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We Like Good Disco! "The Public Sphere of Children" and Its Implications for Practice

Framework and Questions

We like good disco in festival, but we don't like early to go to workshop! - *Festival participant*

I feel quite bad, the children are already put under a lot of pressure, I mean you can see it yourself. They are sitting in the workshop, very tired and shattered and then I have to bother them with my book? Today my impression was that the children should be protected against some adults so that they have a bit of time for themselves. I honestly don't feel like doing this at all! - *A research student in the evening of her first day at the festival*

For the seventh time since 1990, about 400 young people from over 20 nations met at the World Festival of Children's Theatre 2002 in Lingen, in order to show their theatre productions to each other and to play together in workshops. A varied program was planned around the many performances. An adult symposium, Children's Theatre and Culture, which provided an exchange of views at the levels of professionals and directors, was also an important feature of the festival.

Two years previously, at the sixth World Festival in Japan, one of the main criticisms was the failure to address the participants of the festival - in other words, the children. Speeches, words of thanks, words of welcome, awards - the adult culture dominated in Japan. It was obvious that some changes needed to be made. Following enthusiastic debate, we decided to undertake some investigation concerning the *Kinderöffentlichkeit* - the 'public sphere of children' - at the festival, and consequently to pose some questions and to make recommendations which could be taken to promote this public sphere of children over and above dominating adults. The German term *Kinderöffentlichkeit* was first mentioned by Negt and Kluge (1972: 464). In the English translation of their book, the phrase is 'the public sphere of children' (1993: 283). The translation we first worked with was 'children's public', but this was unfamiliar to English speakers. Colleagues from abroad recommended 'children's voices'. That term might fit for much of our practice, but it means something different and does not fit the connection between the theory we built on and the practice, so we decided to stick with the original translation, though the phrase is lengthy.

The questions posed were:

- In what forms is the children's public sphere expressed amongst themselves?
- The festival creates its own public sphere - how much of this do the children create?
- To what extent do we allow the children to create their projects themselves and what affirmation do they receive from other children and from adults?
- To what extent do adults pre-ordain the structures?
- To what extent does the exchange of the theatre levels (in workshops and performances) contribute to the development of a public sphere of children?
- To what extent can adults recognise and interpret a public sphere of children?

All these points merged in the main question:

- To what extent (in spaces, times, forms) are children encouraged to make themselves public?

For the first time in the festival's history, there was not only a scientific exchange of expert colleagues in parallel symposia, but also a scientific investigation of the festival itself. A group of 15 research students in the second semester of a Theatre Pedagogy course at the University of Applied Sciences Osnabrück/Lingen observed the festival from the perspective of these questions.

This paper is an attempt to critically evaluate these findings and an attempt to establish some hypotheses as answers to the questions, in order to enable festivals and other participatory events in the future to move towards the realisation of the involvement of children that takes their actual culture and public forms of communication seriously.

The Public Sphere of Children

One of the most effective ways of exposing the true nature of any public sphere is when it is interrupted,

in a kind of alienation effect, by children.

Some time has passed since this statement by Negt and Kluge (1972: 464) - time in which the spaces of children and adults in the industrial nations have drifted apart more and more. Public transport is one of the last places where, by the sudden regular boarding of groups of children or families, the 'concretised character of the individual public, its inflexibility and the fact becomes visible, that public always means the public of the adults.' (Negt and Kluge, 1972: 464)

A public sphere of children for the purposes of self-organisation and self-regulation of children has always only existed as a passing phenomenon. The British school experiment Summerhill, the Play-group Movement or the Children's Republics of the Soviet Union were touched by the idea of crediting children with their own public. However, the connection to the general public claimed by Negt/Kluge was very loose here, too. The special status which has been accorded to these projects points to this fact.

Nowadays, this separation has intensified. The institutionalisation of all areas of public life allows a 'public' only 'within' the respective establishment. It is obvious that, within institutions, the interests and views of the children must be accommodated. But who knows whether this alienates/changes the general public in the long run? In literature concerning the participation of children in public matters and decisions, exemplary projects are introduced from time to time (cf. especially Hart, 1992). However, perhaps these have a certain frame (time and organisational) that is separated from the general broad public and so cannot develop as an alienating force.

In contrast to the abovementioned larger projects for the self-organisation of children, there are certainly always smaller 'own publics' among children - self-regulated activities which become visible in public only very rarely. According to Lansdown (2001), a reason for the gradual disappearance of children from the public sphere paradoxically is for their own protection:

In many societies, children are increasingly perceived as at risk from dangers in their local environment - fear of their exposure to traffic, drugs, violence and sexual abuse has led to the imposition of far greater controls over the freedom and mobility of children. (2001: 4&5)

As a consequence, children are often seen to be a nuisance when they appear in public.

Furthermore, the homogeneity of the adult general public has intensified since the 1970s. Just a few media make up the opinion makers. Whoever has the money buys the right press and so creates the opinions and the lobby. Public life is corrupt and people can be bought.

The fact that children do not have their own lobby has led to organisations such as children's delegates or children's parliaments protesting and claiming rights for children. So the first children's report of the Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk (2002) identified that children are exposed to stress and pressure to perform in the same way as adults because of the institutionalisation of their learning and play areas, and that they do not have a 'public voice' of their own to influence this. The report claims (according to the Frankfurter Rundschau, 2002) a renewed greater participation of children by, among other methods, a government ombudsman - as in Norway - or a lowering of the age limit with respect to the right to vote. The term 'participation' for an increased involvement of children in public decision-making processes has been asserted both in German and in English. Hart (1992), for instance, establishes a step-by-step model of participation that has been taken up in many other publications for the analysis of fieldwork.

In relevant publications, it is pointed out that children communicate in other forms and make themselves public in other ways than adults (Fr&rdrich and Jerger-Bachmann, 1995: 126). However, in the majority of the cases presented, adult forms of participation predominate - forms children (for instance, as delegates in parliamentary forums, appearances in media, project-related hearings or conferences) have to adapt themselves to. In contrast to Negt and Kluge's idea of 'the public sphere of children', this kind of participation always adapts to the prevailing (adult) systems and structures, because for the time being prevailing social structures are not called into question; rather, it only incorporates the children - that is, 'participates them' and partially even selects them. This exercise of system-confirming forms can be seen in many well-meant participation projects. It gives the impression that the adults tend to listen to such children who do not correspond to the scheme of things, leading to descriptions of children as 'engaged, funny, at ease with grown-ups, precocious'. Accordingly, such a process is very limited and the participation often tends to fulfil the token function of a 'mutual decision'.

The Summary Report of Children's Participation in Community Settings, the international symposium of Childwatch International and the MOST Program of the UNESCO, held at the University of Oslo in 2000, includes some questions that should be asked prior to every practical implementation of such projects, if children's participation is not to be simply a token gesture:

- How are children already participating in their everyday lives and settings?
- How could these activities be made more visible?
- How can structures of governance be changed to accommodate children on their own terms?
- How can the culture of participation be aligned with children's own cultures?

One of the conclusions of the conference was that:

Attention needs to be paid to creating environments in which children are invited to participate and feel comfortable participating; therefore adult attitudes and the role of adults as mentors are critical.

Only a few other publications consider the role of the adults in participation projects to be so critical. The questions that were asked in Oslo rose above the term 'participation' as it is usually shown in practice and theory. They pick up the concepts of a children's own culture and of a public sphere of children.

In the rest of the paper, we therefore use the term 'the public sphere of children' to define those moments in which children publicly represent their own spaces, times, forms of exchange and activities. In representing themselves thus, they are deliberately playing to the adult public, alienating themselves from it, and in fact both confronting and - according to our point of view - enriching it.

The method

In the broadest sense, one could describe what the drama students did under direction during the festival as 'practice research' (Moser, 1995). This cautious formulation is necessary because of the developing research understanding of the students on the one hand, and on the other because the field of observation had a dynamic that could not be estimated in advance. To this might be added the intercultural dimension of the festival, with the findings needing to be analysed in terms of their cultural components. However, two students - independently of each other - noted in their summaries that the main differences between the children were not of a cultural but of an individual nature.

We could find hardly any comparable projects in literature investigating a public sphere of children, and none at all relating to their participation. This was not a field that had specifically been constructed for participation or research projects, as is frequently the case (Hart, 1992). It was obvious that hypotheses would need to be reached through a range of qualitative methods. A central means for arriving at hypotheses was the research diary, for observation, which was placed at every research student's disposal.

The situations to be interpreted should be examined from as many sides as possible in a comprehensive collection of material. The aim was to use the wealth of access to various interpretations, and understandings of terms, to prevent a facile (pre-) understanding and an easy judgment being made by the student researchers, and to assist them to remain critical with respect to their own interpretation. The participation of the observers during this process was crucial in order to understand the children from their own perspective, to respond accordingly and to simultaneously observe the students, the children and the structures of the festival. All situations that took place on stage within the scope of a performance were excluded. In order to limit the research context, the extent to which the formal performances of the children represented a public sphere of children was not investigated.

The students' concrete method instructions were:

- *Intensive observation.* One instruction was to find up to three partner children in the first three days of the festival and to observe their behaviour. The purpose of this was to identify the public behaviour of children that was different from that of an adult public.
- *Extensive observation.* The questions applied 24 hours a day. About 400 children participated in the festival, so there were always and everywhere possibilities for collecting observations.
- *Non-participating observation.* Students were to be silent observers - to collect information by writing, drawing, filming or taking photographs.
- *Participation-observation.* Students' role here was to communicate, ask, tell, reply, play and also to hand out material, to let the children draw, take photos and films. But they also needed to remind themselves to be curious to questions but not to 'sound the children out' (to see whether a common language is possible); to acknowledge their own unusual ideas - for example, to let the children draw the way from the 'TPZ' (the local theatre education centre) to the festival area; as well as to observe communication at meal times, note communication through eye contact, bring two children from different countries together, initiate non-verbal communication, and bring various resources with them in order to start communication with or among other children.

Their instructions with respect to the research diary were to:

- document language as precisely as possible, using direct speech (better to have precise extracts than a woolly summary);
- describe observed moments as precisely as possible and be bold enough to attempt to interpret them through the students' own thoughts/pictures/communication patterns;
- encourage the students with the idea that the book exists to paint/draw/write something very interesting in it.

In addition to the research diary, a photo or video camera was at the disposal of everyone, as well as being a self-selected identification object for the recognition of the partner children.

Furthermore, it was the task of the research students to participate and to assist the workshop leader in one of the four morning workshops in which children worked in mixed groups (at least two children per country) on different theatrical forms. The theme of the workshops was that of the Festival: Let's Fly. The titles ranged from 'Children and Rhythm' and 'Dance Theatre and Acrobatics' to 'Get Your Choochoo Wings', 'Let's Fly - The Flock of Feelings' and 'Icarus - Look Daddy, I'm Flying'. The workshop leaders came from Germany, Estonia, Finland, Croatia, Malta, The Netherlands, Austria, Russia, Serbia, Czech Republic and Uganda. Here the students had various tasks: in addition to the responsibility for the room, materials and checking the attendance roll, they had to take the children to the festival area when the workshop had finished and sometimes helped with translations. In addition to this, there were daily follow-up meetings with the workshop leaders as well as two preparatory meetings. The students could reasonably couple this assistance with the research project because of their close contact with the children in the workshop. For some research students, however, this combination was a strain.

On two days, some of the research students took over an intermediary function in the symposium by introducing the perspective of the children. They presented selected moments from their data collection where they considered that a public sphere of children had begun to grow or even take over. The form of these presentations depended on the meetings that took place between research students and children. Children were not to be excluded, though a performance demonstration was to be avoided for the sake of the children and for adults.

The preparation for the investigation took place in discussions in which the methods of observation were clarified, modified and agreed upon. The identification object, for example, proved controversial because some considered it to be bribery or too childish. Its usefulness was affirmed over the course of time as the students realised that recognition was easier if they wore the same clothes, the same haircut, etc. This became somewhat irrelevant because, in the structure of the festival, only a few intensive observation strands and relationships with the partner children could be established.

During the three days following the festival, the results were analysed by the research group. The most important agreed findings were written down and the personal research diary was examined, supplemented and annotated as needed. This was followed by the instruction to each student to code their personal observations according to the research questions. Then they continued their work in small teams: two groups shared the research diaries, checked the allocations made, found further results and sorted them according to the questions; one group was responsible for the photo and film material; one group interviewed two children from Lingen who had participated in the festival; and one group wrote a reflection on the research work.

Initially the children, as the 'objects of the research', did not participate in the research process - that is, planning and publication. We are aware of this contradiction between the content of the research and its method. On the other hand, the research work done by the students had some validity in this respect, because their data collection and presentation made the perspectives of the children public in all their aspects. The children were aware of the fact that what the students drew/wrote down/painted, etc. was all intended to go in a book or publication about the festival.

In future research, a more thorough participation of the children in the research and use of their own insights must be developed.

Findings

There is obviously a children's language that everybody understands.

The central finding of the students' final reports is that children - even under very unfavourable conditions - create their own ways of communication. In this context, not least because of the international

character of the festival, these mainly comprise non-verbal sign language, which in contrast to comparable situations with adults works very naturally and without any effort. The children confirmed this in the interviews: 'And everything just with a smile!'

Only a few adults would have noticed the satirical nuance with which the Finnish group changed the festival song, which many children indicated they got very tired of: It became 'Let's Die!' instead of 'Let's Fly!' In addition to the sign language, musical and rhythmical forms also had great importance - as in the spontaneous dances that were observed to break out in a number of places, especially where many children mutually created their own atmosphere which could be taken up by others (as in the disco, and the bus ride together). The atmosphere in the theatre was a powerful contextual stimulus - from the dynamic applause before and after the performance, often led and orchestrated by particular children, to the whizzing paper planes in the audience. All of this enriched the detailed descriptions of the students, who perceived a public sphere of children in this 'different' atmosphere, and was also described by the participating children themselves.

While the special applause dynamic was an area that was not foreseen or planned by the adults, there were other structures in which a public sphere of children was conveyed. In addition to the disco, these included the pavilions, which offered very different meeting possibilities, and the guest books, placed strategically. These books, as well as the 'Letters of Friendship', created a public forum for the festival children, where they could send messages to each other, as the children interviewed emphasised. With respect to the workshops, the opinions were very diverse. The possibility that the workshops contributed to the public sphere of children through non-verbal elements in the work was certainly raised, because through this the children could get to know each other intensively, and beyond the workshops then felt themselves belonging to a large group - suggested by exchange of addresses among workshop participants, etc.

From this point of view, the seventh World Festival of Children's Theatre offered spaces and forms in which children were encouraged to find and to live their own public culture. However, the time available did not correspond to these spaces and forms. The pavilions with the guest books, the tent with the 'Letters of Friendship' and also the workshops were opportunities for which there was hardly any time in the schedule for the guest children to take, if they wanted to see the performances of other children/acquaintances/new friends or to take part themselves. Sometimes it would appear that the workshops were planned as places where the children were kept in, who otherwise would (possibly) have had unsupervised time for themselves, or to spend with their friends, with their guest families, visiting the pavilions or just finding their own activities in a public sphere of children. Only the disco was an exception to this, a breath of fresh air where no other parallel event was offered for the children. This event was described by all interviewed children and by the students as an outstanding event supporting children's culture.

All types of public speeches, to audiences of which at least half the members were always children, were an obstacle. Neither the formal (adult) or the exaggerated funny (children's) speech-making struck the right note, much less excited the interest of the children. These comments apply equally to the opening speeches and speeches when children were presented with their awards:

Melanie's cousin would say now that he did not bore us with his speech. When he practised he never managed to let it not sound ironic. (Sarah, 13, about her friend who was allowed to act as a presenter in the opening ceremony)

The youth presenters were perceived as adults who had been put in children's clothes rather than as children who had to give a message to a children's audience. The obtrusive and much too loud festival song accentuated the alienation.

Hopeful information emerged from the observations that children 'create their own public where they need it'. The crowded program may explain the fatigue that some of the children struggled with each day. They had just taken the time to meet friends, to recompose the festival song, to write Letters of Friendship, to write in the guest books and a lot more. The seedling of the public sphere of children that was planted on this occasion barely managed to maintain its position in an adult's public. Nonetheless, we can conclude that children can escape from the adult forms:

It cannot be the intention of the children, when they organize for themselves to be among-each-other and try self-regulation, to pay for this free space with a massive reality withdrawal and a withdrawal from the adult world. (Negt 1972: 466)

At some places, the children might have made changes or alienated the general public atmospherically,

like ordering the applause in the theatre or the festival song. An 'overload of the public sphere of children by adults' dominated, as the research students finally discovered - not least as the press was lying in wait everywhere. This confirms the finding that children are 'undoubtedly the most photographed and the least listened to members of society' (Hart 1992: 8).

Much of this can be explained as the demands of the organisational structures and the festival character which is exciting (the children can sleep when they get home). However, it does suggest that children are not in the focus of the festivals as partners who have to be taken seriously, but rather as a façade for an adult's public, which pushes the children always into the focus of attention in order to be able to demonstrate their own kindheartedness - and perhaps also in order to refresh themselves in the children's purity of heart with the hope that the world might be good one day. This suspicion is given further weight by the detail not immediately noticeable: that all adults on the stage during the festival (as hosts/game master/speaker) were allowed to fulfil their task uncostumed, while the children were always put into costumes - as players, of course, but also in the adjudications. Negt formulates this even as a requirement:

Not only children need adults. The adult status, the consciousness of being mature and superior, is seen in the extent to which within the event the children are allowed the pictures of childhood, and how the daily reality threatens this strenuously reached development step. (Negt, 1997: 64)

In this connection, Negt talks about a 'social infantilisation' of the children. (1997: 62) Even if interpreted as a place for child-minding, the workshops did give the children the possibility to decide on their own public time forms and their own behaviours. Of course, adults fear that they will lose control and this fact prevented some opportunities in which a public sphere of children could be demonstrated. This did not, however, apply to the spontaneous dance on the stage during the final event. In this, the scheduled room and time organisation were questioned by the spontaneous activity of the children, which, as Negt indicates, is a sign of a public sphere of children (1997: 98).

All in all, it can be said that the possibilities for children to follow their own public during the festival varied. These differences can be seen if one uses Roger Hart's participation model (1992: 9) as a standard. Parts of the opening ceremony could be classified in the category 'children as decoration', such as the younger dancers who could not see the performance because they had to wait for their own performance. Other parts fell in the category of 'token participation', such as the children presenters with the texts not written by themselves using gestures not developed by themselves. However, overall the project did fulfil some categories which at least showed the first signs of a real participation - on a scale of participation up to cooperation. As the children are not permitted a decision in planning and implementation of parts of the festival program, there are only very few areas in which they can perceive the festival as a place of their own public.

Finally, there remains the question of the extent to which adults either perceive a public sphere of children or can understand it. This problem has been explored already in the introductory statement, and it emerged strongly in the reflections of the students. The notes of the students were based on the premise that to desire a right to a voice on matters of substance, and in public, is a general human desire, so they reflected their feelings about and interpretations of the observed situations. Their notes frequently indicate their own opposition to too much structure, classification and objectification of the children, and also the constraints that the observation procedures themselves imposed. Their meetings with the children and their shared understanding of the situation became very intense when the students were freed from the pressure of making notes all the time. So, when one of the students handed out her research diary on the second day, the children wanted to take it home. When the student got the book back after some days, there were hardly any changes. Here, too, the time pressure on the children became visible.

Hypotheses

The research team made a number of hypotheses, at least about this festival context, based on the research project:

- Children want to be with each other.
- Children use many forms of communication for understanding each other and are not dependent on spoken language competency.
- The exchanges in workshops and working together can be beneficial to a public sphere of children.
- The public sphere of children is always accompanied by an escape from the adult world structured in advance by adults.

- Children create their own public sphere, particularly where adults offer a framework and the children have the chance to use such a framework.
- The public sphere of children was, in the context of this festival, in contrast to the programming and structure: 'adult structures' dominated and functionalised the courses, rituals and socialising.
- When they are asked questions perfunctorily, children give only such answers as they think the interviewer wants to hear.
- Where there are interim spaces and times besides the festival structure, children's publics can develop automatically. To safeguard, strengthen and allow such adventurous meetings is a challenge to the organisers of the festival. The challenge is to design and provide the necessary structural requirements for the festival while at the same time providing possibilities for children to create their own public sphere.

Outlook

This first research investigation into the festival has led to hypotheses that could be further analysed and embedded in concrete action. Therefore, it would be helpful to continue this research within the framework of the coming festivals and in coordination with the festival management under similar conditions. The basic condition would be that the hypotheses would be integrated into the preparation and planning of the festival. Some very concrete suggestions, which are mentioned within the framework of this paper, should be thoroughly examined - for instance, with respect to a possible extension of the festival framework in which the children could follow and create their own public forms of expression. The participation possibilities would need to be trialled to see whether they fulfil the higher level categories of Hart's scale. Some ideas worth examining along these lines have already been suggested by adults not directly involved in the research project:

- There are so many nationalities in Lingen, so why were there no speeches in more languages (Russian, Turkish, Italian, Dutch, Arabic, Chinese)?
- Why do adults award the prizes? There is a children's parliament in Lingen!

Epilogue

In one research diary, there was a stuck-in press clipping about the visit of the Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, Sigmar Gabriel, to the Cuban performance with the headline: 'Gabriel: I haven't seen something great like this for a long time'. Underneath a student writes:

Of course this was after the 1:0 against the USA. He arrived 20 minutes late because he first wanted to watch the football match in the circus tent. Then he could see the fantastic performance from Cuba.

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