The unbearable difficulty of growing up – education through the arts as a bridge in learning to know oneself

by Marja-Leena Bilund

I sit here on a beautiful autumn evening, writing this article on upbringing, only few days after the shooting at a school in Kauhajoki. This desperate action tells us how totally lost young people can be in their lives – how utterly devoid of hope. There has been all manner of speculation as to the reasons for this tragic event, but foremost in the minds of many writers seems to have been bullying experienced by this young man while at school.

In my experience, children need guidance in growing up, for they seldom know themselves sufficiently well. They usually know what their failings are, but they can rarely perceive their own strengths. Education through the arts has proved to be a good tool for this purpose. Children and young people need to know that there is hope, that they will learn to cope on their own and that they can have dreams. They need to have a sound sense of self-esteem, and when they finally close the school door behind them it must be crystal clear to them that they will survive and be able to cope in their lives. Education through the arts is more than a matter of learning techniques; it is a channel by which children and young people can learn about themselves.

'Unbreakable'

What are the values respected by this new 'media' generation? It is clear that they have imbibed their values through the Web and TV. They are used to dropping the weakest link, or voting unwanted persons out of the group. Money and a life of luxury seem to be the uppermost aims – for me and right now. They were born under good economic auspices, when mobile phones, leisure-time interests and design clothes were already commonplace. The 'Top Model' culture of the USA and the life of Hollywood are more familiar to today's children than what is happening in their own environment. Are these statements too much of a generalization? Teenagers nowadays know more than we used to know, for many of the secrets of adulthood have already been revealed to them through the media. The world of adults is not shrouded in mystery for them, but how are they to confront it? They are well aware of their position and their rights, but at the same time they are more lost than any generation before them, with record incidences of depression, anxiety, dietary problems, social problems and restlessness. Lying behind these problems is a loss of true childhood, or, if you like, the disappearance of parenthood (Bardy 2002). Children are no longer content to follow their parents and submit to their will. As Merja Korhonen (2008) puts it, our society has moved from a culture of obedience to one of discussion and negotiation (see also Korhonen 1999, 2002, 2006). Parents and teachers are faced with a new, challenging situation in which what is needed, in Korhonen's opinion, is a new set of interaction skills centred upon a pact between the generations, a concept of how adults and children should behave towards each other. Parents need to take responsibility for their children, both physically and psychologically, and show that they are listening to them, care about them and are ready to support them, while at the same time setting the limits within which they can act and demonstrating the importance of a responsible sense of freedom through the example of their own actions. As Korhonen points out, adulthood and parenthood should not merely be a form of childhood with relaxed constraints. I believe that education through the arts can have

a place in this process and that it can help children and young people to learn to discover their own place as individuals and members of society.

For life, not for school

Technological knowhow and interaction skills have become the most important assets for our young people in the modern competitive world and the principle measures of their competence, but it is essential that the teaching aimed at imparting these skills and forms of knowhow should also lay emphasis on the importance of the young people's inner, psychological resources for enhancing their self-confidence and control over their own lives (Rubin, A. 2002). These young people are the adults of tomorrow, and it is their parents, teachers and friends at the present time who will determine what impression they have of themselves as possessors of knowhow and masters of their lives. The way in which we educators confront the children and young people in the learning environments of our schools is not a matter of indifference as far as this process of growing up is concerned, for their experiences of life and of learning will, consciously or unconsciously, affect the decisions they make in the future.

According to Elise Boulding (1995) an individual looking into the future can perceive his or her own place in the world as being either full of possibilities or hopeless, and anyone who sees the future in the latter way could end up by committing a desperate act. Martino (1993) similarly suggests that a person who sees the situation as hopeless can start looking for an explanation for this in past events or else can decide that it is not worth even trying, as we cannot know what is in store in the future, nor can we influence it. This can lead eventually to indifference or apathy.

Hautamäki (2008) prefers to speak of retaining a perspective of hope, as a source of strength that can prevent the rise of a fear of failure and preserve one's confidence that those who are different in spirit will be accepted. It is important for children and young people to believe in their own ability to manage in their lives, but what help and advice can we offer them? How can we strengthen their understanding that the future is in the last resort dependent on us human beings and the decisions that we make? One vital aspect in this process of growing up is to show them by our example that things do not just happen to people but that we all have a chance to influence our own lives by the choices that we make. Each of us can be the hero of his or her own life.

The Postmix Model

I wish to describe briefly in this paper a model that I have developed for a teaching method aimed at supporting children and young people in learning to know themselves, finding their own strengths and increasing their control over their lives. The method sets out from my own philosophy of education, which I refer to as the Postmix Model. A central role in this model is assigned to learning through the arts, as this can be an important tool for helping children and young people to discover their own strengths and to come to know themselves better. They need to be helped to believe in their right to make their own choices, as this will eventually be the key to growing up as people and developing control over their lives.

My own philosophy of education

I have been pondering over the philosophy of education ever since I qualified as a teacher, and have gradually developed my own version over the years on the basis of further study, personal deliberations and many discussions with the fellow teacher that I work with most closely. It cannot be said to be a permanent philosophy, of course, as I am still refining it constantly as I work with the children, pursue my studies and follow public discussions on the subject. A teacher never stops learning. As noted by Saloviita (2007) and Prashnig (2008), a teacher's personal qualities influence the way in which he or she builds up a relation with the pupils and conceptualizes the process of learning. My own experiences of school, particularly junior school, were somewhat humiliating, and when I had qualified as a teacher I set out to search for alternative ways of approaching learning, because I soon noticed that the "keep in a straight line and all turn to the same page" arrangement simply did not work in practice. Learning must be more than social control or the maintaining of an illusion.

Education through the arts

In their discussion of what constitutes art education, Arthur Efland, Kerry Freedman and Patricia Stuhr (1998) conclude that its most salient features are small narratives, the connection between knowledge and power, deconstruction and double coding. One other thing that we try to emphasize in the classroom is everyone's right to be heard.

The various projects that I have carried out with my colleague over the last ten years have given expression to small narratives in a variety of ways, with themes that have included narratives from children in different countries about their homes, games, toys, fears, family customs, humour, appreciation of beauty, etc. We have also had children from various countries thinking about the place and purpose of children in the world, and also the importance of health and art in the lives of different people. Children have used their work to tell their own stories.

The Postmodern notion of art presupposes that the recipients (viewers, listeners etc.) will assign their own significance to each work, so that the artist's original intention does not carry the same weight as in the Modernist approach, for instance. We likewise encourage children to interpret art in their own way, to tell us about their ideas and to talk about photographs, books, videos and games. They are usually very enthusiastic when they can do things in a new way.

Double coding is taken by Jencks (1986) to refer to the combining of modern techniques with traditional ones. I have been able to combine old techniques and equipment with the present time both methodologically and in terms of implementation, without rejecting any earlier information or experience. In this way we have been able to develop new ways of approaching the Finnish cultural heritage that are more interesting for the children.

Main principles of teaching

My own concept of learning has emerged on the basis of the constructivist model, Kolb's model and the humanistic concepts of the human being and child that regard the child as a person, a holistic entity responsible for directing his or her own actions under the influence of personality, the emotions and the environment. Thus pupils can be approached as individuals with a will of their

own and able to direct themselves on the strength of their own internal motivation, persons who are conscious of their own decisions and responsible for them. They wish to be independent and to control their own learning (Sahlberg & Leppilampi 1994).

In the field of the arts, learning is an active process of combining, experimenting with and selecting information obtained from the senses, experience, the imagination and processes of conceptualization, the outcome of which is to be seen in a personal artistic and aesthetic interpretation and an expression of the overall information communicated by the work of art, whether through music, pictures, dance, a poem a film or whatever (Sava 1993). Thus one cannot go into a learning situation with the idea that the teacher will "pour knowledge" into the pupils and they will all learn the same things in the same way (Rauste-von Wright & von Wright 1994). It is essential for successful learning that the learning environment created by the teacher should inspire the appropriate questions, to which the pupils should seek answers through their own experimentation, comprehension and reasoning under guidance from the teacher (Rauste-von Wright 1997). It is a question, then, of arrangements and an environment that will enable the pupils to engage in active personal study. As far as the teacher is concerned, the crucial key to this pupil-centred approach lies in the art of asking the right questions. New situations should be accepted as opportunities and not as problems.

Art can in a profound intellectual sense be therapeutic, although not in the everyday, psychological sense of the word but by enabling the recipients, through artistic empathy and expression, to give artistic form to human suffering or anxiety, for instance, in order to transform it into inner human strength, increased comprehension and wisdom with regard to the multiplicity of human reality. We have had a number of children in our classes whose conscience and self-knowledge have been strengthened through the acts of writing, painting or model-making, in that the respect shown for them by the other children on account of their work has altered their concepts of their own selves.

Jan-Erik Ruth (1987) notes that one of the most important starting points in teaching is the adult's desire to grow along with the children, penetrate the world of their thoughts and allow them to determine the direction of pupil-teacher interaction. The key to all this, of course, is the willingness and ability of the teacher to connect the matters being taught to the multifarious situations of everyday life. Teachers can with their own personality provide one model for how the pupils can approach their environment. If a teacher can show activity and enthusiasm to the extent that the pupils receive an intellectual stimulus from this and can have the empathic ability to explore the world of the children's thoughts, the children will be able to acquire an active, cognitive attitude.

Certain branches of art can also help children to appreciate ethical opinions and to evaluate what is right or wrong, good or bad. Thus introducing children to art can at the same time be a form of ethical education which should help them to understand other people in their hearts (Ruoppila 1987).

Learning by doing

After much experimentation I ended up by dividing the annual goals for the various subjects in the curriculum into weekly goals. I first determined what things had to be gone through with the children in the school year and then we divided these up into

weekly tasks in each subject. This helped each pupil to understand that certain things had to be dealt with in the course of the year in order to progress to the next grade. They would write these things down in their exercise books and each Monday we would go through the things to be learned in the coming week. I would then arrange teaching in short sessions with either the whole class, a small group at a time or individual pupils, as required. We would discuss how the work was to be planned so that it would be spread evenly throughout the week, and gradually the children would learn to do this and to develop a rhythm for working. I would give them still more freedom within the time available for each subject, so that they could plan additional work of their own once the minimum goals had been achieved, and this extra work could be connected with ongoing projects or suggestions raised by the children themselves. The curriculum was our principal handbook, but the model also allowed us to pay attention to the children's individual needs and interests.

Taking the individual into account

For the first time I noticed that we had plenty of time to do our work. There was no great hurry, provided that we started out from the curriculum and not from the textbook. The children were able to work at their own pace, as suited them best. We had a number of children in the class who were certified as having special difficulties (Asperger's syndrome, dysphasia, spatial perceptual defects or emotional disturbances), but these blended in with the rest of the class as learners of a slightly different kind, as all the others in effect were. To my mind this was a suitable approach for these children, as they were accepted on a par with the other learners and our system allowed them to progress in their own individual ways just as the others were doing. This implies that it should be possible to place children with special difficulties in an ordinary class if only the teacher is willing to do this, and particularly if the process can be backed up with appropriate teaching methods and support from a special teacher. In many cases they have skills that can enrich the life of the whole class (a sense of humour, a gift for drawing or painting, a talent for using language, empathy or exceptional motor skills). They can often be an example to others with their efforts to do things and their ability to manage in spite of their difficulties.

Three types of learner could be distinguished as far as the rhythm of studying was concerned. The first consisted of the children who found learning easy and achieved their weekly targets very quickly. They were happy, energetic children who had plenty of time for extra work and exercises, and it was these that made school interesting for them. They were accustomed to taking responsibility for the actions and had a strong belief in what they were doing. They knew what they wanted and were willing and enthusiastic to learn new things. They were eager to take on the project work, but they were also bold enough to refuse on occasions and suggest other things that they might do. They liked to work in pairs or groups and would help each other in all manner of things, and they also spent a large amount of time at home doing extra school work.

The second group insisted on doing all the work for their weekly targets at school and were seldom interested in doing anything over and above this. They liked to have clearly defined tasks and time limits in which to carry them out. It was important for them to plan what they were to do, in what order and how much time should be spent on it, and when Friday came and the week's work should be finished they had everything ready. These were usually quiet, well balanced children who worked

best alone or in pairs. It was important for them that they could decide on the pace of the work for themselves without anyone standing over them or urging them on all the time.

The third group of children were the ones who needed constant guidance. They were unable to start their work on their own and did not really understand the weekly goals, which meant that I had to give them alternative tasks for each lesson separately. In the last resort we would have to tell these children what they had to do in the lesson and sit next to them to make sure that they did it. It was difficult for them to conceive of themselves as responsible pupils at school, or to do anything on their own initiative. In practice we had to plan these children's work individually from one lesson to the next, and they would frequently like to sit next to us to do it, because they felt that they couldn't manage without an adult to guide them. It was very important to strengthen and support these children's own initiative little by little, allowing them to make small choices of their own to encourage them to take more responsibility and make decisions. We had to be particularly careful not to make decisions for them or answer the questions which they would ask almost automatically, – where the scrap paper should be put, whether their work was good, or where they should put paintings to dry – as these children would inevitably seek an answer from someone as they were unable to rely on their own decisions in such matters.

Work in the classroom was thus a variable mixture of teacher-centred instruction and individual or group work, with the children working on different things at the same time, and required constant interactive contact between us as two teachers working together, between the children and with other instances in the project networks. The children had an active role in planning their work and carrying it out, and I had the pleasure over the six years of teaching the same class to watch the majority of them grow into independent, responsible and confident young people.

Away from the established role!

We have often sat down with the children to discuss questions related to their life at school, such as why they have to learn to work with other people, or why they have to study subjects that they don't like. They showed a good understanding of these things. They were expected to work in all manner of groups, and it was evidently important for them to realize that grown-ups have to face the same problem. In fact, it seemed to be a relief for them to know that things don't always go smoothly for adults either, and that adults, too, prefer to work in groups of like-minded people. One thing we have learned over the years is that children will accept most things if we discuss them openly and admit that they are not to be taken for granted even by adults. It was also comforting for the children to realize that it is impossible for teachers, or anyone else for that matter, to know everything, and we frequently had to tell them – and sometimes contrived to do so – that we didn't know the answer to their question and that they would have to find it out for themselves. Many of them asked how it was possible to be a teacher if one didn't know everything, and it was only gradually that they came to understand that teachers are not infallible or omniscient and that being a teacher is anything but having ready-made answers to all possible questions. Being a teacher is not a matter of serving up the one correct answer but of opening various doors. The children gradually lost their fear of making mistakes once I was able to demonstrate through what I did that I was only human, and it was wonderful to see them gathering the courage to make choices of their own and developing an awareness that this was possible, although it took several years to reach that stage.

It was also interesting to note that working on a common project helped to foster a spirit of togetherness. They thought it was just great to be part of a project that allowed them to put their own plans into action in a way that interested them, enabled them to learn new techniques and introduced them to the cultural backgrounds of children in different countries through exchanges of exhibits.

"Can I get on with the project if I do this week's school work quickly?" was one of the children's favourite questions. They found the work distinctive and inspiring, and many of them were able to reach their weekly targets surprisingly early if it meant that they could concentrate on the project work after that. They were all allowed to join in on this in some way, and if one child didn't want to perform, he or she could video the others performing. The most important thing was that all the activities set out from the children's own initiative. The concept of control over one's own life arose frequently in connection with the project work, and we talked a lot about dividing up one's time, planning work and creating new ideas. We inevitably had to face the fact that things don't always go according to plan, or that the end result doesn't always conform to what we imagined at the beginning. This led on to the subject of disappointments. Gradually, too, the children found new ways of collaborating among themselves. Even the parents were astonished how they would do their homework together, and the parents of the boys were particularly pleased at this. This habit of working together lasted for the whole six years, developing further all the time.

Collaboration of this kind supports the development of interaction skills such as the ability to express one's thoughts, handle and control one's emotions and understand other people, and these skills in turn release new resources for responsible and creative working (Hämäläine & Sava 1989). I believe that this helped the children to internalize the concept of freedom with responsibility.

The children who didn't want to take part in the actual activities on their own initiative were included in the groups for producing the ideas. It also turned out that some of them were interested in technical aspects such as video recording and were able to film the workplace interviews or help in photographing the cartoons. By watching what the others were doing, they gradually, without realizing it, gained ideas on what they could do for themselves. The most important thing for these children was that they were not forced to take part but we able to decide to do so of their own accord. The weekly learning targets were their salvation, as they could always fall back on these when they didn't want to join in with the project work. On the other hand, the children who were not good at mathematics or science would spend a lot of time over all kinds of practical work, from sewing to painting and pottery, and their achievements would be much admired by the others. This, in turn, helped them to believe in themselves, for having previously been left out of many activities, they were now included in the group on account of their special abilities. One case in point was Tuuli (the names of the children have been changed), who had been left very much on her own because of her lively nature and unusual ways. She later became an important figure in the group, however, because she was adept at handling a video camera and produced an enormous number of useful ideas. The project put an end to Tuuli's isolation. Leena was a creative character and good at drawing and painting, so that many of the other children asked her for help when they were in difficulties, but Netta had problems with much of the schoolwork and often didn't quite know where to begin. For her, painting was a source of relief, and she did a lot of painting.

Looking back, we might say that all forms of art, handwork and acting on one's own ideas helped large numbers of children in our class to manage better at school and gain acceptance for what they were. Our project succeeded in putting into practice the fundamental idea that I had – that teaching and learning are a matter of interaction between human beings. Our experiences suggest that projects of this kind are needed if we wish to have concrete knowledge communicated from one child to another and wish to overturn the prejudices that exist against children who are different.

Points of discussion

As noted by Siltala (2004), a relaxing atmosphere is a major tool in the work of those engaged in teaching and helping others, and it is clear that children need space and peace in which to grow up. The inclusion of artists in our teaching was one way of showing the children that art can be of value for people and help them to cope in their lives. It would seem that the school system is still apt to ignore the issue of situational individuality, in which emphasis is placed on the human being in a holistic sense: mind, body, emotions and reason. If we forget this situational aspect of our children, the teaching they receive will become mechanistic and excessively knowledge-based, so that the world of the senses, with all the experiences that it entails, will easily remain unexplored and the children's natural ways of acting and expressing themselves will suffer. In this respect fragmentation into separate subjects and their distribution into lessons is an artificial way of organizing teaching. This disturbed me, and I eventually found that the Montessori method offered a more flexible way of arranging our teaching and taking account of the individuality of the pupils. I was then able to devise my own system for teaching in accordance with the curriculum on the basis of the Montessori philosophy, a system which divided the material to be taught into weekly goals or targets and allowed the children to have a say in both the content of these targets and the manner in which they were to be attained. In this way the children could be treated as individuals by encouraging them to make choices of their own, take responsibility and come face to face with art. The result was that they took to working in various forms of art more frequently than they would otherwise have done. In my experience this Postmix approach permits implementation of the cognitive-constructivist notion of learning and its related precept of a holistic view of teaching brought about by combining the subjects. It was not easy to carry out this methodological development work in the context of a medium-sized, traditional junior school, however, especially when the fear of being different and of making mistakes made life hard for both the pupils and the teachers. As Eisner (1979) put it, "If schools cannot understand the growth potential of their teachers, it is useless to imagine much chance of growth in the pupils."

The hope is to be able to introduce art into the lives of the children through experiential learning and to take their experiences into account when planning the material to be learned. It is nevertheless difficult in a sense to introduce ideas based on Postmodern concepts into the school system, as chaos and unpredictability as forces capable of creating a new order are virtually unknown in that sphere, where the principal accent is on the preservation and maintenance of knowledge and customs and their transmission to new generations.

The attaching of value to the children's experiences and their utilization in the learning process is a means of supporting learning, where the importance of motivation should always be borne in mind. It is also necessary to stop and think

about things sufficiently often in the course of the work, so that what one is doing does not become simply a matter of routine. Everything should impinge on the children's world of experience.

Education through the arts can help children and young people to understand themselves as individuals and to appreciate their own position as part of the world around them. This is a process that requires above all interaction, both with adults and with other children and young people. Education through the arts can help them to see themselves as others see them, and to realize by experience that they are not alone, that there are others who have the same feelings and thoughts. The adults around them occupy a crucial position in this, helping them to process and unravel their experiences. It is important to be aware that people are the same the world over, that they have their joys and sorrows, and that they have their families. Everybody wants to feel loved, to feel that they are important to someone. It is possible to open up a wealth of such experiences to young people by delving into the vast field of education through the arts.

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