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Media related childhood – part of school or out of school?

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Introduction

It goes without saying that media forms nowadays a central part of children's lives. One Sunday I fetched my eight year old daughter from a birthday party, where I saw her jumping in front of the television. Her friend had got a present of a dancing-carpet. The following day in my workplace in the Institute of Educational Research a research group showed a learning game they have developed. In the evening my older daughter came to visit to my workplace and went to the internet program where one can travel from place to place in different countries and cities in the world according the amount of points you have collected by moving in the real world. Ten points is needed for London, for example, and you can see and read about schools in London. Friendship, technology, exercise, knowledge, and entertainment – we have to look with broad eyes at what really is the media, and especially from children's point of view.

This article examines this from the children's point of view for both media education and teaching citizenship. In Finland this is a current interest: we have a programme for civic learning and a pilot project for media education, both financed by the Ministry.

Traditionally we consider media is a one-way relationship, from the media towards the children, not as an interaction - even less as an action that enables physical exercise. A favourite theme of public concern is how the media influences children, and this is very seldom supposed to be positive: parents seem strongly worried, even upset about their children's use of the media. I used to visit many schools' parental evenings talking about children and the media. My point would be that media can open the world, and parents could encourage their children to take them into the media worlds in order to understand it. Very many parents told me how their attitudes have changed and how they started to look at the media from their children's point of view.

The meaning of media in children's self-identity has not been widely studied, especially from the sociological point of view. Sociologists have been interested in childhood, but children's media related self-formation has usually not played a major part in these studies. Most research concerning children and the media has been in developmental psychology, and has been concerned with the influence media might have on them. In effect, they connect a mythology about childhood. On the one hand the computer becomes a convenient 'bad' object for worries and frustrations, and on the other hand the computer can be a magical agent that will unlock wisdom that has previously remained hidden. Media technology is seen to transform our social relationships, and, crucially to transform what it means to be a child. (Buckingham 2000).

I shall touch on the question of how children feel about media themselves and what part it takes in everyday life.

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Sensitivity in data gathering

In this article I use empirical data collected from three primary schools from different socio-economical backgrounds. One of them is a so called many-problematic neighbourhood and two of them are better off neighbourhoods. In this paper I describe the first school 'lower class' school' and others as 'middle class'. In the first the pupils come from many cultures - some are refugees, some migrants, and some represent a Finnish old minority, the gipsies. In their family backgrounds there is lot of unemployment and social problems.

The data was collected to draw a picture of the children's relation to media, both in the day and in the evenings. The first part of the data was collected ethnographically. I observed pupils of about eight years of age during the school day (including breaks) and in after-school clubs to find what part media formed in their lives. I had not fixed in advance a definition of what was meant by 'media'. I listened to children talking during lessons and in breaks and corridors while they were putting on outdoor clothes: I was not only listening but also watching and observing. Some children were moving like the figures in the computer games, some were fighting like robots in the fighting games, and some were acting like singers in rock-videos.

In the classrooms most children were very interested in my laptop and my cell-phone. This was an efficient method to collect data: the children reported in detail the different kinds of media equipment they had themselves. 'We have got a huge amount of computer games at home', one boy said proudly and continued: 'But they are not any forbidden ones'. They were simply bursting to explain what they had and what they liked.

The second part of data collection might be called 'a drawing-related interview'. Childhood studies have devised a new methodology suitable to explore children and childhood. I asked the pupils to draw two pictures before my visits to school. One was to be called 'The most important thing' and the other 'A nice evening at home'. This drawing-related interviewing is a very effective method for studying childhood: it gets children to forget they are talking to a strange adult. The interview starts with the question: 'What can you tell me about your drawing?' Useful advice is to sit as low as possible, at the same level as the child: not easy at a small desk, but well worth it, because it narrows the gap between adult and child. The drawing starts an interview with a concrete point, something that child has made, rather than a question about which she or he might feel uncertain or doubtful.

It is important when interviewing a child to look warmly and kindly, with an encouraging expression. Good advice is at first to just point to items in the drawing, not saying anything aloud. Instead, try to hear children's own voices and how they name the objects. Children are very different, of course: some report immediately, some need time and leading questions. The idea is to catch not only their ways of using media, but also their experiences, thoughts and feelings. The drawings come from the children's own world. I am interested in the ethos of the new childhood study about children's own stories presented in their own voice (Alanen 1992). In this research, children themselves asked questions, not by parents or teachers.

Finally, I tried to see how media as a whole is seen in their plays, actions, ways of talking, behaviour or in their sign language, as a source of their identity construction. My data collection will continue till the end of the year: the observations expressed in this presentation are based on the existing data.

Media competence is related to the children's background

About 80 % of the drawings contained media: television sets, computers, playing consoles etc. The most common view in the drawings was a sitting-room with a sofa and television: this a traditional way to live family life. According the surveys it is the most common habit, and sometimes television is called 'old media' and has reached the status of a tradition. In children's minds, the task to draw about a nice evening meant the television with a sofa, connecting together family members and friends. (Picture 1. The most typical view: friends sitting and watching television together, eating popcorn.)

There was no great difference between the schools in the amount of media equipment children drew. But there were differences in the way the children drew their ideas. As Sonia Livingstone and Magdalena Bober (2005) have noticed in their studies of social differences among young people in the use of information technology in UK, differences are not about access to different forms of media, but in the quality of their use.

The drawings from children from the middle class schools were brighter and more coloured. These children are more used to drawing than the children in the lower class school. Even if the drawings from the middle class children were full of play stations and television settings, they included also many more other items like toys, pets and trampolines. In their drawings, things and events are also happening outside, not only in the sitting room or in the children's room. (Picture 2. A boy from lower class school is in his bed alone, listening to music and watching television.) The drawings made by middle class children include such things as swimming, skiing and travelling with other family members. One amusing picture containing both a trip to nature and a big television set, in the middle of forest. (Picture 3. In the Finnish text: 'A sausage, television setting and a friend'.) In Finnish culture children play and waste their time outside because it is healthy. Babies sleep outside, even in the wintertime! So playing computer games in your own room is culturally disapproved of, and seen as a sign of irresponsible parenthood.

There were more people, mostly family members, in the drawings made by the middle class children. The media was shown in their drawings, but it was connected to other activities. In interviews these children described their activities with rich language. There were significant differences in how they spoke about the media, and the part the media form in children's time and activities.

There were no differences between the schools in the quantity of media facilities. The differences were in the amount of time spent playing with them. The children, particularly boys, from middle class homes have many more restrictions on playing time. Many were only permitted to play during weekends, while boys from lower class families had almost complete freedom to play as much as they liked. They were also

allowed to play games forbidden for under 15 years-olds. This was also seen in a behaviour about films, videos and DVDs. Children from middle class homes had more restrictions and had to obey the age-limits, while children from lower class homes were able to see the films not legally accessible to children.

The middle class children could also describe well the ways they used different kinds of media equipment. They knew the special terms and concepts of media use, and used these in their chat. They had a rich vocabulary and current terminology about the media.

One sad occurrence in the lower class school: one boy with a blank paper said he had no fun in the evenings at home, nothing, he repeated. I didn't push him to say more; but then a girl beside him started talking about a television programme. He suddenly started speaking about games, particularly Play Stations. He talked continuously and I didn't interrupt him. There were no social aspects to his talk; the interaction was directed towards the game-world. It is said that digital media technology, particularly computers and games-playing are bad for social life, and lead children to become anti-social and destroy human interaction. I suggest that game playing does not have a negative effect on social life itself, there also has to be a certain kind of background.

I have not yet fully analysed the interviews, but present a few preliminary observations. The children from the problematic neighbourhood had a different form of contact with adults than children from the middle class schools. These latter children took contact to an adult with courage. The children from the problematic school pretended to be suspicious of the visitor. It is assumed that the middle class children are more used to talking to adults about their hobbies, but they also have more, and a greater variety of, hobbies than children in the lower class. Even noteworthy is the way children speak, not the language, but the richness or poverty of the vocabulary.

In Finland there is an increasing polarisation between rich and poor. The background to this lies in the financial breakdown in the early 1990s, after which social policy has not been able to repair the situation because of lack of political will. The results are seen now in the schools. Teachers suggest that the quality of pupils has weakened over the past years. Not just wealth, but social and cultural capital is also distributed unequally. These increasing inequalities have implications for almost every area of children's lives: they have fewer options for leisure-time and less capacity for making use of aspects of the media. Ethnic diversity is increasing, even in Finland (Kautto 2006). It has not been popular or regarded as correct to discuss social class in Finland, and we instead talk of the risks in children's development. Problems that arise from social or economic considerations are given a medical or psychological form, and have been 'medicalised'. But rich and poor children are increasingly living different childhoods and this has specific implications for children's relationships with the media - and the capacity for civic action and ability. It is essential to situate children's relationships with the media in the context of broader social, economic and cultural changes.

The internet and other digital media have not narrowed the social and information gap: on the contrary, these gaps have been widening. The Finnish researcher Pekka Räsänen (2005) argues these gaps are stable, because using the information technology needs the same kind of competencies as does traditional literacy.

I ask how what has been described relates to children's citizenship. The tools and the abilities to use and understand, and to take and make your place in the information society are distributed unequally.

The school is the most convenient place to take on the responsibility to open the many sides of media to children. In Finland the school system is a way to equalise the possibilities to grow and to diminish the effects of social background. Ways to use the media seem to differ greatly, depending on the child's background. The school system has a huge challenge in equalising this.

Conclusion

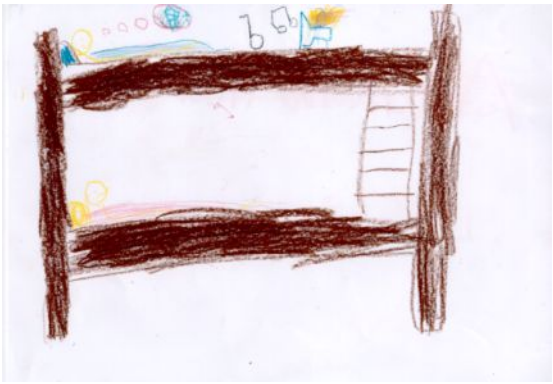
Teachers from all three classes were concerned that so large an element of the drawings contained media. While some are concerned about media use, others have celebrated these (new) media as a means of empowerment for children and see the media as democratic and participatory. My data suggest the different kinds of media really form a central part of children's everyday life, and adults, both parents and teachers, generally do not se this in a positive way. Some schools are even proud to say that they have protected children from the media, and announce themselves to be 'a media free district'.

Instead of this, I would recommend schools take the media seriously: media gives materials for the construction of identity; media provides material that directs children towards the world. The media can serve as an empowering or a disempowering force for citizenship. The dimensions of citizenship such as critical thinking, creativity, meaning, identity and social agency comes near to the meaning and targets of media education.

There is a danger that school will only include the media if it seen a 'useful', or if might profit children's developmental aspects. As Tatjana Koke said at this 8th CiCe conference [see paper 2 in this collection], teaching and learning citizenship should also include the idea of being part of something, togetherness. The media plays a crucial role in this context: the social aspects, common meanings between children, positive feelings and enjoyment. Should these aspects also be a part of the curriculum of citizenship?

'Schools – as settings for the socialisation and development of future citizens – are capable of making an important contribution to this undertaking'. This is taken from the survey of the European Commission on *Citizenship Education at School in Europe*. The media inevitably play a crucial role: whether we should protect children from the media or not, the media might effectively prepare children for citizenship - even active and constructive citizenship. As Sirkkunen & Kotilainen (2004) suggest, these possibilities should be developed and learned through media education in schools.

(Picture 1.)



(Picture 2.)

(Picture 3.)

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