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

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Working interdisciplinary with students in the main subject Geographical and environmental learning

Inge-Marie Svensson, Department of Teacher Education in Malmö (Sweden)
Gunnilla Welwert, Department of Teacher Education in Malmö (Sweden)

Background

Over some years we have developed a collaborative project in which students whose main study is in *Geography - environment and learning* spend a couple of days investigating interesting content through working in a visual way. As it is still rather uncommon to work in that way with students in the Swedish schools, we think it necessary to give examples during the study. We have to set a good example. In Malmö Teacher Education elements with aesthetical methods are considered a natural way to work in many different subjects. We know that varied methods support different pupils, because humans learn in different ways. Since 1994 the Swedish Government has decided that the concept of knowledge has four forms. These forms are facts, understanding, skills and experiences and they represent the varieties of knowledge. It is very important for the students to be aware of and to practice these forms during their time of study. This means that each student must reflect about his/her own way of teaching. You have to reach different personalities at school and everyone has the right to work not only with written language but also in other ways. We know from many investigations that pupils learn for the most part outside school. We define this as informal learning. Therefore it is interesting to find places where young people come together and to think of these places as learning-places, both for the pupils and for the students. What can we teachers learn from that? Young people are now more perceptible in daily life and they take up a great deal of space in publicity and the media (Lieberg 2003).

Young people and publicity

When we talk about young people or teenagers, we often describe them (carelessly) as a homogenous group. But it is much more complicated than that. Instead of trying to describe young men and women's social reality as totally different we ought to talk about it in a more nuanced way. The concept 'youth' is more fluid now. The border between children, youth and adults is not so sharp. This depends on if you think about it in a biological or a legal way. The social meaning and the cultural background are other factors that have great importance. But one thing that is new is that young people use public space more today (Lieberg 1992). They are active and the girls take more space than earlier. The time of youth is characterized by a strong connection to public space where the young can make their activities. At home they eat, sleep, get their clothes washed and prepare themselves for the life outside (Drotner 1994). Youth culture has always been associated with consumption directed by the class society. Since the 1990s we have a new lower class, racism has increased and we have multi-ethnic suburbs (Lallander 2002). There is increased differentiation and teenagers have more possibilities to select from. Many proposals come from media, through pictures and symbols. It can be hard to distinguish between their own authentic experiences and from indirect

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mediated ones (Fornäs 1987). In Sweden we debate the young people on the margin, who are looked on as dangerous. To be a young man, immigrant and live in an exposed suburb is almost synonymous with being risky. But this is the way media want to present it. Results from research point out that the young people need to come together to work with social, psychological, cultural and existential conditions (Lieberg 2003).

We can describe the publicity in two ways according to Lieberg. It can either mean place and room or social connection. In a public place there are informal rules and norms which regulate relations. Accessibility can depend on, for example, age or clothes. But young people are often excluded many places because of their lack of money. One reason is that young people go to school until they are nineteen years old, and because of this they do not earn any money. It is usual that a group of young people occupy a space, a part of a market or some bench in a park. They make this place not accessible for others. The limit lies in social behaviour. We asked our students to find such places and try to get answers from those involved. Do adults listen to the young ones? In what way is it possible for them to influence their out-door life?

To study young people moving around in public spaces it is hardly sufficient just to observe them (Lallander 2002). In this course we have, depending on the time and scope of lessons, tried to introduce an element about this phenomena. The students, in groups, observed a place they have chosen themselves. It is a small example of ethnographic study and visible signs are important. Because of this, we ask for the students make a presentation in a visual way, and not in the form of written text. They had to document the place with a special focus on young people and they were required to give the result in a visibly clear way.

It is free time activities that are the most important when young people want to decide for themselves and have fun. Young people use the aesthetics in their daily life - with ornamentation of the body, the music they choose and the pictures they are attracted to (Drotner 1994). We know that the late modern life implies to live in a mediated and global world where existential questions arise. Lessons at school have to contain such elements too. It is a good thing if you can combine the material from a theoretical subject like 'the city' and discuss it from the view of youth. It could be a good idea to spend time with other teachers who teach theoretical subjects: new ways could be combined with a serious content. Which is what we do in this project.

In the Swedish upper secondary school each pupil has fifty hours in the three years on a subject called Aesthetics. These lessons are quite often rather traditional and pupils train in drawing and painting rather than using new technique and methods. This is because of how the teacher interprets the word aesthetic. We have discussed this concept many times in Teacher Education at Malmö. Democracy belongs to the aesthetic. We talk about freedom of speech and publicity in this connection. The radical inheritance of art could be a good example of how to defend and develop inner and outer freedom (Aulin-Gråhamn 2004). In an earlier project we have worked with contemporary art and democracy. We know that artists today work boundlessly and suggest similar work at school today. Earlier experiences show that one can work with visual methods and make material living about how pupils understand things, how they understand the meeting

between themselves and the world. They create the reality through choosing aspects to live in the surroundings.

The students in this project come from different places and are of various ages, so they present quite different content. One thing we notice, as Lieberg says, is a marked difference between the centre and the outskirts. Some teenagers choose to stay where they live and try to find places in the surroundings, while some leave and move in to the city. The students who were involved in this project showed examples from both kinds of environments.

Results from a recently-published investigation

In the report the question was asked 'do upper secondary youth want the city of Stockholm to invest in meeting-places?' 42% out of 1,536 pupils responded yes to this question. There were differences between the responses of girls and boys: girls were more positive and showed a greater engagement than boys. The girls wanted that meeting-places to be situated both in their local environment and in the city, while the boys were satisfied only with the local environment (Elofson, 2006). Björn Andersson of the University of Gothenburg thinks that this is a natural part of the socialisation process: when boys and girls are younger they normally are in the local environment, but as they become older they want to conquer the public space of the city (Andersson, B 2002). As boys mature more slowly than girls, this could be the reason why boys are satisfied with the local environment. On the other hand, girls often say that they feel insecure when they are moving in the city at night: this may be a reason some girls choose the local environment (Elofson & Blomdahl 2006).

The visual task work in 'The city' course

Introducing the fieldwork, we discussed a text about young people moving in public space, and we looked at different visual examples of environments in Malmö. The task was about public places where young people meet, with a focus on the pattern of movement within the city of teenagers. The students worked in groups and had to choose an example from somewhere in Malmö. The environment they chose could be temporary or permanent. We also wanted the groups to work outdoors. An important question was how the environment was created, and what possibilities and changes might there be room for. Would young people be listened to?

The students went out to investigate different environments and on their return wanted some feedback on their practical work. Every group gave an account, choosing different ways to report within about 20 minutes, after which we discussed views and questions. We considered content, performance and active participation.

The results of the task

When the students gave their accounts we documented them with videos and notes, and then the whole group discussed the content and the performance. An important element was to talk about didactic questions, which could be about subject matter and visual solutions.

Student group A

This group started out from a market place, Gustav Adolfs Torg. The students asked fifteen and sixteen-year olds what they would like to change in the public space in the city of Malmö. The girls wanted a café and the boys an amusement hall in which activities were free. From this, the students suggested a model in which, at the east end of the market place they kept the old shops and the fountains; along the north end they built shoe and clothing shops, from cheap to expensive - a sports shop focused on active lifestyles. Along the west end they constructed bus stops, a green open space and a Cuban café, reflecting Malmö's many inhabitants from different countries. In the middle of the market place they built a house for different activities, made of cheap materials and recycled products (thinking of sustainable development). This building had a huge amusement hall, an Internet café, and a recreation centre with a large screen in the ceiling: all of these activities being free. The students felt that the house would contribute a feeling of solidarity among the teenagers, prevent damage to public space, and show that youth had been listened to and their wishes realized.

Student group B

This group reported through a role play, with the following scenario: it is Friday evening and three seventeen year old boys wanted to visit pubs in Malmö, but when they tried they were stopped because of their age. Eventually they ended up at an Internet café, and then went to a multi-storey where they sat talking. They were bored. The students asked the audience what teenagers of this age are supposed to do. They also asked their colleagues about the possibilities they had had in their own local environment, when they were growing up. Group B also interviewed some teenagers in Malmö about their recreational needs: they said that they wanted workshops for making film and music.

Student group C

This group chose two different environments: one in the surroundings of Möllevången, an old labour district of Malmö and one in a newly built area, the Western Harbour. They started in a backyard close to Möllevångs torget. Many cultural associations are situated here: the area is multiethnic. They met boys and girls around twelve to sixteen years old, who explained that the municipality had closed the recreation centre and now they had nothing to do, not even a place to play football. They used a dead-end street as a football ground and shared a playground with five year old children. They were displeased. The students asked them to describe their typical days in words and pictures on a big sheet: their pictures showed both happy and sad parts of life, and their words to describe the pictures suggested the young boys and girls were using words that they did not understand the real meaning of - it seemed as though the words did not have the same value for the young ones as for the students.

The students then went to part of Malmö called the Western Harbour, a new part of the city. Here they investigated a newly built skateboard Park. Young people, teenagers and men and women over thirty skated here. The foundation cost the municipality a lot of money. Youth has participated in the design of the skate Park. There is an agreement that

those using this park had to be good skaters, and that the best ones skate first. As the students talked to the girls and boys it became clear that there were a conflict of interest between skateboarders and BMX drivers. In this locality there were hardly any cultural associations, and those who are using the area came from all over Malmö.

When the students compared the two environments they noticed some interesting things. The environment around Möllevången had many cultural associations compared to Western Harbour. The young people in Möllevången lived their lives there and were connected in age, socio/economic conditions and locality. They were a homogeneous group compared to those who were in the skateboard Park, who did not seem to have anything in common except skating.

Student group D

This group chose an environment in the countryside: they visited a small village, part of Malmö but situated in the outskirts. The village consists of small houses and farms surrounded with fields. The students wanted to investigate what kind of public spaces teenagers choose in a small village like this. They observed how teenagers move in public space. What did they notice? Most teenagers gathered outside a video shop, because here they could meet other teenagers and the recreation centre had limited opening hours. The centre was opened for children and teenagers between seven and twenty years old, but only on weekdays between two and ten pm, it was closed on Saturdays and on Sundays it was open between three and ten pm. Another place where the teenagers met was at the bus stop. When asked what they needed for recreation, they answered computers and pinball.

Student group E

This group chose a square in Lund, a neighbouring town to Malmö with a famous statue called Klumpen, by the Spanish sculptor Edward Chillido. One of the group had been to school in Lund and knew that teenagers had gathered here for generations. They talked to many young people who told them this was 'the' place to meet, because they felt the square was nice and very open-minded, a node where everybody met. From this node one could have a total control over what is going on. An elderly woman told them that this was nothing new: it had been like this for generations. The people inherited the feelings for this square, generation after generation.

Conclusion

Young people utilize public space more than before. What are the differences in this pattern of use, by sex, class or ethnicity? Our students showed that youth below the age of eighteen miss meeting places which are interesting for them. One has to be eighteen years old to visit a pub, and this is also expensive. Girls and boys have different needs. Girls wanted places like cafés, where they could sit and talk; while boys want recreation halls with different workshops. This wish was confirmed by group A in their investigation. The students in group C showed that young people who lived in an old labour district of Malmö had fewer opportunities to meet each other, and the place they did have had to be shared with younger people. These young people felt lonely and

missed the presence of adults. These young people stay in their district. This agrees with earlier research that shows that this is a natural way in the socialization process concerning young people (Andersson, 2002, Lieberg 1992). We have met similar experiences as teachers. The students in group C showed also that some young people of both sexes were moving in the public space over large areas, because they wanted to create a special sport activity, for example skating in the Western Harbour. These young people had only one thing in common, an interest in skating nothing else. Having read the various literature and listened to our students accounts we are convinced that young people are heterogenic: it is important to notice this in considering their needs.

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