

What To Do with the Six-year-old

— Louise deForest

One of the great challenges of the age we live in is the acceleration of time. We move at an ever-quickening pace and the glut of information available to us paralyzes our will and clouds our thought life. With the advent of ever more sophisticated technology, we are being asked to do more and more in less time. The result of this is that we are increasingly absent from the lives we are living. This is a very powerful attack on the human being today—a dehumanizing force that takes us away from being present in our relationships, our actions, and even our thinking. No one suffers from this more than the children of the world, and the increasing demands on children to be what they are not yet ready to be is of deep concern to early childhood educators all over the world.

In many parts of the world the timing of going into first grade is no longer based upon a developmental threshold but is rather a purely numerical reality. Going to first grade is determined by state or government regulation, with no pedagogical basis to the determined age, and the question of whether a child is ready for first grade is often a moot point. Increasingly, early childhood education and the entrance into first grade is seen as a “quick fix” rather than a rights-based engagement with young children, their families, and their communities.

In many countries, children are mandated to go into first grade at the age of four or five, long before they are developmentally ready for a more academic approach to learning. This is often justified by the belief that children today are brighter, quicker, and, in the highly competitive world of today, need to know more to be able to survive in the world of tomorrow. However, the Gesell Institute did a study several years ago to ascertain whether the children of today are, indeed, developmentally ready at an earlier age than in the past. What they found is no surprise to those of us who work with children: children are capable of learning almost anything but they do not *know* what they have learned until they have reached the appropriate maturity in their development, and these develop-

mental stages—these awakening moments—occur at the same time for all children as they have been in the past. So a four-year-old can learn that $3+2=5$, but will never figure out that $2+3=5$.

The three-year incarnational rhythms remain true for all children, but suddenly we no longer trust that life will unfold for them—that life itself will prepare them for their future. Increasingly, in our wish to secure our children’s future, we rob them of their present. We are forgetting that transformation and metamorphosis are intrinsic elements in the growth process. Children play their way into knowledge, and what the child uses in play reappears around twenty-one years of age as independent reasoning; the formative forces that shaped the body are transformed into the capacity for memory and thinking; imitation gives rise to morality; reverence and devotion in the first seven years give rise, in old age, to the power to bless; just to mention a few examples. With creation comes potential, each moment influencing the next, each act helping to build the future. Each step prepares the way for the next and can serve as a strong foundation only when the child is given time.

Even within our Waldorf movement the pressure to do more, sooner, is making itself felt. Parents, not entirely convinced that play and movement is all their child needs, want to have tangible proof that they have done something “important” during their day. So teachers often feel pressure to have the children produce beautiful handwork or craft projects, gifts, daily drawings and other evidence that they are “doing something.” These pressures often add a great deal of stress to teachers’ lives, and increasingly teachers feel dread at an upcoming festival or birthday rather than enthusiasm and joy.

Our colleagues in the grades, not so used to the young child after eight years of carrying their classes into adolescence, express concern and confusion about the behavior of the children in their first grade. Early childhood educators may get the message, spoken or unspoken, that they have not done their job

correctly and feel pressure to “prepare” the children for first grade in spite of knowing that our task is to meet the children where they are.

Martyn Rawson, coordinator of the International Curriculum Research Group, wrote an article several years ago titled “The Challenge of the Transition from Kindergarten to First Grade.” In this article he presents research showing that twenty years ago, out of a group of 100 first-grade-aged children, only seven of them were deemed *not* ready for first grade; today, taking children from the same socio-economic level, only twenty out of 100 first-grade aged children *are* deemed ready for first grade. His group found what we all know: there are more language and speech difficulties, shorter attention spans, more signs of nervousness, more allergies, more difficult social integration and less capable gross motor activities—leading the group to conclude that what we are seeing with children today is an expression of disassociated development. In other words, there are less harmonious interactions in the bodies of the child.

So what are we to do when confronted by parents who make choices for their children out of their fears and concerns rather than out of their convictions, colleagues who question our abilities and feel that something is not quite “right” with the children who come to them from our kindergartens, state and government mandated age cut-offs for first grade regardless of the maturity of the children? These all create a confusing and sometimes distressing environment in which to work. In some classrooms I have seen a quiet desperation on the part of the teachers to make everyone happy. And in the midst of all this there stands the older child, eager to push forward yet not having had adequate time to consolidate the present stage of development.

Many schools and programs are experimenting with alternative classes and group activities designed to provide more complex challenges and movement opportunities while at the same time striving to maintain a play-based curriculum for these older children. In Europe, many places have created what’s called “Class Zero”, in an attempt to hold children back from first grade for another year while giving them plenty of stimulation and movement. These classes can give the children another year’s opportunity to develop their social skills, yet many teachers who have experienced this type of alternative class remain concerned. Having only six-year-olds in one class is not an easy situation; there are no younger children to temper the six-year-olds’ adventurousness and daring and few opportuni-

ties for the six-year-olds to be of service to others. Being six can become a situation of privilege with no attendant responsibilities. And it is very difficult to find teachers able to offer these children the subtle mixture of imagination and authority so needed at this age. All too often class teachers lead the Zero Class, unfamiliar with how to guide and carry children through self-directed play. The Zero Class slowly becomes incorporated into the life and the mood of the grade school, with more preparation and less play.

In many countries in Europe and in North America a compromise is being tried. Instead of having separate classes for the six-year-olds, special activities or clubs are formed, sometimes once a week, sometimes every afternoon after school. There the six-year-olds have special rituals or activities, stronger fairy tales are told, and more complicated games are introduced. In some places language classes are also offered as something special for the older children. Children look forward to this weekly or daily class and some teachers feel that this is a viable and positive addition to the children’s day, while others still wonder whether this is really necessary and in the best interest of the older child. In many of our schools, the older children must spend the whole day in school, staying for lunch and rest and play, as a way of giving them something extra or building stamina but also reducing the unstructured family time so many of them are missing.

In some countries it is first grade itself that is slowly transforming into a program that takes into account the children’s lack of academic readiness. There are moveable classrooms—classrooms that have almost no fixed furniture but, rather, large cushions designed to be used to write on but easily rolled away to provide ample space for movement activities and play. Some first grades in Europe have no academic subjects until the second half of the school year, focusing instead on games and movement. One first grade teacher I met in Germany was building a yurt in the woods with his new first graders and planning on having a year in the forest with his class, chopping wood, carrying water, and “living” in the yurt.

When we look for signs of first grade readiness in our six-year-olds, we are looking to see if the etheric has finished its formative work on the physical body and will now be freed for memory and inner picture making. When we do see signs of readiness we say that the etheric body is born. What we often forget is that, as with any process, time is the key element; the etheric body is not born, it is in the process of being born, a process that can last several more years. The

longer we can let this enormous transition unfold and stabilize, the more settled the children will be in their own lives. I am not suggesting that we should hold children back from first grade beyond their time but rather reminding us that children need movement and play far longer than we may realize. I visited a Waldorf school in Mexico where once a week the first and second graders had indoor play time for a full hour in a kindergarten classroom, and how they played together! Puppet shows, meals, restaurants, and building all happened at the same time and with great joy and concentration.

It is a given that children need more movement; no longer do they have home chores that give them the opportunity to overcome retained reflexes and help establish dominance; no longer do they roam freely outside and engage in the movements they are hungry for, so of course we must meet those needs in them. But I am often reminded of the advice given to me by a kindergarten teacher many years ago. My son had a June birthday and we had decided to keep him in kindergarten for another year. I asked the teacher whether I should enroll my son in the full-day program as a way to strengthen him for first grade the following year. Her advice rings as true today as it proved to be twenty-five years ago. She said, "Pick him up from school at noon and take him home to a good, quiet lunch. Give him a long rest time, go out for a walk in the park

afterwards, and he will be ready when the time comes for him to go to first grade."

Laurens van der Post once wrote, "If one served the small needs of all the living, urgent moments utterly, the great necessities could be left to take care both of themselves and those who trusted accordingly." I think it's important that we remember that it is not our job to prepare the older kindergarten children for first grade; our job is to meet them in the present moment, offering guidance and support where they need it and giving them the message that they are just perfect the way they are. Six-year-old kindergarteners are not "rising first-graders"; they are kindergartners. Can we trust that if we meet the children where they are, give them a healthy, joyful environment where they have the freedom to explore and learn, and offer extra support where it may be needed, they will be ready for whatever next step they need to take? Can we trust the wisdom of human development? Meaningful work, lots of movement, guidance in healthy social interactions, and above all, true rejoicing in the growth of capacities and abilities are all any of us need to be ready to meet the future. ♦

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Photo courtesy of Ruth Ker, Sunrise Waldorf School, Duncan, BC, Canada.