When does size matter? Size and location of homes in children’s narratives of social participation in everyday life

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In my study, I explore social participation through the lens of children’s stories. Storytelling is seen as a co-constructed, situated social praxis embedded in the discursive-material worlds in which children live their lives. In this paper, I will analyze how material cultures come into play in children’s narratives about everyday lives, by the following question: How do children narrate significance of size and location of their homes? The children in the study are 12 year-old boys and girls, living in three geographically, socio-culturally and socio-economically different areas within the city of Oslo, Norway. The material was collected at their schools, and consists of 37 interviews about one day in their present lives, and 43 written narratives about one day in their imagined future lives as 30 year-olds.

Making material conditions of size and location matter when describing their present and future homes seems to be a way for children of positioning themselves in their social worlds. The material shows that social inequality seems to be taboo, as it is openly addressed only by a few, but implicitly at stake in most narratives. Based on the variation and complexity of the children’s narratives, I suggest three main analytical categories to be further explored: 1) Equality and solidarity as a norm; one should all be ordinary. In these narratives children describe their homes as ordinary in size, like most others. 2) Acceptance for, and naturalization of differences in status between people in a hierarchy. These narratives are about extraordinary homes, bigger and better located than most others”. 3) Counter narratives where the home is described as non-ordinary, smaller and worse located than most others. These narratives are less common and tied to explicit descriptions of being in marginalized positions in the local, social scene of peers. In these narratives, children use alternative distinction-markers to renegotiate their position.

The paper discusses the relevance of this analysis for social work. Size and location of homes in children’s narratives seem to be part of children’s negotiations and positioning, tied to their opportunities for social participation through processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: Social participation, Social inequality, Narratives, Size, Location