

“This Is the Way We Bake Our Bread. . .”

– A Note about Work Songs

Nancy Foster

Work songs can be a lovely way to draw children to an activity, to create a mood of enjoyment and purposeful focus, or to discourage excessive chitchat by parents or older children in a group. Baking songs, grinding songs, sawing songs, cleaning songs: all may have a place in a group of children or parents and children.

On the other hand, if over-used, such songs can become a sort of “Waldorf muzak,” going on throughout the time of the activity and becoming an unwelcome and invasive background music. This may seem a strong statement indeed, but it is worth considering the possibility that constant singing may prevent children from experiencing their own internal music or rhythm or imaginations as they participate in an activity or play elsewhere in the room.

There has been some study of the spontaneous songs and chants of children at work and play. What may arise naturally from children as an accompaniment to their activity is something at once personal and universal, which surely deserves an opportunity for expression. Aside from such spontaneous music or word play, the concentrated

silence which can occasionally occur during activity is special in itself and should be permitted its place. Further, the art of conversation — “more refreshing than light,” to quote Goethe — has its humble beginnings in early childhood. Teachers sometimes hear wondrous exchanges among children hard at work on their watercolor painting or kneading their dough. Wouldn’t it be a pity if such conversational forays were frustrated by constant singing?

It is also good to avoid using songs as a sort of “disguised instruction” to tell children how to do an activity. We strive to teach through imitation. Occasionally a few words of direction will be needed, but these can be offered in a by-the-way, matter-of-fact, brief, and tactful manner to an individual child, perhaps accompanied by physical guidance, in a way that is less consciousness-raising than a song which is sung in a “teaching” manner and almost compels all the children involved to follow its instructions.

Finally, there is a fine line between having a familiar song that becomes associated with a particular activity — which is a healthy thing, such as always having the same song when lighting the

candle at circle time — and using a song as a *signal* for something. At clean-up time, for example, it would be fine to have a song to sing now and then during the process, like a happy accompaniment to the activity; but if the teacher starts singing a song as a signal that it's time to stop playing and clean up, this creates an abrupt waking-up moment and prevents a more flowing transition in the morning's rhythm.

In summary, work songs can be wonderful for “priming the pump” as an activity begins, and for

drawing the mood together if needed along the way, but it is good to leave the children inwardly and outwardly free to find their own rhythm and mood as they work. Many teachers have experienced the magical hum that can arise in a room full of busy children; this hum may be the most beautiful music of all!

Nancy Foster taught children and parents at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery for over thirty years. Now retired, she is active in mentoring, speaking, and serving as a Regional Representative for WECAN.