

Governance Talks: Children's and youth's perspectives and participation in park management¹

Last week we had Nina Törn talking about her research, where she investigated how Swedish municipalities integrate children's and young people's perspectives and enable participation in park management.

The study took place in three Swedish municipalities: Gothenburg, Jönköping and Varberg; and provided interesting results showing how administrations work strategically to develop solutions and meet the needs of children and young people. Even though they face similar challenges such as budget, time and staff limitations, specific projects that concern children's and youth's places were seen as a possibility for involving children and youth in decision making.

The study tried to answer two fundamental questions: how do municipalities with experience on integrating children's and young people's perspectives in park management work? What factors are essential for enabling and integrating participation?



How do Swedish municipalities integrate Children's and youth's perspectives?

The three municipalities employ different working methods and strategies, such as:

- ✓ A child perspective is included consistently in steering documents and among employees when planning, designing and managing outdoor environments.
- ✓ Collaborations within and outside the municipality are fostered to improve routines and increase knowledge.
- ✓ The Park management strives to involve children and youth through a dialogue process at schools, pre-schools and youth leisure centres where collaboration with the leisure administration (fritidsförvaltningen) schools, preschools, recreation- and youth centres is important in order to contact children and youth to enable dialogue.
- ✓ Projects and dialogues mainly concerning places dedicated for children and youth are most often initiated by the administration and there is a focus on formal participation where children and/or young people are invited to participate.

A dialogue process

In the beginning of the planning process, the municipalities attempt to capture the views and wishes of children and young people, by using established methods like drawings, models and simple analysis of the sites. After that, the materials produced are interpreted by professionals and forms the basis

¹ Compiled by Geovana Mercado SLU - LAMP- Landscape Governance and Management Group and Nina Törn, Teacher in management of the outdoor environment for people in labour market training at Hvilan in Örebro. All pictures are for illustrative purposes, taken by Geovana Mercado.

for an initial proposal which is presented to the children and youth participants who are given the opportunity to comment and provide their feedback.

What factors are essential for enabling and integrating children's and young people's perspectives and participation?

Some of the factors identified in the study are:

- ✓ A comprehensive child perspective in all governance documents and policies related to the administration's work.
- ✓ A clear division of responsibilities to drive the issues within the administration.
- ✓ Awareness of children and young people's needs among employees.
- ✓ Collaborations within and outside the organization to drive the work strategically in the municipality.
- ✓ Adapted ways of communication to establish contact between the administration and children and young people.
- ✓ Sufficient resources in terms of staff, budget and time for the implementation of dialogue processes.
- ✓ Feedback and evaluation procedures for projects involving children and young people.

Urban open space governance and the participation of children and youth

Could fostering the participation of children and youth in the park management planning processes give rise to new forms of governance in urban green areas? Are children and youth really part of the governance structure and hence hold some decision power and share some responsibilities? Or are they only participating as user groups who are to be consulted? How can an emerging governance structure allow for this?

Taking into account children's perspectives in the planning processes could be a way to fostering real participation and engagement in the long term. Children and youth are as special sector of the population which is usually regarded as too immature or incapable of seriously participating in decision making, hence their voices in governance tend to be included at a minimum extent, and only in relation to projects and areas that concern "places for children". However, in order to develop child-friendly environments, it is important to consider participation on all levels of strategic management such as policy, tactical, and operational level. Hence, to foster a greater engagement of children and youth, there is a need to develop new forms of governance, as well as a more nuanced understanding of their needs and perspectives, this could be achieved through designing dialogue and communication paths adapted to the way children and young people communicate, as the three municipalities explored in this study did.

