



THE THREE PILLARS

Equality · Democracy · Creativity



The three pillars, Equality - Democracy - Creativity

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Teachers use different approaches to gather the children together.

Profoundly and wholeheartedly

When I started working as a preschool teacher after my graduation a few decades ago, I had high notions about my job, especially concerning the teachers' influence on children's development in early childhood. I had recently had a daughter myself and was deeply sensitive to the significance, that parents were able to trust the whole team in charge of their children and that they thoroughly and wholeheartedly understood and desired to contribute to the children's development and well-being in the best possible way.

It wasn't long into my career when reality hit me. Many of the methods that were being practiced were not providing the expected results, nor did they correspond to the pedagogical theories that I had studied and held in such high regard. Furthermore, some of the teachers' and staff's approaches were conflicting with my personal values and latest theories on ethics in work with children.



Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir the founder of the Hjalli Model, innovator and advocate for equality, democracy and creativity in pedagogy and education.

Unorthodox territory

My quest for desirable approaches in education has at times led me through unorthodox territory. Some of my ideas, that even started as experiments, have turned out to be so successful that they have remained a fixed feature, and an important component in the Hjalli method. The options' system is one such feature, where the children take a serious part in democratic process and training every single day, and in order to create more freedom for the children in their daily environment. Another element I experimented with, was to seriously diminish the number of conventional toys in the classrooms. There was immediate contentment with that, to the point that open ended materials have been, from the very beginning, one of the Hjalli model's trademarks. The simple approach, making sure the playground was always divided between the different groups of children, so there was always a steady number of children at any given time inside and out, increased the children's opportunities for activities and motion

New approaches

There were numerous things I tried in the beginning as a young nursery teacher, but there was one thing I knew I would have to work on and I didn't know how to approach it. The constant proximity of the two genders turned out to be the main obstruction preventing the ultimate progress I dreamt of for each individual child. In brief, the boys developed their individual skills, with minor training in social skills and the girls developed their social skills but got little training in their individual skills (see The Hjalli Model's Gender Curriculum). It was not until I was offered a post at a new nursery in Hafnarfjörður, Hjalli, that I finally got the opportunity to try out some new approaches that could contribute to equal development of girls and boys and therefore hopefully more equality in our society.

Fundamental equality

The Hjalld Model's single sex school system has clearly turned out to be effective and has established its reputation in Scandinavia, and further afield, as one of the most radical experiments in equality upbringing. Since the early days of Hjalld, many things have changed; girls have become more powerful in terms of individual skills due to growing equality in the society, desegregation of schools has forced teachers to deal with more special aid teaching, and societal conscience regarding trans children's position is heightened. These fundamentals we have worked on as we profoundly celebrate diversity. With flexibility we fashion the school program according to the needs of each individual child that we are entrusted with, from our best ability.

Let us learn from children

This is how I have learnt from children, parents and colleagues; which methods work and which don't, and hence the Hjalld Model is in constant progression. The one thing, however, that always stays unaltered is the foundation of our approach, and our ideology. It is taught and explained in reference books, articles and lectures about the Hjalld Model, and discussed in all our schools. A lot of emphasis is placed on the main principles and the gender curriculum, but in its purest form it all rests on these three pillars; equality, democracy and creativity. Following are several examples that show our ideology in practice and how we react to children, parents and colleagues, founded on the Hjalld Model's life vision and human understanding.

All methods deliberated

It is very important to remember that our methods are not theory-laden, but simply ways to reach certain goals in equality, democracy and creativity. Accordingly, every new approach that is being tried, must be studied to ensure that it is genuinely based on the three pillars. There is e.g. no point in clearing away traditional toys and providing open ended materials, if the teachers are not conscious of simultaneously increasing the cooperation between the children, creatively partaking in their play and hence giving them ideas of how to use the play materials.

Pleasant advancement of the grammar schools

For the first half of my working life I considered early education as a temporary destination. I was definitely heading somewhere else. But the parents and not least the children themselves steadily pulled me back in, so eventually due to their persistence, the Hjalli Model's ideology progressed up to the grammar school level. It turned out to be a pleasant surprise to me and my colleagues, when we realized that despite the difference in teaching methods, as well as the syllabus for the grammar level, the three pillars, equality, democracy and creativity, were just as relevant and applicable.

I hope that those of you who want to get acquainted with the Hjalli Model's fundamental method will find this booklet useful. My hope is that it will guide and explain how the three pillars materialize in everyday practice and what it is that makes us work the way we do.

Yours Magga Pála



It is easy to create magic, when the school day is all about practicing joy and happiness.

The three pillars

The fundamentals of a care oriented and creative democratic ideology

The three pillars are a simple representation of the ideology of the Hjalli-model and encompass both the main principles and the curriculum of the model. All methods and all solutions must undergo a thorough examination of whether they truly rest upon these three pillars: equality, democracy, and creativity.

All fundamental values and educational concepts of the Hjalli model revolve around empowering each child to develop on their own terms, by highlighting their strengths and supporting them so that the child feels secure, can utilize their abilities and enjoy their childhood.

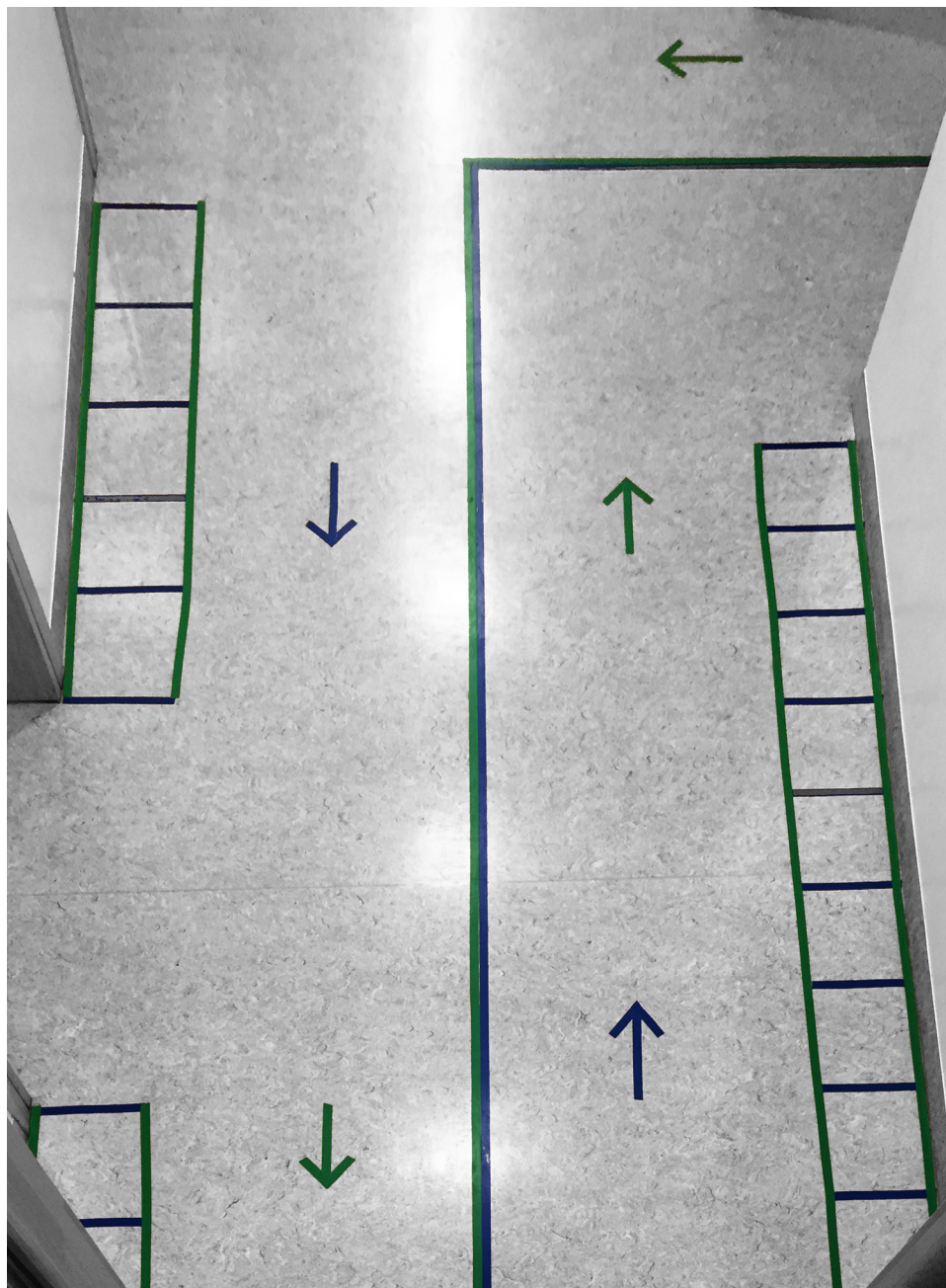


Barefoot and cheerful practicing their courage in a group lesson with their teacher, who actively participates.

Equality

with kindness and joy

Equality is the condition where all individuals within a group or society have the same rights, comparable opportunities, and access to the available resources, while also sharing similar responsibilities.



Simple and quiet environment with moderate visual noise. This facilitates children and adults to “read” their surroundings, helping them to understand and navigate within their environment.

Equality extends to everyone within the group or society, regardless of gender, gender identity, origin, ethnicity, race, appearance, mental and physical abilities, religion, economic status, or other factors.

In the Hjalldi-model approach, we constantly strive to ensure equality through three approaches: the organization of school activities, the culture of the school, and the educational efforts (teaching).

Equality in organization

The CORE principles of the Hjalldi-model are Consistency, Order and Routine. The entire school environment is simple and understandable, with the aim of creating comfort, stability, and security for each child.

- *Clear and tangible instructions, such as traffic signs on the floor, designated clothing areas for outdoor activities, labeled cupboards, drawers, and shelves for materials and toys, are designed to help children quickly and effectively learn about their surroundings.*
- *Each child has their own designated space to keep their clothing, a designated place at the group assembly point, and a drawer to keep their work.*
- *The environment is straightforward, with closed cubbies, walls, and tables free from unnecessary visual distractions (visual noise).*
- *Play materials are simple and encourage cooperation rather than competition.*
- *The daily schedule remains consistent and transparent, ensuring that all children know what to expect each day and what comes next.*
- *Each child belongs to a small group to ensure they all receive equal space and attention - no child is overlooked.*
- *The small group has one or two group leaders who oversee the group for a significant part of the day, during group time and mealtimes.*
- *All children wear school uniforms, placing them on equal footing regardless of their gender or their parents' economic status.*



Practicing fine motor skills with unusual material, which they can nibble at if they wish.



The children's groups are small to assure that all the children get even encouragement and attention. That in itself builds resilience, positivity, and boosts academic confidence.

- *Staff also wear school uniforms to avoid social discrimination, gendered clothing, and to make it easy for children to identify staff members immediately.*
- *Staff harmonize responses and rules, which they all follow and apply consistently throughout the school, including when walking around the school, waiting at designated areas, etc.*
- *Staff are always present and vigilant over the children in all circumstances.*

Equality in culture

Every child is entitled to respect. They should enjoy rights and human dignity, encounter kindness and good care, positive attention and encouragement, and have access to age-appropriate play and education.

- *All aspects of the school's culture should promote cooperation rather than competition.*
- *In daily activities, both children and staff practice respect and positive discipline that creates tranquility and reduces unrest.*
- *Staff harmonize their vocabulary and terminology they use with the children in their work, so that the same words are used for the same things in all classrooms.*
- *Staff commit to practicing positivity, nurturing joy, and showing kindness in their work according to the main principles of the Hjalli-model.*
- *All staff members in our schools commit to flexibility and to serving families, which is why children and families can seek assistance and advice regarding all matters related to the well-being of the children.*
- *Staff greet each and every child with joy and kindness when they come to school.*
- *Each child celebrates their birthday in a special way at school, for example, by creating a meal or baking a cake and inviting their group to a celebration.*

- *A small group with a designated leader ensures that the leaders establish special emotional bonds with their children and have trusted communication with parents.*
- *Children's human rights are respected by allowing them to make choices at the dining table, whether they choose to play outside or inside, and how they dress for outdoor activities.*
- *Quality control includes, among other things, parent surveys to continually improve collaboration between the home and the school.*

Equality in upbringing and teaching

The Hjalli-model utilizes social gender as a tool to overcome the limitations of traditional gender roles and to meet the diverse needs and development of girls, boys, and non-binary individuals.

- *Everything that happens in the work of the single-gender groups reduces gender-based emphases, as nothing is considered "boyish" or "girlish" in the traditional sense - all children try everything and fulfill all roles, making life easier for children who don't fit into traditional boy and girl cultures.*
- *Single-sex school activities are our way towards equality, where children work in single-gender groups for a significant part of the day.*
- *Children who perceive their gender different from their physical sex can choose a group according to their own preference.*
- *Girls and boys have the opportunity to play and learn on their own terms in single-sex peer groups, without the constraints of traditional gender roles.*



Reality based, collaborative projects in group lessons are especially entertaining and a good foundation for communal responsibility.

- *Both girls and boys get to try out various games and tasks that are often associated with the opposite gender and therefore gain new experiences and skills.*
- *All children are trained in all human qualities through supplementary work:*
- *Boys and children with prominent masculine qualities receive additional reinforcement in social skills such as cooperation, caring, closeness, and using words instead of conflict.*
- *Girls and children with prominent feminine qualities receive additional reinforcement in individual qualities such as self-confidence, courage, initiative, and using their voice instead of holding back.*
- *Through supplementary work, all children gain diverse experiences, and their skills gradually become more versatile and comprehensive.*
- *Gender mixing occurs daily, where children of the same age meet and practice respect and communication in organized and teacher-guided activities. This way, the interaction between girls and boys becomes a positive and desirable experience.*
- *The groups are associated with colors such as Red Core (boys) and Blue Core (girls) to break up ideas of “boyish” and “girlish.”*
- *School uniforms are the same for all children, with a choice of two colors, blue and red. Experience shows that these colors seem equally popular among girls and boys.*
- *Play materials are gender-neutral without any gender-specific references, so traditional toys are not used in the school.*
- *Books, stories, songs, and other content are examined based on gender and gender identity references, and only content that meets all requirements for impartiality and equality is selected.*



Boys engage in everyday chores, where the older one teaches the young one, both of them equally proud.

Democracy

with positivity and resilience

**Democracy is a system in
a society where power is
derived from the people who
constitute the society**



Security creates serenity in the same way as competition creates tension. Consistency, Order and Routine are the CORE principles of the Hjalli pedagogy.

Democracy is a system in a society where power is derived from the people who constitute the society. It is important and natural for children to practice expressing themselves openly and freely about all matters that concern them and have an impact on their lives. Adults listen to them, take note of their thoughts, guide them when necessary, and explain how they can use their rights correctly without infringing on the rights of others.

Children develop critical thinking and deliberation in interactions with other children and adults at school. They exchange viewpoints, find solutions, and communicate issues. This way, they grow in openness, empathy, determination, cooperation, expression, and independence. They are all individuals while simultaneously being part of a group and a society characterized by fairness and respectful interactions. In the Hjalld-model approach, we employ democracy as a method for decision-making and nurture democratic thinking through three approaches: the organization of school activities, the culture of the school, and educational efforts (teaching).



Strong girls jump in their own time and way. Each one is unique, but all united in finding their courage.



The children choose comfortable work positions and locations within the classroom. This is decisively a democratic exercise.

Democracy in organization

Each Hjalili-model school is a community with rules and procedures that manifest in the environment and the school's schedule. This is applicable on a larger scale where everyone needs to learn to follow rules.

- *The schedule is consistent every day, providing children with a sense of control over their circumstances.*
- *The school day is divided into group activities on one hand involving tasks and instruction under the guidance of teachers, and on the other hand, free playtime where children choose their activities.*
- *Group activities during the day support each child's personal development, allowing them to practice their abilities and develop new skills. Part of the group activities consists of practicing democratic methods to share resources or resolve disagreements.*
- *All spaces, cupboards, and shelves with materials are clearly labeled to make it easy for everyone to find the resources they need for play and work.*
- *Walkways are marked similarly to roads with centerlines, arrows, and right-of-way signs to ensure safe movement around the school.*
- *Each child has their own designated personal space at the gathering point, marked and delineated.*
- *In the center of the gathering point is a sun, where children can practice presenting themselves and expressing themselves in front of a group.*
- *School uniforms promote equality among children, give them a sense of belonging to a "team" and highlight their importance as active participants in the school's democratic activities.*
- *Children's play times begin with meetings where each child can choose their activities, aligning with their interests and promoting growth in their areas of enthusiasm.*

Democracy in culture

A clear distinction is made between what we consider children's rights and what responsibilities adults should take on as educators.

- *It is democratic to "invite" children to do something rather than "have" them do it. Mandates are undemocratic and not suitable around children.*
- *Self-governance is essential for success in social interactions, thus we practice positive discipline and behavior that supports self-governance.*
- *Rule violations are immediately addressed by staff in a consistent and impartial manner.*
- *Group leaders follow instructions on conduct and whatever else is required to ensure all children practice order and rules and thereby gain an important skill needed in a society.*
- *Courage is practiced in various contexts, such as specific exercises and meetings. Courage is developed during democratic meetings by practicing how to stand up for oneself, one's interests, and opinions.*
- *In gender-mixed and age-mixed group activities, protected conditions are provided for children to express themselves in front of the group, negotiate, engage in enjoyable activities, and try new skills.*
- *In daily age mixing during free play times, cooperation is practiced between groups with varying developmental stages and abilities, such as older and younger children.*
- *Group leaders are quick to assist a child who is struggling in behavior with firm kindness.*
- *Children have the right to assess the weather before dressing for outdoor activities.*
- *Children can always visit the bathroom when needed.*
- *Children have the choice of breakfast and what they eat, but are encouraged to include practice bites.*



Soft friendly hands during a compensation exercise, where the boys train closeness, affection, security and expression.

- *Children are never forced to finish their meals or to eat quickly as they need to learn about their own bodily cues.*
- *Children can bring items or toys from home to show their friends (children's needs are not disruptive) and then keep them in their cubby when not in use.*

Democratic upbringing and teaching

Rules of interaction teach children about their freedom and rights within the limits that their freedom and rights do not infringe upon the freedom and rights of others.

- *Children choose their tasks for play time, that makes up half of the day. The teacher plans the other half of the day; group sessions/teaching hours, but children regularly have the opportunity to influence their content and tasks.*
- *Play time begins with a formal meeting where the children take turns choosing their task according to transparent rules, and a limited number can choose each play-area at once.*
- *During these meetings, children are trained to know their preferences, express them positively, and ultimately accept the disappointment when a certain play-area is occupied.*
- *Children influence their environment by participating in planning group times with their teacher and by suggesting what they want to learn and do.*
- *Children participate in discussions and decisions about play-areas, activities, and the number of children in each area.*
- *Democratic meetings are held regularly to practice giving children even more influence over their environment, such as making suggestions for the school's menu, discussing rules, and more.*
- *Real-life related tasks are prominent during group times to promote community responsibility. Cleaning, gardening, recycling, cooking, repairs, and selecting play equipment are examples of real-life related tasks that benefit both the school and the children equally.*
- *Visits to retirement homes to bring joy or help, field trips to cultural institutions, companies, and workplaces enhance the children's sense of participation in the local community.*
- *Leadership training is a daily part of the work, such as being a leader for one week at a time, where the child leads the group and sets an example for others.*



Through choice meetings, the children train their ability to know what they desire and to choose between two or more options. That is how they learn never to take anything in their life for granted and always to be ready to scrutinize their circumstances in every aspect.

Creativity

with respect and freedom

**Creating is the process
of generating ideas for
innovations or new solutions
and possibilities that can
solve problems, express
emotions or opinions, and
entertain ourselves or
others**



Self-empowerment is an exercise in courage, breaking predetermined mind frames of what is allowed and what not, like rolling in flour without worrying about others' opinion.

Creativity involves breaking up predefined ideas or mental frameworks to allow new thinking to emerge. The prerequisites for creative thinking are flexibility, originality, and curiosity. By supporting children in developing these aspects within themselves, they acquire the ability to create their own lives.

In the Hjalli-model approach, we continuously aim to promote creativity through three approaches: the organization of school activities, the culture of the school, and the educational efforts (teaching).

Creative organization

The entire structure and environment of the school are simple and well-defined so that no energy needs to be spent on trivial details. A serene environment and subtle stimuli provide children with opportunities to rest their senses and enhance their own creativity and ideas.

- *Each core group is self-sustaining, and staff members manage all their affairs as needed. They plan the work when absences occur (utilizing group swaps), replenish supplies such as play-dough, ensure that materials in play-areas are in order, keep hygiene products available in the restroom, and so on.*
- *Staff members democratically organize positions for play-times and exchange times, and distribute group session resources and areas fairly between themselves.*
- *The environment is serene, free from clutter and distractions, to foster mental openness for children's own thoughts and imagination.*
- *Colors are gentle, and furnishings are made from natural materials whenever possible.*



Nature is an endless source of new impressions and everything becomes playing materials.

- *The only stimulating elements on the walls of group rooms are objects with multifaceted purposes, such as bulletin boards for the children's own work or organized displays.*
- *The stimulating items present in communal spaces are preferably of natural origin such as colorful fish tanks, plants and stones.*
- *Walls are often minimally decorated to avoid excessive distractions in daily workspaces unless children are working on significant projects, exhibitions, or specific ideas.*
- *Children's works are displayed for a specific period, and only as long as they serve their purpose, such as showing them to their families when the work is completed. Afterward, they are removed, as children's attention span is so rapid that stimuli lose their purpose as incentives within a few days.*
- *Containers for open-ended play materials and materials for group sessions with teachers are closed to prevent clutter and chaos, and tables and countertops are organized and tidy when not in use.*
- *Recyclable materials from the school or brought from home are utilized in activities and crafts.*



These islanders examine the capelin with great interest.



When repair and maintenance is needed in the schools, the gadget sisters are summoned!

Creative culture

“Creating your own life” is a phrase that is used to explain the foundation of creative culture according to the understanding of the Hjalli-model.

- *Our principle of equality involves supporting all children in gaining the sense of security and autonomy that enable them to trust themselves, their emotions, solutions, and ideas each day.*
- *Computers and smart devices are not used without a creative purpose, as there's no need to add to the general screen time that children experience at home. Such screen usage has the same effect as distractions, reducing imaginative power.*
- *During play time, children have access to open-ended materials such as clay, play-dough, wooden blocks, various types of paper and fabrics, blankets, pillows, cushions, etc., which they can use in any way they choose.*
- *Open-ended materials never come with only one predefined solution, such as jigsaw puzzles or pattern games, where children need to find the “correct” solution that someone else has designed.*
- *Open-ended materials demand more from children and require patience, persistence, and resilience, as the items themselves don't inherently provide entertainment value but rather act as props. The use of open-ended materials supports original and solution-oriented thinking, as children need to put in effort to initiate enjoyable play.*
- *Gender-specific materials are never present, allowing everyone the freedom to play without being restricted by stereotypes of how boys or girls “should” play.*

- *Plastic materials and items are not preferred during children's play time.*
- *Play time is controlled by the children themselves and the adults only intervene to provide support. Independence and self-confidence increases, providing the basis for approaching solutions in their lives in a creative manner.*
- *The Hjalld-model play materials are different from the toys most children have and use at home. This widens the children's experiences, and preschool becomes an extension of the home environment.*
- *Traditional children's books are used, and groups visit libraries which we use extensively. Group leaders assist in selecting books to ensure that they don't contain prejudiced views towards people based on factors like gender, skin color, or disabilities.*
- *It is preferable to "read together" with a small group at a time to facilitate discussions, questions, and ideas – even engaging in role play and recreating events from the books.*
- *The school's books are, for instance, photobooks where Hjalld-model prefers real-life photos that stimulate emotions and creative thought, as opposed to adult-drawn illustrations that interpret reality for the children.*
- *Music is never used as background noise; it's only used as a part of ongoing activities.*
- *Group leaders are always active participants in the group's tasks and demonstrate enthusiastic leadership instead of leaving children to complete group activities by themselves.*
- *Group leaders practice unconventional behavior to break up mental frameworks of both children and adults. They step outside the normative behavior to broaden perspectives and open the children's minds to various possibilities.*



Practicing impartiality, independence and tolerance through dancing with joy and beauty, because everything that happens in the boys' classroom is boyish.

Creative upbringing and teaching

The role of the school and teachers is to foster innovative thinking by encouraging children to think beyond boundaries, analyze needs, and work with solution-oriented approaches. "Everything can be helped except helplessness."

- *Emphasis is placed on unconventional tasks and approaches to create new life experiences for children and strengthen their cognitive development during crucial formative times. Children's ideas about group work are also celebrated. Ideas can always be adapted and simplified to be executed with creative energy and children's desire to influence their own lives.*
- *Group leaders respond positively to mistakes, which are integral to the creative process. It's beneficial to practice tasks that lead to mistakes and/or result in poor outcomes, such as drawing with the non-dominant hand, painting with twigs, drawing without looking at the paper, building with adventure cubes and branches, etc. A fear of making mistakes hinders the development of creative thinking.*
- *Confidence-building exercises are examples of activities that challenge mental boundaries of what is possible and what is not. These exercises are practiced in order to achieve deeper creative perspectives.*
- *All children practice expressing their feelings and ideas, enhancing self-esteem, self-confidence and expression.*
- *Outdoor activities take place in all weather conditions and circumstances, as nature itself is variable, constantly presenting new challenges and creating new inspiration.*
- *Decades of experience with open-ended play at the Hjalli-model schools have shown that our children's play is versatile and endlessly evolving, bringing immense joy to all participants with a great variety, new ideas, and continuous creativity.*

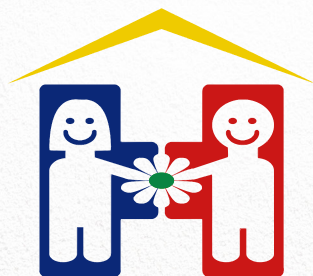


Magic happens in group lessons, when hearts, hands and minds are joined in the mixed gender settings.

- *Considerable emphasis is placed on teachers telling stories, while also providing children the opportunity to create their own stories. It's also enjoyable and beneficial to compose and rehearse plays and present them to friends and family, or even during school assemblies.*
- *Children create their own books with drawings and/or text that they draw and write themselves or with the assistance of teachers.*
- *Children create their own color books when the group photocopies drawings from everyone in the group, resulting in each child receiving a book with drawings from all. Groups also create photo-books featuring images of the children's activities within the preschool.*
- *Children also create their own puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, and bingo games with the teacher's assistance.*
- *We choose to listen to and dance to world music, folk music, and classical music that inspires creative thinking. Music is never used as background noise.*
- *Children and staff sing extensively, as singing enhances language comprehension and children's expressive abilities, brings the groups together, and generates joy.*
- *Children should have the opportunity to improvise and compose light rhythms and melodies using school instruments such as shakers, drums, and bell instruments.*



Girls and boys join in different projects daily, where the journey is more important than the final product.



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Stoðirnar þrjár
á íslensku



The three pillars
in English