

Pikler principles, play and a kindergarten near Munich

Karsten Czimmek

Reflections by Jennifer Kowalewski

· To begin, the main question of the keynote speech was: ***What can we do to provide an environment in which every individual child develops their unique interests while preserving the joy of doing?***

· This then led to the question: ***What can the child do on its own and where does it need support?*** In the kindergarten Karsten explained how they offer support, but with allowing the children to be as active as possible when giving support. So the support is as little as necessary in order for this kind of environment of active learning to flower. Karsten mentioned how the facilitators in the space talk as precisely as possible in explaining what to do, rather than just taking the materials and doing it for them. It is also important for the facilitators to stop their own urge to want to step in and just do for the student.

· The children are allowed to build, construct and create/experiment with many different materials. Through stepping back, the children show them how they learn, how they solve problems and make solutions. The goal in the kindergarten is not like usual Montessori schools: it is neither to aim for autonomy nor helping the child fully. Rather their goal for the environment the children inhabit is: ***to play and experiment as long as they want. We allow for the process to unfold, without any aim or expectation, while carefully and attentively looking where the child stands in the moment.***

· **Tools and Materials:** All the tools in the space are real, not child toys mimicking these tools. These 4-6 year olds work with hot glue guns, soldering and welding tools, real saws of all different sizes, sewing machines, various wooden pieces of all sizes that can be used to construct parkour trails, craft and woodshed materials that can be used to craft wooden knives, spoons and additional sculptural pieces. What tools and materials they have indoors, they have outdoors on a larger scale. ***Note:** Health and safety is considered, but first and foremost, trust and oversight is given to the children and out of that trust allows for this kindergarten to provide an incredible array of materials. Just seeing the climbing wall in their straw barn, their parkour constructions and the height which children are balancing on wooden rods was incredible. ***Most importantly, these wide array of different tools and materials provide an invitation to move.***

· **Woodshed:** Children learn to identify appropriate tools for their jobs. Facilitators pass them out when the children want them and keep a close eye on these tools and how they are being used. There is an activity once a year to sharpen all the tools and the children are part of this. Also, there is a masonry workplace next to the woodshed. These spaces along with the other outdoor spaces provide natural jobs for the children throughout the entire year.

· **Breakfast and Snack Time:** All throughout the morning the children have access to a kitchen with all supplies and materials they need. The students can prepare their own breakfast when they feel ready to eat because the majority of them do not want to eat shortly after they wake up. This is a really important social element of the day and they relish in making their own breakfast, sitting with small groups, or even enjoying some solo/quiet time eating on their own. There is no pressure or rush to eat their breakfast in a certain time or clean up quickly. And having breakfast going throughout the whole morning (*up to 11:30*) allows for a generally calmer atmosphere and a lighter

traffic flow in the kitchen when it comes to waiting for the use of a toaster, tools to cut and shred and a tap to wash their plates. The old-fashioned apple peeler and corer seems to be the highlight of the kitchen and children love to put time into carefully preparing and laying out their breakfast.

- **Caregiving:** An important aspect of their environment, which does not actually need adults to do it. This includes all kinds of grooming from hair care, nail care, cleaning their feet and other parts of their body.

- **The Outdoor Space:** The children enjoy having breakfast outside and experimenting/making their own infusions with herbs/aromatic plants from the garden. There is a fireside, sand landscape where they can work with an abundance of materials: sand, water, wood pieces, buckets, wheelbarrows, etc. Outdoor activities always brings the question to groups of children: ***What can we do together? How can we unite our strengths and skills?***

The outdoor space is critical for creating movement: Construction of houses, designing of climbing parkour units of various pieces of materials they can use, children experimenting with what they can do and how far they can go with it whether physically or in how they construct something, the straw barn where children can climb and scatter up the wall and continue along monkey bars on the ceiling (quite a high ceiling not to mention!). This climbing wall was designed and created in the time when the children were present, so most of it came from their necessity. Many of the outdoor activities promote “self-imposed tasks,” challenges from each other to see how much they can do in a certain time frame. The facilitators observe them in their outside play and only give the children suggestions when it is absolutely necessary such as describing the way down from a high element they have climbed and don’t know where to proceed next. All play outside, as inside, is closely linked to their reality.

- **Conflict:** There is very little conflict at the kindergarten. Karsten mentioned how the goal/job of the adults is first and foremost safety and the second is to discover what moves the child and help them express their feelings, but to not solve their conflicts. There are no teacher resolutions, the most important aspect is that the moment can flow on with little interference on behalf of the adult. A recent study that Karsten mentioned “*Conflicts in Educational Settings*,” found that the moment the adult interferes, the conflict escalates.

- **Overall Importance in Kindergarten:** The kindergarten is a place where they break down life where it is more “seeable” for the children. Two questions that are important to introduce in the daily living of these children for them to discover and explore in this learning space: ***What can I do or make for myself that I need? and What can I not do or change?***

- **How we talk to children:** Karsten mentioned a study in Germany a friend of his passed on to him some years ago. The study showed that 85% of educators reactions were negative and included habitual responses of “no” and “you can’t do that.” Karsten took this information and began to reflect deeply on his own responses and reactions and began to see what would happen if he began to put everything in a positive way or outlook. Presently he now observes the way in which he can take the time to step back, not respond immediately, reflect and then go back in to respond.

He also established a kind of culture of thinking out loud with the child. As a result of this, the children then start to become aware of the adults thinking and a sense of where the adults are coming from. In this process of thinking out loud with the children, there are no yes’s or no’s. As a result, this kind of interaction and dialogue between the children and the facilitators, removes the metaphorical “sheriff’s badge” that some children psychologically perceive on the chest of the educator and even parent. Karsten recommends avoiding negative phrases that are commands such as “*Please tidy up!*” but instead try to turn the phrase around into an observation/fact such as “*Your materials are still laying around on the table, do you still need them?*” This is not so confrontational.

· **Final Reflections:**

-To take a step back from playing with children and observe. The most important work is to know your students precisely. The observation and interaction then flows.

-Among educators, it is important to talk about the young people you are working with and what is happening daily in your interactions and what is it that you are observing or have questions about and to reflect on this with the people you work with.

-You don't necessarily need many adults for groups of students, it is more about the changing of the adults attitude towards young people.

-Karsten's most present reflections on education is that educators need to develop more clarity, precision, and sharpness because nowadays there are many more distractions linked to the many changes in our society such as technology.

-He also concluded with a reflection of what the children in his kindergarten receive in this overall environment and learning experience at the kindergarten: "***They know they are capable and no one can take this away from them. Especially having just experienced it once in their life.***"

Finally I would like to share some text from one of Karsten's slides in his presentation where in three points he describes what is at the heart of their work in the kindergarten.

At the heart of our work:

· ...is each human being, with their inherent need to express themselves and bring into reality the essence of their own being.

· We consider education to be essentially a question of self-building (the German word for Building means education as constituting in the sense of forming and image-making). This requires constantly and radically re-thinking things from the standpoint the child, in order to foster their personal development.

· At the same time, we strive to provide the children with orientation, from a humanistic point of view, to help them learn to navigate between their own interests and those of others in the situations that arise in everyday life together.

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