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IFEN inspire Podcast

S3 EP 05: exposé (EN translation)

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Didactics of inquiry-based learning and outdoor education

For the implementation of outdoor teaching, the teacher is the key. They decide whether lessons can and may take place outdoors, with what quality, how often, and with or without follow-up in class.

That is why we – Daniela Müller of Zurich University of Teacher Education, Prof. Ingmar Schumacher and I – surveyed teachers in Switzerland and Luxembourg about which supportive aspects around the teacher are relevant: as a person, in school and in the school's environment.

Unsurprisingly, the school's location and the accessibility of learning sites matter for how often outdoor teaching happens in both countries. Training courses also have a positive influence in both countries. Besides suitable training, it is above all the support of parents and cooperation with colleagues that positively affect how often teachers teach outdoors. Hence my recommendation for educational projects: train teachers together in teams and let them try out examples directly during the training – and also test materials that can be used straight away in the schoolyard, since many schools have no suitable outdoor area to serve as a classroom.

Interestingly, class discipline is also an important factor in outdoor teaching. Here I think teachers can best be supported through training. Because indoors as well as outdoors, you have to ask yourself regularly: what are the levers for successful teaching? And if you want to teach outdoors: what changes concretely for the children, and what for me as a teacher?

You need to know this: there are certain developmental-psychology prerequisites for children's learning processes. They are innate and must be taken into account if you want to create a good learning environment. Indoors as outdoors: the basic physiological needs must be met – a child that is cold or has had too much sun cannot learn. Outdoors you have to pay closer attention to this. Now one could say: then I'll just stay indoors. But outdoors many more positive factors come into play: learning in movement, on real occasions for learning, and with all the senses. That means we are talking about considerably higher cognitive activation outdoors.

The factors are: orientation and control; attachment; experiences of self-efficacy; interest and motivation – inquiry as a motivator.

One of these factors is orientation – that is, as a child I have to know what I am supposed to do, ideally why, and where I should go. When you move teaching outdoors, orientation in space is initially different. Where is our break area, where the learning area, where can we sit? What are we working on? With what? Where do we look at our results? In the classroom these structural elements are given. Outdoors you have to communicate, make visible and mark them – for example by sitting on cushions around a working surface and always starting the work that way. You can use clipboards for tasks that show the child: now you are in the role of the researcher, here is your task.

If you use the inquiry-based approach in outdoor teaching, you have another great advantage with respect to the developmental prerequisites. To learn, the child needs: attachment – the shared experience with the teacher, the feeling of being safe and getting support when needed; experiences of self-efficacy – neither over- nor under-challenged, i.e. feasibility; interest and motivation – inquiry as a motivator. Flexibility is required: adapting teaching to the group, moving away from the idea of having to know everything, towards joint inquiry.



Last but not least, parents' information and acceptance play an important role. My recommendation: inform parents also via the school magazine or website, involve them in walks and activities, and inform them about suitable clothing.