



Children's access to play in school

National Adaption Plans

Field research

Hungary

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National Adaption Plan – Field Research – key findings

1. Database

There were different stakeholders:

- teachers from the countryside,
- a teacher who runs an afterschool programme for poor kids (mainly Roma children),
- a university professor who teaches teachers,
- professionals from the Hungarian Institute for Educational Research and Development,
- a professional who works at an NGO and deals with environmental issues, recycling,
- parents,
- university students on special education.

2. Research method

We made a focus group event with nine people from different organisations and there were also five of us from the Rogers Foundation.

Then we also made two personal interviews.

During a two-day playwork training, we collected lots of benefits and obstacles about playing in general. Ten people were there, two of them from Poland. At this training there were also three kids, not as participants, but sometimes they also contributed to our findings.

3. Key findings from field research

Professionals agreed that playtime is important and schools have to make time for it. Playing is a natural process, and it's fun, but we must highlight why it's necessary to let children play freely, and why it is beneficial to become a play-friendly labelled school. Many ideas came up about it: it helps in gender equality, it's cheap and it's also good to develop the abilities and skills of students.

There were lots of challenges, but what is important is that the focus group members and interviewees always came up with a solution to how we can handle the obstacles. We divided them into four groups: objects and environment, children factors, adult factors, structural-institutional factors.

There were different thoughts about implementation and intervention. The most important thing is that we should do it step by step and not rush it. Interventions in different fields should happen together, such as negotiate with authorities and make changes in the school yard.

Participants collected loads of materials, training activities, scientific studies, videos and many other things which can help schools in becoming play-friendly.

One of the main ideas which came up is how to deal with the lack of the human resources (playworkers). The focus group suggested asking help from high school students and university students.

For last but not least: if we talk about the freely chosen “playing” of adults, it can be helpful to understand the whole concept of playwork.

3.1. Value of playing

One of the member of the focus group said that playing is a natural process; it’s natural for the kids to play. Children must have enough time where they can play, with a certain amount of risks. Because without risks the process can become boring. The feeling of experiencing the state of flow is also important: during this experience (when we say “time flies”) kids get lost in their activity, focus a lot and make many efforts without the fear of punishments and the pressure of an adult to “do something”.

The primary thing is: playing is fun! If it’s not fun, it’s not playing anymore.

It helps the brain to function well, but there are also other main parts which can develop through playing. To summarize we can say that freely chosen playing is good for all kinds of development, but it’s important to highlight different examples within the SPICE model (**S**ocial interaction, **P**hysical activity, **I**ntellectual stimulation, **C**reative achievement, and **E**motional stability). The interviewees collected these answers for each of the parts:

Social interaction: cooperation, problem solving, openness, asking, self-reflection, empathy, relationships, take care of others, resilience, make friends, helpfulness, braveness.

Physical activity: running outside strengthen the immune system, courage, control their own body, coordination, stamina, flexibility, small and big motor-movements, coordination, muscle memory, strength.

Intellectual stimulation: pay attention: visually and acoustically, memory, orientation in space, logical thinking, decision making, lexical knowledge, reading, writing, linguistic ability, learning foreign language, abstract thinking.

Creative achievement: flexible thinking, problem solving thinking, eye-hand coordination, associative skills, divergent thinking, “thinking outside the box”, use tools differently, innovation, create new things, fantasy, imagination.

Emotional stability: anger management, learn the names of emotions, realize the emotions, be aware of their own emotions, learn how to lose, self-regulation, failure is okay, freedom of expression.

Antisocial kids participate in this type of playing. They can choose activity for just themselves, or if they see some major fun, they may join when they feel readiness.

We can use these as an “answer” when schools ask: why it’s important to play, why should we deal with this issue? A university teacher said that this is a crucial question, and we should collect answers for it.

What is essential is that there is “free playing” in schools, but it’s not a conscious offer. If we become conscious about it, we can create both space and time to ensure freely chosen playing. And our expert, who works within a civil recycling organisation, said: it won’t cost a lot, if we use recycled parts, and start to think of reusing the resources of the school in favour of playing.

Freely chosen play can also help in the gender balance: boys and girls start to play with each other, the “reign of football” will fall, and other activities will take place. Making bunkers, roleplay games or any other creative actions can happen.

3.2. Challenges for play friendly schools

Several challenges came up in the focus group events and during the interviews. We divided them into four major fields: objects and environment, children factors, adult factors, structural-institutional factors.

Objects and environment

Different problems came up with the playground/schoolyard, especially when there isn't any. It could be also problematic when the yard contains just a few opportunities, objects to play with or there are some toys (e.g. swing, slide) but nothing moveable. If the yard consists of only a football pitch that's also lowers the number of the possible activities. It may also be an obstacle if the tools are not really play-friendly (lot of sharp objects) or the environment contains too many risks: a lot of avoidable accident can occur.

Children factors

Being in a play-friendly environment for the first time can be hard for the kids, especially for those, who have never experienced such freedom before. Lots of aggression, bullying may happen between the kids or they just become too shy, intimidated to play. If there were just a few interactions between boys and girls it could be also difficult for them to play together – or at least to start to thinking about it. They also need to get use to play with different age groups. Children may feel bored, disinterested or unmotivated because now they don't have instructions to follow. If there are kids with special needs or disabilities it could be a problem if the obstacles are not cleared. Another possible problem can be if a kid who becomes “the leader” and the rest of them follow him or her all the time. Or the other side: if a child worries too much and ruins the fun of the others. If the playtime happens when the others have lessons or want to do their homework the loud playing can disturb them. There are two more factors: if they feel tired (maybe because they played on the computer all night long) or they don't have a sense of healthy fear.

Adult factors

Adults, especially parents may worry about their kids: if they go home dirty and unclean, or with scars, injuries because they had free play sessions. Teachers may also have a lot of concerns: it will be an extra work for them (they still have to do a lot of paperwork) they are inspected by authorities so they feel already stressed about their job. Teachers can be burn-out so they are not really interested in new methods, structures; they just want to survive the school time, then rest. Or for some of them it could be difficult to change their attitude towards students. Teachers are used to have the control over the activities; it's also a challenge to give up their leadership. Maybe the biggest challenge for them is that there are not enough teachers or adults to facilitate the process of the playwork sessions.

Structural-institutional factors

Hungarian culture is similar, but still different from the UK culture, so it will be a challenge itself to adapt the OPAL system. On the other hand, Hungarian schools also differ from each other. Financial issues also came up: schools cannot afford new programmes, lot of them struggle with money problems. It will be a long-term process so it will definitely be hard to understand the benefits of freely chosen playing.

3.3. Fields for intervention

Becoming a play-friendly school should be by step by step process. Firstly, schools can create a parents club where they can meet with playwork theory. Then there can be a "playhouse" in the school: just a small amount of time (20-30 mins) where the kids can "practice" freely chosen playtime, and adults can also learn how to deal with this framework.

It's really important to know that every school is different, so there should be some basic principles, and the schools can work with that and form them into a shape that is suitable for them.

Teachers should be convinced that this mind set is really great for them and for the kids as well. There are different ideas about how to do that: create a short promotion video, start with a summer camp (3-4 days with parents, teachers and students), school staff trainings – experience based. It's highly important to involve some teachers in the process from the school, and if they start to love this concept with its efforts and enthusiasm, they can change the mind-set of their colleagues.

The video have to contain the following things:

- main concept of playwork
- why it will be good for the kids, teachers and parents
- what are the benefits
- why it's not an expensive idea.

Need to change the environment: get rid all of the stuff which can be extremely dangerous (contains too many risks) or if there's not enough risk, then put in objects which contains some. For example: different scrap materials. But keep in mind that scraps can have a bad connotation and parents don't want their kids to play with "garbage". So we should build on the "green trend", this is eco-friendly, enhance creativity and nobody has to be afraid. If we have some videos to show, or they can see and experience how much fun it is to play with scraps then they will agree to use them more and more. After a while the school staff can ask parents to bring in their own unused materials: broken electronical things (keyboards, microwave etc.), old vessels/pots/dishes. For roleplaying purpose these are really great objects and we can also highlight that this is not an expensive programme, they don't need to buy new things for it.

To contain the scraps there should be a shed: it don't have to be a classical "playpod", any space which can be locked up fits for it.

Meanwhile there's a need to keep in touch with local and governmental authorities. It can be a good thing if we can include the concept of playwork into the Hungarian National Curriculum.

The quality criteria can be a multi-level system. So after the schools have this in the afternoon, after lunch, then they can start to implement playwork into different classes or between classes in the morning.

Children involvement is essential. For this reason they have to be involved in the whole process, we have to think with them about the "laws of freeplay" and make sure that the rules made with them, and all of them (or the majority) can agree on them.

If there's not enough space outside, or the environment is quite not suitable, then the corridors and the classrooms can also turned into play-areas. Put aside the tables, desks, chairs, and fill the rooms with scraps. Children love to running on the corridors, maybe if we let them to do this sometimes, they become less stressed, and they will be able to focus more on lessons.

3.4. Need for support

We asked the stakeholders to collect different materials, training activities, scientific studies or any other things which can help schools in creating the quality criteria and the implementing.

Different source of grants came up which can be earned by national and international applications. There are some which is about environmental changes (if we include scrap materials).

There are trainings which are slightly connected: experiential education, drama pedagogy and tale therapy. The Rogers Foundation can offer some as well, we have well-trained trainers on these fields, and we also have trained playworkers. Schools can ask us any time if they need some supervision or help in some issues.

There are loads of OPAL videos online (we can create Hungarian subtitle for them) and we also have some play-pod videos. These are great tools to show to those who are afraid or uncertain about playwork.

Michael Follett's brochure about OPAL is a great summary and handout; it should be printed and also translated into Hungarian.

Ken Robinson's TED talk and his books are available in Hungarian, and these can be convincing if somebody says "everything is all right in the school system, we don't need to change". The TED video about the Japanese kindergarten is also very good for this purpose.

We can connect the primary schools with universities and high schools. University students (especially those who will be teachers) can come to schools and practice as a playworker. They can have the connection with the kids which is really missing from the University studies, and on the other side the school teachers can rest at these times; they don't need to pay attention during playtimes. High school students can do the same in primary schools, because

they have to do 50 hours of community service, and they can spend these hours on meaningful activity.

There's a Hungarian NGO the Organisation for Democratic Education and Learning; they may also help in the process.

We have connection with the Ministry of Interior, they can help from the authorities level to create the criteria and help schools with trainings, and maybe financially as well.

3.5. Any other topics

Schools can start with one hour of freely chosen playtime every morning.

Playwork can be implemented into teaching teachers as a University subject for credits.

Environmental psychology as a supportive science.

Took this method into festivals, create freely chosen areas for kids, it will be also good for dissemination purposes.

Involve university students on psychology.

Gather volunteers.

Talk about the freely chosen "playing" of the adults to understand the concept.