



FRONTLINE
 NEWS FROM THE GRASSROOTS



A mural made by children at the Bifrost School about Leonardo da Vinci's life. In the centre is Leonardo himself, holding an eye

DENMARK

A GLOWING
 EXPERIMENT

CECILE VERHEIJ

Bifrost: a new way of learning.

IN THE PROVINCIAL Danish town of Ålborg, there is a remarkable school for children (ages six to sixteen) named Bifrost. The word Bifrost is derived from Scandinavian mythology and means 'rainbow', a bridge between the Earth and heaven. The educational experiment, which has been ongoing since 1987,

is attracting much attention.

Though the school radiates a mood of art and culture, it is not an art school. The core tenet of the school is that expressions of art and culture are an important source of inspiration in the learning process. The Bifrost approach aims to break away from the traditional, one-sided focus on cognitive learning processes and passive education. "We want to integrate different dimensions of learning. In that sense we are very much inspired by the American psychologist Howard Gardner," explains Bodil Abildtrup Johansen, founder and director of the Bifrost School. "Gardner claims that in Western education we overvalue cognitive learning, while human beings in fact have multiple learning capacities. He distinguishes for example emotional, social, sensual,

and physical capacities. Here at Bifrost we aim to enhance all these different ways of learning. We value aesthetic expressions highly. Throughout the building one can find a diversity of artistic creations. Children here learn to express themselves in many different ways, through painting, music, sculpting, theatre, writing and poetry. These are all different ways of communication. We take up the challenge of turning education into an exciting endeavour."

From the beginning the Bifrost approach was based on the innate inquisitiveness of children to learn. It is the teacher's task to cherish and stimulate these impulses, which can only manifest themselves if the children continuously have a say in and impact on their own learning processes.



At Bifrost, both children and teachers become 'investigators' and 'learners'. All education is related to cultural-historic themes, which we call inspiration themes. On average the teachers select two or three inspiration themes per year, with which the whole school works during an extended period of time. These themes include Van Gogh, Mozart, the Danish composer Carl Nielsen, M. C. Escher, the Olympic Games, Leonardo da Vinci, and the children's book *The Mystery of the Playing Cards* by Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder.

Johansen explains, "We want to provoke children and raise their interest for historical periods. Introducing new perspectives, breaking conventions, confronting and investigating: these are all important pre-conditions for learning." Since all learning is related to the direct experience of the children, standard learning books and methods are not suitable. Building on the ideas and proposals from the children, the

teachers are challenged to collect and compile all learning materials themselves.

Each theme brings along its own perspective or specific assignments. Where one theme seems appropriate for a more aesthetic approach, another might be more suitable for a natural or scientific or historical approach. This process of creating study material demands intensive preparation and inquisitiveness, and presupposes an extraordinary spirit of co-operation. The teachers consider this to be a very stimulating and inspiring process.

Another remarkable feature of Bifrost is that no assessments are made through grades or tests. "Creativity, flexibility and responsibility have become ever more important assets in current society, but it is exactly those qualities which are difficult to express in grades," says Johansen. Grades contribute to anxiety and add to an erroneous 'learning for reward' attitude. Learning should be considered as a *personal*

challenge, and not something one does to gain the approval of others. From an early age, children at Bifrost are trained to evaluate their own achievements, as well as those of others. These evaluations encompass much more than what could be expressed in grades, as they reflect both the process and the result. In close co-operation with the teachers, children review their acquired knowledge, mutual co-operation, interest, creativity, time scheduling, and so on. Bodil Johansen formulated very succinctly what Bifrost is all about: "All the time, both alone and together, we should have the courage and the will 'to be on the way' — not to reach a predetermined goal, but to experience new and different possibilities." ●

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USA

REALISING POTENTIAL

BRIAN TOKAR

The Institute for Social Ecology offers an inspired interdisciplinary approach.

SINCE 1974, the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE) has offered intensive summer programmes and student-centred degree programmes highlighting our interdisciplinary approach to ecological philosophy, politics, social theory and hands-on praxis. As we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary, we are affirming our close ties to ongoing campaigns for global justice, food sovereignty, and direct democracy, as well as our long-range reconstructive visions for

a free, ecological society.

It is the ISE's core belief that the human potential to play a creative role in natural and social evolution can be realised, and that we can help to foster communities free from hierarchy, social inequity and ecological degradation. We view the increasing centralisation of political and economic power, social and cultural systems of domination, and the alarming increase in social control as root causes of our current ecological and social crises. Social ecology envisions a directly democratic, confederal politics, and a moral economy that moves beyond scarcity and hierarchy towards a world that truly celebrates natural and cultural diversity. Thus, our curriculum combines theoretical and experiential learning in such areas as community organising, political action, social theory, and sustainable building and land use, helping students develop the skills, ideas and relationships that can help nurture vibrant, self-governed, healthy communities.

We offer intensive summer programmes in Sustainable Design, Building and Land Use, as well as our internationally acclaimed programme, Remaking Society, which offers a comprehensive overview of all aspects of social ecology. We offer both on-campus and offsite independent study-based programmes at the undergraduate level, in collaboration with Burlington College. Additionally, Prescott College and the ISE have recently launched a renewed Master of Arts programme in social ecology, which combines campus-based and off-campus study models, including guided independent study, experiential learning, and classroom-based activities at our exquisite Central Vermont campus. A host of shorter workshops and courses are also available throughout the year. ●

For more information:
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