

Practical Work as Healer

～ Heike Adamsberger

Our Waldorf early childhood education practices embrace holistic development, fostering creativity through arts, nature-based activities, and imaginative play. We aim to nurture children's emotional well-being, social skills, and love for learning, which all contribute to the child's overall health and development.

In all this, rhythm plays a crucial role. Daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms provide children with a sense of predictability and security. Consistent routines, such as circle time, storytelling, and outdoor activities, help create a harmonious environment, supporting emotional stability, a sense of purpose, and a deeper connection to the natural rhythm of life.

As I fondly remember many years with my kindergarten class, my memories are full of rhythm. There were seasonal festivals and celebrations, the rhythm of activities each day, and the rhythms specific

to the day of the week. For example, there was the snack that we cooked each day (the children often referred to the days as “rice day,” “soup day,” and “bread day” long before waking up to the concept of Monday, Tuesday, and so on). On Millet Day, the children knew we would have a beeswax story; on Porridge Day, we would paint. On the last day of the week, everyone would join in cleaning our room thoroughly. There was a sense of calm, purpose, and pride in the air. Everyone was involved and took great care, which fostered, in turn, a sense of reverence for the environment.

Practical activities in the early years involve hands-on experiences like baking, gardening, and simple crafts. These activities enhance fine motor skills, promote coordination, and instill a sense of accomplishment. In our class, everyone washed their dishes every day. It seemed a rather mundane task, but

I made a conscious commitment to it, even though it meant a lot of work for the teachers in setting up and tidying the activity afterward. It also meant less outdoor playtime for the children, in exchange for waiting patiently in line with their bowl and spoon for their turn to wash, rinse and dry their dish.

I always felt that in our modern world, when children are being rushed from activity to activity and are used to instant gratification all around them, this was a gift: the gift of using one's "muscle" to wait patiently and be part of a group, settling into an unrushed activity. Grandparents and parents were always amazed when they visited our class on

birthdays and witnessed 15 children, aged four-and-a-half to six-and-a-half, lining up, waiting patiently, and washing their dishes even better than many adult spouses, as I was frequently assured.

Engaging in practical tasks helps children connect with the tangible world around them, fostering a balanced development of both physical and cognitive abilities. To me, the best practical activities were always the ones that directly related to the "life" of the classroom. Sometimes that meant making long paper garlands for Valentine's Day (by carefully folding and ripping with two fingers and then connecting loops), or making leaf garlands for our harvest celebration with

leaves found on our long hikes or in the yard. The children always rejoiced in preparing our much-loved classroom for a celebration. Keeping things simple and allowing plenty of time were vital. Other times, it was planting the seed "babies" and bulbs in anticipation of spring arriving. Once a week, two children would wash our napkins, using two buckets and a wooden washboard, and hang them up to dry afterward, carefully pinching the wooden clothespins.

I was always joyfully surprised at how often the children would downright beg for a turn this week and how seriously they took their work. After all these years, I still think it is one of the few palpable ways to truly build confidence and self-esteem: by cultivating purposeful activity, fostering the feeling that you belong, you contribute to our community, and what you do matters. Even though the message is carried quietly and implicitly, it is powerful. And now, looking

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back, I can say with certainty what my instincts knew then: these mundane and seemingly simple activities are indeed healing activities, as they allow the children to live with purpose and give them a feeling of competence—something they will carry within themselves for the rest of their lives.

Indeed, we easily overlook such activities. When we think of therapeutic activities, don't we think of puppetry, zoo exercises, storytelling, and other teacher-led activities, not the things that we allow children to do for themselves and each other? Yet these are just as impactful, if not more so. I encourage any teacher of young children to have the courage to slow down, make space for the everyday practical tasks and life-oriented activities, and observe the children!

Watching the children in my care engaging in these activities, being carried by the daily, weekly, monthly, and annual rhythms of "our land," has left me only

more grateful and devoted to Waldorf education, as I have witnessed first-hand the health-giving and harmonizing qualities of this educational approach that is as relevant now as it was 100 years ago. ♦

*Born and raised in Germany, **Heike Adamsberger** spent her formative years with her Austrian grandparents near the Baltic Sea and in the southern German forests. The last 30 years of her life have been devoted to educating and nourishing young children. She has longstanding experience as a Waldorf kindergarten teacher and serves as the WECAN representative in Southern California.*