

THE PLAY TOWN A SCHOOL FOR LIFE AND LEARNING

The Wide Horizon in Brief

“Those who drive up a mountain with their car on a paved road, will experience the mountain in a different way than those who walk up on foot paths, crossing boulders and shrubs on the way. They have arrived in a different way, despite the fact that from their mere physical presence one will not be able to detect any differences. They look the same, they feel the same wind, the angle of the sun is identical. However, the mountain on which they are standing is completely different for them. Knowledge which is absorbed and communicated in such a way that one can no longer feel the obstacles, the disturbing, confusing or fascinating experiences, which they have brought about – this knowledge retains a flat taste...

The building of motorways to the peaks of culture, the sources of wisdom, it all has its price. You just tick off errands and are in charge of the situation without feeling any emotion”
(Horst Rumpf 1996)

This quote truly describes the core of the concept and the practical experience made regarding the Play Town. Created with an uncomfortable feeling about the predominant formal understanding of learning as such, which was trying to eradicate all obstacles in this process, the didactic concept of the Play Town is based exactly on the children being actively involved in the production of their learning processes.

Since the obstacles usually arise from the social and cultural daily life of the children, their facts have to be an integral part of their learning environment. The possibly confusing as well as the fascinating experiences should not be excluded, as distracting as they might seem. Not only because of the fact that children do not solely draw their knowledge from formal, structured offers to learn, but often from the quarries of everyday life, from information channels they were not supposed to access, from events which are not intended for their eyes and ears.

From the start, children learn about the world in a far more extensive way through learning characterized by immediate experiences, which are memorized in the process, if they are available or made available for them to process. Otherwise they will create an amorphous or raw perception of the world, full of

wishes, fears and unrealistic fantasies of life.

Without being asked they are the seismographs of the cultures of the adult world and detect changes and cracks faster and in a more unvarnished way than the adults themselves.

Learning is inevitable, anthropologically speaking, embedded in social processes of life together with movement and action, accompanied by emotions, characterized by surprises, by the unexpected, by influences of the most diverse kind. It is never a clear, linear or definable process.

All this results in the pedagogic insight that connections have to be established between the living environment and the learning environment, which compare the conveying and subjective perception of knowledge with the social realities children grow up in. If learning is not based on this, the social and cultural task of pedagogics is missed.

Its task should (as it is different in reality) basically consist of the creating of learning environments, which initially allow life in general and which allow children's activities and actions in real time and without restrictions and which provide the necessary items, tools, materials and media for independent learning.

The handling of objects must be explained by adults, but the explaining must be done in a way that the curiosity and love to experiment and inquisitive minds of children are kept alive and encouraged. The gap could be bridged by recognizing the method used by children in learning about the world, which is by playing. In doing so, they learn, acquire knowledge and at the same time they can assure themselves of the social aspects of their world as well.

The Play Town as Living Environment

The Play Town is both pedagogically intended and didactic and as a game, it possesses all of the characteristics that are attributed to games played by children: entertaining, loud, action-oriented and paced according to the children's own rhythm. It is often hard for adults to accept this and acknowledge it as a principal, since the forms of their own learning experiences are opposed to such a change of methods.

"When I entered the sports complex at the Olympic Park where the children's town of Mini-Munich was set up for the first time and was looking down from above into the maze of rooms, alleys

and squares, I could not physically move for a long time, I was so fascinated by the view ... strange - if this association should have some sort of a point - that a place in which so much learning about life was planned in between reality and game, could have such a metaphorical and symbolic effect, despite the all the pedagogic fantasy of the organizers -as if the hall was like a funnel, leading down into our cultural history and not just into the present of a modern pedagogic setting“ (Gert Selle, professor of Aesthetic Education, Unna, 1992

The Play Town as a model of life is taking children and their different quirks seriously; it is adapting their ideas and actions into the game and is respecting all risks, irritations as well as successes and failures. The realities created, connected by actions and words, are unveiling the children's' cultural facts in their complex public life. These facts are necessarily marked as a mix of imitating as well as adapting to the world of adults and of a liberated interpretation of the world, which is individual as well as based on probing and testing - the result is highly dependent on the respective educational environment which allows room for the latter or does not.

The Range of Pedagogic Freedom

The Play Town model does not know fixed schedules with regard to time, no division of subject units and knowledge segments, no division of children according to age, sex, nationality and no formal checks regarding the learning content. The various partial requirements permanently arising and generating themselves in the course of Play Town life in form of a self-made curriculum, if you will, are providing the exams in the form of activities and actions - the results of which can be jointly assessed by everyone from the course of the game and the results: each action and initiative is an adventure and each own project a test, the success and failure of which will have obvious as well as concrete consequences witnessed by many of the participants.

Life developing and taking place in Play Town, cannot be grasped at a glance. Those who remain onlookers, will perceive it a chaotic or at least uncontrolled and without structure. One will not be able to decipher the context according to which children are milling about busily in their town and are apparently compelled to act. This applies both for the perception of the

children and adults who will just remain visitors. If you do not immerse yourself into the game, you will recognize neither logic nor impulses according to which actions take place.

A lot is happening at the same time and only little is of the same importance to many children and everyone involved will feel permanently exposed to the pressure of having to decide what is important to him or her just at this moment or what is more important than something else. The advertising agency in the Play Town, acting as lawyer for the procurement of attention for its cause, has its counterpart in the advertising industry of the adult world.

The Play Town is offering the children a public stage, which makes all actions and transactions controllable by them, but which also offers them opportunities to withdraw themselves as well as anonymity, if they wish. In the course of the actions and transactions contacts are being made, relations and relationships of trust established which are as solid or revocable, as they tend to be in real life. This way the game is becoming serious for the children and this is only tolerable, because children possess the ability to determine all actions regarding their reversibility, meaning they can repeat the game again, as if it were a new game, irrespective of the consequences of their actions. This is the only factor which distinguishes the Play Town from a real town ... and from real life.

The Play Town as Learning Environment

The aesthetic design of a room and its learning environment, geared at an increased perception, which can be beneficial or an obstacle, can, if it is successful, be the motor for self-induced, proactive learning. The "aesthetic" does not solely refer to the decoration of the place of learning, but also on the equipment of the internal structures in accordance with the respective topics. This requires a lot of effort and precise organizational planning. For this reason formal learning processes usually neglect the supportive, motivating effect of such aesthetic emphasis, playing with room compositions and set-ups for different tasks as well behavior modalities, which will prevent learning from becoming dull and from creating an atmosphere of unwillingness. Only from the world of theatre do we know this kind of increased motivation, curiosity and attention through its "productions", which have perfected depictions of the world - for pedagogic

matters this is still to come.

Not just for this reason the Play Town project with its dramaturgical settings is causing pedagogic irritations, since learning impulses and further acquisition of knowledge cannot be identified through defined rules of conduct, tailor-made learning steps and learning progress which can easily be measured or tested. The conditions and transitions between game and learning, concentration and distraction, strain and love to experiment are fluid, always arranged in a new way and negotiated with other children. This is also requires the full participation of the adults as co- players, as they otherwise cannot follow the courses the game takes, cannot classify events and cannot weigh results.

The actions taking place in the Play Town, their course as well as their developmental dynamics are the result of a didactic orchestration, which makes life in a town a learning environment, but without forcing these actions into a planned schedule according to which they have to happen. The intended liberty to act freely is based on the fact that the aesthetic appeal and physical presence of equipment will motivate the children. The mere "scenery" of a town would not guarantee the willingness to participate. It is above all the promises connected with materials, tools, media, technical equipment, which just by themselves promise productive, vital actions, which attract children in a fascinating way, so that they voluntarily enter the adventure - without it having to be mentioned as such at all. "The professional aesthetic educational reasoning of today seems to solely draw from the rationality of abstract legitimation figures and plausible pragmatic arguments regarding organization. As a modern pedagogic attempt, the large-scale project of Mini-Munich, has proven itself magnificently in discussion. But the aesthetic effect, which was not just produced by the orchestrated social milling about close-up, but also by the fast motion "picture" observed from afar and above, seems to drop out of the plan. As if this silent part of the didactic arrangement contained a secret of undiscovered effects? Why was I, the level-headed observer with a different perspective, suddenly so enchanted by the visual quality of the place, where all the action solidifies - by the "old" town on the floor of the hall, recreated every day, brought to life by the children, protected, charged with the promise of participation in an hitherto unknown

life full of new events?" (Gert Selle).

From Role-Model to Self-Perception

The Play Town is a small-scale model of the large adult town with real city life providing the topics. Working and studying, participating in public life, earning money, consuming and using services – the orchestrated world of the Play Town is presenting children with the opportunity to play town by assuming roles and functions of a town taken seriously, to feel and understand via their own self-produced experiences. In Play Town, the children will come across a great number of institutions and events which they know from a real town, but from which they are normally excluded and which they only experience as those looking on or those merely tolerated, if not those suffering from it. Here in Play Town, the children are the creators, they assume the roles of different professions, form the public, phrase their opinions, verdicts, run the administration and decide upon politics. Sometimes even beyond the city walls of Play Town, as in 1985, when the children got the city council and the mayor to continue "their" projects, as those had promised to do the year before.

The town principle is characterized by the pedagogic principle of not necessarily simplifying or trivializing complicated contexts, but maintaining complexity, if possible. This is achieved by the orchestrated architecture of the Play Town which is intensified through the many rooms built as a city landscape with streets, alcoves, crossings, squares, markets, workshops and shops as well as by shaping and decorating the different institutions in an aesthetic way.

The bank, the employment office, the town hall, the newspaper, the TV studio, the restaurant, the waste disposal, the theatre, the university, the workshops and so on will become immediately recognizable to the children by their specific equipment. At the same time these bits and pieces from the adult world, these markers of adult territory, rich in symbolic value, will increase their motivation to become active as well as their willingness to participate in the authentic situations which can be experienced with all senses. This way learning (writing, calculating, drawing plans to scale, devising of speeches, sowing, cooking, drilling holes and sawing planks and many more) is not just a simplified, isolated acquisition of knowledge, but taking place in a context of socially interactive situations. Thus the acquisition of

knowledge becomes recognizable in its dependence from the cultural facts and therefore one can speak of an aesthetic approach towards reality for very good reasons. This approach is not relying on indoctrination, but it is forming as a process of an active and vital appropriation of the world of today.

The Play Town as Action Structure and System of Communication

With just a few rules, the Play Town is starting a dynamic process which steers itself, which is propelled by the combined actions and communication of children and adults. Beginning and end, entering and exiting, all determined by the children themselves, as well as the speed of the individual sequences as well as time out, if requested, from the actually quite tiring life in their town. The rules are only based on the condition that it should be possible for a certain number of persons to begin the "game" without long explanations and agreements in advance. The fully-intentional final rule should therefore be that all rules set can be changed, if the majority of the players decide to do so. This democratic principle is relying on the participation of as many participants as possible, as well as the assumption of leadership roles by individuals in a responsible way, otherwise the rules will stay the same. This should not be criticized or prevented in individual cases, because the children are witnesses of their time and world and understand them and handle them better than adults want to admit, some sooner, some later. The practical experience from Play Towns in the past justifies placing trust in the children.

Rules as a Liberating Principle

Rules can be a limiting, but also a liberating factor. They relieve from the burden of having to be dominant (decisive). Many social situations have been organized according to ritualized standards and their development is following certain norms, without fearing that the creativity of the participating persons is limited or even prevented. Children are not doing anything different in their games: they agree upon a set of rules, according to which they play, feeling free to change the rules if required or to abolish them altogether.

In this sense, the rules of the Play Town (see individual chapter) are nothing but guidelines for starting a game together, as the participants are a mix of different children, who did not know

each other before and due to their great number (up to 3000 in one day) are not able to decide upon a game easily and quickly.

The rules offered are simple and easy to understand and since the participation is voluntary, they are only binding for those who decide to participate.

Each player gets a citizen I.D. card, in which later on working or studying hours as well as other data are listed and by doing so, is entitled to actively participate.

The work places are (with exceptions) distributed by the employment office. The payment of salaries is effected via the bank.

There are only two rules which are occasionally remarked upon by children, mainly older in age: "All types of work are rewarded in the same way, that is with the same salary or wage and studying is also rewarded with the same 5 currency units. Of these 5 currency units, one is kept as tax."

The discrepancy with regard to social reality which for the children themselves is still without meaning, which they are very well aware of, though, does not hinder them from accepting this rule. And that, although they very well register the last rule: "All rules can be changed by majority vote of the citizen assembly."

In the 30 years of Play Town they have only done so twice. And every time, after long negotiations, the original rule was maintained, above all for practicality reasons.

The rules of the Play Town, which are also displayed on big placards at the entrance of the Play Town, are explained to all new children and accompanying adults on city tours by the professional city guides. Then, upon handing out of the citizen I.D., the game can start right away. The dynamics of Play Town life result from the transactions done between the workshops, companies and institutions, similar to the economic life of a real town. Work and costs are calculated and allocated by the children in charge, prices are established according to supply and demand.

All events and everything that is going on in the town, is observed, documented and commented by the public media (newspaper, TV, radio, info screen).

Due to the complex set-up and orchestration of the Play Town, which does not allow a controlled overview, participants often only find out about all that took place during the day from the daily newspapers and broadcasts. Depending on the age of the

children, this increases attention regarding the public events in the city and the willingness to participate in the citizen assembly that is political life. The same happens to the adults who only become aware of excerpts of events in their close surroundings and who therefore do not have an advantage compared to the children, they also have to act and react as spontaneously as the children.

The overall course the Play Town takes is guaranteed by the rules of the game, which all, children and adults, have to observe, as agreed upon.

Transgressions will be taken to the town court and judged by the children.

What goes on within the companies and institutions as well as individual actions by individual children or groups of children is not immediately evident and comprehensive. The resulting proliferation of active actions, unconventional initiatives, speculative deals, also trickery, explanations, individual strategies of achieving one's goal, violations of rules and so on, creates a network of authentic life for the children in which the adults (whatever role they take on) participate only as co-players.

The overall action is mixed with the cultural forms of expression of the children, which they develop in the fields of theatre, film and art productions. This is complemented by joint events in the market square, in citizen assemblies at the town hall or during court cases which all lead to the creation of many different environments of an independent public for children.

The children feel also responsible for the overall action and they are, since interventions by adults, as far as they are taking place despite the agreements and the concept, are assessed critically by them and are insignificant, considering the power of control of the children in all binding decisions, which are made in public negotiations. The children intuitively feel whether they are really taken seriously or not.

This also shows the obvious fascination of the town game, which feeds the motivations and the productive willingness of the children to participate and learn voluntarily. In its own modified and humble form, the Play Town is creating a public life forum, in which children can experience themselves as active, busy, effective participants, "almost like in real life", as one child put it.

An Overview on the Pedagogic Guidelines

The guiding ideas regarding a revision of the existing structures of learning which are demanded in many theoretical discussions on education, are partially listed here, in order to examine how much of them comes across in Play Town in practice.

- One has to trust children that want to learn.
- One presumes that all children are different and therefore have different interests and needs on the one hand and on the other require different time rhythms with regard to learning (the fruitful moment).
- Children come from different backgrounds, different social classes and cultural environments. Therefore they need differentiated access for acquiring knowledge.
- Learning is based on perception and experience and is becomes apparent in changes in behavior. Therefore learning surroundings are required, in which children can act and be productive and are not just recipients of knowledge presented in an abstract way.
- Self-determined actions and independent learning can only develop in a fear-free environment, therefore the relationship of coercion between child-adult in learning situations has to be eliminated (free choice of person of reference, no grades, etc.).
- Since the time span in which knowledge is becoming outdated (the economy is talking about 2 years), it is becoming more and more necessary to convey basic competences and key qualifications.

The principles of the Play Town derived from those could be headed with a quote which goes beyond pedagogics: "I do not know any other way of handling great tasks than as play". (F. Nietzsche, Ecce homo)

The pedagogic work with children has to orient itself on the characteristics of the game.

Principles for Productive Learning

Openness as a principle has several dimensions, it refers to space and time. The learning space is open for everyone, for children and adults, which makes it a public space. Nothing is happening behind closed doors, all that is happening can be observed by an audience. This sharpens the children's self-

perception and perception of others, as their learning processes are connected to social situations. A further aspect is movement: children need a public space with an emphasis on space, in which they can move about freely and alternate between workplace and other places, if this plausibly results from their tasks. They themselves decide which route to take and if they make a stop in between to observe. This removes the boundaries of one's own place of learning and enables to conquer the space as a whole – a change in perspective important for learning. The space is also open with regard to time: everyone can come and go when he wants, that means the game can be interrupted at any time. Agreements with regard to time concerning appointments made have to be kept, however, they create obligations, which require a high level of time management, for example if the daily newspaper has to be published at 5 o'clock. Handling time, while being almost always free in how to divide it, is hereby bound to a context and not to an abstract limit of time set from outside.

The Play Town is also open with regard to the age of the participants (7-15 years), the origins, sex and nationality. The participation in the Play Town project is based on the principle of optional participation and it is free of charge, so that nobody is excluded. All children can choose any profession and pursue this profession, the decision is made at the employment office. The resulting mix of the then randomly forming groups of children, requires a high level of social competence from every single one of them or will promote social competence.

The Play Town concept does not prescribe binding goals for individuals. It depicts complicated factual connections of life in a city or town in a simplified way, but tries to maintain the complexity. This is done by rules of conduct, which are developed by the children together with the adults in the respective institutions. If somebody wants to build a house, for example, he will have to buy a plot of land, this is registered with the local building commission via a contract of purchase, then you need an architect with a certificate, who has trained at the architect's studio and who then plans the house. Then the necessary wood and tools can be obtained from the builder's yard and the building of the house can start. The same way all institutions of the Play Town develop their procedures which have to be adhered to by everyone until they undergo changes.

The individual institutions of the Play Town are all overseen by an adult (pedagogues, artists, professional experts). They achieve authority simply by their expert knowledge and do not necessarily have the authority to issue orders. The children can resign their workplace in situations of conflict at any time and change to another workplace. This relieves them from the relationship of force which is predominant in usual educational situations. Thus conflicts can also be attempted and differences in opinion settled, if necessary in front of the town court. The adults are primarily responsible for the safety and wellbeing of the children. Additionally they are co-players and provide ideas and advice and provide help with technical instructions in their respective professions. The offer of cultural techniques which are available in the complex network of the Play Town are multi-faceted: reading, writing, calculating, using measurements and weights, using the computer, free speech, giving lectures, convincing, standing up for one's arguments, understanding and honouring the opinions of others are just a few.

Each child decides upon the choice of item to learn about, the extent and the intensity. In doing so, the children are in charge of their own learning and they understand that they themselves are responsible, not just today, but for their whole life. This is an important aspect for the future, as already today the learning process does not stop when finishing school and all learning cannot be covered by school alone. 70-80 percent of their knowledge will be acquired by children outside of school.

The Play Town is no closed pedagogic system, but receives its special qualification by external partners from the area of city or the big city (politicians, administrative employees or professional experts) becoming involved. By opening and extending the learning environment, it becomes a social "education laboratory", in which research is done in a communicative and interactive way and experiments can take place.

Closing Remark

Only the consequent application and implementation of the guidelines and principles will assure a stimulating world of learning and at the same time living, which will connect informal learning as a whole and formal learning within the internal structures. Thus the Play Town earns the acceptance of the

children and teenagers as a learning environment, because they recognize their every day experiences and can connect to them. The Play Town in this sense is a production model of both elementary and social competences, which offers children a meaningful and motivating frame to meet and participate in the action together.

Accepting the risk of failure for this form of cultural education means to reintroduce pedagogics to life and to provide a chance to become able to cope with it in future, which cannot be achieved without acknowledging this form of cultural education as a learning principle.

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