

Educating the Feeling-will in the Kindergarten

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The following is an excerpt from Chapter 4, “Educating the Will in Practice,” of the book Educating the Will by Michael Howard. The book as a whole explores the quality and training of different aspects of the will in Waldorf education: the thinking-will, feeling-will, and comprehensive or common will. Here Michael Howard argues for the critical importance of cultivating the feeling-will in early childhood, with many practical suggestions. Reprinted with permission, © 2004 AWSNA Publications.

The defining characteristic of feeling-will is the capacity to live deeply into the inner quality of something outside us, knowing and feeling it as if we are within it or it is within us. In the early childhood years a healthy child is naturally inclined to drink in the inner mood and qualities of places and persons. It is one of the tragedies of our times that the ways of the world, including the life of family and school, can dull rather than foster this natural soul attunement. Tragically, many young children come to kindergarten with a sense-nerve disposition already strongly developed. Their thinking has become prematurely intellectual and abstract, and their feeling life inclines toward strong personal like or dislike. It is crucial for later life that in these early years we do everything we can to keep the feeling-will alive as much and as long as possible.

In early childhood we do not “teach” the arts and crafts to the children so much as we create

opportunities for children to be exposed to and engage in the realm of art as a natural part of everyday life. We can do this in a variety of ways.

One way to foster the artist in each child is to provide frequent opportunities for engaging in art and craft activity. The following are just some possibilities to consider:

A natural clay pit, such as can be found at the edge of a stream, within walking distance of the kindergarten, is a wonderful gift from Mother Nature. If we can overcome any personal aversion we may have to clay and the so-called mess it can create, then the children can reap the full benefit of her gift. Allowing our children to “muck about” to their hearts’ and wills’ content, without interjecting cautionary admonitions, is a true and lasting gift we can give them. Their souls’ receptivity to the elementary quality of matter, the spirit of the elementals and Mother Nature, is a precious capacity that can fade all too soon. By enduring a little mess, we give our children experiences in heart and will which are a source of health and strength for a lifetime.

In the absence of the good fortune of having a natural clay pit nearby, we can create one. Dig a hole a foot deep and two feet in diameter and fill it with at least 100 pounds of clay for the children to seek out in free play. A bucket of clay available indoors for free play is also desirable.

In addition to outdoor sandboxes, we can also

create a sandbox for free play indoors. With a sheet of plywood and some 1" x 4" or 1" x 6" pine, we can make a 3' x 6' or 4' x 8' sandbox with sides or legs of appropriate height. The developmental value of moving and shaping sand is so important that its use should not be limited by the seasons but be possible year round. Snow is a wonderful material as well, but does not replace sand as a form-building medium.

We can use earth-tone beeswax for modeling with the children. All materials have color – natural beeswax has a golden earth tone color. But as educators we have good reason to be sensitive to the different effects produced by modeling a material that has strong color – primary and secondary colors – in contrast to one with earth tones. Can we distinguish between a deeply felt color experience and a deeply felt form experience? In finger-painting, for example, children have a tactile experience that competes with and may override their color experience. Likewise, the strong color experience of brightly colored beeswax interferes with a vivid form experience. This is even more pronounced when children assemble beeswax figures from part to whole, using several different bright colors of wax.

To become fully engaged and absorbed in something means to give our whole heart and mind to it. Here the distinction between color experience and form experience is also related to the distinction between sense-nerve and feeling-will experience. When we give children brightly colored beeswax, however good our intentions, we are exposing them to two different worlds at the same time. If we want them to develop a capacity to live deeply into form, we will want to minimize rather than maximize the color experience during modeling. The use of simple, natural-colored beeswax allows the child to have a pure form experience, which strengthens the feeling-will.

Provide sunflower seeds, corn kernels, rice, or other grains and let the children draw and create patterns with them on a large surface. Unlike drawing on paper, this allows them to move and change the forms so that, for example, a tree turns into a bird. The seeds also lend themselves to creating non-outline forms – outline forms are the result of sense-nerve experience, while the filled-out forms allow the feeling-will to be active.

Provide good rasps that allow the children to rasp to their hearts' content. Sawing logs and hammering pieces of wood together with nails is a great favorite, but is largely a sense-nerve experience. Rasping, and rubbing sticks and/or corncobs against softer wood, inspires a more feeling-will creative play. Little children do not need to be making anything specific, unless their own imagination spontaneously sees something like an animal – it is natural that what they see in the form will change and evolve as they work.

There is every reason to have stone and stone tools in the playground as well. Limestone and marble are not too hard. An old, not-so-sharp hatchet or roofer's hammer is a good tool. Again, children do not need a preconceived idea of what they are making, nor do they need verbal instruction in how to use the tool. All that matters is that the children have the freedom to chip away, that the free play of their limbs communes unconsciously with the beauty of the material – they will covet the sparkling chips as precious treasures. In terms of safety precautions it is sufficient that we are quietly present nearby, provide safety goggles, and allow only one child at a time to work.

The above suggestions are just a starting point and stimulus for early childhood educators to become more open to the potential of all manner of materials that may be readily available and can serve this vital need of the children to engage in formative activity. The list of activities is limited only by our openness to the possibilities, yet the point is not for every kindergarten to have every possible material on hand. These few examples are intended to bring into focus developmental considerations that can influence our choice of activities and how we provide them to the children.

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