

Grundschule Harmonie

The Rediscovery of Freedom of Learning

How independent learners learn to develop themselves, their own learning and their learning environment.

The “Europaschule Harmonie” is located in the western part of the community of Eitorf, which has a population of 20 000 and is in southeastern Rhineland. Our school was planned to have two classes per school year and is now home to eight classes, which are all mixed from year one to four.

The school was built in 1995, in the district of “Harmonie“, which is an old mining settlement. The building is similar in style to a bungalow with a great deal of light, stonework, wood and glass, with an assembly hall including an adjacent theatre and music room. The architect modelled his work upon Hugo Kückelhaus’ image of school buildings suitable for humanistic learning (“menschengemäße Schulgebäude”¹).

Our parents readily accept up to 40 km journeys to allow their children to educate and develop themselves within the framework of our holistic pedagogical concept. We are a school which bases learning on each individual child and allows learning, movement, thinking, health, laughter, nutrition, relaxation, cooperation, democracy and achievement to belong together.

The children of our school learn within the entire building and in the summer on the school grounds as well. When they have decided on what and with whom they will work, they look for their suitable work places. This can be in the classroom, in the hall, on the school grounds, in the staff room, in the assembly hall or in one of the other rooms. They do not have to sit “on the school bench” or “at their seat”.

They can always move within their classroom, the building or the school grounds. They decide whether they will write lying down, sitting, standing or while walking. Our children use the entire school grounds to climb in trees, over beams and bridges, to crawl through bushes and shrubs, to play catch and to hide anytime (!) of the day. They build tree houses in the “Forbidden Forest”, an old fruit orchard run to seed within the school grounds. They read in the crawling-

¹ Hugo Kückelhaus, *Unmenschliche Architektur. Von der Tierfabrik zur Lernanstalt*. Gaia, Cologne 1973

tunnel, run up and down little hills and lie in the grass doing arithmetic.

We teachers work closely together. Every day begins with a morning conference, where all points of the day and the pedagogical life of the school are discussed, including debates over educational theory or the policy of education. Every Monday, there is a teacher conference solely for school mission and vision work, for personal research and reflection work and for the further development of our own concept as a school of education, serving ourselves as well as our student teachers and university students. Once a month these take place as cooperative case counsellings or pedagogical supervision session organized by us within our group of colleagues, which we call “children conference” („Kinderkonferenz“²).

The children of our school learn to organize and determine their own learning. Every day, in cooperation with their classmates they must decide on their own what, how, with whom and within what time frame they will work and learn³. This is all done without teacher made annual, weekly, or daily plans, without work sheets, text book lessons or teacher specifications. They learn to develop an intrinsic concept of achievement which allows them to become successful confident learners.

Between 60 and 80% of our children leave our school with a recommendation for the “Gesamtschule” or the “Gymnasium”, few children have to be sent to the “Hauptschule”. Various long term studies⁴ also show the continued success of “our children“ in the school years following. Teachers and parents of our school all agree that an extension of elementary school as a school for all would be better, even better would be from Kindergarten to year 12.

We are by no means privileged by our social composition. We have children of educationally aware middle class parents, children from Sinti families, or from families where more than one language is spoken at home and where money can be dam tight. Since 1995 our experience has shown that all children, independent of social status or ability can learn openly, democratically and independently.

² Walter Hövel, Unsere Kinderkonferenz, www.grundschule-harmonie.de in „Artikel“

³ Further basis ideas of our pedagogy can be found on our homepage and in books and essays of Falko Peschel, Walter Hövel, Uschi Resch, Ulli Schulte and others

⁴ cf. Anne Witt, Die Bedeutung des offenen Unterrichts für die Bildungschancen, www.grundschule-harmonie.de

We are a school, which orientates itself upon the index of inclusion, where the living together of all individuals exists. We assume that every individual is unique and must follow his/her own path in the formation of his/her own learner identity. The admission of people with physical or mental problems into regular schools will take place in upcoming years. Society will quickly have to change its way of thinking in accordance with the example set by other European countries. Alarming are the attempts of the German education system to take children with learning or behavioral problems out of the regular schools. It is another hostile selection into various school forms, like the one that takes place presently following year 4 or 6. We make it our duty to give every person the right to live within a community, which includes learning in a regular school!

Every morning, within the class the children independently plan their school day, upcoming weeks and months. The organization of a democratic self determined school life continues in hall assemblies, school assemblies and children's council. Children's council meets every week and has the same deciding power as the teacher's conferences do.

We take it for granted that consistent individual support must be imbedded within a democratic functioning school body which is very able to cooperate and communicate.

As a result of the trust placed in the children they opt for learning and social behavior which is against aggression, destruction and boredom. They have not been given or sold freedom or rights. They have acquired them on their own and adopted them as their own as well.

Our children learn to learn on their own, what they think and what they can do, what they understand and what they can pass on, what they can change about themselves and in their environment. We have established school as a place where young people, who have been entrusted to us, can feel the joy of taking over responsibility for their own learning. As adults our responsibility is to set an example for that which we can and want to be answerable to. Just as one cannot force a person to hunger,⁵ we cannot force one to think, be healthy, move or learn. It is the schools responsibility to offer health, knowledge, movement, thought, nutrition and learning in a manner that people can internalize and use. School must stop feeding children like pets or zoo animals, but must offer them access to experience how to obtain what is necessary for life, especially learning.

⁵ Manfred Spitzer

We don't impart knowledge through lectures, but pass on to the children how they can learn what they need for themselves and their future. In order for this to take place a relationship is required between children, adults and school and a relationship with oneself, including mind, thought and body which are respectful, accepting, authentic and trusting. In our learning environment to feel at ease, to feel and understand oneself and others has its roots in children being able to find their own ways of learning and understanding.

There are hundreds of little experiences along our path which we offer or they offer themselves. Conversations during assembly take away fears of the dentist, daily class assembly ("Klassenrat") prevent mobbing and segregation, children go together to carry toads across the street, salamanders are saved from experiments gone wrong, apples are picked at the farmer's, which are then cleaned and shared with all, a mother who can tell stories to dream about is invited by the class, celebrations are organized by the children that include good food and personal musical contributions. They consciously experience their daily life, which we like to call the "creation of normality".

It is the daily class assembly, where it is not considered stolen time from curriculum, where children's problems in regards to behavior, emotions, working together, learning, playing, fighting and relaxation time are talked about.

Our school functions on the basis that each child decides daily, to what extent he/she will work alone or take part in activities offered.

Learning and working on one's own means, that the children say what they would like to work on, and with whom, within the morning class assembly. Our children learn to take control of their own learning, to organize, evaluate and assess themselves due to the following reasons: We are not restricted by hourly lessons and we do not use teacher created weekly plans, worksheets or school books which are designed as instruments of non-individual learning. We don't follow the idea of common German teachers' education, which asks the children to complete work assignments instead of thinking and learning on their own.

This complete individualization within the cooperative learning of the class and the entire school is the standing leg of our learning. The various things offered throughout the entire school can be described as the free leg.⁶

⁶ To experience our daily school life you can visit us (contact us: grundschule-harmonie@web.de) or read about it in the „Chronik“ on our homepage.

This begins in the classes with the small daily activities offered by teachers, assistants and other adults to individuals or groups of children. Consultation, evaluation, estimation, mathematics, writing or something else for the individual needs of the children is offered at this time. The children decide whether they want to accept the offer as with all other activities offered at the school.

These activities intertwine themselves with projects and teaching units of the teacher trainees, our students, interneers, parents and others, as well as offers from teachers and the children themselves.

Our teacher trainees offer learning sessions, which have set topics and end in the famous demonstration lessons for the faculty of teaching. Once again the children decide whether they would like to take part. The planning and support of these teacher trainee sessions normally takes place together with teacher trainees and teachers within the framework of our definition of a "training school for all".

Our assistants, who normally stay with us for up to a year, are capable unemployed people who work as educational helpers modeled according to the „Teaching Assistant“ in England. Among these helpers there are people who can teach children to play instruments, people who can speak Turkish or Romanes, some who speak only English with the children or others who help individual children with their learning.

Interns work in a similar manner in that they offer something for a week such as "Wiener Waltz and Disco Fox", "Playing Handball" or „Harry-Potter-Theater“.

Students offer our children one day courses that take place within the framework of a seminar in cooperation with the University of Siegen and other universities. Binoculars are built, many science experiments are done or other highlights of learning are brought to reality.

Researchers, PhD students or thesis writers visit our school and interview the children, fill out questionnaires or have questions answered in other manners. This is an important part of the learning of self evaluation and self assessment. Similar things take place in weekly visits.

Parents offer printing, cooking, Yoga, relaxation opportunities as well as groups for reading, knitting or sewing carnival costumes.

Students from the program „Development and Inclusion“ („Entwicklung und Inklusion“) of the University of Siegen have

„Sponsorships“ („Patenschaften“) with children and offer various activities on the two days of the week that they are in the school.

We were able to set up Atelier similar areas. The children decide if they would like to go to the printing room, music room, theatre room, math room (which is part of staff room) or the art room. There are parents in the printing room everyday to accompany the work there. The math room is taken care of by the teacher trainees and the music and theatre rooms only have occasional visits from adults. In the art room there are two artists on a daily basis from 9:00 to 15:00. This is a full day offer financed in cooperation with ARGE (job centre). This is not the typical way of executing lessons, but children address artists directly to pick up the skills that they need. Artists offer courses on a regular basis for small groups of interested children.

There are also events offered by out of school organizations such as the “Mobile Forest School”, “Skills for Life”, “Obstacle Course”, Traffic Theatre, bus training, “hands on science” and much more. These organisations come to us or we visit them.

There are fixed activities in our school, offered on a weekly basis. These include children’s parliament, school assembly, question of the week, choir, the Adam-Riese-Circle, weekly reading and Wednesday two hour English seminar.

The school is not divided into two morning blocks of independent learning and learning offers but every day has a different rhythm. The children decide on their “dosis” of independent learning time or their use of offers. Analysis showed that we have everything from children who visit almost no offers, because they organize their learning completely on their own, right up to children who try not to leave out any offers. Otherwise it is a picture of a standard distribution curve.

It is important for us to balance out the implementation of our understanding of learning. We must be able to give children enough time for self determined learning as the core of the development of their individual learner personality and at the same time offer a large variety of activities which meet all children’s tastes and satisfy their needs for learning.

In order to understand how we work on this „balancing“ another component of our work called „Children University“ must be described.

We assume that we give the responsibility for learning back to the children at our school, in the sense of brain, social and psychological research and the democratic tradition of education. We stopped the

learning and achievement spoon feeding that takes place through school books, class tests and frontal teaching. Since our foundation we have been learning how children and adults learn on their own. Our work began with the individual and cooperating planning of learning in the Klassenrat, which today continues to be the most important motor of learning.

Over the years we have learned more and more to sense the extent of our responsibility as adults, in regards to the children. It is our job to offer children our knowledge in a self critical, reflective and democratic manner without spoon feeding, black mail (through marks), secret curriculum, or subtle persuasion.

We learned to create everyday learning, in which the children choose to take part in offers of learning from adults because they are high in quality, authentic and relevant.

This is how the idea of the “children university” developed. At some point and time we realized that our school has become a so called refuge for gifted children⁷, who are excluded from the regular school system.

We learned to teach them cooperation by offering learning opportunities like “working in a team” in training seminars. So the idea developed, to offer these techniques of learning to all children, which they could use by themselves during their daily self determined learning linked to intellectual and social problems.

For a number of years there has been an effort (with varying success) to provide school leaders with „Leadership Training“ in Europe. Basic methods and attitudes in regards to the improvement of schools‘ functions are to be passed on in this leadership training. So we offered such methods and attitudes to our children in training courses over a period of several days. Two children from each class attended a course, so that the experiences of over ten leadership training courses would meet in every class. There was “Team Training”, “Media courses from Power Point to Film Cutting“, class logistics“, „Forum-Theatre for the Change of Structures“, “Cooperation and Communication Training” and much more.

The results were astounding. In class reflection circles afterwards the children came to the main conclusion that they were responsible for their own learning. Our aim, the transfer of methods and skills, was of secondary importance!

⁷ Cf. „Alle Kinder sind begabt“ in Walter Hövel, „Begabtenförderung“, www.grundschule-harmonie.de/Artikel

We sensed that this was expandable and were annoyed that this annual school event, named „Children’s University“, offered by banks and administrations exists. We were allowed to send one (!) highly (!) gifted child from our school to learn Japanese, chemistry or „real“ mathematics for one week.

As a school which orientates itself around the „Index for Inclusion“, we assume that every child is gifted and that people should be provided with assistance even when there is not a single hint that it is needed. So we decided to set up a children’s university in terms of the original meaning of university as a “Community of Learners and Teachers”⁸.

We followed through with our thoughts and organizing of „Leadership Training” as a learning of competence skills. As a rule, all teachers in our school offer a two or three day seminar on a topic such as „Science Experiments“ or „Narration Techniques“⁹.

Our completely age mixed English learning takes place in seminars offered on a semiannual basis, which each child decides to participate in on his/her own ¹⁰.

Children are read to on a weekly basis for 50 to 70 minutes ¹¹. Topics introduced here include such things as: an outline of the “Grammar and Semantics Rules“, „Writing of Free Texts“, „Voting and Democratic Models“, „Historical Time Lines“ or the „History and Structure of the Bible“ by a theological expert. 30 to 70 children go to these offers every week.

20 or at peak times 30 adults are present on a daily basis for the 180 children at our school. We have worked hard for this and are happy that we are able to offer so much support for the children. This surplus of adults carries the risk that children will take on the offer of care and consultation so that they do not have to make decisions or take on responsibility. They can attach themselves to adults so that people learn „with them“.

We must urge the children again and again (also ourselves) to plan and identify their own ways of learning.

There are several children who do not want to enter cases of conflict on their own initiative or through the “Klassenrat”. They would rather

⁸ „universitas magistrorum et scholarium“

⁹ Cf. www.grundschule-harmonie.de/Unterricht/Kinderunis

¹⁰ As well: *Homepage in Unterricht/Englisch/Seminare* and in *Über uns/Förder- und Schulprogramm/Englisch*

¹¹ To be found in weekly homepage „Chronik“

ask the closest adult who is then to solve the conflict. (Which every adult is very good at!).

Therefore the priority of self regulation of a child's own independent way of life and learning, face to face with adult expectations concerning success never loses its importance.

As a result a boy, who came to us from another school, after just a few days said: „At this school stress disappears and then there is only the joyful desire to learn!“