Nimble Hands, Warm Hearts, Wise Heads

The Waldorf Way: Handwork at Berkeley Rose Waldorf School, by Natalya Logunova, BRWS Handwork Teacher.

Waldorf education is unique for many reasons. One of those is the intentionality with which each aspect of the curriculum meets the growing child at its different developmental stages.

Berkeley Rose Waldorf School's handwork teacher, Ms. Logunova, has offered an inspiring and educational outline of the handwork curriculum through the lower grades in Waldorf education!

"If you've had the experience of binding a book, knitting a sock, or playing a recorder, then you feel that you could build a rocket ship or learn a software program you've never touched. It's not bravado, just a quiet confidence. There is nothing you can't do. Why couldn't you? Why couldn't anybody?" — *Peter Nitze, Waldorf and Harvard graduate, and director of an aerospace company.*

Waldorf students have a "can do" attitude. They develop this enthusiastic approach to life as they grow in the Waldorf school community where their

education is enriched with a well-planned curriculum, an important part of which is the Applied Arts program.

The Applied Arts program consists of handwork, woodwork, and clay modeling, each fostering the above “can do” attitude. With this, students develop a healthy will and cultivate an understanding and appreciation for how things are made because they make them themselves. The Handwork stream of the Applied Arts curriculum in a Waldorf school stimulates the creative powers and establishes a heart-related aesthetic and confidence through a conscious guidance of the student’s developing will. Handwork draws the will forces into the heart realm of feeling and beauty, stirring imagination into creative action, using the will in a new way.

To explore the applied arts through the grades, continue reading.

First Grade

In the first grade, the dawn of thinking begins to break through with the change of teeth, and the hands are ready to take on more subtle tasks as the fingers become more nimble and awake. The heart of the child is eager to make things to keep and give away.

It is well known that the hands offer knowledge about the world. Current research tells us that touching, exploring, and manipulating the physical world stimulates cellular development in the brain, thus strengthening the physical foundation of thinking through activating pathways in the brain. With handwork, students learn to plan ahead, work step by step, and sequentially. They learn to envision a project – whole to parts then parts to whole. All these skills are carried over into math, reading, spelling and writing as handwork enhances student abilities in all academic areas. Besides beauty appreciation, their aesthetic perception is being modeled as they ‘make useful creations which also shall please’.

The first graders work on training their fingertips and fine motor skills starting with making their own knitting dowels through sanding them patiently. The children will learn to knit not by understanding the technical details on how to

knit but through muscle memory. The children sit in a circle and learn short songs and verses to remember the sequence of steps for each stitch.

Rudolf Steiner once said, “Thinking is cosmic knitting”, a wonderful thought upon which to meditate. One can imagine the continuous thread of thinking weaving into the whole patterns of thought. During the quiet part of the lesson the students are encouraged to “listen to their thoughts” as they learn to be comfortable working in silence and to start practicing mindfulness. It is a nourishing atmosphere for children and a chance to tap into the potential of their gamma brainwaves.

The gift of natural fibers and wooden tools awaken the child’s tactile sense, which, along with plant-dyed rainbow colors of various hues and values, stimulates their mental development. The first graders practice math concepts through counting stitches and rows by ones and twos as well as preparing their eye muscles for reading by knitting left to right. The power of concentration is awakened with each stitch. The rhythmical pulse of repetition becomes enlivened by the enthusiasm for the project being made. Attention to detail is learned when one stitch looks different from another and needs to be improved to keep an even gauge. Anticipation and surprise keep students involved so the will is strengthened as they witness their persistence paying off.

The first graders are also helped to develop good habits such as handling materials with clean hands, learning not to waste anything, and putting things back in a tidy manner.

Second Grade

The second grader brings knitting to the next level with more complex projects and the use of a wider palette of colors to support their inner feeling of joy and satisfaction in their work. Children choose smaller needles for knitting as they learn the purling stitch. Remembering how a purl stitch is formed differently than a knit stitch takes much concentration and fine motor agility.

The next challenge is to learn to increase and decrease stitches, again using their math skills. Handwork projects are made that require both knitting the garter stitch and purling to form a stockinette stitch. Some children at Berkeley Rose help create items for school fundraising. Besides being a heartfelt gesture, working together on an item as a gift increases the children's enthusiasm while the anticipation of pleasing someone cultivates altruism.

The last part of the year is dedicated to an introduction to crocheting. Creating simple cylindrical eurythmy shoe bags and square potholders inspires children to crochet during summer months. Making things on their own when children are young develops powers of invention and creative thinking, which, if continued, will increase as they mature.

Third Grade

The third grader seeks to be useful in their daily lives as they enter a new stage in their development. In handwork class, making beautiful things that are useful fosters the feeling that beauty is part of everyday life and that they are not separate from it.

The "can do" attitude continues into grade 3 when students master crocheting. The crochet hook mimics the pencil grip, which prepares hands for cursive handwriting and building the proper muscle memory for successful handwriting skills. Left-handed children however are encouraged to use their right hand for crocheting to get them ready to succeed with their string instruments.

Since crocheting emphasizes one hand instead of two, the balance is different, although both hands are busy. This requires a new, more intense kind of concentration. This is another rhythmical, repetitive activity with the hands that strengthens the will and brings clarity to thinking. While difficult to learn at first, the students rise to the challenge with their strong willing and learn to single and double crochet in circular movements. Again, math comes into play, counting stitches and rows, increasing and decreasing to make sure the circles stay in a flat 2 dimensional form. Starting with multi-corner star placemats for practice, children endeavor the most exciting task of the year…

designing and crocheting their own hats! Children learn to endure and practice with grit while creating their masterpieces. In both knitting and crocheting third-graders learn to critique their own stitches. They know ways to seek assistance while they learn the value of a mistake. Striving for the best, the children are willing to take out stitches to improve their work. This lesson is generalized in future endeavors — it is okay to make a mistake as long as you correct it if you can, learn from it, and then move on. This is a valuable life lesson in itself. Some third graders at Berkeley Rose who finished their hats early helped the teacher by sewing a circular braided rag for the school fundraising event.

Fourth Grade

In the fourth grade, the children will learn basic geometric principals and find satisfaction in seeking to understand what beauty is, along with how to form a concept and bring it to completion. This year is dedicated to fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination brought through embroidery and cross-stitch. Cross-stitching is another tool that supports strong communication of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. The fourth grader is encouraged to slow down and pay more attention to detail instead of speeding up and moving at the faster rate that our society is pushing for. A feeling of peace and great satisfaction is felt in the fourth grade child when they are able to relax into their needlework. Students enjoy “stitch challenges” while working on their needle books and handwork bags. Planning ahead is required, as stitches need to be consistent in size and much consideration is paid to each color choice. Once everyone is finished with these tasks, students are taught basic rules of symmetry through cross-stitch as they discuss working in four quadrants along an x and y axis. Students then design useful 2-way and 8-way pincushions and scissor cases. Keeping the design symmetrical is challenging and pleasing at the same time. Attention to detail is required along with patience and perseverance.

As our Berkeley Rose Waldorf School grows a grade each year, an exciting handwork curriculum is being prepared for the rising fifth graders!

I am excited to share insight into some of the deeper importance of the applied arts in Waldorf education. I want to give credit to two fellow handwork artists, Patricia Livingston, handwork teacher at the Rudolf Steiner Waldorf School and Cindy Hansen of White Mountain Waldorf School, from whom this article was inspired, along with my teachers and colleagues at the Waldorf Applied Arts training in Spring Valley; and the book, ‘Will-Developed Intelligence’ by David Mitchell and Patricia Livingston.