



This paper is taken from

*Citizenship Education: Europe and the World
Proceedings of the eighth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2006

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 899764 66 6

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
 - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
 - a official of the European Commission
 - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

Pétursdóttir, S. (2006) 'It has to come from the heart': Character education in playschools, in Ross, A. (ed) Citizenship Education: Europe and the World. London: CiCe, pp 377-386.

© CiCe 2006

CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The rector and the staff of the University of Latvia
- Andrew Craven, of the CiCe Administrative team, for editorial work on the book, and Lindsay Melling and Teresa Carbajo-Garcia, for the administration of the conference arrangements
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement

‘It has to come from the heart’: Character education in playschools

*Sigríður Síta Pétursdóttir,
University of Akureyri (Iceland)*

Does regular and systematic discussion about moral issues, carried out in playschools affect the children’s behaviour? In this paper, I present and discuss findings from a three-year investigation, carried out in three playschools* in the northern Icelandic town of Akureyri, in collaboration with the University of Akureyri.

It is important for everyone to know their own moral identity and to be adept at empathetic participation in life around them. To investigate and to address this need, three playschools were chosen to focus on character education, emphasising ethics and values in their daily work. We took the view that the basis of character education as a subject is the cultivation of the inherent personal qualities of each individual. What are those qualities? Are they potential or actual? How are they connected to the ensuing investigation and discussion? The main conclusion we have drawn from the experiment is that playschool-aged children are able to adopt values and to place them in the context of every day life. To some extent, we tend to take this for granted. The interesting question is whether discussing ethics enhances this process: we conclude that regularly discussing moral issues increases the social skills and moderation of both the children and adult members of staff.

The moral base

The Icelandic National Curriculum for playschool (NC) (Iceland 1999) highlights life skills as part of the education given at playschool level. The curriculum maintains that life skills are based on children’s overall development, their ability to communicate reason, appreciate and respect other members of their social environment, indeed the entire biosphere. The authorities encourage playschool teachers to develop certain social and behavioural activities in order to enhance the children’s social skills. As an example of desirable activities, the authors of the curriculum refer to practising democratic processes, partaking in decision-making and evaluation, not least in matters that concern them directly. The rationale is that in this way children experience that their views and wishes are respected and taken into consideration.

The curriculum does not attempt to define life skills. Rather it suggests, through a list of examples, what being a participant in life entails. Their list includes being socially literate, respecting oneself and others, respecting common rules, showing consideration and taking responsibility for oneself. It says that a playschool must teach democratic methods of work. One way of doing that is to give children the opportunity to set rules that apply to the group and explain their purpose. According to the authorities, the discussion that takes place when participating in rule setting is the beginning of

* In this paper, I will use the word playschool for educational settings for children aged 1 – 6 years old, as is standard in Iceland.

democratic working methods that children need gradually to learn and use. Research indicates that children's social and emotional intelligence is formed throughout the early years and that is why it is important to begin early in governing and supporting these qualities.

Virtue is the moral basis of the individual; the personality comes from the combination of good manners/virtue and bad manners/vice. Individuals and their self-esteem are defined by their reaction to life's difficulties. Research shows that children with good self-esteem are less likely to give in to peer pressure (Lickona 1999; Aðalbjarnardóttir 2004). One of the aims of playschool education should be to strengthen children's self-esteem, by developing the personality, sympathy, ethics, respect and responsibility of each individual.

To learn the difference between right and wrong, children need to be able to make decisions on ethical grounds. I believe that an individual who gets the chance to make a decision based his or her own convictions will have self-control and is more likely to be free. Dewey (1933) said that control over oneself and freedom were the same thing and that real freedom was intellectual i.e. the ability to think, to reflect upon, and examine a situation from more than one angle. Therefore one can reason that it is important to practice reflective moral argument with children and give them the chance to learn how other people think. Strong personalities are the ones who can, having done all the above, come to their own unselfish decisions, even if they have to oppose their peers (Lickona 1999). Learning to do what is morally or ethically right is best practiced in real situations. Environment and models are important when it comes to introducing the moral thinking which will encourage children to be both good and smart.

The implementation of this project is based on research carried out on children's moral and social development, and emotional intelligence, along with relevant theories on this topic. What these theories have in common is that playschools should give all children the opportunity to develop, the talent to comment on their thoughts and opinions and thereby rule their own lives, to take responsibility for their own acts and environment and to understand and to act in a democratic way by taking part in varied communication and decisions.

Investigating the world

In cooperation with parents, teachers and children, Loris Malaguzzi (1921-1994) developed an approach based on activating the resources of the children, parents and teachers. It emphasises that children and teachers research together to become better at using their talents and potential to the full. While it is very important to strengthen communication between teachers, children and parents, it is no less vital to strengthen children's awareness of themselves and their involvement in the community. Respect for children's research and cooperation, their ability to think, organise, criticise and to learn from their actions, are the characteristic approach. Each individual has to be viewed from his or her strengths and developed from there. This approach is based on human resources, which has great faith in the potential of the individual (Edwards and others 1998). There is no simplified or superficial method for teaching such skills: the main thing is to listen to children and take their theories seriously (Bohlin and Ryan 1999).

Dewey has pointed out that if education is to have any meaning it has to be built on understanding and experience, which can only be gained through transaction and discovery. The individual's world changes and grows as the experience grows. It is like going on a backpacking trip; at the start, you have only a few basic travel supplies. Gradually you collect in your backpack all sorts of things that you find on your way, some of which you use straight away, others you keep until later. However, what is important is that what goes in to the backpack is not chance; it has to have been put there with thought and for some purpose to be of any use. In other words, when training a mind it is necessary to use the same methods as scientists and researchers – i.e. reflective thinking. Reflective thinking is a process in which facts and ideas meet in a constant interplay. Dewey has pointed out that one of the aims for schools should be to find the balance between concrete and abstract thought (Dewey 2000). This means using an individual's strengths, so that those who are strong on the vocational field are allowed to use that strength to increase their intellectual development and vice versa. Malaguzzi (Edwards and others 1998) also indicates this when he says that if the project is rich and varied then the child is likely to be rich in experiments and it is likely that every child will find his or her interests and strengths.

It has been pointed out that if teachers document children's conversations and work, and listen to their theories and hypotheses, they will learn to understand the children's world (Rinaldi 2006). Children have different experiences and attitudes, so it is necessary to listen to each one. Malaguzzi placed great emphasis on documentation as a collection of evidence of what is really going on in the playschool, what and how the children learn. Documentation leads to better understanding of children's thought and communication and their methods of applying their knowledge (Harðardóttir 2001). Respect for the individual, his strengths and qualities are what matters; children need to be active to create their own self-esteem and independence. To support independent thought children need the freedom to investigate and collect data to test their own hypotheses. The teacher's role is, among other things, to maintain curiosity and interest, for example, by leading children into furthering their knowledge by questioning them.

Every teacher has to know and be conscious of the impression he or she makes and how that can be used as a model in communication.

What matters?

Intelligence is more than something that can be measured with tests, such as the IQ test, for example. According to Gardner's theory, each individual has many types of intelligence that will be activated by different activities that are personally important (Armstrong 2001). Gardner's theory describes experiments that activate and experiments that inhibit intelligence (Armstrong 2001). Adults, whether teachers or parents, are an important model for children. The teacher is in a position to influence a child's life as much as the parents are. How he or she sees and feels about the child can affect the extent to which the child's intelligence is activated or inhibited. Children who get the chance to express their opinions and share their experiences gain a wider perspective and expand their experience.

Good emotional intelligence is a key element in human communication according to Goleman (2000). Those with good emotional intelligence also display a sense of self-worth, self-restraint, social abilities, concentration and self-control. Goleman has argued that being socially literate is more important than so-called IQ. Through play, in every day activities and in communication with their peers, children sharpen their social abilities. In role-play, for example, children are primarily contending with social subjects, such as communication, and unscrambling conflicts that arise when playing. In children's play, emotional and social skills are interlaced with creativity, and these are the basis of the child's development. Children learn about their emotions, desires and abilities through play. They learn to describe their actions and to communicate.

Four boys, Baldur and Hafsteinn (3.4) and Hafþór and Birkir (3.0), are playing with blocks, when Hafsteinn starts to fight with Birkir. After a little while Baldur stands up, walks slowly to them put his hand on Hafsteinn's hand and says slowly but with emphasis, 'He is younger'. Hafþór, who has been watching them says, 'We are all friends'. Hafsteinn smiles to Birkir and they all put their arms around each other's shoulders and smile.

Children who are able to know their emotions and to comment on them are able to put themselves into others people's shoes and to show empathy (Gordon and Browne 1998). According to Goleman, the basic level in emotional ability is to be able to deal with conflicts in an objective way; that is to think before acting and to get the message from the environment that you are good as you are and the person best suited to being the leader of your life (Goleman 2000).

Almost everyone experiences rejection at some time in their childhood and feels that they do not have any friends. One's reaction to this is vital; does one give up or search for a solution? Systematic ethical discussions with playschool children, where they learn to describe their feelings, help children to strengthen their sense of identity. In modern society human communication, sensitivity and empathy are important, which is why it is necessary for individuals to strengthen their identity in order to be happy and have a successful life (Goleman 2000).

In his book *The Moral Child* (1988) William Damon writes about research that he has carried out on young children's moral development. Damon claims that infants, even when only few days or months old, are capable of showing sympathy, and that you can notice by the nature of their crying when together with another crying infant, that they are showing moral support. Damon calls it a precursory sign (Damon 1988).

The children are taking a nap after the lunch, when Soffía (2.0) starts to snivel. Tómas (2.7) is lying beside her. He takes her blanket and put it over her and then put his arm over her as if he is comforting her. When Soffia stops snivelling, Tómas closes his eyes and falls asleep.

Friendship is important to moral development, and can be an advantageous setting for children's moral development. True friends share both sorrow and joy with reciprocal respect. There is a belief that friendship among children is conducive to moral awareness, Damon believes that friendship among children encourages honesty (Damon

1988). Reciprocity, honesty and equality are the pillars of civilisation and are equally important in adult communication as between children. Peer relations strengthen children's ability to put themselves in other people's shoes.

Key findings in Damon's research indicate that children are more capable of finding solutions to moral dilemmas than was previously believed and that it is possible to increase their moral development earlier than was assumed. Due to these findings, playschool can easily support children's moral development in a systematic way, through play, in everyday communication between children and adults, and in planned reading sessions.

The model is important

It is obvious that the influence of parents and teachers is vital when strengthening children's moral development. Virtue is subjective and children's backgrounds play an important role in how they understand and act. This is why it is important for teachers to take part in discussion groups with children, to understand each other and themselves.

One of the significant roles of the teacher is to be a model in both word and deed. Research has shown that words transmit only 10% of a message to children; tone of voice sends 35% and body language along with facial expression communicate the remaining 55% (Gossen 2002). Clearly, it matters that adults are aware of how they send messages to children; words must match actions. Dewey (2000) pointed out that teachers are never a transparent or neutral source of knowledge for children; the personality of the teacher is interwoven with the effect of knowledge.

Teachers also influence manners, language skills and behaviour. Most playschool teachers are aware of their role as professionals in communication with children and parents. They listen to the children, treat them with concern and respect and encourage them to help each other.

Parents are also aware of their importance as models and that it is important to respect society's conventions, other people and believe that it is important. As one of the fathers said:

...in my opinion it is respect and how you treat the child that matter... then you are a good model. For example when we cross the road... respecting the rules, because the children look up to us. Actions matter.

Parents were unanimous that the discussions at playschool had an effect at home. The children used the concept at home and reminded their parents of if they thought that they were not acting consistently and virtuously.

At playschool children learn about empathy and communication, what it is to be an individual seeking answers. Everyday there is an opportunity to strengthen children's moral and social development, increase their sense of self and support them in increasing self-control. They will be able to answer, as the four-year-old girl did when was asked how she knew what was wrong and what was right, 'My mind tells me'.

Learning to share with others is social behaviour that has nothing to do with being 'good'. Children who offer another child use of their toys create a situation where they can get to know each other better by playing together (Damon 1988). Siggi (3,5) and Paul (3,5) are playing together in their Batman uniforms, when Paul (who has a mask on) says 'I have two masks but Siggi has none so I am going to lend him one of mine'. As the child uses the toy as bait to create an enjoyable relationship, teachers use ideas as bait to create delightful and creative collaboration. Creativity is the trait of inspired atmosphere (Ekholm and Hedin 1993).

Methodology

To evaluate the project and to find the answers to the questions, the teachers collected field notes by documenting exactly what the children said and did. The teachers observed every day while the children were playing and during organised meetings. With the help of video cameras, the children's relationships were examined. Playschool teachers and children were interviewed and both parents and teachers took part in focus groups.

Pedagogical documentation

Pedagogical documentation is a way of learning to understand how children gain knowledge (Clark and Moss 2005). Documentation makes the children's and playschool's work visible where it may previously have been assumed (Dahlberg 1999). That is why documentation was chosen as one of the ways to collect data to find out if the children were applying virtues. All the teachers collected data about their group of children, as well as writing down what they witnessed in the playground. Parents were encouraged to write down events that took place at home and could be related to the project.

Video documentation

Video documentation is a good way of examining young children's relationships, because they often use body language and facial expression more than words (Lindahl 1998). A video camera gives a wider perspective and enables observation of more children simultaneously than is possible otherwise.

Focus group and interview

A project can gain a broader perspective and deeper meaning by setting up a focus group and/or group interview (Gibbs 1997; Hitchcock and Hughes 2001). This requires both that the participants are active and that they give their opinion of the subject. The playschool teacher took part in group interviews that were semi-structured with few questions.

Because it was important for parents to know what was going on inside the playschool, and because their opinion of the project was important, they took part in two focus groups.

At the beginning of the project, micro stories were used to find out if the five-year-olds would answer in a virtuous way or not. Here is an example of a micro story and answer:

‘You and Paul are playing with 4 cars. Jonas comes to you and wants to play. What should you do?’

Answer, ‘Share the cars so he can play with use them. So everyone can have cars together’.

‘You and Ari are playing outside. Then you see that the big cycle and you both want to have it. What should you do?’

Answer; ‘I will push and he steers, then I steer and he pushes.’

It looks from these answers as if the children take the virtuous view, but is this translated into everyday activity? The children were asked regularly about how they understood virtues. The teachers discussed with the children about these virtues in daily actions to find out if they were putting abstract virtues into action.

Key findings

The youngest children were aged 20 months at the beginning of the project and they were studied for three years. Because the teachers had no model of how to work with such young children in such a project, they had to rely on their own intuition. The approach was primarily through play and everyday communication. When the children were assembled the theme subject was the virtue of the month, both through spontaneous stories and from books, songs and poems. Teachers tried to look at everything from an ethical or moral point of view, visualise the virtues and to put them into words. The teachers observed the children, took pictures and wrote down what was said and done. It was important that the teacher made comments and encouraged the children to examine and investigate. The teachers had to ask themselves how children learn, how they learn through play, and what methods children use to seek knowledge (Cuffaro 1995).

In everyday activity, we face situations where courage, sympathy, friendship, tolerance and other virtues are put to the test. By writing down what happens when children are talking, the teacher can see how far the children understand the concept of the chosen virtue. It is important that the adults accept and respect the children’s feelings and situation. One way of doing that is to listen to them and help them to describe their actions, thoughts and feelings.

Elva (2.0) is showing Rakel (2.0), a doll. Markús (20 months) comes to them and looks at the doll. Beside him on the floor lies Elva’s bag, Markús glances into it, ‘No,’ Elva says firmly. The playschool teacher says, ‘Elva is kind to allow Rakel to look at Viddi (the doll). Now Elva can have him back, and now we’ll put Viddi in the bag. Markús was just looking; he was not going to take the bag.’

Sometimes it is hard to share with others, and in that situation, it is good to get support from the teacher. In the example the teacher shows that she understands that Elva has difficulty in sharing with others, but she also helps her to practise sharing.

Playschool children appear to be able to adopt the concept of virtues and put them into practice in daily life. Children seem to understand the concept of friendship and are able to show it in action when as young as two years old.

Svana and Iris, two two-year-old girls are playing with a doll's pram. Svana drives Iris around in the pram, Iris has a doll in her arms. Svana finds a pillow and puts it under Iris's head. They do not talk much, except when the doll falls on the floor and then Iris stretches out her arms and says, 'My doll'. Svana picks it up and puts in Iris's arms again and they laugh. Svana shows consideration for Iris's comfort when she finds a blanket on the floor puts it over her and continues to push the pram around the room. Their gesture shows concern and friendship.

Another example that the children are able to understand others' feelings: when a boy hesitates and does not want come in to a room where he will be the only boy, Auður (5.2) says, 'Maybe he doesn't want to come in because there are no other boys here.' 'Yes, that is possible. Do you think that boys think that it is difficult to be where there are many girls?' asks the teacher. 'Yes.' Auður says. 'Why do you think that?' 'Because some boys do not like playing with girls,' Auður answers.

It is important to respect oneself and others. Respect also means respect for rules. 'To respect what one says. If someone says "Quit" or "Stop", then one should respect that, obey and respect what is said,' said Auður (5.2). The teachers discussed with the children the meaning of the concepts they were practicing and asked them the meaning of the words. 'What can we do to be cheerful?' 'Cheer up each other'. However, when you are learning new words and the meaning of them, it can sometimes get a little muddled, such when the children are making gifts for their parents, because making something for others makes you feel good. After Kristjana (4.5) has made her little gift she says to Ágústa (4.7) as she walks by 'Ágústa, come on you, are supposed to make some jolly remark'.

As the time goes on the children's understanding increases and they are more capable of setting out examples. The following example shows that the children understand the concept courage and are able to connect it with other situations.

Six boys find some balloons. When one of them starts to squeeze one of the balloons, Ólafur says, 'you are brave if you dare to burst it'. The teacher asks them what they can use to burst the balloon. 'A needle', said Steinar. 'I don't dare burst the balloon, because then I'll get a pain in my ears,' says Ingólfur. Now the other boys say that Ingólfur is not brave, but Ingólfur declares he is. The boys find a needle and they look at each other when Tomas says, 'I dare' and bursts one of the balloons. Gestur looks at him admiringly. 'Tomas, you were brave'. Now the others except for Ingólfur burst the other balloons, and shout, 'We were brave, all except Ingólfur; he wasn't'. Then Ingólfur says 'But listen, Sirrý, I don't like when it makes a bang; it hurts'.

The teacher decides to talk about courage to point out that it is possible to be brave in more than one way and that it is brave to speak your mind and not to do something you do not want to. Then she says, 'It is all right, because you can show courage in so many ways, for example when you sang for the penguin figure in the bank, Ingólfur'. In

addition, Ólafur says 'Ingólfur was brave when he stood up and said his name on the stage when nobody else dared to do it alone'. 'That's right Ólafur. That was brave,' said the teacher.

It seems that the children are able to show helpfulness, concern and kindness to each other. Gunnar, 2 years old, starts to cry because he cannot push a big bolster away, which has fallen on him. The playschool teacher hugs him and Maria (2.6), says: 'He needs his baby's dummy'. 'Yes, he does, doesn't he?' the playschool teacher says. Another example is when Andri (5.11) and Björn (5.6) go to get some milk in the kitchen, and there is no one there to help them. One teacher overhears this conversation from the next room:

Andri: I have to get my milk.

Björn: There's no one here so we'll have to help each other.

Andri: Yes, lift me up.

The teacher hears huffing and puffing, and after a moment, the boy walks in front of the office and the teacher asks: 'Were you able to do it yourself?' 'Yes, we helped each other, I lifted him up' says Björn.

It is important that the teacher follows up when she witnesses that the children are acting in a virtuous way and puts it into words when the children learn to connect their actions to the virtue.

The teachers said that the open discussion did do some good, especially with children who were shy or had difficulty in expressing their feelings. As this example shows:

Páll (3.11) had some difficulty making attachments to adults and other children when he started at playschool in the autumn of 2001. He didn't take much part in discussion in the beginning and had difficulty in talking about his feelings, but that changed. One day when he is putting on his outdoor clothes he says, 'I miss Gurry'. Hóffy, the playschool teacher, says that she will tell Gurry, (also a playschool teacher who was on holiday), that he misses her, and that she will be pleased to hear that. Then Páll says 'I am glad now, because I am glad in my heart'. Páll's mother said that once when he was with his father he said 'Dad, when I am with you I am not lonely, because we are together'.

Summary

In the interviews with the teachers it was clear that playschool children appear to be able to adopt virtuous concepts and put them to practice in everyday life. Playschool children are able to respect others' wishes and can resolve conflicts in a positive way. The playschool teachers said that respect and tolerance for others' ideas, projects and opinions increased during the project, both among the teachers and the children. But does this carry over to new social environments? According to a primary-school teacher who subsequently taught some of the project children, they excelled in working independently, respecting rules, social literacy, expression and communication. Whether this difference is one of temporary acceleration or whether this can lead to a stage of ethical development that would otherwise be less likely to be achieved, is an interesting

question. The answer is likely to be an individual one, but that too would be a significant gain. Only time will tell.

References

- Aðalbjarnardóttir, S. (2004) *Rannsóknir*. <http://www.hi.is/~sa/sarannsoknir.htm>
- Armstrong, T. (2001) *Fjölgreindir í skólastofunni*. (Erla Kristjánsdóttir, translated to Icelandic and localised). Reykjavík:JPVútgáfa. (Origin. title: Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom. 2000)
- Bohlin, K. E. and K. Ryan. (1999) *Building Character in Schools. Practical ways to bring moral instruction to life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Clark, A. and P. Moss (2005) *Listening to Young Children. The Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Cuffaro, H.K. (1995) *Experimenting with the world. John Dewey and the early childhood classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Damon, W. (1998) *The Moral Child. Nurturing Children's Natural Moral Growth*. New York: The Free Press
- Dewey, J. (2000) *Hugsun og Menntun* (Gunnar Ragnarsson, translation to Icelandic). Reykjavík: Rannsóknarstofnun Kennaraháskóla Íslands. (Originally pub 1933)
- Edwards, C., L. Gandini and G. Forman.(1998). *The hundred Languages of Children. The Reggio Emilia Approach – Advanced Reflections*. Greenwich: Ablex Publishing Corporation
- Ekholm, B. and A. Hedin. (1993) *Det sitter i väggarna! Daghemsklimat – barns och vuxnas utveckling*. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Goleman, D. (2000) *Tilfinningagreind*. (Áslaug Ragnarsdóttir translation to Icelandic) Reykjavík: Iðunn (Original title: *Emotional intelligence* 1995)
- Gordon A. and K. Williams Browne. (1993) *Beginnings and Beyond*. New York. Delmar publishers
- Gossen, D. (2002) *Uppeldi til ábyrgðar*. (Magni Hjálmarsson trans. to Icelandic). [Reykjavík];Útgáfufélagið Sunnuhvoll. (Origin. pub. 1996)
- Harðardóttir, G.A. (2001) *Í leikskóla lífsins*. Akureyri:Textasmiðjan
- Iceland (1999) *National curriculum for playschool*. (Origin. title: *Aðalnámskrá leikskóla*). Menntamálaráðuneytið
- Lindahl, M. (1998) *Lärande småbarn*. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Rinaldi, C. (2006) *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia. Listening, researching and learning*. London: Routledge