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## **Play as a basis for stimulating literacy and language in upper primary school in Norway.**

### **Abstract**

This project began in 1998 by studying children in upper primary school (ten to eleven years of age) in Norway with results presented at the ICCP-conference in Oslo in 1999.

The same pupils have now another year of upper primary school (twelve to thirteen years of age) and are the participants in the present investigation, which seeks to answer four questions:

(1) In which ways does playing give inspiration and motivation for oral and written communication? (2) In which way does literature give inspiration and motivation for playing which, in turn, gives new inspiration and motivation for written and oral activities? (3) How can continuous playing at school increase skills within reading and writing, as well as in oral communication? (4) Is a good play environment a good environment for learning?

A participant observation methodology was used to examine these questions were generated employing videotapes, interviews, field notes as well as pupils' written material gathered over a period of nearly three years.

The children have played together from 1995 or their first year in school, and they still play in different ways, from "free play" to teacher-directed play. Until this last school year, they had "play" written on their timetable despite their age and grade. A special interest is to examine the impact from play on the pupils' work with respect to different aspects of the Norwegian language.

Results include the observation that the children have developed strategies and structures in their playing, which seem to influence their literacy skills in a positive way.

Some effective activities will be described and how they have been modified as children mature. Results and applications will be discussed in my paper with special attention to how play and literacy are reciprocally related in upper primary school as well as in the lower primary grades.

### **Background**

#### **Curriculum 1997 (L97).**

#### **Writing and reading instruction in Norway for 11 - 13 years old children.**

In 1997, Norway lowered the school start age from seven to six years following an intensive ten-year long debate. Compulsory education was then extended to ten years with the Primary Stage covering grades 1 - 4 (age 6 - 10). Norwegian language remained the dominating subject in school with about 20 % of total lecture time for grades 5 - 7. Children should now be taught as well in separate lectures and as a meaningful tool in cross-subject themes. The new curriculum for Norwegian language is strongly inspired by new theories in reading and writing and has the following three areas for grade 1 - 4, grade 5 - 7 and grade 8 - 10: (1) Listening and speaking; (2) Reading and writing; and (3) Knowledge about language and culture

Oral language, dialogues and discussions are more focused upon than before L97. Pupils experience daily oral discourse concerning something that both fellow pupils and teachers have been listening to and have answered. They also learn to express themselves in different situations and they also learn to listen to others as an audience. Pupils further experience language variations in different genres of literature - a rich source of inspiration for play and for imaginative expression. Creative text production is a keyword in the new plan (Lorentzen, 1997). The seeking for wholeness and meaning is quite opposite to the old view from the 1960s common in Norway.

In the national curriculum the actions of listening and speaking, reading and writing are considered to be inseparable parts of a process: searching for meaning through language. This has been inspired by the shift in the 1970-80s to more cognitive/constructivist thinking in psychology and in learning theory in education.

### **Personal background**

For the last twelve years I have been working as assistant professor of Norwegian language within teacher education at the college, interrupted by a period of two years as elected Programme Director of Education studies. I also have 17 years of work experience from primary and secondary school. During the years 1991 – 1993, I performed a research investigation together with a colleague who teaches Pedagogy at our college. We entitled our project Planning and Implementation of Teaching Practice by Supervisors and Student Teachers (Ervik & Meling 1994). In the autumn of 1998, I started a new study in another field at the same school, connected to the subject of play and literacy.

### **The area of investigation/collaborate partners**

The Tjødnalio primary school has an active philosophy: the development of the entire personality. However, the teachers and pupils are «just ordinary people», not selected in any way, and the children with whom I am working come from diverse social backgrounds and have varying mental capacities. For this reason the project gives a unique chance to follow up previous on-going work. Together with the teaching team, I want to see if playing has a positive impact on the pupils working with the Norwegian language.

This work is equally important to create a base for new thinking within research in connection to language development and to reading and writing skills. At the same time, my work is very useful for teacher students studying Norwegian at our college.

In 1998, I started studying two classes in upper primary school (school level: 5/ages 11-12 years). The teaching team had chosen to accentuate play. Playing (organized and free playing) has been used as an intentional method for learning and socialization for a number of years.

The children have played since their first year at school in 1995. The teachers, inspired by Trageton, dared to use 3 hours per week for free play two years before the reform (L97) was launched (Trageton 1997). Trageton writes about the classes:

«[...] The classes had one hour «free playtime» two days per week before lunch. These classes were trained in group working and «workshop pedagogy», and therefore it was rather easy to arrange ten different play corners. The children chose in which corner they wanted to play, but if three or four children had chosen one play corner, no more children could choose that corner (something like Weikart's «High scope» system for preschool in the USA). Later on the classes also used the outdoor area for these periods. [...].  
(Trageton, 1997)

This experience provides useful background knowledge about something all grades now do. The two classes continue to have «play» written on their timetable despite their age and grade--- even as this kind of activity normally ends after grade 4. This is quite unique: the children have developed special strategies and structures in their playing which seem to

influence their literacy skills in a positive way. My hypothesis is that playing can be learning when pupils are in higher grades just as it is when they are in lower primary school.

What I consider special with this project is that it has concentrated on children in upper primary school. Research within the field of «Play and development» is today mostly concentrated on the younger children; that is children in pre-school and lower primary school. These children (twelve to thirteen years of age) are finishing upper primary school. At the present time, my work has mostly been concentrated on one of two classrooms comprised of 22 pupils.

### **Research questions**

- 1) *In which way does playing give inspiration and motivation for oral and written communication?*
- 2) *In which way does literature give inspiration and motivation for playing which, in turn, gives new inspiration and motivation for written and oral activities?*
- 3) *How can continuous playing at school increase skills in reading and writing, as well as in oral communication in upper primary school?*
- 4) *Is a good play environment also a good environment for learning– even in upper primary school?*

### **Application to my project**

The pupils I work with participate in «workshop pedagogy» (Trageton 1992), with the organization of studies and some material brought from the lower grades into the higher grades in primary school. The teaching team saw the importance of using play as a working method for strengthening learning and personal development. My interest has been to study the impact from play on the pupils' work with different aspects of the Norwegian language.

In this process, the main role of the teacher is not to be a lecturer, but to organize the learning experience and to be a dialogue partner to each child, asking demanding questions to raise each child's level of conceptual understanding (Vygotsky 1962). This is akin to scaffolding teaching in DAP, or developmentally appropriate practice (Bredenkamp & Copple 1997). Internationally, in pre-school settings play is accepted as a working method; nevertheless in most countries within the schools there are great barriers against play (Christie 1999:33).

Still, after the new National Curriculum (L97) a new «playful» school climate exists in Norway. Today play is considered as a learning centred method within a clear-cut framework set up by the teacher.

My interest is the use of play as a tool for development of the different areas in language skills. I also find it important to develop creativity in using language in different matters as a counterpart to consumption of ready-made products and solutions via TV, Internet and other electronic media.

Playing with language is also an important instrument for personal development as a whole. Expressed and inner private language is equally important for one's own identity and as a key to communication within all subjects and across all kinds of human activities. Furthermore, both written and spoken language must remain alive as a tool for contact between human beings, instead of replacing human communication with electronic ways of «communication».

### **Methodology**

#### **Qualitative research tradition**

My project is as a modern classroom study (Egebladh and Tiller 1997; Hoel 1995) and also a case study, where the case is the class, -the pupils as a group and as individuals.

**\*Observation and participating observation**

I have taken notes during my observation, and then worked with my material directly afterwards summarizing dialogues, conversations, and remarks verbatim.

Both the pupils and the parents are fully aware of my doings in the class, why I am there and what I want to find answers to. I have never had the feeling of being a kind of guest, but have rather felt like I have become integrated and a natural part of the class and school environment.

**\*Conversations**

I talk a lot with teachers about what we are doing, about experiences and thoughts we have about what is going on. We exchange point of views and make plans for how to get answers to my questions. Also the pupils are important parts of conversation. I talk with them informally and ask questions without having planned interviews. This has given me useful information about what the children are thinking about their doings.

**\*Interviews**

I have made formal and planned interviews, both with children and teachers.

**\*Videotapes**

I have videotapes of play sequences, connected to play, drama and language activities. The tapes make a useful documentation when I draw my conclusions.

**\*Written pupils' work**

I have access to the different products made by the children during the last three years.

### **The idea of play**

According to researchers it is very difficult, if not impossible, to give an adequate definition of the word "play". For one thing you can explain playing according to different categories, such as grade of freedom and control, frames, etc.

The latest years we have in Norway got lots of literature/theories dealing with play. After we got the new curriculum, L97, there have been - and are going on - lots of projects and research, connected with play, and many different categories are mentioned in books and reports. This is very useful work, but mostly defined and linked to pre-school and lower primary school. Hopefully some ongoing projects at our college (Merete Økland, paper 2001, and Liv Ingrid Grov, paper 2001) together with my work will give some support to play research in upper primary school. So far, I connect my play theories to categories used by Trageton. (1997).

### **How the children play**

When the pupils started upper primary school in 1998, they had to move from their former locations to where the classes 5 -7 use to have their rooms. The teachers were eager to see how this change of location together with the fact that the pupils now would be surrounded by older pupils, would affect their playing.

Would they be shy? Would the older pupils tease them in any way? The answer was no. On the contrary, the they often uttered a wish to take part in the playing. This year the pupils are the oldest children at the school, and they are to be considered as models for the younger ones. Our pupils still show no kind of shyness or seem to be disturbed when other pupils, other teachers, cleaners or visitors pass the «playground», neither in the corridor nor in the classroom.

The classes dispose a small and simple collection of clothes and «things/ requisites», which they can use if they want to.

The teachers roughly classify the different types of playing into «free play» and so-called «framed play». In the first category we can put play without any kind of instructions, starting point or task. This kind of play is less used than «framed play» when it is going on in

hours/lessons inside the school building. The starting point for these kinds of play can vary to a great extent depending on what the aims are.

Flip-over: The classes have developed a sort of framed play through the use of a flip-over with written arenas for play, -such as «police-station», «shop», «hospital», «bank», etc. As an introduction to a play hour, the pupils choose which station/arena they want to play on, and their names are written on the flip-over under the heading of the chosen arena.

Of course, sometimes various drama-methods also are implemented, mostly when the play is steered by the teacher to a great extent.

### **Classroom, play area**

I have drawn a simple sketch of the classroom with room for group activities and corridor. Shelf units, bookcases and the total conversion of the area give room for different activities without great disturbance.

### **Pupils' behaviour**

#### **The rules for playing**

There are no written rules for or restrictions in the pupils' playing behaviour. During the years the children have made their "habits", the playing is in a way founded on their experience and has been continually developing. One rule is pointed out as very important, that is the agreement never to use toy weapons, and that all kinds of violence are strictly forbidden. The pupils show no problems with handling those rules. The philosophy is that communication based on friendship and respect shall function as a replacement for aggression and violence. During the project it was quite interesting to see how old playing habits still have their unwritten rules among the pupils.

Examples: They talk in another dialect than their own. They try to speak like they do in Oslo, probably influenced by TV.

I also noticed that when they had the role of a little child, they walked on their knees. When playing an animal, they marked it by walking on both hands and knees. This I have seen in many of their play-hours/lessons.

#### **Different group arrangements**

We have tried out many different ways of making groups in order to see if there would be any signs of favoured constellations among the pupils, or if there are children who cannot function together in a group.

Four different methods were used:

- (1) The teacher knowing the pupils very well points out who are to join each group.
- (2) The pupils count from their seated position (e.g.. 1 - 5) so the group is put together the ones, the twos, etc. Thus the group constellation will be quite coincidentally.
- (3) The children are totally free to choose their group partners.
- (4) The pupils choose out of a wish to play on a certain station.

Our observations seem to be quite univocal.

There occur no protests against different group constellations, -self chosen as well as directed. One would think that, for instance, there could be a conflict or protests among girls and boys, different friendships, etc. But this was not the case.

#### **Pupils' personal qualities**

Considering the fact that the two classes consist of 45 individual human beings with colourful and different backgrounds and conditions, my observations of the children's behaviour early struck me as quite astonishing. It seems that the pupils through continuous playing have developed unique personalities as well as literacy skills. I just want to put down some key words for some of the positive personal qualities I have registered when observing and interacting with the children:

Respect, also in connection with different kinds of divergence, confidence and safety -natural behaviour without fear, but with cooperation, friendship, acceptance, equality, tolerance, self consciousness and self control, concentration, ability to give constructive critics, ability to argue, etc. There is an extremely good social tone among the children, as well as between the children and the adults.

All these impressions could create a solid base also for a research within the sociometric field, in order to map out if there are any «stars», favourites or rejected children in the classes. We could answer the question whether peer status is related to play skills and styles among the pupils at different grade levels.

### **Some examples of activities**

During the three years in upper primary school we further developed former literacy activities connected to different play activities. We also tried out new methods in order to see how these would influence on the childrens' literacy skills.

Four activities mentioned in my paper for the ICCP conference in Oslo in 1999 include the Book Review, The Book Worm, Storyline through Pictures, and the Publishing House; these are connected to the two first aims in our curriculum (see page 1): "Listening and speaking" and "reading and writing".

### **Book review**

This activity, which started autumn -98, has its clear structure for the accomplishment. The pupils borrow books at the school library, read at home in their spare time and prepare for the review. They sit in their "gathering corner" (see sketch), and in turns the pupils go to the front chair and tell the others about the book(s) she has read. She shows the book, tells the name of the author, the title and tells something about the content. Over the years unwritten rules for the review have developed, i.e. it is important not to unveil the story, in order to keep the excitement for a new reader. After the review there is time for questions, and a possibility to borrow the book. Sometimes it happens that a book gets negative mentioning and is not recommended.

The pupils have developed considerable skill using the language for the review exercises. For one thing, the oral language has become varied and living. They have also developed a skill to be active listeners. When one child is presenting something whatever, it is demanded that the others shall be active listeners. The first year different rules for behaviour were often discussed during the sessions. The teacher asked questions to the pupils, i.e.: "How are you listeners going to behave in order to maintain your concentration?", -or: "How do you as listener expect the reviewer to behave to hold on to your concentration?" -"What will you as a reviewer do to hold on to listeners?", etc.

Today it seems quite unnecessary to repeat these rules, they have it worked into their consciousness, and have developed a self-discipline in the area.

From what I have observed and experienced, I am sure they are so good talkers and listeners because of their continuous playing, which has made them free, respectful, safe, disciplined and at the same time also to be friends.

### **The Bookworm**

This is a continuous activity, which has been practiced in the classes since the pupils started school. The teacher sits reading from a book in the gathering corner, the pupils are allowed to choose their favourite "listening position", -some sit on the bench, some lie on the floor relaxing their bodies, -but concentrating their minds. For each book read a new circular piece of paper with the title and the author's name written on it is added to the now quite long worm hanging on the wall. The bookworm have invited to many "side-steps", break-ups to use the actual book as foundation for experiments with play and literacy.

One example:

The teacher started reading a book of the author Roald Dahl: *Matilda*. We decided to try different speaking-, playing- and writing-activities connected to the reading of this book. For

instance, I went in as a "teacher in role" (Bolton1984) to build up figures outlet from certain chapters. I brought a small wooden box containing small "treasures", and I - in my role as an important person in the book - together with the children fabulated and made up a "side story". The pupils then went into groups and played something inspired by the things they found in the box.

Afterwards the groups presented their solutions for the class. The next session was organized similar to the first one, but now the playing had the same starting point, and there were no performances afterwards. Instead the pupils should write a story about what they had played, -individually or in pairs. After the writing session, the pupils uttered that the box-stories and the playing had inspired and motivated their writing.

The method used here has resemblance to the «Storyline method», a method which gives many opportunities to vary and to experiment with different kinds of input and directions. (Bell & Fifield 1991).

We found that even if the book is read to the end, there are many aspects to hang on to later in different connections. Our observations were that the pupils' phantasy has its base in playing.

Similar results were obtained in other experiments concerning book reading and play.

### **Storyline through pictures**

The Storyline method has also been used in connection with pictures, and we have tried many variations of building up stories in common, playing, writing, -or writing and playing.

Here is an example of the procedure: We gave each pupil a copy of the same picture.

Through building up a fiction, we all had the same story as a starting point for «what happened next?» After the storyline phase the pupils went into groups and made their solution to the question mentioned above. When the groups had finished this discussion, they distributed the parts and played their story. Afterwards they showed their results to the other groups. It was quite astonishing to observe how different they ended up in their fiction. Another time they chose to write down their stories instead of showing it as a performance. In the gathering corner we had a useful conversation about which possibilities there were in different ways of working inspired by pictures. The pupils also in this case expressed satisfaction having play as one important form of inspiration.

### **Publishing House**

The publishing house activity seems to be an unconscious application of Célestine Freinet's ideas. (Freinet 1972). Freinet – born in 1896 - is often described as «the great unknown»: a legendary and badly handicapped schoolteacher who turned his handicap - a lung destroyed during the war - into pedagogic strength. He could not teach in an ordinary way from the front desk, as he could not stand the dust from the chalk at the blackboard. For that reason he tried other ways than traditional teaching to get the pupils to learn. His teaching was characterized by freedom from ready-made books and teaching from the front desk. He and his pupils picked up ideas from their surroundings, played, told and wrote. Freinet helped the children to transfer their ideas and thoughts to spoken words and the words to written text. His main idea was to stimulate the children to produce their own textbooks, pictures and other forms for description of their experiences.

In Tjødnaio, production of text-books was not the main idea, but a method to teach the children to express themselves in a new way - The Publishing House - has a lot in common with Freinet's ideas. His theme was «Let the sun shine». To live, work and develop was for him something obvious in children's nature. For that reason all individuals must get the possibility to «shine» in accordance with their inherent strength and to choose - or at least have a strong influence on – their activities in the learning situation and not be forced into learning that is experienced as artificial and unfamiliar.

The publishing house activity in our class was started in spring term the 5. school year. The main teacher in 5a, was inspired to form her own variation adjusted own ideas and aims for

her class. A shelf section in the classroom was established as the Publishing House. A lot of inspiration material, like pictures, toy animals etc. was placed on the shelves, and each pupil got her/his own "publishing portfolio" to put books, finished and in production. From a given theme, a project or a given subject, the children write books, -often inspired by playing beforehand or along on the way, concurrently.

When a pupil has finished a book, she presents it to the rest of the class. She reads and tells from the book, and the others are being active listeners. They all give positive response to the "author", and they have to argue, "I liked book because ŠŠ.", it is not good enough just to say, "It is a good book". When they all have said something, one of them, -chosen by the author, is allowed to give a good advice "I think you should speak a little louder". Next time the author pupil is presenting a new book, she is asked if she remembers the advice given the former time.

Over time the Publishing House activity has grown and has become more popular than expected. The children are very proud of their books, and they are eager to present them to an audience. When looking at the collection of books, we have registered an obvious development in writing skills, also individually. The pupils often utter that they themselves get their inspiration and motivation from playing. They also say that in addition to presenting a book, they often want to play it and making a video version of it.

### **Formal language teaching**

The pupils have had separate lessons focused on special grammar subjects, such as the use of simple and double consonants in written language, etc. The lessons are founded in teaching-books and practicing-books. The pupils also get trained in using the dictionary for their own spelling. The formal teaching is now going to be directed more against the children's writing activities, -their creative writings will be used as a base for response and supervising. (Dystry 1988). In this way we can give the children individual tutoring/supervision according to their needs. The children say they like working with grammar, they show a great ability to concentrate on what they are doing. Like with other literacy activities, I am sure that also skill in the field of grammar is due in part to the children's love for playing.

### **Conclusions**

So far I have found an extended support for the assertion that continuous playing at school increases skills and reinforces creativity within reading as writing as well as in oral communication. In turn, reading and listening to literature gives inspiration and motivation for playing. Play and literacy are mutually reinforcing at school.

The children love playing and say that they wish they could have much more of it. Now they gradually seem to understand that playing is used as a conscious way of learning and as inspiration to activities within mother language. They continue to develop a stronger creativity, which in its turn is transferred to the development of literacy skills. I therefore find it important to know that play has an important function in upper primary school as well as in the lower grades. It is important to maintain the two-way activity-- playing as inspiration for reading, writing and oral activities, as well as using the activities mentioned as inspiration for playing, in order to support the pupils' intellectual, social and personal development as a whole.

It is equally important for the monitoring teachers to have certain guidelines like the ones. Playing must not be an escape from the traditional school activities, but -in combination with more formal classroom teaching and learning - a tool for development of the pupils' entire personality.

### **Future Directions**

I am of course aware of methodological weaknesses that exist in my project. My research is built on humanistic, qualitative methods, such as interactive observation, interviews,

discussions based on the teachers' many years of experience, reactions from the pupils, etc. As such, generality of the findings or their external validity remain an open question. Also, whether other methods are more effective and efficient remain an open question. However, it would be very difficult to perform comparative research on the subject, because I would have needed a much more extended material to make any valid conclusions.

What I do now, is to tell what I and the teachers think, what we do and which solutions we draw from our observations and discussions. I think that the project could lead to a new and positive attitude to playing as a useful foundation for learning, not only in the lower primary school.

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