



This paper is taken from

*Human Rights and Citizenship Education
Proceedings of the eleventh Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2009

edited by Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9562789-6-8

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de Jong, M., Eklundh, A. & Lutz, K. (2009) Children's participation in their physical environment in pre-school, in Ross, A. (ed) Human Rights and Citizenship Education. London: CiCe, pp 162 - 170

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Children's participation in their physical environment in pre-school

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Abstract

The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child underlines the right of children to express their views in matters affecting them. How can this be put into practice for children between 1 and 5 years of age, in pre-school? The OMEP project "Children's participation in their physical environment", aims at developing methods to enhance children's involvement with the physical environment. Listening to children and taking their thoughts and preferences about places and activities into account, can be seen as teaching them the basics of democracy. Ten pre-schools in different residential areas in three cities in Sweden were selected for the project. Examples of methods that were developed and used, such as video-filming of activities, walk-and-talk discussions with children and staff's reflections will be presented.

Introduction

The Swedish chapter of OMEP, Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Pré-scolaire, an international NGO, started the development and research project "Children's participation in their physical environment" with financial support from Allmänna Arvsfonden in 2007. With the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child as a point of departure, the overall aims of the project were to enhance active participation of children and teachers in the physical environment in pre-school, to work together with other relevant agents, and to document and develop methods to support and enhance the process. The research questions dealt with meeting places in the outdoor environment, how to make (educational) use of them (pedagogically), and how to involve children in planning and shaping of the environment.

OMEP groups in four cities in Sweden are involved in the project. In Gothenburg, Stockholm and Umeå, pre-schools were invited to apply for participation in the project and three or four of them that fulfilled the project criteria, were chosen in each city. The criteria were made to guarantee variation in the outcomes of the work in the participating pre-schools: the structure/organisation should differ between the pre-schools in each city; demographic variation of catchment area; location in different residential areas such as inner city, outskirts, high- or low-rise residential areas; staff experience of documentation methods and interest to participate in the project. A local project leader coordinated each project, and introduced as well as monitored and supported the participating pre-schools.

The project has an action research approach which implies that each pre-school has its own influence on how the project is carried out. While the overall aims are shared, the individual projects have their own focus and detailed aims, in connection with the specific circumstances such as child groups, the location of the Centres and the design of physical outdoor surroundings, as well as weather conditions (Pictures 1 and 2). Methods are developed and documentation is collected in slightly different ways in each city.



Picture 1. Details of the outdoor environment of a pre-school in Umeå



Picture 2. Details of the outdoor environment of a pre-school in the Stockholm area.

The OMEP group in Malmö is responsible for a meta-analysis of the documentation collected in the project groups. This paper is based on the project report after the first year (Sheridan, 2008) and on our first step of the meta-analysis which will be carried out between June and August 2009.

Theoretical background

Main concepts are participation, influence and democracy as well as child perspective and children's perspective. How can these concepts be understood with regard to very young children, 1-5 years of age? How can children's participation in and influence on the physical environment of the pre-school be enhanced?

The research about these questions is very limited concerning young children. In general, a child perspective is used when adults focus on children in a number of areas such as economy, education, health and planning to name but a few (Näsman, 1995; Rasmusson, 1994). Obtaining the child's perspective, i.e. the child's view on a situation, is more difficult. Research about children's own thoughts for instance about play (Hjorth, 1996) and about adults (Arnér & Tellgren, 2006) has shown that five- and six-year old children are aware of their circumstances and have detailed observations and opinions about matters that affect them. However, it takes great effort to make contact with children and to create a situation where they are involved in the discussion and not just answer an adult's questions (cf. Rubinstein Reich, 1993, p. 147 ff.). Another point is to also respect their opinions so they are used in decision making.

Because of this, children's participation and influence are problematic. When young children in pre-school were interviewed about who decides, 75% said that the adults decided everything (Söbstad, 2002). Also in research about older children, the results often show they are disappointed with the results of their participation and that adults seem not to take them serious or find other priorities than children's wishes (Horelli, 1999). There also seems to be a lack of consistency about the amount of influence in the classroom, where teachers think that they give many opportunities to influence, while the children do not seem to notice this (Stigendal, 2000) Even some interesting gender differences have been noticed. At the same time, efforts are made in Sweden with youth councils in different municipalities where children are involved in planning of activities or neighbourhood areas (Engwall, 1998). Another ongoing discussion concerns the inclusion of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in the Swedish legal system. Different models have been described of children's participation in planning and design processes (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002; Hart, 1997).

Young children are dependant on adults to make their voice heard (Engdahl, 2007). Therefore, teacher's awareness and ability to interpret children's behaviour, are preconditions for children's possibility to participate actively in decision making and carrying out of projects. On an everyday level this may include children's preferences or choice of activity and place, which can be seen not only in words but also in their physical movements and facial expressions. An example of such research was the Nordic project about Quality in the child's life in pre-school (Broström & Thyssen, 1996; Hännikäinen, de Jong & Rubinstein Reich, 1997). Observations of activities and children's involvement (cf. Laevers, 1994) showed how children created their own meaning in their play together, even when doing routine activities (chores) decided by adults. Subject – subject relations between children and adults were a necessary condition for shared participation.

In these and other studies, children become participating subjects and not only objects of study. These studies teach us about teachers' attitude: it is important to actively involve the children and encourage them to express their opinions. Teachers must then take (and have) time to understand them, to find out what interests them, to catch their experiences and how they are understood by the children themselves, and use this in the daily work with the children. When teachers listen and respond, children also learn this behaviour as part of a democratic process.

Also in research there is a strong drive to collect children's perspectives through interviews, video filming, documentation of children's artistic expressions etc. However, it is difficult to analyse and implement results from documentation in such a way that children's possibility to influence their own learning and their educational environment can increase.

Research shows that participation is a basic precondition for children's possibility to speak for themselves; and, that children should participate both in decision making and in educational processes. In order to be able to interpret and understand children's perspective, adults must have knowledge about children's way of learning and they must listen carefully to what the children have to say.

The physical environment carries strong messages about what is allowed to do (Dahlberg & Åsén, 1998). Already John Dewey (1933, p.22) wrote: "We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference."

In summary, the daily life of young children in pre-school depends on the local situation, the physical environment and practical routines, as well as on teachers' and other actors' awareness, attitudes and didactical strategies. To be able to practice their right to participate, children need to develop competence

and skills in democratic processes in social situations. Children's participation thus has both a democratic and a learning dimension. The aim of the present paper is to analyse and discuss some material from the first part of the OMEP project.

Methods used and developed

A number of methods were developed and used to discover the children's perspective on preferred activities and places:

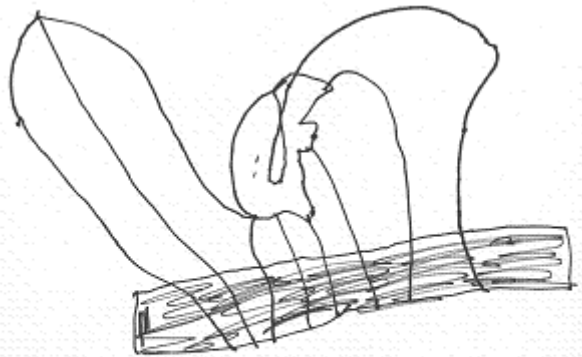
- The teachers mapped the outdoor environment and observed how it was used by the children (see below)
- Children's activities were video-filmed to study how children used different elements in the environment
- Walk-and-talk interviews (Cele, 2006; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2009) consisted of one or two children guiding a project member through the yard, showing their activities in different places and telling about them. These walking interviews were filmed for later analysis. In this way, it was possible to come close to the children's perspective, to identify their preferred activities and places as well as those they did not like, and to hear their own thoughts about them (Picture 3)
- Conversations with children were also held in small groups about their thoughts of the environment, their preferences of activities and places and their opinion of who decides
- Children's drawings were collected of e.g. their favourite places outdoors, ideas or design of new play material, and children were asked to explain their drawings (See Picture 4)
- Children's design of a new playground in clay. One project leader challenged the children: Imagine that everything blew away from the yard last night. What would you build and why? (See Picture 5)
- Visits to another pre-school with a group of children, and observation of children's behaviour and choices in a new environment. This inspired their teachers to make changes in their own centre
- Mapping of non-places, i.e. unused places, and discussing what could be changed
- Inspiration lectures, especially the lecture Don't say NO, say YES! (by Elisabet Arnér, fall 2008) was mentioned by many as giving insight into the small means that are needed to increase children's influence in their everyday life in pre-school. Many teachers realised that they often said NO to children's requests (for example, the children's wish to take out a bike 15 minutes before going home) because it gave them extra work, instead of supporting children's initiative and influence
- Staff meetings and discussions with supervision. After the introductory meeting in each city for all participating pre-schools together, and various inspiring lectures, they met in different types of groups: staff from the same pre-school, staff from several participating pre-schools (cross-reference groups), or staff from different focus groups (e.g. learning, esthetics, gender and children's influence). The groups discussed the documentation they collected, and showed excerpts of films to discuss together. Project leaders participated, supervised and documented the discussions.



Picture 3. Children showing their preferred places when educator is filming.



Flicka 3,9 år: - Jag ska rita en stor Nalle!
 Ped: - Har ska den vara? Ska det var en stor mjuk nalle?
 - Den ska vara mjuk, men kan klättra på den.
 - Ettan kom överst på sin Nalle och björja med att göra den stora.
 Nallen gör björ och strack länga nar (i.). Den är ben och fötter.
 Han ritar armar och länga upp ögon. Nallen en ring i mitten som hon
 gör prickar i. Ped: - Vad är det för prickar?
 - Jag ska göra många prickar som man kan klättra på.
 Han e' sjuk.
Flicka säger att hon ska rita gräs på rullen. Vi pratar om var vi går för
 Nallen ska stå. **Flicka** berättar hur hon tänkt på gräsmattan.
 Sedan är hon klar med sin bild.



Pojke 6 år
 Jag tycker om sandlådan. Jag ritar slanger som suger upp vattnet. Det
 ser ut som i bobildarna. Det är många slanger som suger upp vattnet, det
 var mycket vatten i sandlådan på mitt gamla dagis. Jag tycker om att
 bygga hus.

Picture 4. Examples of children's drawings.



Picture 5. Children's design of a new playground.

The ten local projects worked in different ways in the three cities. Children's wishes about the environment were based on their own practical experiences. Therefore it was important to broaden them for both children and staff. Here the mapping activities and visits to other pre-schools were mentioned as giving inspiration. Different methods were developed and used to document children's thoughts and preferences in connection with activities they liked.

The mapping method in the three regional projects

How the maps were made

Description of the physical environment, i.e. the yards of the pre-schools, was done in different ways. In one region there were detailed maps made by architects (Figure 1 in appendix), in scale and with clear markings of objects and pathways. In other cases maps were made by the staff themselves, where objects such as sandboxes and swings were marked out. Two examples are shown in Figure 2 (in appendix). In these maps, also minor objects that were important for staff and/or children could be included, such as flowers and trees. This implies that they were closer to the reality of the pre-school everyday life.

In order to be able to analyse the design (layout) of the yard and to relate activities and use to spatial properties, it is important that the details of the map such as size and scale, the positions of entrances and play spaces, as well as the directions and length of pathways, are correct. Sight lines (axial lines) that can be related to lines of movement, are important in space syntax analysis.

A preliminary analysis of the available maps suggests that it might be important to combine the two ways of mapping in such a way that size and scale are correct and that staff gets the possibility to add details to the map that are important for them and the children. In this way it is easier to relate observations of behaviour to physical properties. Examples of such details are the location of entrances and the transition area between inside and outside. Also, it might be important to know what department the children belong to, which entrance they use and how far away from their own department they go play. Younger children often find security close to their own department and their own staff, while this often is not so important for older children. When "architect's maps" and "staff maps" are combined, this can give learning advantages for children: they can learn about maps and the symbols that are used to express physical properties and in correct spatial relations.

How the maps were used

In the regional projects, each project leader gave instructions to the staff about how to mark observations on the map, such as where the children were playing, and the position of the staff. Different other variables were marked, such as children's gender and age (Figure 5 in appendix), and the type of activity. Markings could be made in different ways, for instance a different colour for boys and girls, or for each observation round, or a different colour for each of five children whose activities were observed. Examples will be shown in Figure 6-7 during the conference.

When there is more detailed information, the material that is collected can be analysed in depth. Simply marking the presence of children may give an indication about their preferences of places and activities. Markings of gender and age can show interesting differences between activities for boys and girls and different age groups. A power perspective can be used for instance when we look at the use of bicycles and the use of swings. Power structures could be seen both within and between gender groups. Another example is playing in pairs or in larger groups in different places of the yard. Also the presence of staff in different parts of the yard and the connection between the location of entrances of different pre-school departments and the facilities of the yards, may be of interest.

During the project work with maps, the concept of '*non-place*' emerged, pointing at places that were not used by children. The staff discussed the properties of these places and what could be done to improve them and make them more useable.

More information was collected about children's preferences during "walk-and-talk"-interviews. Here the interviewer was guided by one or two children through the yard and the children showed where and how they played. They explained what they liked and why they preferred each place and why not. The interviews were filmed and transcribed. In this way, the children could express their thoughts both verbally and through bodily action (Picture 3). The analysis of this big material is not yet finished.

Preliminary results and discussion

The staff reported that the different methods of mapping and the following discussion of observations increased their awareness of properties in the physical environment and of children's behaviour. This resulted in several practical changes in the yard. Piles of snow were made in different sizes instead of only big piles, thus expanding the younger children's possibilities of climbing up and sliding down. The staff made a conscious choice of the position of the piles. In order to simplify for the youngest children to move around, the staff asked for the digging of small paths through the snow. The result was that the youngest children could use a larger part of the yard during winter, instead of being forced to stay around the building.

The examples also shows that the staff through the project focus, started to see the available material such as snow and water in a creative way instead of regarding them as limitations especially in winter. Local weather conditions as well as cultural traditions were used to make coloured ice blocks, snow sculptures and thrones for kings and queens.

These examples also show the importance of cooperation between the staff and municipal workers who were in charge of removing snow from the walkways of the center. The dialogue between architects, pre-school teachers, researchers and municipal planners seems important to improve the environmental conditions of pre-schools, and the participation of the children makes it possible for all actors to develop a child perspective.

"Now it is for real!" A child's comment may be interpreted as an indication of a change in the staff's focus and behaviour with regard to children's influence and participation.

The use of maps for documentation in the project also lead to an interest of the children in maps as a tool to study and construct images of their local environment. This stimulates children's learning of mathematical and spatial concepts. More material is available for the children and construction play seems to have increased. Some interesting examples show that children were proud of their constructions and explicitly wanted to be identified as the creator. This kind of play seems to be important for their self esteem and identity formation.

Although we here report about many successful changes, it is important to be aware that the support of children's participation and influence is a long term process. We have seen many examples where children got more influence and were listened to. When the staff understands the thoughts of the children and then wants to implement a change, it is time consuming to involve the children in the process and it is very easy to fall back to traditional staff discussions during planning meetings where no children are present.

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