A NEED TO NURTURE PUBLIC NATURE: URBAN PUBLIC SPACE AS A CO-EDUCATOR FOR YOUTH

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Research on the relationship between young people and the city is often normative, as there is an implicit ideal pedagogical environment present. However, this disregards how the city acts as an everyday pedagogical context. By addressing the city as a co-educator, we open up this debate. Building on the results from a case study with young people in Brussels, we illuminate that the city as a co-educator emits various images of what constitutes a good society and of young people's place within society. We argue that this is related to three intertwined dynamics: the loss of a public, the loss of the public and the loss of publicness. To conclude, we advocate that there is a need to nurture public nature to address these dynamics and strengthen the social position of young people in the city.

public pedagogy; democracy; public space; citizenship

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in the experiences of young people living in urban contexts (Powell, 2024). Within this research, two main perspectives can generally be distinguished: the city as either a Big Bad Wolf or a Good Fairy. The first perspective views the city as an unfavourable context for the socialisation of young people, portraying it as a familiar but unpredictable threat (De Visscher & Sacré, 2017). In contrast, the second perspective sees the city as a source of opportunities and a supportive factor for a healthy development (Powell, 2024).

What both perspectives share, is a normative assessment of the urban environment as either negative or positive (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008). Both perspectives are rooted in an implicit pedagogical ideal based on notions of what constitutes good education. This in itself is not a problem. What is problematic, though, is that this ideal is rarely made explicit, leaving it intangible for critical debate.

To move beyond this dichotomy, this contribution focuses on how the city actually shapes the relationship between young people and society. Therefore, we will present a view on the city that defines it as an important socialising context (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008) within which urban neighbourhoods are regarded as co-

educators (De Visscher, 2008). To support this perspective, findings from fieldwork conducted in 2023 are presented. This research included observations, interviews and focus groups with 53 young people (18 girls and 35 boys), 4 youth workers and 5 policymakers in 3 neighbourhoods in Brussels.

1. THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AS A CO-EDUCATOR

The concept of the neighbourhood as a co-educator stems from a social-pedagogical understanding of the city, positioning the neighbourhood not merely as a background against which education takes place, but as a pedagogical agent in itself (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008). This perspective explores how and to what extent the urban environment organises the relationship between young people and society from an educational point of view (Hämäläinen, 2013). More specifically, it focuses on the conditions of citizenship and community into which young people are being socialised as a result of both the physical and social construction of the environment in which they grow up and their own actions within it (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008). This way, the city shapes the actual conditions of young people's citizenship (De Bie, 2015), as it both creates and restricts opportunities for individual, social and cultural development and expression. By engaging in daily interactions within the urban environment, young people can get to know the meanings, rules and values of their community and are able to influence them. As such, the urban environment emits to young people a certain idea of what constitutes a good society and what their own position within this society is (De Visscher & De Bie, 2008).

2. DISCUSSION

Adopting this perspective, the research in Brussels illustrates how the city acts as a co-educator in diverse ways towards a variety of young people. Through their daily interactions with others and societal institutions within the neighbourhood, young people gain insights into society and their own place within it. *What* they learn, however, varies depending on the neighbourhood and the young person. Nevertheless, a common thread seems to be the loss of *a public*, *the public* and *publicness*, all of which are intertwined and influence young people's relation to society.

1.1. Different neighbourhoods, different ideals of a good society

Within different neighbourhoods, distinct ways of living together seem to be prevailing. In some neighbourhoods, the private sphere seems to be dominant. Within this sphere, private networks and commercial and individual interests prevail (Lofland, 1989). One way this was evident, was in the way (young) people used public space for commercial use or as a means to travel between private islands. They could mainly be seen as *consumers* of public space (Biesta, 2012) and services. In contrast, in other neighbourhoods, the parochial sphere characterised by the community, it's interests and the prevailing norms and values seems to be dominant (Lofland, 1989). This was apparent, for example, in a strong identification with the neighbourhood:

> There is nevertheless a kind of group identity of "we from Peterbos". We have people here who left the neighbourhood, who moved out because the flats were too small and so on. And who still miss that. Those keep constantly coming to the neighbourhood.
> (Interview youth worker Peterbos, 6 December 2023)

It is important to relate to these distinct lifeworlds, but at the same time, the desirability of the related norms and values should also be questioned. For example, neighbourhoods with a strong parochial sphere are characterised by *warm solidarity*, delivered through personal contact, often in an informal way (Mostowska & Hermans, 2023). This is in some way a good value, yet it is also emblematic of the lack of *cold, formal solidarity* based on rights and grounded in legal procedures (Mostowska & Hermans, 2023). It is an expression of the failing welfare state (Cantillon, 2020) and as such, aligns with feelings of being left behind by the public services and of being stigmatised by the outer world. Feelings which are very much present in these neighbourhoods. On the other side, the individual focus characterising other neighbourhoods could also be questioned. This is often seen as neutral, as it aligns with the dominant neoliberal model in society. This way, it is often put forward as a standard for all youth. This is evident in the focus on active citizenship in youth work and in the way public space is designed and monitored to prevent non-commercialised 'hanging out' (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023). This, however, pushes out certain users and uses, as was evident for some young people in the study. It is thus important to keep questioning the apparent neutrality of ways of living together, even when there are no apparent issues.

1.2. Loss of a public and loss of the public

What was clear in our case study, is that for some young people, the neighbourhood brings with it mostly experiences of being-a-citizen. For others though, it serves as a constant reminder of inequality. Experiences of not-being-a-citizen prevail. These sensations are partly impacted by differing experiences regarding neighbourhood dynamics such as insecurity, spatial claims or stigmatisation and whether or not their ways of being present are in line with the ruling norms and values within the neighbourhood. Indeed, some young people experience restrictive actions on a daily basis, because they question acceptable ways of being present or because of stigmatisation:

> [...] or even, for example, when they go to Stockel, they get insulted or when they walk in the street or on the tram they make too much noise, whereas sometimes they tell me "we're young people, we have a laugh on public transport and we avoid it. People turn round and look at us just because we're either tanned, black or white and we have a group. We also have our own way of dressing". The fact that you're in training, you can quickly be misperceived.
> (Interview youth workers Stockel, 26 September 2023)

These sentiments are also affected by diverse experiences with and trust in public authorities and institutions, such as the police or the social welfare system. As mentioned before, some young people feel as if public authorities are failing them.

Some of the experiences of not-being-a-citizen can be related to 'being young':

> They have the perception that we are annoying them, we are no longer allowed to play in places in front of their door. We pose a disgrace because we play in front of their door, but the rules here are that we can make noise until 9pm or 10pm… but when it's only 6pm, sometimes complaints follow.
> (R2, focus group Stockel, 20 September 2023)

The resulting processes of exclusion indicate that the presence of some young people as *a public* is under pressure. This reflects their social position (Hill & Bessant, 1999), as established power relations are perpetuated. Furthermore, it also emits expectations of *good behaviour* and of a *good young person,* affirming the prevailing norms and values. Additionally, the results also indicate that it is especially challenging for (Muslim) girls as they do not have the same access- and activity rights as boys (De Backer, 2020). This is often related to spatial claims of men and resulting feelings of insecurity. Consequently, they feel as if they are pushed away and sometimes feel as if policy makers do not really care. Next to that, girls' position in public space is also under pressure due to gender-stereotyped expectations (Pyyri & Tani, 2016), social control and gossip (De Backer, 2019). All of this puts girls as *a public* under pressure and perpetuates their unequal social position. However, there is no clear-cut answer to this issue. After all, maintaining security and exercising control over other groups is in itself also an expression of power that can involve exclusionary dynamics (Crane & Dee, 2001). These actions should thus be used thoughtfully.

Furthermore, the results also indicate that often, feelings of not-being-a-citizen also relate to being part of a disadvantaged community. No matter how great the sense of belonging to a neighbourhood might be, growing up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood always seems to lead to at least some frustrations over not being respected by broader society. Several factors such as poor housing, lack of interest from policy makers and stigma impact on this. As a result, (young) people seem to lose faith in *the public institutions* and *responsibility*. All of this indicates that it remains important to make quality public space *available, accessible* and *usable* to a wide range of (young) people. Yet, it also shows the importance of not merely focusing on space and youth. An in-depth approach transcends the youth domain and requires structural interventions related to various social problems.

1.3. Loss of publicness

What all neighbourhoods share, is a certain consensus on *who* can be present and *in which way* they can do so, fed by expectations of *ideal behaviour* by *ideal citizens* in an *ideal public space*. There is thus always a clear dominant order, despite manifesting itself in various ways within and between neighbourhoods. This is propagated by ways of direct (e.g. police, infrastructure) and social control (e.g. spatial claims, gossip). This way, public space becomes a hegemonic arena which reproduces existing inequalities and manages the status quo (Davet, 2022). There is no space for *dissensus*, acts or events that are explicitly out of place (Biesta, 2012).

Therefore, in each of the neighbourhoods, the *publicness* of public space is under pressure. Indeed, as soon as public spaces are homogenised by prescribing and policing *who* can do *what*, the conditions under which action is possible and freedom can appear are eradicated (Biesta, 2012). Thus, the freedom to act, "to take an initiative, to begin, to set something in motion" (Arendt, 1958, p. 177), the foundation of publicness, is lost. This is also reflected in the way some participants look at institutionalised initiatives to act as a 'free space':

> […] And a place where you can express yourself. That's not just in terms of noise, but I think, gosh… […] but for example if you do graffiti that you can have a place where you can paint with young people. […] So, to be able to have a context also that is more respectful to young people. Same also with skateboards. I think there really had to be a place where they can skate, the young people think that's cool to go there and be on the street. And the people on the street who usually find that inconvenient, so they're also going to like that they're not there anymore. Such places where they have the freedom… to express their hobbies and youth language.
> (R7, focus group Brabant District, 21 May 2023)

This confirms that this openness is not present within public space. In a way, you could argue that these settings act as *heterotopias*, places which enclose subjects or behaviours which do not comply with the prevailing social norm. These heterotopias are 'acceptable islands' for young people (Pitsikali & Parnell, 2019). As a result, however, young people grow up disconnected from the public sphere and democracy, as it is only at the moment of dissensus that democracy takes place (Biesta, 2012).

CONCLUSION

In general, this loss of a public, the public and publicness indicates that there is a *need to nurture public nature*. Whilst this will not solve the issues mentioned above, it can at least help to address the status quo. This does not mean that anything goes or that control measures are not an option, but rather that they cannot be separated from a debate on where people can, may and want to be present and the social conditions in which they live. Nurturing the public nature involves a public pedagogy concerned with reconnecting people to the public. On the one hand, this involves a concern for the publicness of public space and the possibility of actors and events to become public. To do so, educational agents should introduce dissensus in public space (Biesta, 2012). On the other hand, it also involves addressing structural inequalities. Therefore 'private troubles' should continuously be transformed into 'public issues' (Biesta, 2012). This is essential, not only for the feeling of being-a-citizen, but also for addressing many of the aforementioned issues such as unsafety, which are often tied to social inequality and social problems.

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