

From view-change to Bordercrossing in Haninge

autumn-winter 2017-18

Building where we put our feet down

“With *Bordercrossing*, we wanted to take an extra step. But also to celebrate everything that we had done since our ‘view-change’” says Maria Pelle-Bäck, central atelierista in Haninge municipality (near Stockholm) where she is the project leader for *Bordercrossing*, when she and her colleague Lucila Belén Bagalà, atelierista in the preschools in Central Handen, welcome the visit from *Modern Childhood* so they can tell us about what the exhibition has meant for their preschools. The exhibition will soon be packed up and transported to Södertälje to be inaugurated there, where it will have the company of a new atelier while the Haninge atelier will remain there as a part of their continued work for better quality and greater equity in all of the municipality’s 43 preschools. After *Bordercrossing*, instead their re-cycling and education centre KreMiMa will move in with the atelier. And soon they too will have almost 300 of their own ‘grains of gold’, one from every preschool unit, to continue to work with.

“Here you can see our development line from 2004,” says atelierista **Lucila Belén Bagalà**, when she and **Maria Pelle-Bäck**, give us a quick summary of what has happened after the municipality’s ‘view-change’ up to *Bordercrossing*.

“At first, there was a top-down perspective here, from politicians, civil servants and preschool directors, because there was so much that needed to be re-viewed, changed, and that was good and important then. But it wasn’t until our project *Bygga drömvär(l)den* (Construct dream values/world) – a project for all the preschools in Haninge municipality – two years ago that we started to talk about values, that I consider we really started to build up our equity. It was then that something really did happen in our organisation. The last few years, we have changed it to a leadership directed more towards the process, so that not just the twelve preschool directors in the central management group govern us, but also KreMiMa, our re-cycling and education centre, a quality group which also includes educators,” Maria explains.

“Yes, because it is always a priority for us that *everyone* is included. The educators who work with the children in everyday practice together with the preschool directors, the atelieristas, the pedagogistas...” Lucila adds.

It was not until they started working with the preparations for *Bordercrossing*, and working with the actual exhibition, that these groups became a more unified group – before that, they had been more separated, in as much as KreMiMa worked in a more practical vein, with the hundred languages. But *Bordercrossing* has meant much more than that.

“Especially the educators who have been responsible for manning the exhibition here have really experienced an enormous development of their competence,” Lucila tells us. But their colleagues too, since all preschool teachers and child-care assistants, a total of approximately 900 educators in Haninge’s preschools, have each had a training day here. Something that Maria and Lucila





have already begun to notice in the ‘grains of gold’ that the educators now bring forth together with their children in the preschools. The grains of gold are a sort of example in themselves of the border-crossing investigative activities like those that the preschools in Reggio Emilia share with us on the exhibition hangings, and which everyone has had the chance to try out in practice in the atelier during the autumn and winter.

“An important lesson for us has been that the work here in the atelier becomes deeper and more developmental if the educators and the children have the chance to ‘warm up’ before, by having a starter of some sort that can help them to direct their attention and get going. What we saw was that there was a great difference between those who had something with them from their preschool, from a project there, when they came to the atelier. Although it worked just as well if they simply went outside first and could bring something in from our fine nature here in the vicinity of the Rudan Centre,” Maria explains.

“Environment and material can have an ability to direct sensitivity in the direction one wishes. Here, we have been able to show the intelligence of the materials and talk about their possibilities and secrets,” Lucila continues.

And about listening to the children. Then even experienced atelieristas like Maria and Lucila can catch sight of new things in the material they have had in front of them for months. Like the girl who pointed out that if there was lots of large material in a room then there must also be small ones.

When *Bordercrossing* came to Haninge last autumn, it was the first time an exhibition from the municipal preschools in Reggio Emilia was shown in Sweden since *A child has a hundred languages* in 1981 and *More about hundred languages* in 1986 at Moderna Museet in Stockholm. But, as compensation, *Bordercrossing* is going to go on tour for several years, to more municipalities in Sweden, where – just like in Haninge – they are going to use the exhibition to work with their own preschool development. Now it is Södertälje that takes over, which will host the exhibition in March and April of 2018.

When *Bordercrossing* was inaugurated in September 2017 in Haninge, atelierista **Vea Vecchi**, from Reggio Emilia, pointed out that now we need to find new relations and links to be able to solve severe challenges that the world is currently facing, and to do that we must ask new questions: “I believe that everybody must train to do this, but especially we educators, if we are going to be able to re-form our thoughts and take ourselves through borders in a new way.”

In Haninge, the municipal politicians seem to want to do it too, especially in preschools, and they have long since succeeded in cooperating across political boundaries in their policy on this. Like when *Modern Childhood*, eight years ago, met politicians from different parties, and the director of education **Mats Öhlin** then told about how Haninge in 2004 had the very lowest school results in the country, with “40 percent of the pupils in year nine not achieving a minimum passing grade, 40 percent of the pupils in year one not learning to read, and 40 percent of the teachers not believing that all the pupils would reach the goals.” (From *Modern Childhood* 2/10). To find out why it was so bad, they undertook a comprehensive study which led to Haninge’s previously mentioned ‘view-change’ when it was decided that everybody – educators, school leaders, civil servants and politicians – would start to focus on the learning environments instead of blaming the children. It was also then that they realised what an important role preschool has, and that they should be given more resources, especially considering that a large part of Haninge’s preschools were on a rather low level at that time.

“Ever since then, we have worked to raise the quality and the equity in all our preschools,” says Maria Pelle-Bäck, who describes how they – like many other municipalities today – also struggle with the problem of too large groups of children and too few preschool teachers. Besides which, Haninge is a municipality with large geographical and social differences. Here is everything from sparsely populated rural areas in the archipelago to the high-rise flats from the ‘million-flats’ programme in the 1960s and 1970s with relatively high unemployment, low income levels and a very fluid population, as well as many different mother tongues.



“All the politicians have been here at the exhibition and they have also held a committee meeting here so we could show them in our atelier what a rich environment can mean. And how important it is to be able to feel that somebody cares about it being nice where you are, that you have the possibility to be creative, and that there is lots of material for that. All that together creates security too,” Maria explains.

When the director of education Mats Öhlin talked at the opening last year, he reminded us – and you could see how proud he was – that: “I said early on that we shouldn’t just travel to Reggio Emilia and be inspired by them, but that Reggio Emilia should also come here one day and now they are here.”

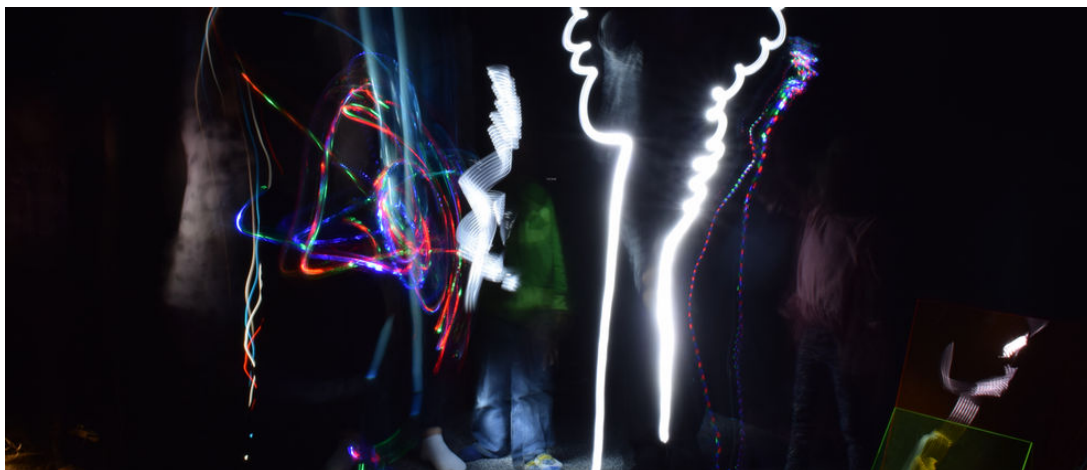
Since then, Haninge has also had a delegation with politicians, civil servants and pedagogical leaders on a visit from Reggio Emilia. Atelieristas **Marco Spaggiari** and **Federica Castrico** from Reggio Emilia have also been there, and cooperated with Swedish atelieristas **Ebba Thorell** and **Maria Kozłowska**, and designer **Karin Gandini**, to create and build up the atelier for the exhibition on behalf of Reggio Emilia Institutet.

“It was really stimulating when they were here. During those days we learnt so incredibly much,” Maria Pelle-Bäck recalls.

Lucila Belén Bagalà tells us that she comes from Reggio Emilia where she trained and worked for several years as a preschool teacher at the Nido Scuola Otello Sarzi preschool. But a few years ago she wanted to give herself a challenge in a new context and she then chose to move to Sweden, and Haninge, above all for the natural surroundings there.

Apart from the responsibility for Haninge’s part of the exhibition, Lucila and Maria have built up the KreMiMa group together (the group is linked with the recycling and education centre). In the Haninge part, they have also created a black room where children and adults have been able to paint with light and movements, like a sort of ‘sign in space’. First out in the light, and then inside the darkness.





Yet another example of crossing boundaries, which is exactly what the *Bordercrossing* exhibition wants to encourage. Now they are going to make the room into a 'White box' instead, Lucila tells me before we move on to the atelier, and enter the sound room which was originally difficult for visitors to grasp.

"It has gradually become a really important room. But that room really made considerable demands on us. Here, we couldn't just let children and educators loose, because then they weren't free, but we had to think again. So we chose two aspects to delve into deeper here, smells and movements, which they could transform into sounds, so that we would begin to understand sound as a material," says Maria, continuing: "The sound room really has helped us not to be so concerned about looking for results even in other contexts, and to see that we can learn things without there being any results that can be compared with what others have done."

Everywhere, a Winter day like this, in all the rooms we pass through, there are signs from nature, albeit not quite so colourful as when *Modern Childhood* was here in Autumn.

"Before we opened, there was a jungle inside the entrance when all the preschools came here with everything the children had gathered together," Lucila tells us. Because children and educators in Haninge haven't only visited the exhibition and the atelier to investigate and learn, but have also joined in and contributed to it.

"When they came here we could tell them that their plants, pine cones, stones, leaves, skeletons were spread out here. We also asked them to send pictures from their preschools to the Haninge part.

"Many of their processes here have also left mark. Like all films in the black room, the sounds in the sound room and the pictures the educators have sent to us after they have been here to show how they continue working with this at their own preschools. This has given us lots of new ideas. And Lucila and I have had a place where we have been able to meet the children in their investigative efforts

together with their educators, and have tested so many different things with them. This has meant that we are now working on two completely new specialised courses that we realise we need to put together for Haninge's educators."

Because just like Maria Pelle-Bäck's colleague **Henrik Lindh**, central preschool director, pointed out at the opening: "Preschool needs to be a place for knowledge, development and investigation."

"Here we really have been able to show how that can be done," Maria went on, remembering when she worked with a large group of children and thought they came from the same preschool because they were working so well together.

"Then I found out that they didn't know each other at all, but came from different preschools. Here, the educators have also been able to see what environment and material can mean when many children have been here at the same time, and it has nevertheless been calm and that the children have been completely concentrated," says Maria.

"We have a documentation room here too, where you can gather together ideas and processes while you are here," Lucila goes on to explain, and shows us documentation files in different colours that are spread over the floor.

"Now it is we who are building where we put our own feet down," says Maria, before she and Lucila have to return to the KA-group to go on working with that.

Text: Maria Herngren
Photos: Maria Pelle-Bäck
Lucila Belén Bagalà
Translation: Rod Bradbury

Bordercrossing

Bordercrossing is an exhibition from Reggio Emilia in Italy, which is now touring in Sweden under the auspices of Reggio Emilia Institutet.

In every municipality where it is shown, the institute also constructs an atelier as part of the exhibition and which remains after the exhibition has moved on.

In the atelier, visitors can themselves test ways of meeting nature with various types of analogue and digital expressions, just like there have been many examples of from the preschools in Reggio Emilia in the exhibition.

Modern Barndom (Modern Childhood)
Reggio Emilia Institutet
Box 34203
SE-100 26 Stockholm
www.reggioemilia.se