

QUILT-MAKING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASS

by Monica Nixon

As our world becomes more and more technological, it is essential that we remember one of the main ways the child's brain develops is through meaningful work of the hand. It has been my pleasure to share quilt-making with my elementary students for the past eight years and to observe the effects that this work has had on them. Over the years I have made a few group quilts with all the children during our regular class time, and I have given after-school classes in quilt-making. Now for several years my class has settled into a ritual quilt-making event that begins in early November and finishes before our winter break in mid-December. Since my class consists of about thirty students ranging from age six through age twelve, we have two categories of quilts being made: a nine-inch square by the six- and seven-year-olds and an eighteen-inch square by the eight- to twelve-year-olds. Every step is done by hand; no sewing machines are used. Students are not required to participate, but since the ritual is firmly in place, all the students look forward to the day the process begins.

Each spring I show the class a few quilt designs that are simple enough to yield success. The children help me narrow the choices down to two designs. For the smaller quilts made by the younger students, I decide on the design, which is usually a four-patch, nine-patch, or log cabin pattern. Over the summer and early fall, I buy fabric to replenish our stock. Sometimes the children and parents donate

Over the years I have heard several students remark about how they are more focused than they have ever been. Indeed, this is true; the sewing process seems to be especially helpful to my students who have difficulty sustaining their attention during most learning activities.

Monica Nixon is founder and director of Mountain Laurel Montessori School in Front Royal, VA. She is in her seventeenth year of teaching an elementary class of six- to twelve-year-olds. Prior to this, she taught for fourteen years in primary. She is both a quilter and a knitter.

fabric for the quilts. It is fun to have about fifteen different fabrics in our school laundry room before the cutting begins.

For the older students, the next step is to choose from the two different designs and to select their fabrics. I keep track of their choices by pinning small bits of the fabrics they have selected by their names on a large piece of paper. Four copies of each design are taped in windows throughout the classroom for students to refer to during the next few weeks of piecing.

Cutting of the pieces is done by me (usually at home), by volunteers, and by a few of the children who have perfected their cutting skills enough to have success. It is crucial that the cutting is done well. The children understand this skill is a point of arrival attained only by careful practice.

Children choose from the pre-cut pieces. To keep some semblance of order, each child has a one-gallon zip-lock plastic freezer bag with his name on it to keep track of the fabric pieces. We cut small felt hearts to hold each child's pins and needles.

Once the quilt top is assembled, students make a "sandwich" with the quilt top, cotton batting, and a white piece of muslin as the backing. These are basted together and then the "sandwich" is quilted, basting stitches removed, and binding attached to complete the quilt.

During the four to six weeks that we give to our quilting project, I enjoy the natural conversations that take place. I learn more about their siblings, their pets, and their cousins than I do at any other time of the year. These conversations also help children to create bonds with students they may have not have known as well beforehand. I also get to hear about the special person each of them chooses to receive the quilt being made. Sometimes it is a parent, a grandparent, an aunt or uncle, and even once a special dog friend. Often as we are all sewing, some students will begin to sing; gradually more students join in until we are all happily singing together. These weeks of quilting are nurturing for all of us, even the observers who happen to be in our class during this time.

Over the years I have heard several students remark about how they are more focused than they have ever been. Indeed, this is true;

the sewing process seems to be especially helpful to my students who have difficulty sustaining their attention during most learning activities. I think it has to do with the repetitive actions with each stitch and that there is no way to speed through any part of the process. The pride these students have in their beautiful finished products is heart-warming. Often their newly acquired ability to sustain their focus carries over into their other work. For sure, their self-esteem is a bit stronger from their experiences of success.

One of my greatest joys with this activity is watching the children helping each other with their quilts. Older students who have made several quilts provide plenty of support for the less experienced sewers. It is not unusual for a younger student to learn a technique such as basting, quilting, or attaching the binding from an older child with absolutely no input from me. They also help each other remove stitches when mistakes have been made.

As each student completes his quilt, it is hung on the wall in the classroom. Gradually our room becomes full of their beautiful creations that are made with stunning color combinations that most adults are not brave enough to try. Over the years the parents notice as their children's sewing skills improve. Often I will hear about





a student who has lined up their quilts in chronological order at home to appreciate what they have learned.

As students graduate or move and have to leave us, their love of our quilt-making ritual becomes apparent. Once I received a quilt as a gift from a graduate. One student taught his teenage sister to make a quilt during vacation. Another sweet recognition came from a ten-year-old boy who had moved away. In November, when he knew his old class would be deeply involved in quilting, he asked his mom to take him to a quilting store to buy fabric to make a quilt. His mom shared with me the amazement of the quilters in the store who helped him as he conversed with them about the various steps. They were impressed by both his knowledge and his passion for the craft.

The children enjoy participating in an American tradition that has been part of our history since the early days of our country. They experience the joy that comes from having created something beautiful and unique to share with those they love, while at the same time the work of their hands contributes to the development of their intelligence.

