

Iceland visit 1-5th December 2019

Attendees: Paula Blackburn, Lesley Van Kesteren, Denise Rusga, Molly Michelin, Imogen Blackburn, James Watson, Anita Care

Aims: to gain an understanding of the Hjalli approach to education, to observe methods of teaching and learning in both Hjalli and state kindergartens and primary schools, to make comparisons between the Icelandic approach and our own with a view to reviewing practice, to improve staff wellbeing

What is the Hjalli model?

The Hjalli model promotes a system where children work in small single gender (not sex) groups for the majority of the school day in order to liberate them from traditional gender roles and stereotypical behaviours. It aims to ensure that all children get even attention and equal opportunities through compensation work. Activities focus on empowering children to be themselves regardless of gender and to gain a positive, tolerant and compassionate disposition towards one another. You can read more at www.hjallimodel.com

The trip:

The trip was fully funded by the European Commission as part of a KA101 staff mobility for continuing professional development. We travelled Sunday and returned Thursday and although we spent 3 days in school, we did have chance to explore a little in and around Reykjavik and have a dip in a hot spring lagoon followed by a roll in the snow!!!

Hjalli Kindergarten and Hjalli Primary School (both in central Reykjavik) – 2 days

Birna, the communications officer gave us some facts about the school and introduced us to the staff and children. They are a federation of 17 schools, 14 kindergarten and 4 primary and have just opened a nursery in Scotland. Their typical day starts with a morning meeting where they greet each other with handshakes or hugs. They then have choosing time to allow them to nurture their creativity, followed by group time where they practice the gender curriculum, this is repeated in the afternoon. The gender curriculum time is time where they work on eradicating gender stereotypes, compensating for what society is not giving them the freedom to do. They find boys naturally need more focus on social skills and qualities such as friendship, intimacy and cooperation, emotion coaching whereas the girls need more input on physical strength, leadership, independence and being OK not to be perfect! They have activities such as yoga, climbing in small groups of 6-8 children with one adult. The adult is not always a teacher but a member of the community with something to offer. Eg., one group leader was the European Chess Champion who lived in the area and he taught small group chess for half an hour a day.

The uniform is a red or blue t-shirt with the school logo on it. They can wear anything on the bottom half but preferably joggers. You could not tell which gender the children were. If a boy identified as a girl, he/she could choose which group to work with. They use lots of open-ended materials such as wooden blocks, figures with no faces etc to promote imagination and enhance creativity. Behaviour was outstanding. Children used adult materials and sat on adult chairs.

What we noticed: similarities/differences in Hjalli method:

Girls had more confidence in the playground and were doing more physically challenging activities and playing in the mud. Boys typically dominate the playground and girls tend to form in groups around the outside but there was none of this. There is a huge amount of trust and risk-taking, children are allowed to learn their own boundaries and parents trust teachers to allow them to manage their own bodies by taking risks. Eg one child had lined up a piece of wood onto the side of the shed and was walking up it, the teacher knew he would slip but allowed him to. He did not hurt himself but changed the position of the plank and put it through the window. One activity which promoted this in the school was allowing a group of girls to hang from a beam until they felt confident in letting go; physical strength and resilience.

There is a no blame culture for injury. Other children are encouraged to hug a child if they are hurt rather than the teacher. Staff train in yoga, meditation, massage etc.



Reflection of staff, food for thought:

Calming atmospheres, choosing activity for 40 mins and sticking with it without distractions so they get depth. Non-teaching staff leading activities relating to their strengths. All children having nurture time, not necessarily single gender but eradicating unwanted behaviours by giving them the attention before they start craving for it. Carpets spots and meeting times. Boy/girl sections outdoors, are they needed? Simplistic useful pointers eg/ tape where blocks need to be tidied away into, dressing up gender neutral. Hanging bar for building confidence. No ICT, bare walls, life size tables, no dumbing it down to child level.

Action planning: To discuss at staff meeting/parent meetings

Carpet time circles, yoga hands, carpet spots, playground sections, parent meeting re: gender curriculum, staff meeting re: gender curriculum, transition strengthening with YR-Y6 buddies, Soft play

cubes (taking away strength element of building), parent charter re: trust and risk taking, log pits, holding bar (safety, grip, resilience, confidence and courage), foot spa, teachers to use phones for QR codes etc., ICT – project onto ceiling, maps on ceiling, omit stereotypes of boy girl, use names such as swift/swallow for groups, leader position when lining up prevents space invasion, chess club, parent assemblies re: future employment, Nurture time for half an hour a day, sharing breakfast in the piazza, gender neutral dressing up/role play eg, scarves, hats.

Graenaborg Kindergarten

State run but partially funded by parents (they pay a % of their wage totalling approx. £200 a month). 72 children aged 2-6. Ratio 3 and under 1:4, over 3 1:9. The curriculum for all pre and primary schools is the same:

Literacy, sustainability, creativity, health and welfare, equality, democracy and human rights. Each year group focuses on a the same but differentiated. Pre school has one booklet covering all aspects which is approved by staff, parents and the Office for Education. Children have free access to materials and can choose what to do, focusing on “9 ways of learning” by Howard Gardner. Teachers from preschool and primary meet regularly in last year so there’s good transition. By the time they start primary school at 6 years old, most children have learnt how to read naturally through being read to, repetition and their interest in learning to read for information and most can write their name. They are not formally taught to read and write before primary school. Day starts with a leisurely breakfast all together; staff and children. All children eat from what they are given unless they have an allergy, there’s always a veggie option. There are no formal assessments throughout preschool, teachers observe so they can pass information on to primary school. All teachers must have a Masters’ degree to become a teacher.

Reflections:

No pressure to meet targets for staff or children so much more stress free, children didn’t wear shoes so it seemed quieter and calmer and cleaner. Staff ratios much higher. Seemed to be lots of clutter so children were confused where to find resources. Indoor treehouse was amazing; used for risk taking and developing physical strength. Playground had many spaces rather than a vast open space to play ball games, instead there were bumps, tunnels, log pits etc. Staff had a wellbeing room with a massage chair and black-out curtains. Designated PPA areas and staff room. No freeflow to outdoors for children. Not a lot on walls, lots of maps everywhere! Great storage of coats/boots with shelves above cupboards. ^ year olds had lots of prepping for primary with prolonged focused task where they were sitting at tables in adult sized chairs. No uniform; readiness for all activities. Adults dressed for comfort, warmth and activities rather than formal workwear.

Action planning: to discuss at staff/parent meetings

Staff wellbeing massage chair or designated area, more maps/globes promoting where we are in the world, development of the playground as a more interesting space, storage design, dress code; staff and children. Indoor treehouse.

For more photos, take a look in our gallery on our school websites...

www.boskenwyn.cornwall.sch.uk

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