

Report Writing

Ruth Ker

In September 2018, WECAN, the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America sent out a survey to member schools asking questions of early childhood educators about report writing. This topic is alive in the Waldorf early childhood movement these days and can be somewhat controversial. For all practitioners and the families they serve, assessment and report writing can have the possibility of potential benefits and disadvantages.

Wishing for further understanding myself, I prepared for the writing of this article by interviewing some of our beloved mentors and some experienced Waldorf educators who are currently in the field. Some of our colleagues were full of appreciation for the opportunity to write reports and others were questioning the validity of this practice. Because I encountered so much variance in the responses and also a wide range of motivating factors, I thought it would be of interest for us to have a closer look at this topic. I welcome any further comments that you may have, as well.

Some of the comments encountered:

“Is something drifting into early childhood which is more grades relevant?”

“It’s not clear how report writing can be brought in such a way that it relates to healthy child development.”

“We all need each other. Report writing could become a way of participating in a healing conversation.”

It is this last comment that I would like to take up more fully in this article. Although I fully appreciate and support the reasons for not writing reports, I’d like to explore some other thoughts that may help us prepare for another possibility on the horizon.

It seems that the request for report writing is entering our schools from a variety of directions. Interestingly enough, in the small cross-section of responses in the recent survey (56 responses from 178 WECAN Full and Associate Member Programs), the majority of educators replied that report writing was requested in their schools by the school faculty or college of teachers first, then by school administration, then by parents and finally by local, state or provincial regulations..... in that order. One colleague reported, “Perhaps the colleagues/administrators think parents want the reports. Other colleagues reported that they rarely get feedback from the parents and some said that the parents are more interested in Parent-Teacher conferences than written reports. If it is the case that schools are beginning to recognize a need to respond to the requests for reports/assessments within the culture of their specific communities, then how can we make these reports as health-promoting, helpful and harmless as possible?

In a document published by ECSWE, the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education, called “Assessment: Friend or Foe of Learning”, it is suggested that “individual centred education” like Waldorf education, “needs to be accompanied by forms of assessment that takes the unpredictable development of individuality into account.” This report goes on to say “Assessment practices should

reflect the social nature of learning and therefore foster relationships between learners and teachers instead of alienating them. This requires an atmosphere of trust and esteem.” (1)

In the WECAN survey on Report Writing, many colleagues commented that some types of reports based on child observations are “, “fixed pictures” “snapshots” of specific points in time and the actuality is that children tend to go through many growth spurts and rapid change from birth to seven. As expressed “We find that written reports fixate the parents on a point in time and make the conversation between parents and the teacher less fluid” Others expressed also that, by the time the parent reads the report, there is the likelihood that the child could have passed through this stage and be on to some other developmental manifestation. Parents may then be feeling the need to respond to something the report describes and the child will have grown out of this. Many schools reported a lack of consensus about whether it is appropriate at all to write reports on children under age seven. (2)

However, there were also very many early childhood educators commenting that, although it’s “time-consuming”, they have begun the journey of finding the way to interface with the culture of their schools and communities, by developing a skill-set around report writing.

In my research, I learned that, although it might be the choice of some educators to refrain from report writing, it is a mistake to generalize, thinking that it has been a common Waldorf practice to refrain from writing reports in early childhood education. Many of our experienced elders relate that they have enjoyed the opportunity to practice the art of report writing as a way to create a bridge with the parent and/or the child’s next teacher. For them, it has become a self-education opportunity to cultivate flexibility of thinking, positivity and objectivity. Surprised by this joyful recognition, some of these educators have reported a spiritual aliveness inherent in the process; a way of doing ongoing child study that welcomes the participation of other beings.

End of the year report writing or check-ins with parents during the year can become opportunities for the educator to hone in on the essence of the child and develop a closer working relationship with those who accompany the child at home and in the spiritual worlds. One teacher reported, “My end-of-year report was my last loving embrace before the family left for the summer!”

There are countless ways to take up the art of report writing. Many schools have a designated process for passing on child observations for rising first graders and for assessments/reports for the younger children. The survey indicated this was more common for the kindergarten than the nursery aged child.

The International Waldorf Early Childhood Association, IASWECE, has created a position statement for “Non-judgemental Assessment in Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Settings” to support early childhood educators who find themselves required by regulatory bodies to write evaluative reports on each child in their care. This document, **important** reading for Waldorf early childhood educators, urges teachers to refrain from “reaching diagnostic and specific conclusions”, and to ensure that “all observations are conducted in a spirit of caring, loving attention” with a “gesture of gentle inquiry” in order “to deepen the relationship with the child”. We can heed their caution, “The early years of childhood need special protection to guard the child’s unfolding forces against premature expectations” (3)

So we can see that this question, affecting early childhood education on many continents and in a diversity of ways, is not so simple anymore. Responding to the educational climate of the community in which they live, many Waldorf/Steiner educators are now compelled and even sometimes required to find the best way to interface with the predominant educational impulses of this time.

In the Canadian province where I live, most of the Waldorf schools are significantly subsidized by government grants. The writing of reports has become a necessary part of the mutuality of this agreement and the teachers with whom I spoke expressed some interesting viewpoints. They reported that it has been a steep learning curve and an arduous task for them. It involved learning new skills and language and finding ways to communicate the wealth of Waldorf education within narrower parameters which didn't quite fit the totality of its shape. With honest reflection on the drawbacks of this process, they all commented on how valuable it has also been to learn the new language of the core curriculum; how supportive it has been to emerge from their own classrooms and collaborate with other Waldorf kindergarten colleagues; and how important it has been to win the respect and admiration of the government inspectors. The task of delving into these lengthy reports has helped the Waldorf schools in this province to have conversations with licensing bodies where deeper understandings have occurred. The Waldorf educators learned that play-based kindergartens are promoted by the provincial ministry of education and the ministry learned that Waldorf schools have insights and do a stellar job at this. As one Waldorf educator expressed, "We really don't have to see ourselves as separate from that world".

Two teachers told me the story about one of the inspectors who was asking a kindergarten teacher about how she dealt with the topic of death. The teacher responded that death is a natural part of life and the children often play it out. The next day this same inspector visited the next door kindergarten where the children were "playing veterinarian". The inspector took off her shoes and climbed up in the loft with the children who were performing "an operation on a cat". The cat began to bleed and the children began to talk about this, exclaiming about what they should do next; getting into huddles with shells tied onto ropes (stethoscopes) and sticks (scalpels), skillfully tending to their patient. Of course, eventually the cat died, but not until it had bled profusely. The inspector then began to climb down the loft ladder but the children stopped her saying, "Wait, we'll spray the blood off the ladder so you don't slip". Whereupon, one child scrambled past the inspector down the ladder to clear the way before her, spraying water with an imaginary hose.

In this same inspection visit, the officials took pictures of the handwritten reports of the educator, exclaiming about the beauty of the presentation and later they recommended to the grade school faculty that they follow the kindergarten teacher's example.

So, what is it we should consider if we find ourselves in the position of being a report writer? Here, we have the opportunity to take counsel from Rudolf Steiner when he says, "The teacher must feel that he or she should perceive each child as a question posed by the supersensible world to the sense world."

(4)

We can ask ourselves, 'what is the gesture behind the report. What is my intention or motivation for taking up this task? ". If it is to prove something that we want others to think about a child because this is the judgement we have made, then we are probably striving in the wrong direction. If it is to build a picture that allows the child's essence to shine through, so it can be recognized by the parents, our colleagues and even spiritual beings who want to contribute and inspire us further, then we are probably on the right track.

Some teachers approach this task by giving a recap of what happens in the yearly programming and then adding some positive information about the uniqueness of each individual child. This allows the teacher to provide a deeper picture of the qualities of the child that the parents might not be seeing or understanding. It can be an opportunity for the educator to relay insights that have occurred, perhaps in connection with what the child's angel would want to be recognized and, ultimately what the child unconsciously would want us to understand and share with the parents. Oh the joy of being truly seen!

Parents can sometimes have preconceived ideas about their child based on previously encountered behaviors. The child may have grown out of these manifestations but the parent may still be attached to a former pattern that the child has outgrown. Reports can be a vehicle for transforming ideas and removing attitudes that limit the child's greatness.

Reports can also be a vehicle for cultivating more conversation with parents who can then teach us about their insights into their child. I remember as a parent looking for the indication that the teacher really saw and recognized the spirit of my child.

Some educators value the importance of developing report-writing skills as a preparation for practicing right speech - as an aid to knowing how to speak about the child in Parent/Teacher conferences. Writing the report, imagining the parent reading it and, in the process, carefully walking the well-worn path you have tread together is also a loving deed which can expand into a greater healing for the parent and the child. Developing trust by working actively on warm connection and integrity in relationship with the parents is the prerequisite to being effective in these communications.

For some educators, report writing has been a path of consciousness to help develop clarity about what they are actually seeing in the child. And, sometimes this process makes us realize we have to go back and look again because we don't have a full picture. This becomes obvious when we imagine the child in our mind's eye in our evening practice. We can be reminded that we don't really 'see' the child in enough fullness in order to be able to form a picture to offer up to the spiritual worlds for guidance and support. Sometimes we realize that there are certain children, who are invisible to us, perhaps because they require so little attention. These, often calm and complacent children, may be unconsciously yearning to be seen.

Reports can also be opportunities to recommend professional support for the child. These types of reports must be written with the greatest care AFTER the educator has spoken already to the parent about the recommendation or whatever is the sensitive issue in the report. It is a good rule of thumb to always find the way to speak to the parent first if you have any concern or delicate words you will need to write in the child's report. These kind of communications can give you the opportunity to recommend

practitioners that you know will make a positive contribution to the child's, parents' or family's wellbeing. Developing a resource list of healers who are resonant with Waldorf practices is a must nowadays.

Reports also allow us to impart the deeper attributes of the children to the upcoming first grade teacher. It can be helpful as well to pass on something to the first grade teacher about your working relationship with the parents. The interactions between the children and how they operate as a 'rising first grader group' is also important information for the first-grade teacher.

Sometimes this teacher is unable to absorb all that the kindergarten teachers can verbally tell them at a scheduled meeting time. A written report gives them the opportunity to glance back at the teachers words later, at their own convenience.

Educators have told me that meditating on the children and families for the purpose of passing on an accurate picture has allowed them to deepen their own understanding of the intrinsic beings of the children and the parents as well. Within the body of the report to the parent, ideas about what the child can do over the summer can also be recommended. Sometimes parents worry that they might need to do something to prepare the child for grade one.

Of course there is the side of reporting that can deteriorate into checklists and core competencies, describing the child in unnatural forms. Some of our Waldorf educators are having to rise to the task of learning this new language and bringing meaning to it in order to find authenticity in their report writing. Finding the ways to have these truthful conversations with other school authorities who don't speak our common language is an important task of our time. Those that can cultivate this reciprocity are the current pioneer warriors. This is important work and something that will need to happen if Waldorf education is to share its gift with the world.

As one teacher expressed, "These reports will continue to be my dragon until I find the way to authentically assess the children." How do we accomplish this with the minimum of compromises? Rudolf Steiner in *Discussions with Teachers*, tells us of many situations where, in the first Waldorf school, compromises had to happen.

In closing, I express my admiration and gratitude to those who are pioneering these conversations for us in a world where competencies, core curriculum and proficiencies define young children. Thank you for your innovative striving, extra work, flexibility and courage. Every day, many of us experience the gift Waldorf education has to give. We have a responsibility to share these understandings as well. It's my deepest hope that the children of our time will find protection from and perhaps even be served by this dragon that our dear colleague above has mentioned.

1) *Assessment: Friend of Foe of Learning*, ECSWE, Brussels, Aug. 26, 2016, pages 1 and 6

2) *Survey on Assessment and Report Writing*, WECAN, September, 2018

3) *Non-judgemental Assessment in Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Settings: Seeing the Child*, IASWECE position statement, 2018, page 2 and 3

4) *Education as a Force for Social Change*, Rudolf Steiner, pg 56-57, Anthroposophic Press, 1997

5) *Discussions with Teachers*, Rudolf Steiner, Rudolf Steiner Press, 1967, London