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Thoughts for the week

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Over the past two weeks, we have been holding transition meetings for families whose children will be moving from third into fourth grade, from fourth into fifth grade and from sixth into seventh grade. These meetings about transition emerged from the prior meetings in which we shared the results of the Parent Survey.

At these sessions, teachers provided parents with information about the overall curriculum, about social expectations, trips, specific topics and books, about homework, tests and much more. Our sense is that these are important meetings to hold every year so that parents can have a better sense of what to expect as their children move from grade to grade.

While there was specific information shared during these sessions, the theme that slowly evolved centered on the idea of what exactly was a transition. Children move from grade to grade; they read different books, study different areas of history and social studies, explore new areas of science and math, continue developing art and music skills. These are the 'givens' of a school curriculum that has a scope and a sequence.

What interests me is the manner in which the learning (as well as the teaching) moves through a transition. Education is cumulative; yet also thrives during certain growth interval. So that while a child in the third grade may experience a story as a series of narrative details, incidents and settings, a child in the fourth grade may be able to see that story in somewhat of a more abstract manner. As children grow, their skills develop but so also does their capacity to abstract and to draw on what they have previously learned.

The great critic, Northrop Frye, made reference to this in a short book called *The Educated Imagination*. I have mentioned Frye's book in other contexts, but within the context of the idea of transition, Frye's point about the educating of the imagination has a direct impact on what we are seeing in children. A child who studies math in the third grade, of course, covers certain topics in math. Obviously, these topics are important in themselves. But something else is happening. By studying those topics, that child is also learning to think in mathematical terms. He or she begins to see that their world can be formulated through math. The same is true for literature, history, science etc. When a child reads a book, the details of the story are important, identifying the characters feelings and thoughts are important. However, even more powerful than the details is that the child begins to understand the world, his or her world, through a fictional representation.

These 'transitions,' from grade to grade, from the concrete to the abstract, from detail to representation speak to the central purpose of education. If education or knowledge is the way in which we explain or represent our world, then the accumulated power of the transition from grade to grade, from developmental stage to developmental stage, from beginning to experience forms the most important part of that transition. Transitions are not just from year to year; they are from one intellectual level to another.