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A wider perspective on public space

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Background

The Convention of Children's Rights and its intentions are intended to permeate all decisions in Swedish society that involve children. Children's and young people's own knowledge and suggestions should be used in community planning. How can we at the School of Teacher Education prepare our students for such tasks?

- A necessary precondition is that there must be a vision of the future.
- We must discuss what kinds of environment are important for people's well-being.
- There needs to be a forum where the different people involved can meet and have real opportunities to influence development. Current research stresses that to have influence is a base for learning.

With our students we have developed content and methods for this related to daily life in an urban environment. This includes the complete visual text one meets as a citizen. Reactions differ, depending on age, gender and experience: the context is an important factor in how one receives impressions. We need to listen to children's arguments and what they propose as changes and alternative solutions. Our students investigate how this happens in society, deepening their knowledge in particular areas and finding new learning fields. This work with students is documented in digital photographs and film.

It is important to create urban environments that are human, and to do so recognising that the population is mixed and includes young people. We have to consider accessibility, security and meeting place. When outdoors we have to deal with different kinds of activity. Some are necessary daily activities, such as going to school or waiting for a bus. Urban planning in these cases has to be functional. Optional activities demand something else: one selects environments that are particularly pleasant, and pays attention to both practical and aesthetic qualities. In such environments we have the opportunity to encounter others and develop our social life. Adults are like children: we want to stay where other people stay, where there is life and movement. Today our private life is so central and important that it is necessary to create public environments that are inviting.

In teacher education we attempt to make students pay attention to the importance of environment through different ways. Students might use the environments in their daily work at school. We have studied the environments around houses, and investigated playgrounds and public areas, and discussed how it might be possible to involve young people so they participate in decisions more fully. Public places are often abandoned because they are dull and desolate. We have been critical of the way those in power have handled questions: we want now to go further and develop other elements in our students' courses.

Citizens' perspectives

During the autumn of 2004 a group of students investigated whether municipalities in the south of Sweden managed to keep children in focus when they were making decisions about children and youth.

The Convention of Children's Rights (1989) stresses that the child's best interests should always be the focus. Principles of national guidance dating from 1999 set out that municipalities must have a system demonstrating how they pay attention to children's best interests in their work. Two common ways of demonstrating this are a children's welfare checklist and a final report that focuses on children's concerns. This report is often an annual document, showing what has been done that concerns children and young people in different municipal (local) areas over the past year. Sometimes the report also includes an appendix to a decision that has been made, in which the consequences for children are explained.

The children's welfare checklist is a questionnaire which is supposedly completed when political decisions are made. Typical questions would be 'has consideration been shown to the child's best interest?' and 'have children and young people been paid attention to?' A newspaper article in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (6 June 2004) reported that eight out of ten municipalities in the south of Sweden are planning to introduce a children's welfare checklist for political decisions. On the other hand, some municipalities that have had a welfare checklist are going to discontinue this, because it has not resulted in the anticipated tangible proposals: they will instead try to find a better way to work with children's perspectives in the activities of the municipality.

The situation in various municipalities in the south of Sweden 2004: using a welfare checklist or a final report

Burlöv:	A welfare checklist will be used.
Eslöv:	A welfare checklist is supposed to be investigated.
Hörby:	A welfare checklist is supposed to be investigated.
Höör:	No plans for either a final report concerning children or a welfare checklist.
Kävlinge:	The politicians will decide which alternative they will choose. The suggestion does not contain any welfare checklist.
Lomma:	They have used a welfare checklist since 2002 but will get rid of it soon.
Lund:	They have used a welfare checklist but are going to get rid of it soon.
Malmö:	They have got rid of the welfare checklist after five years.
Staffanstorps:	They have decided to have a welfare checklist.
Svedala:	The welfare checklist is going to be investigated.
Trelleborg:	The welfare checklist will be in use soon.
Vellinge:	The welfare checklist is going to be investigated.

Examples that show what practical work focussing on children's and young peoples best interests takes place in the south of Sweden

1. When a physical space is being planned in the municipality, proposals are sent to the pupils' council in different schools, who work to improve or change the plan. An example was the town-planning people asking teachers and pupils in school to work on the Lomma Harbour projects.

2. Another municipality tried to engage young people in making travel to school safer. They asked the pupils for suggestions to improve the traffic situation.
3. One municipality has a child and youth delegation, with deputies from eleven to sixteen years old. This has different councils, such as the environmental council. The young people suggest that they want a new building designed for that group.
4. In one municipality the old child and youth committee is to end its existence, and a new committee will be chosen through elections in the senior level in upper secondary schools. The young people will decide themselves what they think is important and on what they want to take their stand. In this child and youth committee the young people will work on questions that affect them: this municipality also introduced a brief welfare checklist.
5. In another part of Sweden, young people are encouraged to send suggestions to the municipal council, which gives them serious discussion. Officials in the municipality advertise essay topics for children and young people to give suggestions about how different areas in the municipality can be developed or planned.

In the compulsory school curriculum and syllabus for social studies there is stress on pupils making decisions about questions, practising making arguments, and in preparing for action. Dealing with questions concerning democracy strengthens pupils' capacity for action.

The students thought it interesting that while some municipalities were about to start working with a welfare checklist for children, others had been doing this for some years and were now deciding to abandon this approach. How could this be possible when all municipalities were following the same law? The students felt that there was too much officialdom and bureaucracy attached to decision-making, and people found the law toothless. Some students with positive experiences (for example, with experiences of the municipality of Lund) told us that Lund was appointed as the youth municipality of 2004.

To work in a visual way with the city as a scene for learning

We have cities as they exist, and we have to make the best we can of the situation. We tried to let students investigate the city of Malmö to find how places could be used in learning. In the commercial and multi-coloured city one can find interesting things that can develop young people's knowledge and make them more aware of the place in which they live. They can find arguments for change, and adults must help them do this if they find difficulties in doing this by themselves. In the city of Malmö one never knows all the people one meets, but it is exciting to listen to and observe anonymous people moving around. The design of the physical environment is important in providing opportunities to encounter other people.

Another aspect of the commercial and urban social environment in which we live is that one can stay passive, but one can also use it for understanding. Many of the visual signs in the city are directed towards young people, such as advertisements and shop-windows. Young people are a large target group: they are consumers and are often manipulated by commercial forces. They can develop a more nuanced understanding if the city-space is used more in education.

We can also achieve historical knowledge in this way. Adults may have to point to connections between earlier periods and contemporary life. Looking at old buildings and market-places and trying to understand their age, we compare old building materials and architecture with the new. We look at buildings as aesthetic objects and discuss phenomena such as harmony and balance; we can think of the people who lived in these places over the years. It is an opportunity to talk about scale, space and urban space when moving around buildings. Territories that have changed function, and thereby appearance, have a new definition and identity. Many new buildings are out of proportion to the human body: they are buildings more suitable for elephants. Many people feel much more comfortable in cities with lower architecture and surprises around the corner. We think it is important to express experiences in different ways, for example visually and verbally.

At the beginning of 2005 we started a project with students who had chosen a course in Visual Language and Art. On the first day we took the group to the largest and most central market in Malmö, where we gave the students brief information about their task:

Think about these points when you work with the visual environment from a learning perspective

1. Choose an environment or phenomenon in a limited area.
 2. Document the chosen environment you want to study visually (sketch, find pictures, advertisements, information) Observe, ask people who are passing.
 3. Decide what is the content of your work. What can you learn? What are the meanings, anchor these to the curriculum. Can it be learned in another way? Which age of pupil do you work with? Stress the visual!
 4. Think about an interesting performance which rouses the audience.
 5. Suggest a topic for discussion.
 6. Each group has 20-30 minutes for their performance.
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As lecturers, we had no answers, and did not want to prejudice our students, because this was new for us too. The students worked in small groups and investigated different parts of and phenomena in the city. They kept their projects secret and worked independently. Two days later we met and the students presented their material.

Initially the students were somewhat confused, but they succeeded and produced many interesting examples. As the course was on education in visual language, they had to stress the visual element. Their forms of expression differed, so that the lessons were varied, with creative examples that kept the children in focus. These examples came from the work of groups in which students from different subjects were mixed. We filmed their presentations.

- What can we learn from the house facades? Old and new architecture were compared and the discussion moved around pattern, materials, proportions and changes in function. The shop-windows are like big gaps and you feel that the buildings do not have any base.
- A department store in the centre of Malmö; initially the group was not allowed to film inside, but after a short talk they were admitted. They tried to become children once more and looked at the signs with children's eyes. They noticed problems, but

also possibilities. They decided that much could be learned from mathematics and patterns. Advertisement and their content showed sexual signals and that had to be discussed at school. Young girls were forced to behave and look like teenagers. One group visited a hotel lobby and studied all the things that could be used with young people in a teaching way. The hotel has its history; there are rules to follow when you visit a hotel, some famous persons have stayed at the hotel. What kind of persons were they? Why were they famous?

- Where is the centre of Malmö and how old is it? Some students had found the milestone from which place all distances in different directions are measured. Many of the students did not know this, even although they lived in Malmö.
- Finally we mention the group which most stirred the students' minds. They had chosen MacDonald's and were not critical about the business idea. Instead they tried to find good learning examples in the restaurant. They thought of the children's interest. But many of the students were enormously critical of that phenomenon and said they would never visit such a place.

The more we try new methods, the more they open up new possibilities. We think it very important that children and young people have opportunities to influence decisions concerning themselves. This will lead to their becoming involved into practical democracy work. Democracy has to be guarded by all of the people, all of the time.

