

Keys to the world: Unique places, learning and possibilities in the hands and minds of children

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Think about your first trip to a new and distant land. Most likely you had to have a valid passport that was checked upon arrival. You were met by a place that looked different from home – filled with new sounds, smells, tastes and experiences. Surely you found some of them intriguing, others nothing special to note, and yet others uncomfortable or, quite honestly, truly baffling. You were relieved to find that there were some things that were just like home. As far as language, perhaps you knew a little from before or picked helpful phrases, such as “thank you” and other helpful phrases for getting by as the days went on. It was fun to interact successfully with the locals, wasn’t it – particularly those times when you managed to do it in the target language? You may even have experienced a few thrills when you found yourself connecting more substantively with locals who showed an interest in you, your background and your visit to their country. There were likely times when you just wanted to

take a break from the exotic aspects of the country and eat something familiar or be with others with backgrounds similar to yours – people who could relate to your puzzling or amusing experiences of the country or simply talk about completely other things.

Imagine traveling coached in the culturally-specific ways of being at your new destination, proficient in communicating with people in their own language. How much richer your experience could be! There is actually a program that prepares young people for international experiences like this. The program is called the Concordia Language Villages.

I have been working with children and youth all my professional life at the Concordia Language Villages (CLV). CLV offers programs to which thousands of young people (ages 7-18) come every year from around the world in order to learn one of 15 different languages (Arabic, Chinese, Danish,

English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish) – at least that is what these young people and their families often first think they come to CLV to do. As it turns out, we have documented that they do learn language, but also much more. How does it work, what else might they be learning, and how do our current research methods limit what we can know about it? That is what this working paper is about.

A Unique Place: The Concordia Language Villages (CLV)

The Concordia Language Villages (CLV) is an experiential language immersion program with the goal of creating a world where “everyone understands”. CLV offers instruction in its many different languages embedded in programming representative of the cultures associated with them. By creating “villages” where target

languages are spoken in environments that look, smell, taste, feel and function like communities where the language is actually used – in ways tailored to learners’ abilities, no less – learners (called “villagers”) are compelled to use the language in culturally appropriate ways.

The mission of this work is to create experiences that help prepare young people for responsible citizenship in our global community. This is an ambitious goal and involves helping young people understand and appreciate cultural diversity, communicate in more than one language with confidence, respond creatively and critically to issues that transcend national boundaries, express empathy for others worldwide, and promote a world view of peace, justice and sustainability (Concordia Language Villages, p. 104). With these experiences and skills, CLV villagers are better equipped to unlock the mysteries of new places in the world.

The CLV People and Content

CLV offers programming year round for people of all ages – from preschoolers to senior citizens, and most of the programs take place in Minnesota. The more than 4,000 7-18-year olds who attend CLV in the summer time come from many different countries, though primarily from North America. They can attend for one- or two-week sessions, though an ever-growing proportion of our young people now choose to come for four weeks for an intensive program during which villagers do a minimum of 200 hours of language instruction in order to earn one year of high school language credit.

CLV villagers are met on site by over 1000 staff members who come from around the globe to work with them. Among the young and old alike, the staff is dominated by young adults – largely students. They represent a wide variety of experiences with diverse ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds, yet they share a common interest in working with young people and using language as a tool to communicate meaningfully with people from other cultures. Most are not teachers, so

all staff are schooled at CLV in the learning principles that facilitate language immersion in an experiential environment.

The villages are alike in that they all share a commitment to the overarching CLV mission and follow certain guiding principles for their curriculum and programming where the practices should (1) “give learners courage to participate and use the language”, (2) “be learner-centered so that learners become invested in their own learning, (3) “take place in linguistically and culturally authentic surroundings, (4) “take place out of a real need to interact and communicate”, (5) “be experiential and hands-on”, and (6) “be embedded within extended projects” (Hamilton, Crane, & Bartoszesky, 2005, p. 5).

Accordingly, the villages all share certain experiences that distinguish them from language programs elsewhere, making them more like your visit to that distant land. For example, all villagers receive a CLV passport in the mail and use that to cross the “border” into the village. To enhance their sense of identity with the culture, all villagers take a new village name (like Kenji or Nikolai), open a bank account and exchange their US dollars for whatever currency is appropriate (Euros, won or kroner). The foods they eat at meals, the music broadcasted on the radio, and the items they can buy in the village store are also all representative of the cultures relevant for the target language being taught. Likewise, the places around the village are also named after towns or other places where one might speak the target language in “real life”, with names like São Paulo, Duoala or Ráfi Ája.

Some of the villages have permanent sites and have buildings that are architecturally true to the cultures they represent. At Skogfjorden, the site of the Norwegian village, for example, there are three stuer originally built in Vinstra, Norway that were shipped over and rebuilt for program use, and the Skogfjorden dining hall sports original artwork by eight different Norwegian and Norwegian-American artists.

The villages are different from each

other in that there is substantial variety in the content and flow of the day to day activities. For over thirty years, I have been a part of shaping the content of the Norwegian program. To bring Skogfjorden to life, I drew extensively from my background in educational psychology, my connection to Norway and the experiences of the staff I hire every summer. Since no two people’s experience of Norway are exactly alike, no two summers are alike either. However, the methods we use and many of our cultural, linguistic and educational traditions we employ do carry over from summer to summer.

It is always our goal to use the approximately 30 Skogfjorden staff members on site to provide sufficient depth and breadth in our programming to offer the 100 or so villagers who attend each session an experience that is varied and rich enough to draw them back for up to ten years of participation. By mindfully blending tradition with innovation, the villagers can return to something that is both familiar and new every year.

The staff is guided by a promise to each other that was articulated as a guide for how to live and do our work. Briefly put, at Skogfjorden, we are responsible and accountable for establishing and maintaining our vibrant Skogfjorden community where everyone is and feels safe, everyone belongs, Norwegian is at the heart of everything we do, connections to Norway are affirmed, refreshed and extended and teamwork is based on individual contributions (Dahl & Jensen, 2003). This operationalization of what we are about helps define the standards by which we judge how well we are doing with kids and with the language and culture of Norway in order to effectively build connections between our cultures and people. This, then, provides the village-specific means by which we seek to facilitate the goals of the CLV mission.

If villagers experience that they can successfully connect with Norway and Norwegians through what they learn at Skogfjorden while at the Village, then it is our hope that they will pursue that interest actively long after they leave

Skogfjorden, too. With that Norwegian success, we hope that the villagers will feel a desire and ability to pursue connections with other cultures and people such that they actually invest in doing so.

This is a tall order. How do we actually do it?

The Methods

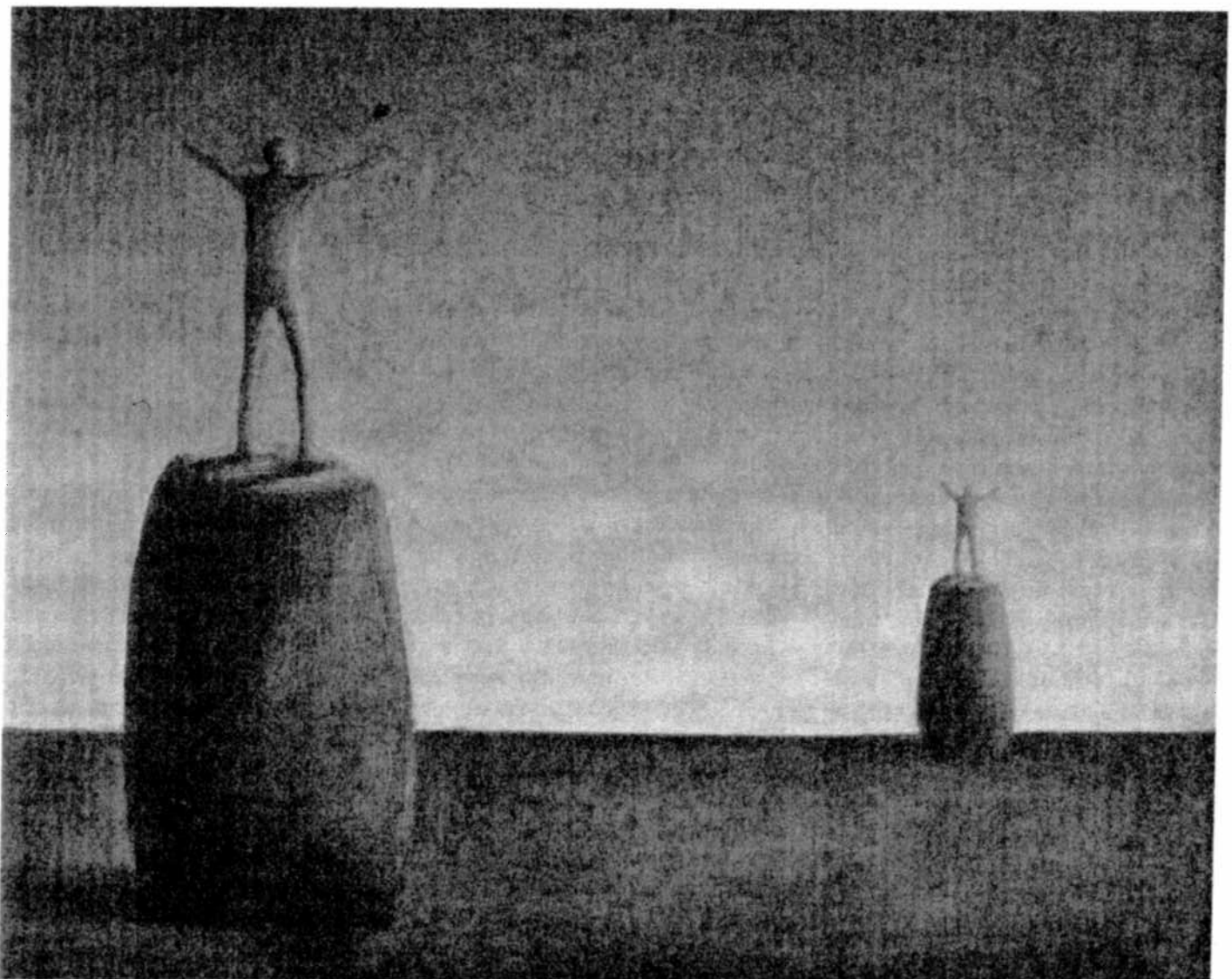
At Skogfjorden, villagers experience activities like those any young person in Norway might experience, like outdoor life, sports (football and handball), and arts (film and music) (Dahl & Jensen, 2003). They also experience activities that give them insight into the lives of Norwegians past, present and future by traveling through space and time to experiential learning centers where the villagers can simulate the lives and experiences of Norwegians from any time in the nation's history.

They may experience Altasaken by assuming the role of various actors in that historical event, the lives of Norwegian immigrants on the North American prairie or participants in the Tromsø Internasjonale Film Festival, Holmenkollenstafetten, or Molde Jazzfestival. It is all done in a spirit of fun where play is key (Hamilton & Cohen, 2004).

All Skogfjorden activities take place in Norwegian, and villagers are primed to use Norwegian as much as possible through what they have learned in (1) staff-led tailored language instruction together with peers at the same level of language ability, and (2) staff- or villager-led content-based activities together with villagers of any or all ability levels (Dahl & Jensen, 2003). These mixed-level activities are designed as fora where villagers can actively use language that they already know, learn new expressions as needed

from peers or staff to get by, and/or where they can use what they know to coach their less proficient peers so that they, too, may actively take part. With activities specifically geared to facilitate different degrees of language learning and language use, the villagers develop a wide range of communicative skills as they take on the roles of language learner, language user and language resource for others with increasing proficiency.

Naturally, the range of activities make for full days, and villagers meet numerous challenges from the moment they wake up 'til the moment they fall asleep (Dahl, Jorgensen, Borey, & Schweppe, n.d.). The village days and sessions therefore have natural rhythms that open for breaks and guided opportunities to simply digest and reflect on all that they have accomplished (Dahl, 2009). This happens formally in cabin councils, in guided debriefings



after simulations, in celebrations of accomplishments both great and small, and informally in writing and drawing in journals designed to capture villager experiences and growth and in quiet gathering places around the site.

Possibilities: What CLV Learning Is About

The kinds of activities we offer may all be well and good, but what do villagers and staff actually get out of their participation at CLV, and is it the same or different from what they can get out of any other language program? These are fair questions and have been scrutinized by several researchers over the past few years.

In terms of language learning, an observational and survey study was done to capture how the learning by villagers at Waldsee, the German village, compare with the high school learners of German (Martinson, 2001). Villagers participating in the one-month high school language credit program at Waldsee were compared on several measures to traditional high school educated learners of German who had had studied German for the same amount of time. Video observations were done twice in all classes – once near the beginning of the session and once near the end. Observations were also done in several of the villagers' group activities. Three times during the session, the villagers were also asked to fill out surveys that rate their own sense of participation and learning progress in various activities throughout the day, comment on what they had learned, identify what they felt helped or challenge them in the process and to name the resources they used in the program to help them progress.

When comparing Waldsee villagers with a high school comparison group that did not have Waldsee experience, the Waldsee villagers tended to outperform their high school peers on nearly all language measures. By language level, the lower-level Waldsee villagers were particularly strong compared to their high school peers, though the higher-level villagers were at least as strong as

their school peers. Additionally, when compared to those who learned German while living abroad, the Waldsee youth showed greater grammatical accuracy.

Contextually-based routine language seemed key to these differences, as did the assisted acculturation into the culture of the target language (Martinson, 2001). Learning vocabulary and developing communicative fluency seemed important to how well learners grow in their grammatical capabilities as well. Sociolinguistically, two community factors seemed particularly relevant: identification with the community and continuity within the environment through opportunities for target language expression and a wider range of situations for communicating. Waldsee learners distinguished themselves from their high school peers by self-initiating German more often and exerting effort to stay within the target language once they begin using it – a trend about which Martinson concluded “If students concentrate on speaking a language as a means to learning it, then through meaningful interaction successful learning and acquisition can occur” (Martinson, 2001, p. 104).

In terms of CLV's other mission-specific goals, I and developmental psychologist Lisa Sether-Hofstad and educational psychologist Gavriel Salomon conducted an interview study with 60 current and former Skogfjorden villagers who had been either short- or long-term participants in our program (Dahl, Sether-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2007). The interviews focused on questions that shed light on the degree to which villagers experienced learning at the village as something similar or distinctly different from their learning experiences elsewhere – both in terms of content and method, what the villagers actually learned as related to CLV's goals related to multiculturalism and peace, and what impact, if any, their village learning experiences had on their learning in other environments.

Our findings are rich and informative, indicating that Skogfjorden villagers develop a deeper conceptual knowledge of the nature of peace and the nature of culture and multiculturalism and

refine their attitudes about difference and getting along with others, becoming more aware of and able at using peace-related skills (Dahl, Sether-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2007). In terms of knowledge and skills, they reported gaining a greater awareness of other cultures and world events, a greater understanding of and increased involvement with others, and greater skill in problem-solving and conflict management. In terms of personal growth, they reported that their CLV involvement increased their commitment to peace, integrating the CLV-specific values in their life trajectory and drawing on them to make life choices. They specifically mentioned this learning was significantly influenced by living in a culturally different place, the taking on of new roles while there and participating in cultural exchanges with other CLV villages.

The villager responses also indicated that the quality of each village activity varies in terms of its emphasis on peace, friendship, reflection and cultural awareness such that the sum of the experience is greater than the individual parts. Time seems to matter to the coherence of the experience for villagers, with longer-term villagers more than short-term villagers identifying the CLV experience as important for how they have come to understand others and grown as problem-solvers, and alumni becoming more committed to living out the goals of CLV in their daily lives than current villagers (Dahl, Sether-Hofstad, & Salomon, 2007). Overall, these findings underscore that the unique environment created at Skogfjorden and CLV matters to the kind of learning that happens there for villagers (Dahl, 2009).

How Do We Know What We Know?

What is common to everything we can claim about CLV so far is that the manner in which the questions are formulated and the types of research designs that have been used to pursue them were all developed by academic adults formally trained in discipline-specific research methodologies. Formal research training is useful for

identifying interesting questions for pursuit, essential for ensuring that the work is done with integrity and that the final product is academically and ethically sound. Paradoxically, the very methods that open our world to us also limit us. Likewise, simply by being adults, our perspectives are both broad and limited.

When critically examining the methods we trained adults use to understand particularly children's experiences, I recently began a quest to understand what we might be missing by not premising some of our research about children's experiences on children's own terms (Dahl, In Press). That has raised new questions about CLV research in particular, but also research with children in general.

Research Possibilities in the Hands and Minds of Villagers

What if children got involved and called the shots in research? What else might we learn about the Concordia Language Villages – or anything else related to childhood, for that matter – if studied from the child perspective?

Let's acknowledge that our adult perspectives, though academically and methodologically informed, are biased, and by generational default removed from the child perspective (Tauer, 2002). By preparing young people to formulate questions of interest to them about how they and their peers experience the world, by giving them tools to explore and look for answers on their own, and by allowing them to report their findings in ways both their peers and adults can understand, we may well discover things about the child experience that would otherwise go undocumented or forgotten (Dahl, In press).

Implications

The implications of taking on the challenge of doing research with children instead of just about children are vast. They are epistemological (for what counts as valid knowledge to pursue

and disseminate?), methodological (for what child-friendly research paradigms and tools for capturing that knowledge count as valid?), structural (for what kinds of systems are in place to facilitate the pursuit of these potentially new types of knowledge using children and child-friendly methods) and political (for what are the channels that would publish or disseminate children's findings that would be sufficiently valued and used by those who make decisions related to research or child-relevant policies?).

To take just one of those areas of implications as an example, the research paradigms that academic adults blithely use in their research about children are not equally accessible or appropriate for research done with or by children (Hogan, 2005). Rather, research designs based more on participatory-oriented models such as action research, participatory action research, participatory rural appraisal, community-based participatory research and empowerment evaluation may be more appropriate (Dahl, In Press). What they all have in common is a collaborative focus where participants are directly involved in different ways both in the research process and the use of the results.

In order to draw children into research, a turn to new methods naturally raises new ethical questions for how to actually go about doing it. Even though there exist ethical standards for how to go about doing research about children, for example, there are no good guidelines for how to protect children's rights while doing research with them. We cannot treat the young researchers just like adult researchers since children differ from us in their competencies, vulnerabilities, and how adults construe them (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Figuring out how to work with these new parameters is important since young researchers can offer unique strengths to the process. Prior research has shown us that youth can be vital in defining questions in ways that are easy for other children to understand and respond to, and in collaborating

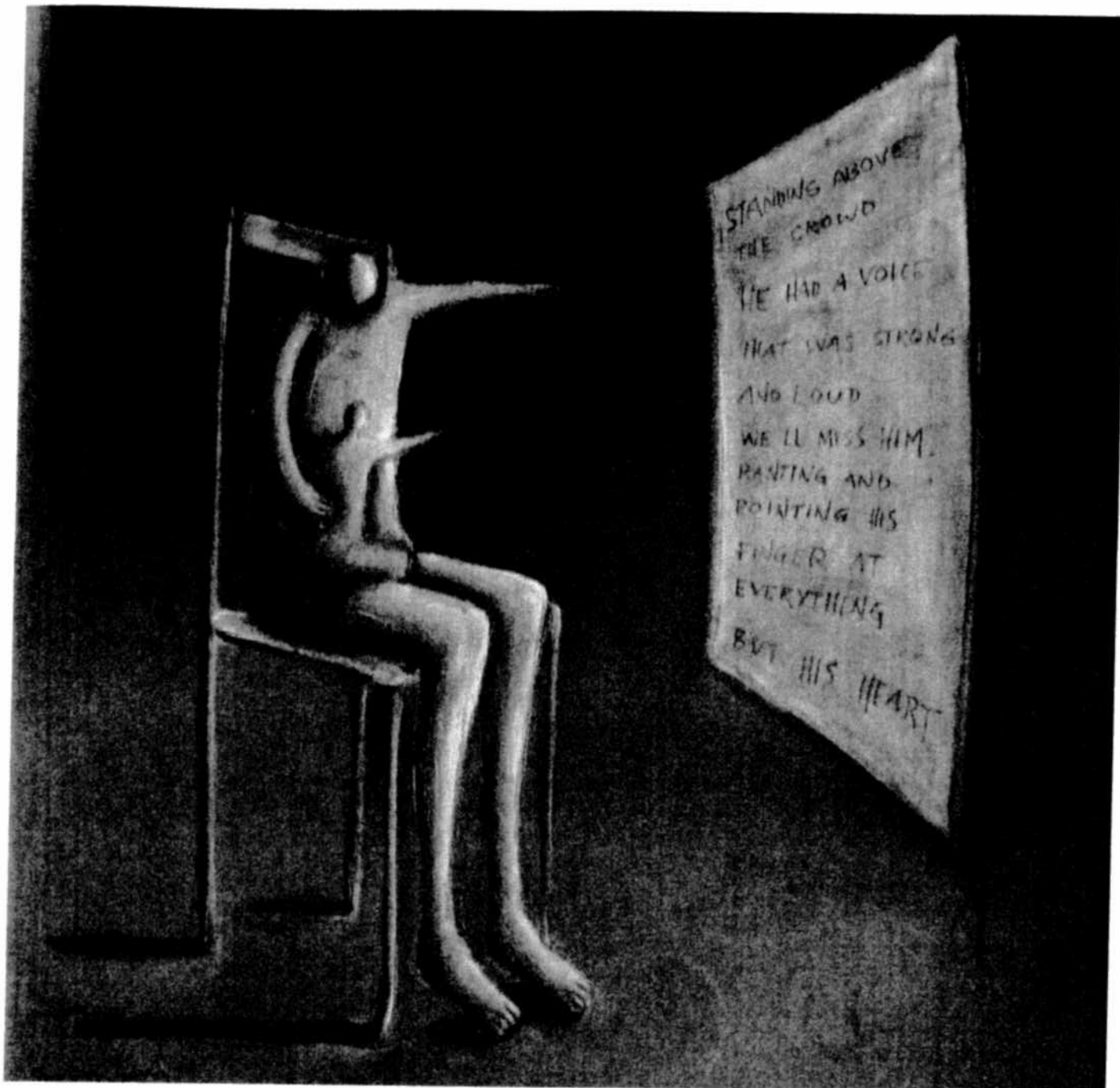
with participants that adults might have less success reaching (Alderson, 2001; McLaughlin, 2005; Save the children, 2004). Furthermore, child-friendly ways of disseminating results such as writing for newspapers, creating wall displays or videos have been shown to reach relevant audiences effectively and have had greater impact than information disseminated through more traditional channels often have had (Alderson, 2000, 2001; Cairns & Brannen, 2005; Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004).

These implications have profound relevance for how we think research with children. They demand a total revision in how we approach work with children. Adopting such revisionist thinking need not supplant current approaches and methods, but promises to offer vital contributions that meaningfully complement them.

Potential Outcomes

What might the outcomes of directly collaborating with children in research be? Who knows? That's the exciting part that I look forward to discovering the answer to. After all, the daily tasks before CLV villagers are at least as complex as those you experienced in your first trip to that distant land. They serve as keys to our understanding of the world. Finding the answer will require turning our field on its head, however, providing new keys to understanding the world as children know it. The prospects for new discoveries are tantalizing and I invite others to the table to explore this.

After all, CLV is guided by the goal of creating a world where "everyone understands". Research has been done to explore whether we actually help villagers achieve the goals of CLV's mission statement (or not) and, if so, how. However, if we want everyone to fully understand the kind of learning that goes on in our programs, we are challenged to take the lead in preparing our villagers to help us understand and communicate their CLV experiences on their own terms – expanding our world by putting research in the hands and minds of young people.



Coda

In the end, it is interesting to me how research at CLV invites such a wide variety of questions about the learning process and equally fascinating questions about how we study it. As such, CLV is a social microcosm that offers boundless research possibilities that could be important for multiple areas within and beyond our discipline.

Many students from Norway have worked at Skogfjorden in the past, including students of psychology. I invite today's psychology students to consider the same. Working at CLV helps one gain insight into the child experience as well as to develop vital

professional skills such as teaching and cross-cultural communication. Such an experience may also provide the foundation for helping develop future CLV-based research. Kirk Martinson was himself a student when he did his Waldsee research, as were Heidi Hamilton's collaborators Cori Crane and Abigail Bartoshesky. Likewise, I have recently supervised two Tromsø master's students on projects related to yet other aspects of the Skogfjorden learning process. Their results should be available soon and we look forward to sharing them with you. Nonetheless, there remains much to be explored at the Language Villages from any

number of perspectives. I'd like to end by inviting you to consider taking part in the unique experience that CLV provides – learning with and through children and seeing the world in a new light.

Join us!

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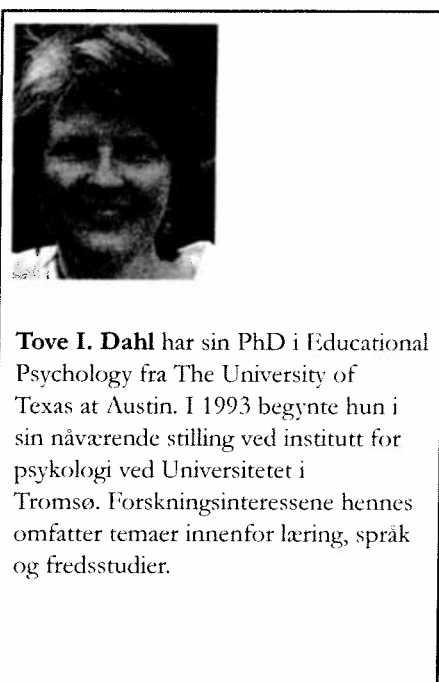
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Bilde 1: "Disconnected but still talking"

Bilde 2: "Above the crowd"

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