How the Waldorf Mixed-Age Kindergarten Curriculum Supports and Lays the Foundation for Academic Learning in the Grades

OUTDOOR TIME

At Apple Blossom Waldorf School, children ages 3 to 6 enjoy daily outdoor play for an hour and fifteen minutes, in all weather. On Fridays, the Kindergarten spends the entire day outside, where all activities including circle, story time, snack, lunch, and even handwork all take place outdoors. The first and last weeks of the school year also follow this fully outdoor rhythm. This time supports gross motor and sensory development as children climb trees and structures, jump from logs, balance on stumps around the sand pit, pull and push wagons with heavy loads of other children, logs or rocks. They dig in the sand with their hands or shovels, and search for treasures within the earth's soil.

Children invent imaginative games like "kitty playgrounds" using planks to crawl on with hands and knees. The *six-year-olds* will gather groups of children to become "ponies" pulling wagons with hand-knitted harnesses.

In all seasons, children are immersed in nature. They make mud pies, skate on frozen ground, sled or roll down hills, and in spring, dig garden beds for planting peas, potatoes, flowers, and herbs. In the fall, they delight in harvesting what they've grown. With small shovels, the children uncover potatoes hiding in the depths of the soil, which are then cooked into our Tuesday soups.

Each day we gather for an outdoor circle time where the children imitate the singing, rhyming and movement of the teacher. The circles are created with awareness of rhythm (movements are fast and slow, short and tall, big and little, in and out), rhyme, sensory development, connection to nature and the passing of the seasons.

The older children are aware that the younger ones are looking to them to imitate. The *six-year-old* becomes aware of the nuances of each gesture and attempts to be exact in their imitation.

THE TRANSITION OF COMING INSIDE

Transitioning inside is a meaningful part of the day, which we treat with respect and mindfulness. Taking off outerwear and putting on slippers (and the reverse when going outside) is an opportunity for developing fine and gross motor skills, balance, and organization. Children pull off mittens, boots, and snowsuits, then tidy their cubbies. When dressing for the outdoors, they zip coats, pull on boots, and layer mittens and hats. This is a rich practice in self-care as the children come to learn which layers are needed for all different seasons, and how to correctly order base layers, midlayers, and outer layers so that they are both comfortable and well protected. This daily sequencing practice and managing of tasks develops executive functioning skills which are crucial for later academic success.

The *six-year-olds* are called upon to help the younger ones when they have finished their own tasks in the cubby room. The older children also have the new challenge of wearing shoes with laces, and are diligently practicing to tie them.

FINE MOTOR AND SENSORY DEVELOPMENT

Snack Preparation and Mealtime

Children help prepare snack by chopping vegetables for soup, and apples for apple crisp, and they help to grind grain, and mix, pound and knead the dough for bread. During snack we work on manners and respect for each other in conversation. Children pour their water from small pitchers and take turns passing and following directions. The five and *six-year-olds* are given responsibilities in snack preparation and model helpfulness and maturity.

Handwork

The teacher works with yarn and string to sew small projects, finger knit horse reins, and knit classroom toys and children's birthday presents during play time. Children begin with simple fiber crafts, twisting yarn with thumb and pointer to make twizzles, and then learning to finger knit. *Six-year-olds* advance to five-finger knitting, often challenging themselves to create the longest ropes and proudly teaching younger peers how to begin and finish their work.

Stitching projects begin with teacher guidance. Children learn to thread needles and sew small items. *The six-year-olds* will take on the task of teaching the younger ones, helping them to start, showing them how, and tying their knots at the end.

The teacher cards wool and felts projects with care, and the children learn through imitation. They reach into the wool basket and pull out the wool to put on their carders. They learn to card softly and to pull the wool slowly to separate it. They plunge their hands into warm soapy water to felt and they learn to start gently "as though bathing a newborn kitten" to preserve the integrity of the wool.

In the fall, *five-year-olds* begin weaving on round looms. Their completed weaving is later sewn into a turtle puppet which they will use to create a simple puppet play for their peers.

In September, the *six-year-olds* begin their six year projects. On hand work days they work as the other children play around them. Most often they decide that they will devote much of their free play to work on their projects.

Painting

Wet-on-wet watercolor painting in the Waldorf Kindergarten honors the process. The heavy watercolor paper soaks in water, is smoothed out with a sponge. The teacher may work with one color that corresponds with the seasons, for a few weeks before introducing a second color. The children experience color deeply and the blending of two colors to make a third fills them with wonder. The younger children's paintings are awash with color whereas the five year olds, turning six, will begin to play with the diagonal or divide their paper into sections with a cross in the middle. They begin to have more awareness of the result and they usually start with an intention and attempt to carry it out.

The six year old paints with purpose will try to create form in their paintings. They love to copy the teachers painting or each others

Beeswax Modeling

The children are given beeswax that they warm in their hands during story time to model something from the tale. This supports their sense of touch and in forming a specific object allows them to once again work on their fine motor skills and imagination. *Six-year-olds* begin to focus on the details of their creations and the final outcome, exercising patience and persistence.

LANGUAGE ARTS

Story Time

Waldorf Kindergartens work with the oral tradition of storytelling. The teachers expose the children to the rich language of nature stories, folktales and fairy tales. Children form their own pictures out of their imaginations and develop remarkable capacities for focus and concentration. Throughout the year, the teachers perform puppet or marionette plays. These are rich sensory experiences for the children as the puppetry tables are decorated with soft muted silks and the puppets are hand made out of wool and the marionettes out of silk. After the puppet plays the *five-year-olds* will begin to be interested in setting up their own puppet plays and the *six-year-olds* will take this on by directing the story telling, design and execution of the puppet play.

The six-year-old story teller will often tell the story almost word for word as testimony to their memory and language development.

Eurythmy

A trained Eurythmy teacher comes into the Waldorf Kindergarten to work with the children in making language visible. The children imitate the gestures and language of

the Eurythmist alongside their Kindergarten teacher. The Eurythmy teacher works with a story rich in language and clear gestures for the children to imitate.
The six-year-olds lead the children through their keen imitation of the Eurythmy teacher. They stand up at the end to recite a verse with the Eurythmy teacher as all others look on with great respect.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT & DEVELOPMENT OF ENGINEERING SKILLS

Indoor Play

It is through free play (play directed by the children's imagination) that the children meet "the other" in the social realm. They learn to share, take turns, and become inclusive. They learn about the give and take of ideas, about flexibility, about making rules and changing rules. They learn about giving and receiving.

The young ones play what they have been surrounded by at home so they nurture their dolls and each other when playing family. They build cozy beds for each other or their dolls. They set the play kitchen table and "cook a meal". They play "kitties" rolling on the sheepskin. They play "ponies" and build barns for each other and prepare the oats. They develop engineering skills as they build marble runs, luggage ramps and houses. *The six-year-olds*' play grows very big and they may decide to wire a village for electricity (using string) or build bi-planes out of wood and wagons. They design obstacle courses for the class. They produce and direct puppet plays and will often direct the play of the entire class. They learn to be inspiring and gracious leaders.