

Kari Bjørka Hodneland:
Room for Children's Participation? Reflections on Communicative Practice in an Educational Context.

Summary

The thesis title asks if there is room for children to participate in matters concerning the built environment. The concept "room" in the title, points at three different meanings; the physical room referring to the public place in the local neighbourhood, the administrative room and the political room.

In Norway, the right of children to participate is, in principle, well looked after in many respects. However, this does not mean that all children are experiencing the chance to participate. All permanent bodies of participation like the pupils' council are based on the principle of participation by representation.

In Norway, as in the rest of Europe, there are many examples of projects where children and the built environment are linked to participation. For many years a critical voice about the value of these projects has been heard because they seem to take place just once, they are rarely evaluated, and they are often bound to local conditions. The likelihood of transmission to parallel projects is therefore small or non-existent. By studying children and participation in an educational context, the transmission value might be increased.

The thesis builds on reflection on the author's communicative practice. The pilot-project about the "Small Ugly Places" constitutes the main part of the empirical part of the thesis. The project was about participation, children and the urban environment and was put into effect in five inner city primary schools in Oslo. The aim of the project was to use the public outdoor places in a practical-educational context. In co-operation with the municipal divisions, the children were encouraged to improve the design as well as the maintenance of the public place in the local environment. The **Model for Increased Awareness of the Built Environment**, the MIABE, designed by the author, is a context-bound teaching and learning model aiming at participation. The model comprises many different components, amongst others the acquiring of a limited vocabulary linked to the details of built environment as well as to public administration. The purpose of this component was to contribute to a dialogue between the different actors in the project. The responsibility for implementation of the children's informed ideas for change was that of the local authorities. The aim of the further project activity was that all children and young people should get practical experience from participation. The school was, therefore, chosen as the arena for implementation of the model.

The research design for the author's strategy was built on method triangulation based on the narrative, the reflexive and the conversation as methods of acquiring knowledge. The first method has offered the possibility to present a story about the pilot-project of the "Small Ugly Places" in the shape of a narrative. The different incidents reported have resulted in a growing insight into the applicability of the MIABE components.

The second method is discussion of the MIABE related to some central aspects of communicative planning theory. The reason for this was that both are concerned with the level of society as well as the individual level. Although planning theory deals with children to a limited extent, communicative planners and the practitioners of the MIABE share a wish to prepare a process for active participation. Other common aims are the encouragement of a capacity to communicate with authorities, stimulation of responsibility and interest in the public place and generally to gain positive experiences from dialogue. Through inspiration from Theory of Communicative Planning on the above issues, an extended "room for participation" has emerged, called the MIABE Plus. The initial MIABE aimed at making use of

the public places in a practical educational context to enable an increased understanding of the built environment by the pupils of the primary school. The MIABE Plus aims at helping to form a foundation for young people's reflective argument and political dialogue, thus placing a heavier weight on communicative preparation for democratic practices in general and on the aspect of participation in particular. Hopefully, this might contribute to the enhancement of increased social engagement now and later in life.

Conversations with pupils who participated in MIABE related projects ten years ago have, as the third method of studying one's own practice, given new points of view about the application of the MIABE. In addition, they have thrown new light on the MIABE Plus as a possible introduction to communicative practice in a democratic society.

One of the conclusions of the thesis is an assertion that the practical experience of participation of children and youngsters deserves to become part of their everyday life. Another conclusion is that there is a link between comprehension and facilitating of some of the MIABE components. This implies that the MIABE and the MIABE Plus might interact or be used separately depending on the age of the participating children and young people.

Application to the MIABE has taken place within the framework of representative democracy. In a possible application to the MIABE Plus, no structural or legal amendments would be required. However, a responsive government and an accountable bureaucracy would be presupposed for application to both models.

Through reflective argument and political dialogue, the aim of the MIABE Plus would be to facilitate social engagement of all children and young people that will last long after the project ends.