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Fantasy design: children's work with design and imagination - a democratic process

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Our surroundings are designed - even nature is often designed. The surroundings children live in are especially designed. The Nordic project *Fantasi Design* documents how pre-school and primary teachers can intensify the experience of children by work with design. By taking seriously designs created by children as a contribution to their immediate surroundings, teachers and other adults emphasise that children are an equal group in society. By acting with and in the design process, children clarify a part of their role in a democratic society. It is a challenge for teachers to use such an opportunity to help children to develop their understanding of democracy.



Background

Fantasi Design is a practical and interdisciplinary project that was originally based in the Scandinavian countries (Iceland, Finland, Sweden and Denmark). It has been supported by the Nordic Council as a pedagogical experiment across the inter-Scandinavian borders. The idea of the project was formed in 1997, and in 1998-99 it was realised as a practical project in schools and institutions in Iceland, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. The project was directed towards 5-14 years old children and young people (1st - 10th class).

Guidelines and freedom

The structure of the project was common for all participants, but inside the guidelines there were many possibilities for experimenting, researching and developing activities. The element of *fantasi* (imagination/fantasy) is given as high a priority as the element

of design. Design is the target, and the elements of fantasy/imagination are the liberating and creative factors. It is evident that as they grow, children develop and use creativity and imagination/fantasy and that they are a huge creative resource. Many professional designers, architect, and so on were astonished at the creative potential demonstrated by the products designed by the children during the project.

Although children are in the need of imagination and creativity during their socialisation and education and though they have a huge creative potential, this part of children's development is given very little priority and value compared to that given to more concrete and traditional subjects such as mathematics and language. At the same time society is in need of creativity in order to solve political, economic, social and other problems. *Fantasy Design* is an attempt to give more space to creative activities in the ordinary schools and institutions dealing with education.



Beside those guidelines that determined the aims of the project, there was some further guidance for schools. They were asked to:

1. Work across disciplines. In the curriculum the demand of interdisciplinary activities are mentioned as an important part of education towards a post-industrial information society.
2. Involve experiences and people from outside the classroom. Contact with members of the surrounding society is important for children to allow them to meet the challenge of a complex modern society. Activities included visiting industries, visiting exhibitions, visiting designers and craftsmen or inviting local designers to the classes to teach, or just to tell about their work.

3. Give high priority to imagination and creativity. In order not to confine the children's imaginations it was important to give space to the element of play, and to ensure that the element of competition (mentioned below) should not be given too much priority.

The exhibitions and the element of competition

The participating schools were requested to arrange exhibitions of the children's work locally. This had the dual purpose of showing the surrounding community the work of the children and of confirming the value of their efforts to the children. At each local exhibition a jury was asked to select 4-5 items; these were sent for a final selection by a professional, international jury. This took place in the beginning of September 1999.

The work finally selected was to be part of an exhibition to be shown in the participating Nordic countries in 2000 and 2001. After the jury selection, the chosen items were returned in order to let the children try to produce real design models on the basis of their sketches and models in collaboration with local professional designers and producers. This aspect also gave priority to contact outside the school and to collaboration between school and industry: it was also a way of demonstrating that the community took the efforts of the children seriously.



The project from a democratic point of view

In the Scandinavian pedagogical tradition, education is often seen as either a technical, professional education or as a general, liberal education. In general one would consider a general/liberal education appropriate for the development of a democratic identity, but in this project we are trying to combine a professional/technical education with a general education.

Technical education

The professional/technical education is based on the premise that skills and techniques have to be learned in order to create sketches, models and descriptions. Furthermore, much technical training is connected to work with design in many disciplines; mathematics, history, language, sociology, physics, chemistry, marketing, public relations, media and so on. We have found that the opening outwards of the school, as described above, is important in order to achieve identity and to realise the connections between individuals and society.



General education

Three elements of general/liberal education are important to the project.

- The international aspect. Although the Scandinavian countries are related, citizens of each country regard the others as foreigners. The children experience the project as a widening of their perspectives: "I /my class is not isolated. Other children in other countries working on this project are experiencing the same problems". Experiences like this are of course important in order to develop a democratic understanding.
- Influences on their own lives. The study of our surroundings in order to increase consciousness is the first step towards being able to interact with our surroundings. In the project the children are confronted with how things are produced and how

products can influence their lives: at the same time they are being asked to imagine how things could be done differently.

- To be taken seriously by their community. The children's experience of having influence is central to the creation of a democratic identity. Teachers working with the children had to be open and accepting in their approach to the children's suggestions. This openness was also expressed in the local exhibitions and not least in the final, international exhibition. Often children's creative work is displayed carelessly, perhaps hung with tape or pins on a convenient wall - professional standards in the presentation of children's work are seldom seen. By choosing to exhibit the children's work and ideas the project signalled that their efforts were being taken seriously.



Temporary conclusion

Fantasi Design has completed its first phase. At the moment we are trying to collect data on the experiences of the children and teachers who took part in the project. We are also making plans to develop material and textbooks for teachers and children who wants to work with design in education, and efforts are being made to develop a *Fantasi Design 2* based on the experience gained in the work already done, and maybe with other countries participating. These plans are still at the discussion stage, but if I had to sum up the two main pedagogical experiences in short pedagogical terms I should say that:

1. Guidelines provide freedom and
2. Children's ideas and suggestions must be taken seriously.