

Why are we teaching? What are we teaching?

By Barbara Klocek

When I first began teaching, I thought my main goals were to create a wonderful environment for the children, to create a harmonious breathing in the morning and to give them an opportunity to experience through their head, heart and hands. I still feel these are important elements in our work. However, over the years I have come to see that there are other, more subtle aspects that are equally important.

These lie in the social realm. Many questions come to mind. Is it part of the teacher's role to enter into the social realm or do we "let the children work it out?" Do the children feel safe in our classroom? Are the children free to play with whomever they want or can they reject other children? Do we step in when the play becomes exclusive or too rough? Is the role of the teacher to create the social mood, or is it set by the children? How do we meet the children who at the age of six are saying, "You are not the boss of me?" What do we do when we are met with outright defiance from a child?

Each year these questions are brought to light with different children. This year I had several situations that needed my attention. One had to do with the question of one child excluding other children, especially the six-year-old children. Over the years I have come to the rule that all children get to play together. If two children are longing for time alone, I suggest a play date with the families so they can enjoy each other's company in that way. This year a six-year-old girl returned as one of our oldest children as she had a summer birthday. Two other returning girls were her best friends and she loved to be the leader. This year instead of the mellow trio of last year, they started competing for each other's friendship and were not at all inclusive of the new children. I tried gentle diversions of having one bake bread, etc. but they were like magnets. So, around the middle of October, my colleague and I decided to tell them that they were on vacation from each other in order to make new friends. The first day or two they were at a loss, but soon they were found happily playing with other children. How delighted the new children were to make friends with them. After a month, we said that we had noticed how many new friends they had and that they could play together if they would include the other children. This worked well for a while, but a few weeks later they were in their intensive trio again. So we give them a week together or a week on vacation depending on the mood and it seems to work well. I had a short phone conversation with the involved parents so they would understand how I was working. I was unsure how these parents would feel about these "vacations." However, one mother put me at ease as she said how grateful she was and how it was like her sending her two daughters to their own room if they couldn't play nicely together.

This brings up the question of whether children should be able to exclude other children. Sometimes this will manifest as a trio or as only boys (or girls), or in many other ways. I have struggled with this question over the years and was delighted to come across a book *You Can't Say You Can't Play* by Vivian Paley. She is a kindergarten teacher and storyteller who also struggled with this question and held many discussions with different age children about this question. She also came to the rule, "You can't say you can't play," and found it created a much more harmonious classroom. I try to put a positive slant on it by saying we all play together.

Often preschool is one of the first steps out of the home and into a classroom. One of the main skills children learn is how to get along in a group and this is learned often from the rules of that classroom. The arrows of exclusion and the pain of rejection are hard at any age. We have a unique opportunity to help children develop new skills in our classroom. Even at the age of four and more strongly by the age of six, the children experience sympathies and antipathies towards other children. How can we help them move beyond this reaction and begin to play/work together at another level? I personally have come to see this as an important part of my work toward peace in the world, in this tiny kingdom called the Red Rose Kindergarten. It doesn't happen magically that the children get along and include everyone, but over time, they open up their play to everyone and indeed become new friends. I am fairly active initially, supporting a child to be included if someone has just said they cannot play by helping them extend the house, dress up or bring some wooden "cookies" as an entrance into the other children's play.

Do the children feel safe in our classroom? This for me is an important gauge as to whether I am disciplining in the right way. If we as the teacher are not in charge, usually one of the older, choleric children will be in charge, directing the play, etc. These children are often the leaders of the class and it is our responsibility to see that they are kind and benevolent kings and queens and not tyrants. So one of my main tasks is to listen with sensitive ears as to when the play is too rough or chaotic. Listening from the periphery, I am always sensing the tone in the classroom. If it is not harmonious but has a tinge of pain, anger or fear, quietly and rather quickly I move into that space, sometimes just sitting with my work or entering in if it seems appropriate. This provides an opportunity to work with the six-year-olds directly for their feeling life is becoming stronger and often they find themselves nearly overwhelmed by the inner storm themselves. Here we can help soothe the storm and create a space in which each child can speak and be heard. I can help find a middle path if necessary. I see the feelings of relief on the children's faces and things settle down. Everyone is safe in this kingdom.

This is usually the case every year if there are several choleric boys. They each want to "be the boss" of the game and voices begin to rise in anger. I waited too long one year to help temper the power struggle and a pattern had become established outside of arguing. In this case, I bought a bag of six penny nails and they were both delighted to be allowed to hammer them into the fence for the first part of recess. Then they were able to settle into play.

I had an opportunity this fall to deal with a child who was defiant outright. Usually I find this attitude begins later in the year, in early spring with the six-year-old children moving out of imitation and beginning to find their relation to the world in terms of who is in charge. Rudolf Steiner speaks of the seven-year-old child learning out of respect for authority rather than as a young child, out of imitation. So we as teachers of six-year-olds are being met with this transition every year. It is not an easy transition for either the child or the teacher and it influences the mood of the whole class. I find that by living and breathing our rhythms and stories so deeply together, the class becomes a living organism around the beginning of December. If then, in early spring, the six-year-olds are resisting clean up or circle, the class already is a cohesive whole and a firm but gentle hand will bring a new respect to these children of the teacher as an authority.

However, this child came in with a defiant attitude. Only with much coaxing would he participate in circle. He was rude to the other children in his play as he insisted on doing things his way. He did not respect the quiet times and would be disruptive. I have in my classroom a "watching chair." This is any convenient chair where a child can sit and watch how other children are doing it correctly. I find this very helpful early in the year if the children are in line and one is pushing or at clean up time when all the children are helping except for one who is spinning around. These children often need to come out of movement into stillness (sitting), to even notice what is going on. I often will sit down beside the child in the watching chair and point out what the other children are doing and then invite them to participate in that way. I do not see it as punitive as much as instructive. The children who are being gentle meanwhile are being noticed for their kind behavior.

I had this boy the year before. His birthday was in June so he was already five for his first year with us. He had some challenges in sensory integration and many social patterns from previous day care situations that were difficult. His parents were aware of the problems and followed through on suggestions to give him some extra help through sensory integration, etc. We saw improvement at the end of the year. However, when he returned the following September, he was even more defiant. The first year it was difficult for him because sometimes he couldn't do what was asked. This year I felt it was because he wouldn't. This is a difficult distinction to perceive, but over time, with observation, it usually becomes clear.

His defiance began to spread throughout the day, with his friends as well as the teacher. Other children did not like him or began to imitate him, and I felt the mood of the class was being shaped by his attitude. We had a conference with his parents and I was clear about how serious this problem was. I told them I could not see him in a larger class in first grade with this defiant attitude. I asked the parents to be stricter in response to his defiance. I felt he needed a wake up call as to the effects of his behavior. We arranged that when he was defiant in school, his parents would be called to come and get him. When he was taken home, it was not to be a time of fun but of time out.

When he returned from a weekend of his parents being more consequent, he was better. However, before long he was refusing to come down from a tree when it was time to go in. I told him I was calling his father. He was shocked and asked me not to. I said I needed to because he was not listening. He sat contritely until his father came and I, in front of him, said to the father that I was very sad that he would not listen, and tomorrow we would give him another chance.

What a change this brought about. He became much more responsive and began new patterns of cooperation with the teachers. He played much better with the children, although is still working out issues of “who is the boss.” This was the first time in over fifteen years of teaching that I have sent a child home in this way. However, I am finding that parents have increasing more difficulties in setting and following through with boundaries with their lively children. I have two copies of John Rosemond’s book, *Six Steps for Raising Healthy, Happy Children* in my parent library. This is a wonderful resource for parents, as a mainstream book, which supports their relationship with each other, their role as authorities within the family and the importance of no media for the children.

Our involvement as teachers in the social realm can create an opportunity for many social skills to be learned, for many rough edges to be smoothed and for many friendships to bloom. The children can relax because they feel safe and can experience harmony as a reality in our classroom.

Barbara Klocek is a long-time kindergarten teacher at the Sacramento Waldorf School in Fair Oaks, California.