

Grade Six in Edmonton

Mrs. Cunningham is a teacher. She works for the Edmonton Public School system. Most of the schools in Edmonton, Canada, are public, with the exception of a few religious and language-focused schools. She has a Masters in Education, with a specialty in high school education, and experience teaching at all levels. Edmonton's classes tend to have 20 to 26 students, evenly split between boys and girls. Like many young teachers, she spends part of her time as a staff teacher and part of her time as a substitute. She's certified to teach kindergarten through twelfth grade, and as long as the job isn't subbing in a very science-focused course, she will most likely take it. Mrs. Cunningham, herself, went to an Arts magnet school, a public school that takes students with certain special aptitudes.

When it comes to supervising sixth grade students, it's mainly a matter of ensuring they are properly doing what they're supposed to do. For example, most of them know how to cross the street safely. The danger is only that they become silly in the process of crossing. For the first time, the students are able to do things on their own. However, in some cases, the rules may not have caught up to them. For example, most sixth grade children don't need an escort to the bathroom anymore, even though some schools have rules that say they do.

But the real significance of grade six, says Mrs. Cunningham, is that it marks the beginning of self-awareness in the children about their roles as social creatures. Not only can they understand how they are seen by others, they understand the consequences of those impressions, and slowly but surely come to realize how those impressions can be adjusted to different effects.

When they enter sixth grade, Canadian students assume their place as the most senior in the elementary school. Girls seem to mature faster than boys, at least emotionally; and you can see it in how differently they handle this new role. Sixth graders don't know how to hide their feelings yet, but they're slowly learning. Everyone gets more self-conscious about what excites them.

The differences and choices that emerge can be even subtler than that. Even beyond how children choose their friends or how enthusiastic they allow themselves to appear, the special social awareness of sixth grade students makes them think for the first time about

identity as a goal in itself. They start to imagine identity as something that exists apart from how others see it. They see identity as something they can create and shape within themselves.

Some sixth grade students crave order, stability and the confines that allow them to still be carefree students. Others want to be less safe, more interesting. They want to escape boundaries, have adventures and test limits. But they all start to want to be seen as individuals. They want to be recognized and appreciated for their individual traits, who they are, and are not. Grade six marks the true beginning of experimenting with which traits will be incorporated into their identity, and which will not. They will often say things simply to see what kind of response they will get. When they see the response, they ask themselves simply: Do I like how this feels? Is this something I want to become part of who I am? What I'm known for?

Mrs. Cunningham feels her job is to create a positive and welcoming environment for these experiences. "I want to help children feel less fear. When they feel safe, they feel freer to learn. I want to make everyone feel as though they have something valuable to bring to the table."