
Report Writing: Challenges and Opportunities

— Ruth Ker

In September 2018, WECAN sent out a survey to member schools asking questions of early childhood educators about report writing. This topic is alive in the Waldorf early childhood movement these days and can be somewhat controversial. Assessment and report writing have potential benefits and disadvantages, both for practitioners and for the children and families they serve.

Wishing for further understanding myself, I prepared for the writing of this article by interviewing some of our beloved mentors and some experienced Waldorf educators who are currently in the field. Along with concerns about something drifting into early childhood which is more relevant to the grades, and questions about how report writing can be brought in such a way that it supports healthy child development, I heard “We all need each other. Report writing could become a way of participating in a healing conversation.”

It is this last comment that I would like to take up in this article, recognizing that while there are valid arguments on the side of not writing reports, we can also look at it as an opportunity.

Where does the impulse toward writing reports come from? In the small cross-section represented by the responses to the recent survey (56 responses from 178 WECAN Full and Associate Member Programs), a majority of educators replied that report writing was requested in their schools by the school faculty or college of teachers first, then by school administration, then by parents, and finally by local, state or provincial regulations. While it is not possible to draw generalized conclusions from this small sample, it is interesting to look at what comes first and last on the list. One colleague suggested, “Perhaps the faculty or administrators think parents want the reports.” Other colleagues reported that they rarely get feedback from the parents, and some said that the parents are more interested in conferences with teachers than written reports.

In any case, when schools are asking for reports or assessments within the culture of their specific communities, then how can we make these reports as health-promoting, helpful, and harmless as

possible? What has been done already to take up this opportunity in the best possible way?

In my research, I learned that although it might be the choice of some educators to refrain from report writing, many experienced teachers have enjoyed it as a way to create a bridge with the parent and/or the child’s next teacher. For them, it has become a self-education opportunity, a chance to cultivate flexibility of thinking, positivity, and objectivity. Surprised by this joyful recognition, some educators have reported a spiritual aliveness inherent in the process and find report writing a way of doing ongoing child study that welcomes the participation of other beings.

End-of-the-year report writing or check-ins with parents during the year can become opportunities for the educator to home in on the essence of the child and develop a closer working relationship with those who accompany the child in earthly life and in the spiritual worlds. One teacher reported, “My end-of-year report was my last, loving embrace before the family left for the summer!”

Even when compelled by an outer authority, report writing can offer significant benefits. In the Canadian province where I live, most of the Waldorf schools are significantly subsidized by government grants. The writing of reports is necessary to this agreement, and the teachers with whom I spoke have found this to be an arduous task that has required learning new skills and language to attempt to communicate the wealth of Waldorf education within narrower parameters that do not quite fit the totality of its shape. But while difficult, it has been extremely valuable to learn this new language, to interact with other Waldorf kindergarten colleagues, and have conversations with the licensing bodies. The Waldorf educators have learned that play-based kindergartens are promoted by the provincial ministry of education, and the ministry has learned that Waldorf schools have insights and do a stellar job at this. As one Waldorf educator expressed, “We really don’t have to see ourselves as separate from that world.”

Some comments from the WECAN survey express concern that some types of reports based on child observations are “fixed pictures” or “snapshots” of

specific points in time, when the truth is that children tend to go through many growth spurts and rapid changes from birth to seven. One said, “We find that written reports fixate the parents on a point in time and make the conversation between parents and the teacher less fluid.” Others said that by the time the parent reads the report, the child could have passed through the stage described and be on to some other developmental manifestation. Parents may then feel the need to respond to something the report describes but that the child has outgrown. Many schools reported a lack of consensus as to whether it is appropriate at all to write reports for children under age seven!

Fortunately, much work has already been done to describe what kind of assessment is appropriate for early childhood settings. In a document published by ECSWE, the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, called “Assessment: Friend or Foe of Learning,” it is suggested that “individual-centred education,” such as Waldorf education, “needs to be accompanied by forms of assessment that take the unpredictable development of individuality into account.” This report goes on to say: “Assessment practices should reflect the social nature of learning and therefore foster relationships between learners and teachers instead of alienating them. This requires an atmosphere of trust and esteem.”²

And the International Waldorf Early Childhood Association, IASWECE, has created a position statement on “Non-judgemental Assessment in Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Settings” to support early childhood educators who find themselves required by regulatory bodies to write evaluative reports on each child in their care. This document, which is important reading for Waldorf early childhood educators, urges teachers to refrain from “reaching diagnostic and specific conclusions,” and to ensure that “all observations are conducted in a spirit of caring, loving attention” with a “gesture of gentle inquiry” in order “to deepen the relationship with the child.” We can heed their caution, “The early years of childhood need special protection to guard the child’s unfolding forces against premature expectations.”³ So,

what is it we should consider if we find ourselves in the position of being a report writer? Here, we may take counsel from Rudolf Steiner, who says, “The teacher must feel that he or she should perceive each child as a question posed by the super-sensible world to the sense world.”⁴

We can ask ourselves, “What is the gesture behind the report? What is my intention or motivation for taking up this task?” If it is a judgment that we want to prove to others, then we are probably striving in the wrong direction. If it is to build a picture that allows the child’s essence to shine through so it can be recognized by the parents, our colleagues, and even spiritual beings who want to contribute and inspire us further, then we are probably on the right track.

Some teachers approach this task by giving a recap of what happens in the yearly programming and then adding some positive information about the uniqueness of each individual child. This allows the teacher to provide a deepened picture of the child’s qualities that the parents might not see or understand. It can be an opportunity for the educator to relay insights that have occurred, perhaps in connection with what the child’s angel would want to be recognized, and ultimately what the child unconsciously wants us to understand and share with the parents. Oh, the joy of being truly seen!

Parents can sometimes have preconceived ideas about their child based on previously-encountered behaviors. The child may have grown out of these manifestations, but the parent may still be attached to a former pattern that the child has outgrown. Reports can be a vehicle for transforming ideas and removing attitudes that limit the child’s greatness.

Reports can also be a vehicle for cultivating more conversation through which parents can share their insights into their child. As a parent myself, I remember looking for the indication that the teacher really saw and recognized the spirit of my child.

Some educators value the importance of developing report-writing skills as a preparation for practicing *right speech*—an aid to knowing how to speak about the child in Parent/Teacher conferences. While writing the report, we can imagine how it will be for

the parents to read it. We want to walk a path together as a loving deed which can expand into a greater healing for the parent and the child. Developing trust by working actively on warm connection and integrity in relationship with the parents is the prerequisite to being effective in these communications.

For some educators, report writing has been a path of consciousness to develop clarity about what they actually see in the child. Sometimes we realize we have to look to the child again because we don't have a full picture. This becomes obvious when we imagine the child in our evening practice. We can realize that we don't really "see" the child fully enough to offer up a worthy picture to the spiritual worlds as we seek guidance and support. Sometimes we realize that other children are invisible to us, perhaps because they require so little attention. These often calm and complacent children may also be unconsciously calling to be seen.

Reports can also be opportunities to recommend professional support for the child. These types of reports must be written with the greatest care *after* the educator has spoken already to the parent about the recommendation or whatever will be the sensitive issue in the report. It is essential to always speak to the parent first if you have any concern or delicate words you will need to write in the child's report. Developing a resource list of specialists and therapists who are compatible with Waldorf practices is a must nowadays.

Reports also allow us to impart the deeper attributes of the children to the upcoming first grade teacher. It can be helpful as well to share with the first grade teacher something about your working relationship with the parents. The interactions between the children and how they operate as a "rising first grader" group is also important information for their new teacher. It can be difficult to absorb everything given verbally in a meeting; a written report gives the opportunity to glance back at the kindergarten teacher's words later as needed.

Of course there is the side of reporting that can deteriorate into checklists and core competencies, describing the child in unnatural forms. Some of our Waldorf educators are having to rise to the task of learning this new language and bringing meaning to it in order to find authenticity in their report writing. Endeavoring to have truthful conversations with school authorities who don't speak our common language is an important task of our time. Those who

can cultivate this skill are the current pioneer warriors. This is important work if Waldorf education is to share its gift with the world.

As one teacher said, "These reports will continue to be my dragon until I find the way to authentically assess the children." How do we accomplish this with the minimum of compromises? This is not a new question; Rudolf Steiner in *Discussions with Teachers* tells us of many situations in the first Waldorf School where compromises had to happen.⁵

In closing, I express my admiration and gratitude to those who are pioneering these conversations for us in a world where competencies, core curriculum and proficiencies define young children. Thank you for your innovative striving, extra work, flexibility, and courage. Every day many of us experience the gift Waldorf education has to give. We have a responsibility to share these understandings as well. It's my deepest hope that the children of our time will find protection from and perhaps even be served by this "dragon." ♦

Notes:

- 1 *Survey on Assessment and Report Writing*, WECAN, September, 2018
- 2 *Assessment: Friend of Foe of Learning*, ECSWE, Brussels, Aug. 26, 2016, pages 1 and 6
- 3 *Non-judgemental Assessment in Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Settings: Seeing the Child*, IASWECE position statement, 2018, page 2 and 3
- 4 *Education as a Force for Social Change*, Rudolf Steiner, pg 56-57, Anthroposophic Press, 1997
- 5 *Discussions with Teachers*, Rudolf Steiner, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1967, London

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