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Children, culture and media

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In 1999 a new national curriculum for all schools, including pre-schools, was introduced in Iceland. The new curriculum is thought of as a guideline for educational work, and emphasises the close connection between culture, society, and work in schools and pre-schools. It also stresses that the child's environment, both social and geographical, should play a large part in the individual curriculum of each school.

A key word is culture: it is important to define what culture means. It can be defined as the ideas, rules, values, and norms we inherit from previous generations, albeit sometimes changed over time. In other words, culture is everything we learn about right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, practicality and impracticality, our daily occupations and the meaning of life. Our cultural heritage has been passed from generation to generation in the form of literature, song, dance, the way we prepare our food, and so on.

In Iceland we often talk about our heritage in terms of our Sagas, but our culture is much more than the Sagas, although they play a large part in our identity as a nation. Our cultural heritage is the sum of the experiences and insights which both inform and are shown in our belief system, traditions, arts, spoken and written language, sciences, techniques, etc. and which are manifest in the institutions of our society. Our cultural heritage takes many forms – and our children's culture is one particular kind of culture. It can be divided into two main groups: culture that is made *for* children (specifically designed for children or with children in mind) and culture the children create or make *for themselves*.

Children's culture

Culture for children consists of the books, songs, visual art, theatre, and poems that are created by adults for children or with children in mind. Children or childhood can be considered as the target consumer group. On the other hand, the culture that children create themselves is transmitted between children or groups of children in the form of plays, rules, stories and even name-giving. In the pre-school we see both forms of children's culture every day. Children create their own culture in order to define and understand their social environment and experiences. They also use play and other creative activities to explore and understand the adult world.

In this paper I make some preliminary exploration of the effects that the media have in the pre-school, effects that are reflected in the life and activity of the child in the pre-school setting. To do this I will draw on experiences from my own history as a pre-school teacher.

I worked for many years in a pre-school in Ásborg, and in the school yard there was a place called *Bjölló* (coming from the word bell, something like *bello*). Nobody knew how the name came about, but we guessed that once there was a bell used to call the children to come in for lunch or something like this. It didn't matter at all: what mattered was that the name lived on among the children. The same is true for a lot of 'rules' in pre-schools. The staff does not know that some of these 'rules' exist, but new children are enlightened by the older children and quickly learn them. These are the unwritten rules of childhood.

Last year I visited a several pre-schools. In one, I watched a group of five to six year-old boys play in a small playroom, which was separated from the main playroom with a glass wall so that the staff could observe what was happening but could not hear what the children were saying. The children lay on a mattress; their play was conducted with body movements and words. They did not seem to mind my being there - I had been in the school so many times that the children were relaxed around me. The play was about aeroplanes dive-bombing something; there was lot of death, knives and all manner of violent things. (The context was that this was the end of the period when NATO was bombing Serbia, and the air raids were receiving a great deal of media coverage, especially on television.) Later I interviewed some of the boys about the school, the rules, the things children do and so on. In the interview I decided to ask about this play: I really wanted to understand it.

I said I was curious about their play – ‘you know, the death play’ (a title they had used during the play). At first the children just looked at me: I had the feeling they were looking to confirm that I was not going to blame them. During the interview we had been talking about the Cartoon Network and one of the boys told me that his parent had banned him from watching it, so I asked if this play were related to some Cartoon Network TV show. ‘No’, he said, ‘it is play without rules’.

Kristín: What is that?

Hugi: Oh, I don’t know, I did not invent this particular game, Óskar did.

Kristín: Did Óskar invent it?

Hugi: This is a game where you are allowed to do everything

Kristín: Should do everything?

Hugi: No, you are allowed to do everything.

[The words ‘allowed’ and ‘should’ sound very similar in Icelandic]

Kjartan: You are allowed to decide what to play.

Hugi: One can decide what to play

Kristín: Oh, then before you start to play, you decide that now you are playing a game where you can do whatever you like?

Kjartan: Yes, and I have never liked that game

What is behind games like this one, where all the children follow one of them, and this one child sets the rules for everybody? In which they build on the concept that everyone has to follow the example of one, even if it goes against their sense of fairness, their own free will, and no matter how foolish it seems to be? Is this kind of play common only in the pre-school or is it paralleled in everyday life?

Children and news

Some further examples from my own experience:

- I was watching two five year-old boys building a train. It was made out of blocks, and going around a curve. This construction was very important to the boys: just the week before there had been a train accident in Germany where a train left the tracks on a curve and people were killed. Not long before there had been another horrible train accident in Norway. Both accidents got a great deal of media attention and were widely covered on television news programmes.
- I was visiting a playroom in a pre-school. The children were playing in two groups in different part of the room. I was concentrating on a group on one side of the room when I looked up and saw the children on the other side running around. I went over and noticed a farmhouse on the table, and in the farm there was a whale, but all the farm animals were lying on the floor. I almost told the children to pick up the animals, but decided instead to ask them what they were doing. They told me that Keikó was in the farm: it was his cage and he was very sick. The children were waiting for him to get better, so he could go and save all the animals who were in the ocean, swimming around or drowning.
- When I was working at the pre-school in Ásborg, the children invented a game they called “I am a dead child in Sarajevo”. In the adult’s context of Europe, this was a strange and disquieting period: we suddenly had a war in our midst, too close to home for the comfort of the other European countries - we had thought that we were too civilised to have wars. The media went into overdrive: the war was all over the news, special programmes were made about it, and it was broadcast live in our homes. Children are influenced by their environment, and if they are lucky they have the opportunity to play and interpret their experiences in pre-school. When “I am a dead child in Sarajevo” was played in Ásborg we did not stop the children from playing it, or even disturb them. We thought that the game was full of horror, and we did not use the opportunity presented to us. We did not listen to what the children were saying to us, and lost the opportunity of becoming better pedagogues and of understanding the way the children were thinking about themselves and the world.

When I asked staff about this ‘play with no rules’, they had never heard about it. But it exists, and has a part within the children's culture in the school.

Children and media

So far I have discussed television news: but what of other kinds of media – such as multinational or international cartoons and children’s shows, and computer games. These are media which are designed with children as the market group, media that are overloaded with all kind of messages, hidden and overt. These media must have some influence on children’s lives, and children must be as confused by it, and must try as hard to understand it, as they are from the messages they get from the television news. Some years ago I was trying out one of the international computer games especially designed and marketed for girls, about Barbie the doll. The aim of the game was to dress Barbie and to design clothes for her, but every time I had to shift between levels the screen would go black for a few seconds. This showed the scant respect the manufacturers had for the girls who would use the product.

Media for children is often produced with a clear message and goal in mind. We had a children's television programme not long ago about endangered species. In some of these fishermen followed sweet little fish all over the ocean, hunting to kill: one brave little fish cut the net, thus saving the other small fish. In Icelandic culture the lives and well-being of many communities depends on fishing, and fish are the nation's biggest export. Many parents work in the fishing industry or in related areas, but programmes such as these present images of fishermen as bad people, willing to hunt down and kill all the creatures in the ocean.

There are also programmes in which the main aim appears to be to build or to change the belief and value systems of the child. There are good and bad men: the good are white and the bad are black. We see the Dark Land, full of horror and where evil animals live, and we see the Light Land full of goodness. Such programmes, movies, computer games and toys are made with particular goals: to build and strengthen prejudices towards differences. They support the idea of the strong imperialistic white man. Parallel with these kinds of media, the amusement industry markets all kind of toys, computer games and accessories for children. These are heavily advertised to parents with a message implying that all children should have these products, and that the happiness and even well being of the child is based on owning these things. If your child doesn't own this, he or she will feel left out and you as a parent are damaging her or his self-image. In this way parents are made responsible for the child as a consumer, and the parent can buy this 'quality' for the child, allowing the child to compete in his or her own world and culture.

Parents sometimes feel powerless against these trends and participate; they buy the products because they don't want their children to feel left out, or - if some of the media messages are to be believed - so as not to destroy the child's self-image. A quick look into almost any child's room is likely to show toys and other products designed with the child as a consumer, and as parents most of us play along with this to some extent.

How do we in the pre-school encounter this world and culture of the child? Do we accept it and experience it with the child, or do we just tolerate it? How does this world appear in our schools in the form of plays, visuals and language? Do we trust the child to define and work with experiences related to these multinational phenomena or do we deny them as something that does not concern us?

I was talking to some children aged four and five about things they enjoy. Anna (aged four) told me that she enjoyed watching her big sister and her friend controlling what happened on the television. I didn't understand and asked what she meant. Siggi (a five-year old boy) explained that Anna meant a video computer-game, where children sit in front of the television with a remote control, with which they control what happens 'inside'. It was not until afterwards, when I listened to my recording of this conversation, that I realised the opportunity I had missed. I would like to have pursued these theories of 'controlling the television' and the ideas that lay behind it, but unfortunately for me that was impossible. But I learned was that it is as important for children as it is for adults to have feeling of control over life and its situations. Children like to have power and they like that power to be the real thing, not some kind of a token.

Image of the child

What is the image of the child, and how is the child going to be as an adult? Is this completely within the power of the adult, or has the child itself something to contribute?

If we look at children, and admit that they are rich, curious and able, can we not also admit that we do not control everything in children's lives, and that children can form their own opinions, have their own yearnings and desires, which they will try to fulfil in their own way? Can we not admit that our job is to help children to build up the tools that enable them to choose, based on critical thinking that enables the child to look beneath the surface and to evaluate? Is our image of the child a *tabula rasa*; do we think that the child is without free will and it is the role of the pedagogue to model the child?

If we believe that the child has free will, then he or she can make responsible decisions, based on critical thought, and will then be able to talk about this thought and decision making. Our image of the child is closely related to how we understand ourselves as human beings, and this understanding of ourselves controls - or at least influences - how we conduct our work in the pre-school. It has an impact on how desirable it is that we think that children should have an influence, for example, contributing to the decisions that make and shape the pre-school curriculum. It has an impact on who is allowed to define what is goes on in the pre-school. The conclusion is that it must be one's understanding of humanity that influences the values one find desirable and uses in daily life and work.

In Reggio Emilia in Italy, people have been working with this image of the child for decades. In Reggio pre-school workers believe that that the child is an able, thinking being who can and will define her own world, her own desires. The role of the teacher is to discover and explore the world with the child. In Reggio there is a vision of a society where we are all responsible toward our smallest brothers, a society where we share the responsibility for children's lives and their environment. Bourdieu tell us that our understanding of humanity, our philosophical views and values appear little by little, and that the school system plays a large part in this development. The school influences in many ways what we think is preferable, good and beautiful. Because of this, the society of schooling has for a long time aimed to categorise or classify people, especially in higher education. Schools recognise desirable qualities and strive to reproduce these qualities. In other words, teachers like to have students who are similar to themselves, with the same beliefs and values, and such students are likely to be ranked higher in the school society. These ideas in education have a dark side: Bourdieu claims they harm both our research community and our power of critical thinking, because students are not supposed to be critical or creative. They are not encouraged to ask why.

New ideas in early childhood education run counter to this way of thinking: we look upon differences as opportunities, on problems as new occasions to think and to learn. But we must not forget the role and responsibility of the community, including the media, in shaping our children's futures and values. We have to confront the influence both the media and schools have on our children's lives. In the pre-school we have many different methods of observing what influences our children, and what matters to the child. From these observations we can decide the next step. One methods is documentation: Gunilla Dahlberg suggests that documentation is always based on choices; what we do not choose to record shows certain emphases, certain ways of recognising the child and its life.

Finally, I ask in what way have we chosen to see the influence of the multimedia and multinational phenomena in the play of our children? How does the world outside our pre-school appear in the children's culture within the school, and more importantly, how do we recognise it? Are we people who are only willing to recognise ideas we are

comfortable with, the images we ourselves themselves have of the child? Do we forget that, as we can look up to the sky and shape the clouds in our mind, so we can shape our image of the child?

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