

Waldorf Calendar and Theme Teacher Notes
First Grade
Barbara Warren, Class Teacher
2008–2009

Calendar Notes

August

During home visits, I would ask each child this question, in hopes of calming any hidden fears about the transition to first grade: “Do you have any questions about first grade?” Here is how the answers stacked up: Twenty-one out of 27 children answered with a simple, “No.” The greatest percentage of children replied with this answer, or simply a blank look.

Here are the other few answers: “How long do I have to sit in a desk?” “Is Elliot in our class?” “Do I get my rose on the first day of school, or at the Rose Ceremony?” “Do I get to knit a toy?” “Is Soren in our class?” “Do we get to sit in the same place we did when you told us a story?” “What does first grade look like?” That’s it: Out of 27 home visits, seven simple questions asked by six very ready first graders.

September

September 2 found 30 first graders ready and anxious to greet their teacher on the first day. From the first moment, this group of children embraced school with a zeal and vigor unlike that ever seen by their teacher.

The first book was from drawing; the children heard a story that reflected their own quite significant developmental step. A brother and sister left home to see what was true about the rest of the world, and their journeys took them to quite different places. The brother’s journey took him to the cold north, which gave the children imaginations about the straight line: the Beam of Light. The sister’s journey took her to the tropics, which gave the children imaginations about the curved line: the Curve of the Moon.

Each day, the students practiced these new forms with water and chalk outside or crayon and twine inside. The forms were walked, drawn in the air, drawn on a partner’s back, drawn on their feet, and finally placed on paper. This was their first giant step into literacy, all done with active imagination! That, combined with images reinforced in the circle and on nature walk, gave children the beginnings of a foundation built in a world that is both true and good.

October

The first letter block of first grade is a magical one indeed. It is a moment etched into the heart of the class forever; four weeks of school had finished, most of us were used to the routine, and we were at the very beginning of becoming one whole class.

The experience of learning each letter in vivid imagery and movement as a group of humans forged a lasting bond. Of course, this is most deeply felt and remembered by those children with no previous literacy instruction, but still, it is a gift to all, even their teacher. This class learned their first letter, *D*, in honor of Michael, a being celebrated by most cultures—including

Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and Hindu—as a slayer of dragons and a harbinger of strength. For Michael’s sword is meaningless without the dragon: the two together form the letter *D*.

This class was amazed to learn that writing began with the storyteller etching symbols of lovely stories into the dirt; our cycle is not so different, except that we etch our symbols onto beautiful main lesson books after the story has been told. The children then heard four fairy tales from Africa, and from those images sprung 11 more consonants—12 total for the block.

The story cycle was firmly held to: The children heard the story on day one, retold and illustrated or acted out the story on day two, and brought it up into their thinking (learned the symbolic letter) on day three. This cycle, when held to, develops both very strong, healthy rhythms for the children as a whole and short-term memory capacities within the individuals. An added benefit to children: We added orange, brown, and gold block crayons to their red, blue, and yellow of September in order to enrich our drawings of the African continent.

November

Our study of the quality of numbers began in November. We examined each number, 1–12, to see where they were found in ourselves, in our world, and in beautiful symbolism and form. From one Earth, to the Sun and Moon as two, to the combination of all three, we started to see the world open up to us in the safety of both beauty and form.

During this block, the children learned a new circle that put mathematical learning right where it belongs: in controlled, rhythmical movement. Including both poems about the quality of numbers and poems and movement activities that are at the beginning of number patterns and times tables, this circle created the foundation of mathematical thinking that will last a lifetime.

We began to look for numbers on our nature walk and in everyday natural items that came into the class: a rose brought with love to the teacher, a pepper brought in for a snack, walnuts from the harvest. Twice a week, these lovely numbers found in nature were translated into the world of geometry: Our form-drawing class took on the quality of numbers found in the shapes the children saw for the first time as surprising and beautiful.

Theme Notes

Festival Cycle and Crafts

The festival cycle of our class will be determined, in unspoken ways, by the children themselves. By watching them both as a group and as individuals, I will be able to determine where to put the emphasis in our natural, yearly cycle.

It was for this reason that we celebrated the legend of Michael and the Dragon. We ate home-baked *struan*, or Michael bread, with honey and butter on September 29 and began creating our shields in crafts class that week. This culminated with the class knighting ceremony on October 10. Each child chose the colors for his or her shield and was then knighted with one of four gifts in his or her color groups.

The children rose to this occasion beautifully, and it helped them continue forming as one class. October led naturally to the celebrating of autumn with our trip to the pumpkin patch and the

celebrating of Halloween with our fifth-grade buddies and our individual class. For this, the children created felt Halloween masks in crafts class; again, they were allowed to choose their colors and patterns, but the activity was designed to add to our group cohesiveness by providing similar materials.

In addition to the activities mentioned above, the students create their own painting portfolios in September and began sewing craft bags using the backstitch in October. This stitch requires more thinking and concentration and more fine motor skills than the running stitch learned in kindergarten.

Beeswax

Beeswax modeling in first grade follows a systematic pattern of metamorphosis. Children begin with universal forms, such as the sphere, the egg, or the cylinder, and transform those forms into an element of nature or the fairy tale.

A small story is told while the children mold and warm the beeswax in their hands. A new capacity awakens in the child to receive artistic instruction: As is true in guided drawing and painting, gone are the kindergarten days when a child can play with artistic media. While that does have its place during free rendering, much more important is developing the ability to attend to instruction and gain basic skills in all artistic areas.

We began in our warm summer September with a three-part sequence: the nest, the egg, and then the bird. Next, as fall landed, came an acorn, a squirrel, and, most importantly, the garden snail. This class had regarded the snail as something to be “smashed”; I read them a book about life from the snail’s perspective, and then we modeled them with a new reverence.

Painting

As is true in beeswax, painting in the Waldorf school follows a specific pattern. The children are allowed to live deeply into the color itself, free of form. We begin with the three primary colors; the red beam of light and the blue curve of moon come first to reinforce what we have learned in form drawing. Then the gesture of both red and yellow: center out to the periphery.

The students learned to set up for painting, paint in quiet, and follow the teacher’s directions and clean up from painting the following day. Each week afterward followed an interaction with pure color, such as green and yellow alone (the Moon and the night sky), or green and yellow that meet: “O, golden sun so great and bright (yellow) . . . it makes the dark earth (blue) green and fair,” thus producing green. Small amounts of form have been begun such as Michael’s sword and the pumpkin growing in the patch, but the emphasis has been on color.

Flute

Flute instruction began on the first day of school. The children were given their interval flutes and told a quirky story about a shepherd boy who made the first flute from wood. They learned to warm their flutes, play them as percussion instruments, breathe into them instead of blowing, play as a unified group of musicians, and play in three smaller groups that play different notes on the scale.

Flute playing was postponed afterward for a few weeks in order to allow the children to develop a longer focus and a greater control over their impulses and fingers. This is one area that demands a lot of quiet reverence in order for the music to enter the class.

Nature Walk

Once a week, the children go on a nature walk as a whole class. This is not merely the passing of time for “fidgety” students whose school day is “too long,” but also an integral part of their entire education. Not only is it the basis for future scientific observation, it gives the children a chance to see themselves as part of Mother Nature, and as Earth’s caregiver.

They learned nature is not something to be collected and brought inside, but something to be watched, revered, and cared for. Each week, changes in the nature area were “magically” brought about in circle so the children could feel, in their hearts, that all the learning is integrated, a part of one large whole. The children delighted in reciting verse and song, and in finding the forms they had learned in form drawing in all of the natural world that surrounded them.

At one point in time, they even saw the “Moon on the left and the Sun on the right,” which is a daily hand-dominance verse we recite. As our study of numbers began, we began to discover not only forms and letters living quite strongly in the out of doors but also the world of numbers. It is very exciting as a teacher to watch this natural learning awaken within the children. This class has quite easily commented on the ripeness of the persimmon and just as easily skipped past a homeless person’s tent.

What great lessons live out in our nature area! A highlight is finding the climbing tree and climbing to the top; much to their dismay, 30 first graders are a great deal heavier than 20 kindergartners, so they cannot all climb the tree at once. I am so thankful for this most integral part of our curriculum.

Building Connections

One of the most important aspects of the move from kindergarten to first grade is the healthy move into the greater community. This begins during their first week of school with the Rose Ceremony; the children unconsciously feel they have become a part of a bigger whole.

This important objective is built into many of my lesson plans and strategies for the entire life of the class. Our fifth-grade buddy exchange began in September and will follow the festival cycle of the year. From the first moment, the first graders attached strongly and deeply to their buddies, and vice-versa. The two classes seek each other out on the playground each day in a loving and healthy manner.

Part of our Halloween celebration was to trick-or-treat within the school: of course, we went to fifth grade, where the children exchanged treats. But we also went to grades three, six, and seven, where our first graders have many siblings. It was a beautiful moment to watch older siblings hug and kiss the younger ones when we came into their rooms! These momentary connections build health and strength within the young children as they become a part of the Morse community.

With a shift in our office staff, I also had the children trick-or-treat in the office; it was a wonder to behold how quiet they became—rare indeed for this bunch! We were even lucky enough to have John Sanchez, our plant manager, join us on a nature walk for persimmon collecting.

Birthday Celebrations

Birthday celebrations in Waldorf schools are a much-anticipated event and different in every classroom. I designed the structure of this celebration to multiple objectives, the most important of which is to allow me the time to give each and every child individual attention.

They receive three gifts from me: a stitched wishing bag, representing human striving; a thinking stone, representing nature's gifts and the children's new capacity for intellectual work; and a chosen birthday poem, representing the planting of a seed for the children's future.

The birthday poems were written by Michael Hedley Burton based on the yearly, seasonal cycle. It has been a wonder to behold how well each child in this group fits his or her individual birth week! These poems are meant for them to "read" or "memorize," though that may come naturally.

The celebration itself leaves behind the world of the family-centered birthday as celebrated in kindergarten, and instead focuses on the children surrounding the birthday child as one cohesive, newly formed group of humans. Each child bestows a wish on the birthday child; this has been a learning experience for the class, as I have set the bar high and expected them to leave material wishes behind and focus on something far more important. At this writing, children have come so far in their feeling life that I am often fighting back tears of joy as they give their classmates expansive wishes for their future.

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