

## *Group Size: Some Further Thoughts* *Christine Christiansen*

I read Christiane Maria von Königslöw's article (Fall 2000 *Gateways*) with great interest, and I want to take up your challenge to send comments! I base them on several years' experience working in a group of about twenty-five children aged one to seven.

The questions the author raises in relation to the size of groups when the children are very young is something I have been thinking about for a long time. She brings up the very important point of the small child's need for the *intimate* meeting of the 'I' with another 'I' (my italics), and concludes that groups should be no larger than ten as a maximum. I agree with the first part, but do not think that the second is necessarily true — though if the group is larger than ten it requires great commitment and real fellowship since it means there would also be more adults in the group!

One way to start looking at this issue is by describing the needs of very young children based on our own experience and observations. Then we can see how to meet these needs in the kindergarten. To meet the very young child's need for intimacy, for example, we have each adult take responsibility for particular children. Is this possible in a group with older children? These questions require a lot of hard work and study, and there are still more questions than answers, for in-depth work with the very young child is only just beginning.

It is my experience that we cannot meet the children's needs in a mixed age group of more than ten if all the children have the same daily rhythm. The one year olds, barely walking, need to be inside — especially in winter in Denmark. The physical embrace of the house and the activity of the adult cooking, washing, and "keeping house" are especially important for the very small child as it is also taking hold of its own house, physical body. In fact, I would say that until the child says "I" of itself, the kindergarten house and garden (for it is extremely important that all children are out in the fresh air every day) should be the center of the child's day.

The soon-to-be school children, on the other hand, need to run and climb and hang upside-down from the branches of trees. Especially after the weekends they seem to need to move with large gestures, and a garden can really seem too small. They need to be able to find a place away from the adults on the periphery of a larger but defined area. Then, after lunch, they can play horses or hunters, or build things in the garden.

Each age group has its needs, which become apparent as one observes the children daily. Working to develop an understanding of each child's and each age group's needs, we can establish a nurturing rhythm, and if there are twenty-five in the group with a wide age range, that will necessarily mean that there will be times of the day when there are smaller groups within the group.

The social aspect of kindergarten life must also be nurtured. From the time they are born, children are social beings. Within hours of birth, the newborn baby imitates its mother, when she puts out her tongue, for example. The very fact that the children are together allows a natural social interaction which is also cultivated in the song circle and the fellowship of eating together.

It is a challenge to meet the needs of each individual and age group while at the same time nurturing the wholeness of the group; how can we weave individuality and community together in the rhythm of the day, week, and year?

The under-threes, for example, might have a daily rhythm in which they are based in the house and garden, starting the day as part of the whole group through the song circle, and later sharing the mealtime with the other children when they come home from their walk. The threads of community (the whole group) and intimacy (one or two adults with a smaller group of children) would thus weave through the life of the kindergarten.

What becomes apparent when one begins to work this way is that for such a daily rhythm to work, the adults have to work together very closely in cooperation and trust. But then isn't it by example that we nourish the social impulses in the child?

I am not saying that all kindergarten groups have to have all ages in them in order to cultivate the child's social impulses, and I think we must be careful not to prescribe one way of doing things. In fact, we must be careful in *all* the aspects of our work not to be dogmatic. The meeting of the 'I' with another 'I' can also take place in larger groups; the important thing is the physical and spiritual presence of the adults. Recent research in Denmark has shown that what matters in the path of a child's life is the meetings with others along the way. A group of young adults from families with problems such as drug addiction or alcoholism were interviewed in an attempt to understand why some of the children from these families also became addicts and others didn't. What those who *didn't* had in common was that they told of a relationship with a teacher, a social worker, or even in one case a single meeting of a few hours with an adult in a children's home, that had deep significance in their lives.

In a time when the patterns of family life are changing rapidly, we are looking after children who may have stepmothers and fathers, half brothers and sisters and this will necessarily be reflected in our kindergartens. The model of "mother" on whom all others in the kindergarten are dependent is not the only one anymore, and working with larger groups ranging from toddlers to school age gives us the opportunity to work with ourselves through meeting with the child, but also through the meeting between the 'I' and the community of adults.

*Christine Christiansen teaches kindergarten in Denmark.*