

Scenes from the Child's Garden

— Stephanie Hoelscher

The Child's Garden of Orchard Valley Waldorf School in Vermont is home to two early childhood programs on its own farmhouse campus, providing a small, intimate community for young children. The Apple Blossom Nursery group consists of children ages two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half, while a mixed-age preschool group serves three-and-a-half to five-year-olds.

Sounding Notes

Morning in the play yard at the Child's Garden is hardly quiet. There is the squeaking of swings as the four-year-olds practice pumping their legs and propelling their bodies high into the damp, grey autumnal sky. From the sandbox there is the scraping sound of metal on metal as real tools dig into the earth—perhaps colliding with an inanimate mineral object—and carry a load into waiting buckets. There is the cry of a distressed child in the arms of his teacher. It is Monday. Mama is on the wrong side of the gate. One wonders, what is the passage of five days in the experience of a young child? And then there is, of course, the sound of children at play laughing and quarreling as they learn to be by themselves and with each other at school.

A teacher's voice floats and somehow penetrates through these layers of sound. She sings, "Come little children; come along and follow. . ." A few children come running; others slowly pick up their heads and

look about. Others continue in their work of play. The teacher's voice is not loud, but she sings in the mood of the fifth with an open tone that steadily embraces all the children. In a matter of minutes all fifteen children are standing at the gate holding hands and ready to leave for their morning walk.

Children have a sense of being in their element wherever singing and playing, speaking and moving are in unison. To take note of the quality of sound on any given morning in the classrooms and play yard of the Child's Garden is to appreciate how the "speech-body" of the children is nourished not only by the spoken word as such but by the formative power of the verbal music that works in the flow of time in which they participate.

Later in the morning the Apple Blossom children sit around their table eating bowls of rice. They hear singing from the adjoining kitchen. The larger preschool class is sitting down for snack as well and has just begun to sing a blessing. In terms of actual words, it is not the

same blessing that the Apple Blossom children sing. As they listen to the free-flowing rhythm, however, they find something familiar in its openness that is both enlivening and soothing to them. One child says to his teacher, “Those other kids are saying blessing, just like us. I can’t really hear them, but that’s what they’re doing. They are having snack too.” The rest of the children look up from their bowls of rice in silent agreement, listen, and then return to the task of eating.

Wills at Work: Rocks, Stumps, and a Fire Pit

Alongside the old barn at the Child’s Garden there is a collection of stumps. Last week there were sixteen stumps. Day by day the pile has grown smaller as the stumps have been moved to a grassy area extending off the meadow path that the children call “the circle.” The circle is a favorite place for resting, rolling, chatting, and cloud watching. It is here also where the children of the Child’s Garden have been busy throughout the fall resurrecting an old fire pit. In this creative and practical work of moving rocks to make the fire pit and hauling stumps to make a larger ring of seating, one sees the full range of qualities present in what we call the “will forces” of the young child. To observe how a child moves a rock from forest to meadow or lifts a stump together with classmates tells a story of an individual child and hints at the gifts that they bring—and will bring—to this world.

A child not yet three walks in slow deliberation cradling a heavy and muddy rock against her chest. Her

full cheeks puff with exertion; her eyes gaze unblinkingly ahead as she walks—one foot after another. Her teacher asks if she would like to take a rest. The child answers with a side-to-side shake of the head. Some minutes later, the child’s destination yet unreachd, her teacher asks if perhaps they might work together to carry this heavy rock. Again, the child responds with a shake of the head, never missing a step in her slow rhythmic march. She does not stop; she does not speak until she reaches a ring of rocks in the circle of the meadow. Quietly she lowers the rock from her chest and rolls it into place alongside the other rocks. Only then does she speak: “My mittens are muddy.”

Another child sits on the meadow path with a rock between her feet. “I can’t do it,” she says to her teacher. She points with a frown to a small rock. Her teacher smiles and continues walking with her own rock. The child stands, picks up the rock again, and walks on until she too gets to the fire pit: “Look what I did,” she announces to her teacher and classmates.

One day before the snow flies the children and families of the Child’s Garden will gather to sit around a fire in the fire pit in the meadow circle. Perhaps it will be cold—I hope it will be cold—and we will cook a pot of soup and eat together. We might take a moment to think about the contribution that the children have made in creating a new hearth for our Child’s Garden community. Rock by rock and stump by stump. ♦

Stephanie Hoelscher started the *Apple Blossom Nursery program* at the Child’s Garden in 2010.



Three-and-four-year-olds sanding cutting boards for use on soup day. Photo by Jay Ericson, courtesy of Orchard Valley Waldorf School.