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Abstract

The aim is to study children’s politics by exploring how children relate to and rework positions and identities offered to them and others in a residential narrative of “Swedes” and “immigrants”. Children’s politics is defined as children practising politics when negotiating and challenging positions and defending identities. The results are based on a reanalysis of two studies. The results show that participating children use the narrative, and to it connected stories about neighbourhoods, to position themselves and to negotiate exclusion, inclusion, identity and belonging. In relation to this they deal with political issues connected to national and global discourses that blame the category of ‘immigrants’ for being the cause of local and national problems. They also reflect on the positions and identities offered in the narrative and use tactics to manage the positions and their consequences. From this point of view, the children practise politics in their everyday lives.

Introduction

This paper focuses on children’s everyday lives through the notion of children as political subjects. The notion is related to a recent call within childhood geographies about children practising politics in their mundane everyday lives (Kallio and Häkli 2011a, 2011b; Philo 2003; Skelton and Valentine 2003; Skelton 2010; Elwood and Mitchell 2012; Mitchell and Elwood 2012; Kallio et al. 2016). The call wants to challenge the often-used binary within political geography between ‘Politics’ (referring to ‘formal’, ‘institutional’ and ‘macropolitics’) and ‘politics’ (referring to ‘informal’, ‘personal’ and ‘micropolitics’), and by doing so to conceptually broaden the definition of children’s politics (Elwood and Mitchell 2012). Various authors argue that it is in the intersection between the big ‘P’ and the small ‘p’, or beyond these
two domains, that the political geographies of children and young people take place (Philo and Smith 2003; Skelton 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2010; Kallio 2016). Kallio (2016), for example, refers to the plurality of children’s politics by relating their politics to spatiality and temporality, spatiality referring to physical and societal diversity and temporality to the past, present and future. The point of departure is that there are many histories that place children in their communities, histories containing a multiplicity of social orders and hierarchies that relate people to each other in the past and present and into the future. This paper explores children’s politics in relation to spatiality and temporality with regard to spatial stories of place and social category. As Elwood and Mitchell (2012) argue, spatial stories are significant for children’s politics because, through these, children recognise and articulate who they and others are, and negotiate positions that demarcate difference, identity and power. Here the stories are investigated in relation to a narrative of ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’ in a city in southern Sweden, which during the last decades has undergone major changes in population demographics due to substantial immigration. The demographic changes have created a heterogeneous and complex social situation (Wiklund 2005; Salonen 2011; Johansson 2011), and one consequence of this is the development of a narrative of ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’. In the paper, children’s use and reworking of positions and identities offered to them and others in the narrative are investigated. The question asked is, how are their use and reworking of positions and identities connected to children being political in their seemingly apolitical everyday lives?

**Children’s politics in everyday life**

Kallio and Häkli (2011b) argue that children’s political roles and positions are today acknowledged in research, yet often with the focus on top-down processes of socialisation. There are, however, according to Kallio and Häkli (2011a), three ways in which children can be found to act politically: firstly, when children are educated for democratic exercise and active
citizenship, for instance, for participation in planning, decision-making and policymaking processes; secondly, when they are engaged in events and issues known to have political significance in their lives, such as war, political economy and racial struggle. Both ways of acting can be related to more top-down processes of children’s politics, while the third way is more related to their everyday lives. This is when children practise politics in their seemingly apolitical everyday environments, for instance, by negotiating positions, defending identities, and using and challenging positions and identities offered to them by adults and peers (Kallio and Häkli 2011a). It is this third definition of children’s politics that the paper is based on. The point of departure is that families, peers, communities and institutions offer children positions both individually and collectively, positions that are performed in practices and counter- reflected on by children themselves (Ibid.).

Elwood and Mitchell (2012) also argue that questions about children’s and youths’ politics have focused on top-down processes by emphasizing policy and decision-making. According to them, critiques of this focus have pointed out its limitations with respect to recognising and including children and young people. This has led to efforts to theorise children’s politics beyond conventional understandings and to a greater emphasis on children’s everyday politics. Various researchers have studied children’s politics from this point of view (Skelton and Valentine 2003; Bosco 2010; Bartos 2012; Wood 2012; Elwood and Mitchell 2012; Cele 2013; Cele and van der Burght 2016). These studies locate the political in children’s efforts to actively negotiate structures, relations and identifications through spatial practices, contestation, bodily resistance, critical perceptions and judgements about inequality and difference (Mitchell and Elwood 2012). Skelton and Valentine (2003), for example, show how young deaf people who do not consider themselves involved in politics demonstrate forms of political participation by actions such as volunteering and using BSL (British Sign Language) as resistance, and through political awareness and campaigning. These actions demonstrate, according to the authors, that
young deaf people are agents of political actions and make political choices about their identities. In another study, Cele and van der Burght (2016) explore how material and discursive bodies play a central role in the politics of children’s everyday lives. Their results show that participating children are highly engaged in acts of segregation through processes of categorisation and distancing in relation to places and bodies. The children adopt socio-spatial strategies to negotiate the identity placed upon them by highly politicised adult agendas. Stigmatising discourses are pervasive and are used as powerful political tools by participating children, who are constantly working to identify with and against places and their assumed characteristics. Cele and van der Burght (2016) demonstrate the centrality of socio-spatial narratives in the understanding and defining of children’s everyday politics, which is also pinpointed in a study by Elwood and Mitchell (2012). The authors found in children’s maps and writings, as well as in their interactions, copious examples of critical perceptions and judgements of inequality, power relations, subject positions, and social and spatial characterisations set out by adults and peers. Their results show that children’s negotiation of individual and collective identities, capabilities and characteristics occur not only in relation to their original experiences with adults, but also in the spatial stories they narrate in relation to everyday interactions, experiences and places.

These previous studies show how children’s politics can be located in their everyday lives in various ways. However, as Skelton (2013), with reference to Kallio and Häkli (2010), points out, it is important to be clear about the difference between children’s politics and their behaviour or social agency when identifying whether an act is political or not. One way of marking the difference is, according to the authors, to utilise the notion of intention and the ways in which children act as intentional beings based on their subject position. An aspect of children’s political acts is children intentionally acting in ways that affect other people (Skelton 2013), and children as intentional social beings relating to subject positions offered them by
others (Kallio and Häkli 2010). Another difference is, as Kallio and Häkli (2010) point out, that children as political actors differ from adults. This is because they are not autonomous members of society.

The context of the study

The results in the paper are based on a reanalysis of two studies, one that aimed to explore children’s experiences and perceptions of outdoor places in a city, and another that aimed to study social relations in the same city. Both studies were implemented by the author, and results from them have been published previously (Harju 2011, 2013; Harju and Rasmusson 2013; Harju 2015). The two studies are a part of a large-scale interdisciplinary research project that aimed to explore the social and economic changes of a city in southern Sweden (Salonen 2011; Johansson et al. 2015). The city, with 33,000 inhabitants, has undergone radical economic and social changes during the last few decades. From being a city with a manufacturing industry and a shipyard playing a vital role for the local and national economy, since the mid-1970s it has steadily lost its position, with an overall decline in the local economy, high unemployment, and considerable population losses as a consequence.

Since the 1980s the city has experienced new population gains by receiving refugees and by attracting internal migration flows of foreign-born citizens (Johansson 2011; Scarpa 2011). At the time of the two studies people of foreign background accounted for approximately 30% of the population (SCB 2011). At the same time, the inequality in household economic and living conditions has increased within the city (Salonen 2011; Johansson et al. 2015). Salonen (2011), for example, shows in a neighbourhood analysis that during the period 1990–2006 the city became more divided by socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Until the end of the 1980s the majority of its population lived in socioeconomically and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods. During the period 1990–2006 the mixed neighbourhoods decreased in favour of a division into
resource-rich areas dominated by Swedish-born households and areas with poor foreign-born households. The social, economic and demographic change has created a complex social situation in the city.

**The empirical context**

The two studies selected for this paper were selected because they are the only ones, within the larger research project, that included children as participants. The study that aimed to explore children’s experiences and perceptions of outdoor places in the city (also called the map study) involved a total of 114 children in fifth grade, aged 11 to 12 years. They were asked to place dots on a map of the city for places they liked and places they avoided and disliked. As they were placing the dots, they were asked why they liked or disliked the places. The children were accessed through four schools. Two of the schools were located in highly segregated areas in relation to ethnicity and socioeconomic position, one in an ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood, and another in a homogeneous, ‘Swedish’, affluent area on the outskirts of the town. The two other schools were more mixed in relation to ethnicity and socioeconomic position. (For a more thorough discussion on the implementation, see Harju 2013).

The study that aimed to explore the social relations in a city included 38 semi-structured interviews with a total of 56 people. Four of these interviews included five children aged 11 to 16 years and their parents, and these have been selected for the purpose of this paper. The interviews focused on the interviewees’ own experiences of everyday life in the city, positive and negative aspects of life in the city and relationships with other city residents. They give an insight into children’s reasoning about different aspects of life in the city. The four families were accessed through the map study. This is because the letter sent to parents asking for their approval of their children’s participation in the map study included an option to participate in
the study about social relations in the city. Two of the families had immigrated to the city in the 1990s. One is a mother from Kosovo and her two daughters, Flora, aged 12, and Ana, aged 17 (all the names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants). The other interview was with a mother from Bosnia and her son, Muhammad, aged 12. The families had come to Sweden, and the city, as a result of the Kosovo war (1992–1995), and the Bosnian war (1998–1999), respectively. Both lived in rented apartments, in the city’s ethnically diverse and economically disadvantaged neighbourhood. Flora and Muhammad participated in the map study. The other two participating families had a Swedish background. One of the interviews was with a couple and their daughter, Lena, aged 16. The other interview was with a couple and their son, Marcus, aged 12. The families lived in owner-occupied houses, in the homogeneous, ‘Swedish’, affluent neighbourhood, at the outskirts of the city. The two families were accessed through the school in the neighbourhood. Marcus participated in the map study, as did Lena’s brother, who was not at home when the interview took place.

**Analysing process and limitations**

The two studies have been reanalysed in relation to the children’s use of the narrative of ‘immigrants’ and ‘Swedes’. The focus has been on the children, although parents also participated in some of the interviews. Although children’s political actions and involvement were not in focus in the implementation of the two studies, as for Skelton and Valentine (2003), these aspects emerged through the material. The analysis therefore takes its stance in Kallio and Häkli’s (2013) illustration of how children’s political agency can be teased out in work that as the starting point does not have children’s politics as its aim and analytical focus. They argue that by analysing how positions are offered to children, how these are conceived and the tactics that are used to respond, children’s politics can be made more explicit in such studies. The analysis in this paper has such a focus, that is, on what subject positions and identities are offered in the narrative, and how are these used, conceived and reflected on.
The reanalysing of the two studies enables political aspects of children’s everyday lives to be identified, and thereby, knowledge of the same to be developed. However, there are limitations to this approach. One is that the empirical data have been collected from two studies with different aims and implementation. They also differ in relation to what knowledge they were supposed to develop. However, both studies were implemented in the same city, with participants sharing larger narrative patterns about social categories and places, narratives that were explored in both studies. The results of the two studies corresponded on several key themes, which in turn became a guide for the selection of the empirical data presented in this paper.

Another limitation of the approach is that parents and children were interviewed at the same occasion, and that a group of children were interviewed by an adult researcher. It could be argued that the participating children were affected by existing power relations between adults and children in our society, and that their statements therefore have been too much affected by their parents and by me as an adult researcher. It could also be argued that some of the children in the group interviews dominated the outcomes of the interviews. It is thus of relevance to point out that I, in both studies, tried to ensure that the children felt comfortable in offering their views of the topics discussed. In the interviews with children and parents, I deliberately turned to the children, who showed that they both agreed and disagreed with their parents. In the group interviews, I tried to ensure that all participants felt comfortable in offering their views.

**Children practising politics through narratives of place and social categories**

In all cities, there are narratives about the city, its places and residents. These are stories interwoven with specific historical, cultural and social contexts, and they tell us something about the city and the relationships between its residents. As Kallio (2016) argues, children come through these narratives to apprehend who they are and how they are positioned in their
worlds. This is because these narratives, embedded in the neighbourhood and the city, contain a multiplicity of social orders and hierarchies that relate people to each other. In the city in focus for the paper, there were, above all, two narratives of the city and the relationships between its residents. Both were based on the demographic changes, but they focused on different aspects of this change. One was a problem-oriented narrative, while the other focused on the more affirming aspects of the changes. The problem-oriented narrative, with a focus on the categories ‘immigrants’ and ‘Swedes’, was the most dominant. It was based on assumptions of difference and separation, where the ‘immigrants’ were seen as ‘the others’ and accused of being the cause of the social problems in the city. Perceived behavioural factors such as involvement in violence, criminality and gangs were often cited when the category was described, as was bad behaviour such as rowdiness and loudness. These conceptions were linked to a specific neighbourhood, located in the city centre, with low employment rates, high social assistance recipiency rates and a high degree of residents of migrant background. In the problem-oriented narrative the neighbourhood was described as dilapidated and dangerous; it was, for example, singled out in the police’s citizen survey (2009) as being perceived as the least safe place in the city, due to the fear of being attacked or robbed (Wiklund 2005; Burcar and Wästerfors 2007; Harju 2011, 2013; Lundberg 2011; Viscovi 2011).

One significant insight of the map study was that the children used narratives of this singled-out neighbourhood to define themselves and other children, their schools and neighbourhoods. The most disliked places were situated in the neighbourhood, and it was clear that the understanding of it, and its inhabitants, was influenced by negative images that correlated with the dominant narrative of ‘immigrants’. For example, when referring to the children from the school in the neighbourhood, children from the other schools constantly expressed relatively fixed ideas about what the pupils at the school were like. They were often talked about in terms of being bullies, not behaving, being cocky and quarrelsome. The children at the other schools
clearly positioned themselves against the children at the neighbourhood school. What ‘they’ are like was a negative contrast to what ‘we’ are like (Harju 2013). For example, during the interview with a group of children, it emerged that a girl was going to move to the school in the singled-out neighbourhood. She did not want to. When asked why, the girl responded: ‘because I don’t want to be one of them’.

This kind of narration was also found in relation to the category ‘immigrants’. In the interviews with children and their parents both children and parents referred to the dominant narrative of ‘immigrants’, who were blamed for being the source of the feelings of insecurity in the city. Regardless of the families’ ethnic or socioeconomic background, the ‘immigrants’ were assigned characteristics and positions as troublemakers, while the ‘Swedes’ were pointed out as the victims of their actions. This kind of reasoning emerged, for example, in the interview with Lena and her parents. Both Lena and her parents talked about the ‘immigrants’ as something opposite to themselves. The behaviour and character of ‘immigrants’ were contrasted to those of ‘Swedes’, a narrative that Lena also drew on. On various occasions, she said that ‘Swedish’ people in her generation do not interact with ‘immigrants’. When explaining why, she referred to behavioural factors, such as ‘Immigrants screw up and love to mess with you and beat you, and especially the guys usually say “fucking whore” and such. They have no respect for girls.’ This reasoning about ‘immigrants’ was commonly used with regard to the category in the whole city, and it was often, as in Lena’s case, the behaviour of young males that was targeted and that served as a model for the whole category. The behaviour and character of the young male ‘immigrants’ were contrasted to those of the ‘Swedes’, and a distinction was thereby made which categorized ‘Swedes’ as good and ‘immigrants’ as bad (Harju 2011, 2015; Lundberg 2011; Viscovi 2011).

This ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hierarchy was found in the interview with Flora, Ana and their mother. In the conversation, the mother explained that she would prefer her daughters to socialise with
‘Swedish’ boys rather than ‘Arabs’. This was because, according to her, the Swedes behaved better. The mother made a clear distinction between ‘Swedes’ and ‘Arabs’, the latter being for her the bad ‘immigrants’. Her daughters also made this distinction. On one occasion during the interview, they were asked whether there was a division between Swedes and immigrants in the city, and Ana said that there was. She continued as follows:

Ana: That’s how it is, Swedes going by themselves and immigrants going by themselves, that’s how it is.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Ana: They [Swedes] are afraid of immigrants; they [immigrants] don’t want to be with Swedes. They [immigrants] are cocky against them [Swedes].

Flora: There is nothing wrong with Swedes.

Ana: I know, that’s what I am saying.

Flora: It is better to be with Swedes.

Interview: Why is it better to be with them?

Ana: They behave better.

Flora: You learn better Swedish.

The conversation echoed the content of the bad and good narrative related to ‘immigrants’ and ‘Swedes’ being told in the city: ‘Swedes’ behave well and are the victims of the bad behaviour of ‘immigrants’. For this reason, it was, according to the sisters, preferable to interact with ‘Swedes’. The bad behaviour was, as in Lena’s case, connected to the behaviour of young ‘immigrant’ males. During the interview, the sisters repeated that the city is unsafe, especially for girls, and Ana connected this unsafeness to a gang of boys:
Ana: The gang are about having weapons, and about beating girls and having girls who do everything for them.

Interviewer: And how many are we talking about?

Ana: Around 200 or more in the gang, it’s almost all guys [in the city].

Interviewer: All of them?

Ana: All immigrant boys are in the gang.

According to Ana, all the boys with immigrant background were in the gang, and as with Lena’s statement, Ana’s statement included their disrespectful behaviour in relation to girls. Ana thus repeated the story about young immigrant males told in the city, a story not unique to that city. Stereotypes of dangerous and aggressive ‘young immigrant men’ is a common story present in Sweden and other western countries (Waquant 1996; Alexander 2005; Sernhede 2006; Jonsson 2007).

Elwood and Mitchell (2012), argue that spatial stories play an important role in the formation of political subjects, as they are one medium through which storytellers represent and position themselves and others as particular social actors. From this point of view, it could be argued that the participating children practise politics. Despite their different backgrounds, the children all position the category of ‘Swedes’ as good and the category of ‘immigrants’ as bad. Based on this logic, persons defined as belonging to the category of ‘immigrants’, such as the children in the singled-out neighbourhood or young males defined as having an immigrant background, are positioned as bad and troublesome. By doing that, the participating children connect to a local, national and global narrative about places and social categories, a narrative containing hierarchies that they use for differentiation and positioning. When politics is defined in this way, children in studies that do not have children’s politics as a focal point can also be defined
as practising politics (Rasmusson 1998; Karsten 1998; Poveda and Marcos 2005; van der Burght 2006, 2008; Reay 2007; Gustafsson 2006, 2011). Van der Burght (2006), for example, shows in her study about children’s perspectives on different places in the urban environment, that participating children had lively discussions about one specific neighbourhood, its inhabitants and the pupils in the school there. It was a neighbourhood that was heavily stigmatised with low income rates and a high degree of residents of migrant background. Collective narratives played a key role for the children’s understanding of the neighbourhood and its inhabitants.

Reflections on consequences of the narrative

Kallio (2016) argues that children’s political agency is situated in the past. By these histories, children find out how they are positioned in relation to other community members and through that, who they are in their communities. Based on this reasoning, it could be argued that children learn to conform to social norms and positions such that they, in the present and the future, become reproducers of it. However, as Kallio and Häkli (2013) argue, to say that children are acting in relation to issues and events readily defined does not mean that they are passive receivers of the same. This is in line with arguments within the sociology of childhood that pinpoint that childhood is not only a time when children learn to conform to social norms, but also a time when they create and influence their own and others’ lives (James et al. 1998; Qvortrup 1999; Lee 2005; Corsaro 2005). This implies that children are not only constrained by existing social structures; they also act in relation to them. The duality between readily defined positions and children as actors in their own and others’ lives is interesting to consider in relation to the participating children’s reflections of the content and consequences of the narrative of ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’.
In the map study, the children from the school in the more affluent neighbourhood a bit farther away from the city centre, made a very clear connection between the school in the singled-out neighbourhood and the category ‘immigrants’. The pupils at the school, like their neighbourhood, represented what is threatening – danger and trouble – and bad behaviour (Harju 2011, 2013). All the same, in the interviews, the children from the same neighbourhood reflected on the consequences of such preconceptions. In the interview with Marcus and his parents, for example, Marcus was asked about his associations with the word ‘immigrant’. He related it to such things as trouble, threat, robbery and mugging, but he also reflected on his, and others’, preconceptions:

Marcus: Even if they’re nice, even if I see a nice immigrant, I think about that [trouble].

Mother: So they give each other bad reputations.

Marcus: If I know someone – one or two guys, say, or maybe three, and we’re just acquaintances, and I know they’re nice people – when I look at them I’m thinking about fighting and stuff like that.

Marcus was aware that he saw boys who were defined as belonging to the category ‘immigrants’ as potential troublemakers, even though he knew that they were good people. He was thus aware that he had preconceptions that affected his own attitude, even though his mother was much more into blaming the ‘immigrants’ themselves.

Lena, who lived in the same neighbourhood as Marcus, had similar reflections. In the interview with Lena and her parents, her parents explained that the city during the last decade had received too many immigrants in relation to the total number of residents. This was, according to them, one reason why there were antagonisms and prejudices. Both Lena and her parents agreed that the prejudices have had consequences for persons who are defined as belonging to the immigrant category. Lena reflected on these prejudices:
Lena: That makes it harder for such a person to be accepted. They have to make an utterly fantastic impression for me to be able to accept them, for them to be accepted. So, it’s much harder for that person to be accepted.

Interviewer: And you think such prejudicial attitudes exist here?

Lena: Well, most of my buddies are, you know, hesitant about immigrants.

Lena knew that her friends were hesitant to interact with ‘immigrants’; at the same time, she reflected on the consequences of that hesitancy. She was aware that the prejudices could lead to exclusion at an individual level. Lena also reflected on existing preconceptions of ‘immigrants’ in relation to people she knew. During the interview it became clear that she had friends with immigrant backgrounds, and that she made a distinction between them and other persons in the category. She realised that her friends did not have the common attributes given to the category of ‘immigrants’. When asked about her friends, she, for example, said, ‘Yes, but I have known Mila for ten years.’ By that, she meant that Mila is not like ‘them’. On the one hand, Lena was talking about the category ‘immigrants’ as troublemakers; on the other, she was differentiating within the category when talking about her friends. An interesting aspect of Lena’s reasoning was that she identified herself as an insider by saying, ‘we will have prejudices’. She thus gave herself as a ‘Swede’ the position of belonging to the ones who judge.

Both Marcus and Lena reflected on the prejudices towards the category ‘immigrants’. They had an awareness of its consequences, and they knew their own position in relation to the category. The preferential positioning of oneself, on one hand, and the awareness of its consequences, on the other hand, shows an ability to recognise positions and to reflect on their consequences. This kind of duality was also found in Gustafson’s (2011) study, when children from a middle-class area discussed the division between ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’. The children were aware of the problems with segregation as well as their own prejudice, but did not, themselves, want
to attend schools in stigmatised neighbourhoods. They just wished that their world were not as divided as it was. In addition, in Elwood and Mitchell’s (2012) study, children highlighted their awareness of social positions foisted on them, which will be dealt with more in the next section.

**How positions offered are conceived and dealt with**

Previous studies show that adults and children living in stigmatised neighbourhoods and persons defined as belonging to the category of ‘immigrants’ are confronted with ambivalence and equivocation in relation to where they live and who they are expected to be. These studies also show that they are well aware of the positions offered, and that this is something they have to deal with (Elias and Scotson 1965; Karsten 1998; Poveda and Marcos 2005; Gustafsson 2006, 2011; van der Burght 2006, 2008; Reay 2007; Waquant 2007; Elwood and Mitchell 2012; Gilliam 2013). In the map study it was evident that the reputation of the singled-out neighbourhood and the school there was not unknown to the children who attend the school.

The children made statements like: ‘They say that our school sucks and things like that’ and ‘Lots of people hate our school.’ On one occasion, when a group of children from this school were talking about another school, a girl said: ‘The pupils there say that our school is the worst.’ The children themselves expressed mixed opinions about their neighbourhood and their school. To some extent they had opinions that coincided with the dominant narrative, but as other studies show (Rasmussen 1998; Chawla and Malone 2003; Christensen, 2003; Gustafson 2006; Van der Burght 2006; Reay 2007; Bunar 2010), these negative images were contradicted by their emplaced knowledge of the neighbourhood and their school (Harju 2013).

Also, in the interview with Muhammad and his mother, it was clear that Muhammad understood what was said about the school he went to as well as about the category ‘immigrants’. In the interview, he said things like ‘They [Swedes] think that everyone is bad’ and ‘They don’t give others a chance.’ Muhammad was aware of the prejudice and exclusion and felt that it was
unfair; at the same time, he tried to understand why it was like this. One explanation from his point of view was that other ‘immigrants’ behaved badly:

So they might see ten immigrants beat their children, yes, ten times they have seen various immigrants beat their children, so when parents see me they might not dare to give me a chance, and they do not want it for their own children. I mean all mothers and fathers are doing what they think is best for their children.

Although Muhammad thought that it was unfair to be judged, he too used the common explanation about bad behaviour to understand why there was prejudice against ‘immigrants’. From this point of understanding the blame is put on the ‘immigrants’ themselves, however, not on Muhammad himself and his family but on the ‘bad ones’, those who beat their children. His mother made the same kind of distinction. In the conversation, she tried to tell her son that they [‘Swedes’] can distinguish between good and bad immigrants by how people behave; that is, if you behave well, then you will be seen as a good person. Behaving well was, from her point of view, for example, to not fight back: ‘I’m raising him to never fight back. If they hit you, do not hit back – tell an adult’. Muhammad also reasoned about behaving well:

Obviously, no doubt Swedish people think, when they don’t know that I’m a nice person, they think I’m not nice. But then perhaps when they see that I behave well, sometimes they ask where I’m from and so on, then when they hear my pronunciation they think I’m a Swede.

Muhammad’s reflections about the ‘Swedes’ seeing ‘immigrants’ as behaving badly and then thinking that he too is as bad, shows an awareness of how he thinks that he might be perceived. One way of manoeuvring this position is to differentiate himself by doing the opposite of what the narrative says, for example, by being nice, not fighting back and not being a bully, and by speaking the Swedish language well. It is interesting that Muhammad mentions his Swedish
pronunciation. According to Jonsson (2007), there is in Sweden an ongoing debate about how youths in multi-ethnic suburbs speak poor Swedish and use inappropriate language. By pointing out that his Swedish is correct, he is distancing himself from this narrative. This in turn can be interpreted as a tactic used to work against assumed characteristics and positions attributed to him, and thereby, as an act of politics. Such tactics are also found in other studies. Van der Burght (2006), for example, found that children living in stigmatised areas used tactics such as behaving ‘nicely’ and being properly dressed when in public spaces to change people’s perceptions of their neighbourhoods. However, this type of distancing can also have an effect on relations with peers and classmates. Muhammad, for example, related that when he was a new pupil at the school he never said a bad word to anyone or fought back when teased, and this led to some of the pupils starting to call him a Swedish geek and saying that ‘you embarrass us ‘blattar’ [‘wogs’/’immigrants’], you [Muhammad] should be a gangster’. He distanced himself from a position that others at the school wanted to place him in, and for that, he was punished. From this point of view, not only do children practise politics by challenging positions and identities offered to them by adults, but also by peers (Kallio and Häkli 2011a).

Discussion

This paper has sought to explore children’s politics in their seemingly apolitical everyday lives by exploring children’s use of narratives of place and social categories. The point of departure is, as Elwood and Mitchell (2012) argue, that spatial stories constitute sites for the children’s formation of political selves, because through these they make and remake social subjects, relations and norms. Another point of departure is that children practise politics when negotiating positions, defending identities, and using and challenging positions and identities (Kallio and Häkli 2011a). The results show that the participating children use a narrative of ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’, and to it they connect narratives about neighbourhoods, to position themselves and to negotiate exclusion, inclusion, identity and belonging. They also reflect on
the positions and identities offered in the narrative, and use tactics to manage them and their consequences. From this point of view, the children practise politics in their everyday lives.

When using and managing the narrative, the children deal with political issues such as class, ethnicity and gender. They also deal with issues that are connected to national and global discourses that blame the category of ‘immigrants’ for being the cause of feelings of insecurity and other local and national problems (May 2004; Lappalainen 2005; Kamali 2006; Finney and Simpson 2009; Back et al. 2012). The children’s use of the narrative is thus bound up with wider geographies and structures that affect and constrain their lives. These are situated not only in the present but also in the past. In the city in focus in this paper, for example, the social, economic and demographic changes have created a complex social situation, a situation embedded in the past, containing spatial stories about residents and places. As Kallio (2016) points out, children come through histories to apprehend how they are positioned in their communities, and their positions unite and separate them in relation to other community members. She calls this spatial socialisation. As a result of this spatial socialisation, it is of importance to acknowledge that children’s everyday politics is enacted within wider sets of social relations (Valentine 2003; Holloway 2014) and in relation to the past (Mitchell and Elwood 2012; Kallio 2016). However, the political formation of children is also constituted in relation to the future (Mitchell and Elwood 2012). The future is thus an important aspect of children’s politics in the present. As Kallio and Häkli (2011a) argue, what children today learn and rehearse in their political practices is mobilised in various contexts later on, in the future. The children of today will be involved in future transformations and developments of their communities and societies. Children are therefore an important target group for further research and discussion, about belonging, inclusion and exclusion, and residential relationships in the complex and heterogeneous cities of today. This is especially relevant today, when populism and xenophobia is a worldwide growing concern of both adults and children’s everyday lives.
The results of the paper are particularly interesting to ponder, considering that they are based on a reanalysis of two studies that did not have children’s politics as their starting point. Other studies that do not have children’s politics as their analytical focus are also referred to in the paper (e.g. Rasmusson 1998; Karsten 1998; Poveda and Marcos 2005; van der Burght 2006, 2008; Reay 2007; Gustafsson 2006, 2011). An interesting question in relation to this is whether these studies can contribute to the field of children’s politics. The results show, as Kallio and Häkli (2013) argue, that children’s politics can be identified in studies about children’s lives that deal with identity, belonging, positioning, exclusion, inclusion and power relations. Intentionality is a central aspect here. It is when children intentionally act in ways that affect other people or themselves, or when they intentionally relate to subject positions offered to them (Kallio and Häkli 2010; Skelton 2013) that their actions can be identified as political. From this point of view, it is possible to look into existing work within childhood studies and children’s geographies to learn more, and develop knowledge, about children’s political actions in the many different spaces that children occupy in contemporary societies.
References


Databases