Urban public space and the construction of social life : a social-pedagogical perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question what meaning the urban public space has in relation to the process of children's socialisation. It builds on data from a qualitative research into the social-pedagogical meaning of three contrasting neighbourhoods in the city of Ghent. In this research, the neighbourhood was studied as a social and spatial context in which particular socialising practices are constantly constructed and reconstructed through the everyday social actions and practices of people, including children, and hence influence the socialisation processes of children. The research shows that different patterns influence the strategies through which children learn to deal with issues like diversity, otherness and unpredictability in different ways, ranging from excluding this diversity from the everyday lifeworld, through enclosing oneself within one's own social group, to learning through the everyday confrontation with diversity.

Introduction

The relationship between children and urban public space is not a very popular topic in pedagogical research. And wherever the urban neighbourhood is integrated within the pedagogical discussion, it often appears in the first place as a background against which formal, informal and nonformal learning processes, developmental processes and socialisation processes of young people take place. This approach is reflected in the international pedagogical literature in concepts like *educating cities* (Bernet 1990), *pedagogy of the city* (Schugurensky and Myers 2008), *community schooling* (Hiemstra 1972) or *urban education* (Pink and Noblit 2007). This background then needs to be planned and designed

through social and spatial interventions in such a way that it meets the developmental needs of young people is the best possible way. These interventions are largely based on socially and historically constructed images (James et al. 1998) and universalistic, developmental psychological models (Hogan 2005) of childhood. Throughout the twentieth century, the content of this prescriptive perspective evolved from a play area approach, to the *play inclusive* design of public space and the more recent child friendly and child oriented design of public space (De Visscher and Bouverne - De Bie 2008b). However, such a view on children's neighbourhoods hampers a more comprehensive view of the role of the neighbourhood as a daily living environment and as a socializing context. Moreover, this type of research fails to reveal the meaning children themselves give to their neighbourhood, which often goes beyond the play opportunities (cf. Cope 2006). This paper wants to present a view on the neighbourhood of children that does not necessarily ignore its play facilities but does not reduce the analysis to this dimension either. It aims to readdress the question what meaning the urban public space has in relation to the process of children's socialization, based on empirical research data from a PhD-study into the social-pedagogical meaning of the neighbourhood for children (De Visscher 2008).

We will address this question, building on a social pedagogical framework (De Visscher and Bouverne - De Bie 2008a, 2008b). The discussion about the different definitions and historical backgrounds of the concept of social pedagogy has been described elsewhere (Hämäläinen 2003, Coussée et al. 2009) and falls beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we will shortly describe the consequences of a social pedagogical framework for the study of the relationship between children and urban public space. Social pedagogy focuses on the pedagogical conceptualization of the relationship between individual and society and the pedagogical interventions into this relationship (Wildemeersch 1995). Social-pedagogical research can be defined as the study of the interventions into a socialization process that has its own course, independent from these interventions, and that are inspired by particular pedagogical assumptions and legitimizations (Giesecke 1987). Children grow up in a particular social, cultural and economical context. They are as much confronted with all kinds

of influences from the neighbourhood, the media, the commercial world, peers, etc. as adults are. As such, the process of children's socialization can never be fully mastered or managed by the pedagogical system, although pedagogical interventions off course do influence children's socialization, be it within their intentions.

From this perspective, the neighbourhood of children is conceptualized as a concrete co-educator (De Visscher and Bouverne - De Bie 2008b): this means not only as a social and spatial background against which children's socialization takes place, but as an active intervention in and influence on this process and on the relationship between individual and society.

1. Urban public space as a co-educator

The dominant focus in pedagogical research is on 'the institutional triangle' that circumscribes children's daily life and their use of time and space (Rasmussen 2004). Youth research and policy practices mainly relate to the three organized settings where children pass most of their time: home, school, and recreational institutions like youth work and sport clubs. However, from children's point of view, other settings are equally important. As such, De Winter et al. (1999) concluded a 'social education gap' as a result of a Dutch peer-consultation project on family policy. In this research project, children indicated that they do not find enough adults within their neighbourhood who really care, see to their safety or provide help and attractive activities. They experience the neighbourhood in which they live as deficient in social education, resulting in a too heavy pedagogical responsibility of the family. This conclusions fits with the theoretical assumption that pedagogical research shouldn't only contribute to new pedagogical instruments, methodologies or programs to organise the socialisation process, but also to a better comprehension of the various influences that come from the social and spatial environment of the child on processes of socialisation.

In our own research, we approach the neighbourhood as a social and spatial context in which particular socialising practices are constantly constructed and reconstructed through

the everyday social actions and practices of people, including children, and hence influences the socialisation processes of children. The reference to people's social practices in public space is based on the realisation that people live together, and as a consequence are frequently confronted with each other, even though these confrontations and interactions can differ a lot in form and intensity (cf. Gehl 1996). Children take part of these social practices and actively contribute to them. This participation of children into these daily social practices refers to socialisation as a complex and interactive process. In this approach, socialisation is not seen as the reproduction of the dominant culture and societal order, or the internalisation by children of specific value and meaning systems, but as a collective and continuous, lifelong process through which children get to know society and learn to influence it through their participation in it (Corsaro 1997). When we refer in this paper to the urban public space as a socialising context, then we refer simultaneously to the mechanisms, processes and everyday interactions through which children are introduced into a specific view on society and to the different ways in which they appropriate urban public spaces and give personal and collective meaning to them. In other words, urban public space is not a neutral, objective reality that exists outside the people (and as such it is not correct to speak about *the* relationship between urban public space and children), but urban public space is constantly (re)constructed through the everyday social actions of citizens, including children. Urban public space is a social construction and different opinions about (the proper use of) this space are the product of the societal context in which they arise (Massey 1995). As a consequence, the ways in which children are present in urban public space is linked with the social, cultural and historical context of the city and the relationships between urban residents, and takes part of the different forms of actual participation that arise within the urban context.

However, as already mentioned in the introduction of this paper, urban public space is not only the social and spatial background against which processes of socialisation take place, but is also a co-educator in itself: an active intervention in and influence on processes of socialisation. This social-pedagogical meaning is primarily based on the physical design of

public space: this design enables specific social and learning opportunities and disables others, and it co-constructs the relation between children and society in different ways. As such the design draws a certain picture about society, community and residents' position within it, including children. The social-pedagogical meaning also lies within the way in which the public space is conceptualised and presented to children by parents and other educators like school, peers or the media. This conceptualisation is translated into different routines, dispositions and rules about how to behave in and move through urban public space. And finally, this social-pedagogical meaning also depends on the differential ways in which children appropriate and identify with this space and the conceptualisation of it by their social environment. So the key question is how urban public space influences the socialisation of children. As such, the social-pedagogical meaning of urban public space is different for different (groups of) children and for different social and spatial contexts. To give one extreme example: in many of the American gated communities, the construction of the relationship between children and society will be very different from children growing up in one of the American black ghetto neighbourhoods. Low (2001) shows that American middle class girls growing up in these gated communities, fear poor and working class people. They know these social groups only from the way they are presented in the media. Consequently, the observation that children grow up in different neighbourhoods with different opportunities and restrictions, is not a neutral observation when it turns out that the boundaries between these different neighbourhoods coincide with social dividing lines such as age, gender and social class.

2. The 'social' in social pedagogy: making the connection between the private and the public

What exactly do we refer to, when we are discussing the 'social-pedagogical' meaning of urban public space? An orientation of education towards 'the social' can be seen as the central historical project of social pedagogy (Hämäläinen 2003, Coussée 2008, Coussée et al. 2009). According to Arendt (1989) the 'social' refers to the intermediate sphere located

between the private realm of the household and the public realm of politics, independent economic and civil transactions. According to Baacke (1976), the neighbourhood is – social-ecologically speaking – the transitional zone between the 'safe, well-known' private home and the 'strange, threatening' public realm. It is the context in which children are able to get to know the public realm with the trusted home environment on the background. There is a long and extended debate about the definition of the public sphere. Different perspectives focus on different aspects of the notion of 'public', such as free access for all citizens without any discrimination, confrontation and interactions between strangers, freedom of action and speech without state intervention or influence, ... Moreover, developments such as the privatisation (Sennett 1977, Katz 2006) and commercialisation (McKendrick et al. 2000) of public space increasingly question the definition and status of the urban public sphere as well as the shifting relations between individual and society. As a consequence, different authors describe the urban public sphere as an arena (e.g. De Rynck et al. 2005). Different groups attribute different, sometimes conflicting meanings to public space and appropriate it in different, often conflicting ways. The importance of this view on the public sphere for social pedagogy is summarised by Lepofsky and Fraser (2002) who show the necessity to gain insight into the actual power relations and inequalities between citizens and how these are connected to the spatial conditions of everyday life. 'The right to the city', i.c. to the public space in the city, is the object of an unequal social struggle (Mitchell 2003). Briefly summarised, the notion of the public includes legal, social and spatial elements (Boomkens 2006).

These discussions show that there are different constructions of the definitions of and relations between private and public sphere. As a consequence, there are different constructions of the meaning of 'the social'. The research data from the study in Ghent that will be discussed in the next part of this paper show that these different constructions of the social are reflected in different ways to deal with the confrontation with otherness and plurality in the urban context.

The construction of the relationship between individual and society includes individual and collective learning processes that are never finished (Delanty 2003). Children – just like adults – constantly learn to deal with different social relations, social practices and social structures. At the individual level, these processes imply learning to deal with the actual diversity within society and the recognition of this diversity as a part of one's identity. The latter includes the recognition that identities are always shaped in interaction, and that one consequently needs others to define one's own identity. In this sense, otherness and plurality in the urban context are not only a *necessary* condition under which processes of socialisation are shaped; it is also a *troubling* condition, one that makes socialisation an inherently *difficult* process (Biesta 2006). Reference should however also be made to the collective learning processes of communities. As a consequence, learning to deal with otherness and plurality in the urban context is also a responsibility for the policies and politics developed by the government and social institutions.

3. Methodology: a three dimensional cartography

As part of a PhD, we developed a methodology for analysing the social-pedagogical meaning of the neighbourhood. This methodological framework has been constructed as a cartographic analysis of the neighbourhood consisting of three interrelating 'maps'.

The first map, the *sociospatial map*, describes the social and spatial conditions of the selected neighbourhoods. Different social and spatial constructions of the neighbourhood create different opportunities and restrictions. The socio-spatial map of each neighbourhood was reconstructed by analysing different kinds of documents (articles, policy and academic reports) describing the original design of the neighbourhood's public space; the social, demographical, cultural and spatial changes in the neighbourhood; as well as the present situation of each case. This information was analysed in relation to the question what kind of relation between the private and public sphere is enabled through the construction of the neighbourhood.

The second map, the *mental map*, describes how residents have created shared meanings about the features of and changes in their neighbourhood. In our study, the concept of a 'mental map' is not used in its usual psychological meaning (e.g. Matthews 1980), but in a meaning that rather reflects Bourdieu's habitus concept (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). This refers to the past of a neighbourhood, the ways in which people have given meaning to the changes in their residential environment and to the ways in which they currently give meaning to their neighbourhood. For this purpose we used oral histories as a source of information. Oral history is a body of spoken narratives that are told by people about themselves and their environment (Mantell 1970) and that thus depict people's social world against a specific social and historical backdrop. It is not just a conversation about the past, but a highly planned, systematic, semi-structured account on a specific topic, based on a clear (social-) historical question (Baum 1974). Comparable research has been done by Bouw and Karsten (2004) in three streets in the Dutch city of Amsterdam. Based on a combination of oral histories and observations, they addressed the question of comparison to see whether any changes occurred in the spaces since the time when the contemporary parents were children themselves. Other examples of historical research into children's presence in the neighbourhood include the research of Raymund (1995) and Wridt (2004). The value of working with oral histories is that it complements 'formal' written historical data by focusing on the everyday history of people. As such, oral history is useful for reconstructing the social-cultural past of groups who do not have access to dominant historiography (Thompson 1988, Portelli 1991).

The third map represents children's actual presence in and movement through the neighbourhood. Children were asked to talk about their *personal map* of the neighbourhood. In order to gain a perspective on the variety of personal maps of young residents, a group of 39 children, aged 10 to 12, were asked to keep pictures about their neighbourhood for a period of one week. Comparable research has been done by amongst others Lynch (1977), Chawla (2002), Rasmussen and Smidt (2003), Burke (2005) and Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2006). Especially Lynch's (1960) description of people's mental representation of a

neighbourhood as a network of paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks has been very helpful to analyse children's personal maps. We clearly instructed the children not to take pictures of 'typical', 'beautiful' or 'well-known' places, but to focus on those places where they were actually present or that they actually passed by during that week. Afterwards, an interview took place with each child about his pictures. During these 'photo-elicited' interviews (Prosser and Schwartz 1998) children were asked to choose three pictures about which they would talk and the researcher additionally chose two other pictures. We asked questions about what was on the picture, when it was taken, who was around when the picture was taken, what the person was doing in that place when taking the picture and why he had decided to take that picture. We did not restrict the interviews to the content of the five selected pictures, but we tried to assess the neighbourhood's opportunities and restrictions from children's point of view in a comprehensive way, by also asking more general questions about the neighbourhood.

4. Different patterns of urban public space as co-educator

4A. Three neighbouring neighbourhoods , three contrasting concepts of urban public space

A case study in three neighbourhoods of Ghent, one of the 13 central cities of Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium), shows that the neighbourhood influences the socialisation process of children in very different waysThe three neighbourhoods, Sint-Pieters-Buiten, Steenakker and Nieuw Gent are situated close to each other, within a range of 2 km. These three neighbourhoods have been selected for two important reasons. The first reason is that they have a shared recent history in common. Some hundred years ago, the region was still a rural area and since then it developed into three very different and contrasting neighbourhoods, both in a physical and social sense. The second reason is that each of these neighbourhoods have been deliberately, logically and systematically designed and

constructed at a certain point of history and on a certain available space, based on certain historical assumptions about community life and urbanism.

Sint-Pieters-Buiten is an upper middle class residential neighbourhood, composed of an exclusive collection of Interbellum architecture. The neighbourhood was built on the former site of the prestigious World Exposition of 1913. The structure of the neighbourhood's public space has been based on the structure of the Exposition site. The City Council explicitly aimed to preserve the recollection to this important event by developing this space into an exclusive area with references to the Expo. The building instructions included aesthetic criteria for the houses, front gardens and wrought-iron fences. The public space is a clear example of a bourgeois-liberal approach to urban planning. This implies a public space that is subordinate to the private sphere (e.g. creating an appropriate context for the exclusivity of the houses) and that serves functions of personal development and expression. The design of the neighbourhood intends to reflect quietness, order and aesthetics. In a way, this design can also be called a defensive architecture, referring to the practice of living with one's back against the city and the creation of a safe parochial island within the city but without any interaction with the rest of the urban context.

The second neighbourhood, Steenakker, is a typical example of the Garden City movement, as it has been applied in Belgium through the 1920s. Garden suburbs were supposed to be small, village-like working class communes at the edge of the city (Howard 1902). They were meant to protect the higher working class against the negative socialising influences and perils of the city, in a time when the socialist movement had a growing influence. The design of Steenakker is strongly influenced by the ideological background of the different social housing agencies: Catholics, socialists and liberals occupied different parts of the neighbourhood. Further, the design of public space strongly refers to its function as a meeting place, originally aimed to create a spatial basis to promote the solidarity among the working class.

The third neighbourhood, Nieuw Gent, nicely reflects the way in which the modernistic architecture of the 1950 and the ideas about a New Urbanism have been applied in Belgium.

Clear ideas about the public space underlie its design, including a rational design of public space, the segregation of groups and functions within the city and the provision of large strands of green space without any user value or public functions between the high rise blocks. From the moment the construction of Nieuw Gent was finished, corrections had to be made into the public space in order to include more public functions into it. These corrections were largely based on the observation that there was no public life or confrontation between different groups in public space, and that the anonymous strands of green spaces between the blocks even caused feelings of unsafety among residents. Today, Nieuw Gent is a social housing neighbourhood, sometimes referred to as the Chicago of Ghent, because of its many high rise blocks and their negative reputation with regard to the concentration of social problems.

The different ways in which each of these neighbourhoods impacts upon the socialisation processes of children, will be presented based on three central concepts that were used during the analysis: nodes, boundaries and children's agency.

4B. Contrasting uses of public space: nodes

Nodes have been defined as places where the different personal maps of children meet each other, or in other words places within a neighbourhood that a majority of the children in the research referred to. This is a physical definition that – in itself – doesn't tell anything about the intensity and quality of the interactions taking place on these points. The social-pedagogical importance of analysing these nodes lies within questions like what kind of places these are, what different meanings are attached to them and what kind of interactions take place in them.

In Sint-Pieters-Buiten, children's personal maps show a very uniform pattern. They consist of a small number of nodes that apply to almost all of the children in the research and places that are situated on the road between their individual houses and these nodes. The different nodes have in common that they enable interactions mostly with familiar and like-minded

others. First of all, there are the primary school, church and youth work group which are all organised settings with selective access (connected to membership) and a selective reach (mostly better-off, white children). And secondly, there is the central park that is not often used by children as a place to meet others, and where there are almost no accidental interactions but mostly pre-arranged: they call each other to go out and play in the park.

In Steenakker, the general picture shows a number of rather group-related patterns of being present in the neighbourhood. Groups are based on age, gender, ethnicity and place of living. The nodes are mostly functionally unspecific places, like squares, street corners and public gardens, that all have a clear group-related identity for the children. Moreover, children seem to respect each other's territory and are not very interested in crossing the borders of each other's territories. There is one exception of a central square which is claimed by different groups of children.

In Nieuw Gent, the general picture shows a very differentiated presence of children in public space. Unlike Steenakker, these patterns of presence in public space are not defined by the identification with one group, but are based on a rather complex set of personalised networks, based on the multiple identities of children. The few nodes that were found in this neighbourhood are multifunctional places. The most important example is the central square Rerum Novarumplein. All the children that referred to this place, attached a different meaning to it, mostly related to the different public provisions situated around the place: a medical practice, a Catholic church, two primary schools, a football square, the church meeting centre which houses (amongst other things) a chess club, a bus stop, etc.

4C. Different boundaries within and of the neighbourhood's public space

A second topic of analysis is related to the concept of boundaries. This refers both to the boundaries *of* and *within* the neighbourhood. Boundaries are an important concept because they shape and are shaped by social identities. Boundaries are the carriers of processes of

social inclusion and exclusion. Through processes of appropriation and identification, boundaries can become carriers of social divisions and inequalities.

Physically speaking, all three neighbourhoods offer quite some open spaces for children to play outside. Yet, in each case, children are confronted with specific boundaries and restrictions in their presence in public space. These boundaries are connected to the spatial, social and individual features of the relation between child and public space. In each case the balance between being able, allowed and willing to be present in public space is different. Of course all three dimensions are present in each of the neighbourhoods, but different focuses can be observed.

In Sint-Pieters-Buiten this balance is mostly influenced by the question how children are still *willing* to be present in public space. The physical design of the public space creates a lot of opportunities for children to play and meet each other: for example, there is a lot of green open space and there are safe sidewalks. However, children are scarcely present in public space. This observation relates children's everyday use of time and space as heavily determined by a busy, institutionalised leisure agenda. A situation that Kampmann (2004) refers to as 'institutionalised individualisation'. As a consequence, there is little room left for informal encounters in public space. A very emblematic quote came from a girl who was a bit confused by the question whether she sometimes played on the streets or in the park: 'there is not very much to do outside, is there?'. The private and institutionalised spaces offer enough social and cultural opportunities to her, turning public space into an anonymous passage zone without any other functions.

In Steenakker, boundaries are mostly related to the question how children are actually *able* to be present in public space, taking into account the presence and spatial claims of other groups in public space, and the influence of their own social group on their use of time and space. A very emblematic quote for this situation was given by a Turkish boy who stated that 'he knew everyone around here' and 'he came everywhere in this neighbourhood'. 'Everyone' and 'everywhere' are important words in this context. Analysing this boy's personal map, shows that he doesn't literally come everywhere in his neighbourhood and he

certainly doesn't interact with all the residents of Steenakker. He interacts almost exclusively with family members, other Turkish children and a small group of non-Turkish friends. This boy's quote is however true in two ways. First, it refers to the fact that he experiences little boundaries and restrictions in relation to his presence in public space. Secondly, it illustrates the more general observation in this neighbourhood that children are socialised in particular group-based practices of using time and space in the neighbourhood. In the case of the Turkish children who participated in the research, the places that they mentioned in their personal maps were mostly places where their family was living or used to live, places on the road to family homes or public spaces where they met with other Turkish people in their neighbourhood.

In Nieuw Gent, boundaries to children's presence in public space are mostly related to the question how they are *allowed* to be present in public space. This is connected to the warnings and rules that parents give in relation to places or strangers that should be avoided. Children seem to have little difficulty in accepting these rules. They are aware of the fact that they share the neighbourhood with individuals and groups who they have little in common with. However, the children from Nieuw Gent who participated in the research didn't really seem to link the perceived diversity in their neighbourhood with feelings of unsafety, as some of the adult residents did. As such, their personalised social networks within public space overcame some of the social and cultural dividing lines that adults experienced.

Beside these boundaries *within* the neighbourhoods, there are also clear boundaries *between* the different neighbourhoods which have a different meaning according to the social and cultural background of the residents. There is for example a very strong boundary between the Sint-Pieters-Buiten neighbourhood and the Steenakker and Nieuw Gent neighbourhoods. But this boundary tends to become more porous for those (rather upper working class) residents of Steenakker whose children go to school or to the youth work organisation in Sint-Pieters-Buiten. Another example is the boundary between Nieuw Gent and Steenakker which used to be an important social barrier in the history of the region in terms of social status. Nowadays both neighbourhoods are more mixed up as a result of

internal moving patterns, although the social boundary still plays an important role for the older residents.

4D. Children's agency

A third topic of analysis concerns children's agency. Children are not only influenced by the spatial and social construction of urban public space, but they also influence this construction themselves.

On the one hand, children seem to deal with their changing neighbourhood in particular ways and as such they question and influence the conditions of social life and the boundaries within and of their neighbourhood. Children are for example important carriers of social networks. In Nieuw Gent and Steenakker this results in the blurring boundaries between both neighbourhoods, and in Sint-Pieters-Buiten having children who attend local school and youth work is an important lever for the local social integration of parents too. On the other hand, children accept most of the boundaries imposed on their presence in the neighbourhood and elaborate strategies to maximise their social and cultural opportunities within these boundaries. This is also illustrated by the interconnectedness between the built, shared and lived neighbourhood. In Sint-Pieters-Buiten, the design of the neighbourhood was inspired by a bourgeois concept of public space, with a focus on the exclusion of the chaos and density of the city, the peaceful, aesthetic and green character of public space, and the subordination of it to the private spaces. The shared neighbourhood summarises how people have collectively given meaning to their home environment. Asked about the qualities of their neighbourhood, residents of Sint-Pieters-Buiten referred to the green and quiet character of public space, the village-like (or non-urban) atmosphere and the ideal location in relation to the commercial city centre and road connections to get out of the city. In other words, qualities that lie mostly in line with the architectural concept of the neighbourhood. The lived neighbourhood summarises the qualities that children attach to their neighbourhood. In Sint-Pieters-Buiten, children mostly referred to the aesthetic qualities

of their neighbourhood, the green and peaceful character of public space, the proximity of different facilities like public transport or shops and the open spaces in their neighbourhood. In other words, children seem to have been socialised effectively in certain values and opinions about citizenship and public space. The same can be observed in Steenakker. The architectural concept behind this Garden Suburb highlights the meeting function of public space. This is reflected in the qualities that adult residents attach to their neighbourhood: these mostly refer to characteristics of the general living environment, community life, social interactions that take place in public space and social issues (both in a positive and in a negative sense). Again, children seem to have been successfully socialised in this perspective. Asked about the qualities of their neighbourhood, they mostly refer to the presence of friends in public space, the general social atmosphere of the neighbourhood and the different neighbourhood activities and everyday situations that take place in public space. In Nieuw Gent too, children mostly speak about the presence of familiar and unfamiliar others and the social qualities (and shortcomings) of their neighbourhood. However these contacts are much more fragmented, reflecting the enormous diversity that is characteristic of this neighbourhood and that is connected to the design (consisting of a mixture of some thousand one-room apartments or small flats, some 600 larger social apartments, a few hundred individual social houses and some hundred private individual houses, all containing a mix of cultures, lifestyles, and life rhythms) and the rules that children get to cope with this diversity and the potential stranger-dangers.

The description of these patterns is not exhaustive: it is not a complete overview of all possible ways in which urban public space functions as a co-educator and influences the socialisation of children. Other neighbourhoods in the case studies may have resulted in other patterns. The patterns are not representative for all residents of a particular neighbourhood either. In Steenakker, for example, some children can be found whose socialisation pattern has more in common with the general pattern of Sint-Pieters-Buiten than with the general pattern of Steenakker. Residents, including children, relate in different ways

to the described patterns and practices and they integrate these in different ways into their own social actions and practices.

Conclusion: ambivalent practices and pedagogical interpretations

Seen from the question as to how the urban public space influences the socialisation process of children and what opportunities it creates to learn to deal with the otherness and plurality within the city, different patterns can be discerned. Very briefly, one could summarise the meaning of urban public space as a co-educator in Sint-Pieters-Buiten as the exclusion of otherness and plurality from the neighbourhood. Children grow up in individualised, segregated networks and spaces, and all physical (e.g. the introduction of a tramway through the neighbourhood) and social changes (e.g. the potential immigration of Turkish or Moroccan families) in the neighbourhood's public space are avoided. And as the urban plurality is gradually immersing the boundaries of the neighbourhood, more and more families are moving to the expensive, quiet suburban towns South of the city of Ghent. In Steenakker, plurality and otherness is much channelled through the identification with particular social groups. In other words, people learn to deal with difference by encapsulating themselves within their own social network resulting in a particular kind of multiculturalism. In Nieuw Gent, plurality and difference are key features of public space, but people seem to have difficulties to get a grip on the extreme diversity within their neighbourhood as is illustrated by the story of a Nieuw Gent resident explaining that he literally doesn't understand the neighbours in his street because none of them speak his language.

The social sphere is very much characterised by ambivalence. Ambivalence refers to the different, sometimes conflicting layers of meaning that exist simultaneously within urban public space. The different meanings and conceptions about the social also give rise to different, sometimes conflicting ways in which children give meaning to, identify with and appropriate urban public space and the broader community they are part of. The ambivalence of the social sphere creates very different individual and collective opportunities

to learn to deal with the diversity and plurality within the city, and related to that different pedagogical challenges.

In this context, it should be emphasised that learning to deal with otherness and difference and to take responsibility for the otherness of others as values and goals of democratic education (Biesta 2006) is not only an individual project but also a collective process. The socialising impact of the neighbourhood can't be ignored when we look at the class-segregated patterns of social life and the meaning and role of urban public space within it. Children learn to deal with otherness in different (class-related) ways that don't necessarily contribute to a more democratic or human society. In other words, the pedagogical task can't be reduced to an individual process taking place during childhood, and requires a lifelong collective learning process: learning to view urban public space as a co-educator. The recognition of this social-pedagogical meaning of urban public space requires a pedagogical interpretation and encoding of the design of urban public space, the way people individually and collectively give meaning to it, and the accountability of this pedagogical interpretation in relation to the question how it makes the life of children and adults, as well as living together in the city somehow better and more human(e) (cf. Biesta, 2006). This doesn't imply a new set of universalistic (social) pedagogical guidelines for good urban design, but requires a democratic approach to the design *process* of urban public space in which children as well as adults are addressed on their urban citizenship.

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