to each other, her postural pattern loosened up to an increasing extent. Her arms, legs and also head were then moved very slowly and in harmony with the spine and the other relevant parts of her body.

The movements are perceived by receptors in the surface of the skin, muscle tissue and bone skin. These receptors report touch, muscular tension and pressure and tensile sensations to the nervous system.

Changes in position and situation also produce changes in the effect of gravitational force. These are realised through a sense of balance combined with kinesthetic perception. The perceptive impressions which match each other but differ in their interplay produce a pleasant, harmonious and holistic physical feeling.

Sandra learnt to use these more harmonious connections in everyday life too, allowing her increasingly to have control and to adjust more easily. But not just her control of movement improved, other system contexts and psychical elaboration processes of the central nervous system were effectively influenced through association fibres e.g. the control and psychical elaboration processes of the fine senses such as seeing and hearing as well as emotional processes.

When standing, it is important to achieve good fine coordination between bending and stretching. If one only stretches, the body is stiff and unstable. If one bends too far, it is difficult to stand upright and there is little head control. This means the person perceives less and does not react well. Sandra is able to coordinate between bending and stretching much better after the Feldenkrais lessons. She stands upright and in harmony without having to hold herself too much. Movement coordination is also much easier when she runs and sits. The overall image is more harmonious and produces very changed movement coordination in Sandra, easier head control and an improved posture on her feet. As these changes are consolidated more and more during movement and in movement perception, Sandra has the opportunity to perceive more clearly and comprehensively, through her fine senses, too. This means she is aware of much more, can process what she perceives more easily and has more competence in action.

It is fascinating that such effects can be achieved without, as one would imagine, having to practise such skills and facilities. On the contrary, it is a fact that this further development can be stimulated in a much more fundamental and sustained way by developing at the basis, in other words by conveying quite basic kinesthetic perceptive impressions.

This support actuates a learning process in the structures of the central nervous system. The space to apply and try out the newly acquired skills must of course

be available, and the development requires a professional mentor in view of this newly acquired competence, as provided optimally in this case by the teachers.

## **6.2 Case: Sarah**

### **6.2.1 Brief description before the Feldenkrais project began**

Sarah is 13 at the beginning of the project. She is mentally handicapped as a result of an oxygen deficit during her birth. She was born during the 32nd week of pregnancy. At first sight, Sarah appears to have developed in accordance with her age. It is only in daily contact with her that her severe lack of orientation in terms of space and time becomes apparent. Her ability to take note of spoken instructions or anything she has learnt or to remember the way around the school is minimal.

Her lack of memory and her structuring weaknesses often prevent progress in learning. The learning effect is clearest when Sarah can learn through precise/graphic references. Sarah demonstrates some performance peaks e.g. her skill at reading and writing, her musical and creative aptitude and her ability to express herself through speech.

Sarah works in class in general with interest although her power of concentration is very limited. She tires extremely quickly, above all where subject matter is rather cognitive. She then lays her head on the table and is unable to continue working. She finds this behaviour embarrassing; she would love to fulfil all that is expected of her. Her reaction is one of great annoyance if her attention is drawn to a mistake or she is asked to do something which she believes she cannot perform. She often gives an absent, strained impression.

### **6.2.2 Development during the project**

Sarah was a great fan of the Feldenkrais Method from the outset. She loved the peaceful atmosphere in the group lessons and especially enjoyed her individual lessons. It seemed that this type of learning was created just for her. Although she showed no conspicuous coordination or perception disorders, the Feldenkrais work had a very regulating effect on her.

Sarah became visibly calmer or to put it more succinctly, she started to find peace with herself. The hectic and volatility she showed at times was replaced by greater inner peace and stability. Her physical posture gradually became more upright, the way she walked and her look also changed. She is very present today. In harmony with her physical erectness, she now finds it easier to hold a point of view. She tended before to accept everything even if it was obvious that she wanted something else. She had a fine sense for an adult opinion and wanted to oblige and do what they wanted. Sarah no longer has to adapt to the opinion of others. She has gained much more self-confidence and can now also maintain her own opinion when others differ. She can also meanwhile distinguish more clearly between unjustified requests or annoyance from fellow pupils.



Intensive perception of her body has given Sarah a very good understanding of her body and her feelings. She is able to describe precisely what she experiences and feels in a Feldenkrais lesson. Anyone who has personally experienced the Feldenkrais Method knows that it is an exceptional achievement and by no means easy.

Sarah's ability to orientate spatially has markedly improved, at least in the school environment. She will now take messages anywhere in the school without fear. Her orientation in terms of timetable and daily routine is also much improved.

Sarah's main problem - her forgetfulness - has decreased considerably and does not emerge at all during the Feldenkrais lessons. She can easily remember movements and their connections, even if they took place quite some time ago. Things perceived through her own body are easier to remember, and form connections to cognitive contents through association paths.

Sarah is able to deal with lesson content for much longer and with more patience. She still gets tired fast but finds it easier to take a break herself and decide when to continue. In addition, she is no longer so dependent on knowing exactly how to perform a task. She is increasingly gaining the confidence to develop solutions on her own initiative.

Sarah has made great progress in arithmetic. One of her characteristic remarks for years was: "I can't do subtraction, 'subtraction' scares me". She is meanwhile competent with numbers up to 20, both addition and subtraction. She is also currently developing an idea of hundreds, and her teachers are certain that Sarah will learn a great deal more here. Other pupils in the class have also made exceptional progress particularly in arithmetic and considering their degree of handicap. Connection to the Feldenkrais work is obvious for the teachers, and could be explained by structure formation in the brain.

Sarah asked to be allowed to watch while her fellow pupil and friend had a Feldenkrais lesson. And conversely, her friend watched her and the Feldenkrais teacher showed both of them simple movements which they can do together. Sarah in particular makes use of this and "does Feldenkrais" with her friend or with a severely handicapped fellow pupil who really enjoys the special attention and very quickly relaxes. Sarah has very successfully made the special way of touching others her own. She is very gentle, observes the other person closely and does not exceed his/her limits.

During a recent class trip, the class teacher was also able to enjoy a pupil-given Feldenkrais lesson. Sarah and her friend played the Feldenkrais teachers Mrs. Block and Mr. Theiß, and each attended to one side of the teacher's body. This scene has been captured on an amusing video film which documents the number of pupils who have already comprehended the quality of the Feldenkrais work. This sensitive way of interacting with others also has a permanent effect if personally experienced on how one interacts with others. Sarah is a wonderful example of this. She has found a very sensitive and gentle way of interaction both for herself and her fellow pupils.

Sarah too painted many pictures during the project. Her pictures before were often about similar subjects and mostly in quite gloomy colours with little differentiation (see Fig. 6) but her repertoire has meanwhile expanded enormously.

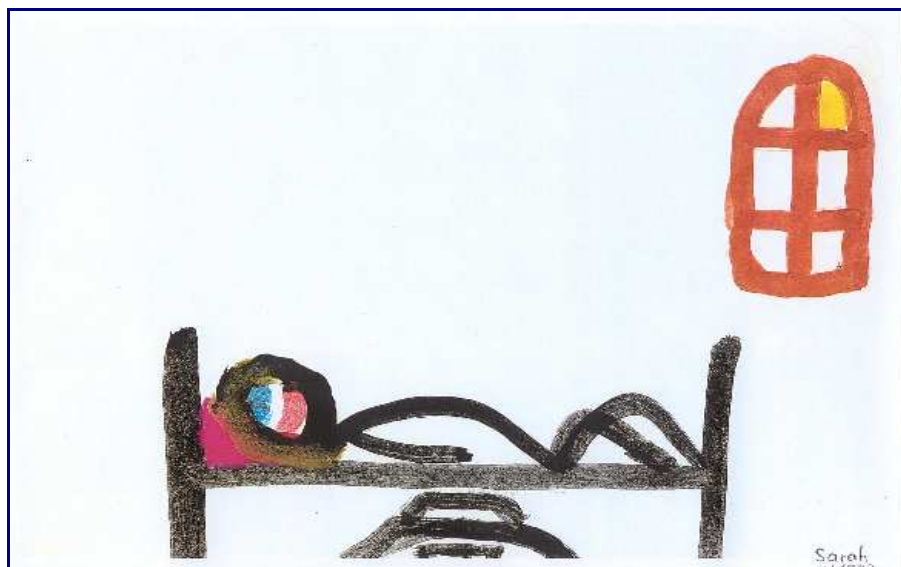


Fig. 6 Sarah April 1997

She primarily paints people who are full of life. She has talent in this area (both her parents work in artistic/creative professions) but Sarah's dedication to painting has become even more intense. The details, colour and exact reproduction are often amazing. It is such fun to look at her pictures, which are bursting with liveliness and the joy of living, and compare them with her earlier work (see Figs. 7 - 10). Moreover, the problem of forgetfulness is not apparent in her painting. Sarah frequently remembers and is also very certain about the most minute details.



Fig. 7 Sarah May 1997

Fig. 8  
Sarah  
30.04.1998  
"On the mat"



Fig. 9  
Sarah  
22.04.1999  
"On the bed  
of nails"

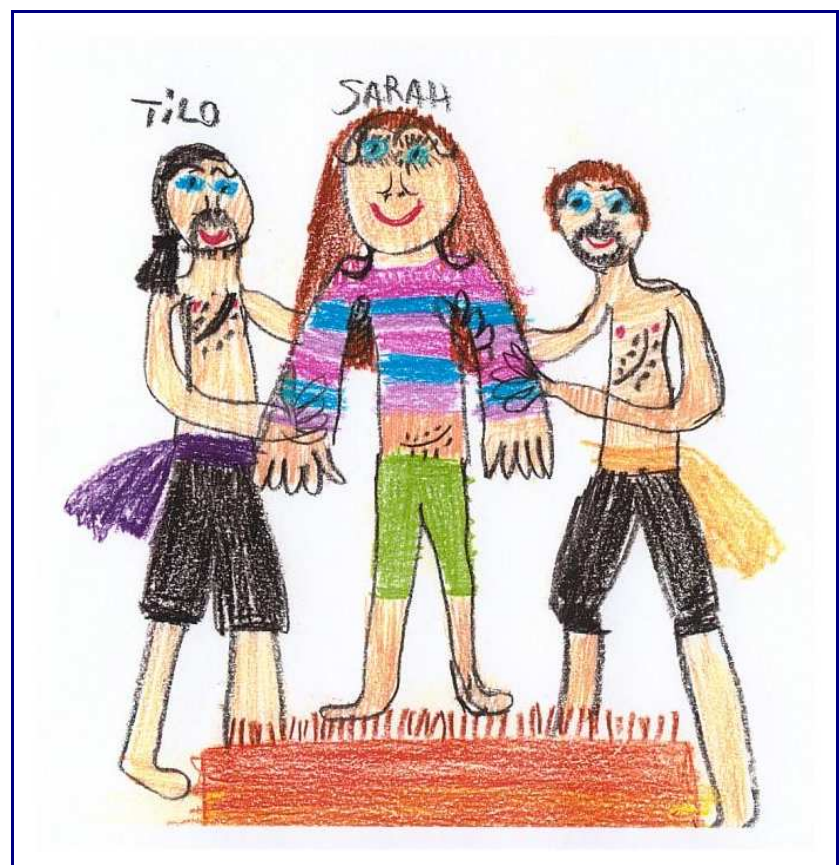






Fig. 10 Sarah 28.10.1999 "Face"

### 6.2.3 Individual lessons (FI=Functional Integration) with Sarah

Sarah was very harmonious and coordinated in perception and movement context before individual lessons began. There was nothing conspicuous which Feldenkrais teachers are generally quick to sense in the case of handicapped pupils.

The question was whether the Feldenkrais lessons would be of any benefit at all to Sarah. As she found the treatment very pleasant and looked forward to the individual lessons, it was an optimum "storybook" situation to work with her.

We started with her in a side position on her back. Individual vertebral bodies were very slightly raised and somewhat turned in relation to the other vertebrae. Her neck was included whereby the movements were also communicated to her head. She was able to move her pelvis forwards and backwards; her upper leg was raised below her knee and moved with her pelvis. In order to perceive the movements at the hip joint, her leg was moved in different ways in contrast to her pelvis which was now motionless.

All these movements were repeated on the other side. Lying on her stomach, her legs could be bent and moved at the hip joints. The segments of her spine were moved in relation to each other together with her ribs.

Lying on her back, all parts of her body - which were differentiated from each other during the lesson - were included. This is possible because the Feldenkrais teacher works very structurally. In doing so, pressure is exercised on the bones in the direction of the support function, first in the individual bones, and then over the joints.

It was extremely important in Sarah's case to repeatedly re-establish this overall context. She was able to let go very intensely and sometimes compared her experience with that of a "dangling doll" or a "wobbly jelly". This experience can lead to problems in everyday life so that one has difficulties in perceiving oneself as a whole, in taking a point of view, in keeping one's balance or it is a problem to focus one's attention.

All these problems had occurred in Sarah and in the past led to the behaviour described above. It was all the more important in the individual lessons not just to convey diverse experiences to her but at the same time to show her how she can use the many details in context.

This proved increasingly successful, and Sarah often described her experience after the lesson like this: "I feel like a tree with long roots stretching into the earth". This showed that she could feel the supporting structure of her skeleton, and was able to establish an overall context in her body.

It was possible through the Feldenkrais lessons to achieve for Sarah a better way of dealing with life, also in the figurative sense. Clarification of the kinesthetic contexts, combined with "structuring" enabled Sarah to develop more order structures in her nervous system. These facilitate orientation of her body in relation to space and orientation with respect to the relation of spatial configurations to each other. As there is a strong link between mathematical skills and spatial imagination, progress in mathematical thinking was to be expected, and occurred.

### **6.3. Case: Sven**

#### **6.3.1 Brief description before the Feldenkrais project began**

Sven was 15 at the time. He has a mental handicap, the cause is unknown. He has autistic traits. Sven has amazing storage skills in terms of speech and music. He is very sensitive to noise and arranges his environment according to specific repeatedly recurring criteria. Sven needs precise graphic terms of reference for all learning tasks; he needs to proceed in very small steps, requires manual guidance for all tasks involving muscular movement, and needs to be constantly reminded to continue his work.

Sven finds it very difficult to perceive himself. He has scarcely any contact with people around him and mostly retires into himself. He often appears absent during lessons and assumes a passive attitude.

### 6.3.2 Development during the project

Sven's great difficulty with his physical image and spatial orientation became clear during the initial Feldenkrais lessons. He was hardly able to take up even one of the positions. For example, he could not find his back or his stomach, and instead lay on his side. Nevertheless, it was obvious after a very short time that he really enjoyed this work. While he was frequently very passive and required motivation in other school requirements, he stood up immediately when he was due for individual lessons and started to move immediately. During these lessons, he mostly closed his eyes and enjoyed the contact, movements and new experiences. Sven always made a very relaxed, alert and attentive impression after each lesson. Sometimes he made brief comments on his experiences, something which was very new for him and us.

Sven rapidly learnt to orientate around his body in a much better way. He is fully aware today where to find his back or stomach and he meanwhile understands such complex requests like: "Lie down on your back, place both feet on the ground and lift your bottom up". Sven has become much more mobile, and this enables him to take part more intensively in all class activities.

The change in him in the gymnasium was especially striking. He was able to overcome his fears of climbing, jumping and balancing, and has become a lot more adventurous and willing to experiment in all areas. He can now better coordinate the parts of his body and follow his hands and arms with his eyes. He has learnt to throw balls at a target, and now has no difficulty in catching. These newly acquired skills mean that the other pupils prefer to choose Sven for their team, and this gives Sven an important opportunity for social involvement.

He now plays a much more active part in group activities. His self-confidence has increased enormously; he has become much more open and more communicative. In the past, one had to guess or read his wishes and needs from his eyes. He is now increasingly able to say what he wants himself verbally. He now "recounts" experiences or events at home in short sentences. His parents are pleased that Sven meanwhile also talks about his school experiences at home. In the past, he was unable to do so. Sven is also able to differentiate more in his emotions. He used to seem rather frightened and inhibited or blocked his emotions off until he unleashed a piercingly loud scream if anything became too much for him. He can now experience different moods and also express them appropriately. He even feels able to complain if someone annoys him, and asks adults for help if he is unable to make himself respected. He has stopped screaming completely.

Sven's growing self-confidence has also resulted in improved orientation at school. He is now really pleased to run small errands to the office or kitchen - something he would have felt unable to do in the past. He mostly came to a standstill in front of the door and came back some time later empty-handed.

The changed awareness of his body and movements is also very markedly reflected in his illustrations. Before the project began, Sven's drawings were almost exclusively deflecting and circular scrawl. They appeared very small and

compressed. There was frequently a sense to them but there were no recognisable signs for the viewer.

Sven began very soon, about three months after the Feldenkrais work, to draw a very tiny shape which was nevertheless clearly recognisable as a person (see Fig. 11).

Fig. 11  
Sven  
20.08.1997

"Me doing  
Feldenkrais  
in class"



During the course of the project, his illustrations of people increased in size. In line with his development in other areas, Sven also took up more space on paper and increasingly varied his drawings (see Fig. 12).

Fig. 12  
Sven  
30.04.1998

"Me doing  
Feldenkrais  
in class"



A drawing he created later (see Fig. 13) even included still more differentiating features than his drawings until then. This was apparent especially in the face of the shape which was also for the first time given two long arms with fingers! This illustration corresponds precisely with the development Sven is experiencing. His access to the world lies more than ever within his reach, also literally.

Fig. 13  
Sven  
19.01.1999  
"Me in bed"



Almost another year later, Sven draws his first recognisable object – a chair (see Fig. 14)!

Fig. 14  
Sven  
December  
1999  
"Chair"



There is a special reason for the chair. Sven helped to paste coloured comic pictures onto a chair during an art lesson. Sven loves comics more than anything else, and since then this chair has become a ritual object. During almost every lunch break, he fetches the chair and studies all the tiny pictures intently. His chair picture was intended to emphasise his greatest wish for Christmas: a "comic chair" for his room!

### **6.3.3 Individual lessons (FI) with Sven**

The Feldenkrais lessons with Sven focussed on developing a better feeling for his own harmony. One had the impression initially that Sven did not know and feel himself well enough; the individual parts of his body sometimes did not seem to belong to him. His movements were very restricted, and he was quite awkward where movements covered larger areas.

Sometimes, he did not even finish the movements but slowed them down and then at some point became immobilised.

For example, he remained still when he got up from a chair or in a curious position in the course of another movement, somehow waiting, without having achieved his aim. He was unable to find himself sometimes and then came to a stop in the process, while actually performing a precise movement.

This is where we were able to start stimulating him. Sven needed a feeling for his body which had to be available to him if possible at all times. For this reason, importance was placed in his lessons on a functional overall context at all times. Lying on his back, his legs were moved so that Sven was also able to feel the simultaneous movements of the pelvis and lumbar region. In the same way, his arms were moved to produce simultaneous movements of the chest and ribs through the shoulder blades. The connection of legs and pelvis to the chest, arms and head were especially important. This connection was varied by tilting him sideways. The overall context was distinctly and instinctively conveyed by pressing, starting with his feet and pulling his arms as experienced when standing or walking.

After the lessons, one could see that Sven was able to move in a more coherent way. He was able to use himself more extensively. The sequences of action were rather more holistic. The connection between perception, thought and action was much more pronounced and had a beginning and an end.

## **6.4 Case: Christian**

### **6.4.1 Brief description before the Feldenkrais project began**

Christian is 13 at the beginning of the project. He has Down's syndrome. He has a situational and factual understanding of speech. Apart from a few sounds and monosyllables, he cannot actively speak. Due to his inability to speak, his interest in speech is often non-existent and impedes his understanding of lesson content. Christian tires very quickly and can only concentrate on a task for a few minutes.

In the area of movement / perception, Christian demonstrates strong insecurity in physical perception and spatial orientation. This often makes it difficult for him to coordinate and adjust precisely in all action-orientated learning tasks, and he finds this frustrating. He frequently tries to compensate for this by applying great force and enormous effort.

#### **6.4.2 Development during the project**

From the outset, Christian very much enjoyed participating in the group lessons and particularly in individual lessons. While he initially exerted himself too much during the movement tasks and overstrained himself according to his typical pattern, he rapidly learnt to carry out the movements in an easier and more flowing way but with less effort. He gradually learnt to judge his capability more realistically. This was a very important learning process for Christian. He can meanwhile apply this capability to other areas of his life; he is now aware much quicker when something becomes too much for him, both at physical and interpersonal level. He then takes a break or withdraws of his own accord.

It was very clear in the group lessons that Christian can now orientate around his own body in a much better way. He is meanwhile able to fulfil very complex coordination tasks and has above all developed a good imagination for certain processes. He often demonstrated in the group lessons which side or part of his body was next in turn; and in most cases he was right! Christian learnt to ride a bike during the Feldenkrais project, and he can now go on short bike tours with his parents. Until then, he had ridden a three-wheeler designed for the handicapped. He has also improved on his swimming style enormously and has learnt to do the crawl and butterfly. Last year he learnt to play badminton which requires very good eye/hand coordination and general agility. All these sporting skills fill Christian with pride, and rightly so. They allow him to participate to a far greater extent in completely normal activities which were previously closed to him. His self-confidence has grown enormously, as well as his openness and his interest in others.

Christian has generally become very sensitive towards himself. A good example of a certain insensitivity was his physical perception which was formerly almost non-existent. For example, it was obvious that Christian's clothes were far too warm after physical activity or simply due to a change in weather but he vehemently refused to take off his jacket or pullover. His behaviour was the same when it was cold. We now believe that he simply did not perceive such differences and was unable to react adequately to them. This is no longer a problem today.

Having learnt to treat himself with more care, Christian can now pass these experiences on to others. It is striking to see how intensively he observes and how sensitively for example he feels the needs of his fellow pupils and is also prepared to help, if necessary. Despite his handicap, he has today an exceptionally good overview of everyday necessities.

An especially important aha experience happened to Christian during individual lessons. His entire mouth and facial motoricity was very undifferentiated for

various reasons and held by very strong posterior cervical and neck muscles. He was hardly able, for example, to open his jaw or move his tongue purposefully. Individual lessons focussed intensively on these problems and Christian was able to experience with great awareness and pleasure how his mouth suddenly opened wide or he was able to move his jaw to the right and left. Before the Easter holidays, the Feldenkrais teacher set him "homework" to practise this every now and again during the holidays. When Christian came for individual lessons for the first time after the holidays, he immediately pointed to his mouth and carried out this movement which was still very difficult and new for him. It was important to him that he had remembered his "homework". This new mobility has affected his speech ability enormously. Although he has attended speech therapy for many years, it did not successfully extend Christian's speech ability.

The intensive Feldenkrais work in this area which is still sensitive for him has also given him, apart from this new mobility in his neck/mouth/face, a new motivation to speak. He is pleased to try out new sounds and to put syllables together. He finds it great fun in particular when he succeeds in clearly articulating a word so that others can understand it. Last year, he learnt how to say a whole series of new words, and no-one has more fun than Christian when he is able to communicate with words. His parents also confirm this development at home.

It is wonderful to see how much his patience and power of concentration have improved generally in class, and above all his inquisitiveness about learning content. If there is a delay in the lesson starting, he is the first to go to his picture timetable and show the teacher that he wants to work. Christian is now much more capable of comprehending the perception of rules, their order and structure. He can now be guided by work sheets, too. He can write his name and the names of most of his fellow pupils from memory. His writing is clearly legible and has become more structured.

Christian had a great inhibition threshold in painting and drawing, probably because the results failed to satisfy his requirements. His scrawled drawings were hardly recognisable to an outsider. It was obvious that Christian took great trouble in creating something recognisable (see Fig. 15). Sometimes he used a ruler, and drew boxes and lines but was seldom satisfied. He refused for a time to cooperate in this area.

After a couple of months of Feldenkrais work, it was clear that his imaginative faculty and perception of himself were obviously sufficient to draw his first recognisable human shape (see Fig. 16). He was himself surprised by the result, was also pleased by the resulting attention he was given and hereafter continued to develop this skill. Ever more recognisable objects followed such as the xylophone in Fig. 17. It is no longer an emotional problem for him today to draw something when he is asked to do so in class. He is meanwhile proud to make presents of his small paintings on special occasions.



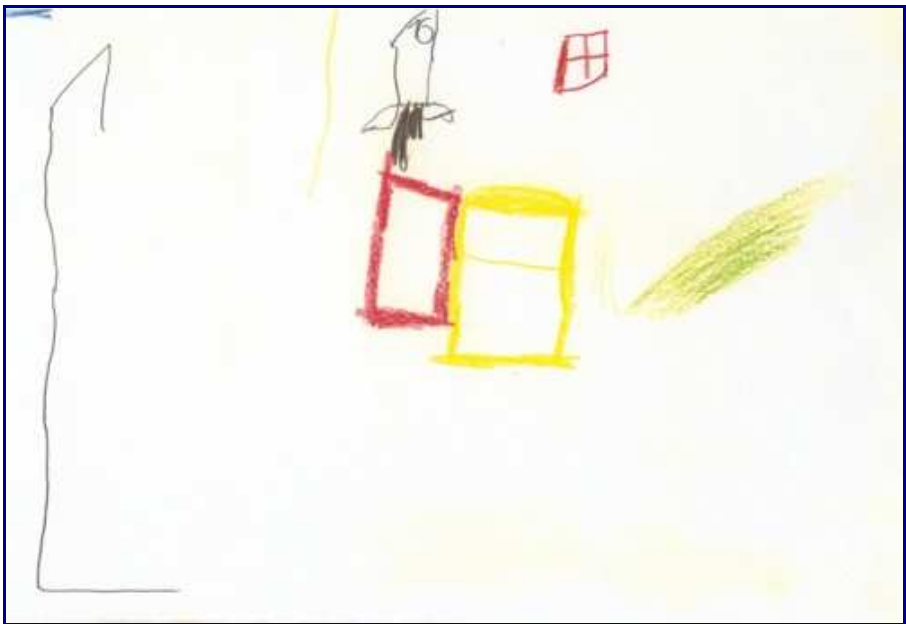


Fig. 15 Christian November 1996

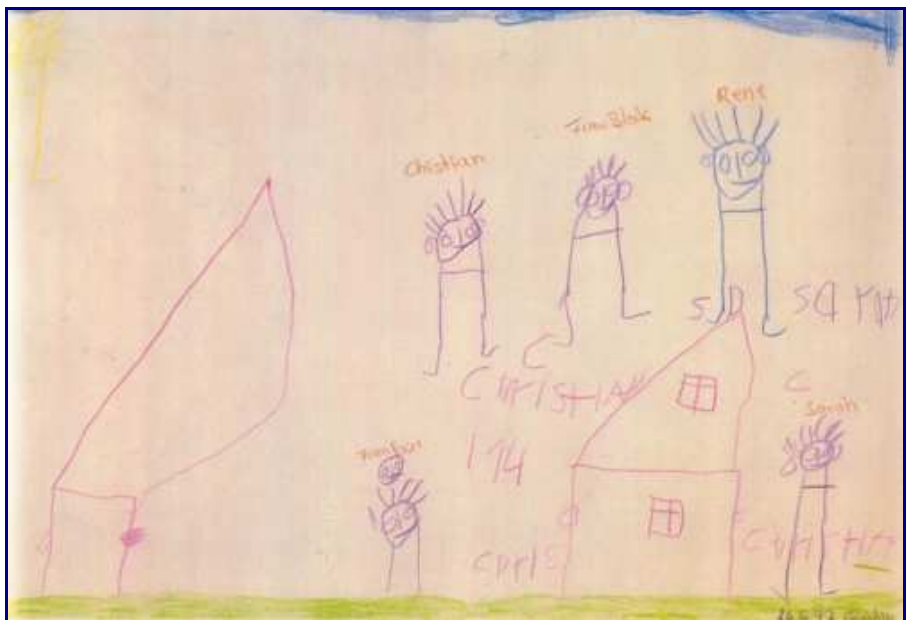


Fig. 16 Christian 26.06.1997 "Me doing Feldenkrais in class"

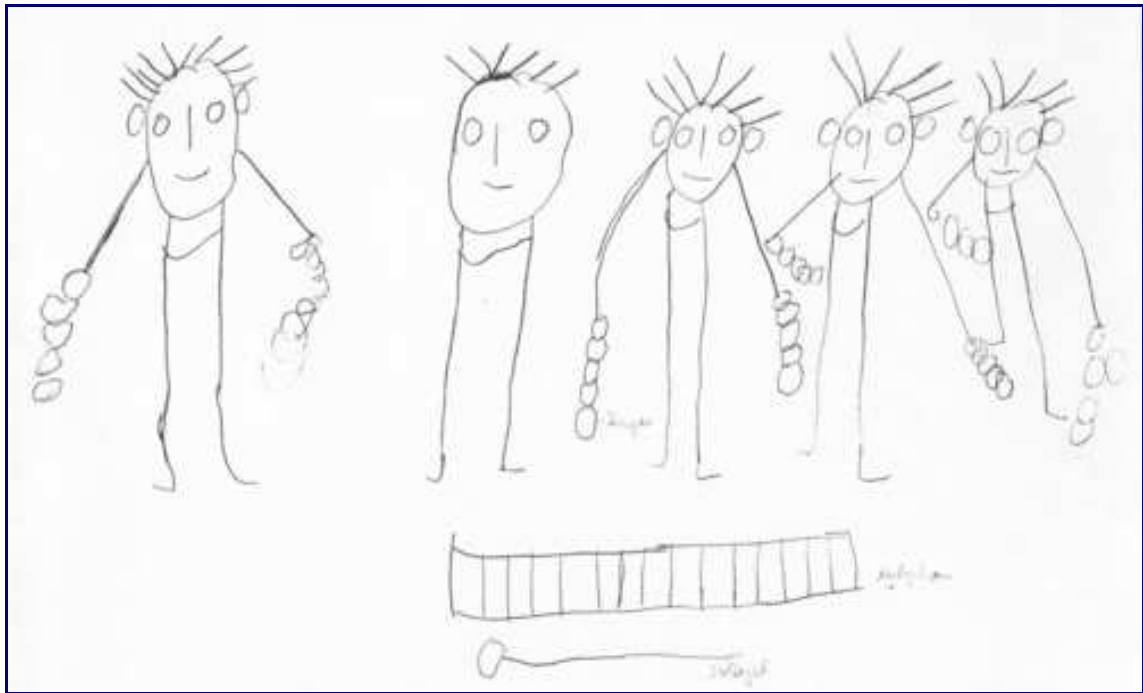


Fig. 17 Christian 12.01.1999  
Performance of the instrumental play "The Potato King"

#### 6.4.3 Individual lessons (FI) with Christian

Christian was very motivated to gain insight into himself from the beginning. He was always first to come forward and tried very hard to do everything "correctly".

Christian seemed physically strong and less differentiated at the start of the individual lessons. His movements were initially determined by a great use of force i.e. his large joints were quite fixed. One had the impression that he could actually stand out to a great extent and more effectively in different areas of life. In short, it seemed there was more to him than he had hitherto been able to realise. Therefore, it was initially obvious to work with Christian in such a way that he could learn to perceive himself in a more differentiated and detailed way. This occurred in individual lessons by the Feldenkrais teacher differentiating between the individual parts of his body through moving and stimulating them in relation to the other relevant parts of his body and separately. This was not easy for Christian at first because his pattern involved him tensing himself and using his strength. This strong behavioural pattern disappeared gradually. He was able to allow more flexibility and therefore feel his body and the connection of the individual parts of his body more intensively and clearly. The experience of ordered connections in the body is not the result of behavioural patterns but is based on differentiated control patterns of the central nervous system, and precisely these control patterns can be developed on the basis of this differentiated experience of movement. This is possible without having to try hard and without being subjected to a precise requirement situation.

This meant that Christian was able to learn how to move his legs, body, head and arms with greater differentiation. The interplay of the parts of his body

became more flexible, more nimble and more in line with the respective situation. In this way, movement and action were fun and achieving what was required proved easier.

A special focus of his stimulation lay in his facial motoricity; this was quite obvious because he could hardly speak and seemed rather stiff in his mimicry. He allowed the teacher to work with his head, neck and tongue already in his second individual lesson.

Relaxed and lying comfortably on his back, one could touch Christian's face and make light movements on it. This gave him a feeling which was new and interesting for him in the interplay offered. Movements with his lower jaw which he was accustomed to holding in one position initially proved difficult. Being able to open and close his mouth easily, movements with his lips and tongue were new to him and could only be initiated in small steps and experienced by Christian in every possible variation. He found all this very interesting, was pleased to cooperate and remembered the new sensations he perceived well in later lessons.

Some six months later - during which we had developed completely different themes - the loud noise of a cracking jaw was heard during the lesson. After Christian was shown that this noise disappears through work with the jaw joint and the upper head joints, his aha experience was tremendous: he was able to consciously open and close his two rows of teeth! Full of enthusiasm, he showed this to his teacher after his Feldenkrais lesson. His potential of using his mouth motoricity in a more controlled way and targetedly forming sounds were subsequently extended to words which were distinctly comprehensible to an outsider.

Individual lessons allowed Christian to learn that he can partially and consciously control muscle tone. Frequently, he just needed a brief instruction "Let go of the handbrake" which made his physical coordination more relaxed. Differentiated movements of the shoulders, spine and hips, for example, therefore led to improved lateral inclination and more equilibrium. Beaming, he made it clear to us that he had now finally learnt to ride a bike.

He was equally proud of being able to play badminton. Here too, eyes, head, shoulder girdle and arms have to work together very flexibly and diversely. Apart from this, pelvis and legs are also needed to run and keep one's balance. When this overall coordination is in harmony, power can also be used - not to support one's own body but to advance and hit the shuttlecock. Christian was able to learn this high degree of differentiation in the Feldenkrais lessons.

## **7. Other cases in brief**

### **7.1 Jutta, 18 at the end of the project, Down's syndrome**

Jutta has developed a materially better feeling for her body. She was very rough with herself previously and put up with injuries but now she treats herself

much more gently and sensitively. She now perceives bruises and grazes as injuries and complains about pain.

Jutta's supple and relaxed facial expression is striking after individual lessons. It is a sign that she can relax and regulate her very fixed muscle tone. Her facial expression has meanwhile become permanently more supple and more open.

Her newly acquired suppleness is also reflected in her behaviour. She always embraces the teacher after the lesson and shows her feelings with an open, self-confident look.

Jutta's orientation around her own body has distinctly improved. When asked, she can now implement even very complex movements.

She still likes to do sport but with a better quality in terms of coordination, stamina, speed, concentration and overview.

Her general ability to concentrate in group lessons and also in lessons as a whole has improved, and allows her to participate on a more continuous basis. She refuses and excludes herself much less.

She really likes the individual Feldenkrais tuition and will even sacrifice her beloved playground break with football for it.

She has become much more sensitive in her perception of her own needs, and has the courage more frequently to express them.

She is now more able to perceive the moods of others around her, to accept them and react accordingly to them.

Jutta has become more flexible in her whole thinking. She used to do things very schematically, rigidly and always repetitively. She has meanwhile gained more scope and willingness to try things sometimes in a different way.

Jutta has developed better orientation to work sheets; her writing is more clearly structured when she copies. She has a better idea of figures and can now do simple sums in hundreds.

Jutta's painting is noticeable for the fact that her improved physical perception is also demonstrated in her illustration of people. They have become more differentiated and colourful, and occupy more space.

## **7.2 Daniel, 19 at the end of the project, mentally handicapped with coordination disorders**

He has developed a materially better feeling for his body and can now follow all requirements in the Feldenkrais group lessons.

Daniel can control his body better; the cramps and co-movements frequently observed hardly occur, and when asked, he can solve them himself.

He likes figurative speech by way of illustration: "Show your courage bone" (this means his breastbone) or "You're the boss of your arm". He directs his attention to the corresponding location when he is given help like this, and can release tension. Daniel has also discovered himself that one can do "Feldenkrais" not just in individual and group lessons but practically at any time in everyday situations.

His behaviour has become more ordered, quieter and more confident; he radiates much more self-confidence and belief in his own capabilities.

He has also become a great deal more motivated and performant in sport. Better quality is observed in terms of coordination, stamina, speed, concentration and overview; he has become a very good and tireless swimmer.

He has better orientation with respect to work sheets, space, timetable and group games. He is making progress in reading and his copying has a clearer form.

### **7.3 Anne, 17 at the end of the project; multi-handicapped, does not speak**

Anne has become more mobile as a whole; she stands more firmly with her feet on the ground.

It is easier for her to hold her weight in the vertical axis when she stands and walks with support; her stamina when running has definitely increased.

Her speech comprehension has improved in relation to her body. She reacts more distinctly to requests such as "Go backwards", "Put your foot straight", "Lift your bottom up", "Let your hand relax" etc. This is also a great help for carers when performing their tasks.

She likes taking part in the Feldenkrais individual and group lessons, is more willing to allow herself to be moved according to instructions, and makes an attentive and concentrated impression.

Anne can perform spoken instructions which she knows from the Feldenkrais work e.g. "Sit down slowly, don't flop".

She has become more attentive and perceives a great deal taking place around her. She follows events purposefully with her eyes.

She demonstrates her needs clearly with "yes" or "no".

She also wants to perform any activities she can do without help on her own; for example, sometimes she turns her head away when she is being fed but will eat when she can hold the spoon herself.

She has learnt to hold a beaker with a drink and to guide it relatively safely to her mouth.

Anne observes the lesson and her fellow pupils very precisely and has great fun when she is involved.

#### **7.4 Oguzhan, 18 at the end of the project, multi-handicapped, does not speak**

Oguzhan is pleased and beams all over his face when he has individual lessons, and expresses disapproval when the lesson comes to an end.

He is now more frequently able to straighten his spine and to sit relatively straight.

His head has acquired a different position, his eyes a different visual field. This allows him to perceive events around him to a greater extent. This was probably often too much for Oguzhan in the initial phase. He was no longer able to isolate himself so well and at first frequently reacted by having screaming fits. The situation is meanwhile under control and Oguzhan is now mostly interested in participating in his surroundings.

He has been clearly able to extend his repertoire of movements: e.g. he can grasp his feet and knees with his hands. Now and again, he voluntarily takes up the position of lying on his stomach which he used to dislike; the mobility of his head now allows him to shake it when he means "no". He can pull himself forward with his arms when lying on his stomach.

He reacts much more clearly to questions e.g. by clicking his tongue when he means "yes".

He has started to take hold of objects himself and put them back after a short time e.g. shoes, cushions, ice-cream cones, balls. He is pleased when he is played with e.g. retrieves an object which he had previously thrown away.

### **8. Final remarks**

The cases show that the Feldenkrais work has left its traces on each of the pupils, quite individually, very differently and by no means predictably.

A common denominator is perhaps the high value accorded to this work among the teachers and each of the individual pupils involved. The initial phase required reorientation on the part of all parties and consideration of this new method of learning. The phenomena of reluctance, refusal, rejection of learning etc. known to all teachers manifested itself at times but such behaviour was no longer or only sporadically apparent after just a short time.

On the contrary, there was great disappointment if a lesson had to be cancelled, and accordingly a great discussion about who was to be the next to have an individual lesson.

There are a number of anecdotes and intensive moments which are related here as conclusion to this experience report.

From time to time, a pupil watched a fellow pupil with his/her agreement during an individual lesson, and also tried out different movements which they found pleasant on each other. Even now after the project, there are still pupils who give "individual lessons" to each other during "structured recreation". It is always moving to see the gentleness and attention applied by the pupils in touching and carrying out the movements.

What social competence these pupils have acquired through these experiences and what a great feeling of responsibility towards each other is demonstrated by these scenes!

It is also wonderful to see how the pupils can create a connection between their posture and movement and different disorders. For example, a pupil came into the class one morning, pointed to his shoulders and neck, and pulled a face in pain. Another pupil remarked immediately: "you should do a bit of Feldenkrais." Another pupil during practical workshop training discovered that his hunched-up shoulders when operating a drilling machine caused him to overexert himself and tire quickly. A brief reference to the fact that he could also lower his shoulders and would need to apply less force sufficed to make the movement more effortless for him. There are many such examples which demonstrate that the pupils also incorporate the physical experiences gained in their everyday life, and have acquired a very strong awareness of what it means to feel at ease in their body and to use it economically.

The fact that the class teacher, Mrs. Schneeweiß, is currently undergoing Feldenkrais training, is a guarantee that the work will continue in class. She has meanwhile taken over group teaching and is currently working on a concept to integrate the Feldenkrais Method more intensively in everyday teaching. For example, short sequences in a sitting or standing position would be conceivable which could be implemented each day before or during lessons.

And finally a remarkable anecdote: When the class had to elect a new class representative at the beginning of the new school year, the candidates all produced their own election poster (see Fig. 18), and just like politicians set out their promises. One pupil wrote: "Vote for me as your class representative. If you vote for me, I'll give you a Feldenkrais lesson." And she really did win the election, and kept her promise to all those who asked for their lesson.

Fig. 18  
Sarah  
August 2000  
"Election poster"



This report is accompanied by a documentary film which we will be pleased to send to you on request.

1st edition in English appeared in May 2003.

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