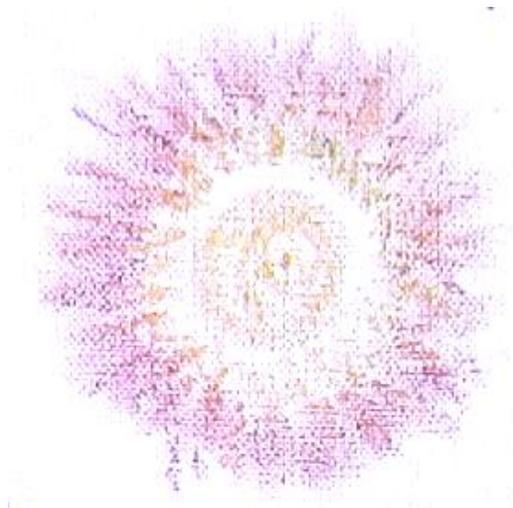


Glasgow Educational and Marshall Trust

R E P O R T

**Focusing with Children**

60 Hour Training with Rene Veugelers ~ 2009



**Thomas Binns**

July 2010

# C O N T E N T S

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Learning by Doing
- 3 The Listening Relationship
- 4 Language & Distance
- 5 Listening ~ All Directions
- 6 Art Making & The Body
- 7 Clearing a Space
- 8 Conclusion
- 9 Examples of art Making
- 10 Certificate of Completion

In July 2009 I received a grant of £350 from The Glasgow Educational and Marshall Trust towards payment of fees for the specialised sixty hour training in '**Focusing with Children**' in the Netherlands. I also received a grant of £250 from the Colonel Maclean Trust and used my savings to cover accommodation and travel costs.

This was to be the first International training offered in English by Rene Veugelers who works with children and young adults as a Psychiatric Nurse and is Focusing Coordinator for the Netherlands. Rene trained with Marta Stapert, who wrote the wonderful book: **Focusing with Children ~ the art of communicating with children at school and at home** which is now present in Glasgow's public library collection. Marta worked as a child psychotherapist and as a Focusing teacher from 1985 on. Along with her husband Ynse, she brought something to many children, parents and teachers that was undeniably helpful, and cleared a path for growth and change in many institutions and families worldwide. Their efforts were recognized in April 2008, when the Staperts were both awarded the Knights cross of merit by the Hungarian Government for bringing Focusing with Children to the professional community.

Marta had been retired for a few years due to ill health, but I was particularly happy to know that she had recovered enough to want to offer us time in her home as part of the course, specifically looking at important aspects of working with traumatized children.

This was particularly relevant to me, as part of my motivation for attending this training was to bring to light, in a safe environment, those elements from my own childhood which remained not fully resolved and difficult to look at within myself. Being at ease with the child within ourselves ~ and our issues as adults, is vital to Focusing with Children.

I was joined on the course by three other women who had all worked professionally with children and parents in their respective therapeutic fields for years and who now wanted to add Focusing to their working practice. Edmunda and Germana from Italy and Barbro from Sweden proved to be both inspiring and supportive during the training.

Rene offered this sixty hour training in his home in Rilland, in the south of the Netherlands and it was quickly evident that the qualities he brings to his work extend to the welcome he offered all of us and the warmth and sensitivity he brought to making a safe space for us to share experiences openly in the group and also in private when we needed to.

This was most helpful for me during the moments when the training process challenged me to look clearly at what remained unresolved from my own childhood and just stay with it, gently ~ **without judgment, criticism or comment** . . . to listen closely, allowing my experience to be heard with an attitude of respect, curiosity and kindness.

**This is the central attitude of Focusing and we need to be able to offer it to ourselves cleanly and clearly ~ to be confident and competent to offer it to others, in any context.**

**Focusing with Children** is based on the educational principle of ~ **Learning by Doing**. Each element of the 60 Hour training builds, in a progressive structure, following the line **Experience ~ Observation ~ Conceptualisation ~ Experimentation** with the emphasis throughout on . . . **Doing / Watching / Thinking / Feeling and Sensing**. We are invited to keep a personal journal and also a sketchbook for any small drawings, symbols or mark making that come when we are listening to ourselves and each other. This ' *Art Making* ' is an integral part of Focusing with Children ~ though it is primarily therapeutic in nature and not required to be shared with the group, unless we wish to. This is a consistent principle throughout the training and also in practice when working with children and using this way of listening and attending to a child's inner experience.

Rene invites us to begin each day, as is common in the context of Focusing, by taking a few minutes to sense more deeply into our physical body and our experience of what we are *carrying* in this moment ~ **without going into anything**. We centre our attention gently, with curiosity, kindness and neutral respect for whatever we find inside ourselves.

This is the attitude we encourage to develop in ourselves and any parents or teachers we may subsequently invite to work with children in this way ~ in the understanding that *this is an entirely natural way of being for a child* and that as adults, we can relearn this way of being, if we want to.

The training includes a variety of exercises for us to playfully explore our inner experience and find a sound, movement, a symbol or drawing of *whatever is right for us*, to express something of our sense of our inner experience. Rene works with us with very closely to how he would normally work with a child, to give us a clear sense of this way of listening.

Rene sets out the underlying principles of how we can create a containment structure for a child which allows them to sense clearly that their inner experience is being valued and respected by the adult in front of them. This is a significant shift away from the teaching methods I grew up with in the west of Scotland, where a child's inner sense of their experience or *what is right for them* is largely ignored and seldom offered the opportunity to be heard in an atmosphere of curiosity, neutrality or genuine respect.

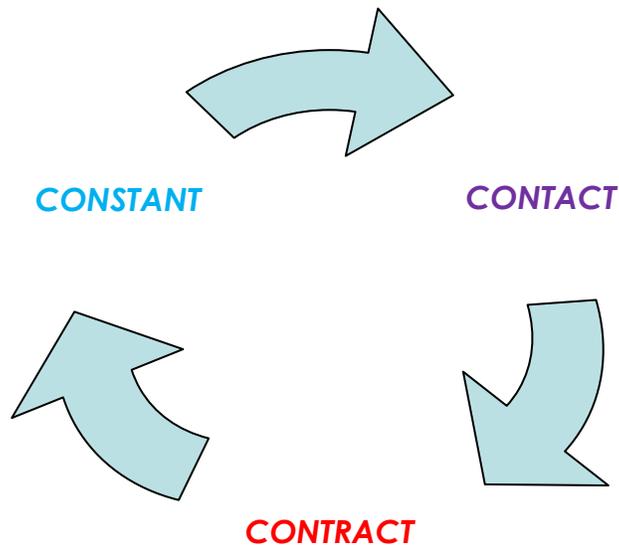
I have had many good teachers over the years as a child and young adult and yet none of them, or in fact any of the adults around me in any context, were able or willing to offer this quality of attention in relation to what was happening to me ~ *on the inside*.

There is a growing richness of evidence from around the world, in many contexts, which shows that if you listen in a respectful way to a child's WHOLE experience, then not only does their emotional and psychological development become positively affected but their academic performance and educational potential to grow, in a direction that is far more congruent with their inner selves, become possible as an everyday reality.

Rene continued to outline the **underlying principles** of this way of working with a child by emphasising that we are always *renewing* the initial contract we make with the child following the moment we first make contact with them. In effect we are always making:

a **Constant ~ Contact ~ Contract**

This is the model for ~ **the listening relationship** ~ between an adult and a child.



We are also keeping one eye on maintaining the structure of:

**Beginning ~ Middle ~ Ending**

Checking out *each small individual step* during each stage and paying particular attention around the phase of **Ending** ~ this is when we have an opportunity to build *continuity* in the child's process and open the door to the creation of new further steps, in a variety of directions, flowing from the child's own internal discoveries.

A child can have confidence that they are being attended to with genuine respect from the moment of initial Contact and can be clear about the boundaries of the Contract of attention being offered to them by the adult. From here the consistency of this listening relationship helps to build a flow of trust between adult and child.

This is NOT an *anything goes* scenario, by any means, and Rene offers us exercises to demonstrate HOW to deal with a child who is frustrated, angry, aggressive or disruptive. We are paying attention to whatever may be under the surface of this behavior without pre-empting our perception of the situation with judgments of what we think is going on ' *because we are adults and they are only children* ' **We know better than them, right ?**

**Genuine listening brings genuine information which is often surprising & always helpful.**

**Language** is a vital component of this way of working. There are some specifics in our everyday speech that Rene draws attention to. For example: using **AND instead of BUT. If we say to a child.....**

" I see you are really angry with something **and** you want to shout **and** smash things up **AND** that is not allowed right now."

**..... then we are acknowledging the child's whole behavior AND letting them hear, clearly, what is acceptable ~ without using CRITICAL language.**

This is NOT a magic wand in the face of disruptive behavior, though Rene makes it clear how modeling the Central Focusing Attitudes in conjunction with Reflective Listening ( where both the words and energy of the child 'as a whole' are reflected back to them ~ WITHOUT ADDING ANYTHING ELSE IN ) can often stop a child in their tracks . . . as their whole-self responds like it has just been heard respectfully, maybe even for the first time, while simultaneously being given a clear boundary from an adult.

' **Something** ' is a word well used throughout Focusing and it is understood to have more than one extremely important function. **It implies** that what is being spoken about, or in the process of being articulated, is not yet fully formed, able to be fully described or labeled. In effect, it remains temporarily in the realm of ' *the unknown* ' and as such is far closer to our senses, imagination and **creative** instincts ( **in every sense of the word** ) and more easily described symbolically, in terms of art making, sound or movement.

**If I put my attention in my body . . . .** and find a vague sensation low down in my chest, quite heavy and grey, which comes with a faint image of my grandfather and an uneasy 'fluttery' tension in my belly reminding me of his funeral ~ and I say to the person listening to me: "**there is something in my belly and chest and it is about family history** " then I immediately and consciously create space for this ' something ' to be WHOLE and yet also able to shift and change, both its internal physical 3-D form as I am perceiving it in my body (**qualities of sensed weight, shape, colour, texture, density, etc**) and also the fluid dynamics of its connection to my life *in memories or imagined future*. All the infinite threads of thoughts, feelings and emotions which connect in to this vague ' something ' in my chest and belly can remain alive and yet only 'known ' and labeled just as much as they have to be ~ for me to keep my attention on them respectfully. Listening inside ourselves in this way is NOT about judging that we know IT already . . . . more like we ask ourselves, through our physical body ~ " What is that something ? and What does IT want for IT to find the next steps of growth and change that are right for IT?

Sounds a little unusual or strange even ? It can seem that way from the outside at first and yet as we become more used to this way of listening to our inner experience, allowing IT to unfold as IT needs to ~ we begin to realize that consciously creating a living internal **I ~ IT relationship** ( *with the complex whole 3-D forms that exist within our physical body* ) has a simple, profound and remarkable effect. **It creates DISTANCE**. This distance is invaluable as it offers a breathing space, allowing us to listen to ourselves while supporting a process of growth and change beyond the patterns and behaviors we know so well. **Focusing allows us to move beyond a rigid view of who we are.**

**Listening** is the heart of this way of being with ourselves and others. Rene describes fully what he means by the term '**Listening in all directions**' when working with a child.

- |   |                   |  |
|---|-------------------|--|
| 1:  | <b>EXTERNALLY</b> | The Adult listens to the child and the situation as normal.  |
| 2:  | <b>INTERNALLY</b> | The Adult <b>also</b> listens to their ' <b>felt sense</b> ' of the child and also of the situation as a ' <b>whole</b> ', checking the words, actions and energy of the child against their instinct of 'what feels right'. The Adult clearly reflects the words and actions of the child back to them so that the child can ' <i>listen to themselves</i> '. |
|  |                   |  |
| 3:  | <b>INTERNALLY</b> | The Adult is listening within themselves to their own 'felt sense' and any information coming up that is personal to them.   |
| 4:  | <b>EXTERNALLY</b> | The Adult <b>also</b> listens to their own words ' <i>as they are speaking</i> ' and shares only whatever is appropriate with the child. This helps maintain confidence, respect and trust in relationship as any child knows when the adults around them are ' <i>faking it</i> '.  |

There is a constant flow of attention between Internal and External experience, in both Adult and Child and a clarity and richness of expression flowing from this, which creates a new depth of connection between both parties and allows for a dynamic process of growth and change to unfold within the child, as they freshly experience themselves over and over again ~ through the Listening and Reflections of the adults around them.

**Felt Sense** is a term to describe these '**wholes**' or '**somethings**' we find when we put our attention in our physical body. There are many contexts in which they form naturally which we can discover by attending within ourselves with gentle curiosity and empathy. One of the easiest ways to get a glimpse of a 'Felt sense' might be to remember a moment such as the last time we were half way down the road when we suddenly sensed something was wrong. Like we had left the oven on or forgotten our keys, wallet or passport etc. That vague sense of *wrongness*, normally felt in the centre of the body, is exactly what we are looking for. It has a form ~ and if we pay attention next time or remember it freshly right now ~ we will sense that it has many other qualities such as texture, density, weight, colour, etc. and one element unmistakable for me: **Aliveness**.

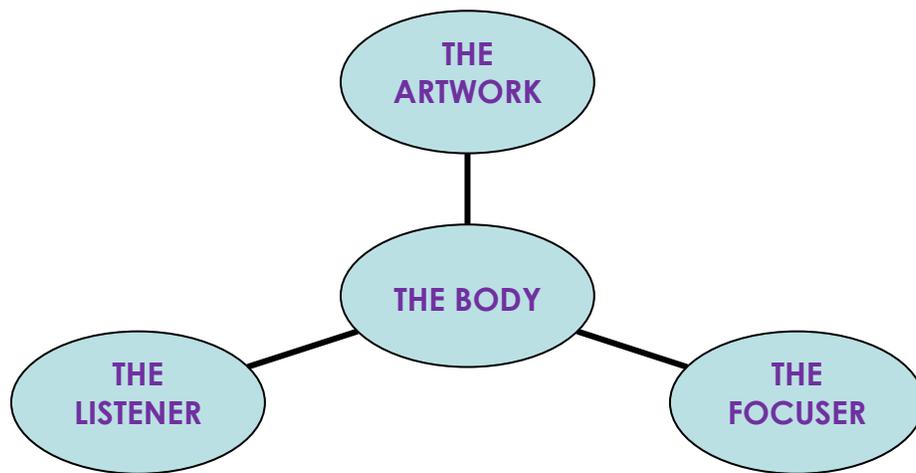
For me, a Felt sense has a 3-Dimensional quality and then ~ *another dimension entirely* which I could only describe as if it had electricity running through it. It is NOT like seeing an image in the mind which is 2-Dimensional in nature. A Felt Sense feels alive and always has that characteristic *vagueness* to it ~ like it has not quite finished forming yet. In fact this is exactly what it is: an unfinished form. It has four characteristic elements which naturally lead me to understand it as a truly 4-Dimensional phenomenon.

1. **It is vague or unclear**
2. **It is felt or sensed in the physical body ~ normally in the belly or chest.**
3. **It is distinctly connected to our life in some way.**
4. **It makes steps , , , , , beyond its present state.**

**A Felt Sense of something is all the information relating to that thing 'the Whole Shebang'**

**Art making** is central to Focusing with Children and most exercises Rene invites us to participate in has an element of art making to it. This is not about making pretty pictures, instead we can create freely without the grip that our self-consciousness can impose. There is no obligation to share our work ~ which has a liberating effect. This is well noted in working with children, though once this boundary has been established for a child it is often the case that they are happy to share what they have created.

*As adults we can all learn a lot from the freedom with which children create anything.*



**The Body** acts as a continual reference point for our inner instinct and felt sense of the moment and the way the art making will flow. In this way of listening we hear the usual chatter and all the helpful ideas that come from the mind ~ and we acknowledge 'all that' and let it move over a little . . . . to make room for something else ~ **the body** and everything that flows *from the inside out* ~ if we offer it some breathing space and a chance for its own inherent direction to be heard respectfully and expressed playfully.

Rene guides us through a number of case studies of his work as an Art Therapist to expand our understanding of how this consistent way of listening affects the emotional, psychological and social development of children who have experienced trauma.

This is carried forward when we travel north to Amsterdam on an extensive field trip, visiting a Steiner School, a Day Care Centre for pre-school children, attending a seminar given by an Argentinian teacher and meeting an experienced Educational Therapist.

Many experiences are shared and much information imparted on the specifics of each professional's way of working and insight into their understanding of the process of working with children in a Focusing way.

**Clearing a Space** is an important part of the Focusing process and a method of stress reduction in its own right. One whole day of the training is given over to exercises on this. Below . . . is an example of just one of the exercises we completed together as a group.



We were invited to draw a tree together, with a minimum of talking, though it could easily have been a different image, such as a brick wall. Then we check inside ourselves to sense anything that was 'there' at that moment. We then took some post-its and drew **a symbol** or *handle word* that encapsulated something of the heart or essence of each thing we found inside and placed them up on the tree wherever we wanted to. We shared nothing of the *content* of our notes with each other and there was no analysis of whether each thing was positive or negative. It was totally OK to put our wishes on the tree as well as our difficulties. We were all struck by how enjoyable this whole exercise was, with a tangible sense of lifted energy, both during and afterwards.

Needless to say ~ children take very naturally to this form of externalising their inside world and this is only one example of many ways to practice this. Clearing a Space reduces stress and frees up energy allowing an emotional charge to be processed more quickly and the usual tensions associated with '*bottling it up*' to be released. It can be practised very briefly and effectively for no more than a few minutes at the start of the school day, a particular lesson, activity or at times of increased difficulty or stress . . . or done much more elaborately, taking care to sift through the background feelings or '*wallpaper*' of our lives ~ often so quietly ever present and so '*right in front of our face*' that we can forget to see them or notice them even a little bit at all.

Focusing is a creative Internal and External activity, using both hemispheres of the brain, Emotional and Rational and is by definition a '**whole-brain**' skill that speaks directly to the connections within us, between body, mind and heart and also to the connections between ourselves and others whether that be as adults or as parents and teachers.

Rene offers us a good deal of written information to augment the training ~ with articles, essays and research papers on many important elements of Focusing with Children from many different sources. This variety of perspectives and specialized knowledge and insight all helps to supplement the scope of the training and also supports the ethos that is evident at the heart of the Children Focusing community: the understanding that: **there is not just 'one way' to do things ~ each of us finds the way that is right for us.**

We were fortunate enough to be invited to visit the author of 'Focusing with Children', Marta Stapert, as she was sufficiently recovered from a period of illness to want to offer us all a day in her home looking in more depth at elements of working with children who had experienced trauma or abuse.

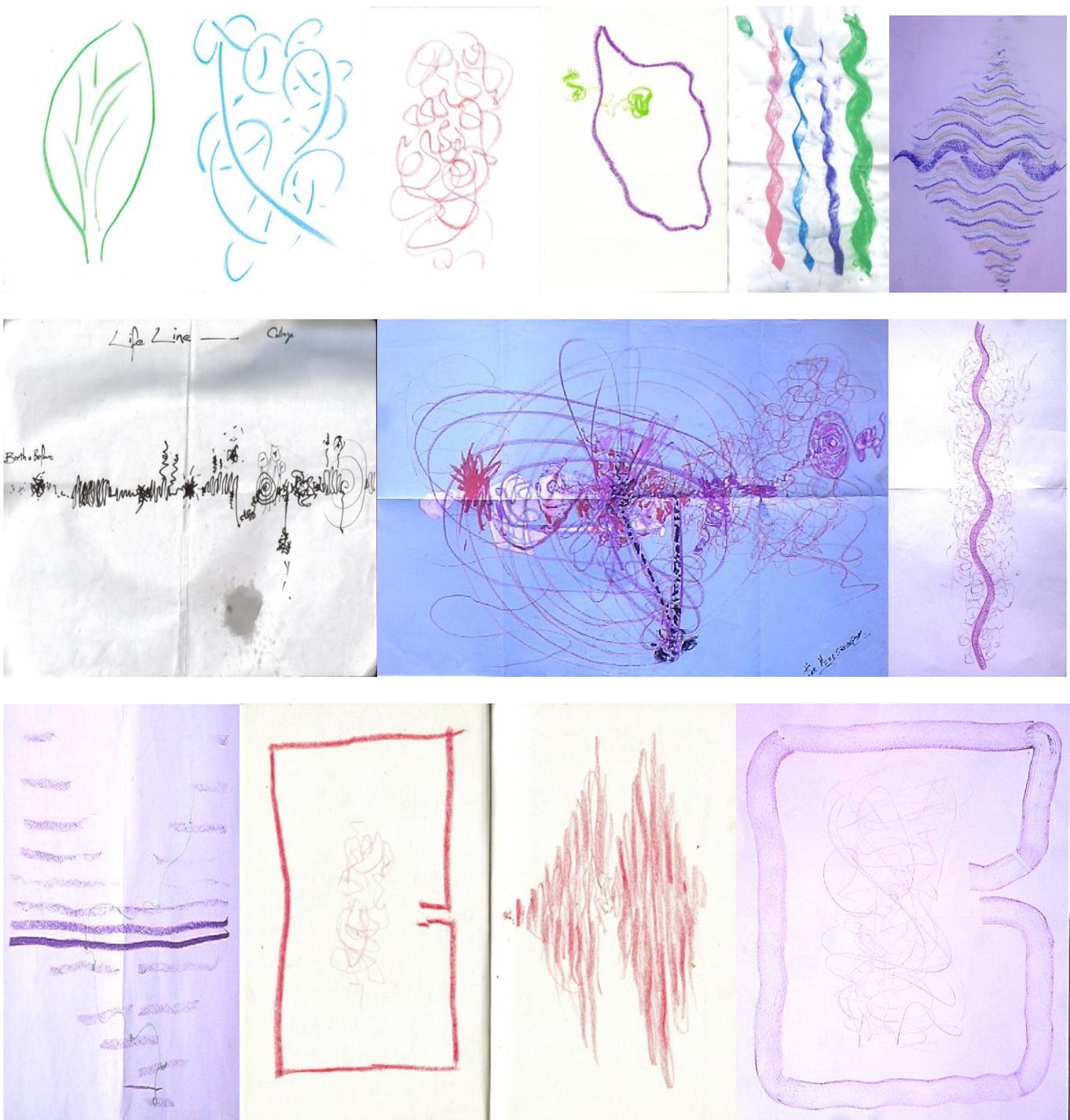
I was in no doubt that this would be most personally challenging for me as this is an area which I knew would bring to light unresolved issues from my own childhood. I had the opportunity to work through this with Rene and Marta and was very moved, both my meeting Marta herself and hearing of her life's work and also by the insight I gained into my own history and how best to allow myself to grow beyond what remains unresolved.

**I am clear that it is certainly possible for an adult who has experienced trauma as a child can then go on and be able to competently and confidently support others to follow their own journey out of the constraints that early trauma may leave on our ability to think, feel and emote freely and choose a direction in life most congruent with our self ... as a whole.**

**In Conclusion** ~ I was most grateful for the grants awarded to me which gave me the opportunity to participate in this training. It affected me profoundly and stimulated much growth, both personally and professionally. I returned to Glasgow well motivated to continue in the process of sharing the new understanding and specific skills I had learned from Rene and the others on the course. I am continuing to build on my existing connections with the Glasgow **VTO** and **LTCAS** (*Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland*) and hope to begin a project in the near future that will offer Focusing with Children to the community in Glasgow.

To that end I hope to return to Holland in September to attend the 7<sup>th</sup> International Children Focusing Conference to make new connections with established practitioners from the worldwide Children's Focusing community and attend workshops and seminars on good practice in this field while gaining inspiration from projects around the world.

Focusing with Children is, as yet, most definitely NEW to educational institutions in Scotland though it is certainly in tune with recent developments in support of such ideas as supporting a child's Emotional Intelligence. It is an important move away from a rigid mentality of '*the Adult knows best*' and represents an expansion of the richness of good practice that exists in our educational institutions today.



All Art Making in this way of working is therapeutic in nature and carries a relevance to the maker, primarily 'in the moment' as a means of EXTERNALISING what is going on inside themselves. This is an extremely important element in working with children who may experience overwhelming thoughts, feelings, emotions in any context. Being able to externalise their inner experience helps a 'working distance' to form allowing the child to move beyond identifying solely with whatever is being expressed. This means they have more space within themselves to breath, expand, release tensions and grow.

# Children Focusing CERTIFICATE

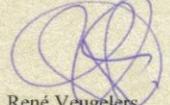
2009

ON THE RECOMMENDATION OF FACULTY OF THE FOCUSING INSTITUTE  
HEREBY CERTIFIES THAT

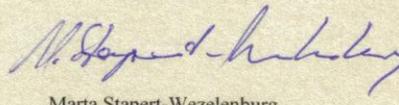
*Thomas Binns*

HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED  
THE 60 HOUR EDUCATION  
“FOCUSING WITH CHILDREN”

Date 2009 November 24



René Veugelers  
Coordinator in Tr. for Focusing and Child Focusing



Marta Stapert-Wezelenburg  
Coordinator for Focusing and Child Focusing

Certified by The Focusing Institute – New York



**René Veugelers**  
BEELDEND CREATIEF THERAPEUT  
FOCUSTRAINER

