

Reality and Joy in the School Garden

by

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School in itself needs to be a friendly place. Outside it is not only going to have a place for running and play, but also a garden where one can in-between send the students so they can take joy in the sight of trees, flowers and grass.

– Johann Ames Comenius (1592–1670)

In a time when society is hurtling forward at the speed of light, a school garden can seem like an anachronism, something left over from a time when people had plenty of time, when they could take joy in producing their own food products, and where the only entertainment that came through the air was bird song. But if we stop for a moment, we will notice that the school garden is about something very different than being nostalgic.

Many people have probably experienced themselves that to work in nature is a good counter-balance to time-pressure and a contribution toward regaining a



slower pace. A garden has to do with the idea that things take time. While we get a lot of facts via the Internet in the course of minutes, we cannot really get to know a plant until we have followed it through at least one cycle of growth. A garden also has to do with experience



permeated with feeling. A garden gives us the opportunity to connect with the outer nature through our inner lives. When I smell a rose today, I can still experience that moment in my childhood when I had my nose buried in the soft, delicate flower petals in my mother's garden.

All of this is even more important for our children, who are growing up in a much more restless time. How can the work in a school garden help to recreate a balance so that the children can take joy in their own self-expression in nature? I will look at some of the themes that have become important for my work with gardening and with outdoor pedagogical work in general.

Joy in Nature

Joy in nature has been an important theme in the work with school gardens, from the first time school gardens were introduced in Norway at the beginning of the twentieth century. This is still important for the teachers too. To be outside with the children in the school garden requires a lot of extra time and much responsibility, but also brings a great amount of joy. One gets to experience wonder together with the students over the peculiar and the beautiful that nature brings forth. One also gets to know the children from another angle than when they are inside a classroom. Everyone works together shoulder-to-shoulder on something that can develop into truly the heart of the school and the most beautiful area on the school grounds. To be a teacher today without the garden is for me unthinkable. My own starting point was my frustration as a biology teacher. The youths I was working with were at a certain distance from nature, and the teaching in the classroom became boring. They seemed to be almost illiterate when it came to the experience of nature outside the door. They knew a lot about the giraffe but nothing about the little porcupine in their own gardens. It was not just knowledge that fell short, but experience. And it is their own

experience which is the condition for interest which means that they are able to participate. I learned right away that the students needed to get out of the classroom at a much earlier point in time. Which arena for learning could work better than a school garden or a farm? Therefore my life as a teacher started with one foot in the field and one foot in the classroom.

The Invisible Source

The origin of our daily bread has disappeared from our children's curious gaze. The results of a research project in England about children's knowledge of the origins of their food help to illustrate this point. About one fourth of the children between eight and eleven, did not know that wheat was one of the main ingredients in bread. They thought that bread was made of rice, potatoes, and perhaps yeast. Only one out of five knew that apples ripened and were picked in the fall. And even here in Norway we have children who will draw a picture of a square fish! Food grows in the store—that is the experience children have. “I will always buy food at the supermarket, teacher,” I heard one of my students say during a garden lesson. We were talking about where we get our food. And when we take a class in the tenth grade to a farm and get milk straight from the cows in clear glass mugs, often some students do not want to taste. “Cow's milk” is something different from bottled milk from the store.

Is it important that the children should know from where the food comes? Yes, I am totally convinced that the more we surround ourselves with things that we do not fully understand, the more it will become difficult to develop a sense of belonging and safety. When the children do not know where their food comes from, this contributes to a feeling of rootlessness and uncertainty. The school should be a place where children grow comfortable with the world around them and gain an understanding of the foundations for daily life—in everything—from the food on the table to how the light-switch on the wall works and how the computer works. When they know where things come from and how they function, then the children will feel at home in the world.

To cultivate a meal themselves, from sowing the seeds to setting the table, gives the students an opportunity to explore what is good and what is not so good when it comes to nutrition. The reports from



professionals in this field are deeply concerning. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there is an decrease in nutrients in food products and an increase in food allergies, the intake of sugar and other stimulates, and eating disorders. The hysteria around weight and the growing problems with anorexia and bulimia speak



clearly. If the students gain experiences at school which make learning about nutrition less abstract, they could develop a sensible and balanced relationship to nutrition. And the joy and pride when they look at what they have produced themselves are perhaps the most important to get across the thought on the right diet.

It is totally wonderful to experience children who have loudly proclaimed that they do not like vegetables, proudly showing their own harvest and eating it with great appreciation. The grumpy complaints about dirty potatoes will not happen when the students themselves have cultivated and harvested the product. The process of cultivating the vegetables becomes so meaningful to them that any sense of antipathy that the students might have is dissipated.

The Passive Indoor Child

In contrast to the time when school gardens were very common both in the city and in the countryside, we have a very different child culture to deal with today. Researchers saw that during the eighties and nineties we were dealing with much more passive children in relationship to movement, and that they spend more time indoors than outdoors before they start school. The consequences of this shift for children shows up in ongoing new research. They have undeveloped large motor skills. In other words they are more clumsy and less capable of controlling their limbs. Doctors and physiotherapists in Denmark have concluded that the knee muscles in about seventy-five percent of ten-year-old boys are underdeveloped. And this can lead to back problems in later life. And allergies have increased proportionately as well.

During the last few years, in many of the school garden courses, teachers have reported experiences that point to a much more immediate, practical consequence of sitting still too much: much more restlessness during the lesson and more difficulties in concentration. A good sense of self and a good social sense are really dependent on the child's capacity to master his or her own body

and to be able to participate in the games. So it is clear that children need to move much more in the course of a school day. To handle a tool, for example, in the school garden provides the possibility to master motor capacities through meaningful tasks.

Active contact with nature in the school garden also invites a rich kingdom of experiences through the senses. Touch, sight, taste, smell, balance, and hearing are stimulated in the garden. A rich vegetation attracts many insects, birds, and little animals. Real first-hand experiences in which many senses are activated give children experiences to which they can connect. They will remember easier and be filled with impressions which they want to share. Teachers have reported how, for instance, language and mathematics lessons are more easy and more effective when they are combined with sessions in the garden, that the garden work gives both material and inspiration for many of the lessons that happen indoors.

The youngest students meet the world of nature with great reverence and respect. In the moments when they are immersed in watching the earthworm bury down in the soil or discovering the first little shoots of their newly-sown peas, they show no distinction between self and the world. They have the time to drink in the experience and make the world their own.

Older students who have a bit more distance between self and environment can be helped and stimulated to wakeful observations through drawing and careful descriptions of the cycle of growth. With too much intellectualizing, the distance to nature is increased. As the famous saying goes from Nordal Grieg, “Botany is the worst experience for the plants.”

Silent Knowledge and Practical Work

Out in the garden with the children, we have the opportunity to reflect all about what learning truly is. In earlier times society and home were real teaching arms and legs. Children experienced daily handwork and skills and how things were made. Going to school was a privilege which gave the children freedom from all the practical work and gave space to head knowledge. Now we experience the over-dominance of the intellect, both in society and at school.

The Swedish pedagogue Stephen von Botmer points out in his book *Ten Years in the School Garden* that the opportunities for practical work in the school garden give us the experience of something different than intellectual learning. Silent knowledge is visible, for instance, in the way a handworker holds a tool and the rhythm and the sense of self-confidence in how to use tools. I have observed children in the school garden when they have those moments of silent working. They look at the adult or the older students who are becoming really

good at doing something, and then they try to imitate by holding the tool in a certain way and trying it out themselves.

This is a form of learning that is more attractive to some students than others. Howard Gardener differentiates in the seven intelligences between different types of skills and talents other than intelligences in the pure, mathematical, logical sense. The students with a kinesthetic, body-based capacity can easily get lost in the traditional school setting. But can we create areas where they step forth and further develop their own skills and talents? I have often had students in the school garden who grow in their own and their fellow students' eyes through their capacity to tackle practical tasks easily. So we dare to call this also as important learning in line with what we teach in the classroom. There is an old saying that expresses this wisdom: "What the hand touches fills the heart, and what fills the heart enlightens the spirit."

Does Anybody Need Me?

The practical work in the garden, which with time and perseverance can include all of the school's environments, also has another side. The hectic life tempo that most adults feel burdened by can easily give children the feeling that they are in the way. They have to hurry everywhere and accommodate the parents who have so many tasks they have to accomplish. When the students experience that they can do important work in the garden and with care of small animals and plants, they have a confirmation that they can also contribute something important. It is therefore important that the finished products from the garden are made visible. The students identify with the products—if my products are needed, that means that the world also needs me. In this way they feel both seen and valued.

Community, the Invisible Harvest

Like all other important and meaning-filled tasks which are solved together, garden work can also strengthen the social life of the school. Through working together with the teachers, the students get to know each other from a different angle than in the classroom. Here they master tasks by joining forces. If one student is lazy and is just leaning on the shovel while another one is busily digging, a certain process happens between the students which the teacher can stand outside without scolding words. There is also great benefit when older students can instruct the younger ones in their acquired skills. The students' working together on the many common tasks during the gardening periods strengthens a sense of "we" and contributes to a sense of identity for the school. The little ones bring their parents to show them all that they have done day-by-

day, and to experience the teacher as a co-worker gives the students a sense that what they do is important. If we can also include periods when the parents can participate in the school garden, the school garden can act as a glue for the social life of the school.

Think Globally, Act Locally

In the general teaching plan for the Norwegian public school system, there is a general encouragement to strengthen the students' belief that they can actually participate in solving the ecological problems. It says: "The teaching must awaken the student's sense of a solitary social action and that common work can solve global problems." If we are truly to take this seriously, we are standing in front of a huge task. This is not solved by just having a few lessons of conversations about the global issues. The starting point for most children and youths today is that nature is threatened, and what is threatening nature is the human being itself.

During the 1980s at an environmental exhibit in Sweden, the visitors were met by the headline, "The Worst Enemies for the Earth" and a mirror in which you saw your own reflection. This is a good picture of the impression that has imprinted itself in our children—that the best thing we can do for nature is to put up a fence and not touch it. We adults have forgotten to communicate that part of our cultural history which is the witness to our cooperation with nature. The open landscape, for example, with its manyfold animal, insect, and plant life, shows that the human being can also work in fruitful cooperation with the natural environment. This is also what a school garden is all about. In order to create a garden we have to listen to nature's needs and possibilities at the local place. And after that we use a treasure that has been inherited through many thousands of years—the cultural plants. Vegetables, garden flowers and fruit trees have all come to us through the human being's positive cooperation with nature. Our continuous care for this is the foundation for handing them on to future generations. The tools and the silent knowledge of handling which also belongs to such a rich tradition are also witness of this dialogue with nature.



If we can manage to give children an experience of this when they are in school, we can take joy in the many little sprouts of hope that the students will have sweated and worked hard and played and laughed in the school garden to carry forward. They carry a slumbering wisdom which hopefully can awaken to meet the challenges of tomorrow. I wish you all the best in your school garden!