

Resilience and the Arts

By Holly Koteen-Soule, WECAN Early Childhood Research Group

Resilience is a prized quality in our dynamic times. It allows us to deal with unpredictability without being thrown off our center. It allows us to stay present to the situation we find ourselves in, even if it is unexpected, and to respond flexibly. It is related to the ability to improvise, creating something not out of a pre-formed plan, but out of intuition.

Child development researchers define resilience as the ability to cope positively with disruptions and attribute a child's capacity to become resilient to two primary factors. The first and most critical one is a stable, committed relationship with a parent or caregiver and, the second is consistent rhythms in everyday life. Not surprisingly, these elements are central aspects of Waldorf education.

There is a third element that may also contribute to the development of resilience. Artistic practices of all kinds are woven into Waldorf education. Music, movement, handwork, visual arts, poetry and storytelling are a part of a student's daily experience in early childhood, grades and high school. One of the unique aspects of Waldorf education is that the arts are not brought as separate subjects but, are ideally, woven into the whole fabric of the curriculum. While the various arts offer many benefits in themselves, they also serve as a means of digesting, processing and integrating the entirety of a student's classroom experiences.

The arts arise and live mostly in the feeling part of our soul life. In this middle realm, in the realm of the heart and lungs, they help us mediate and balance what we experience both in our conscious thought life and in our unconscious will life. They help us bring to light whatever is living below the level of consciousness on one hand and, on the other hand, bring strongly formed concepts down into living pictures or examples.

During artistic practice, we need to be in dialogue with the nature of the medium in which we are working. This requires that we enter into sensing as well as doing. In this way we are also cultivating relational skills, like listening as well as speaking and giving as well as receiving. Learning how to mediate our own opposing impulses artistically can potentially help us learn how to find harmony and balance in social situations.

As a Waldorf early childhood teacher, I always appreciated the artistic work that I needed to undertake as a part of my responsibilities. Only recently have I fully realized how much those activities contributed to my soul health and to my ability to cope with the dynamic nature of modern life.

This new appreciation was sparked by an article that I found recently in a book titled, *Sacred Stories*. In the article, the author, Mary Catherine Bateson, spoke about how the various arts teach us about "composing a life:" from the visual arts we learn about how to balance the elements; from the musical arts, we learn how to work with transitions in time; in stories, we find lenses for interpreting our experiences and discover that we have the freedom to choose how to frame our lives.

Resilience can be a welcome gift from a life full of art or an artfully composed life!