

The Older Child in the Kindergarten

Ruth Ker

Many of you may remember that, in the January mailing of 2003, the results were published of a survey that WECAN conducted about the older child in the kindergarten. The call for help and needed advice in this area of our work was an obvious conclusion from the survey. These requests have been heeded and much has happened since that time. I would like to tell you more about this.

After publishing the survey report, one of the first things that happened was that the editor of *Kindling* magazine in England asked if she could reprint excerpts of the survey results in their latest issue which was devoted to the older child in the kindergarten. It appears that teachers in other countries are also having to rise to the challenge of working with the older child. As email and phone conversations proliferated, the Board pursued funding for an opportunity for a group of teachers to gather and take up further research arising from the leftover survey questions.

While we awaited the response to our funding request, I began to do some traveling on behalf of the WECAN Board to some classrooms where it was known that teachers had developed a strong program for the older children in their care. This opportunity over a four-month period changed many aspects of my own work and filled me with gratitude for encountering such talented and capable colleagues to consult with and emulate. My journeys took me to city and country schools; classrooms with large and small spaces; programs with an emphasis on outdoor play, or indoor play, or balanced time segments for outdoor/indoor play; and classrooms with simple and elaborate furnishings and playthings. Some teachers worked alone and others had assistants or co-teachers but, in each case, it was clear that the teachers possessed qualities of strength, loving kindness, joyfulness and natural authority in their work with the children. It was also obvious that the children flourishing in their

care demonstrated the challenges that we all encounter nowadays and that their teachers seemed to have the expertise to lovingly guide them. Later, in 2003, we heard that our request for funding had been approved, and plans began for a February 2004 retreat centered around the topic of the older child in the kindergarten.

This article is the first in what we hope to be a series of well-researched offerings arising out of the substance of the good work that we did together. The articles will be speaking about our deliberations on working with the older child in the kindergarten and the subsequent research that will be ongoing as a result of this retreat. Although the teachers who met there represented many different perspectives, there was one thing they all had in common—their love for the older child in the kindergarten.

As we gathered in Sacramento for the retreat, having traveled from communities all over North America – Vermont, New York, Washington, California, Colorado and British Columbia (Canada), the flood of conversations began. Our daily routine from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. was punctuated with opportunities for singing, drawing and eating, but even during our breaks, the lively communications continued. Perhaps worthy of note is our study, Lecture Five in *The Essentials of Education* (Stuttgart, April 11, 1924). Many expressed how valuable such a study could be for grade school and early childhood faculty to ponder together. It certainly helped us to deepen in our understanding of what is needed to carry the five- and-a-half to seven-year-old child who is poised at the threshold of entrance to the grade school.

Many questions came out of the survey. Those that we focused on this time were: Is there a change in the children of today? How are we working with the special challenges that the older boys and older girls are bringing? What is the role of the teacher? How do we develop the right capacities to enable us to stand in the right

way in front of a group of older children (as one teacher expressed in the survey when asked this question, “I step up to the plate.” What about the age groups of children? Are mixed-age kindergartens effective? What about the protection of the younger children when the older children are not being worthy of imitation? Do three-year-olds belong in mixed age groups? How can we adequately inform the parents and work closely with them? How can we bridge the gap from kindergarten to grade one and adequately pass over the children to the new grade one teacher? How do we assess the readiness of our children and subsequently consult with their parents? What are some curriculum ideas, activities and meaningful movements specifically geared for the older child?

During our time together, we also realized that other questions were surfacing. Here are some of ours. Perhaps you can let us know if you also have some more. How can we bring balance to the children? Do children need indoor as well as outdoor play to accomplish a harmonizing of inner and outer development? What ideas can we share for discipline, classroom management and social guidance for the classroom? What actually can six- and seven-year-old boys and girls do? What is it that the kindergarten teacher has to transform in her/himself to meet the liveliness and sense of adventure that the older child often demonstrates?

As you see, these are mighty questions, and we met them in a very direct and practical way from a variety of perspectives. It was amazing how many times consensus was reached even though many different program approaches were represented. After three full days, we divided up the areas of conversation and agreed to continue our research further. Each of us will be integrating our combined efforts and informing you about what we are also hearing from other colleagues in the movement.

Now I would like to introduce you to the retreat participants by mentioning what they expressed in answer to the question, “What do you feel is the essence of your work?”

Tim Bennett, who’s kindergarten program offers the children daily opportunities for physically challenging adventures in local park-like surroundings, said the essence of his work is, “To help children incarnate into their physical bodies in the healthiest way possible.” Tim, who has a Spatial Dynamics training and a natural joy and love for movement, will be doing further research around this topic as it applies to the older child. He also will be sharing some of his ideas about his work with parents.

Nancy Blanning, a former Kindergarten teacher and now a curative/remedial teacher for early childhood and the lower grades, said, “To ask the question, ‘What ails thee?’ and to listen to that response without judgment.” Nancy will be exploring avenues of bringing healthy exuberant movement in the confines of the classroom. She will be doing some further research on the protection of the younger child while meeting the needs of the older child in a mixed-age kindergarten. Nancy will also be sharing some of her movement circles with you as well.

Louise de Forrest, whose program is affiliated with a seniors’ complex said, “To engage in meaningful, practical activity for the service of others—all kingdoms of Nature.” Louise will be writing an article about her very unique work on the farm near the Fellowship in Spring Valley. She also has much to offer as practical suggestions with the way in which she is giving parents meaningful experiences in her parent work rather than using mainly the lecture format to pass on information.

Barbara Klocek, who co-teaches with large groups of children in a balanced outdoor/indoor program, said, “The kindergarten work is a cosmic deed. We are walking the path with others to becoming human.” Barbara has several articles that she wants to share, among them, “How do we meet the older children in the classroom, and what about the older boys and older girls?”

Catherine Schlager, whose school in Vermont has just completed a new kindergarten complex, said, “To reassure children that they have come to a good place. We are happy that they are here and we need them.” Catherine will be exploring the role of the teacher more fully.

Ruth Ker, whose country program is a balanced indoor/outdoor experience of taking up meaningful work activities and creative play, said, "To give the child a safe place in which to incarnate and to sow the seeds in the child that become wellsprings for later life." Ruth facilitated this retreat and will continue to carry the survey questions and keep the channels of communication clear between the members of the group and all of your offerings as well. She will also be doing further research on curriculum activities for the older child. Results of conversations about activities for older children will be presented in future issues of *Gateways*.

At the closure of our retreat, we asked each other the question that Rudolf Steiner raised in Lecture Five of *The Essentials of Education*, "How is it that we connect in spirit with one another; how do we *really* meet others in spirit and therefore provide a healing balm to the lonely isolation of soul that we can often experience in our times?" Our ponderings were widespread, but we saw that our conversations based on the genuine love for those rambling, robust, reclusive, reclining, rejuvenating, rascally, resplendent older children led us to an experience of really meeting each other in spirit. We sincerely hope that the fruits of this experience will ray out to all of you and also permeate the future research that we offer.

Please direct your questions and offerings about the older child in the kindergarten to Ruth Ker at the address below.. She will pass these on to the appropriate members of the research group. We welcome and are very interested in your ideas and experiences.

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