

# To see together. Visualization of meaning structures in interaction processes between children and adults in Finland

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## **Introduction**

At the 29<sup>th</sup> NFPF Congress in Stockholm in March 2001 educators agreed in the group of home and school co-operation that parental involvement is crucial to children's learning and education (see also Bridge 2001, Henry 1996, Korpinen 1991, Ribom 1993, Crozier 2000) and new, contextual and democratic methods are valuable and needed. Home and school co-operation has not traditionally taken place in real learning situations but has mainly dealt with information about arrangements of everyday life and varied in different schools and contexts.

Parental and grandparental involvement in two small school contexts are examined in this paper. The first is an elementary school context with three teachers and three grades in Saarenmaa and the second is a pre-school context in the community of Konnevesi with about 3000 inhabitants. The aim of these interactional case studies is to implement strategies that enable parents and grandparents to be more involved in their children's learning and provide a setting for hermeneutical processes of understanding (see e.g. Habermas 1967) both in home contexts and in school. The purpose of the research is to provide a model for co-operation and to improve practices in school.

## **Parental Involvement in School Learning**

The primary learning context for the child is the home context and parents with close relatives as

the first educators. Parental involvement in the school allows children to continue familiar relationships and experiences in the school curriculum and informs people at home about the knowledge explored at school. Dewey (1953) emphasized the view of the child and the meaning of the home context in his traditional educational theories. He stressed common goals, communication and constructing democratic community. He drew the model for interactional education in connection with nature, industrial life, research and home. Dewey thought that it was futile to separate school from the life around it. He criticized schools for the incapability of benefiting from the experiences coming out of the school. In Dewey's opinion the biggest problem in schools was the separation from real life.

Despite Dewey's thoughts, and the astonishment of many others, parental involvement has been defined educationally, socially and politically problematic in practice. Kuosmanen (1982) has noted that parents are not very eager to participate in learning in the school context, because they do not have time for that. Similar to Kuosmanen Bridge (2001) notes that if parents are involved, they are more often engaged in managerial roles than those directly connected with their children's learning. Managerial and financial roles are not democratic for parents living in different situations.

Partnership in education could be based on shared purpose and mutual skills but in practice decision making, knowledge, and activities have been determined and shared by the authorities of the organization. In practice parents have stayed in the background. In the fragmented postmodern world opportunities for parents to have a dialogue with their children have become scarce and possibilities for children to learn in familiar, relevant and contextual ways have diminished.

### **The interactional case study**

Case study research examines closely one specific working entity and focuses on understanding the meanings in it. It gives an insight into a setting, the events in it and shows possible answers to why questions. The case study is real and therefore provides strong evidence in recorded practice. Action research compliments the case study. Action research is concerned with improving the practice in a working setting. It is a practical activity that involves change to the curriculum in order to improve it. Bridge (2001) stresses that changed action in practice is dependent upon changed thinking and understanding and therefore is not a simple project, it needs a lot of reflection and reaction. Action research tries to push forth critical thinking about values and in that way improve practices.

This case study research is especially interested in the interactional, educational functions of the working parts and the possibilities and findings of the action. The research involves children, teachers, parents and grandparents working collaboratively and reflectively. This action research shows that learning is not the plain text written in the document but is intertwined with contemporary and past experiences of children and adults. The hopes and plans for the future and the contemporary feelings, thoughts and knowledge are based on those experiences. In this research qualitative data was gathered using observations and notes, drawings and writings of

the children and adults, photographs and focused discussions with the adults.

### **Research strategies**

At first a joint meeting was held with the teachers in both case studies to clarify ideas about parental involvement, curriculum practices and daily life in school. The ideas were then discussed with parents at the following joint meeting. Parents expressed some wishes which were noted in the following plans. In both cases the phenomenon was first examined in school and then a letter about it was sent home with the child. In the letter the goals of the examination were presented and the adults were asked to discuss the phenomenon and draw pictures concerning it together with the child in light of their own experiences, knowledge and feelings. Small and large, thin and thick pieces of paper with drawings and writings were then brought back to school and discussed at school together with the children and the teacher. The process then proceeded to connect the phenomenon in larger social connections and in the goals of the curriculum. Exhibitions of children's, parents' and grandparents' works were organized. At the end of the process meetings were held together with parents and children, in the latter case those focused discussions were recorded as well as the verbal reflection of the teacher who was involved in the case research.

### **Environmental project in Saarenmaa**

The first co-operational project took place in an elementary-school in Saarenmaa in the Spring . The interactive process lasted for five months and was integrated in environmental education and was carried out especially in art education though the main interest was focused in the environment in all education. The common educational goal in art education was to awaken sensitivity in meeting and perceiving environmental phenomena and through sensitivity to be able to change and improve own environmental actions. Connections with home contexts were built up twice or even four times every month. Environmental examinations in school were

focused on the phenomena which situated near children's everyday life; home, the way to school and the surroundings of the school. The adults at home were asked to discuss and draw pictures together with the child concerning the same phenomena in the light of what they remembered of their own life in the same age as the child. The art educational ongoing of the process in school had goals of the curriculum and visual meanings; colors, shapes, textures and relationships in space and time. (Autio-Hiltunen & Kärkkäinen 1995.)

### **Feelings and moomins in Konnevesi**

The latest co-operational, art educational project took place in a small preschool in Konnevesi just before Christmas and lasted for one month. The children in this project were about six years old. At home they used to watch a popular animated TV-series about the life and adventures of Moomin troll in the evening. All of the children seemed to be frightened and excited about an odd troll called Mörkö in the series. So the process was planned on feelings and especially those feelings which were experienced while looking at the TV-animation.

The process began with the excitement of birth. At home adults were asked to tell stories and draw pictures together with the child about the birth of a child and stories in which they remembered their own birth. The children brought to school the visualized stories. The process continued with discussing the messages together and connecting the excitement of birth in the Moomin world. The odd and frightening Mörkö troll had also been a newborn baby and he had a mother who cared for him. The children used clay and other materials to build and form baby Mörkö and his necessities.

Baby Mörkö needed a place to live in, a home to feel comfortable in. Before beginning to plan the home for the troll, the parents were asked to speak about and visualize the home they had when they were very young children. Based on

those pictured stories the children began to plan a place for the growing and frightening Mörkö in school. Mörkö was ice-cold, so they wanted his home to look frozen and collected material for that. The children really liked to provide the troll home with exciting details that could be used by the troll family.

The process of the Mörkö culminated when he grew a little, examined the environment and saw something that he was very frightened. Before touching upon fear more, the adults at home were asked to discuss and visualize together with the child those fears they had as children and the child's current fears. Fearful feelings were examined and discussed at school and then the children imagined what Mörkö was afraid of. The large paintings that were made to hang in the windows were very imaginative and impressive and there were lots of them.

The process finished just before Christmas, so the last feeling that was examined was the longing and waiting for Christmas. Adults at home were asked to tell and visualize together with the child Christmas stories that they remembered and plans they had for the approaching Christmas. Those stories in the hands and minds children constructed in school a picture book of Christmas in the Moomin world and planned and made three overhead animations for the Christmas party.

Work in this process was based on the communication between children and adults in the home context. Actions at home were not directed technically or with art educational goals. In the school context doing and learning was dealt with visual targets; painting, drawing and constructing, big and small, light and dark, in front and behind, under and above, staying still and moving. Visual targets were not given as orders but like light flashes or fantasies for children to catch if they needed them in their perceiving, imagining and learning process.

**The findings of the process**

In the two processes it was discovered that parents and grandparents form a resource of knowledge and power for children's learning that can be combined with the curriculum knowledge. Co-operation depended on gender so that mothers more often co-operated and communicated with the child at home than fathers and generally they were mothers who participated in the focused discussions. The visual method was useful, almost all of those parents who participated also wanted to draw pictures. Drawing pictures seemed to bring back to mind things and details that had already been hidden aside for a long time. The materials that were used for visualizing at home were rather simple, any paper and pen was used for drawing and writing the messages. The older the generation was, the less color they used. The colors that the children used at home were powerless compared with the colors used at school; their quality seemed to be so weak that it was difficult to build any strong effects with them. Adults sometimes used the same ways to visualize space and perspective as children did and stress the emotionally important things like them. Some adults seemed to have left in their contemporary visualizations the ornamentations of their youth. Children were very interested in the pictures and stories of the adults. The parents and grandparents were eager to see the exhibitions that were constructed from the works of the participants. The participation of the parent at home seemed to influence the activity, interest and capabilities of the child in the school context to perceive the whole process better.

**Science and art**

When I was planning the interactive, communicative and transparent postmodern research project in the primary school context connecting with home contexts, I based it on the hermeneutical philosophy of education. According to it, learning occurs in complex interpretative relationships, in communicative, comprehending processes between generations and contexts. The view reminds me of the image

of science as art or art as science; the detected sketching in a holistic, conceptualized experience of the factor, artefact, observer and the environment.

I picture the interactive, communicative learning process in the school and home context in the following way:

According to the picture the inside education that takes place in the school and home contexts is situated in a triangle. Education is situated in its private side, the side of the home. The private side (the side of the home) of education is rooted under the line of the earth or horizon and in the past. The common side (the side of the school) opens up in the air searching for different types of futuristical, social relationships. The educational spaces of school and home contexts are intertwined in communicative interactions, where common interests are examined on the bases of private and common meaning structures.

**The magic of multicultural art education**

Art education has targets for a child's individual and social growth and tries to understand the self and to approve the other. In art education multicultural phenomena are examined and analyzed. Art education seems to have meaning in empowering the emotions and ethic feelings. Based on Dewey's (1934, 1953) ideas and Kolb's (1984) thoughts concerning the importance of experience in learning, art education has sought problematic, procedural interactions where prejudices, contextual sources of knowledge, interpretation, reflection and producing are taken into consideration. As a result of the process, an aware, considered and shared experience is to be found (see Räsänen 1998). It has its roots in the historical and aesthetic tradition but is eager to find something surprisingly new. When trying to fit different cultures together, it is crucial to develop models for interactions to have possibilities to meet and to understand. All new and even strange materials and references may be used in the magic circle of art education.

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