

First Grade Readiness: The Development of Memory and the Transformation of Play

• Louise deForest

This article is part of the forthcoming WECAN publication First Grade Readiness: Resources, Insights and Tools for Waldorf Educators, edited by Nancy Blanning. This much-requested volume will include perspectives from experienced teachers, doctors, therapeutic educators and others on what to look for in children who are preparing for the transition to the grade school, as well as examples of actual procedures used in several different settings. Contributors include Joan Almon, Michaela Glöckler, Audrey McAllen, Ruth Ker, and Nancy Blanning. The book is expected to be available by June, 2009.

It is increasingly apparent to those of us working in the educational realm that the age at which a child enters first grade can be very significant in terms of academic and social success throughout the entirety of the educational process and beyond. A child who is too young for first grade, although many first grade readiness signs are already apparent, may spend his or her grade school years working very hard to keep up, never feeling that he or she fits into the social or academic world of his or her classmates. For some, this feeling of having to pedal very fast to stay on a par with others continues into adulthood, where they always have the sense that they don't quite "get it." Others may feel that there is still something unfinished in their growing up years. Early in my teaching career, I had the great good fortune to work with a very experienced and inspiring early childhood teacher. When I asked her, what in her life had led her to teaching kindergarten, she answered in all seriousness, "I went to first grade when I was five."

For those children who enter first grade older than the optimal age there are also dangers and long-term repercussions; as we know, our curriculum is based on Rudolf Steiner's understanding of human development and the

content of the main lessons of each grade is geared to meet the needs of that particular stage of development. A child who is too old has the disadvantage of passing through thresholds of development without the accompaniment of his classmates or of the curriculum, leaving that child feeling isolated and different. Many of these children, not being met by the curriculum and not feeling integrated into the social world of the class, quickly lose interest in school and studies and can become under-achievers and never quite shake the feeling of being different.

In many of our schools, however, there is no educational consultant and the teachers often do not have the experience, knowledge or confidence to evaluate readiness. Signs of readiness are often confusing and contradictory; is it the losing of the teeth or the growth of the molars that is one signal of possible readiness? To make it even more complicated, each child develops according to his or her own individual timetable; one might be showing all the signs of physical readiness while still being socially immature, while another may be "awake" enough for first grade but still need more physical development. Too often we rely only on the birth date to move a child forward into the grades.

But children are always revealing to us their needs, gifts and challenges, if only we know how to read the signs. Everything they do, be it walking, playing, eating, even how they get sick, reveals something unique about them and their stage of development. They *want* to be seen by us, and it is up to us to develop the capacity to observe them objectively, with no preconceived ideas or judgments, and to put our observations into the context of human development. In this training—for that's what it is—I have found Rudolf Steiner's lecture "Practical Training in Thought" (Karlsruhe, January 18, 1909; available in *Anthroposophy in Everyday Life*) very helpful, for

it gives very specific exercises to develop both our thinking and our capacity to observe.

In Chapter Three of his book *The First Three Years of the Child*, building on Rudolf Steiner's insights, Karl König speaks about the three phases of memory development over the first seven years. Every human being experiences these three types of memory (indeed, all humanity has passed through this evolution of memory), and if we're observant we can actually see the transformation from one to the next. The first and earliest type of memory, which began in Atlantean development, is called Localized or Spatial Memory and is often confused with the more mature Time Memory. This Localized Memory, however, is completely dependent on outer stimulation, and a memory only comes to mind because something in the environment of the child has reminded that child of something. A child can be going for a drive with her parents, for example, and suddenly begin to describe Grandma's house, complete with all the details. Parents often remark on what a developed and precocious memory their children have but what has really happened is that the child saw something—a tree, flowers, a house of the same color—and through that object, "memories" of grandma's house streamed forth. The same child would not be able to describe what Grandma's house looks like if asked to do so by her parents, but once the memory is sparked, so to speak, all the details flood through. This stage lasts up to the second to third year of life.

In the play of toddlers, we can also observe that the inner activity of imagination and creativity do not play a big role; instead, it is curiosity, the instinctive drive for varied physical movements and the need to understand the world that propels the child through his or her day. The favorite play of the very young child, as we parents all know, is banging pots and pans, climbing onto and into every available spot, pouring, fitting one thing into another, etc. A walk is often an excruciating experience for the adult who is trying to *get* somewhere, as the toddler needs to touch, taste, observe and interact with everything that crosses his path. I remember with some shame and regret, how exasperated I would get from the near constant dropping of objects—food, spoons, cups—from the tray of my children's high chair,

and I couldn't help but think they were doing it out of mischief and joy in seeing their mother so frustrated. But if we truly observe what they are doing, we will come to understand that they are really trying to discover the laws of nature, things we as adults feel are self-evident. The material world is very new to our young ones and they spend their first years discovering how it works: gravity will pull an object, any object, down, no matter how many times you drop it; what goes up *does* come down, and so on. I remember one of my children sitting in the bathtub as the water ran from the faucet; for weeks he would repeatedly and with intense concentration try to grab the water coming from the tap. Finally he repeated it enough times to learn an essential lesson about the fluid nature of water and happily went back to splashing and pouring.

Somewhere between two and three, we begin to notice a change in both how memory works and in the play of the child. Steiner talks about this time as the birth of the I, when a child recognizes that he or she is a separate, independent being. My youngest son, Ry, then two-and-a-half, woke up one morning and, as if drunk, ran around the house saying/singing, "I am Ry. Ry am I. I, Ry." This rapture lasted the whole day and, while he continued to be the ever-active, rambunctious boy he has always been, he was also different from that day onward. In play, too, we begin to see that "pretend" has entered. Now they cook, take care of babies, go off to work (if they have Waldorf teachers as parents, they go to meetings), and are Mommies, Daddies, and babies. At first they play house-related play, imitating what they see in their own homes. They are not so much playing together as they are playing the same kind of play, side by side. Slowly, over the next few years, the pretend becomes more elaborate and veers from the home-centered play to imitating and playing the activities in the world around them. Suddenly we have carpenters, doctors, snow shovelers and teachers and, instead of the side-by-side play, children are playing together. Play is enormously creative and imaginative at this time, between three and five-and-a-half, and is constantly in the process of becoming; a truck becomes a space ship which becomes a restaurant which becomes.... It's a bit like the water streaming from the faucet

that my son tried so hard to hold—totally fluid and unpredictable and in constant movement. As Rudolf Steiner puts it, “Imagination in children represents the very forces [etheric] that have just liberated themselves from performing similar creative work within the physical formation of the brain” (*Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*, 114).

A healthy child will completely invest him- or herself in the role that he or she is playing and the objects become what the imagination makes of them. Children are often indignant when we adults call this “pretending.” We can learn much about children, watching them play at this time in their lives when we can see how creativity feeds creativity and play is a form of nourishment. In the lecture titled “Self Education in the Light of Spiritual Science,” Rudolf Steiner says, “Where do we find what works on the child as a higher Self, and which belongs to the child, but doesn’t enter his consciousness? Astonishing but true: it is *children’s play*, the meaningful, well carried out play of all children, that the higher Self works on.” And later, “a child educates himself for life, simply through play” (10-11).

Memory also changes; what was once sparked by an outer object has now moved more inwards, relying on rhythm to put an event into the stream of time and space. König calls it Rhythmical Memory (as did Steiner) and the basis of this kind of memory is repetition. We Early Childhood teachers experience this type of memory after two or three weeks of school when our new nursery or kindergarten children, seeing the big bowl on the table and the grinders standing ready, know it is Bread Day—Localized Memory— which means that tomorrow is (for example) Painting Day—Rhythmic Memory. As parents, we see this in the daily rhythms we have put into place around our children; when it is bedtime, for example, once the regular routine is started, the Rhythmic Memory leads the child from bath to pajamas to brushing teeth to story to bed and good night.

And so we draw near to the six-year change, that developmental threshold when the etheric forces are freed from their formative work on the physical body and released into the capacity for thinking and independent picture-making ability, essential skills for the academic work that lies

ahead. Almost overnight the child now can, at will, recall experiences or people she knows and create clear inner pictures of real or imagined things. A friend of mine in Finland described a conversation she had with a six-year-old in her class: they were harvesting autumn fruits and vegetables and this child asked her where the watermelon tree was so he could pick watermelons. She answered that watermelons were too heavy to grow on trees so they grew on long vines on the good earth. The child looked very puzzled and finally said, “But how can that be, when I can see a watermelon tree so clearly in my head?” Dr. Claudia McKeen, an anthroposophic doctor in Germany and a leading researcher on the question of first grade readiness, tells of a child who went on vacation in the Swiss Alps one summer; months later, having breakfast with his mother, he looked dreamily out the window for several minutes and then said, “I am walking up the path and I can turn around and see the village below. Now I am at the foot of the mountain and I can see the path we will climb.” Several minutes later he said, “And now I am at the top of the mountain and everything below looks so small. Mom, can you see things in your head, too?” König calls this type of memory Time Memory, when we can produce an inner picture out of our own forces and the released forces of the ether body can begin to work in the soul realm of mental images.

In children’s play, too, we see a change. On the one hand, the wellspring of creativity seems to have dried up and we hear, “I’m bored!” or “There’s never anything to do!”—quite a change from the ever-active and ever-inventive child of only a few months ago. They mope around the class or the house, they are out-of-sorts most of the time, and the rest of the time, little rebels. They no longer give themselves over to the artistic activity, be it drawing, painting or beeswax, but seem to struggle with technique and achieving the look they want, which often results in frustration and discontentment. But once they become engaged in play, one immediately notices a different quality to their play. Now the child enters the classroom with a fixed and clear idea of what he is going to play that day and spends the rest of his time gathering the materials he will need to realize the idea he has. As I mentioned above, frustration

comes easily, because it is now important that the outer object (a painting or a drawing, the rocket ship or boat) match the inner picture. No longer do the materials in the classroom determine the play; instead, they serve to enable the child to recreate his or her inner picture. One can notice that the child has left behind the physical active soul—fantasy forces and true inner imagination begins to develop.

There is also a new social quality to the play; in the past, the roles of each child evolved as the play progressed, gender appropriateness was basically irrelevant (boys could be mothers, girls could be big brothers) and it seemed that the children were carried by the play. Now, with older kindergarteners, the children carry the play and individual roles are assigned right from the beginning of play. There are rules now, more prescribed ways of playing the roles, and there is a strong impulse towards community building. Very often the play of the older child tends to encompass most, if not all, the class. Postman, Santa Claus, restaurant are a few of the many plays that tend towards inclusiveness and almost always they are carried by the older children. Six-year-olds are social geniuses!

It is vitally important for the future health of the individual that children be allowed to build this healthy foundation for thinking with no interference from well-meaning adults. “Accomplishments that come with forces that are available later on should never be forced into an earlier stage, unless we are prepared to ruin the physical organism” (Steiner, *Soul Economy* 116). While we adults often think that fantasy takes us away from reality and we have an obligation

to bring children into the real world, “fantasy is the continuous joy that the child experiences on his waking to the earthly world” (König, 64). As teachers, it is our obligation and responsibility to safeguard this sacred time.

References

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FLY ON THE WALL

Sometimes, in our daily bustle, we forget how deeply the children are living into their life of fantasy. It is always so interesting, this “trek to China” that they make in the sandbox!

Two young five-year-olds shouted, “Let’s dig to China!” A three-and-a-half year old, Mary, looked excited and rather anxious, all at once. She turned to the teacher and said: “If my mommy and daddy come to pick me up while I am gone, will you tell them where I am?”

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