

The Importance of Handwork in the Waldorf School

By Patricia Livingston

Handwork is an important element in Waldorf Education, being understood as critical to the intellectual, emotional, and volitional development of the child. In the first grade the children learn knitting, and in the course of their schooling will learn to crochet, to sew by hand, knit with five needles, to cross-stitch, do wood carving, and to make clothing using a sewing machine. The following article is an excerpt from a newly published book called Will-Developed Intelligence: Handwork and Practical Arts in the Waldorf School by David Mitchell and Patricia Livingston. While addressed to and written primarily for teachers, the piece will be of interest to anyone concerned about education and the development of the child. Will-Developed Intelligence is published by the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, is 210 pages long and costs \$22.00, plus \$4.50 shipping. It can be ordered from AWSNA at (916) 961-0927 or via the online bookstore at www.awsna.org.

R.E.K.

The hands are a unique and beautiful part of the human being, and they bring us important, far-reaching experiences. Therefore as teachers we must try to help the children become aware of their hands and of the great gifts they bestow on themselves and on others. Their hands need to become skillful, sensitive, and strong so that they can accomplish many wonderful deeds. Blind people get to know the world through their hands, but most people are unaware of the knowledge that can be gained when the hands are used in useful and sensitive ways. Think of art and music! Think of what physical work and daily tasks teach us. Think of a handshake and what it tells us about another person.

Handwork and crafts should be imaginatively and artistically taught, so that the children are encouraged to make original designs that are colorful and creative in form. The children should

learn new ways to use color and to make designs that indicate the practical use of the project. Rudolf Steiner gave several indications of how this can be done. The painting and form drawing the children do in all their lessons are extremely important. Working with color and experiencing how colors flow into one another in painting affects everything the children do in and beyond handwork lessons, and fosters artistic, imaginative growth in their thinking as well.

We want the children to make things they love and enjoy and to work skillfully, always increasing their artistry. Handwork should be relaxing and fun, and at the same time productive, involving strong will activity. Nothing happens if you don't use your hands and get to work!



Handwork projects created by Waldorf students in the elementary grades.

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Working to transform the materials of the earth fosters inner growth and a sense of well-being in the children. These lessons support and complement other subjects in the school, helping to bring balance and wholeness to the education.

In the mature artist, handwork and crafts become a balanced activity of thinking, feeling, and willing. The will is the part of us that is most asleep. Handwork can gently wake up and educate the will starting at an early age. Why is this so important?

The will is ultimately connected to the thinking. It is really the task of every Waldorf teacher to help the children become clear, imaginative thinkers, human beings who can go into any profession or any area of work with new, creative ideas—ideas that will be urgently needed as we meet the twenty-first century. The whole Waldorf curriculum guides the children in this direction, beginning in the kindergarten where the creative play of the young child stimulates the inner forces that later become active in the creative thinking of the adult.

Through beauty, color, and form, handwork and crafts help to lead the children from play to imaginative thinking as adults, forming a kind of bridge between the two. The hands play an important part in this awakening. The activity of the fingers stirs the senses that connect the child to the world, and his whole life of thought begins to move.

Handwork and crafts have been taught in all the grades since the founding of the first Waldorf school. Rudolf Steiner wanted the boys and girls to work together in these classes. In this he was way ahead of his time. It was unheard of to have boys doing handwork in 1919. Rudolf Steiner insisted on this radical innovation because, he said, handwork and crafts lead to the enhancement of judgment. Judgment comes out of the imaginative forces, working through the heart. It is not the head alone but the whole human being that forms a judgment. Many of the senses are used in handwork—sight, touch, movement, balance, and so on. The senses take in different impressions of the world and join them together to form a judgment. Our hands bring us into a deeper, closer relationship to the world and, therefore, to a greater understanding of humanity.

Much of handwork has to do with waking up, seeing things, and noticing details. Recent



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Learning to knit takes concentration and patience.

brain research has found that using the hands opens up neurological pathways that would otherwise atrophy. In other words, the inter-relationship of the hand and eye working together allow more neurological pathways to function. So one could say that handwork with young children is a training ground for thinking, and the more one includes beauty and feeling, the more creative will the thinking become.

Many things are happening simultaneously in the handwork classes. First, of course, one wants the children to learn practical skills, to learn how to use the tools, to respect and care for the tools and other materials involved. Also, one wants the children to form ideas about what they wish to make, to create their own designs, and then actually carry out a project that results in a beautiful, well-made piece of work. It is a most satisfying experience to make something and see the practical results. This is true confidence building. Therefore, we must see to it that all the projects the children make are things they can learn to do by themselves, that there are no hidden steps done by the teacher, and that the work is finished on time.

Some children need more help and encouragement than others in order to achieve such goals, but the wise teacher will know how to guide them without destroying their confidence and sense of achievement. Confidence in one subject is carried over into another. Activating the will strengthens ability in all subjects.

There are immense therapeutic possibilities in handwork teaching. Waldorf teachers must study and strive to understand Rudolf Steiner's view of the developing child—an ongoing work for all of us. The teacher must learn to work in a way that is appropriate for each age group, must study the different types of children (small- and large-headed, and so on), and understand and work with the different temperaments. We must know the children so well that we begin to see exactly what each child needs. How much help will move someone forward? Who needs to slow down and perhaps redo work that is poorly and thoughtlessly done? How do you handle a melancholic perfectionist? With the older children it is important that they begin to develop some self-awareness about the way they work.

Resourcefulness is developed as the children see how much they can achieve with a few simple materials. Many simple tasks are no longer experienced in the home. Children today often have no idea how to sew on a button. When a young child learns the "magic trick" of putting a cord in a drawstring bag, he is thrilled. He then becomes more interested and resourceful in solving other problems.

The gifts of nature fill our handwork lessons and create an opportunity to involve the children in the world of ecology and social interaction. The children experience wool, cotton, and many other fibers

through using these materials. They learn of the sources of these materials, about the natural dyes used to color them, and how human beings have contributed to their development and to their use. Respect and reverence are fostered for all we receive and for how humankind and nature work together. We should use only natural fibers in our classes, if possible. Touching silk or wool is an experience very different from that of handling synthetic materials. Our Waldorf kindergarten children know that well!

In a first grade, as the children use their beautiful wool, one can talk about the sheep. Near the Rudolf Steiner School in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, there is a sheep farm. Many children pass the farm daily and watch the sheep gradually grow heavy with wool. Then suddenly one day they see the sheep shorn—a rather shocking experience, but an opportunity to discuss how generously the sheep give their wool for our scarves, and also to talk about the craftsmen who spin it into yarn for us. First-grade children know from the fairy tales how "magical" spinning is and still retain a feeling of wonder about spinning straw into gold. One can also speak about the trees from which our wooden needles are made. The children learn to value and not waste



Doing handwork with a friend is fun. Here two students compare their progress.

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On a sunny day, students in this Waldorf high school weaving class work outside on inkle looms to make woven belts.

these gifts. Conversations such as these continue into the upper grades, changing according to the age of the children, the crafts they are learning, and the materials they are using. At the appropriate time modern technology will also be discussed.

All this helps the children make a real connection to their surroundings, closing a gap created by a modern world in which everything appears out of stores in a somewhat abstract way, made out of unimaginable materials which seem worthless and easily disposable. The children see so much waste! Through the handwork classes they gain a realistic knowledge of and reverence for the world of nature, and become aware of the ecological problems that arise in our modern world. We need to encourage new perspectives and foster a real social consciousness. ✱

Patricia Livingston was born in Manhattan and attended the Rudolf Steiner School of New York (the first Waldorf school in North America) for her first five years of schooling. Later, after having trained as a singer and then having married and had children, she returned to the school as a handwork teacher and was privileged to have Arvia Ege, noted artist and teacher of handwork, as her mentor. Patricia was with the New York school for twenty-seven years, serving a term as chairperson of the faculty and taking a special interest in teacher training and in working with parents. In 1984 Patricia left the school and Manhattan and moved to Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Since then she has been active throughout North America advising established schools, training teachers, and helping young schools in their developmental stages. She is a member of the Pedagogical Section Council of North America, which she chaired ten years. She has served on the editorial advisory board of *Renewal* since the magazine was founded nine years ago.