

The Living School experiment in Norway

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain
part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.*

*The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red
clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
And the Third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter, and
the mare's foal and the cow's calf,
And the noisy brood of the barnyard or by the mire of the pond-
side,
And the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there,
and the beautiful curious liquid,
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads, all became
part of him.*

(Walt Whitman)

In 1996, a remarkable educational experiment started in Norway, called 'Living School'. Its focus was twofold: to develop and use school grounds as learning tools in the school curriculum, and to involve neighbouring farms as educational resources. "We would like to stimulate children to wonder about the living nature. But if we want to achieve this, we as adults need to cherish this wondering as well and engage more. Otherwise using an outdoor area as a learning arena easily becomes as dead and lifeless as all other educational appliances", says Kristina Parow, one of the initiators. participated. A year after Living School was launched - in eight pilot schools throughout Norway - it got a major boost in the back, when a national educational reform was presented. In the

so-called *Læreplan 97*, the Ministry of Education officially acknowledged the importance of education in the outdoors. One of underlying ideas of the reform was that children above the age of seven should be able to spend at least one day a week outside of the school walls.

School gardens

Together with Kristina Parow, Linda Jolly is one of the pioneers of Living School. In 1979 she moved from California to Norway, to become a biology teacher at the Steiner school in Bergen. When she arrived, she was highly surprised that the school ground was a mere gravel play ground: the only things greenish one could discern were weeds popping up here and there. In her lessons Linda noticed that children lacked basic knowledge about nature. In an effort to counter this situation, she grabbed a shovel and started to lay out a garden. Her fellow teachers discouraged her initially, arguing that this would be impossible in Bergen, because of the rainy climate. But by now, in 2001, the school garden is thriving: there is a herb and vegetable garden for the youngest children and an extensive kitchen-garden for the higher grades. The vegetables, fruits and herbs are processed at the school. Herb salts and teas, jams and juices are made, and both in the spring and autumn a market is organized where fresh and processed products are sold. In 2000, the children earned about £6.000 this way. Once a month, the older pupils have the task to harvest the vegetables and to prepare a meal for the teachers and themselves. In this way they can experience the whole process, from preparing the earth and planting the seeds, to harvesting and processing the vegetables and tasting the outcome. When I meet Linda in the lustrous garden, she relates that the school never received any money to build it up. What I see around me is the result of twenty years of voluntary engagement and hard work.

Through Linda's long experience in building up this school garden, she became an important resource for the other schools participating in the Living School project. Linda stresses that Living School is by no means solely directed to Waldorf schools. On the contrary, it tries to engage as many ordinary state schools as possible. In her view it is more important than ever to educate children on the long process it takes for food 'from earth to table': "In the wake of the globalisation process we have developed a distance to the daily food we consume. Today, many children and teenagers have bad eating customs and in a growing number of cases these have even become pathologic. It has been shown that is relatively simple to make children appreciate food better if they themselves

participate in growing and preparing the food they eat."

Together with Linda I walk through the abundant herb and flower garden. Amidst of it, benches are placed in a semi-circular, amphitheatre-like style. From the roof, a spliced pipe directs rainwater to a small pool. It is the children's favourite playing spot. Linda eagerly points out: "The youngest children have lots of fun with this aqueduct here. They play here almost all the time they are free. Our main purpose is to create an environment which they enjoy. We call this the 'fairy tale garden'. This garden is meant for children between six and ten years old, who are mostly too young to work on the beds. It offers the youngest children something to taste. Every class has an area of the school-yard to look after." When we pass a cone-shaped form of willow wood, Linda illustrates how the garden is used in her teaching efforts. The children first learned about making a circle, before they went out and put up the twigs that make up the cone. There are also elements of geography in the teachings, she explains: they learn where the plants come from, how they have differentiated and adjusted. Having a garden at school enables teachers to use an interdisciplinary approach to instruction. In this way, natural sciences and environmental subjects can be taught. Composting, for example, will only make sense when experienced in the garden. The children can sow their own seeds and learn to know vegetables, flowers and small animals. The leap to home-economics is short and with a little imagination most other subjects can also be brought in relation to the work in the garden.

The Bergen Steiner School has in many ways become a prime example of what Living School is all about. Linda Jolly relates how it all began for her: "What struck me is that for most pupils, the concept of 'ecology' usually has negative connotations: the ecological crisis, environmental problems, acid rain, global warming, holes in the ozone layer. Much of these utterings of immanent catastrophe lead to pessimism, despondency. I wondered about how we can give a more positive contribution." In the vision of the initiators of the Living School experiment, school grounds should teem with life - with plants and water, stones and stalks, with workshops for crafts and arts, with secret hiding places, with tables and benches for celebrations and daily meetings. Linda Jolly: "How do we learn to hear the sound nuances in bird songs or see the colour nuances in a flower? When we can connect our impressions to direct experiences, these impressions become deeper. Children grow up today in a world where they are bombarded with sense-stimulations through the media, music, computer and film. At the same time as this bombardment intensifies, the sensual input connected to

firsthand experiences diminishes. It should be an important task at school to help children develop *all* their senses, and one way could be to actively stimulate 'learning through direct experience'."

The farm as a pedagogic resource

One would not find any schooldesk at the Straumøy farm in Sveio. And the goats at Straumøy do not have the slightest idea that they are participants in a new pedagogic approach, even though they have been just that for the last two years. In 1999 the farm of Anne and Leif Grutle became a pilot farm in the Living School project. Because next to developing school grounds, the engagement of farms as pedagogical resources is the other pillar of the project. Several farms in Norway have started to develop intensive forms of cooperation with their nearby local school.

A typical day with school children at the Straumøy farm could be like this: in the morning eggs are gathered in the chickens' house, the sheep are fed, and the pigs are given some food rests. Among the children of the Sveio school, there is no lack of enthusiasm to participate in the work. Leif and Anne have the supervision and do the heaviest tasks. "What counts is learning by doing", explains Anne Grutle. "It is important to learn in a different way than by merely sitting with a mathematics book in front of you. Instead, we try to bring everyday life into the school. And theoretical tasks at school in their turn can serve as complement to concrete experiences on the farm, like finding out how much fodder a sheep daily needs and how much that costs a farmer. To experience in practice gives better knowledge." Anne is a teacher herself, but she has taken a year off to be able to engage fully in the project.

Straumøy has traditionally been a farm which has made use of both land and water. The farmers still continue to do so today. The pupils which come to the farm once a week can take part in the work at sea, or on the land, in the garden and with the animals. And preferably they alternate between the different tasks. One special task the pupils participate in during springtime is the transport of the goats by boat. They have to be sailed to the summer pastures on an island out in the fjords. By grazing the land there, the goats will contribute to the maintenance the characteristic heather landscape. The pupils herd the goats down to the shore and carry them in a small motorboat: a handful of goats, some children and adults packed together on top of the waves establishes a closeness between humans and animals. When the schoolday at the farm is over, the pupils have not seen one single book nor school desk. Anne stresses that children are in need of physical movement as well: "We are now facing a first generation which grows up mostly *sitting still*. There are alarming

reports about the consequences: diminishing physical health, augmentation of concentration disorders and increased aggression. Many studies have indicated that there is a positive connection between physical movement and cognitive development."

Another farm participating in Living School is the mountain sheep farm of Valborg Kløve Graue. In the course of the experiment, she developed an intensive cooperation programme with two nearby schools, in which she managed to engage parents and elderly people in the area as well. The sheep farmer has a clear view of the purpose of the project: "On a farm, one can experience cyclical time, things that repeat themselves year after year, day after day. That gives a certain peace of mind, a sense of confidence in what is to come. The relation between effort and result is so strikingly clear. If one has not prepared a field the year before one sows, the result will be accordingly. Negligence has its price. That is an important lesson for the children. On the other hand, to see the results of one's own efforts gives tremendous satisfaction. When the output is dependent on the animals and nature, one has to devote much attention to maintenance and care. In order to yield healthy and good products from nature, you have to treat nature with clear insight. An ecological approach, in which one sees oneself as part of the larger whole, ought to be expressed in everything you do on the farm." With all it has to offer in using gardens and farms as pedagogic resources, Living School serves a rich example of sustainable education in practice. Linda Jolly feels that this form of education is very much needed today: "Among children, the awareness of where our daily bread comes from has been lost. A British study showed that only one quarter of the surveyed children knew that wheat is the major substance of bread. I think it is important for children to know these things. The more we are surrounded by things which we don't understand or fathom, the more difficult it is to foster a sense of belonging and security. It seems extremely important to me that especially young people, who are expected to find their own bearings in the world in the near future, have an understanding of organic relationships in the world via their very own perceptions and experiences. People who have never had an opportunity to school their perceptions in this way are ill-equipped for making a constructive contribution towards overcoming the true causes of our environmental crisis. For this is rooted in the utter inability of our modern world to relate inwardly to the living Earth."

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