

Mixed Ages in the Kindergarten: Oldest and Youngest Together, or Not?

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Last spring, I attended a six-person retreat focusing on the topic of the older child in the kindergarten. Many deliberations confronted the working group who were asked to look at the needs and challenges of the six-year-old in the kindergarten class. Among these was the question of mixed age groupings. Does it serve both the youngest (generally thinking of three-and-a-half-year olds) and oldest (our six-year-olds, some turning seven before the school year's end) students to have them together in one class? This consideration poses challenges of protection for the younger ones, freedom of expression for the older ones, and practical issues for the teacher of how to orchestrate each day to embrace the needs of the entire group.

This is an interesting topic for me personally to ponder. I have never taught in anything other than a three-and-a-half to six-year-old classroom and have loved every minute of it. As one's own personal experience tends to create a baseline of "normal and typical," it is fascinating to see the wide range of opinions around this question, each of which has its merits. In Denver, the four kindergarten classes, three at the Denver Waldorf School and one at Parzival Shield School, all enroll this age range. One class had for some years only enrolled four-and-a-half to six-year-olds but changed to the wider mix a year ago. The teachers report great satisfaction with this change and will continue with younger children joining the class community.

So what are the issues that put this to question? With the little ones, there are clearly practical as well as philosophical concerns. In the beginning, the younger ones need greater physical assistance.

Working out how to provide this practical support calls for creativity, flexibility, and even some genius from the teachers. The six-year-olds tend to be more "worldly" and can bring some images and behaviors to the little ones that are far from the ideal we wish to cultivate with all of our students. Parents may complain about the "bad influence" of an older child as the young ones imitate all of their

experiences from school. So here rises the issue of protection.

As for the older children, parents often state that they do not wish their offspring to be "held back" by the class having to embrace the younger child and her/his needs. Parents may state, "I can see the younger children learning from the competence of the older ones, but what is in it for my older child? What benefit can the older children possibly receive from their little classmates? If you teach to the whole group, won't my child be bored?" And unspoken may hover the question, "Might my child be short-changed of the teachers' time and attention because of all that is required for the younger children's needs?"

Each of the above questions and many others that we could state from our personal experiences are valid. In the face of these questions, what are the supporting reasons for the mixed age grouping?

In studying the intentions behind Waldorf early childhood education, we find standing the picture of the kindergarten being the extension of "hearth and home." The kindergarten is a bridging step out into the world from the intimacy of the earliest years at home with the mother (which too few of our children get to experience in our modern culture). In the home, the children are all together, learning through imitation as they observe the practical care of the household and family. The family group has no segregation of ages. Everyone learns to adjust to the give-and-take of family life. Each one learns that personal needs will be met, but often we have to wait while someone more in need is cared for.

Waldorf education arose out of the ashes of the First World War, bringing with it impulses for creating a new sense of community. Thus, this picture of a kindergarten family that mirrors real community family life is, for me, very compelling. Although there is the challenge of the practical adjustments within this family constellation, there is also the opportunity to draw out of the children

flexibility, tolerance, and generosity toward one another and individual needs.

Having younger children in the group may call for slowing down the pace for each day and simplifying our expectations around the contents of each morning. This can be a plus for everyone.

Even our kindergartens can become too frantic when we succumb to the anxiety to offer too much to keep the children engaged. The slower and steady pace the little ones require can be a balm for everyone.

The step the six-year-olds will take into first grade will call for all the social skills the kindergarten environment can cultivate. The wider-age grouping can provide an even stronger foundation for creating class community over the next eight years. Years later, on the grade school playground, the grade two children will know many of the grade one and three children because they will have had many long hours of play with them in the kindergarten.

Over the years, there has been the opportunity to observe mixed-age groups in comparison with older kindergartens at our school. The consistent impression has been that the older group became more quickly self-aware than their age-mates in the mixed groups. The older group was more conscious of each other's capabilities or lack thereof. A more competitive mood arose in the older group. This suggests that having to adjust to and hold the younger ones in mind, for both teachers and students, helps the older ones to stay sweeter and younger in consciousness for a little bit longer.

The question of protecting our children from the rampant, negative influences of the world is overwhelmingly challenging for teachers and parents today. Negative moods, attitudes, and behaviors are imitated by children of all ages, not only the older ones. Whether littler children are in the classroom or not, we strive for ways to redirect and transform the images the children are bombarded with. That we strengthen, intensify, and potentize all of what we do with the children is imperative; and the presence of the younger children can help us to remain even more vigilant.

Movement; stories; festival experiences and images; and truthful, hard working, practical activities are all therapeutic antidotes for the ills all the children suffer. Parent education efforts become our most

potent vehicle for supporting healthy development of children of all ages.

Three-and-a-half has proved to be the youngest age that works well in our groups. Each of our classes has enrolled a younger three in exceptional circumstances and, each time has reconfirmed for us that three-and-a-half marks a significant step of emotional and social maturity. The stimulus and social expectations of the mixed-age class can be overwhelming for the younger three.

The spirit of "everyone's wants and needs will be met but not necessarily all at the same time" has proved a good guiding motto. It has worked well to dedicate especial attention to the youngest children through the autumn up to winter break, making sure each finds a secure sense of place in the class. This has been possible because the autumn months are so full of festival preparations and possibilities that it is easy to have a wide range of activities to keep all engaged. The little ones can stay close to the teacher's side if s/he is not otherwise playing. The older children are usually familiar with the activities and are eager to enter into the festival preparations with enthusiasm and experienced self-confidence. After winter break, the focus shifts to the older children. The younger ones by now should have a sense of belonging to and familiarity with the class routines and can take a step of independence. The pace can quicken a bit, if needed, and more challenging activities directed to the big children take the forefront. To do things that are big and heavy or precise and complicated feeds the six-year-old hunger for real tasks.

In a mixed-age grouping, the little ones bring their sweetness and a wide-eyed admiration for the competence and achievements their older classmates demonstrate. Their presence helps the kindergarten retain its connection to real home situations with children of all ages in the family, offering opportunity for developing patience, tolerance, flexibility, and generosity. The older ones have a subtle incentive to display their best, for the little ones to look up to. They can have the experience of being older and more competent, seeing their accomplishments contrasted to the developing skills of their younger classmates.

A last question is how many of each age might the class enroll. Some years ago, our kindergartens

decided to try to balance the age groups, having equal numbers of three-and-a-half, four-, five-, and six-year-olds. This looked great on paper. In reality, it proved completely impractical because the ages of children knocking on our door did not match our mathematical figures. We must strive to assure that there are enough of each age so that no child will be socially isolated. Yet the clustering of children and families who seek Waldorf education each year may surprise us. An experience of visiting with Freya Jaffke's kindergarten many years ago gave me confidence and permission to release expectation of how a class should be precisely configured. She was asked how she balanced the ages of the children in the class. Her reply was that she did not; she simply took the children as they came. If one year most applicants were younger children, they are the ones she enrolled in her class to join the ones already there. This is a guideline that has served us well.

There is surely no single "right" way we must all ascribe to on this question. For myself, teaching in a mixed-age kindergarten was a joy and a pleasure. The rewards of having many children for three years, deeply building and cultivating something with them, far outweighed the challenges and practical inconveniences of accommodating littler ones. The sense of family in a wider spread of ages was enriching for everyone. I can't imagine wanting to do it any other way.

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