

The Role of Handwork

Developing Skills and Meeting the Needs of the Older Child in the Kindergarten

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The long-expected You're Not the Boss of Me! – Understanding the 6/7-Year-Old Transformation, edited by Ruth Ker on behalf of the WECAN Working Group on the Older Child, will be published by the end of 2007. This comprehensive resource is packed with information and ideas about working with children who are going through the six-year-old change. Here is a sample from Section Four, "Meeting the Child's Needs: Suggestions for Working in the Classroom."

Should handwork have a place in the kindergarten? Does it serve the children in some way or does it keep them from play? What is appropriate in the class and why? Does handwork keep the children or teachers focused on product rather than process?

In my kindergarten I have found that there is a place for handwork. It serves the children by providing them with a means for exploring substances, as well as helping them to refine their fine motor skills. The exploration of texture, new materials, and tools unfolds in a mood and process very much like that of creative play. I find that the older children in the class love the challenges the materials give them. The younger children (the four- and young five-year-olds) do not participate in some of these activities, and this allows them more space for their own imaginative play while the older children are engrossed in the handwork.

If the older children are not given challenges, often they become restless and disruptive. By being presented with wood, yarn, wool, needles, and thread, they learn to work with their hands in new ways. I have also found that the children who are not drawn to fine motor skills are often the ones who need practice in this area. We need to balance the breathing tendencies of each child with the question, Does this child need a larger or smaller focus and movement experiences throughout the day, the season, or the year?

Working with the hands on a project unfolding over time develops skills and soul qualities (like patience, for instance). There is a satisfaction in participating in bread making, making our own sandpaper, learning to screw a vice on the table,

or to drill a hole for a peg. Carding wool, making a fingerknitted belt or their own puppet requires a focus that becomes strengthened by practice. This serves the children well as preparation for the challenges of first grade.

Just as we seek to create a balance of large/small and slow/quick movements to create a healthy breathing in our circles, so we need to look at our day to see that this breathing is in the activities we bring to the children. I have found the use of handwork brings a much-needed focus to the child who is restless or chaotic. It also brings the joy of creating to the children and begins to build a practice of patience and persistence. The ability to transform wood, wool, paper, yarn, and cloth can reflect the child's own developmental transformation. The children love to play with the materials and experience the alchemy of the changes that the materials and even they themselves experience. So how does this look in the stream of the year in the kindergarten?

In the beginning of the year we are very busy learning how to go through our day, making new friends, and exploring the wonderful kindergarten spaces. Making bread is a favorite weekly activity – wonderfully tactile, from the sifting of flour to the kneading of the dough. We do this as a two-day process, with the mixing the first day, rising of the dough overnight, and then forming and baking the next day. And what a favorite snack it is! In the winter we also make soup one day a week and have many helpers chopping.

In the fall it is traditional in our kindergarten to make swords for Michaelmas. For many years, every child was encouraged to make a sword. The younger children would like to start one but were usually not developmentally able to sustain their interest and attention. I was reluctant to work with only the older children initially because I wanted the class to form as a whole. Yet I have found that the older children love to be acknowledged and given individual tasks. Whether it is in tying shoes or in helping the younger children put on rain gear, the older ones thrive on helping and on

having challenging tasks. So for the last three years, only the older children have made swords. Making swords is a process that takes at least two weeks of sanding, rasping, drilling, painting, and oiling the wood. What a relief it has been to work only with the older children who have been “champing at the bit,” while the younger children watched with much interest and anticipation. The more eager younger ones were encouraged to work on three swords for the kindergarten during this time, to give them direction and a way to participate in this activity. This allowed for a much more sanguine way of working for these younger ones.

To ensoul the sword in the right way I created a verse for circle time:

*I will polish my sword,
so strong, so bright.
I will use it for the right,
not for some silly quarrel or fight,
but to drive away evil I will try,
and protect those who are weaker than I.*

During the week of the Michaelmas festival we all dye a golden silk with the marigold petals we have dried. In the story we tell, the children have heard how Michael gave a cape of light “to give you courage, strength, and might.” The older children are formally presented with their finished swords as a last activity on our Michaelmas Friday. A note goes home to the parents giving them the verse to help them carry the right mood with the sword. All of the children go home with a golden silk cape and a crown for Michaelmas, the older ones proudly carrying their swords.

Making crowns is a wonderful activity that happens several times throughout the year. These are simply made and I have heard from parents how they enhance dress-up play at home. In the fall when we are hearing a Native American Indian story, we make Indian crowns. These are made with a strip of felt tied with yarn in the back, on which the children thread six little wooden beads. A few children at a time are with me, while the other children are playing. This allows me to observe the child’s eye-hand coordination. With the older children, if there is difficulty with the task I often speak to the parents at our Thanksgiving conference time and ask them to help their child by giving them

opportunities at home to refine these skills.

We also decorate crowns again at wintertime, either for Three Kings’ or Valentine’s Day. They are made of different colored cardstock that I have cut into crowns. How the older children love to cut out hearts or use the hole punch for jewels, glue them on and, when dry, lovingly wear them.

Often for Christmas, we will sew a very simple gift for our parents. I cut out a square for a dream pillow, or a heart for a pocket full of love (stuffed with wool and lavender). I have heard of the opinion that children should not be sewing at such a young age, but rather it is better that they do fingerknitting instead. My experience has taught me that fingerknitting is much more difficult than sewing, and if one is not particular about the stitches, most children who are four-and-a-half and older love to sew. I am often asked to cut out a fish so that the child can sew a present to take home for his kitty.

After Christmas, I take the next six weeks to teach the older children to fingerknit. I have come up with a little verse: “Catch a little fish. Oh, it is so big. Pull its tail, and make it small instead.” Most children take to fingerknitting easily and then want to sew their fingerknitting into horse reins, a rug, a basket, and once, a child asked to sew mittens. This is a challenging activity for some children. In order to do fingerknitting children need to have the ability to focus and to pass through an important developmental stage of crossing the midline. Observing this task can help me to see some challenges that certain children may meet when they are in first grade. My observations may be something that I mention to parents if I am concerned.

From mid-February until Easter we all explore wool that comes from the sheep at our farm. I usually do the major washing but will sometimes wash some with the class. We then finger-card the wool and then card it with little inexpensive and sturdy dog brushes that work very well. On our walk day we visit the creek or Crystal Mountain and gather small and medium-sized stones. One day we wash and sort the stones by size and then, after carding a big basketful of wool, we start making balls. In the center of the ball I put a small stone, about nickel- or quarter-size, and around this I wrap the wool we have carded. The children can pick out two colors of colored wool, which I wrap crisscross over the forming ball. I then dip it into warm water

in a dishpan and drizzle some mild dish soap over the ball. I show them how to squeeze and roll gently at first and then harder as the wool begins to felt. It generally only takes about five minutes. However some children work much longer and enjoy the sensory touch experience.

If there is time before Easter we sometimes make seed babies (after we hear about them in circle time). These are made with slightly larger rocks at the core and a layer of white wool and then colored wool. They are felted by the children, and the next day they have opened and inside there is a little simple baby. I take the seeds home at night, cut them open a crack, take out the stone, and make a very simple needle-felted baby to put inside. We also make little felted rabbits for our Easter baskets (from roving tied in two knots, one larger for the body and one smaller for the head, leaving out the ends for ears with a layer of wool over it). These we felt very gently, stroking the little ears. After a rinse in the warm and cold water the bunnies are named and the children are told that tomorrow their eyes will be open. I take them home and put a little brown or blue yarn through for eyes and needle-felt the eyes a bit for strength. What fun we have with the bunnies until it is time for them to go home in Easter baskets!

I feel very strongly that needle-felting as an activity does not belong in the kindergarten. The gesture is too harsh. Imagine what children, who tend to unite with the adult's gesture, are experiencing with the quick, repetitive, piercing movement of the needle-felter. This can affect their nervous systems and elicit from them nervous gestures as well.

After the spring break the older children have special projects – a needle book and a puppet. First they pick two colors of felt and some colorful thick thread for the needle book. We do a blanket stitch around the edges of the felt and then twizzle two colors of yarn to hold the needle book closed. The twizzle is stitched on the back side of the book and each child receives one needle and six pins to put inside. With this they then begin their puppet. These are simple table puppets and the children can choose whatever character they wish to create. They take time to ponder this. I only say they must be human or angels, not animals. This project takes at least three weeks and I try to have them move

through the process at somewhat the same pace. This year I made the heads earlier myself, as this was a challenging step for some of them. When they are all finished we create a puppet show for the younger children in our class. I make up a story for all the characters. One year I had only royalty; another year there was no royalty at all. Once, six out of thirteen puppets were Michaels. Then the children can bring the puppet and needle book home. This project is met with great enthusiasm as the children come out of free play to make their characters. The choleric ones want to rush right through but we all work at about the same pace so we are all putting heads, bottoms, hair, and capes on at the same time. What a lesson in patience for some and a lesson in perseverance for others.

This project is such a symbol of the culmination of development at the end of the children's kindergarten years. They come to kindergarten as young children, usually participating inclusively with a "we" consciousness. As they near the end of the first seven years, they become more individualized, creating their own inner images. They choose their character for a puppet, create it, participate in a group puppet show, and proudly take it home with the needle book. This has helped them to be ready for the next step into the first grade.

These ideas are only indications of how one could work. It is most important that the gesture of handwork be a joyful mood of creating rather than something that is product-oriented. It can be a lovely social time, while sitting around and talking and working together. . . much like a quilting bee. This year a little five-year-old girl told me that she couldn't sew her Daddy's present because her mother did not allow her to use needles. I said I thought it would be fine if she were sitting beside me. She carefully stitched around the heart. When she finished she danced around the room singing, "I can sew. I can sew." I have experienced many such successes that have filled the children with confidence and dignity.

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