

Anything but Children's Play: What Play in School Means for Learning

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A research project at the Rudolf Steiner School in Hamburg-Bergstedt investigates what play in the school means for learning. This is part of a larger research project with the theme "Independent [self-reliant] Learning," conducted under the supervision of the Academy for Developmental Mentoring and supported financially by Software AG-Stiftung. The participating teachers carry out individual projects that they hope will encourage individual work and learning; they evaluate the results and incorporate the results in the lessons. The author of this article conducted the following research project.

It's eight-thirty in the morning, outside in the schoolyard.

The class teacher of Grade Four, Knut Krödel, observes the boys in his class standing by the garden plot next to a side wing of the school building. There are two groups pelting each other with the bark mulch that is scattered in the garden. There is also quite a bit of mulch scattered all over the pavement next to the garden. Immediately the teacher hurries over to the boys. But before he can begin his admonition, one of the boys comes over to him to say: "Everything is all right. We have set up rules. Afterwards we will sweep it all up." And in fact, a half hour later the bark mulch has disappeared from the pavement and is neatly distributed in the garden. For three days the children play this game, and on each day they clean up after the game.

A few weeks later, at the same time, in an abandoned corner behind the gym, the children of the Fourth Grade want to build a climbing structure. To begin they dig out the earth one meter deep in four locations. The first thirty centimeters is pretty easy to dig, but the rest is very difficult work. After that four posts are cemented in place. Then, suddenly, they are no longer interested. The four posts satisfy them. The class teacher encourages them to keep going with the project, but without success. They are already heading for another corner of the schoolyard.

Shouldn't these children already be in the classroom? What does playing with mulch and building a climbing structure have to do with school?

Whether that is actually school

"And whether that is school," says the class teacher, Knut Krödel. For one whole year, with the children of his Fourth Grade class, he has carried out the project, "Playing before Main Lesson." Every morning, shortly after eight o'clock, after arriving in the classroom, greeting each other and saying the morning verse, they headed outside.

Here the children were allowed to play in the spacious, idyllically laid-out school yard for one whole hour, according to their heart's desire, in the wind and weather, without any direction or instruction from their teacher. He was, to be sure, always present and was the contact person when the children needed help, and he played with them from time to time, when the children invited him, but otherwise he held himself apart and observed. This was all with the permission of the parents. How did it come about?

"After long observation I had perceived that around nine years of age children lose their will to learn, and they experience more problems with learning. Often I heard this sentence: 'School just isn't fun for me any more.' The parents, as well, told me that their children were groaning in the morning, from the time of waking through going to school. How can this be? I thought to myself, 'We want to bring about exactly the opposite!'"

Other considerations connected with these thoughts. What does learning actually mean? Waldorf schools with their holistic approach have never understood learning to be just an accumulation of knowledge or the product of the visible work of the student. This can be seen in the many musical lessons, as well as the many other common social undertakings such as the monthly assemblies, the fairs, the festivals that are put on by the children working together. These things not only build a sense of community and give a glimpse of the actual lessons, but they also foster the perceptual capacities of the students, as well as their creative imagination and their joy in discovery. Along with these aspects, they also encourage, often in a playful way, their entire personality.

Naturally, even in Waldorf schools, the original form of play is displaced by the canon of subjects that must be taught. Play remains something that the child can only give himself up to after his other obligations—schoolwork, homework, often private music or sports lessons, and chores—have all been met.

Often, however, not even then is there any time for play. Since the television, the computer, and electronic games have gained entry into the children's bedrooms, play has increasingly fallen further and further into the background. The potential results for the development of the child's personality, not to mention the effect on the acquisition of necessary academic capacities for

learning, are well known. The numbers continue to grow, of students who are not able to concentrate on their work for more than a few minutes in a lesson, who cannot work alone, and who cannot complete a task once it is begun, or only with great difficulty. It was to counter these developments that the “Play hour” was instituted at the Rudolf Steiner School in Hamburg-Bergstedt. Class teacher Knut Krödel resisted the usual separation between play and instruction.

Children learn during play.

“When do children learn? Children learn while they are playing! To begin with, they learn about the outer things of the world. They must come to know that the things with which they are surrounded can be changed by their activity. They can have an influence on the world. Children often have different ideas about the changes they would like to make, and then in the actual doing, they learn how things really stand.

“In every game there are rules that are invented. The children test the rules and themselves, in so far as they pay attention to the reactions of their peers and their environment. In this process they learn a great deal. I have observed that children always set up rules in their play together. And consequences are immediately applied when there is a violation. In this way children learn to be fair. The one who always wants to be the leader will soon realize that his playmates turn away from him. So they must find compromises, in order for the game to continue. It is fascinating to watch children in this process. In this way they are learning social competence. In contrast, no child learns social competence when the teacher tells him how he should behave.”



Awakening the joy of learning

To re-enliven and stimulate the children’s joy in learning was the great goal that Knut Krödel hoped to bring about with his project. A further objective was to find an answer to the tantalizing questions: What kind of impact would play have on the one and a half hour main lesson that followed immediately after the play hour? Would the children retain the trust in their own capacities and their own initiative? Would they be more curious, more imaginative, have more joy in discovering things? How did the social relations develop among the children?

In answer to these questions, the class teacher replied: “All the students came into the lesson with high spirits and an even temper, they worked joyfully, and had no difficulties joining in with the lesson and following along. At the same time they were able to achieve much more than the previous two fourth grade classes that I had taught in earlier class cycles. They learned fractions, for example, in a shorter, more intense period of time, with greater certainty. I also noticed a great difference in writing dictation between this group of students and earlier fourth grades. And they began to help one another more, which I also attributed to the play period.”

The children begin to learn on their own.

In the fifth grade, during the 2009–10 school year, the play hour was changed. The time allowed to play outside became a free hour “at [the child’s] disposal.” This was to take into account the age of the children, now heading into prepuberty. In addition they investigated in which direction the period would develop under the new conditions. This showed that the children were learning to manage their own time. Often they went outside to play, and then at other times they played in the classroom. But they no longer only played.

On many days, as a matter of course, they worked at their desks in their main lesson books, or quizzed each other on their vocabulary words, gave each other dictation to write, or practiced for a report. Once in a while the class teacher was asked for help, for example when a child had not understood a new lesson. This independence was also observed by the teacher in the main lessons that followed: “The children have slowly gained in form, and it seems that the play time has borne fruit. It seems that what they learned there has worked on in other subjects. When I teach them French, they learn eagerly and with joy. In the main lesson block about Egypt, I notice that they show tremendous joy and curiosity in their reports. Almost every day we experience that a child has come up with a new, creative idea to make everything interesting. It all started with a talk by K., who spoke about the pyramids. She brought in a pyramid that she had made herself, and after her talk she even gave a quiz to the students, to see if they had been paying attention.

“Today E. and P. came in and spoke about Ramses. They had large beautiful pictures and even some photos, too. As the main attraction—they had wrapped up a child, to show what happened to the excavator when he unwrapped the mummy. T. had made a little ship out of papyrus. But it was J. who took the cake, as he spoke about chariots, and presented a large drawing on the blackboard, that was appreciated by all with a great ‘Ah’.”

And what did the students have to say [about this project]? In a written survey at the end of the fifth grade, of the 38 children who participated, 24 said that since the project began, they were much happier to come to school, and 19

children said that they could learn much better since the beginning of the project. 23 children said they would like to keep the play hour in the coming school year. And only 12 children wrote that the play hour was not so important.

Now an interesting task begins for the class teacher to pursue: to find out what kind of lasting effects the playtime during the past two years will have on the present learning of the children.