

Purposeful Work for the Young Child: Suzhou's Shining Example

— Laura Donkel

For the past sixteen years, I have worked as an early childhood educator: fourteen years at Waldorf schools and the past two years at an independent preschool in the Chicago area. Healthy movement and purposeful work have a very special place in my heart when it comes to the young child.

Last November, I had the privilege of visiting a Waldorf early childhood program in Suzhou, China as a school mentor. As is common with most Waldorf travels, I hoped to share ideas, share the work we do in America, and collaborate with new colleagues in line with the anthroposophical ideals of Rudolf Steiner. After two weeks, it was clear that I would return home with a suitcase brimming with new possibilities and ideas for working with the young child in our North American settings. I'm thrilled to share these discoveries with you.

In *Working with Anxious, Nervous, and Depressed Children*, Henning Köhler writes, "The imitating of early childhood has very much to do with creativity. It relates impressions and expressions. Not only is it the first manifestation of the shaping will, but it is also the most decisive step in sense-maturation, in the ability to make a proper use of sense-impressions." (Köhler at 18). Rudolf Steiner has said that the seed of freedom lies in imitation. I invite you now to look at the delightful opportunities that await us outdoors as we work purposefully and offer healthy imitative models for the young child. Let's start with a day in the life of a Suzhou child's school day at Suzhou Garden School.

The teachers show up at their classrooms, situated in the ground floor of an apartment complex alongside a stream, one of many branches of the Suzhou River. The entrance is through the small backyard. A wooden picket fence with a climbing trellis and arched entryway greets the children. Hanging from the trellis grow gourds and vegetables; the former will become musical instruments, and the



Bodhi seeds and sandpaper

latter additions to wholesome meals. A child opens the gate and goes straight to the outdoor shelving units, where sandbox boots line the lower two shelves. The child quickly changes into school boots. The first children at school pull the tarp off the large sandbox, then select child-sized rakes and sturdy spades to use in doing the work of loosening the sand. Not until the whole box of sand is completely loosened do they begin to play. In time, more children arrive; and the quiet hum of purposeful work begins.

There are four workbenches, each equipped with two vises. Wooden tool boxes house various child-sized rasps, files, and saws. Baskets of sandpaper, coarse, medium, and fine, are at hand. The larger saws live in the shed on the upper shelves. Baskets of collected branches, chunks of tree limbs, and logs are sensibly placed on either side of the workbenches. The children select branches and begin to peel off the bark before sanding. The smaller branches will eventually make their way into the classroom to hold up a small rope line of clothespins to hang their freshly dipped beeswax candles.



The workbench in Suzhou, ready for the morning's activities

Baskets of bodhi seeds set beside baskets of sandpaper beckon, awaiting smoothing. As the children sand the seeds, exquisite designs emerge, surprising the eye. The teachers smile and tell me that the longer the seed is sanded, the more pronounced the designs become. I am taken by their beauty and the reverence in which the young child works beside the teacher, also vigorously sanding the bodhi seed.

A young boy of four years takes a piece of wood that he has been working on, clamps it in a vise, and begins to saw it in half. Teachers strategically place themselves in the outdoor area and also do their work, whether separating rice, working on a specific

project, or tending to the children in the play areas. A father brings his little boy, sets down his briefcase, takes up a large, thick log, and begins to saw it. He works for twenty minutes. The log is sawed in half. He sets the two pieces on a shelf, washes his hands in the outdoor utility sink, then collects his briefcase and heads to work. I think of the magnificence in that short span. The little three-year-olds sit on logs and study how the father moves. When he leaves, they are ready to follow suit. The assistant teacher sets out a basket of thick branches for them to begin sawing with smaller saws after the wood is placed in the vises. And so the school day begins.



When the adult leaves, the little ones are ready to follow suit

The five-year-olds are working on small wooden boats and chairs that will be used in the classroom. They know that when they turn six, they will begin to whittle a small knife and sew a sheath. These small pieces of doll furniture prepare them for the treasured tool they will bring home at the end of the year.

Tools. Purposeful tools—rakes, saws, vises, rasps—for the children in Suzhou. We too can offer this work to our students. These Suzhou children learn to work respectfully and with great intent. These tools prepare them, nurture them, and ignite their imagination. This is the bridge that we can build at home with the parents of our students. In an effort to give our children the best, combined with pressures over the college their child will one day attend (yes, college), many parents despair and turn to technology as an answer to preparing for a successful future. I'd like to respond with one word, a different word. Tools. Hand-wrought, manual, practical tools.

I am typing this open invitation to you, dear teachers, on an iPad. I love my iPad. I can take it with me everywhere and steal away to a café, sip tea, and write to you. Before computers, I used my beloved typewriters. I have two. They are beautiful, black, and solid. As a writer, before I followed my path to teaching, my typewriter traveled with me

everywhere I went. Now it's my iPad. In my purse I have my pencil case with my beloved pencils. The little children under our care will have access to computers soon enough. I urge you to give them practical tools *now* that will help them take on the screen world in the future with the same respect and reverence.

I want to touch on one more important aspect of this opportunity. Look at the photos and see the healthy developmental movement that becomes available through this work. You will see crossing midlines, vestibular strengthening, proprioceptive and core development, fine motor movements, and dexterity. From all this work comes self-assuredness. The child's inner light shines brightly.

Patience, reverence, imagination, imitation. These four qualities are spilling over the brim at the outdoor play area. We, too, can offer this here in the U.S. Let's do it. Pete Seeger sang about having a hammer. Let's join him and our Chinese friends and start hammering. ♦

Resources:

- Henning Köhler, *Working with Nervous, Anxious, and Depressed Children: A Spiritual Perspective to Guide Parents* (Chatham, New York: Association of Waldorf Schools of North America 2013)

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