Mobile preschool children’s sense of belonging and citizenship in the city

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Young children’s sense of belonging and citizenship

Today’s presentation:

• increased urban and school segregation and school markets divided cities, where children from different backgrounds and neighborhoods seldom meet

• divided cities - divided childhoods

• a new project on a phenomenon in Swedish early childhood education – *the mobile preschool*

• critically discuss the potential of the mobile preschool to enhance preschool children’s active participation and encounters with diversity in the city
Changes in children’s (im)mobility and shrinking urban spaces for children

Urban childhoods and children's mobility are changing, also in Sweden:

• Shrinking urban spaces for children due to processes of densification and neo-liberalization (Karsten 2005; 2016)
• Changed mobilities due to a tendency towards the institutionalisation and insularisation of children’s daily lives (Zeiher 2005)
• Unequal mobilities depending on social and ethnic background (Lareau 2011, Kallstenius 2010)

As a consequence, children’s participation in urban space and the possibility to practice their right to the city is decreasing as well as socially differentiated
Children’s participation in the city – children as citizens

- Children's active participation in spaces of the city is key to their sense of belonging.
- It provides opportunities for children's physical activities as well as opportunities to develop spatial competence in navigating the city.
- Active participation in the city is a way for children to claim their rights and access to the city, enhance their sense of citizenship.
- It is through everyday life and through using and (re-) defining and claiming everyday spaces that children practice and negotiate politics and engage in active citizenship.
- Urban spaces are key sites in which children perform and are exposed to politics (Kallio & Häkli 2011).
Mobile preschools

Mobile preschools are preschools in buses that on a daily basis travel in and around the city.

Started due to lack of space but also discussed as possibilities to provide children with new – predominantly outdoor – learning environments.
20 children and 3 teachers (bus driver included)

Division that starts and finishes the day in a stationary preschool and drives to different locations about half an hour drive away.
The project

4-year project

where we study the mobile preschool in terms of its time-spatial organisation and mobility, focusing on children’s informal learning, mobility and citizenship in the city

national mapping

ethnographic field work in five preschool buses with children from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds
The fieldwork

**Variety of contexts**, five buses, located in
- suburb of Stockholm
- inner-city Malmö
- Uppsala (2)
- Lund (PhD-project)

**Multiple methods**: participatory observation, video and audio-recording, informal and formal interviews with children, pedagogues and parents, pedometers, gps-tracking as well as a national mapping of mobile preschools.
Mobile preschools exist in 13 cities and areas around Sweden – in urban (and rural) areas. 40 buses, municipalities and private.

Started due to:

- A reaction to acute (indoor) space problems but also a way of
- Providing new learning environments
- Practising outdoor education
- Working with integration and language
Research questions

• How do mobile preschools afford and constrain children’s learning, navigation and participation in different spaces of the city?

• What kinds of places does the mobile preschool use and how? What are the potentials for children to experience and learn about difference and diversity?

• What kinds of relations (material, social and symbolic) are established and sustained by the children in the used spaces?
Two buses – two very different settings

The purple bus

- Is located in a Stockholm suburb
- A multiethnic and poor neighbourhood
- Managed by a private company

The Pippi Longstocking bus

- Is located in neighbourhood in Uppsala
- A quite homogenous white middleclass neighbourhood
- Managed by the local government (Uppsala municipality)
What kinds of places do the mobile preschools visit?

A variation of spaces in and around the city

- Nature spaces popular
  - Large nature recreation areas with facilities
  - Other green and nature spaces

In line with image of the ideal Scandinavian "Astrid Lindgren" childhoods – rural and nature

- Public play grounds
- Museums, sports arena and events
The Pippi Longstocking bus

- Use of wind shelters, rest rooms and other public facilities
- Free play in nature with loose materials (both natural and artificial)
- Climbing, running, motor play etc. (physical activity)
- Regular, demarcated and explicit educational activities (fishing, math)
- Regular educational input

Nature as a play and educational space

The Purple bus

- Use of wind shelters, rest rooms and other public facilities
- Walks for the sake of walking (physical activity)
- Occasional educational input (ad-hoc)

Nature as scenery
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Purple bus</th>
<th>The Pippi Longstocking bus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Free play</td>
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<td>▪ The play ground equipment (themes) inspires play</td>
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<td>▪ Children’s choice of place</td>
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Free zone (for play, moving, fantasy)  
Free zone (children can choose to avoid educational activities)
The Purple bus
• Local preschool events (natural cycles – learn about recycling)

The Pippi Longstocking bus
• Outdoor museum
• Sports arena (visit)
• Architecture festival
Knowing the city through traveling it

Children recognize and talk about

- landmarks of the city; water tower, cathedral
- their homes
- people they know; grandma, father with dog, mother on bike
- animals
- Motor vehicles, trains, metro

“I have been there” - places visited with family

“We have been here before” - places visited with the bus

Place and identity (individual and collective identities) are intimately linked
Counting cars and trucks
Appropriating the city

The Pippi Longstocking bus:

- Open and welcoming towards other people (encounters)
- Open towards difference
- Teachers look for and discover opportunities in places in the city
- Children as a group take for granted their right to participate and appropriate the city
Visiting the city

The Purple bus:

- Showing children a different world – compensatory for their poor neighbourhood
- Bringing children to beautiful nature areas
- Teachers not so open towards other people (encounters)
- Children have to behave in a disciplined way
- Children seen as ‘out of place’ in the city
Tentative conclusions

The talk about nature and green areas in the city is the same - the use of nature and green areas in the city is very different (research method!)

Public playgrounds as children’s places

The two mobile preschool practices have different overarching approaches towards the city

The ways the buses use and view the city have consequences for the children’s identities, sense of belonging and citizenship in the city and wider society
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