



Whom Are We Teaching?

Susan Kotansky

Literacy is a key word in any discussion of education today. Perhaps that is because so many individuals in our society are *not* literate. But what *is* literacy? According to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, literacy is the ability to read and reading is the ability to interpret signs and symbols, print being just one variety. As a kindergarten teacher in the NYC public school system, I have experienced increasing pressure to teach children how to read print, which raises some interesting questions for me. What does a child need to know before he/she can decipher print and make meaning of text? Who is the five year old child? How does the five year old learn?

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In order to read fluently it is clear that one must first learn to *speak and understand spoken language*. It is one thing to learn the mechanics of reading, i.e. phonics, encoding and decoding skills etc. The skill of being able to read is only the means to the ultimate end, i.e. understanding text.

As is often shown in observing demographic correlation to test scores, middle class children often

outscore their peers living in poverty. One of the glaring differences in these two populations is the *language skills* that the middle class children *already have* when they come to school. They are bringing a strong base of language and experience to their learning environment that less privileged children cannot compete with. Therefore children need experiential situations which create the opportunity to learn and use new vocabulary, and they need exposure to beautifully spoken and written language.

Who is the kindergarten age child?

A critical question for teachers is rarely asked: "Whom am I teaching?" In public education we learn methods, content and desired outcomes that are "aligned with standards." There is a real question, however, whether the standards are aligned with children. I would argue that, without a true picture of both the community of children we teach and the individuals within it to guide curriculum, we are not likely to serve our charges well. In my training as a Waldorf kindergarten teacher this question was the foundation upon which curriculum and methods were based. If teachers are not intimately aware of the developmental, cultural and age processes of the children they work with, how

can they serve them as individuals? “Whom are we teaching?” What standards do we strive to live by and what standards *should* the young child meet? As an experienced public school teacher with a Waldorf training, I have found myself confronted by two very distinct pictures of who the young child is. In many cases they contradict each other. It has been my professional task to find a way to reconcile the two.

During my Waldorf training, a metaphor guided my learning and understanding of the young child. The “kindergarten” or “child’s garden” is a rich environment, the “soil,” in which the young “seedling” is nurtured tenderly with all the essentials for a healthy “plant.” Our task is to help the establishment of strong roots that enable the “plant” to endure into the future with the capability of adapting to the elements and, when it is time, to flower and bear healthy fruit. We learned to enrich the “soil” with those ingredients that best address the needs of the growing child: meaningful, practical *deeds worthy of imitation* (such as cooking, making toys, keeping the room neat and clean); ample opportunity for *free play*, *artistic activities* including singing, recitation, painting, and movement; *lots and lots of storytelling*; *a warm, beautiful environment filled with nature’s treasures*; *a loving teacher and a rhythmic schedule*. The goal was a solid foundation upon which to build as the child progresses through the grades and into adulthood. We steered clear of those activities appropriate for older children, such as direct teaching of reading, writing and mathematics. Just as forcing the premature growth of a fruiting plant may yield a product in the short-term, what are the long-term consequences for the plant? When we ask our younger children to “produce,” to perform intellectual feats once considered the domain of grade-school, what is being sacrificed? In the Waldorf kindergarten those qualities and skills essential for academic success were being developed and fostered in an atmosphere centered around and created specifically for the younger child. One would not consider bringing the budding tomato plant to the produce department for consumption.

At the other end of the spectrum has been my experience in public education. The unspoken metaphor in this scenario is that of a vessel. We pour information into the children and have them constantly pour it back out, regurgitate undigested material, to see if they have learned anything. We read stories aloud to children, stopping at every moment to be sure that they understand, rather than allowing them to hear an entire story without interruptions. Then we wonder why they have no attention span. (How would adults feel having their movies at the Cineplex halted every few seconds to see if they “got” every concept and nuance?) We stop their play to ask them what they are doing and what they have learned. We are even encouraged to diagram and chart their experiences. There is fear that, without constant adult intervention, the child may simply have “fun,” a pleasant but unproductive activity.

Although I have taught for over twenty years, it is only in the recent past that the so-called “New Standards” movement has been the defining mandate for curriculum development. It appears to have begun, as many reform movements do, with excellent intentions to provide equal opportunity for all children, regardless of ethnicity or economic background, to receive the best education possible. Content and outcomes are clearly stated for each grade level in each curriculum area and all children are expected to be able to achieve them. Standardized tests are administered from third grade on in reading, writing, math and science to determine the success or failure of the children and the schools that serve them to meet the “Standards.” Poor test scores of individuals lead to summer school and retention, while poor performance school-wide may lead to “restructuring” and state takeovers of schools. Good scores in some areas of the country mean higher pay for teachers. The fear and often the reality that children, particularly those in inner-city, lower socio-economic situations, will not succeed on these tests, has led to the increasingly earlier introduction and testing of skills and the resulting perception of failure at a young age. For example, “Reading *Recovery*” is a program that starts in early first grade. By the tender age of five and a half, many children are already considered failures—it is a deficit model.

So here we have two different ways of looking at the young child. Is it possible to bridge the two? Can we grow vessels in the garden and can seeds flourish in a glass jar?

How does the five year old learn?

In my own experience of working with kindergarten children I have observed the following. Five year old children appear the most engaged, the most open, the most productive, the most creative, the most socially active, the most able to solve problems, and the happiest when they are PLAYING. When the imaginative faculties of the young child are awakened and they are allowed and encouraged to act them out in play, the very capacities that we are trying to teach occur naturally! They are such wonderful human beings that they are willing, delighted even, to please us, even when we ask them to do things that are inappropriate. But when they are engaged in meaningful play one can see that the child is doing what is *necessary* and *essential* for his/her healthy development. It is not measurable (how can one measure joy and deep involvement?), particularly in the moment. But what happens when children are *not allowed to play* during this period of their lives which occurs only once? We talk of “windows of opportunity” for math and reading. Although these so-called windows are the optimum time for learning, one can always learn later, with help. Is this so with play? If there is no time allotted for such “frivolous” activity, can this capacity ever be developed again?

What happens to the spring of creative, imaginative thinking if it is not allowed to flow? The question that needs to be asked here is not whether young children *should* play, but rather what they are learning through play. In terms of literacy, one can look again at the concept of reading as the ability to interpret signs and symbols. During free-play, with “open-ended” toys that can be transformed by the child, the ability to read abstract symbols is developed. When a play-stand and some chairs become a train or a restaurant, and a small block a morsel of food, the child is already using his/her ability to think in metaphor and to represent a concept with an abstract symbol (as in reading print). In play

children solve problems alone and cooperatively with peers and need to develop the ability to “read” social cues. They do “physics” and “architecture” in block building and become “scientists” during sand and water play. Of course basic math skills are exercised in sharing materials, meting out “food” and estimating how many children can fit in a “house.” Putting materials back in their proper place is sorting and classifying. The problem with play is not with what children are learning, but rather how can we as teachers learn to observe and understand the depth of knowledge and creative thinking that is taking place.

I have also observed and experienced the power of STORY-TELLING (as opposed to reading aloud—another experience altogether) as a pedagogical tool. As children listen to stories they are simultaneously creating mental images of the text, an essential aspect of reading comprehension. These are their own images—as opposed to those created by movie or video images, or even pictures in books. The child really has to *pay attention* and stay focused in order to understand the story, which, if told well, is an *invitation* that can hardly be refused. *Listening* to good literature is the natural step before *reading* good literature. When children become accustomed to listening to stories they begin to hear patterns of language that help them become fluent listeners and then fluent readers. They develop the capacity to predict word order and understand how a good story has a beginning, middle and end. This is their model for telling and ultimately writing their own stories.

And so the journey into literacy begins. A good reader brings a wealth of experience and language to the text. It is our job as educators of young children to facilitate the acquisition of both. By creating an environment and curriculum that respect the unique qualities that only five-year-olds possess, we can help develop capacities that will last throughout life.

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