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"The child indicates when it is ready to begin formal learning. How to recognize this moment?"

by early childhood expert Geseke Lundgren,

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SUMMARY

What is the goal of education?

When you observe the development of children you can focus on many different aspects. Often teachers look at the intellectual development of the child and try to find methods to measure knowledge in order to evaluate their teaching, but the social-emotional aspects are important too. What is the goal of education? To support children in developing the capacities needed to deal with and develop in our modern world.

Components of the capacities needed to deal with the modern world:

- *To be able to handle an overwhelming amount of information.*
- *To be able to fulfil continuously shifting roles in our lives, professionally and socially; what do you have to nurture in childhood to help a person to acquire such capabilities?*
- *To be able to be an active and creative thinker. Human beings can only be described as being free if they are able to influence their own situation and create their own destiny.*

The age bracket of 5-7: a key period in which to acquire important life skills

When children reach the age of five or six they do not like to play in the same way as younger children do anymore. They get bored of it. In general, pedagogues think that this is the moment when the child is ready to start formal learning and in accordance with this view in most countries children are offered formal learning programmes.

I believe that a grave mistake is being made here. When a child of five or six is bored this is an important opportunity for the child to experience this moment of boredom and to learn to consciously create his/her own play. This new play is completely different from the form of play of a 4 – 5 year old. Now the child plans his/her own play and uses his/her own creative forces very consciously in order to play. This capacity is a very important new capability for the child. He/she learns to think and act out of his/her inner core. At the same time the child develops his/her own identity and self-image in accordance with this.

Conclusions:

- *The Nordic Approach helps children of 5-7 years to acquire an active relationship to learning, because they are able to play until they are 7 years old.*
- *This method reinforces creativity in children.*

- *Children are not tired of school by the third class (this has been proven by research) and they have acquired an active approach to learning, instead of the passive approach, which is the predominant attitude when children have followed the Pre-School experience.*
- *Children develop a different picture of themselves.*
- *The activity and enjoyment of learning is influenced by the experience of being able to contribute to and influence your situation and maintain a healthy self-image, based on the capacity to realise your own ideas.*

The above-mentioned elements constitute the basis of the creativity of the children in the Nordic countries. For me, it is very important that these characteristics of the educational systems of the Nordic countries are preserved.

I will begin by making a brief comparison between the Pre-School Approach and the Nordic Approach. In the latter approach more emphasis is given to social and emotional aspects of development. In the Pre-School Approach there is a tendency to start earlier and earlier with formal learning. In Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark the Nordic Approach is still present, with the emphasis on "still", because these countries are in the process of losing some of the qualities of this approach.

What is the goal of education?

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'to support children in developing the capacities needed to deal with our modern world.'

Components of the capabilities needed to deal with the modern world

What are the components of this capability to deal with the modern world?

- To be able to handle an overwhelming amount of information.
- To be able to fulfil continuously shifting roles in our lives, professionally and socially; what do you have to nurture in childhood to help a person to acquire such capabilities?
- To be able to be an active and creative thinker. Human beings can only be described as being free if they are able to influence their own situation and create their own destiny.

The age bracket of 5-7: a key period in which to acquire important life skills

When in the life of a child is the best time for him/her to acquire these capabilities? And what should and can be done to enhance the child's capabilities in this respect and what environment decreases the chances of growth?

The changing forms of play

When you observe the development of the child you can see very clear changes in the child's relationship and attitude towards the surrounding world, which are also clearly expressed in the play activity of the child.

Play from 0 - 3

The little child from 0-3 is totally absorbed by learning to walk, talk and think. Children struggle to come into the upright position, to balance and to gain control over their movements. At the same time as they master of movement, children develop the capacity to speak and gain the ability to understand the world of ideas, principles and concepts. During this period their play is clearly ruled by imitation and repetition. There is very little "creativity" to be seen in their behaviour during this phase of development. The creativity is taking place in their inner and physical development. The child is taking amazing steps in creating the basis for his/her whole future life in the function of the inner organs, breathing and nutrition. It is interesting to know that the child is born into an inherited body (a gift from his/her mother and father) and needs about seven years in order to renew and individualise every single cell within this body. (Cancer research has shown that every single cell in our body except for the brain-cells is renewed every seven years.) The functions of most of our inner organs, except for the heart and lungs, are established during the first 7 years.

Play from 3- 5 years old

Around the age of 3 children change their play completely. Now they enter a period of interaction and fantasy play, where they step totally into their imaginative worlds and identify themselves with different characters and situations in order to understand, sort and organise the shifting experiences of life. Creativity works within the child's play, but the child does not really control the process as yet – he/she is not consciously planning his/her play. The child in this period plays as if in a dream world – he/she is not conscious that he/she is playing and is not steering the process according to a plan or goal. You also can describe this phase of play as "the flow". In Steiner Waldorf early childhood pedagogy, we regard this form of play as the child's "royal path into the world". The fascinating truth is that you could never arrange or create a play situation for the individual child that is nearly as suitable for the child as this form of free play. In a game the lion becomes only as frightening for the child as he/she is ready to deal with without becoming overwhelmed or traumatised – a delicate balance that no one else could plan or arrange for the child.

Play from between 5 – 6 onwards

When children reach the age between five and six they do not like to play in the same way as younger children anymore. They lose the capacity to dream and let go into that typical "flow" and experience a phase of being bored – they long to play but have lost the key to fantasy play. In general, parents and pedagogues think that this is the moment the child is ready to start formal learning and in accordance with this view in most countries children are offered formal learning programmes.

I believe that a grave mistake is being made here. When a child of 5 or 6 is bored this is an important opportunity for the child to experience this moment of boredom and to learn to consciously create his / her own play. This new play is completely different from the form of play of a 4-5 year old. Now the child plans his/her own play and uses his/her own creative forces very consciously in order to play. In Steiner Waldorf pedagogy we also call this period the development of construction- and role-play. This form of play is very different from the intuitive, free and completely unplanned, almost unconscious fantasy play.

This taking hold of his/her own creativity and learning is a very important new capability for the child. This is actually the first time in a child's life when he/she has the possibility to consciously use creativity and experience the power of using his/her imagination, creating his/her own pictures and being able to motivate him/herself. Through this the child learns to think and act out of his/her inner core. At the same time the child develops his/her own identity and self-image in accordance with this. The experience of being satisfied and fulfilled through engaging with your own forces gives you a very different sense of self-acknowledgement and self image than if you have proved that you are able to fulfil the expectations from your surroundings, which is what tends to occur if you expose the 6 year old to formal learning activities. If the creative forces that now are free to be used by the child are used for outer tasks and structured learning, the child builds his/her self-image out of his/her capacity to satisfy the expectations and tasks given to him/her by someone else – instead of developing trust in his/her own creative process.

Here we make the decision whether to nurture the joy of free creativity and the free thinking capacity of the child or to force them into a dependence on outer stimulation in order to come into an activity. Most of our young generation is today "spoiled" by constant stimulation in order to avoid being bored. Through placing the children in formal learning programmes we take away from them the tremendous strength gained by having experienced that you have an inner force of creativity that you can activate whenever needed. Children also experience a trust in their own actions and the ability to create their own situations and successes.

Children who are given the time and trust to reshape and rediscover their ability to play in the period between 6-7 years of age, will carry on playing until they are 10-11 years old. They are also then ready to bring another activity into formal knowledge and learning activities, trusting their own capacities.

In short: the advantages of the Nordic Approach summed up again:

- The Nordic Approach helps children of 5-7 years to acquire an active relationship to learning.
- This method reinforces creativity in children.
- Children are not "school tired" by the third class (this has been proven by research) and they have acquired an active approach to learning instead of a passive approach, which is the predominant attitude that one observes when children have followed the Pre-

School experience.

- Children develop a different picture of themselves.
- The activity and enjoyment of learning is influenced by the experience of being able to contribute to and influence your situation and maintain a healthy self-image, based on the capacity to realise your own ideas.

The above-mentioned elements constitute the basis of the creativity of the children in the Nordic countries. For me it is very important to preserve these characteristics in the educational system of these countries.

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