



This paper is taken from

*The Experience of Citizenship  
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's  
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
  - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
  - a official of the European Commission
  - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

*Svennson, I M. and Welwert, G. (2004) Children's rights in the public space, in Ross, A. (ed) The Experience of Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 125 - 130*

© CiCe 2004

CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



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 herein.

#### **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
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **Children's rights in the public space**

*Inge-Marie Svennson and Gunilla Welwert*

School of Teacher Education, University of Malmö (Sweden)

Working in 'the public space' with students at the School of Teacher Education at the University of Malmö and pupils in the compulsory school is an important task for us as lecturers.

## **Children's rights to participate in physical community planning in Sweden**

The intentions of the Convention of Children's Rights are supposed to permeate all decisions in Swedish society in which children are involved - for example planning the physical community. The Planning and Building Law says that physical community planning has to be carried out together with citizens. A Delegation for Children's Security started their work in January 2002: their main objective was to 'listen to youth in society planning' and the Delegation had three suggestions:

- the approach to children's security and development should be cooperative;
- children's and young people's own knowledge should be used in community planning; and
- social differences in figures should be paid attention to.

## **A course about 'The perspective of the citizens'**

One example that shows how the Convention of Children's Rights and its intentions are being implemented is a course at the School of Teacher Education in Malmö. In this course (The development of the city) students are given a task called 'The perspective of the citizens'. To accomplish this they must visit municipal offices and planning committee offices in different municipalities in south Sweden, where they interview key figures and investigate and reflect on what kinds of possibilities children and young people have to participate in and influence decisions concerning city planning at municipality level.

How does this work theoretically and practically? Do the municipalities follow the law, and more exactly the law concerning the child's best interests? The students investigated seventeen municipalities. Most of the people interviewed were aware of the law but did not practise it, while in some municipalities the law was practised on a small scale. However, the students found exceptions to this.

In the X municipality a children's checklist has been drawn up to form the basis of all preparations and decisions made by the executive board concerning children below the age of eighteen. The questions in the checklist come partly from the Convention of Children's Rights and partly from a health matrix.

One example of questions taken from the Convention of Children's Rights is if a proposal satisfies the child's best interests. The decision-makers had to answer yes or

no. If yes: in what way concerning the prohibition of discrimination, the right to safety and development? If no: give the reason. Another question was: Has the child had the possibility of expressing his/her own opinions? Yes or no. If yes: in what way? If no: give the reasons. Questions taken from the health matrix start from elements such as democracy, possibilities to influence and participate, the physical environment, social network, economic safety, belief in the future and so on. The decision-makers had to determine if the proposals they suggested will lead to improvements for children, short-term as well as long-term. It is also important for the decision-makers to be aware of what category of children will be directly affected by the proposal (for example children in specific age groups; ethnic and cultural groups; children with physical or mental functional disorders).

Areas for which the entire children's checklist ought to be filled in are:

- the general plan
- further investigations
- the planning programme
- detailed plans and building law concerning houses, schools, pre-schools, sports facilities, recreation areas, open-air recreation area, playgrounds, allotments.

Examples of common 'public space' are parks, squares, footpaths, cycle paths, residential streets, bigger streets, roads, cultural buildings and cinemas.

Other municipalities had developed citizen's councils, youth coordinators, and youth councils: the consequences are that young people participate to a greater extent than before. But too many communities do not observe the law.

### **Visual perspective of the public surroundings**

Within some courses in the programme for educating future teachers we work with visual language coupled with different contents. We have widened the visual idea to include, for example, public surroundings. Students are sent to study public places and are supposed to relate their impressions to young people, to listen and to pay attention to the children's opinions. Articles 12, 13 and 31 connect this work with the Convention of the Children's Rights. We must look upon children as citizens and interpret the Articles as an urgent request to form society in a way that gives young people a share in power.

Urban life implies a great number of humans from different cultures, occupations and with varying needs. In discussing the urban public space, one can choose two starting points, one physical and one social. But these two points depend on each other. A public place needs people and people need public places where they can meet. It is not enough that the public place is open, accessible and common. It has to be used in a way that does not exclude anyone or make anyone feel unwelcome. Sometimes, for example, young people 'take over' a place and make it more private. Other people using the space can feel embarrassed. A public place is characterised by its accessibility for all people irrespective of background, social position, opinion or dress.

Swedish towns today do not have much in their buildings that signals the cultural or political connections of the individual town. Instead there are many common signs you such as those for public transport and advertising pillars. As an educational source the town can be considered in many ways; as pattern, geometrical form, theatrical stage or as a place including motion, symmetry, function and contrast. People today have homes that provide a larger private area and often prefer to stay within their own walls. The reason for this might be a more difficult social environment. There is also a lack of interesting material things outside which leads to less people just strolling around. The physical environment is more standardised and perhaps lacking in imaginative details. Technological development also means that the need of human contact has decreased. Children and young people live daily lives inside institutions. Many people today spend their lives in the public room through computers and mobile telephones, communicating through text and pictures.

### **Pedagogical considerations**

In spite of this, we think it is important to work with the public places in society. In the pedagogical context it is important to think about how we work with the public surroundings which are a part of our visual culture, where we sometimes live our lives but perhaps mostly just pass from one point to another. What kind of method do we choose? The most usual way to combine the visual approach with content is still to make a picture of our field of vision, but that way of working only develops our skills of drawing or painting. There are other ways to work: it is only necessary to decide from what perspective you want to approach the task. Is it about form or are we historically concentrated? Perhaps we want to create experiences, or do we take up the critical position of the sociologist? The visual culture appears in many ways in the society, in institutions, among objects, through valuations and how we look upon things which influence the way society is created, maintained and developed. Examples of visual public environments which confront young people are houses and flats, gardens, parks, markets and squares, public institutions, shopping centres and cinemas.

Impressions differ depending on the sex, age and social class of the 'viewer', but are also affected by historical, geographical and cultural contexts. It is important to work with not only analyses and understanding, as if we agree with the solution. One also has to add conceptions such as an aesthetic perspective, fascination, experiences, involvement and participation, and to discuss the different opinions. This may have the result that one can continue and work in a practical way where the students, and in the future their pupils, are involved and also important participants in the process of forming public surroundings.

An aesthetic educational process joins form, content and activity. It is also important that the children feel a high degree of participation and that they have sufficient tools at hand. Participation is related to how much influence each child has about its own educational process, and of course depends on the teacher's pedagogical attitude. It is important that the teacher masters different pedagogical methods and ways of expression. When the children are involved in projects through which they can change their physical environment, they take much more interest in and care of it. In a town

where the multi-cultural pattern is evident, tasks should be created with the children and should develop methods and content that strengthens the group. As a pupil you have an opportunity to show a new part of your personality.

The playground is another example of an official environment where pupils participate in planning. Many schools have different councils, such as an environmental council, in which pupils from different classes participate. The pupils often wish for an outdoor environment that is divided according to the age of the pupils. The younger pupils want playgrounds and climbing frames, while the older ones prefer bushes and hedges that divide the ground into different small rooms where pupils can sit and talk. It is very important that the pupils are active in the decision making; that is a part of a democratic upbringing. It is also important that pupils discuss their suggestions, testing their arguments against each other's. This strengthens their inner ethical compass. To have influence within the democratic process is very instructive for later life, and the pupils learn from each other.

### **Malmö - a segregated city**

Malmö is a city with different areas that appear in varied forms. The centre has one character during daytime when the shops are open and with many people are moving around to jobs, shopping and other purposes. They have a reason to be there. In the night this part of town is abandoned, apart from young people who meet there in groups having a meal at MacDonalds, a beer or are on their way to the cinema. We do not know what the environments mean to them - that would be an interesting thing to investigate. On the outskirts of the city there are not many people outside during the daytime – perhaps parents with perambulators, children with their teachers from day-nurseries and pensioners. In the evening the adults stay at home or go to special activities like courses, athletic associations or to visit friends. There are not many people who go outside to enjoy the surroundings. The young ones also go to activities, but there are of course some who just stay outside to meet friends. In Sweden we have a climate which does not allow us to stay outside throughout the whole year.

### **A practical example**

In January we met an international group of students and we had lessons that involved public surroundings and practical visual work. Each student in the group was given a picture of a public ornament and its surroundings near a residential quarter. There were typical examples from the 1960s when the population of Malmö increased and it was necessary to build new apartments. At that time there was an act that implied that 2% of the cost of building houses should be intended for the artistic ornamentation of the houses or their immediate surroundings. That sounded like a good idea, but now when we look at these objects, exposed on a lawn or open place, they are isolated and never seem to touch the inhabitants. The places are deserted.

The task for the students was to transform this special place into a more enticing, one where above all children and teenagers could meet. The students were free to make this transformation in whatever visual form they wanted. It became apparent that it was not a

problem restricted to Malmö but one that was also evident in Spain or Colombia. The students confirmed that there were places near the citizen's homes which were never used as common places where people could meet.

When the student's results were presented we had interesting discussions about the students' solutions. They had made more playful proposals and combined possibilities in one model for children of different ages. Some of them kept the form of the artistic ornament and developed it in a new way. What we need to consider now is whether a more inviting place can change the behaviour and the customs of the inhabitants. Perhaps it is a more private life combined with special activities that is the model, a private life which is more public because, as we said before, we use the computer and tell the whole world things that would have been impossible some years ago. You can show pictures of yourself and your life, how you live, about you relatives and your environment. You do not need to go to a public place outside your home.

### **Questions to the audience**

Do you recognise the problems that we have emphasised, such as

- children not being listened to
- the need concerning official places in a increasingly digital world
- varying methods concerning children's possibilities in decision making.

In what way do you achieve the demand for Children's Rights? How do you use your public rooms? What are the similarities and differences?

