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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 in Norway. The investigation was meant to answer the 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?

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 three years.

Results and applications will be discussed in my paper with special attention to how play and literacy are reciprocally related in upper primary school.

Background

I started my project in 1998 and presented the first years impressions at the ICCP-conference in Oslo, Norway in 1999. Further it was subject for a new presentation in the ICCP-conference in Erfurt, Germany in 2001. The main project was finished in 2002, and the results are presented in a report and in a book.

My papers presented in the previous conferences may be unknown to the precipitants of the Krakow-conference, and therefore I will repeat the main research questions and some facts concentrated in this paper.

In this paper I will mainly present results and further application of the findings.

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?*

The Norwegian National 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 after 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: (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 curriculum.

(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.

In expectation of a new National Curriculum, probably in 2006 (Stortingsmelding 30, 2004)

The political authorities with the Government are working with a new National Curriculum which seems to differ from L97 in a negative way what concerns legitimating of play as a good method of learning. It seems that there will be more weight laid on theoretical education in different school subjects, and that play as a positive influence on learning is toned down. This is based on different tests made in European countries (PISA) where focus is laid on pupils results in theoretical tests in mathematics, science and mother language.

In those tests Norwegian children have a low score, and the national authorities have got scared! Much money is now used to increase theoretical ability among school children in order to get better results in the coming European tests. There is a stronger believe in “hard work and not spoiling the time with playing and other useless activities”.

National tests are now implemented to increase the pupils going for higher scores in order to prove a successful school politic. In my opinion this is a great failure.

I therefore find it particularly important to spread my experiences of the effectiveness of a playful method to people involved with education: teachers, parents, politicians, students and everyone concerned in educational matters.

Play and learning are so close connected factors that if play as method is ignored, we are taking a long step backwards..

Personal background

For the last 15 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 at Tjødnalio school together with a colleague who teaches Pedagogy at our college. In the autumn of 1998, I as mentioned started a new study in another field at the same school connected to the subject of play and literacy.

In 2001-2003 I was involved in Arne Trageton's project "Writing to read, playful computer writing, grade 1 - 3" (2004, paper, ICCP Krakow), and followed a class in the spreading phase of his pilot project as part of a great national research program concerning use of computers in learning.

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 come from diverse social backgrounds and have varying mental capacities. Together with the teaching team, I wanted to see if playing would have 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 useful for teacher students studying Norwegian at our college.

I started studying two classes in upper primary school (45 pupils at school level: 5/ages 11-12 years). The teaching team had chosen to accentuate play. Playing (organized and free playing) had been used as an intentional method for learning and socialization for a number of years. The children had 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 provided useful background knowledge about something all grades now do. The two classes continued to have «play» written on their timetable despite their age and grade, even as this kind of activity normally ends after grade 4. The children had developed special strategies and structures in their playing which during the research period seemed to influence their literacy skills in a positive way. My hypothesis were 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 the 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.

The pupils I worked with participated 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 was 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 (Bredekamp & 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 National Curriculum (L97) a new «playful» school climate exists in Norway. 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 was as a 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 took notes during my observation, and then worked with my material directly afterwards summarizing dialogues, conversations, and remarks verbatim.

***Conversations**

I talked a lot with teachers about what we were doing, about experiences and thoughts we had about what was going on.

Also the pupils were important parts of conversation. I talked with them and asked questions without having planned interviews. This gave me useful information about what the children were thinking about their doings.

***Interviews**

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

***Videotapes**

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

***Written pupils' work**

I got access to the different products made by the children during the research period.

The idea of play

According to researchers it is difficult 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. I am close to the definitions "Play is communication" (Bateson 1971), and "Play is culture creation" (Huizinga 1938, Sutton Smith 1990).

My work is connected to the categories role play and dramatic play.

Christie/Roskos (2001) give a review of the long tradition for connecting play and literacy in American research. Their view corresponds with the total learning climate also in lower primary school (Trageton 2004) and is related to my work in upper primary school.

The latest years we have in Norway got lots of literature/theories dealing with play. After we got the National 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 (Liv Ingrid Grov, paper 2004) together with my work will give some support to play research in upper primary school.

I will not go into concrete examples of activities we used in order to study effects on learning, when those were given in my former papers. In the following I prefer to concentrate on results and findings, and on further application to the project.

Results

The project lasted for a period of three years, 1998 – 2001. During those three years completing the upper primary school, I had gathered a lot of materials consisting observations, personal notes, videotapes etc. But by my earlier presentation in Erfurt 2001 I had no finished results.

The year 2001 – 2002 was used to go through the material, summarize and make conclusions. Besides writing a report, I decided to write a book for students and teachers about the results I had found.

In the following I will give a main extract of the findings of the project

Reservations

I am of course aware of the many weaknesses bound to the reliability in my project. It is meant to build on humanistic, qualitative methods, such as interactive observation, interviews, discussions based on the teachers' many years of experience, reactions from the pupils, etc. It would be difficult to make a comparative research on the subject, because I would have needed a much more extended material to make valid conclusions.

What I do now, is to tell what I and the teachers thought, what we did 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.

In general

Transferred to other school subjects and learning in general, I will point on findings which seem to be important

Considering the fact that the classes consisted of individual human beings with colourful and different backgrounds and conditions, my observations of the children's behaviour early struck me as quite astonishing. It seemed that the pupils through continuous playing had 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. The children developed a high degree of:

- *social and communicative competence
- *respect, also in connection conflicts and disagreement
- *confidence and safety
- *natural behaviour without fear, but with cooperation
- *friendship
- *acceptance
- *equality

- *tolerance
- *spontaneity
- *self consciousness and self control
- *concentration
- *ability to give constructive critics
- *ability to argue
- *ability to variation in expressiveness
- *aesthetic consciousness
- *richness of fantasy and creativity

There was an extremely good social tone among the children, as well as between the children and the adults.

I choose to believe that the qualities mentioned above are results of playing together with firm leadership, humour and heading for aims concerning subject abilities.

The main project was to concentrate on literacy skills in the aspects of mother language. An important finding, though, was that playing seems to have positive influence on other school subjects, and that methods we used easily can be transferred to similar activities in for example mathematics, history, science, etc.

This is a clear positive answer to research question 4) *Is a good play environment also a good environment for learning– even in upper primary school?*

In particular

I have found an extended support for the assertion that continuous playing at school increases skills and reinforce 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 loved playing and said that they wished they could have much more of it. I think they gradually understood that playing was used as a conscious way of learning and as inspiration to activities within mother language. They continued to develop a stronger creativity, which in its turn was transferred to the development of literacy skills.

I therefore find it important to tell that play has a useful 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.

Book about the project

After finishing the project, I together with the main class teacher decided to write a book to sum up the experiences that could be of interest for all people interested in children' earning, such as teachers, students, parents, politicians etc. We thought that an easy read book would reach a broader public than a common research report!

The front page and some drawings inside the book is made by one of my teacher students. Thus the product then became a successful cooperation between the college, the practise area in teacher education and students.

The book is published in the Norwegian language in 2002, the title is. *Leik i norskfaget. Idébok for mellomsteget. (Play in literacy. Idea book for the upper primary school.)*.

The content of the book gives answers to the research questions 1 -3:

- 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?*

Part one consists of different theoretical aspects concerning play and literacy. Part two consists of practical examples of activities combining play and drama with the aspects of main aims in L97 (mother language): (1) Listening and speaking; (2) Reading and writing; and (3) Knowledge about language and culture

The examples are meant to be ideas and starting points for teachers that can easily be adjusted and reconstructed to other groups of age and to other school subjects and pedagogical work in general.

Application of the project

Giving teacher courses

We have held and are going to give courses for teachers on the subject “play and literacy” where we mainly present examples of methods, educational strategies, etc.

The responding to the courses has been entirely positive, and we want to go on with them.

Development of course material

In order to improve our teacher courses we work with our material, both concerning content for schooling and presentation form. This will be of greater importance now to fight for playful learning as we see that the political climate is changing in direction of more tests, higher increased competition attitudes, and more weight on concrete scores and ranking among pupils and schools.

Students` works

We also want to bring our experiences over to the teacher students, in the teacher college as well as in the practise field. It is positive to see that students make use of our work in their papers concerning aspects of pupils learning and pedagogical reflective thoughts.

Further direction

My collaborating partners have new classes now, and have a great opportunity to continue and develop the strategies on which we based our project. Believing that play is such a valuable part of children`s development of human qualities, as well as general skills, make them stand to play as an important part of the school day. Play and drama will continue to be a method in spite of what may come out of new political guidelines in the future. Our minister if education promises freedom of using different methods, so it will be important to spread the idea of play

as a useful method of learning also when it comes to be successful at national tests in reading and writing.

Myself, I have now started a new project at the same school. My former research experiences will of course be useful ballast.

Significance and importance of the project

We believe that play in different aspects motivate and inspire children to learn, communicate and intercourse. Children feel safer in the school situation, and they are more susceptible for learning. By using fantasy and creativity in playing, the pupils get more confident on using their own abilities in order to manage the demands in professional skills and to be positives creators of social surroundings.

In expectation of the new National Curriculum mentioned on page 2, we find it very important to make involved parts conscious of the positive aspect of play and learning.

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