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### On Childhoods and Cities or the Changing Relationship between the Street, the School and Children's Consumption Spaces

Karsten, L.

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# Contents

Preface .....	7
Presentation of the Honorary Doctors 2012–2017 .....	9
Nothing Is As Political As Education <i>Petter Aasen</i> (2012) .....	17
Promoting Education for Sustainable Development <i>Carl Lindberg</i> (2012) .....	31
On Childhoods and Cities or the Changing Relationship between the Street, the School and Children’s Consumption Spaces <i>Lia Karsten</i> (2013) .....	49
Two Applications of Geometric Data Analysis. Possible Plagiarism in Sholokhov’s “And Quiet Flows the Don”, Individual Differences among Gifted Students of Stanford EPGY Program <i>Brigitte Le Roux</i> (2013) .....	61
A Call for an Ethnography of Childhood <i>Marjorie Harness Goodwin</i> (2014) .....	79
What Are Schools Good For? Perspectives from Economics and History <i>David Mitch</i> (2014) .....	99
Recognising Learning. A Social Semiotic Multimodal Argument for a Pedagogy of Recognition <i>Gunther Kress</i> (2015) .....	113
Interpretive Reproduction in Children’s Peer Cultures. A Reflection on My Career in Childhood Studies <i>William A. Corsaro</i> (2016) .....	135
‘Flogged into Learning’ or ‘Treasured Moments’. A History of Education from Below <i>Jane Humphries</i> (2016) .....	151
The Role of Education Policy in the Experience of Teaching. A Sociocultural Perspective <i>Jim Ryder</i> (2017) .....	167
Appendix 1. Honorary Doctors at the Faculty of Educational Sciences 2004–2017 .....	181

# On Childhoods and Cities or the Changing Relationship between the Street, the School and Children's Consumption Spaces

*Lia Karsten* (2013)

## Introduction

This lecture is about the construction of new urban childhoods and the changing relationships between three important spaces of childhood: the street, the school and children's consumption spaces. I will consider this topic within the context of the growing number of families choosing the city as a place to live. As I will argue this trend will make cities and children more closely related and this will ultimately result not only in new urban childhoods, but also in newly invented cities.

Cities and children are often considered to be two mutually exclusive concepts. Cities are big and children are small. Additionally, when people are asked to define what a city is, they most probably will refer to some of the concepts mentioned in the first column of Table 1, not to children; and vice versa: definitions of what a child is will probably not include references to cities, but rather to some rural and suburban connotations.

*Table 1: City children out-of-place*

City	Child
Big	Small
Work	Play
Public domain	Private domain
Apartment building	Single family home
Stony and dense	Green and spacious
Urban jungle	Rural idyll

The dichotomous conceptualisation of cities and children defines city children as being out of place. Yet, children and families have always lived in cities. It is only since the suburbanisation from the 1960s onwards that urban family living is increasingly considered to be problematic and many families, particularly the ones who could afford to do so, indeed left the city for the suburb. Families started to buy themselves a single-family home in the suburbs with easy access to ample public outdoor space. Suburban mothers were made the first responsible parties for the upbringing of the children, while their husbands made long working hours in central cities' labour markets. The gendered character of the suburbanisation process was conceptualised by Susan Saegert (1980) as a dichotomy between the masculine city versus the feminine suburb. Family households became a minority in large cities. Urban populations were becoming predominantly childless households, although families continued to settle down in cities. Outward middle class family suburbanisation went along with the urbanisation of new lower class family households, mostly poor immigrant families from less economically advanced countries.

Over the last decades, however, this situation has started to change. Today, we see a new development of middle class families opting for the city as a family-friendly place to live. This is a trend of middle class families that can afford to buy themselves a suburban home, but who decide not to do so and remain living urban. The number of urban families is on the rise again and the same applies for the number of children growing up in large cities. Table 2 gives some figures about this process in Amsterdam:

*Table 2: Demographics in Amsterdam (1996–2014).*

Amsterdam	1996	2014
Number of households	352.542	392.057
Number and percentage of two-parent families	52.282 (14.8%)	64.219 (16.4)
Number and percentage of children 0–3	34.468 (4.8%)	40.764 (5.1%)
Number and percentage of children 4–11	58.237 (8.1%)	64.551 (7.9%)

Source: Boterman and Karsten, 2015.

The percentages of Table 2 are not very impressive, due to the general growth of the Amsterdam city population. In absolute numbers the increase of family/children is, however, considerable. In addition, the growth concentrates in specific neighbourhoods, which puts high pressure on the building of new schools and other children's facilities.

The growth of urban family life is reflected in several European capitals and within specific inner city neighbourhoods, including Paris, Lon-

don, Berlin, Stockholm, Helsinki as well as some neighbourhoods in the US like New York (Authier and Lehman Frisch, 2013; Buttler, 2003; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2015; Lilius 2014). And as my Swedish colleagues have explained to me: even in the mid-sized city of Uppsala, the trend of growing numbers of families in centrally located neighbourhoods is apparent. We are discussing urban development in the Global North. Today, cities are the home of family households again. And we can distinguish roughly two categories: a large group of lower class, mainly migrant families and a smaller but fast growing group of (upper) middle class families.

Within this new urban context, I want to answer two questions. First, what does today's urban childhood look like? And second: how do new urban childhoods affect cities or how do new practices of urban family life contribute to the shaping of a new urban order?

I will start with the first question and will first reflect on the significance of the street, the school second and children's consumption spaces third for the construction of new urban childhoods.

## The street

Historical studies clearly demonstrate the loss of significance of the city street as a site for growing up. Gill Valentine (2004) argues that urban public space is transforming into adult space. Over the years, children's outdoor play has reduced and has increasingly become supervised. The research by Pia Bjorklid (2004) has demonstrated that motorised traffic is one of the main threats for children's outdoor play. In the context of today's increasingly dense cities and its lack of open space, children's outdoor play has been pushed towards specifically designed spaces such as playgrounds. Those playgrounds have an ambivalent status. On one hand, it is public space and it accommodates children's play. On the other hand, playgrounds set children apart and underline their status as 'the other': not belonging to mainstream society (Karsten, 2002).

In my historical research (Karsten, 2005), I have described the decline of the iconic child: the outdoor child who plays outdoors frequently and during long hours. In the 1950s and 1960s of the last century, playing outdoors was defined as a matter of course. Playing was playing outdoors. My adult respondents, looking back to their childhood, however, made clear that we should not romanticise children's outdoor adventures too much: it was (and sometimes still is) a daily practice without much variation and without much choice. Many children had to play outdoors. They lived in big families with only limited space indoors just like we see today in some migrant fam-

ilies. But this child gathering on the street also had a particular strength: by their playing outdoors so frequently, children created streets that were to some extent meeting places for all children of the neighbourhood. Children with different backgrounds met each other regularly outdoors and without much interference from adults. Children's freedom of movement was large and as a group they took the lead in exploring the neighbourhood on their own. Outdoor play was not yet adults' work. A great contrast with today, as this advertisement makes clear:

Our sons, J. and B. are looking for a nice experienced *nanny who loves to play outside*. On Thursdays and Fridays, Amsterdam 06-... (Advertisement in Amsterdam City Paper, 2005, 18 may).

While the freely exploring, outdoor child has become marginalised in the city, two new types of childhood have emerged: the indoor child and the back-seat generation. The first type of indoor child plays outdoors only rarely. Indoor children have parents who are afraid of the dangers of the street. They want to protect their child. Children in their turn, generally like playing outdoors, but they are also pleased by the newest indoor play equipment; and the competition between indoor and outdoor play is easily won by today's large supply of particularly electronic games and the internet that accommodates children's indoor life so smoothly. The second new type of childhood, the back-seat generation, explores the city in the company of their parents. They have a fully booked agenda and are travelled around to the numerous consumption spaces they attend. This has already resulted in alternative transport means as the new iconic car bike shows. Both new types of urban childhood show that children's agency is reduced to the reach of parents' eyes; and for both new types, the street as a resource for the building of social capital has decreased.

Spatial and social conditions have worked together towards the declining status of the street as a children's space. Besides the aforementioned deteriorating spatial conditions of motorised traffic and increasingly dense cities, I discovered a changing conceptualisation of childhood from resilient to vulnerable. Parents of the 1950s used to consider their children resilient, today many parents define childhood as a vulnerable period in life and they are held responsible continuously for their child's wellbeing. Dealing with risks, however modest, is no longer seen as a necessary part of growing up positively.

## The school

Now I come to the second space of childhood, the school, which you are all so familiar with in this faculty. Schools have always been important, if not the most important, space for out-of-home growing up. In Western society, all children go to school. Schools and education are surrounded by high expectations. Educating young children is considered to be the ultimate instrument for societal progress and personal achievement. Education should deliver a vehicle for the social mobility of all. Ideals and day-today practice however have never run parallel.

In the Netherlands, public education is still the main organising principle of primary education; private schools sponsored by parents with sky-high tuitions like in the US or the UK don't exist. However, within the public education system, we have a large variety of schools distinguished by denomination on religious grounds (from protestant to catholic and non-religious), by pedagogical direction (from Montessori to Dalton) and increasingly by the supply of additional classes like foreign languages, extra sports and other so-called 'enrichment activities'. This is all communicated on the internet and elsewhere and has contributed to a system of school markets as the research by Katarina Gustafson (2011) has made clear. Schools are becoming increasingly competitive in constructing a reputation of high achievements. That's what middle-class parents in particular are looking for. But it is not only high achievements that attract parents. Parents also want to see themselves reflected in the school's culture, its pedagogical principles and the population on the school yard. Following Bourdieu (1984), we may say that with the choice of a specific school, families express who they are and to whom they want and don't want to belong. Choosing schools is an identity constructing activity informed by social class and ethnic status, as the research by Ball and Vincent (1998) makes clear. This mechanism creates schools as segregated nodes in the networks of 'people like us', not only for parents but for children as well.

History teaches us that segregated schools have always existed. There has always been a divide between poor and rich schools and in the Dutch context between schools of different religious denomination. But as I have just explained, in the past, children were more easily in touch with children 'not like us', however superficially. After school, children with different backgrounds met on the street as the quotes by two Amsterdam women born in the early 1950s further clarifies:

I joined a steady group of children, who all lived on our street or one of the streets nearby. When we came out of school, out of our different schools, we used to meet on a small square nearby and play together: catholic, protestant and also communist children; it didn't matter to us.

The children I played with in their homes, they were children from school. The neighbourhood children were different. We played together on the street, but we didn't meet them at home.

The second quote illustrates that neighbourhood friendships were generally characterised by weak social ties, they had a different status compared with the close, intimate and strong relationships among school friends. But following Granovetter (1983), it is often weak ties that enable us to bridge the divides between different status and culture groups. And it is particularly those bridging weak ties that are disappearing in today's urban childhood (Karsten, 2011).

Segregated schools contribute to the narrowing of children's social capital as schools have probably always done. However today, this situation is no longer compensated for. Children no longer meet playmates with different backgrounds on the street. Again, we must conclude that children's agency, given the parental power in the choice of schools, has decreased.

## Children's consumption spaces

Now we arrive at the third and last space of childhood that I will focus on in the context of this lecture: children's consumption spaces. Today's position of the school as the most important childhood space for the building of social capital and personal identities supposes a strong relationship between schools and after-school spaces. This however is a relationship we don't know much about. It seems to be logical that the attendance of a specific school relates to the attendance, membership and consumption of specific after-school spaces. In school yards, parents inform each other about 'nice' sport clubs, good music classes, child-friendly restaurants and so on. The raising of children is a frequently discussed topic among befriended parents. Parents consider children's growing up as a project with the aim to ensure that children acquire a range of healthy, safe, meaningful and instructive experiences. Middle-class parents spend money on the reproduction of their status by passing on the right life skills, clothes, food, and ultimately friends to their children (Vincent and Ball, 2007). In the words of Annet Lareau (2003), middle class parents are engaged in a project of concerted cultivation that is very much reflected in today's commercialised childhood.

The new family practices in cities correspond with the changing of cities from landscapes of production to landscapes of consumption (Zukin, 1995). The increase of urban family households and their new ways of spending time and money on children is reflected in the rise of new children and family-related consumption spaces. In an Amsterdam research project, we studied the changes in the consumption infrastructure of some inner-city neighbourhoods. In the neighbourhood of Middenmeer, a popular middle-class family environment, four categories of family and child-related consumption spaces have increased over the last 20 years (Karsten, 2014). First, the number of family focusing food businesses has grown significantly. Family-welcoming restaurants, coffee houses where they serve babyccino, cafes with play space for children, healthy family caterings: they popped up in several centrally located neighbourhoods (Karsten et al., 2015). Those new family spaces develop as gathering places for young families (Lilius, 2015). The entrances are often blocked by prams and strollers as if to make clear: this is a family space.

Second, the number of shops selling family related non-food commodities also increases. An example is the enlargement of departments of children's books in bookstores or the opening of new bicycle shops specialized in children's bikes and sturdy mother and father bikes, including the iconic car bike.

The biggest growth we discovered among the third category: that of children's leisure spaces (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). New children's leisure spaces vary from children's creative clubs to music studios like the piano-shop, located across the street of a big primary school. Also, the number of children's sporting places has considerably increased. One of the tennis clubs of the neighbourhood used to have adult membership only, but has now broadened the scope and welcomes children as their new client group. A fourth and last very visible change is the establishment of new services for child care, including after school care and a new homework institute.

The Amsterdam study further reveals that part of those new consumption spaces are started by parents themselves. Here we meet the self-organising middle classes (Buttler, 2003). It is particularly mothers who develop initiatives to start toddlers' music classes, children's yoga studios or family-friendly organic catering services. Parents' pre-occupation reflects the intensification of parenting described in the literature and a situation in which children and parents share each other's company during long hours (Van der Burgt and Gustafson, 2013; Craig and Mullan, 2012). Family outings, parents and children accompanying each other, are one of the fast growing 'children's' activities I see in my latest research (Karsten and Felder, 2015).

The new market-driven family and child-related consumption infrastructure now fosters a new urban family culture. It is, however, evidently clear that many of the new family spaces don't cater to all urban families to the same extent. Inequality across class is definitely there.

## Conclusion

In this lecture, I have focused on three important spaces of childhood where children's growing up takes place: the street or the urban public space, the primary school with its different denominations and pedagogical regimes and the after-school supply of children's consumption spaces. Conclusions about today's urban childhood and future cities are two-fold and have both negative and positive dimensions.

First, the negative side. The decrease of urban public space as a meeting space for children is certainly a loss for the individual child, including the ones who still play outdoors regularly. While the street is declining in significance, the segregation among different class children is growing. The strengthening of intra-group (among people like us) relations at school is no longer compensated for. School is gaining importance not only as a learning site, but particularly as self-chosen identity marker and as a resource for social networking for both children and parents. It even seems to be that the choices of after-school consumption spaces are largely reflecting school composition. As I have argued, children's use of those three spaces are inter-related and together contribute to the construction of segregated, unequal and commercialised urban childhoods with only limited agency for children themselves (Karsten, 2011). Family-related consumption is becoming big business in the global North and contribute to a further spaceialization of class (Lees, 2003; McKendrick et al, 2000; Putnam, 2014).

Secondly (and to end with more positive words): It is my opinion that we should not continually stress what has been lost. I want to shift the discussion to an exploration of what has replaced past practices. The growing number of urban families and children and the related rise of new urban consumption spaces can also be interpreted as contributing to a new age, gender and family-inclusive urban order away from the dichotomously conceptualised city of the past. Susan Saegert's masculine city is fading away (Saegert, 1980; McDowell, 1983). By their mere presence, families reflect a demographically more diverse city than in the past with increasing numbers of children and growing gender equality in family households (De Meester, 2010; Boterman and Karsten, 2014). Children's visibility in the urban arena has further grown by their family related ways of consuming the city,

which has now improved conditions to foster today's urban family life (Lil-  
ius, 2015). Central urban areas are transforming in places to raise children  
as used to be the case before the massive family suburbanisation. In my re-  
search, I recognise potential gains for equalities related to the emancipatory  
city as described by Loretta Lees and others (Bondi, 1999; Warde, 1991; Lees,  
2004). From this perspective, children are not only losing agency, they are  
also important agents of societal change.

My two-sided and ambivalent conclusions have one advantage: they urge  
for further and preferable comparative research between different contexts  
in Sweden and the Netherlands. We have much in common on the level  
of the nation-state and on the level of the city, but there are differences as  
well. I already suggested one topic: the primary school as network location  
for parental advice and children's after-school spending of time. Regarding  
this topic, a comparison between different classes and a further refinement  
of lower and middle classes is much needed in order to go beyond a di-  
chotomous conceptualisation. And another suggestion: how urban are my  
analyses in this paper? Which developments about a decrease of playing  
outdoors, the growing importance of education and the growth of children's  
enrichment activities are also reflected – and maybe in different ways – in  
the countryside? As the Faculty of Educational Sciences, you will have am-  
ple access to different categories of schools in cities and in the countryside  
and thus to children and parents who can be approached to participate in  
research. I hope that this paper inspires you to do so.

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