

Renewal of local communities' educational landscapes by introducing City Farms and Activity Playgrounds as an important learning space



In Africa they say “You need a whole village to raise a child.” Accordingly, today we need a rich educational landscape with various learning opportunities and spaces which invite children to learn and which enable holistic development. Such a landscape is colourful and encourages adventurous spirits, it contains gardens, parks, woodlands, meadows, open spaces and nooks, where children and young people are able to organise themselves and invent their own play.

It contains sites which facilitate knowledge directly, such as schools, nurseries, sports grounds with the option of joining a sports club, music schools and libraries. Educational landscapes also invite children to just stroll around, so that they can suddenly find open spaces which encourage them to imagine whole new worlds, or experience nature in a self-organised and responsive way, like on City Farms or Activity Playgrounds. Here, they experience handling and caring for animals, dealing with fire, giving various crafts a try and can take over responsibility by helping to build a stable or maintaining existing buildings on their own accord. In their self-determined action children and young people are supervised and supported by pedagogically trained staff in a secure space.

Such a responsible community structure enables children and young people to develop competence, and to experience the impact of their actions on their environment. These days – more than ever – children and young people need a broad variation of activities to help them make inspiring and vivid experiences to balance verbally transferred knowledge. Learning that happens in schools is only one part of their learning journey on their way to a self-determined future as an adult - practising social behaviour within the family and their peer group is just as important. But what really leads the way for children and young people here is direct experience with those around them and the environment.

There is very little time for that kind of experience today besides school. Possible reasons can be the increasing use of media in our every day life, which leads to a lack of “hands-on” experience in many areas, or the urbanisation of our living environment which results in reduced realms of experience. Therefore we need a different structure in the educational sector: schools and other actors within the educational landscape are called to find their place within the landscape in close proximity to places which their target group is also likely to visit. This provides a rich bouquet of possibilities for children and young people which helps them to improve the essential skills they need to cope with life in a positive and holistic way - now and in future.

Schools as important educational actors, which no child can avoid, are presented with more and more challenges today. It's hardly possible to meet those requirements, since a school is expected to not only provide theoretical knowledge, but also to take over in areas of social competence which were formerly in family hands. Furthermore it is expected that schools prevent undesirable behaviour as well as serving the statutory guidelines of the department for education to support holistic development¹. School can't do this without a supportive network; therefore holistic education, in the sense of communal upbringing of children and young people, gains noticeable relevance.

The German Federation of City Farms and Activity Playgrounds (Bund der Jugendfarmen und Aktivspielplätze e.V.) sees itself as a mediator between the educational actors and seeks to assist the growth of a network between existing learning spaces, so that children and young people are able to explore their surroundings in an age-appropriate way.

So far we find clearly defined spaces within educational landscapes, which can be used within a set time frame, such as schools, training centres, music schools and sports clubs. These settings are supported by other informal learning spaces such as playgrounds and clearly defined open spaces. To provide a fruitful and supporting network in the above postulated extended concept of education, it needs more than a network of formal educational learning spaces. It rather needs all areas of learning to be included in the process of educating children and young people - especially the informal settings within the public space.

City Farms and activity Playgrounds play a special role in this network; they gain children's acceptance naturally and where they are established, no one can imagine the area without them – against all funding struggles and decreasing communal support.

The German Federation of City Farms and Activity Playgrounds postulates therefore, that schools and other actors within the social space need to work together in an inter-professional way, to ensure that every child is able to gain maximum benefit from it's local variety of formal and informal learning spaces in a holistic way.

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¹ See for further reading: 12. Kinder- und Jugendbericht, Leitbild “Ganzheitliches Lernen”.