

Wellbeing and involvement; *Experience Oriented Education advancing*



Experience Oriented Education (E.O.E) is aimed at the pupils' wellbeing and involvement. Children who love going to school and who are often involved in their work, develop in a good way. During the past decade E.O.E. has grown very fast. Not just in the Netherlands, but in the whole world... from Iceland to New Zealand. There has been an expertise centre for E.O.E in the Netherlands for some years now.

Experience Oriented Education is more than just an educational theory. Whereas some schools start from educational programmes which have been drawn up before, others start from products (test data such as the Cito-test), E.O.E. is aimed at the process that occurs in the children, in the group. Of course it is the 'result' that counts. But happy, well-developing children notice themselves during the activities that they are doing useful things.

The E.O.E. focuses on the 'Experience-stream' of people, which means on the whole of possibilities. All relevant factors which teachers can chart: character, development, home situation, relationships, ability to learn etc. are taken into account. In other words, teachers within E.O.E. are focused on what happens inside another person. That is visible in *Wellbeing* ('how is somebody doing?') and *Involvement* ('how is somebody performing?'). The team regularly trains in observing from these factors. They must be able to see or hear if there is a real development. We all have learnt a lot of things, which we cannot remember exactly. But that which is learnt with real involvement is something, you do not forget anymore. Those are fundamental experiences.

In order to achieve this, there is much attention for a well-prepared environment: a pleasant room with many clearly arranged challenges. Much room is given to children's initiatives. Of course it is essential that teachers imagine themselves in children's situations. That is why it is necessary that they communicate in a good, open and respectful way. Because they are constantly focused on the children's involvement and wellbeing, they are tuning their acting to it. Not only the test results but especially their observations determine what the next activities are going to be. That is why intensive learning is brought about at one's own level and at one's own pace. And that is not only true for children. Because the teacher and the pupil are getting along together, the teacher also constantly develops.

A total approach

The project group E.O.E. started in the spring of 1975. Then a central group of eight kindergarten teachers was formed after a lecture by professor Ferre Laevers. So the E.O.E. started as an elementary project. Primary school Uilenspiegel in Boekel started as the first E.O.E.-school in the Netherlands. The concept was applied in the complete primary school there. In the meantime the concept has been strengthened by numerous practical experiences and scientific research. Initially the 'free initiative' was central. If children are allowed to choose in a rich educational environment, they develop naturally. Meanwhile the ideas have been developed into a complete educational concept. Unique is the process-oriented child monitoring system, within which children are not only compared to peers, but especially their own development is monitored well.

E.O.E. schools know five ways of working: *Circle*, *Forum*, *Contract work*, *Project work*, *Workshops* and *Free activity*.

Recently the E.O.E. has been enriched by a new dimension: 'linkedness'. What Experience Oriented Education is pursuing, is a basic attitude of linkedness with everything that is alive. That experience of linkedness ensures that people are going to take care of themselves, the others, the environment and the world.

Circle

In practice teachers are trying to increase involvement by paying attention to a good atmosphere and good relationships, adaptation to the level, meaningful "proximity to reality" (from real situations), sufficient activities and ample pupils' initiatives.

Monday morning, the school is filling gradually. Marina, the teacher of group 3/4 is sitting in a circle. The classroom is filling with children and parents. Some children are proudly showing their exercise-books to their parents, others are immediately sitting down with Marina in the circle and start telling enthusiastically about the weekend. Three girls are sitting in the handicraft corner with the foldable books they had ended with on Friday afternoon. And Bram... Bram does not see his mother anymore. He is immediately climbing onto the platform where his friends are very busy building. The box with knights has been pushed nearby. Bram greets his friends and he is looking in the box for his faithful, strong, black knight. "Hi boys, I was Black beard, wasn't I?". The morning has started.



In connection with linkedness, there is a moment every day, at which the class is going to sit together... *the circle*. Thoughts and experiences are exchanged. The *circle* as a meeting place is pre-eminently a place where the mutual contact between the pupils and between pupils and teacher is realized. In the *circle* a planning is made with children and evaluations take place

While the parents are leaving the classroom, Marina is looking around. A number of children are so busy that it would be a pity to invite them into the circle. With the small group that has settled down, she starts the conversation about the weekend, about missed goals and visits to grandparents. Bram casually casts a glance down. His glance meets Marina's. She winks: "Yes boys, we may go on for a while". He goes on with his playing.

Forum

In order to increase linkedness with the rest of the school there are forums. The *forum* is the moment at which more groups of the entire school come together in view of exchanging ideas and experiences. The *forum* can be used for meetings or planning and evaluation.

A quarter to nine. The playing is interrupted. The school assembles in the gaming room to celebrate the week's opening. Bram is

shuffling with his friends onto the mats near the stage. His friend Tom is already on the stage. He is going to be seven years old this week. The gaming room is filling. After the school song being sung, all the pupils celebrating their birthday that week are put in the limelight. Bram is singing at the top of his voice. When Tom has sat down next to Bram again, a sketch of two teachers follows. Great fun: the John Lanting effect.



While one of them is turning around, the other one is stealing a cookie. Children try to prevent the stealing of the cookie by shouting loudly. The fun has become even greater when it becomes clear that it is a dog's biscuit en the thief is leaving the stage while retching. The week can start!

Contract work

To ensure that children have a good view of the obligatory curriculum, but also know what they can choose after that, E.O.E. schools are using contract work. *Contract work* is a way of organisation in which activities for every individual pupil and for a certain period (e.g.a week) are formally put down. For finishing the activities a pupil can use a certain amount of the class time (contract working time), within which he/she can decide relatively independently about the duration and order of the distinguished activities.

Back to the circle. Group 3 is starting with assignments and Marina points out what can be chosen from. Bram is very busy learning letters. While the choice consists of diverse mathematics, language, reading and writing



activities, Bram chooses for his scrapbook. Last week he drew a castle, now he wants to deal with Black beard. Black beard is being picked up from the building corner and with his tongue between his teeth Bram is drawing his hero. On the shield, armour and sword the letter B appears. Tom is sitting next to Bram. Tom has also chosen for his scrapbook and together they are going through further adventures of the knights while drawing. Marina is passing and asks if she may write words on the drawings. While Bram and Tom are calling words in turns, Marina is adding the words in block letters. Bram is trying to copy those letters. After half an hour Marina gives a sign that it is almost time to clear up. Bram is proudly showing his drawing to some other children. "May I show it in the circle, Miss?" He is beaming. The class is assembling in the circle. On the floor there is a varied collection of "Knexx-work", drawings and handicraft. Full of enthusiasm Bram is telling what he has made, while knight Black beard is in his fist.

Project work

In order to base education as much as possible on reality, one works with projects, in which children examine matters that exist in their lives from their own motivation. *Project work* develops when children come across certain questions, problems or themes which strongly appeal to them.



The afternoon is especially aimed at project work. Inviting corners have been arranged in the classroom. On a viewing table there is a wasps' nest with a magnifying glass. Together with some books and flattened wasps under some sellotape, the intense work of a number of children. The house area has changed into a real castle. Honourable ladies and knights are drinking from goblets that had been won before. There are self made shields and flags and battlements have been cut out of cardboard. There are also picture-books and informative books about the age of chivalry. Bram has brought his new bicycle. The table in the circle has been moved aside. Bram and his friends are discussing enthusiastically the things worth knowing about his bike. The words which go together with the bike are written down on rectangular cards and Bram as its real owner may stick the cards with sellotape to the bike. Marina has found a worksheet about bikes in the traffic book with several assignments on it and she puts it incidentally on the circle table. In the handicraft corner two girls are cutting and sticking about "the rabbit". There is some rabbits' food in a smudgy

plastic bag and there are some turds in a small jar.

Workshops

It is important to offer many different forms of activities. This happens in particular during *workshops*. We define *workshops* as separate time units of about half a day in which children can choose from an offer of activities which suppose special materials, a special room and sometimes special guidance. The emphasis in these activities is on the doing, the acting, the being busy actively. Because “doing things oneself” makes experiences remain!



Thursday afternoons are great for Bram: workshops! While first he always chose for a workshop which his mother took care of, he now listens attentively to the supply and makes a conscious choice. Baking cookies, making an excursion to the bicycle repairer, origami, papier mâché, carpentering, pawing.... For Bram the choice is simple this time: pawing! Very pleased he is looking at the telephones, alarm clocks and video apparatus which are there to be broken up with a soft hand. Under guidance of a parent Bram unscrews part for part. The parts are carefully divided over some trays. It is surprising what comes from an alarm clock! Putting things together again is an enormous task. Fortunately the parent has different plans. While using clay Bram may create a new work of art. While delicious baking smells are coming from the kitchen, a surprising new figure is growing under Bram's hands: Knight Black beard.

Free activity

Finally the kids develop best if they can help designing their own development. That is why they have to make choices.

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This is among others possible during the *free activity*. The *free activity* is an organization form in which children have many choices and at which there are as few restrictions as possible. *Friday afternoon is very relaxing. Free choice! A small group of children in group 3/4 is totally under the spell of playing games. On the wall there is a self-invented scoreboard on which it is written who is going to play against whom and how the matches end. A big group chooses for playing in one of the corners: in the building area, the knights' castle, in the handicraft corner and on the blackboards children are very active. In consultation with Marina the children have arranged that Rob from group 8 will give them a training session during the free activity on the little field near the school. While quite excited, Rob and his friends are changing before the training. Nobody has forgotten his sporting bag. Dressed in stout football shirts and with the football ready... heading for the field.” Hey”, Amar shouts, “You were knight Black beard, weren't you? He cannot play football at all”. Bram is*



smiling. A quarter of an hour later Black beard has scored. Amar, who is in the same team, is very happy about that.

The E.O.E. knows several working ways which can also be recognised in other school types. The big difference with other educational concepts is the criteria. E.O.E. schools adapt their education to increase the wellbeing and involvement of the pupils and teachers. This gives a maximum output. Many school systems are based on the (cognitive) results. The E.O.E. tries to offer chances for every child, at every level... every day again.

The definition, concepts and materials of Experiential Education refers to the work of **Ferre Laevers** and The Centre for Experiential Education, Leuven, Belgium. (www.cego.be)