

Creating Partnerships with Parents in First Grade Readiness Decisions

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In my first years of teaching in a mixed-age kindergarten class I felt anxious about the challenge of making decisions around first grade readiness. Witnessing the grandness of the change that the six-year-olds experience on all levels left me confused as to what criteria I should consider when making decisions about their future placement. The ability to understand what I was observing was not living in me yet, and I relied heavily on my instincts and untrained observations. Many times I simply fell back upon the school's cut-off date for grade school entrance and hoped that the parents would support this.

Then I began to meet more and more mystery children whose development and future placement posed even larger questions to me and also more and more parents who wanted to know what was behind my recommendations. Many times I felt inadequate to meet the important questions of the parents. How I longed for skilled and informed local companions to accompany me in making these decisions!

Some Waldorf schools are fortunate to have school doctors, readiness committees, or remedial or curative teachers to assist them when it comes time to consider whether it's appropriate for a child to enter first grade, but in many schools the kindergarten teachers are on their own when determining whether the child is ripe for school. Results from the last extensive WECAN survey on "The Older Child in the Kindergarten" show a variety of ways that schools in North America cope with the decision about first grade placement. Most established schools stated a definite procedure for shepherding the children into first grade—some more elaborate than others. Many kindergarten teachers reported using the cut-off date as the sole determinant. One school relayed that their assessment process and the subsequent report had become so stressful for the parents, children and faculty that they were questioning its benefits. This same teacher commented that she was going back to observing the children in their natural classroom setting rather than setting up separate out-of-class

screening appointments. However, the majority of schools reported being at varying stages of establishing clear, effective assessment procedures and are still revising these practices. Many schools also stated that there is uneasiness about who gets to make the decision when the parents and the kindergarten teachers disagree about first grade placement.

This survey also showed that even in schools that had extra professional support there seemed to be different understandings as to who should be responsible for this decision. Here are some aspects of the question:

- Is it the responsibility of the remedial teacher or the child's kindergarten teachers or a care committee (comprised of the child's kindergarten teachers, the remedial teacher, grade school representatives, a member of the College of Teachers and/or an admissions person)? The answer to this question seemed to vary according to the personnel resources that the particular schools had.
- There was also the underlying question of whether it is best for the kindergarten teachers who have observed the child regularly to develop the skills of carrying the first grade readiness assessment, or are these teachers already too subjective?
- Another part of this question is the issue of how it affects the children's response to the assessment if they are taken out of a familiar environment to interact with someone, perhaps a remedial teacher or other school representative, who is unknown to them. One school reported that their remedial teacher had regular weekly contact with the kindergarten classes and teachers and this made it easier for her to do the assessments in consultation with the children's kindergarten teachers.

So we can see that there are a variety of perspectives and opinions on how to achieve recommendations for first grade placement.

At our school in British Columbia, Canada we do not have a curative or remedial teacher, a care group, or a readiness committee, and our first grade teacher often does not arrive until the summer before the next school year starts. Out of necessity, I have had to labor diligently to hone my

observation skills and to develop my own process for determining the placement of the kindergarten children in the next first grade class. When I feel stumped I consult with my colleagues in the kindergarten and the grade school. Sometimes I consult with remedial teachers in other schools.

I owe much gratitude to a colleague who, through her own studies, began to share some of the ways in which she was beginning to gain fresh eyes in which to see the children. This opened doors to me and I began to realize that, through research and observation, I too could find ways to understand and look for developmental milestones. I began to determine what the common phenomena are that most children display at the transition between kindergarten and first grade. Some of these manifestations of the six-year change can be witnessed in the regular indoor and outdoor play of the children and are described in the book *You're Not the Boss of Me!—Understanding the Six/Seven-Year-Old Transformation* (WECAN, 2008).

As time progressed, I also began to realize that some of the children's changes could not be witnessed easily by me while the children were engaged in their normal daily interactions with their peers. I began to wish for opportunities to be alone with the children in order to look more closely at other developments that are necessary for success in the first grade year. Memory, fine motor dexterity, fine balancing, crossing the midline, dominance, awareness of body geography, language development, stamina, and the child's ability to follow directions are just a few of the things that could not be easily observed while the distractions and needs of the group were ongoing. This is when I decided to begin a procedure of spending time alone with each one of the children who are candidates for the future first grade class. This decision has served the children, the parents, and me very well.

Research and consultation with other teachers and doctors has resulted in the development of an objective process including a checklist with criteria for objective observations of the children. Because I do not feel comfortable with the word "assessment," I refer to the time I spend with the children as "the first grade readiness games." However, the children themselves do not know that this time has anything to do with first grade readiness. They only see that they have a chance to play games with their teacher.

So each year I “play games” with each child who is a potential candidate for first grade the following year, for one hour at a time, for one day only. I begin at the end of January, asking the oldest and most obvious candidates first. My colleague and I discuss when we should begin this process in the new year and whether there is a need to call in a substitute to assist her on the playground while I am inside with each individual child. In this way, all of the children have had their turn by the time that we have the Parent/Teacher interviews in March and I can feel more sure of the recommendation I have for the parents then. The younger children in the kindergarten aren’t as interested in the games. They would rather play outside. The sun children (as we call them) are content to wait until next year for their turn when they will be one of the big helpers in the kindergarten.

As time has progressed, my initial clumsy observations have been replaced with a deepening of interest and understanding. Witnessing similar responses from the children as they played the games helped me to pinpoint the important milestones demonstrated before me. By repeating these experiences with different children over and over again I have been able to hone my own powers of observation and find my way into recognizing various nuances in the signs of readiness. The value of developing some concrete criteria that can be used year after year cannot be overestimated. There is an old adage that goes, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one single step.” I would encourage kindergarten teachers to take their initial steps upon this rewarding journey. Childhood and the six-year-old transformation came alive for me in a different way when I included the first grade readiness games in my yearly plan.

There has also been an added dimension of joyful interaction as I witness the enthusiasm with which the children look forward to the opportunity to play games with their teacher. Another bonus is the respectful response of the parents for the first grade readiness recommendations when they discover that it has a definite procedure and a set of observations behind it.

More importantly, these games have given me a venue in which I can make a deeper connection, a soul-spiritual link with the child and parent. I can’t say enough about the value of this. There have been

times when I have felt stumped by the placement of a child and, after playing the first grade readiness games with the children and consulting with the parents, I have known what my recommendations would be. I regard this time that I spend with the individual children as a time that supports a depth of observation so poignant that, in the evening when I carry the question of the child’s placement into my sleep, I am able to present a truer picture of the child to his/her angel. Then I think that the child’s angel, the parents’ angels, and my own angel are able to find each other, draw closer, collaborate and inspire us all with the right decision.

Although my intent in this article is to share some ideas about being in this decision-making process with the parents, it seemed necessary for me to explain beforehand the benefit of having a first grade readiness assessment process that engenders the necessary respect from the parents, who have the potential to be some of our greatest allies and helpers. Below are some considerations that I implement in my work with the people who are most familiar with the children and tend to know them very well: their parents.

A very valuable piece of advice was given to our teacher training class by Joan Almon: “Before you begin to advise the parents, find a way to love them. When you strive to do this, then you will eventually be able to say what you need to say to them.” Each year I take this up as my mantra right from the very beginning of my encounters with the children’s parents. Here are some ways that I develop this loving relationship through time:

- When I first meet a family I take interest in the parents as well as the child. What are the parents’ hobbies, activities, and viewpoints? What are their concerns about their child? What was their childhood like? This initial openness paves the way for a strong future connection.
- If there is a child that I sense may be in the position of needing another year in the kindergarten then I work very hard at creating this connection with their parents. I want trust, respect, and warmth to exist between myself and the parents when, later on, I know I will be advocating another year in the kindergarten for their child. At the initial

interview when I meet the family I am very clear about stating our cut-off date for first grade readiness. If the child falls within this time then I explain the benefits of another year in the kindergarten.

- Engaging the parents in warm conversation by phone or taking them aside at drop-off or pick-up times is very helpful.
- Involving the parents in some kindergarten tasks can engage their interest and make the kindergarten year(s) more meaningful for them.
- Sometimes, I also incorporate the parents in my evening meditation by accurately seeing them in my mind's eye.
- When I sense that an issue is brewing in the parent group, newsletters can be an effective and neutral way to build group trust by addressing the issue and sharing living stories that are part of the kindergarten day. Sometimes it's easier to speak about an issue to the whole group, as if the topic just occurred to me, then it is to risk defensiveness or offending someone by approaching them directly. Reading a newsletter gives them the opportunity to read the idea and ruminate on it in freedom.
- Creating a vessel for the parents to get together and talk while I am present also paves the way for open discussion about parents' observations and questions. I host a monthly Parent Discussion and Craft Circle.

During the school year there are several meetings with the parents. At each one of these events, the six/seven-year-old transformation and first grade readiness are mentioned, sometimes briefly and other times in greater detail (depending on what developmental manifestations we are witnessing in the older kindergarten children). Explaining common behaviors that can be witnessed at this age helps the parents to see the reason for their child's upheaval as being related to the six/seven-year change and not the "fault" of the kindergarten.

As the year progresses and the children show more signs of the change, I speak directly to individual parents about it again. "Have you noticed Sarah's giggling and that she's racing around more lately? Have you noticed that Johnny has increased

his appetite and is going through a growth spurt? Is Allison questioning your authority at home? Do you notice Nathaniel's fascination with teenagers lately?" By comparing observations the parents tend to be put at ease and feel more fellowship and support when their children are going through these changes. This can be a confusing time for parents and teachers alike. If this atmosphere of warmth, mutual respect and trust has been built and the parents have been properly informed beforehand, then it can be welcome news when the teacher recommends that a child have another year in the kindergarten.

The cut-off date for our school is June 1, although we often give May birthday children (especially boys) the opportunity to attend kindergarten for another year. As I look back over the past five years I see that we have been blessed with some March and April boys and girls turning seven during the end of their kindergarten year. Through time I have discovered some important ways to bring this possibility to the parents. The following suggestions are helpful when parents question the teacher's recommendation and are determined that they want their child to go on into first grade.

First, rather than using the language that the child is "staying back" (the connotation being that he/she is missing something), it works better to place the emphasis on the benefits of another year. The language I use is, "Let's give Sally the *opportunity* to have another year in the kindergarten."

Here are some of the benefits that can be mentioned to the parents:

- Rather than having to struggle to keep up with his peers, the child who has more time can have the opportunity to develop the self-esteem that comes with being fully ready to take on tasks with ease.
- A child who is the youngest in his or her family can have the opportunity to practice being an older "brother or sister" in the kindergarten.
- An only child or a youngest child in the family constellation can have an opportunity to nurture younger children, because in her second year in the kindergarten she will be in the position to be a helpful older child.

- If the child has just begun to show signs of the six/seven-year change then it can be helpful for him to have some consolidation time through more movement opportunities rather than sitting at a first grade school desk for longer periods of the day. It's often helpful to ask the parents if they can imagine their child managing her impulses and sitting contentedly for long periods of time.
- Having an extra year in the kindergarten can help a child who would have been the youngest in first grade to be one of the oldest in the kindergarten. Cultivating leadership qualities prepares the child for a successful future.

As well as discussing the benefits with the parents, there are also a few helpful strategies that can assist the decision.

- By far the most helpful strategy that I have found is to make a list, in order of age—oldest to youngest—of the children who will be going on into first grade, and then, in the same manner, a list of the children who will be staying back in the kindergarten. Then, with the parents present, plot where their child would be situated on these lists age-wise. Often when parents see that their child would be the very youngest in the first grade class and, as it often turns out, not even the oldest in next year's kindergarten class, they understand what that could mean for their child.
- Sometimes a decision can be assisted by the teacher saying "If I can let go of Johnny being in kindergarten next year, can you let go of him being in first grade next year and we'll just give this decision some more contemplation time?" If the parents agree, I ask them if we can keep this conversation open to future sharing of our observations. Then I often tell the parents about the importance of the child going on with his or her own peer group. I tell them that I will document daily whom the child plays with. Sometimes the parents invite over an older child and a younger child to their home (on separate occasions) and they can then witness how their child's play changes depending on the age of the playmate. It's important to keep in mind here that often the younger child becomes the slave of the older

child, fetching things and so on. When we sensitively observe their play we can see that the younger child is not really playing as an equal with the older one.

- Handouts from parents expressing successful results from giving their child the opportunity for another year in the kindergarten are very helpful.
- Members of the parent body who struggled with this decision of first grade placement and whose children are in the grade school now can be a rich resource if they are willing to accept phone calls from a current questioning parent.
- Hosting a parent evening where the first grade readiness games are explained (after the games have been played with the children) eases the parents' concern that this decision be made by qualified professionals.

The warm bond that we make with the child's parents is essential for a healthy year in the kindergarten. The efforts we make to insure that the social fabric we weave together is abundant with the golden threads of love, trust, and respect are well-justified, forming a foundational garment that can be carried forward into the future.

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