

"If there is something I can give them, it would be the experience of being listened to"

- Offering Council in a Swedish kindergarten -



In February I sat down with Sabine Håkansson, ECN member from Skåne, Southern Sweden, for a Skype interview on her experience of offering Council at a local kindergarten for children between 2 and 5. There are 14 kids to the kindergarten group.

In this talk Sabine shares stories and best practices from this special Council field. You'll learn how a toy chicken, called *chicken*, can assist in bringing a lively bustling crowd of kids together in a circle and that sometimes children can surprise you with their own inventive ideas of how to use the talking piece.

Andrea: What would you say, are you of Council? On what path are you, if on any, the carrier path, the facilitator's or trainer's?

Sabine: I have a difficulty knowing the difference of all those words, but I would say, I am a human being who is really fond of the way of thinking in Council and I use it daily. Sometimes I use it really as a Council facilitator, like at the moment [...]. Every Wednesday and Friday morning it's my turn to open the kindergarten. There are just 14 children at the kindergarten all together and I've never experienced that all are there in the morning. Most the of the time, I am having about seven, eight children. The hour between 6:00 and 7:00 am, or sometimes 7:30 am when the children are arriving, I decided to use for a kind of Council. It's of course not the Council in the way that you light a candle and things like that, but since I've started there, I prepare some cushions and I have a talking car in the middle. The children know, when I am there in the morning, they go straight away to that room and sit down, they choose a cushion and sit there and they know, they're allowed to tell me something which has happened or they dreamed of. That's the most "official" way I am using Council at the moment, as a facilitator.

A: Why did you think, it would be a good idea to have Councils at the kindergarten or a way of Council? What made you try?

S: Oh, I really don't know, what made me do that. I just think it was enthusiasm about having a tool which is so good and so great. I really wanted to share it with the children, because I thought, they can use it for the rest of their lives and it's a great gift or opportunity for me to meet them. I stay there for just half a year and if there is something I can give them, it would be the experience of being listened to, because already very young children have to be in the kindergarten for sometimes about eight, nine, ten hours a day. I felt, they need grown-ups to listen to them in the way Council offers, not just in the normal way at the kindergarten where you do a lot of things and use your hands and eat and all that, no in the Council way.

A: Did you explain to your employers that you intend to sit in those Council rounds with the children? Did you just start to do it or did you ask permission?

S: Neither the parents nor the people who are working there ever asked me what it is? I actually just started, because I thought, I do it in a way no one can come and say: you're not allowed to do that, because it's just one way of gathering. And I thought, I really want to get the kids to get used to it.

At the moment, I am just kind of preparing the kids, I show them how to use their place, how to use their toy car, the talking piece, to be quiet, to stay if they can, to listen to the others. I never did it the right way :-), you know, when you sit down and you say, you have the four intentions. Never like that, because they are just between 2 and 5, so it's a really different way of introducing it.

A: What vocabulary did you use, how did you approach them, how did you explain it to them? What worked?

S: It's very basic. The first time I put the cushions on the floor, the little toy car in the middle and I said: *let's go into a room and sit down. And they sat down. And what are we going to do now? I just said: Well, if anyone of you wants to tell me something, just take the car and the one who has the car, can either tell me or show me.*

I remember the first Wednesday, the first time I ever did that, – I think, we were three children in the morning – there was a 5 year old girl who took the car right away and told me about what she had dreamed that night. And she put it back. There was another girl, she is 4, who took the car and started to drive the car around in the room – that was her way, she didn't want to say anything. She just drove the car around, but I realized, it was not just playing around, she knew, this car at the moment is my possession, I can do whatever I want with it if I want to drive around. After a while she stopped and put it in the middle again. And then there was the little sister of the 5 year old. She didn't do anything, she was just smiling.

That's the way I try. It's very much like this: The 2 year olds are getting up and starting to run around, it's never really quiet, there are things happening all the time, but slowly, it's like, you know, a dance. I realize, they know to sit on the cushions and even the 2 year olds know to go and choose, to pick a cushion or they sometimes take the car and put it back, things like that. So, they are getting it very very slowly, they know the signs. They start to know the signs.

A: Are they listening when someone else is talking?

S: Yes, sometimes they are, sometimes they really are and very often they are not. It's amazing, because if you imagine, there are sometimes two more children coming just ten, five or three minutes after we've sat down. I haven't come to that point yet, that we can really sit like the old ones, but I am really patient, because I know, they need a long time just to get used to that scenery and to know, yes alright, Wednesdays and Fridays we sit on the cushions and we have the car in the middle, just to get that feeling of that atmosphere.

Just on Friday, something happened: I think, we were five sitting in the circle and the oldest one told a story. There was also a 2 year old and it was her turn – very often they ask: is it my turn now? With just 2 years, two of them can't even speak. One of the 2 year olds though took the car, not in the first kind of round, but in the second, she took the car and she had never ever taken the car before, because she's a very shy girl... I have been working down there for five weeks and now after five weeks this 2 1/2 year old girl who up till now didn't even want to touch the car in the middle, took it. She looked down and just held the car and after a while put it back. And I recognized this, I mean you have seen that very often with grown ups too and just regular Council circles, haven't you?

So, she didn't play around, she didn't say anything, she just took the car and I could feel that she knew, now the others are looking and she could cope. She could take it that we were waiting for her. That was so wonderful!

A: So it really pays off to be patient with them, very patient and there's no pressure at all?

S: No, I think, it shows the way of being really patient. I have no after-six-weeks-they-have-to-do-that agenda... I really look at the group and take it as it comes and even if after this half year, they haven't achieved sitting in a circle for more than ten seconds, that will be okay, too.

A: Is it more like you just open the space and they can tell you what they'd like or are there sometimes specific topics or questions you address?

S: Both. I asked them one morning if they have dreamed something. Another morning, I started the Council by telling them what I had experienced and that had the effect that they answered. Now it happens very often that they already have something to tell in the morning. They come, sit down and want to tell me something which they have experienced.

A: Did you choose the talking piece, did they or did you choose it together?

S: There's another story coming now. Actually, it was the first day, I just chose the blue talking toy car. I thought, it's easy, it was just lying there. And then of course, the second or third time, there was a child saying No, that's not enough, we need another one. So, most of the time, we have two or three different talking pieces in the middle.

One day, I had this car and a toy plastic airplane in the middle and I went out to greet a child who was arriving. When I came back, this 5 year old girl had put a toy on each cushion and I said: Oh well, we can't have it like that, because then everyone has a talking piece. How shall we do that, because how do we know, who is going to talk and when? She was quiet for a while and you know what she said then? Ok, now we have one talking piece each and to make it work, we are only allowed to use it once. And I just thought, that's just perfect, just imagine: each of you has a talking piece and to make it work, you are only allowed to use it once. You can decide. I thought, well then everyone wants to talk at the same time. And she said: No, you're only allowed to use it once.

A: And did you try it that way?

S: Actually, I think we did it two children and then they forgot about it. But I wrote it down and I thought, this way I really would like to try with adults some time. I thought, this is such a great idea. So, I really would like to try it in a real adult Council one day.

A: Great. Are you offering games to get them into the mode...

S: No, because at the moment, it's so easy to get them to sit down. But, we do have chicken.

A: Oh ja, the chicken story.

S: Yes and chicken is very very important. Chicken is about five centimeters big, yellow and it looks like a cuddly toy. It's like a real small chicken and the thing with chicken is: where the chicken's feet should be, it has a battery, too and if you put both your fingers on the two buttons, it will say "beep beep beep". The great thing is, you have to use both of your fingers, because then the circuit is closed. And they, of course, love chicken. Chicken is just coming on Wednesday and Friday mornings and they're allowed to put their fingers on it and it says "beep beep beep". The older ones, they know now, if we hold hands and one of us is taking one foot of chicken and the one who is next to that person is taking the other foot of chicken, then the

circle of all of us will be closed and then chicken is going “beep beep beep”, too. They know how to close the circle and they play around, because every time they close the circle it says “beep”. So, they’re really looking forward to hold chicken and to just get it to make a sound. I think, chicken for them is very much Council. It’s a bribe, I guess, but they’re expecting both chicken and cushions. :-)

A: It’s very much adjusting to the group, to their age and to the circumstances. Is that sort of your opening?

S: Not the opening, because I want them to take the talking piece and tell something and listen to each other. Chicken is more like the glue ... to postpone and to get their attention back and things like that.

A: Do you have a way of closing?

S: Most of the time the closing way is that, now we are all going to make breakfast together. Because, very often after like half an hour, most of the children got there and also very often after much coming and going, they really need to move. They can’t cope with sitting down on cushions for more than twenty minutes, half an hour. Then they really need to scream and run around and things like that.

A: As you said, you’re very patient and you take it as it comes. You read the field and adjust to what is there. Is there any difficulty, any challenge that is hard to deal with or was in the beginning?

S: Yes, at the moment there is. It is that they are so different in their interest of sitting and telling and using the language. There are six 5 year old children and they are so different in the way they are. One boy is really not into talking, he is into screaming and running around, that is his energy. And one boy is really into talking. One girl is really like an adult having the control, she is already having a kind of feeling, what is needed here? So, the challenge is, to include those really different kinds of persons – the boy who wants to move, maybe for five seconds, and still to give the attention to that other boy who is really loving to talk. They’re not at all in one minute on the same level, it’s more like five seconds on the same level. It’s very short short times they are... That’s really a challenge.

A: How do you handle that?

S: At the moment I just read the field as you said or read the person and I am very tolerant. I am really tolerant, because if I just have the patience, I will have them there when times comes.

A: Has anything changed with the kids or in class since you’ve started these morning rounds? Have you gotten any feedback from your colleagues?

S: No, I wonder if they wonder? Because I thought, if I get the kids there to let’s say be able to sit for two or three minutes, the older ones, I have in my future plans, that I would invite the others too. But I would really like to prepare them more, so they can see there is something. Because at the moment, I don’t think they could see anything yet. My hope is, that before I am leaving – that’s my picture of where I want to be in the summer, that the kids and the teachers are sitting in a circle and the parents are sitting around us. And we can have a circle for just a few minutes.

I also told the lady who is in charge if there is an opportunity for me to someday take the bigger group, the four and five year olds for something to do, I am really happy to do that and then I would sit in Council with them. She heard that and well, she hasn't asked me about it yet.

A: What are your future aspirations with Council in schools, are there any? Are you hooked, would you like to work in other schools and go deeper with CIS or Council in kindergarten with younger kids?

S: I am hooked in a way that I will have done Council in schools before. It's not that I see myself selling Council and being a facilitator and say that's what I do. Whenever there is a need though or a possibility, I am sure I will take it.

A: Maybe you can share some best practices from your experience so far? Do you have advice for teachers who work with really young kids, how to go about it, how to start it?

S: I think, one trick is to be there, really be there, meet the kids, not like a teacher or someone who's going to work there. But to get their attention like ... I am really interested in you, as a human being to a human being. I know that takes a lot of energy and I am not sure that if you were working at that place for twenty years, you could cope, because it takes so much from you. But really meeting the children, really meet them not as a grown up or a teacher, but human being to human being. Because I realize if you meet children in that way, they love you, they accept you as a human being. They don't know „this or that“ or have prejudices. They are just so open and so willing to meet you as a human being and that's the way...

A: So, it's on eye level, it's on heart level...

S: Yes.

A: Deep respect for their world as well?

S: Eye level and heart level and deep respect. That's just right. Not intellectual. And if you are willing to be there with all of you and all your heart – you have the best Council participants you can ever wish for.

A: Of course, there are pretty obvious ones, but what are the main differences between Councils with adults and kids or younger people?

S: Yes. One difference – and I am not sure if I am expressing it in the right way, because I don't know if there is a difference like that. But in my words, one big difference is, the children are on heart level right away. It's not so much an intellectual way. It's so much more work with grown ups or adults or even 14, 15 or 16 year olds, because we already have such a big intellect which is judging, saying this is good or not. Children don't have that yet. So it's heart level directly. And they just love it. It's so much easier for me. I don't have to think so much, it's more like tapping into it and there you are. That's one big difference for me.

A: Not to generalize too much, but it sounds to me that they're in a way closer to the practice than adults are, because they haven't gone through a big socialization yet. They are somewhat "purer"... and this is actually a very pure practice ...

S: Yeah, it really is. That's what, I think, I love with Council, it's seems so pure, so into the heart and so human.

A: Also, when you explained the field before and all the different things that happen there all of the time, I got the feeling that it's easier to actually accept all that as part of the field, as part of the Council. Whereas with adults, you sometimes might feel more quickly that an interruption of some sort, could get you out of or distract you from the sacred space. With kids from what you said, it seems, you just can't think in that terms. With them it seems easier to accept everything that's happening... as part of the field?

S: Exactly. And they don't mind a child playing and coming back, in a way it's much easier to hold the field, yes. Even if it seems like there is no field, but yes there is.

A: Imagine you had a chance to attend a training for CIS teachers or carriers who want to implement or offer CIS? What would your burning questions be? Are there any insecurities, things you really would need help or support with. If there are any.

S: At the moment I am quite happy, because it seems to me, I have so many tools and so much experience I can cope. But that's only at the moment. I haven't experienced something I haven't been able to cope with yet. I am knocking on wood.

And I guess, there is something which could be a problem for me. For example, if I were to offer Councils like in kindergarten and schools and to really go to places and bring it, I would really have a hard time to find the right words, to put it and to explain it and to know what is allowed and not allowed, because for me it's so „natural“ ... And it's nothing harmful, nothing devilish, it's nothing against the law... I would have millions of difficulties to find the right words and being put into the limitations which there are in society at the moment. I can really imagine me coming into really difficult situations if I had to mind all those things you have to mind if you're "official".

A: Assuming you have one, what is your wish for this work?

S: Well, my wish for this work is, just to share it, because I think Council like it is meant to be, not like a tool you're going to seminars for, but this Council way of being is part of you just in a natural way. I think, it would make you a happy human being. Thank you for asking and it was great to share it.

When I checked back how things are going almost 6 weeks after our interview Sabine said: It's been going great. On Monday we sat in circle together with the 2 other teachers for the first time and the children were really proud to show them how we usually come together in the mornings. We're getting there, slowly, slowly ... to be continued.

Interview with Sabine Håkansson, Sweden
Andrea Widegreen, Germany
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