

It's Practical Occupations, not Practical Life Skills: How to Teach Home Surroundings in Third Grade

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There is a discrepancy between Steiner's Home Surroundings curriculum in third grade and common practice in the Waldorf classroom: Steiner recommends practical occupations, not practical life skills.

It is worth considering this discrepancy because Steiner's practical occupations allow teachers to use economy in teaching in grades 4–6. Economy in teaching means Waldorf teachers “arrange all of the teaching so that within the shortest possible time the maximum amount of material can be presented to students by the simplest means possible” (Steiner 2003, 118). In Steiner's curriculum, practical occupations in third grade are the foundation for history and geography in fourth grade. They also augment the study of zoology, botany, and mineralogy in grades 4–6.

This article provides information about Steiner's indication (i.e., practical occupations) and current practices (i.e., practical life skills) so that Waldorf teachers and homeschool parents can make an informed choice. It is based on *Continuing the Journey to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 4 through 8*.

Christof Wiechert's Challenge for Waldorf Faculties

In Will Stapp's article “Why Do We Do What We Do? An Interview with Christof Wiechert,” Wiechert suggests that Waldorf teachers and Waldorf faculties do two things:

1. Start by asking the question “Why do we do that?” and then research what Steiner recommended and why.
2. Ask the follow-up question: “Is Steiner's advice what we need in our time?”

As his example, Wiechert suggests that faculties explore housebuilding in third grade. He says:

I'll give you a simple example. We are always talking in grade three about the house-building block. Now if you look at the original advice, Steiner said we should bring the children in grade three to an understanding of—or in contact with—the archetypal professions around the place where they live.

Now, house building is an archetypal profession, but if you live on the coast, fishing is as well. A baker is an archetypal profession. A farmer is an archetypal profession. It is not only about house building! (Stapp 2014)

Let's apply Wiechert's advice.

Why Do We Do That?

Christof Wiechert's first question is as follows: why do we do that?

Some Waldorf teachers in the English-speaking world teach Practical Life Skills blocks in third grade. They usually teach three blocks which include housebuilding, gardening/farming, and clothing/textiles. The names of these blocks include Textiles, Housebuilding, Shelters around the World, etc.

Why do we teach these blocks? One reason is that Waldorf teachers are taught in teacher training that they help with the nine-year change and that they “meet” the students of this age, in part because they give the students the skills they need to live on the Earth. These blocks are a standard part of teacher training and are routinely taught in Art of Teaching during the summer.

Research into What Steiner Recommends

Wiechert then recommends researching what Steiner recommends.

Going back to Steiner’s indications reveals this fact: Steiner never said anything about Practical Life Skills blocks. Instead, he gives indications for Home Surroundings blocks, specifically practical *occupations* for third grade. This fact begs the question: what are Home Surroundings?

Home Surroundings

The term *Home Surroundings* refers to a series of main lesson blocks that Steiner introduces in grades 1–3. In these blocks, the teacher interprets the students’ surroundings in an imaginative way (Stockmeyer 2001, vi). In grades 1–2, Home Surroundings includes stories and experience involving local nature. In third grade, Home Surroundings includes the study of local occupations that depend on the land and local resources.

Steiner explains his objective for Home Surroundings by saying:

We must add something that can stimulate the children’s thinking when we tell them about things that are close at hand, things that will later appear in a more structured form in geography and science [natural science]. We explain such things and introduce them to the children’s understanding by relating them to things that are already familiar—to familiar animals, plants, and soil formations or to local mountains, creeks, or meadows. Schools call this “local history,” but the purpose is to bring about a certain awakening in the children with regard to their surroundings: a soul awakening, so that they learn to really connect with their surroundings. (1997, 185)

Steiner’s objectives for Home Surroundings include both the academic curriculum (i.e., geography and natural science blocks in grades 4–6) and the child-development curriculum (i.e., a soul awakening where the children really connect with their local environment). Steiner’s Home Surroundings curriculum balances the developmental needs of the students and their academic needs. It is a very valuable part of the Waldorf curriculum for these reasons.

Note: Steiner’s curriculum called for 10 weeks of Home Surroundings in main lesson (Stockmeyer 2001, 58). This recommendation is on top of 14 weeks of language arts and 12 weeks of math, for a total of 36 weeks or 9 full months. However, many schools have shorter school years, so Waldorf schools wisely cut Home Surroundings back to one block to make sure there would be ample time to cover academics (i.e., language arts and math). This background information helps explain why some Waldorf schools schedule three full blocks of practical life skills in third grade.

Steiner's Indication for Home Surroundings in Grade 3: Practical Occupations Connected with the Locale

Steiner's Home Surroundings curriculum for third grade is **practical occupations**, or archetypal professions relating to the locale. They are described in two parts. The first part is included in Stockmeyer, but the second part is not. Both parts are needed to understand what Steiner intends.

The first part of Steiner's indication tells what to teach:

Now you see that the material you have gathered through describing the environment you employ in a free way for forming your lesson on practical occupations. The child of about nine in the third class can very well gain an idea, through such a lesson—I can only give instances—of preparing mortar as it is employed in house-building. The child can also have an idea of how to manure and how to plough; what rye and wheat look like. In short, in a free way, you let the child enter into his surroundings as far as he can with understanding. (Stockmeyer 2001, 58–59)

The second part of Steiner's indication explains the academic objectives for Home Surroundings. Steiner goes on to say:

In the fourth grade we make the transition from this type of instruction [practical occupations in third grade Home Surroundings] to speaking about what belongs to recent history, still in a very free way. For example, we can tell the children how it happened that grapes came to be cultivated locally (if in fact that is the case), or how orchards were introduced or how one or the other industry appeared, and other similar things. Then, too, we draw on the geography of the local region, beginning with what is most readily available, as I have already described. (Steiner 1997, 190-191)

Note that Steiner's indication for third grade is Home Surroundings, with an emphasis on practical occupations, not practical life skills.

Is Steiner's Indication What We Need in Our Time?

The second question Wiechert asks Waldorf teachers to ask themselves is this: Are practical occupations what we need in our time?

The answer is a resounding yes, for the following reasons:

1. Academic Relevance: Foundation for New Subjects: Steiner intends practical occupations to be the foundation for new subjects in grades 4–6. Note the use of economy in teaching. Steiner states that the Home Surroundings curriculum becomes the foundation for two new subjects in fourth grade: history (i.e., local history) and geography (i.e., local geography).

Steiner also states that Home Surroundings will become the foundation of the science curriculum [natural science] (Steiner 1997, 185). Note that all four of Steiner's examples fit into the natural science curriculum in the grades 4–6:

- Manuring = botany grade 5 and zoology grade 4. Manure is produced by local farm animals and is an example of how people use the waste products of animals.

- Ploughing, difference between rye and wheat = botany grade 5
- Preparing mortar (as used in house building) = mineralogy grade 6. Mortar is produced from limestone and sand.

Steiner's indication is an example of economy in teaching. Students still benefit from these practices, and they benefit when their teachers connect subjects to the real world and the students' experiences.

2. Child Development: Connecting Students with the World Via Their Locale: Practical occupations connect students to their locale. The initial introduction to zoology, botany, and mineralogy should be different in every Waldorf school because each new subject should be thoroughly grounded in the students' locale. Home Surroundings would look very different in the UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, etc. Even within a country, Home Surroundings would look different in Waldorf schools located in different regions of the country. The Home Surroundings curriculum for a Waldorf school in a desert region such as New Mexico would be entirely different from that found in a school in a tropical environment such as Florida. Students need this connection to the world via their locale now more than ever. Technology is disconnecting people from their locale.

3. Child Development: Getting the Students out of Screen World and into the Real World: Research shows that students can spend hours of every day engrossed in screens—cell phones, tablets, computers, and TV. Home Surroundings is an antidote to this exposure. Home Surroundings introduces the students to the real world that is all around them—the plants, animals, geography, topography, stones, earth, etc. In third grade it shows students that economic activity is connected to the Earth. For example, mortar comes from sand and limestone, and people use it to build. Seeds grow the food in the field. It can be argued that this is a lesson today's students need more than students at any previous point in human history, and the situation is only getting worse.

4. Academic Relevance and Child Development: Connecting Students with the World through Time: The occupations taught in third grade Home Surroundings connect students to their time. Local practical occupations change over time because human industry that depends on the locale is not static. Gold mining would have been taught in Sacramento, California in the 1850s during the Gold Rush, but it is no longer a local occupation. Instead, the students would learn about farming because agriculture is an example of a profession that depends on the local environment. Agriculture has replaced mining as a driving economic force. It is now one of the archetypal occupations relating to the Central Valley. The benefit from this practice is subtle, but something will occur to well-taught students when they are older: Human industry depends on the locale, but it is not static. It changes over time. The land goes on. However, what humans do to the land has effects after the industry is long gone. This lesson is one that all people need to learn, and it is more powerful if students come to the realization themselves as they mature.

Teaching practical occupations in third grade provides value in the academic curriculum and in the child-development curriculum. It serves students well in third grade and continues to serve them well in grades 4–6.

How and When Did the Practical Life Skills Blocks Originate?

Practical life skills blocks originated when Waldorf teachers confused Steiner's examples for the indication itself. For example, Steiner says to teach practical occupations and gives instances (i.e., examples) such as preparing mortar as used in housebuilding (Stockmeyer 2001, 59). Teachers flipped the indication from *teach practical occupations* to *teach housebuilding*. They flipped the other indications too. Instead of teaching practical occupations, they claimed the indication said to teach housing, farming, gardening, and/or clothing.

This misinterpretation can be found in many publications. First, it is the basis for the 1975 booklet by Roy Wilkinson entitled *Studies in Practical Activities: Farming, Gardening, Housebuilding for the Age Groups 9 and 10*. Wilkinson's misinterpretation of Steiner's intent formed the basis for Wilkinson's entire curriculum:

- Mortar making became Housebuilding
- Manuring and ploughing became Farming
- What rye and wheat look like became Gardening.

Wilkinson's booklet is not an isolated occurrence. Other permutations of Home Surroundings include Practical Life Skills, House Building, and Textiles. *Waldorf Clearing House Newsletter, Spring 1977*, edited by Anne Charles, has an entire spread on practical life skills. Observe the titles of the subheadings:

- Practical Life—Housing
- Practical Life—Clothing
- Practical Life—Farming

Multiple teachers from multiple schools contributed their ideas for practical life skills in this newsletter. This sacred nothing is quite widespread and has been around for generations.

What Does Steiner Actually Say about Practical Life?

Steiner indicates that practical life belongs after the twelve-year change and not beforehand.

According to Steiner, practical life skills belong after the twelve-year change. He speaks about the timing in various lecture cycles, and his reasons can be summarized as follows:

- To understand life (Steiner 2001, 233–234).
- As preparation for future employment (Steiner 2003, 235).
- To help students make sense of the modern world (Steiner 2001, 234) (Steiner 2003, 233).

Second, Steiner states that before the twelve-year change, students should learn to appreciate beauty and not consider practical life. In *Soul Economy*, Steiner states:

We really have to ask ourselves whether there is any possibility of encouraging children between their second dentition and puberty to become more practical and skillful. And if we look at life as it really is—guided by life and not by abstract ideas or theorizing—we find that the answer is to bring children as close as possible to beauty. The more we can lead them to appreciate beauty, the better prepared they will be at the time of puberty to tackle practical tasks without being

harmful for the rest of their lives. Our students will not be able to safely understand the working of conveyances or railroad engines unless an esthetic appreciation of painting or sculpture was cultivated at the right age. This is a fact that teachers should keep in mind. Beauty, however, needs to be seen as part of life, not separate and complete in itself. In this sense, our civilization must still learn a great deal, especially in the field of education. (2003, 238–239)

Steiner's indications are clear: students should consider practical life and practical life skills after the twelve-year change.

Why are Practical Life Skills Blocks So Tenacious?

Practical life skills blocks in third grade have become a fixed tradition in the Waldorf system. There are numerous reasons practical life skills blocks are so tenacious.

1. Practical life skills have been a fixture in Waldorf schools in America and Canada since the 1970s, if not earlier. They are firmly established in teacher training programs and have been for generations of teachers.
2. It is difficult to discover Steiner's intent for Home Surroundings. Only part of the indication is contained in Stockmeyer (see "The Use of Compilations Sets" in chapter 1.1 #1). It is necessary to read Steiner's indications in *First Lecture on the Curriculum*, a work that is not always covered in Waldorf teacher training. Furthermore, once teachers find Steiner's indications, they must interpret them because Steiner characterizes rather than defines. It makes his meaning opaque. Note that it has taken *Continuing the Journey to Literacy* several pages to explain Steiner's meaning.
3. Some teachers are not receptive to hearing the results of this research. They like teaching Practical Life Skills blocks and offshoot blocks such as Shelter around the World. (Note: Shelters around the World is a block where students in third grade study shelters made by indigenous peoples around the world—yurts, igloos, etc. In many ways, it is the antithesis of Steiner's indications for Home Surroundings in third grade. Instead of studying local Home Surroundings, students are studying the wider world. It is a cuckoo egg.)
4. Practical life skills are popular with students, parents, and teachers. Teachers are excited to be able to teach something besides math and language arts blocks, which are the only academic subjects taught in grades 1–3. Students love practical activities for the same reason and because it is infinitely more fun to chop vegetables and talk with your friends in a cooking class in main lesson than it is to parse sentences to find the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Parents like the idea that their child's school is teaching students these skills.
5. Teachers think practical life skills help with the nine-year change and thus feel they should not give them up. This idea did not come from Steiner. He never mentions practical life skills in connection with the nine-year change, only the twelve-year change. Steiner talks about the nine-year change in various lectures, and he always stresses the same two things that do help with the nine-year change:
 - Demonstrating to the child that her faith in your authority as teacher is justified and that you know your stuff (Steiner 2003, 159), (Steiner 1982, 52), and (Steiner 1996, 114).

- Teaching grammar:

In addition, the idea that practical life skills help with the nine-year change may be based on a misreading of Steiner’s indications about meeting students’ needs.

For these reasons, practical life skills are entrenched in the Waldorf curriculum. Practical life skills blocks are a giant cuckoo egg. They push aside Steiner’s intention and undermine the rest of the Waldorf curriculum.

Ramifications for Teaching the Subjects in Grades 4–6

Steiner’s Home Surroundings curriculum in grades 1–3 is the key to introducing most of the new subjects taught in grades 4–6. First, practical occupations in third grade are the foundation for two new subjects in fourth grade: history and geography. Second, the material from practical occupation is supposed to be included in all three natural science blocks in grades 4–6: zoology, botany, and mineralogy. Third, Home Surroundings stories in grades 1–2 are seeds you plant for natural sciences. In grades 4–6, you pick up the themes you introduced in story form in Home Surroundings grades 1–2. It is healthy for the students and a good way to teach the subjects. It balances the child-development curriculum and the academic curriculum.

Table 1 shows the connections Steiner made between Home Surroundings in grades 1–3 and the subject blocks in grades 4–6.

Table 1: Some of Steiner’s Use of Economy in Teaching in the Waldorf Curriculum

| Grade | Block |
|-------|---|
| 1–3 | Home Surroundings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grades 1–2: Stories about local animals, plants, geography, etc. • Grade 3: Local practical occupations relating to the environment. |
| 4 | Local Geography: Use the local practical occupations from Home Surroundings in grade 3 to introduce local geography. Show the connection between the people, the land, and the local economy. Local History: Use the local practical occupations from Home Surroundings in grade 3 to introduce recent local history. Zoology: Use material about local animals presented in Home Surroundings stories in grades 1–2 to introduce zoology. |
| 5 | Botany: Use material about local plants presented in Home Surroundings stories in grades 1–2 to introduce botany. |
| 6 | Mineralogy: Use material presented in Home Surroundings stories in grades 1–2 to introduce mineralogy. |

Source: Adapted from Steiner (1997, 190–192), (2000, 147), and (2001, 198–214).

These connections are examples of economy in teaching, which means that teachers “arrange all of the teaching so that within the shortest possible time the maximum amount of material can be presented to students by the simplest means possible” (Steiner 2003, 118). Note that Steiner has the teacher introduce the students to the world around them in Home Surroundings grades 1–3 and has the teacher extend out to the entire globe and humanity in grades 4–8.

Home Surroundings grades 1–3 is the foundation for much of Steiner’s Waldorf curriculum in the grades 4–6. Practical occupations in third grade are pivotal. Teaching Practical Occupations (instead of practical life skills) in Home Surroundings in third grade allows you to use economy in teaching to its full extent. Your curriculum in grades 4–6 will be the better for it.

Using Economy in Teaching with Your Home Surroundings Curriculum

There are numerous ways to use economy in teaching with Home Surroundings in grades 4–6, including history, geography, and natural science (i.e., zoology, botany, and mineralogy).

History (Grade 4 Only)

Use one or more of the practical occupations you taught in grade 3 to show how the occupation contributes/contributed to the history of your region as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Economy in Teaching: Using Practical Occupations to Teach Local History in Fourth Grade

| Practical Occupations— Third Grade | Local History—Fourth Grade How That Occupation Contributed to Local History (e.g., Is it related to why people originally settled your area? How is it relevant to the history of your region?) |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Fish hatchery | The salmon used to be a major part of life in this area—particularly for the local Indians such as the Miwok. Discuss the areas where they lived. Discuss how the use of the American and Sacramento rivers changed when gold was discovered. Discuss how the river was dredged. Discuss how the hatchery is working to protect salmon for the future. |
| Quarry worker | How people dredged the American River (and why rocks are piled up along the path our class used to use for nature walks in first and second grade). Touch upon how different companies sell sand, gravel, stone, etc. to tend a seed for local mineralogy in sixth grade. |
| Farmer (tomato) | After the Gold Rush, people continued to settle California’s Central Valley because it has exemplary farmland. Discuss how this impacted the local Native American peoples who lived in the area (e.g., Miwok Tribe) and how the use of the land changed. Field trip to Effie Yaw nature center to see how the Miwok tribe lived (e.g., how to grind acorns). |

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Farmer (fruit) | Review third grade field trip to orchards. Discuss other migration to California's Central Valley from around the world, such as the Chinese. Consider mentioning the only Japanese migration, the failed Japanese colony, the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony of 1869–1871. Include the book <i>Okei-san: A Girl's Journey, Japan to California, 1868–1871</i> by Joan Barton Barsotti. Use the book to discuss riverboat traffic, accidents on the river, how Sacramento was an important destination during this time, etc. Discuss farm workers, including Latinos. Plant a seed for Caesar Chavez and farm workers' rights, topics to be covered in a later grade. |
| Farmer (almond) | Discuss third grade field trip to the Blue Diamond plant. Discuss almond farming as part of the history of land use in the Sacramento area. |
| Transportation Workers (railroad) | Discuss the history of the railroad in Sacramento and how Sacramento is still a hub of transportation. Discuss history of the railroad expansion across the continental US. Discuss Chinese immigration and the importance of their labor in building the railroads. Possible field trip to the Railroad Museum. |

Geography (Grade 4 Only)

Think back to the stories you told in grades 1–2 and to the local practical occupations you taught in grade 3 (see chapter 5.5 #6 and 7). Look for examples that show how the occupation is connected to the geography of your region as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Economy in Teaching: Using Practical Occupations to Teach Local Geography in Fourth Grade

| Home Surroundings Stories (Grades 1–2) and Practical Occupation (Grade 3) | Connection to Local Geography in Fourth Grade |
|---|--|
| Sal's Journey | The geography of the American River, Sacramento River, and rivers system to the Pacific Ocean. Show the students maps of the rivers Sal traveled. Have them make their own maps of the local rivers. |
| Farmer (tomato) | Show a map of California's Central Valley and where Sacramento is (as well as the farms and orchards we visited in third grade). |
| Fish Hatchery | Show the fish hatchery on a map of the American River. Have the students include it on their map of local rivers. |
| Transportation Workers (railroad) | Show a map of local railroad activity. Put the railroad systems on the map. |

Natural Science (Zoology, Botany, Mineralogy)

Think back to the Home Surroundings stories you told in grades 1–2 (see chapter 5.5 #6 and 7). Look for examples that show how the occupation is connected to natural science (i.e., zoology, botany, or mineralogy) as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Economy in Teaching: Using Practical Occupations to Teach Natural Science

| Story | How to Work with It in the Natural Science Blocks |
|---|---|
| “Sal’s Journey,” a story about the life of one salmon from the American River | Zoology (Human Being and Animal block): Use it to introduce the salmon, a local fish, and to teach its life cycle. |
| “Leaf Day,” a story about the oak tree | Botany: Use it to introduce the oak tree, particularly the trunk (including the phloem, which is part of the story) and the leaf. |

Home Surroundings is the foundation for much of the Waldorf curriculum in grades 4–6. The stories and practical occupations from grades 1–3 are the foundations for the subject blocks in grades 4–6.

Conclusion

Steiner’s indication for Home Surroundings in third grade is practical occupations, not practical life skills. Practical occupations allow teachers to use economy in teaching in grades 4–6 in the following subject blocks: history, geography, zoology, botany, and mineralogy. Practical life skills belong after the twelve-year change.

Practical life skills blocks in third grade are a sacred nothing, one that undermines the individuality of Waldorf schools and leads to a homogenized Waldorf education. They should be on every Waldorf teacher’s radar.

If you are part of a Waldorf faculty or a homeschool study group, please bring the topic of Home Surroundings for study and consideration. It is a vitally important topic, but one that is largely overlooked. For more information about how to teach Home Surroundings in grades 1–3, please read Steiner’s indications in *First Lecture on the Curriculum*. (It is sometimes published at the end of *Discussions with Teachers*.)

For more information about how to teach Home Surroundings in grades 1–2, consult the book *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3* by Langley and Militzer-Kopperl. For more information about how to use material from Home Surroundings grades 1–3 to introduce subjects in grades 4–8, consult the book *Continuing the Journey to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 4 through 8* by Jennifer Militzer-Kopperl.

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