

Cultures and Interculturality

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School cultures and youth cultures: spaces and intercultural dialogues

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School spaces are a field in which cultural dialogue – interculturality (Stoer & Cortesão, 1999) – can be discussed and challenged. We argue that school cultures and youth cultures understand school spaces as having different uses and meanings. In this paper we aim to clarify different understandings given to school spaces. This means that space is understood as a social and cultural construction and different appropriations are applied to it.

The research underlying this paper is based on a multidisciplinary perspective about the built space (Augé, 2005; Bachelard, 200; Lefebvre, 1991; Lévy&Segaud, 1983; Norbert-Schulz,1976), having an integrated approach of concepts from different disciplines – education, architecture, anthropology and sociology – in order to produce a meaningful discourse. Therefore, in this research we intend to reconcile the different perspectives about school spaces in particular and the relationship between young people and the spaces they inhabit, in general. Our purpose is to clarify different representations of school spaces constructed by young people. In doing this we will pay attention to symbolic dimensions given to school spaces that can be considered as comfort or fight zones, trying to understand how young people build up a sense belonging towards different places. In this process there seems to exist a specific cultural identity, related with their inhabitants and their diversity: age, gender, cultural and social background, etc.

The empirical data from which this paper was developed came from a two year ethnographic research in the scope of a PhD project entitled: "Education and Architecture. Dialogues and young people's perspectives towards a better understanding of built space». The research took place in a High School in the center of Porto, with young people (13-15 years-old).

Data was collected through participant-observation, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The main objective of this study is to understand the possibility of a mutual understanding about the built environment – in this case school, but useful to think other spaces - between young people as citizens and the architects. This reflects also a possible cultural dialogue between different cultures. Through the analysis of meanings constructed towards different school spaces by different young people, we reach different cultures and the possibility or impossibility of a cultural dialogue. The identification of comfort, transition and mixed spaces reflects not only the confrontation of School Culture and Youth Culture, but also the confrontation of different cultures within youth using the same space and, finally, reflects the confrontation between the Architect Culture and “people’s” culture related to space.

The chosen school brought an additional interest relevant to this research: the building, after recent transformations, includes two different schools, for different purposes. Half of it is a High School and the other half is a music school. The space management requires a special attention, existing common and independent spaces among them. This particular question highlights the intercultural dimension through different cultural and social communities of young people experience, understand and give different meanings to similar built spaces. Built space is a fundamental concept in this research because leads to construct a speech that needs to be contextualized to be fully grasped, clarifying the differences and similarities between “the space” and “the place”. A major concern is to increase the quality of life through the quality of design and living spaces and perceive how we can involve citizens from different backgrounds around the same issue.