

The grass is greener on the other side of the fence

The SPRING project in Nynäshamn

by Anna Lenninger

Seven preschools and four primary schools in Nynäshamn municipality have participated in a municipal public health project called SPRING, under supervision of Nynäshamn Nature School. The teachers in the nature school have for a long time been engaged in the schoolgrounds of the schools and preschools in the municipality, and emphasised them as important places for play and areas for goal-oriented pedagogical work.

The nature school's way of working is characterised by collaboration and simple solutions. Collaboration is strived for between children, pedagogical staff, parents and different municipal actors. Focusing on simple solutions creates room for actions even if the budget is limited.

Segersång preschool – a change in the planning process

– Turn the building around and place it differently!

The preschool in Segersång got the forest as yard instead of the otherwise mandatory open, treeless and weather exposed south-facing part of the plot. Now there is space on the southern side for plantation boxes in front of the red-painted building, and the big play areas are located in a forest part north of the building. Both traditional playground equipment and home-made constructions can fit in the broken shades provided by full-grown vegetation.



And the children have access to diversified and unplanned land next to protective barriers, to prevent them from falling, and sand used for baking. So natural, but still so rare when it comes to planning and construction of schools and preschools.

The reason why the preschool in Segersång got a new location in spite of the well advanced planning process was because the nature school was aware about SCAMPER. It is a study showing the outdoor environment's importance of minimising the risk of dangerous sun radiation and increasing the preschool children's physical activity. The

availability of shady vegetation and diversified ground show measurable positive effects to the children. The study also shows that a diversified outdoor environment affects the children's cognitive ability positively, that is, it encourages the ability to use their knowledge. This means that the children's play sequences become longer and there are fewer conflicts in a stimulating environment.

A project based on research

Inspired by SCAMPER, Nynäshamn municipality created their own public health project directed towards children in preschool and pupils in primary school: the SPRING project (Shadow – Pedagogics – (R)Activity – In – Nature and (school)Ground environment). The project in Nynäshamn got valuable backup from Cecilia Boldemann, public health scientist at Karolinska Institutet, one of the researchers in SCAMPER and responsible for the study.

Based on the results from SCAMPER, SPRING formulated seven criteria for a good outdoor environment at preschool:

- An area that exceeds 3000 m².
- Space for running. The children must be able to "pick up speed".
- Between half and two thirds of the area should be hilly and vegetated.
- The open sky area should be limited by vegetation and should be less than 50% where the children spend most of their day.
- Popular play areas should be integrated with the nature – among trees, bushes or stones.
- Passages giving the opportunity to run around and in between for example house walls, bushes and fences – and that connect different play environments.
- The outdoor environment should be traffic and crime safe.

* The sky view is measured using a camera with a fish-eye lens that shows a round picture of the sky. The size of the area that is covered by bushes and trees is measured.

Nature around the corner

Nynäshamn Nature School has for many years propagated for an improvement of the preschool playgrounds and schoolgrounds in the municipality, and they have also contributed with advice and divided funds as well as provided practical help. The municipality has quite a few, as well as nice, natural environments, but it is not for granted that the children normally get access to these fantastic areas – although they're just around the corner. Even in cases where the forest was prioritised during the planning stage for preschools, the vegetation was cut down because information about the pedagogical planning process did not reach the construction process.

Deteriorated maintenance

In 1993, the former Property Unit was closed down, and the budget, decision-making and responsibility for the entire school environment were transferred to each separate school principal or preschool manager. The consequence was deteriorated maintenance of the yards and also a low level of new investments in the outdoor environment.

Thanks to the SPRING project, a steering group was established in 2008 with representatives from different departments that raised the issues about the outdoor environment to a common agenda where different municipal actors are concerned. SPRING had a time-limit between 2008 and 2011, but the intention is that the way of working and the attitude towards the yards will continue being important for all concerned parties. Principals, administrative managers, preschool teachers, child care takers, superintendents and caretakers – all must cooperate. And Nynäshamn Nature School should continuously have an overall unifying function. Recurrent educational trainings are necessary also in the future to constantly emphasise the importance of the

schoolgrounds. Education is one of three overall methods that the Spring project identified in order to deepen the collaboration within the municipal organisation. The other two are the safety inspection and a database.

Safety inspection and database

The project proposes a supplement to today's safety inspections, currently named *development risk*, which intention is to look upon the schoolgrounds as adequate learning environments. The schoolgrounds will provide an healthy environment based on the SPRING project's criteria, support pedagogical work, and display biological diversity. The yards must be seen in a longer perspective than is done today concerning inspections of play equipment safety.

A future database is proposed as support for planning and budgeting. All relevant information about the yards' constructions and maintenance is stored here. The database would facilitate the planning and material handling as well as observe actions to take that no department feel responsibility for.

Which actions have been taken on the schoolgrounds?

So – which actions have been taken to fulfill the criteria of a good schoolground? In the evaluation, the annexation of land and moving of fences have been raised as the most cost efficient actions. Four preschools and one school got access to green areas, which used to be unaccessible, and thus they have got bigger yards with more vegetation and more diversifying topography. So, more places for play, running around and pedagogical work have been added. The municipality owns the actual land, and the people working with issues concerning planning and property boundaries were participating in the project – which of course facilitated decisions and implementation.

Fences that segment parts within the same yard are still there, and are mainly a problem on the playgrounds of the preschools. The project group suspects that the staff's habitual way of working is a reason why the boundaries still exist – an open yard requires an active staff that moves around the whole yard, and that takes collective responsibility for all the children. The staff's role concerning where children play and move around will hopefully be observed in future educational initiatives.

Plantation of trees and bushes has been an important element in the project and been implemented to varying degrees on all yards except two. Overall, resistant types of plants were chosen, but the need to protect all new plantations against play during the establishment phase was emphasised. A good establishment is a precondition to make a better environment in the future with more diversified play environments and protective vegetation shading. To plant – and to make the plants survive – means investments for the future.

The constructions done within the framework for the project have been simple and cheap constructions, partly done by pupils in the Construction course at Nynäshamn Gymnasium (upper secondary school). Slopes have been supplemented with wide stairs or grandstands (and they are movable), long seats and play furniture in the shape of long "winner's stands". Benches have been built around grown-up trees, and two preschools got small playhouses. Big boulders and logs have also been used to create a more diversified ground.

An activity park was built during a summer holiday at Vanstaskolan – a primary school with all grades from preschool class up to the ninth grade – with the help of student summer workers. The material is simple and most of it could be picked up within the municipality:

Logs, worn-out ropes and tires, a small part of a railway and bicycle stand made of concrete.

The activity park was designed by Nynäshamn Nature School. Also a so called illustration of the Vanstaskolan's yard is being implemented, for example through workshops together with the pupils, arranged by two industrial designers named Folkform. Their participation has been made possible thanks to the school's participation in one of the National Public Art Council's collaboration projects.

Survey

Cecilia Boldemann carried out a survey among the staff at the preschools, one at the start of the project and one at the end. Due to poor response, she is cautious in making conclusions, but can see that more people are satisfied with the vegetation and climate conditions at the end of the project than at the start. During both occasions the staff reported only positive effects of outdoor stay, but more had observed

pedagogical possibilities outdoors at the end of the project. The survey responses show an increase when it comes to the children's play in dense vegetation and with natural materials such as soil, sand and water, and the girls' fantasy play has increased. Probably both girls' and boys' creative play has increased, but the survey material is too small to be able to say that this is the case.

The latter survey shows an increased number of responses where the staff say they spend less time outdoors than other preschools, and that they cancel the outdoor stay more often. More people complain about high noises and lack of time to be able to do their work. Cecilia Boldemann sees this as a result of bigger children groups, and not as result of the SPRING project. On the contrary she believes that the staff would have experienced the work environment even worse had the improvements outdoors not been done.

The text above is based on the report *Spring project 2008-2011. Documentation of a public health project in the Nynäshamn municipality.* The full documentation can be downloaded from Nynäshamn Nature School's website. The documentation contains an exact presentation of the project's establishment, budget and implementation. The SCAMPER report in pdf format can also be found on the website.
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