What's Going on With this Child? Child Study for the 21st Century

by Allison Jones and Jacqueline Cossentino

Allison Jones and Jacqueline Cossentino have taken the term child study *to describe the work they do with children experiencing challenges. Their approach to child study attempts to change the typical question of "What is wrong with this child?" to "What is going on with this child?" They have created a system by which they try to pinpoint what is going on with a child (the BASE System) and then create an action plan for working with that child. It is a collaborative effort on the part of the school community, including multiple teachers and the school's instructional leader. In this work with children experiencing challenges, organizing and recording the work and progress is crucial to understanding what is effective, what is not, and ultimately in determining what is best for each individual child.*

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Child study is an old-fashioned term. Interestingly, it originated at about the time Maria Montessori became engaged in education, and it was used widely in both Europe and the United States through the first three decades of the twentieth century. Montessori's own orientation toward the inherent goodness of children and the need for scientific study of human development is wholly compatible with the tenants of the child study movement as they were framed by philosophers like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Hebart, then later by American educator G. Stanley Hall. Dr. Montessori was well versed in the aims and methods of the movement, especially its early emphasis on experimental pedagogy, exploratory learning, and education aimed toward practical living. And while the movement eventually led to a wide range of practices—including, somewhat ironically, standardized testing—the idea that education should be grounded in observation and centered on meeting the child's needs rather than moving through a set curriculum remains the hallmark of child study (Seigel & White). And that's the reason we use the term to describe our work with children experiencing challenges.

As every Montessorian knows, the work of following the child begins with curiosity about who the child is, what makes her tick, what brings her joy, wonder, frustration, what calls her to concentrate. Likewise, for the child who is not able to concentrate, we must ask a similar set of questions. Where is their attention drawn? What obstacles are in the way of development? How might the environment be affecting well-being? What can adults do to modify the environment, remove obstacles, redirect his energy? These are the central questions of child study. And in the world of special education, questions like these diverge from what can be a persistent drive to diagnose the child. That is, in a world where the prevailing question is, "What's wrong with this child?" child study calls us to ask "What's going on with this child?"

That simple rhetorical shift makes a world of difference to practitioners aiming to follow not just typically developing children, but all the children. The approach to child study described here represents both a method of supporting children experiencing difficulties and a stance of curiosity and humility. Child study is about learning. The method aims to support adults who need help in understanding what is going on with particularly challenging children. It aims

to provide that support through a community of practice focused on discovering what is, in fact, going on with children, with the environment, and with ourselves (Cossentino).

The process begins with close analysis of a selected child. Then it extends to group deliberation about that child, his development, challenges, and potential for growth. Finally, it asks all the adults engaged in supporting this child's development to consider what we can do to modify the environment to support the child. What follows is an example of how one team of primary teachers attempted to engage in child study in order to support a very young child.

The Case of Tanner

Tanner is a three-year-old boy who entered Montessori six months ago (Tanner is a real child whose name and certain identifying details have been changed in order to protect his privacy).He is affectionate and gregarious and especially generous with hugs to everyone in the school building. He shares a close bond with his mom, Veena, who keeps in close touch with his teachers and serves on the school's board. Weekends are spent visiting museums and parks, and Veena encourages Tanner's imagination and love of nature. His father is not in the picture as he is incarcerated.

Veena's job at a daycare center allowed her to have Tanner with her at all times. When he entered Montessori four months ago, it was his first experience in a formal educational setting and his first time away from his mother.

In the first months of school, Tanner has demonstrated difficulty integrating into the classroom, especially in the area of finishing work and getting personal satisfaction from his work. For example:

> Tanner sits down at a table with the work of spooning chickpeas. His teacher, Ms. C., is sitting on the other side of the table giving a lesson to another student. Tanner picks up a spoonful of chickpeas and says "Ms. C.! I made you some couscous! It's made of semolina!" Ms. C. smiles at Tanner and continues with her lesson. Tanner spoons a few more spoonfuls, then picks up the spoon, holds it high, and watches as chickpeas cascade onto the floor. He looks at the chickpeas on the floor for about 10 seconds,

> then takes another spoonful and spoons it onto the table. He takes both hands and moves the chickpeas around on the table for about 40 seconds. He sweeps the chickpeas from the table to the floor. Tanner then gets up and walks over to the snack table, and begins to cry when he notices that all three seats at the table are currently taken.

Tanner repeats incidents like this nearly every day. Often, his emotional upset escalates to the point of screaming. At other times, he leaves the room to sit in his cubby.

For example:

> Tanner stands up from the reading corner and runs to the door. Ms. C. intercepts and asks where he is going. "I go bathroom" he yells, and tries to leave the room. Ms. C. takes his hand and says "hang on, Jonathan is in the bathroom already." Tanner falls to the floor, still holding Ms. C.'s hand, and starts to roll around and scream. Ms. C. asks, "Tanner, are you sad?" and Tanner continues to scream. Tanner gets up and tries to leave the room. Ms. C. says, "Tanner, you can't leave the room, there's already someone in the bathroom." Tanner pushes past Ms. C., runs into the hallway, sits on the floor, and screams. He refuses attempts to talk to him and does not re-enter the classroom for 20 minutes.

Ms. C., a new teacher in a new school, is frustrated by the daily disruption, which is affecting not just Tanner, but the entire class of three- and four-year-olds working to adjust to the culture of the Montessori prepared environment.

Her training has prepared her to expect separation challenges with very young children, but all of the responses she has attempted have failed. She has invited him to engage in a variety of activities that appear to capture his interest. She has attempted to offer him emotional support by naming the emotions he appears to be experiencing. She has worked to remain neutral but warm in her interactions, such as taking care to respect his physical space and allowing him time to choose to engage. Yet Tanner's disengagement from the classroom and challenges with regulating his emotions continue. So she seeks help from the child study team.

Child Study Protocol

Overview

This is a protocol for fostering robust program level team meetings focused on child study. The purpose of this protocol is to develop the first phase of an Action Plan for students who are showing difficulties thriving within the Montessori prepared environment.

Prior to the meeting: Presenting teachers complete the *Child Study Student Summary.*

Step 1: What's going on with this student? 8 minutes

The facilitator invites the presenting teacher to describe his or her concerns about a given child, referring to the Child Study Student Summary. The rest of the team is silent, and encouraged to take notes as the presenter is speaking.

Step 2: Clarifying the situation 5 minutes

The facilitator invites the rest of the team to ask clarifying questions about the case. The presenting teacher answers questions as directly as possible. The facilitator manages the sequence of questions.

Step 3: Defining the problem 10 minutes

A free discussion takes place in which the team offers suggestions/analysis as to what may be the cause of the child's difficulty. The facilitator structures the discussion by directing teachers to consider categorizing difficulties according to: behavioral, academic, social, emotional, challenges.

Step 4: Articulating the goal 10 minutes

Based on the discussion above, the facilitator proposes a goal designed to address the problem. The goal must be specific, measurable, relevant, and timely. The presenting teacher responds to the proposal and a discussion aimed toward refining the goal takes place.

Step 5: Completing the plan up to 10 minutes

The facilitator invites the entire team to generate as many potential interventions as possible. Using sticky notes, the participants write one intervention per note.

After 5 minutes, the facilitator invites one team member to organize the interventions as the rest of the team reads his or her suggested goals one by one. Following the reading and display, the presenting teacher selects 1-3 strategies to serve as the foundation of the action plan. The convener records the interventions.

The Facilitator's Role

The facilitator is charged with keeping the meeting running smoothly. This entails

- Keeping time
- Reminding participants of the goals when necessary
- Paraphrasing and summarizing during steps 3-5.

The Convener's Role

The convener is charged with maintaining accurate records of all cases brought to the team for discussion. This entails maintaining a comprehensive docket of cases detailing:

- Date the teacher requested a meeting
- Date the meeting was held and plan developed
- Dates progress monitoring occurred

SMART Goals

Specific - must be concrete
Measurable - progress must be evident in data
Attainable - must be a goal that is within reach of the student's current capacities
Relevant - appropriate to the child's developmental stage and level
Timely - progress must be evident within a period lasting no longer than 1-6 weeks.

Figure 1. The Child Study Protocol

Using a protocol developed by the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, the school's child study team is composed of all five primary guides and the school's instructional leader. The child study lead (Allison Jones) convenes a weekly gathering of the team, during which children who have been designated "on the radar" are considered and action plans are developed collaboratively.

Tanner was one of the first children to be considered in this new school's child study process. Moving through the roughly forty-minute process, the team considered Tanner's strengths as well as challenges, brainstormed possible interventions that could be implemented in the prepared environment, and then developed a plan that would be monitored for the next four-to-six weeks.

The team's deliberation initially led them to conclude that Tanner's difficulties stemmed from weak pragmatic language skills. That is, he was not able to make his needs known verbally, which caused him to become frustrated, which was manifest in crying and, at times, screaming. The goal, based on this analysis, was to support his ability to express his needs verbally. Supports already embedded in the Montessori prepared environment, including lessons in grace and courtesy, avoiding power struggles through "getting to yes" language, and working with Tanner's mom to enable more independence at home, formed the core of his action plan.

The first iteration of the plan failed. Not only did his tantrums continue, his tendency to run, often out of the classroom, accelerated. About three weeks into the first action plan, Tanner regularly

Today's Date	**Action** What will be done with/for student or group? e.g., intervention, service, instruction	**Responsible Person** Name and Position	**Timeline**	
			Start Date	Monitor Dates
10-6-16	Grace and Courtesy - individual, group, targeted	Teacher	10-7-16	12-15-16
10-6-16	Getting to yes language	Everyone	10-7-16	12-15-16
10-6-16	Work up to visiting various parts of the school to do activities / deliver things / share his accomplishments with Mr. Keith	Executive Director Assistant	10-7-16	12-15-16
10-6-16	Set up a plan with mom to let him be more independent	Child Study Lead	10-7-16	12-15-16

Figure 2: Excerpt from Tanner's First Action Plan

needed to be coaxed to enter the classroom, and once inside, frequently escaped to the hallway to sit in his cubby.

Fortunately, these events were occurring at the same time the team was reaching out to Tanner's mother to discuss her role in the action plan. During one meeting, aimed initially towards building a plan for more independence at home, the team learned even more about Tanner's interests, strengths, and history. Tanner's mother explained that they spend nearly all of their time together. They cook together (hence his interest in couscous), visit museums together, and spend time outdoors together. Tanner is fascinated with the solar system, and not only loves camping in nature but keeps a tent in the living room that he uses as a retreat when he is feeling over-stimulated or just needs a rest from activity. Whenever he needed time to himself, he entered the tent and zipped it closed, and no one disturbed him until he was ready to talk.

This meeting sent the child study team back to the drawing board to revise Tanner's action plan. The first and most important revision involved the articulation of the challenges Tanner was facing. Shifting from an emphasis on language skills to emotional needs, the team aimed to support Tanner in feeling more at home in the classroom.

Tanner's revised plan featured a number of environment modifications, including a calm-down area, complete with a beanbag chair, that was available for all of the children's use, and to which Tanner

Today's Date	Action What will be done with/for student or group? e.g., intervention, service, instruction	Responsible Person	Timeline	
			Start Date	Monitor Dates
10-20-16	Set up a relaxation/calm area for him in a corner of the classroom and teach Tanner to use it	Assistant	11-5-16	12-15-16
11-5-16	New material about the solar system and other topics of interest	Child Study lead	11-5-16	12-15-16
11-5-16	Physical affection before he asks	Teacher	11-5-16	12-15-16
11-5-16	Earlier naptime	Assistant	11-5-16	12-15-16

Figure 2: Excerpt from Tanner's Revised Action Plan

was introduced explicitly. When Tanner was upset, he could retreat from the classroom space without actually leaving the classroom by going to the beanbag. The plan also called for relationship building between Ms. C. and Tanner, including an increased emphasis on hugs. Ms. C. is a newly trained teacher, and extremely sensitive to typical Montessori expectations related to respecting children's physical space. But a closer look at what was going on with Tanner led the team to understand that Tanner needed physical affection. So Ms. C. started offering him affection before he asked for it.

The other elements of the plan, included "getting to yes" language (restating to Tanner what he wants before discussing how he is going to get it), grace and courtesy lessons, and an emphasis on water work, botany, as well as special solar system work. These were all elements of the prepared environment that were already present and just needed more emphasis and awareness on the part of the adults working with Tanner.

This time the plan worked. By mid-December, Tanner was spending 93% of his time inside the classroom. There are still challenges: Tanner often leaves to go to the bathroom and does not return for twenty minutes. He is just now starting to become engaged in and invested in classroom material. Four months after the other students, he is just starting to learn classroom routines and expectations. For example, he struggles to understand why he can't just pull any material that catches his eye off the shelf and play with it. However, Tanner is happy, connected, has good friendships with other students, enjoys lessons, and absolutely loves his classroom. The trajectory of his first year in a Montessori setting has been changed.

Identifying the Challenge: The BASE System

The most important (and challenging) part of responding effectively to Tanner's needs revolved around pinpointing the nature of his difficulties. What was getting in the way of his full engagement in the classroom? What, in Montessori terms, *obstacles to healthy development* could the adults working with Tanner remove?

To address these questions, the team engaged in an analysis of Tanner's needs using a system inspired, in part, by Ross Greene's (2016) framing of behavioral difficulties as "lagging skills" and "un-

solved problems." Like Montessori, Greene's assertion that "kids do well, when they can," is based on the premise that developmental challenges–especially behavioral challenges–are the result of capacity rather than choice or motivation. Likewise, his orientation toward understanding why children exhibit challenging behavior is also grounded in principles of child study.

Where Greene's approach emphasizes nonpunitive responses to behavioral challenges, our approach looks at all aspects of development. We ask adults seeking to understand what's going on with a given child to consider four domains of experience: Behavior, Academic, Social, and Emotional–BASE for short.

In truth, each of these domains spills into the others. For instance, academic difficulties frequently show up as behavioral challenges. Emotional difficulties often influence all three of the other domains, and so on. Moreover, each cluster of difficulties can be further broken down to discrete skills or sets of skills. The skills we identify for

Figure 4: The BASE System

each domain are, largely, a cluster of capacities known as executive functions. Executive functions, sometimes described as the "air traffic controller of your brain," are those skills that enable us to reason, solve problems, and regulate our behavior and emotions.

Behavior, for instance, as Greene so clearly shows, is almost never caused by a fundamental desire to be disruptive, degrading, or dangerous. Rather, behavior problems are more often the result of lagging in skills such as the ability to inhibit impulses or recover from disappointment or shift from one area of focus to another. To address the problem, we must find ways for the child to develop the skill(s). To do that, we must attempt to isolate the difficulty. And to do that, we must, once again, look at the child and ask the question, "What is going on?"

In Tanner's case, we initially missed the mark by identifying his core challenge as one of pragmatic speech, an academic challenge. When we looked deeper, we learned that his core challenge was actually emotional rather than academic. By concentrating on ways to help Tanner feel at home in the environment, he began to trust that his classroom was safe, which set the stage for increasing engagement.

Child Study as Both Method and Culture

The child study process described here took place in a brand new school with a brand new staff. The learning curve was, and remains, steep. Tanner was one of the first children to be considered, and, as the progress of his action plan illustrates, there were missteps along the way to eventually finding a plan that yielded results. It would have been easy to abandon the process after the first plan failed, and many practitioners have described versions of this story that ended without a successful result. What made this process work? And what lessons can we share for others aiming to institute similar processes?

First, child study at our school is understood to be a cornerstone of all our work with children and families. It is a priority for all members of the school community, and this commitment is made clear by several structural features, including a minimum of one

hour every week devoted to the process and a staff member who is charged with managing the process. These structural features require financial resources and a commitment to building a weekly schedule that enables the entire primary team to meet for an uninterrupted sixty minutes.

Second, because we understand that child study is crucial to our work, we enter into the process with an eye toward learning. In order to be supported by our colleagues, we must make ourselves vulnerable by describing our own difficulties, recounting our failures, and asking for help.

Finally, shifting our focus from extinguishing undesirable behavior to facilitating the development of necessary skills turns out to be a disruptive stance to take in an urban public school. Many of our colleagues who specialize in providing services to students experiencing challenges are puzzled by our commitment to solving problems before a child is identified for special education. Some fervently believe that children like Tanner would be better served in environments that limit choice, direct behavior through external controls, and provide constant adult supervision. Others argue that serving children prior to identification is too costly a burden for schools to build into their standard operating procedures. We understand that this commitment to the child runs counter to a good deal of what dominates the current culture of special services, and that only emboldens us further.

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Because we believe that this sort of early investment in children is much more likely to yield lasting results ranging from resolved issues to more effective IEPs to deeper engagement with families–we insist on building early supports into our budgets, carving out time for adults to deliberate about children, and naming our support process *child study*.

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