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Paper presentation:

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Nordic children's play and imagination are a part of the cultural heritage.

Impression and expression mediated through play and imagination.

An international student preschool-teacher project in Norway, Sweden and Denmark

This project has been organised by the Nordic co-operation and development program for students and teachers, NordPlus. All the participants in this specific project are involved in the education of preschool-teachers. The participating university colleges are: the University College of Vestfold, Norway: the University College of Froebel, Denmark: and the University College of Udevalla, Sweden. The project started in August 2003 and continued until June 2004.

During this ICCP conference in Krakow, the presentation of the project focuses on the key issue of play as an important mediator between children and educators.

1.0. Background

This project is the 5th co-operation project between these institutions concerning children's culture and children's cultural expression (<http://www.hive.no/internasjonal/nordplus/>).

The title of this year's project is:

“Nordic Children's culture and cultural expressions, with focus on preschool children's development of play and imagination”

This title was chosen due to the importance of this issue in the education of student preschool teachers.

The UN Convention highlights the importance of this issue under the category of development rights, which it defines as:

- the right to play, to education and cultural activities, the right to rest and recreation, the right to information, the right to family, mother tongue and national culture, the right to person development and full development of all individual potentials, the right to life in a free society in peace and tolerance.

(<http://www.pds.org.yu/konvencijae.htm>)

This is an important platform for the purpose of the NordPlus cooperation. Student preschool - teachers can study similarities and differences in the Nordic countries related to play as a part of the children's cultural heritage. In this way the students can increase their knowledge about the phenomenon of play and imagination in its variety of forms, and of its importance for children.

2.0 Presentation of design and title

The methods used in the development of this project are of some importance. This is partly due to the involvement of the students in the choice of titles and design, but also because of the autonomous structure which has made it possible to study the issue in diverse ways.

Students and teachers from the universities involved in the NordPlus project have arranged regular meetings and workshops. These have provided a forum in which to exchange ideas. At the same time, the participants have worked on the theory and the practical aspects of the project. The different groups of from Norway, Denmark and Sweden have carried out the relevant practical work in kindergartens using action-learning methods.

At the end of the project the students prepared an exhibition of the project, a "multi-media" room, which highlights the findings of the project. With posters, drawings, photographs and

children's creative work, the exhibition represents the similarities and differences in the Nordic countries related to play and imagination as a part of the children's cultural heritage. We hope that the participants of the conference will find time to visit the exhibition.

At our first meeting, the students were asked to recall their own childhood memories and present them to the others in a creative way using music, movement and pictures.

Here the students decided to focus on:

“The unique possibilities working with children's play and fantasy in the context of impressions and expressions through folktales and art.”

The students wanted to interpret how children's impressions are related to their cultural heritage and to examine how they express new realities through their play.

This was the point that triggered the first stage of the process.

3.0 Theory and results

Some theoretical approaches were central in our research. These were theories concerning imagination and play, and the aesthetic dimension in children's play.

The Russian psychologist Vygotskij, says that:

“The imagination is always taken from elements of experience and reality. The experiences are the materials and constructions that the imagination is built of.”

(Translation of Vygotskij: 1995; Swedish edit.)

As the students identified their childhood experiences, they shared and discussed similarities and differences. They also saw different ways to communicate expressions, and they all used a broader register for communication than presented in written or oral language.

Vygotskij also believes that besides language expressions, drama and drawing are natural ways for children to communicate. The child will be able to express its imagination and impressions in lively drawings and activities. What happens is not merely a reproduction of the impressions, but it is reproduction in a new and creative way. (Ibid)

By entering this process the students themselves were inspired to learn more about children's imagination and play in the kindergarten.

After enthusiastic discussions the students chose different approaches.

Sweden and Norway continued working with folktales and drama.

The theme of the Norwegian group was:

“How can the Norwegian folk stories give inspiration to children’s play and inspiration?”

The Swedish groups made the children create new stories based on:

”Little Red Riding Hood played with unusual props.”

The Danish groups looked at the phenomenon of children’s imagination and play in a more modern and urban context. They worked with three different themes:

1) *“What is the child’s own perspective on playing?”*

The children were asked to take pictures of what they like to play in the kindergarten.

Afterwards they described their pictures and their accompanying thoughts. Finally, they made some drawings where they copied or retold the stories in the pictures.

2) *“Imagine you are a tiger or a princess.”* Imaginations expressed in drawings.

3) *“Playing and imagination are of great importance when you are growing up.”* Realized through *”A princess and castle project”*, where children heard stories about princesses, visited castles, made crowns and expressed the experience in playing, drawing and drama.

The phenomenon of play and imagination had seemed to be more obvious before the students started their process of interpretation. The discussions during the process were interesting in the way that they reflected the complexity of these issues.

The aesthetic dimension was central, and therefore it is possible to see the students’ work in the light of two main aesthetic patterns in the children’s culture, and children’s play:

- 1) in motion, connected to music, poetry and movement.
- 2) in action, what takes place increases in importance -as a child gets older he or she becomes more interested in stories and storylines. (Lindquist: 1997)

The interpretations the students have made are related to both these dimensions.

The first approach is particularly important in the photos showing the places children choose to play. As for the second approach, this dimension is connected to storytelling, specifically folktales. Sutton-Smith says in his book; *”The folkstories of children”* that the patterns used in folk stories are often found in children’s own storytelling. He also makes a point of calling the traditional orally transmitted stories folk stories and not fairytales or folktales. The reason for this is that the word story indicates change, simply because every storyteller will create a new variation. (Sutton –Smith 1981)

The philosopher Gadamer says that playing and experiences of art are closely linked. It is not possible to understand the aesthetics of children's culture and play only by reading about it in a book. Like art it has to be experienced, and has its value only measurable by the person that is playing. (Steinsholt :1999, Habermas :2003,Gadamer:1965)

The students' work and meetings with the children in the kindergartens, reflects this complexity of aesthetic play, and it gives them valuable knowledge.

It is interesting to see how play and imagination are present under studies of different circumstances. Play is an important issue to challenge students to examine more deeply. They will be able to get a deeper understanding of their own role in the context of seeing play as an important mediator between child and educator. They will also be able to see how different national and local cultures and different curricula create diverse approaches.

We see this cross-national, cross-curricular project, devoted to children's play and imagination as a way of getting this important issue on the agenda, and of improving our education of pre-school teachers.

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