

Brief Thoughts on Small Kindergartens ***Stephen Spitalny, Santa Cruz Waldorf School***

We would welcome articles by teachers on the advantages and disadvantages of small and large class sizes. One consideration, for example, is that in a smaller class such as Steve describes here, the children relate to only one adult. This creates a very strong and direct bond between children and teacher. An element that is not present, however, is the experience of being in a kindergarten carried by two adults who are sharing the care of the children and are working daily on their own relationship. At a time when so many children live in single parent homes, this social element also needs to be considered. — J.A.

At the beginning of the article by Christiane Maria von Königslöw, “The Children’s Oasis,” (*Gateways*, Fall 1999) it was mentioned by the editor that the issue of small kindergartens had not appeared in the newsletter for some time. Hence, as a proponent of small kindergartens, I am responding with some of my thoughts and experiences on the subject.

For the past decade we have set a maximum group size of fifteen children in kindergarten at the Santa Cruz Waldorf School. Prior to that we had larger groups, sometimes with assistants or parent volunteers. This fifteen-child maximum has been philosophically and financially supported by the Faculty and the Board of Trustees. There is one adult per group and no assistant. The ages of the children are from four years nine months to six years plus, as wide a mix of ages as is possible due to State and County licensing issues. Over these years group size has fluctuated from eleven to fifteen and from our three small kindergarten groups we fill one healthy sized first grade; this current year has twenty-eight first graders. I am convinced that small kindergarten groups are a healthy approach for the young child of our time. The following are some of my own considerations about various aspects of life in a small kindergarten.

1. There are more and more young children with developmental challenges, from delays in speech and movement development, to attention difficulties. In a small group it is more possible to observe and assess the individual children’s situations and to create ways to support their development. The children can get more attention from the adult, more conscious focus.

I have observed an increase in aggressive behavior among the children over the years. In a small group the adult is more able to work pedagogically and therapeutically with such children. One can find ways to engage this type of energy without having to resort to ‘time outs’ or sending the child out of the room.

In a small group, I am more able to evaluate individual first grade readiness in the group setting, rather than assessing each child individually outside the kindergarten setting. Over the summer, our first grade teacher-to-be does individual interview/assessments, but the class is already established.

2. To paraphrase Helle Heckmann, in our time the kindergarten has taken on the role of the home. It is here that there is rhythm, consistency, and a pace that allows the child to breathe. There is very much the feeling of a family at home in our kindergarten groups.

A small group is more suited to a smaller kindergarten room. It seems to me that young children are more secure and held in a small, home-like space. The large rooms necessary for large kindergarten groups seem to me to be too expansive and cavernous for the young child.

The small group can really feel like a family at home, the type of family life the children often don't have anymore. In our "family" it is possible to have different boundaries and privileges for the various children, and for the others to accept that as a matter of course. My experience of larger groups is that there are, of necessity, across-the-board rules that leave no room for the individual's capacities.

In my small kindergarten, except for food shopping, all activities related to life in the kindergarten are done with the children present. Backstage activity is unnecessary. Laundry is not sent away to be washed. We wash it together, hang it to dry, and fold it and put it away. All the housework is done on a regular basis by the children and me — the dishes, the windows, the floors, cobwebs, laundry, and food preparation. We do have a janitor who daily cleans the bathroom, but the children and I clean the bathroom too. Festivals are prepared for and set up. Of course, I do occasionally spend time in my kindergarten room when no one else is there, perhaps to set up something extra special like the Advent Garden, or perhaps because I, like some of you perhaps, am a perfectionist. But the gist is, it is possible for the children to be present and participating in all aspects of kindergarten life and this is important to me. I wonder if this is possible in a large group setting.

3. My philosophy of kindergarten life is to intervene in the children's activities as little as possible, and to be an example rather than an instructor. When children are allowed to come to their own solutions, there is a deep learning. This particularly applies to their conflicts. In a small group, it seems easier to allow the children to work off their rough edges on each other. I try to stand back and let them work things out themselves. Of course I intervene in moments of potential physical harm and before a child gets too frustrated or distraught.

I feel with Christiane Maria von Königslöw that in the small group the "individuals cannot avoid each other." The children cannot hide in the crowd. They are in a situation in which personal antipathies cannot simply be avoided, but the children must work through these antipathies to a place of tolerance for each other.

4. I have more time for each child and her family. I can feel that I am serving their needs adequately in terms of phone calls, conversations, and the like. Parents, too, are very enthusiastic about our small kindergarten size for they feel heard and attended to, and they have confidence their child will get more attention in the smaller group, compared to other kindergarten options in our area.