

PLAYFUL INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

Can guided playful interaction contribute to inclusion in class? Especially in school recess, a lack of playful interaction patterns can be seen as an indicator as well as a cause of exclusion. In a practical research project, students undertook an intervention with children of two classes in primary schools, consisting of a series of guided playful interaction sequences. The play sequences were recorded and interpreted. Network data about relations within class was compiled by interviewing the children before and after the intervention. Results show that the sociograms were stable or improved over the course of the intervention. Ambiguous roles within and outside of the play frame proved to be pertinent to the intervention, leading to the following conclusion: By providing a secure frame, which is inclusive for all children, a teacher or play tutor can further the learning and habitualization of playful interaction patterns, which themselves lead to better relations in class.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing amount of attention towards play as a key concept in educative contexts (see e.g. Pellegrini (ed.), 2011; Hauser, 2013; Brooker et al. (eds.), 2014). Also, a medial discourse about play, especially in connection with the buzzword *gamification* (of education and society) could be observed.

But quite contrary to the perception of a play renaissance, the problem this article addresses is the lack of play, especially in school contexts (Baines & Blatchford 2011, Johnson 2014).¹⁴

¹⁴ In Switzerland, as in some other European countries, play as the central form of learning for young children has partly come into a defensive position in the education system, having to be justified against school didactics, in order to keep its position in kindergarten. In school it proves even more difficult to promote the worth of play as a key to education and as a cultural end in itself (Weisshaupt

The everyday experience of teachers in local schools differs from the discourse of play renaissance, as we learned from teachers in the local community of our institution.¹⁵ Playful interaction patterns seem to have waned in recent years, especially in school recess, where the play repertoire of children is diminished (see also Baines & Blatchford 2011). At the same time, the requirements of inclusion in schools have moved into the focus of educational politics as well as research (McLeskey 2014, Albers 2012) and inclusive peer groups in classrooms are a moral as well as a legal requirement in today's schools. However, everyday inclusion often seems hindered by the lack of inclusive interaction patterns (Campana, Weisshaupt & Scheck, 2014).

These developments and real-life experiences were the background for the intervention project "Play along!" In this project, students designed a series of playful, inclusive breaks for two classes of primary school (one 1st and one 2nd grade). During one semester, student groups attended the big break eight times. The project goals lay on three levels, which we aimed to bring together: First, the students were supposed to benefit, as methods of inclusive play tutoring should be applied and reflected in a practical setting. Second, the inclusive structures of the classes should be supported. The teachers that came forward to take part in this project obviously wanted their classes to benefit. And third, we wanted to gain answers to the following research question: Can guided play contribute to inclusion in class? There has been work concerning the usefulness of play for inclusion in heterogeneous preschool and kindergarten (see Albers, 2012), but can play prove beneficial for inclusion also in the very different setting of a primary school? This article highlights the theoretical and research framework as well as the practical course, the methods and the results of the project "Play along!"

SCHOOL CLASS, INTEGRATION AND INCLUSION

Even in early childhood, peer-groups are pertinent for developing social repertoires and common scripts, rules and habits of interaction (Vygotsky, 2012; El'konin, 2010; Göncü & Gaskins, 2011). Beginning with school, the peers in class take a central role in the life of young children. The comparatively stable group allows for the development of habits and interaction scripts which can be tried out, altered, negotiated and institutionalized among equals (Schneider-Andrich, 2011).

& Campana, 2014), despite all gamification hypes, which are in some parts rather ambiguous. Learning and playing in school have not been seen as really concurrent throughout a very long historical line (Kluge, 1999).

¹⁵ In the context of teacher training, especially for levels of education for children from preschoolers to 3rd grade of primary class, students at the School of Education – University of Applied Sciences of Northwestern Switzerland can opt for a intensive study of the subject of play and games in the seminars of the study workshop PLAY at Campus Brugg-Windisch (see also www.lernwerkstatt-spiel.ch). The seminar intervention project that this article is based on, was undertaken in this framework. In Switzerland, the preschool kindergarten is mandatory for all children from the age of four, for regularly two years before primary school.

Among their peers, children can experience the effects their own actions have on others and relate to themselves in accordance with the role expectations that others begin to form about them. For school children, some of the most important experiences are to anticipate and negotiate these expectations about oneself, to develop commonly shared chains of interrelated action patterns within a larger group (Weisshaupt, 2008), to develop personal identity and at the same time to develop a sense of community in class. These experiences in school allow, in addition to experiences in other peer communities such as sport associations, a gradual build-up of independence, which is later pertinent for adolescents freeing themselves from the socio-emotional dependence of their parents (Wahl, Weinert & Huber 2007, 133).

The school class represents, more than ever, one of the few potentially including forms of community. But organizational measures at the school cause by themselves, of course, no inclusion. The issues of belonging, recognition and inclusion arise in particular within the class and are negotiated between the children.

The school class as a socialization space does not form itself voluntarily. In it, children come together that are not already familiar with each other and they do not automatically gravitate towards community forms. In the development of relationship structures and under the regular performance pressures of school, exclusive cliques can emerge that have little or poor relations with other groups. Also, individuals can become stalled on outsider positions. Outsider positions can manifest in two different ways: Either the outsiders are simply ignored by the rest of the class, or they are actively excluded. In sociometric measurement methods, the former are distinguished by few positive responses, the latter by many negative responses.

With regard to the explanation of how outsider positions arise, one can distinguish two perspectives, which can be roughly related to the patterns of *integration* and *inclusion* respectively: The *integration* perspective emphasizes that children in outsider positions often have insufficient social skills that could help them to overcome this status. This perspective therefore centers on the inability of the individual to be integrated into the greater whole. The second perspective, referring to *inclusion*, however clarifies that a vicious circle may arise, so that "dysfunctional behavior" and negative perception of the outsiders is not necessarily the cause of isolation, but also a result of it (Wahl, Weinert & Huber 2007, 138). Experiences of social rejection can lead to uncertainty and fear of further failures. This in turn can promote avoidance of social contacts and either withdrawal or the development of aggression. Such behaviors can then reinforce the negative attitude of the peers, thereby solidifying the outsider positions.

In the inclusion perspective, the social rejection can even be seen as a cycle with no real beginning, except the general effort to distinguish between the *own* and the *other*, which is often sufficient to give rise to social discrimination. If heterogeneity is considered a cherished resource in the group, a self-reinforcing social marginalization is less likely because then mutual aid and complementarity can be seen as central values and action patterns (Campana, 2012).

Following Ainscow et al. (2006, p. 14ff.) the challenge of inclusion is to overcome social discrimination and marginalization at various levels. When seen in an inclusive perspective, interventions and support measures aim not to “integrate” the individual, but rather to focus at the level of groups or the class as a system. Interventions at the group or class level aim to increase the opportunities for positive social contacts for all persons and try to influence the overall structures and interactions instead of just the interactions of single persons.

PLAY AND RECESS AS AN OPPORTUNITY SPACE FOR NEW RECOGNITION AND INCLUSION

On first thought, it would seem relatively easy to influence group processes and peer interactions in the classroom. However, this is not always possible. Inflexible curriculum structures of the school, fixed time schedules for the class, time pressure by the syllabus and the socially transmitted pressure to perform at grades often impede work on the systemic group structures in class, despite the best intentions of individual teachers who would like to do "more".

Then again, the daily routines of schools also offer times of hiatus, times of uncontrolled social interaction, such as the school breaks. Recess can be seen as the opposite of school, the time out of time within it. It functions as a phase of freedom and transition in contrast to the highly specialized and often teacher-centered lessons. Here, children can meet, without "task", in free interaction. It enables the building of friendships and the emergence of (class) communities. These possibilities are however tied to the requirement for the children to organize themselves autonomously in recess. From the perspective of children, recess is a key element of their school day. In studies, children have emphasized the informal gathering of friends and play with others in the break (Biffi, 2011). It even seems so important that the well-being in school depends crucially on a successful design of the break. If children interact in a satisfactory way during the break and feel that they are not alone, they also show more positive attitudes toward school as a whole (Hascher, 2004).

Good interactions in the break lead to the children expressing less worry and less physical discomfort (ibid.). The break, for these reasons, should have an important function for inclusive processes.

However, the break is often the time of *exclusion*, isolation and aloneness. Especially for children in outsider positions the unguided, free break can lead to excessive demands – recess for them can become an ordeal. So the importance of playing together in the break on the one hand is realised, but on the other hand there seems to be missing a habitualization of play, a ritual knowledge of play.¹⁶

¹⁶ The reasons for this may lie in different factors. Especially the tendency of less children altogether and more only children in many societies leads to children getting more individual support, but less interaction experience in the group (apart from medial experiences), less spontaneous outdoor play, street play or play in nature. Play experience and appropriate playful scripts are therefore less shared and habitualized (Herzberg, 2001; Baines and Blatchford, 2011) Here the various kinds of reasons cannot be investigated in detail.

What is the potential advantage of experience in the game frame? When children meet in play, their "normal" class roles can be cast off and new roles are being tried. New fields of recognition are entered – recognition which might be different from the previously recognized roles in the classroom, from former bad or good performances in certain subjects, from previously (positively or negatively) perceived (dis-)abilities, from former outsider roles or from former clique affiliations. This contrasts play and game to everyday life as framework for possible change of interaction structures (Van Gennep, 1999; Turner, 2009). The variability of social interaction structures is a basic assumption of the so-called 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1971; Cloerkes, 1982, Kronig, Häberlin & Eckhart, 2007), claiming that more frequent contact with members of other groups helps to reduce prejudice and to develop more favorable attitudes. Not only the frequency of contact determines whether a positive change takes place, but also the contact quality and the framing conditions are crucial. Empirically, a positive effect of multiple factors has been confirmed, such as: the relative status of equality between group members, the pursuit of common goals, the realization of common tasks and the support of positive relations by representatives of the institution. Superficial, non-intense contacts, however, seem to reinforce prejudices. Contacts are especially likely to cause positive change if they are perceived by all parties as pleasant (*ibid.*). Play and games as forms of interaction therefore come into consideration as games allow children to pursue objectives together. Especially in guided play, the shyness to interact with someone of the "others", someone outside of one's own clique, can be cast off more easily within the seemingly non-serious game frame, which itself can soon inspire its own aura of solemnity (Weisshaupt & Campana 2014, 54ff.). It is indeed this ritual dimension of play, which can bring about that the old everyday roles are left behind in the game, that something new is tried and new possibilities for recognition emerge.

Play and game can be seen as forms of rites of passage in which old identities become confused and new identities arise (Van Gennep, 2005; Turner, 2009). This "liminal" experience affects all players present and ideally leads to equal status among the group members during the time of the play or the ritual.

THE PROJECT “PLAY ALONG!”

In this project, the students designed a series of playful, inclusive breaks for two classes of primary school (one 1st and one 2nd grade). During one semester, student groups attended the big break of two classes eight times. For the play sessions, the class was split into groups of four to ten children, which were deliberately composed to be heterogenous. The heterogeneity was created by grouping children that had few interaction with each other according to sociogram analysis and teacher perception, so that groups would include outsiders and members of different cliques. The teachers were encouraged to contribute their perspective on the needs of the children at all times during the project, and were involved also by the students if they needed their perspective at any time.

There was no forced play during the interventions. If children did not want to play, they could turn to other things in the break. The goal was to establish forms of play in which all children may be involved as much as possible and which promoted the cohesion of the selected group. Possible criteria for the selection of play forms were worked out in the accompanying seminar as the following:

- Action: The children should be active with their body during the break, and activate their senses. Compensation for frequent sitting in the classroom should be guaranteed.
- Intrinsic activity: All players should have the opportunity and space to act on their own initiative and in cooperation with others.
- Creative appropriation: By adapting the rules of the game by the group, a variety of play forms should be possible.
- Material: As little materials as possible, so the game can start quickly and spontaneously.
- Cooperation: The game contains elements of cooperation, so a sense of community can emerge.
- Challenge: Challenge arises through the nature of the rules and the natural, semi-natural or artificial elements of the school environment. It may be personified by a fantasy figure in the game's story, sometimes the other team, or even the play tutor.
- Rules: Simple rules should apply that can be quickly understood by everybody.
- Rituals: A ritual framing the beginning and the end can be used in order to mark the *other* kind of time – the play time – clearly.
- No formal learning goals.¹⁷

With these features, a low threshold to the game was intended that in turn was expected to lead to self-induced play action after the project. Also, we aimed to consolidate the relations that emerged during the project for the time after the intervention.

The children were guided by groups of three to four students, so at least one person was able to observe and take notes with an open protocol form, while the other students were the group's play tutors. The *passive participant observations* provided the student groups with information as to what needs the group and the individual children had, which play forms proved useful, and what kinds of further adjustments were required for the following play phases. Play tutoring is a delicate matter: on the one hand the tutor supports and sometimes leads the game, on the other hand, the game should not be controlled all the time from the outside or too directly (Hauser 2013, Heimlich 2014).

¹⁷ The game forms were not given "top-down" in detail, but designed by the students in interaction with the children. In practice, it was found that in many cases cooperative games like Robot or corresponding versions of traditional games that met most of the criteria and that could be quickly understood by all were selected, like Tag you're it-variations, rope skipping, or the Gordian Knot, where a collective effort is undertaken to solve the knot in which everybody is entangled, etc.

Methods

The project 'play along!' was designed primarily as a development project. The students however were encouraged to raise controlled data on the children and their playing processes in order to validate the process and the results (Heikkinen et al. 2012). Although the scope of the project was limited (two classes, eight interventions in about 10 weeks), the findings hopefully can provide interesting insights and also stimulate further practice and research considerations.

Children's views in sociograms

Sociograms of the classes were established at the beginning and at the end of the project by the students. The method, originated by Moreno (1974), records relationships between members of a group in a so-called sociomatrix, which can be shown graphically in sociograms, and can be compared and interpreted. Using two or more sociograms, social relations and processes, stable and changing structures within the group can be made visible methodically. These observations can also be an opportunity for teachers to revise or expand on their own observations concerning their class.

In order to create the sociograms, each child was asked some questions in a short single interview: 1) Whom from the class do you prefer as playmates, and 2) With whom don't you like to play? This was asked both before and after the intervention. The number of expected responses was not indicated, so that none, a single or many other children could be named. With the aid of a computer program ("Soziogramm-Editor 2.1"), the answers were collected and visualized in a sociogram.

This method was implemented in order to make it easier for the children to express their own views of the relationships and of the exclusive or inclusive structures and at the same time provide a systematic approach to the structure of the class.

Student observations during the game sequence

During the game sequences, interactions in the children's group were recorded by at least one observer in an open protocol form as passive participant observations. The form contained the time, the setting, activity, the description of the interactions of children (verbal and nonverbal) and any comments made by the observer.

Children assessing the games

At the end of each play phase, the children were asked how they felt during the sequence in the group. The children manifested their emotional state among other things by means of three different smileys (laughing, sad, neutral). The ratings did not have to be explained by the children in any way in order to protect them. Children's open comments and suggestions concerning the interactions that were made before, during or after the game were noted in any case by the students and implemented in the analysis and for further planning.

Case studies and group discussions with the students

In the accompanying seminar, the principles of supportive play tutoring (Renner, 2008; Heimlich, 2014) and the processes and events in the groups were discussed over the semester. In a group discussion at the end of the project, the question was addressed which settings and play forms were promoting inclusive effects best, which support measures were useful, and in which situations inclusion was difficult to improve upon.

CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE AND AFTER THE PROJECT

When creating the graphical sociograms from the sociomatrix, those children appear bright with more positive than negative responses and those dark with more negative than positive responses. The relative strength of the frame around the names reflects the accumulated positive or negative positions of individuals in responses. Thick arrows indicate a mutual choice, thin arrows a one-sided choice. In one of the two classes, no measurable improvement regarding the inclusive structure could be noted in the sociogram. The suspected reasons for this will be discussed in the subsequent sections. The sociograms for the second class (in Figure 1) show a positive development.

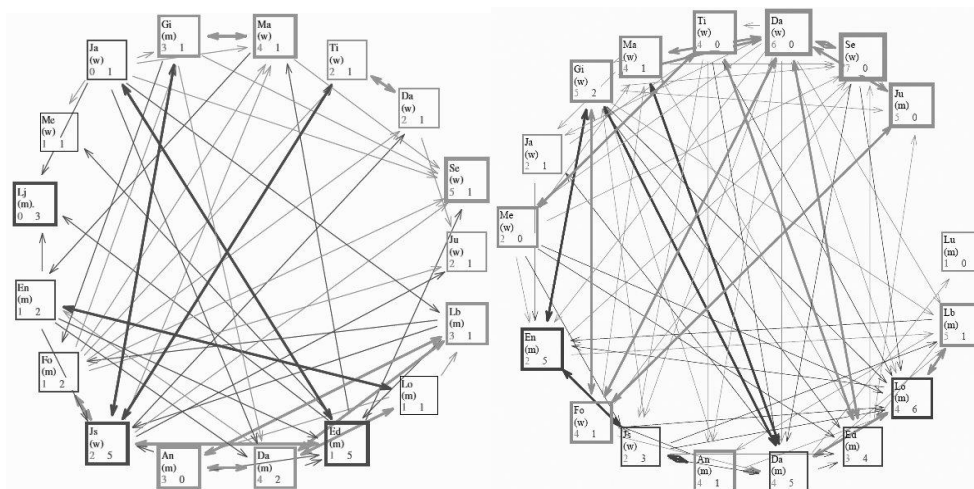


Figure 1. Sociograms of the second class before (left) and after the project (right).

In the second diagram, many more names were mentioned. Before the start of the project, 64 (positive and negative) responses were given, compared to 93 after the project. It would seem that the perception of the classmates as potential playmates could be raised in general. Also, after the intervention, there are more positive responses: The social positions have improved for 11 of 17 children, 3 remained stable and for 3, the values have changed into predominantly negative values.

Conditions promoting and impeding inclusion

Based on the observations, the assessments of children, and the sociograms, the students tried in a final group discussion to identify the factors promoting inclusion during the play sequences and also the factors that impeded inclusion.

The students concluded that the situation promoted inclusion ...

... if the play tutoring was able to create a setting where each member of the group was able to bring in their abilities.

... if there were ritual repetitions of games, interactions and known processes.

... if the play tutoring was able to stabilize the frame of the game against outside interventions.

... if it was possible to set aside old consolidated positions and class roles during play and new roles were possible.

... when socially stronger children supported others of the group.

... if all children felt that they mutually could ask for help.

... if more excluded children could play in smaller groups with others (two or three children).

The students concluded that the situation impeded inclusion ...

... if individual children, even when encouraged, could not bring themselves into play and rejected support from other children.

... if the game mechanics were too complex and were not understood by all children.

... if the play arena was too vast, not all children were within earshot, and thus the processes could not be adequately supported.

... if the play tutors knew the individual children too little and did not have enough information.

At the end of the project, children and students thanked each other and said goodbye, partially with a heavy heart.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

Overall, the play interventions had a neutral to good effect in respect to the support of inclusive structures in the classes, and the children and the students both had a productive learning experience.

Two classes – two different dynamic structures

In the first of two classes, no improvement was found in the sociograms; they remained relatively stable: 4 positions improved, 5 stayed positive, 3 deteriorated. Two strongly rejected children were at least as strongly rejected in the sociograms after the intervention. They were negatively named to the same or even to an increased degree after the intervention.

Observations of the students led to the conclusion that even frictions during the play sequences can contribute to productive interaction, in the sense that the outsider positions were less ignored after the intervention, leading them to be named at all.¹⁸

The children in outsider positions had formerly built up a "prevention repertoire": When the question arose who could play with whom, they often showed a great variability of good excuses and urgent needs that prevented their participation in the games: They avoided to get into a situation of public rejection, which they had probably previously suffered. If the children, however, were simply grouped by the students in the intervention, these children in almost all cases played with pleasure and commitment. According to their teachers, these playful interaction experiences were for some of these children the only playful interactions in the break throughout the previous year, which is satisfying and saddening at the same time.

Nevertheless, it seemed that in this first class, the outsider positions were stronger fixed and more clearly differentiated in contrast to the other positions of the class.

The structure of the second class, which had a positive change during the time of the intervention according to the sociogram, was qualitatively different from the first, which could help to understand the difference in effect of the intervention.

According to our observations, a structure of several more or less exclusive small groups with few positive links between the groups prevailed before the intervention. It was not so much defined by few main outsider positions. This may be one cause for the more measurable move in the direction of inclusion in this class during the project. The two classes could thus be seen as two samples from different "populations" in the sense that the two different basic problem patterns probably require different scopes of observation and intervention. We assume that in the problem situation of few clear outsiders, further supportive measures have to take place, and also need longer to become effective. This assumption is supported by the observations of the students, since in most student groups a clearly noticeable change in the interaction climate of the children has not become apparent until the 4th or 5th of the 8 play interventions.

As the next steps in research perspective, an additional quantitative instrument and a control group might prove useful.

Ambiguous roles and learning outcomes – discussion

The central learning opportunities for the students resulted primarily from the difficult situations. For example, in one group, a boy participated who often played the clown in his "class role". For instance, he deliberately took hits in a team ball game, which endangered the game interaction for the whole group. The constraint of the "clown role" of the class, which is really only to a very limited extent pleasant for its bearer, means the opposite of real inclusion. The boy was often ridiculed by his peers. According to the observation protocol of the students, he laughed along when ridiculed, as it was the only possible way for him to be recognised by his peers.

¹⁸ It is possible to build upon irritations. On ignorance, it is not (Buchs et. al 2004).

This ambiguous role was his class role: At the border of the group, not totally ignored, but also not really inside. In the period of reflection before the next game sequence, the students decided to give the boy a positive leadership role in next play sequence, which he accepted and acted out successfully and gladly, with the others experiencing him in a new way.

Certain restricting class roles that are not consciously selected, but have consolidated in day-to-day school routines and performance pressures, offer only very limited opportunities for varied expression, for interaction, for a range of capabilities and for recognition. Examples are the clown role, the class bully, the math genius, the disabled kid, the princess, the problem child, the foreign child or generally the one from the whichever "other" group. These class roles can ideally be stripped off in the play frame and new roles and new recognition patterns can be tried.

The students' reflections, the case studies in the accompanying seminar during the interventions, and the group discussion at the end showed how particularly important it is to maintain a systemic perspective throughout: not individuals are receiving a "special treatment", but all have the opportunity to change their usual roles in the protected play framework. Thus, students avoid the risk of affirming existing exclusive structures. If the response to the observation of the clown boy seemingly laughing about himself would be:

"The boy with the clown role really is included, he obviously does not resist, he is laughing with them", then one would overlook the bitter and dear price paid by the boy for his "laughing himself into" the usual integration system.

Another example: For one girl who had very little interaction and was strongly rejected by others, a hearing impairment was diagnosed right in the middle of the intervention weeks. The students who guided this group of children reflected how this could be addressed productively. In the next play sequence, all children in the game had an "artificial" hearing impairment to create a common ground of experience for all players.

For the learning experience of the students, the crucial factors were the challenges that occurred during the intervention, the practical experiences they made, the reflection of the value of play forms and roles for inclusion.

Considering the research results, our tentative answer to the question at the start of the project is: Yes, guided play intervention can lead to positive results for the inclusive structures in class, and it does so by providing a secure frame that is inclusive for all children. Certain habitualized roles of children within class can lead to ambiguous roles within play. This can be used by school social workers, play tutors and teachers: Roles can be playfully overturned in guided play, which can lead to new experiences for children and to different perspectives towards their peers. The final goal of course would be a shared playful interaction climate in school, which would need no further guided support, in which all children could easily change the play and their roles within it.

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PREFACE

EAPRIL is a non-profit organisation that bridges practice and research with the aim to cross the boundaries between education and working life. The association promotes practice-based research on learning issues in the context of initial, formal, lifelong and organisational learning with the aim to enhance practice. EAPRIL encompasses different contexts (such as schools of various educational levels as well as organisations and corporations across fields, such as engineering, medicine, nursing, business, and teacher education), at different levels (individuals, teams, organisations and networks), and in different stages of life (from kindergarten over students in higher education to workers at the workplace)

Moreover, EAPRIL aims to enhance and empower practice by narrowing down the gap between researchers doing research on education and learning and practitioners in the educational field. It also bridges education, community and working life.

At the annual EAPRIL conference and during the year, the association promotes exchange, of practice-based research on educational, learning and developmental issues sharing, construction and co-creation of insights, knowledge and improved practice of different educational themes and within various fields. Both research and practice are represent in this profound dialogue and exchange of information.

Via these Conference Proceedings EAPRIL wants to encourage further connections between research and practice. This issue is the result of four days of interactive sessions from November 24-26, 2014. More information about our conference, you can find on our [conference website](#).

Each year EAPRIL selects interesting keynotes who can inspire other practitioners and researchers. The abstracts and videos of the keynotes of the 2014 Conference can be consulted via [this link](#). Moreover, EAPRIL awards each year the Best Research and Practice Project. In 2014, the BR&PP Award was awarded to the project *Using mobile technologies for helping apprentice chefs to assemble learning experiences from various arts and places –a project of the Leading House “Dual-T – Technologies for vocational training”* of Alberto Cattaneo and his research team. More information about this and the other shortlisted projects, can be [found here](#).

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