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Kristín Einarsdóttir
Gardaborg Preschool

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When Unit Blocks Came to Gardaborg

By Kristín Einarsdóttir

A very good friend whom I have great respect for once said to me, “my duty is my pleasure.” That might sound strange to some, but if you think about it and apply it to life, you can understand that it is indeed a pleasure to do one’s duty. And that statement perfectly describes how I feel about my duty to tell you about the unit blocks in the Gardaborg preschool.

Unit blocks have probably been used in some Icelandic preschools since 1950 or 1960. But a turning point occurred when one of my teachers from the Iceland University of Education (Fosturskoli Islands), Jonina Tryggvadóttir, returned from studying with Harriet Cuffaro at Bank Street College in New York City. Jonina learned about unit blocks there, observed children working with them at the City and Country School, and developed the idea of bringing them back to preschools in Iceland. Harriet came to Iceland in October 1991 to teach a block course in Fosturskoli Islands for preschool teachers; she describes the initial idea of going to Iceland and her work with Jonina in a sound recording I made with her in New York in June 2011.

From January through May 1992, five preschool teachers in two schools (Gardaborg and Stardaborg) took part in the block project. Having recently completed my degree in education, I was lucky enough to be one of those teachers. Here is what Harriet said about our work together: “This was an adventure and a gift and it still is.” I find it hard to describe how thankful I am for all the questions that Harriet raised with us. Even when I considered that I had thought something through completely, Harriet would say—never expressing a judgment about my opinion—“I just have one question, Kristin.”

Gardaborg

Gardaborg is a public school run by the Department of Education and Youth in Reykjavik. It opened in 1983. The school’s community consists of 54 children, their parents, 13 teachers, and a chef. The children range in age from 18 months to six years and are organized into two classrooms. The school is governed by the 2008 Preschool Act, which establishes preschools as the first stage of the Icelandic education system and makes them available to all preschool-age children. It is the aim of the preschool to create a healthy and safe environment for the children, providing them with opportunities for emotional and physical development and a happy childhood. The school also adheres to the



Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, published by The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. In Iceland children do not need to pass tests to move up a grade level. Compulsory education begins in August of the year that children turn six.

The teachers in Gardaborg are united by their commitment to John Dewey's philosophy and Caroline Pratt's methodology. At the same time, they understand that Gardaborg is an Icelandic preschool, a product of Iceland's society and culture. At the beginning of the block project, both Jonina and Harriet emphasized that they were not introducing an American method that teachers should adopt unquestioningly. Instead



it was up to each teacher to use unit blocks in a way that was consistent with the existing methods and cultures of their schools (H. K. Cuffaro, personal communication, June 2012).

The Impact of the Block Project on Gardaborg

The participation of teachers in the block project has had a major impact on the school. Soon after the project began, teachers started to see the value of unstructured materials. They gradually placed more emphasis on them than on traditional toys. The school got its first set of unit blocks in November 1991, and two years later we received our first set of large hollow blocks, built by the husband of one of the teachers. By the fall of 1995, unstructured materials had become the main teaching material used in the school, and they remain so today, 19 years later.



The work with the blocks has changed since the project began; this is consistent with Jonina and Harriet's position that they were not presenting a recipe for teachers simply to follow.

With the introduction of every new material, the teachers now ask themselves: "How do I use this material? How will the children learn from using it? What does it have to offer?"

What Do the Children Build?

The children mostly build what they are interested in. We often see what is happening in our community reflected in their buildings. They may build something that they connect with our natural environment, such as an eruption or an avalanche, but they also build things that reflect their own culture, worlds they have experienced in books and

cartoons. The play with the blocks is free play. The children are never told how or what to build; they make their own decisions about that. Through their dialogue with the children, the teachers encourage them to continue to find solutions to problems and ways to expand their ideas. The

teacher's role in the children's learning and play is to be involved in their search for the answers to the questions they have raised.

One very popular activity has been to build a track with many slides and lots of barriers and then let a glass ball roll down it.

For some time it was also popular to use the unit blocks as dominos. When the children started working this way, the initial response of teachers was to stop them, since the sole aim seemed to be to make the blocks fall. But then

teachers began to hear the children say things like "no, this turn is too wide and we have to find another solution." The children started to work together, and we listened to their talking and thinking. We realized and their joy was in solving a problem, not just in watching the blocks tumble.

The large hollow blocks are only used indoors. Our Icelandic weather does not allow them to be used outside. The hollow blocks are used in the same way



as the unit blocks; the children build with them without directions from the teacher.

Over the 31 years that the school has been in operation, emphasis has been placed on staff development. The teachers have always been interested in exploring and experimenting with new materials and ways of teaching. They have never been afraid to step outside the box, and I think that in part that is directly due to their participation in the early block project.



Over the years, Gardaborg teachers have taken three trips to New York to observe in schools that use unit blocks. These visits have provided the teachers with a strong incentive to develop their own work further. During each of these visits, Harriet met with the teachers, and they had an invaluable opportunity to discuss and reflect on their work with her. In 2012, during our most recent visit, we attended a course at Bank Street College on field trips, given by Salvatore Vascellaro.

More about Gardaborg

Preparing children for their transition to school is a project that is constantly evolving in order to best meet the needs of each child. Considerable effort has gone into it. Five years ago we decided to make a book about the school for the children. It was first written by the teachers after they read Nancy Balaban's *Everyday Goodbyes*, and is yet another example of the impact of our visits to New York. The book is rewritten every year.

The implementation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) began in Iceland in 2002. It is the policy of the city of Reykjavik that the CRC is part of the curriculum in all schools. Accordingly, Gardaborg has integrated the CRC into our work with children throughout the year.

In Gardaborg we also do a lot of work with poetry. Children create poems under the guidance of a teacher whose primary role is to be supportive and encouraging, along with documenting the children's words. Writing poetry can be an important aspect of development that enhances the children's vocabulary and literacy. It is also a significant form of self-expression and creativity in which ideas fly and the children get to enjoy themselves. We have published two books of the children's poetry.

Here is one of their poems:





The Light Post

*If the light post outside
were alive
it would like to
walk to Gardaborg
and look at the children*

*if it were stuck
it would feel bad
always*

*Maybe it comes alive
overnight
when no one knows*

We have made considerable progress in recent years in documenting the children's play and work. Now every child has her or his own portfolio. All the teachers use an iPad to document their observations. You might say that it has replaced the camera and pen and paper.

The iPads have also proven very helpful in working with parents. From time to time, for example, teachers email parents a short video or photographs of their children playing or engaged in other activities. At Gardaborg only adults are allowed to use iPads.



Last year parents and teachers engaged in a pilot project about democratic government in the preschool. The members of the group had a meeting where specific issues were discussed, and they made collective decisions about methods of upbringing and the use of funds. Because the goal was a conversational rather

than an electoral democracy, the group had to reach a consensus.



The Gardeborg preschool has been awarded the Green Flag, an international recognition of the school's environmental program. Outdoor learning is a large part of the children's education. All the children spend time outside every day, and older children frequently go on field trips. During the winter, it is dark when the children and teachers go outdoors because sunrise is

late in the morning at that time of year.



Reference

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture web link: <http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/>

Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools: http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf_Annad/Preschool_Act.pdf

Gardaborg preschool web link: <http://www.gardaborg.is/>

Bókin: <http://issuu.com/gardaborg/docs/gardaborg14>

Kristín Einarsdóttir

Kristín Einarsdóttir, a principal in the Gardaborg preschool, graduated as a preschool teacher in 1991. Along with four other preschool teachers, she participated in Harriet Cuffaro's 1991–1992 block project in Iceland.

