

Arithmetic Comes Alive

By Liz Gibbons

My memory of childhood arithmetic is of doing countless worksheets to learn how to add, followed by worksheets of subtraction problems, then memorizing the multiplication tables and sitting through algebra, geometry and solid geometry classes. I learned, but it was all quite boring.

Last Monday evening I was checking out a website that I recently came across. Serendipitously, there was an article about two books the creator of the website, Douglas Gabriel, had written in 2017 relating to Waldorf education. I had not known that he had been a Waldorf school teacher and then a trainer of Waldorf teachers. He related how he had raised the test scores of a failing school in Michigan when he was the principal by instructing the teachers how to begin their school day by pushing the desks back and having the students do certain movement exercises the Waldorf way. Test scores shot way up. Officials accused the school of cheating. Mr. Gabriel invited the accusers to come and observe the school. The outcome was the program was recommended to be used in other Michigan schools.

Waldorf education was developed by Rudolph Steiner. It begins with first grade when a child will turn seven years old during the school year. Being impressed by what I knew of Waldorf education I was curious to learn how they taught arithmetic.

Starting in first grade, arithmetic is taught through movement, poems, stories, ancient fables and music and not through those deadly boring worksheets we had to endure. They know that movement is a key to developing a skill set in children. An early lesson may be that the children are in a gym or outside and are told to make four steps forward, and then five steps back, followed by three steps forward, and seven steps back, and so on, counting as they take their steps. They learn the meaning of each number from 1 to 9 based on ancient philosophies about numbers. They may be given twelve objects such as chick peas or pennies to count into piles of four to discover that they now have 3 piles. Or the teacher may give each child 56 chick peas. He asks the child to find out how often he will find 8 chick peas in the 56. He finds the answer is 7. Another way to teach multiplication is to put twelve students in a circle. Another student, the runner, goes around the circle counting the students and when he gets to three, that student has to sit down on the floor. He goes back to counting one, two, three, and again the third student sits down. When he finishes the circle there are four students on the floor. The students visually see that 12 can be divided into groups of four with three in each group. They do the same exercise using other numbers. These are just some of the ways these young students learn arithmetic.

The Waldorf way of teaching arithmetic seems more suited to a child's needs. It allows the young child to follow his nature by being active, exploring, playing, moving, and having fun learning. It is not until the higher grades that the students solve some math problems on paper as we did, but now they have a much deeper understanding of numbers.

I wish I had learned arithmetic that way.

