School In The Neighbourhood: A Vision For A Diverse City Of The Future?

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What do you see when you think about a neighbourhood school?

Most Nordic people probably envision a small school with happy kids running at the schoolyard. In Finland, the schoolyards are green and open, and for decades, kids have been allowed to walk to school by themselves. The schools have been socially mixed, with kids from all kinds of backgrounds sharing classrooms together and spending time with each other.

Divided cities, divided schools

In recent years, there have been some shadows creeping over both the neighbourhoods and schools in many European cities. Growing socioeconomic and ethnic gaps between neighbourhoods, known as socio-spatial segregation, have become a pressing issue in many countries which have formerly been known to be relatively inclusive. When multiple challenges pile up in the same neighbourhoods, they can become socially excluded peripheries, which offer a bleak outlook on life and a narrowing set of future choices for their residents.

At the same time, a growing number of schools have become divided among the same socioeconomic and ethnic lines. As most kids attend their geographically nearest schools, the socio-economic and ethnic differences between neighbourhoods are reflected on the schools.

This pattern has become visible also in the larger cities in Finland. In Helsinki, the income differences between the wealthiest and poorest school catchment areas are five-fold, and differences in the percentages of adults with higher education are three-fold. While in some schools and neighbourhoods kids frequently travel abroad for holidays, in others teachers report a large number of kids coming to school hungry on Mondays.

School choices – kids travelling to schools further away from home – have not made the schools more mixed. In fact, several studies have shown how choices often make the schools even more segregated. In a study of Boston in the United States, the researchers found that schools can in fact become one of the most segregated places in the city, compared to most places adults visit or work at during the day.

"Immigrant schools" or multicultural diversity?

A particular feature of recent socio-spatial segregation in many European cities is that socioeconomic and ethnic segregation overlap. This has been reflected in the way how many schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been referred to as "immigrant schools" in public discourse, and how these schools have often been seen as problematic environments and even avoided by many parents.

On the other hand, socioeconomically advantaged multicultural schools are often seen as "international schools", which underlines that the question tends to be in fact more about socioeconomic resources than about ethnicity.

The intertwined nature of socio-economic and ethnic segregation means that a disproportionate number of children from families with an immigrant background grow up in concentrations of disadvantage. Besides other effects, this can be problematic for the children's own language development and inclusion in the society. In the long run, it also exacerbates the ethnic divisions in the societal scale and creates barriers for cultural exchange.

Diverging futures

Divided schools and neighbourhoods can have tangible effects on the future horizons for children. In the latest PISA assessment, the difference in educational outcomes between the highest achieving and lowest achieving 10 percent of Finnish schools was 159 points: the equivalent of three years of learning. Stark differentiation between schools is not only a question of score points in tests, but also a question about available role models, peer support and possibilities to access social networks.

During my years doing school research, I have heard many accounts from people who have shared their stories about how their friends and friends' parents have helped them along the way. The disadvantaged kid whose friend helped at school, the kid who got to go to museums and nature trips with a friend's family, and the kid whose neighbour showed her the magic of books as windows to other worlds all testify the importance of social diversity. Social diversity is a means for sharing ideas and providing soft support to kids whose homes do not have the resources available to the most fortunate children.

Alongside the indicators often used in research to describe sharing resources or social and cultural capital, there is a factor that often arises from real-life stories: the possibility to dream about the future. If diversity disappears and social disadvantage starts to concentrate, the future horizons easily start to become narrower. A recent study in Finland showed that 16 percent of children growing up in poor households already do not believe that they could achieve their dreams. In disadvantaged neighbourhoods, trust in the future can become collectively weakened.

Building the future city

Visions for diverse, livable and sustainable cities often focus on cultural buzz, exciting urban surroundings and new technologies. However, almost all pathways towards the future of a city eventually run through its children and schools. The developments that affect children in the schools and neighbourhoods today are central for the social sustainability and the growth of future generations in the city.

In a segregated city, children grow up apart from each other, with diverging future horizons and little contact with people from different backgrounds. Mixed neighbourhoods and schools can, on the other hand, provide chances for exchange of ideas, mutual support, different role models and access to many different social networks. In a globalizing world, social diversity and exposure to varied cultures and ideas is a real asset to both children and adults from all backgrounds.

In this light, the image of a neighbourhood school with all kinds of kids running together in a schoolyard with no locked gates, is in many ways simultaneously a vision for a diverse, livable and sustainable city. When we develop strategies for resilient and successful cities, supporting positive developments and social inclusion in the neighbourhoods and schools is a central building block of the future city.