

Farming Throughout the Year

Prague Waldorf School



International Inspiration for Learning Outdoors

Report by Juliet Robertson
December 2008

FARMING THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

PRAGUE WALDORF SCHOOL

Farming is a key outdoor learning context which combines a *Curriculum for Excellence* experiences and outcomes from all curriculum areas. In terms of developing children's understanding of land use and the role of humans in caring for and managing much of our countryside, children need regular opportunities throughout their school years to visit farms and, where possible, have firsthand experience of using tools and growing food.

This case study highlights a very holistic approach to farming by the Grade 3 class at Prague Waldorf School. A similar curriculum is followed in all classes worldwide. The exact nature of each project varies according to location and culture. For example, some Grade 3 classes might have a fishing theme if they are situated beside the sea. The Prague farming project is very established and the strong relationship that has developed between the farmer and this school over the years strongly contributes to the effectiveness and impact of the project.



One chilly day in October the Grade 3 (Primary 5) class had their monthly visit to a farm located outside Prague to prepare the ground and plant wheat for harvesting the following year.

The day began at 8.15am at a Prague subway station. This was the arranged meeting place and parents dropped their children off in the middle of rush hour. The children were unperturbed by the hubbub, clearly used to being together as a class in the city centre.



Figure 1: The journey to and from the farm was a circular trip, adding interest.



Figure 2: The re-built farm

The 22 children and 2 staff members caught a local bus. The ride took 45 minutes, out of Prague, deep into the Bohemian countryside. The class was met in the village of Slapy by the farmer and another parent volunteer. The children led the way to the

farm, knowing where to go and how to behave on a country road with no pavement. The walking pace was brisk. Each child carried their own packed lunch and other personal items in their own backpacks (Fig 1)

The farm was in the middle of construction (Fig 2). When the River Vltava flooded in 2002, the original dwelling had been made uninhabitable. The children used a makeshift toilet in a tiny cabin at the end of a field.



Figure 3: The farmer meeting and greeting the children

The farmer had three daughters attending the Waldorf School and was familiar with the children, staff and parents. He had also undertaken this activity for several years and knew exactly how to manage the children around the farm, tools and animals.



Figure 4: The cultivator being pulled by the children to the field



Figure 5: Scattering the fertilizer on the soil just after it had been cultivated

The day began with a recap of previous visits. The children had attended twice already, to view the previous year's crop. They had prepared the fertilizer according to biodynamic principles on a prior visit. The children had also helped out with other farm activities such as collecting rosehip berries for making syrup.

Then the class had to move the equipment over to the field (Fig 4). There was an old-fashioned cultivator which needed six or seven children to move it, along with various hoes, spades, clippers and hand rakes.



Figure 6: Breaking up the soil. All the children are spaced a safe distance from each other - more than the length of their tool away from another person

The various jobs were distributed. One group of the children removed weeds from field edge with clippers. Others broke up clods of earth using hoes, spades and forks (Fig 6). The soil was fertilised (Fig 5) and everyone helped remove large stones from the soil.

The main task was to loosen the soil with the cultivator which would normally have been pulled by a horse. However kid power did the job nicely (Fig 7). Every child had the chance to pull the cultivator, whilst the farmer steered and issued commands.



Figure 7: Cultivating the soil

When a task ended and no other job was issued the children quietly got on with playing. They created little houses and forts using the mud and stones (Fig 8). This was undirected free play and a good example of how the children were used to playing with whatever materials were to hand rather than relying on ideas supplied by an adult or resources brought in specifically for this purpose.



Figure 8: A miniature house on the edge of the field



Figure 9: The farm cat

The farm cat adored the children and loved all the attention (Fig 9). She was picked up and petted routinely. This was all part of the farm experience and the children were allowed to do this whenever they wanted as a quick break from the task at hand.

At snack time the children had a sandwich which they had brought with them. Early finishers went with their teacher to pick more rosehips. Others read or chatted (Fig 10).



Figure 10: Sharing a storybook brought to the farm.



Figure 11: Circle time

This was followed by a circle time. The children shared their thoughts on the morning events. It was here that the amount of planning and preparation for the farming visit became very apparent. Not only had the teacher covered the technology, science and social studies aspects of the farm visit but this was taught through stories, dances and songs as well.

For example, a story-song-dance took place which talked about the cycle of wheat and the role of the weather and the seasons in the process. The children knew the actions and words and clearly enjoyed their role in performing the dance (Fig 12 and 13).



Figure 12: The girls and boys each had a specific role in the story dance



Figure 13: The dance had been practised beforehand so the children were familiar with the words and actions.

This circle time activity clearly linked into the planting routine. Still wearing the cloths from the circle time session, the children moved back to the field and formed a wide circle around the edge of the area to be sown. Each child was given two ladles of seed, held by the aprons. Quite a number of children enjoyed tasting the grain and chewed it whilst waiting their turn (Fig 16), thereby adding to the sensory experience!



Figure 14: The farmer giving very clear instructions about where and how the seed was to be scattered.

After a dedication, the children in groups of four or five walked across the soil, scattering the seed and saying a blessing (Fig 15). It was very spiritual. The other children remained calm in reflective thought. The moment was not rushed and every child was fully involved. Again it was interesting to see an aspect of religious and moral education naturally integrated into the day, making the connection between spirituality and every day life.



Figure 15: Scattering the seed



Figure 16: Feeling and tasting the grain

Next the fun began! The soil needed to be raked finely. This involved more collective kid power and a lot of cooperation to turn the harrow in accordance with the farmer's instructions. After that the children pulled a big roller across the soil. In order to increase the effect of the roller, a child stood on top as it was pulled over the ground (Fig 17). This required a good sense of balance, humour and a lot of co-operation to ensure the process worked!



Figure 17: Covering the seed!



Figure 18: A quick bowl of soup before departure

Once the seed was sown, the tools were gathered and it was back to the farm for a very quick bowl of homemade soup and bread (Fig 18). The farmer's wife had made both whilst the children were hard at work in the field.

The walk back to the bus stop was remained brisk (Fig 19). I had difficulty keeping up! The buses were not frequent so time keeping was essential. We arrived with only minutes to spare. The children were chatty on the bus back to Prague, clearly pleased with how the day had gone. The children were collected from school around 3pm. It was a slightly longer day than usual. However the teacher felt that the extra time and effort was worth it for the benefit of the experience.

This trip was not an isolated event. The class was due to return twice through the winter months. Once spring arrives, the visits become monthly and continue into the following academic year. The project cumulates with the harvesting of the wheat. It

is then ground into flour and used to bake bread for the whole school as part of the annual harvest celebrations. Thus this project is very clearly linked to the seasons, traditions and patterns within the farming year.



Figure 19: Walking back to the bus stop

Thinking Points:

- 1) Does a farming project feature in the topics covered in your school? How do you or how can you provide practical hands on farm activities?
- 2) The children visited the farm monthly in all seasons except winter. The advantage of this is the familiarity of approach. What can your school do to ensure consistency and progression in terms of learning opportunities provided by farming, both at a farm and in the school grounds?
- 3) The Grade 3 class teacher had spent time preparing her class for each visit. This included stories, songs and activities led by her on the farm. What can you, as a class teacher do, when you visit a farm to support the farmer and enrich the learning opportunities afforded by a farm visit?

The Royal Highland Education Trust works extensively with farmers throughout Scotland to ensure schools can access local farms and have many resources to support schools for before, during and after their visit. For more information, including finding a farm near your school, visit their website: www.rhet.org.uk

This report was compiled by Juliet Robertson, Creative STAR Learning Company, after visiting a variety of schools and other establishments in North America, Sweden and the Czech Republic as part of her 2008 Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship. The Winston Churchill Trust operates Travelling Fellowships as a living memorial to Sir Winston Churchill. For more information visit www.wcmt.org.uk