

Youth Catholic Groups as communities of learning and social transformation



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Abstract

Youth catholic groups are constituted by young people and young adults (age 15 to +/-35 years old) that have a more or less continuous participation in groups of the catholic church, that might be seen as a form of social participation. Social and political youth participation have been central to policy and research agendas in recent years because of its influence on the promotion social cohesion and citizenship (Ferreira, 2016; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014; Rodrigues, Menezes, & Ferreira, 2015; UE, 2015). Social participation is linked with the involvement at distinct levels such as cultural, sporty, religious, environmental, solidarity, unions, etc. In what concerns to the religious dimension the data from Ferreira (2016) show that 11,8% of Portuguese youngsters are involved in religious groups. Youth catholic groups as spaces for social participation and consequently informal and non-formal education, are significant in the education and training of thousands of young people and adults and through the initiatives that these groups develop have an important influence in their local communities, which can be a significant contribute to the achievement of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Thus, is it important to ask: what leads thousands of young people to become involved and participate in Catholic groups? What youth cultures and forms of participation are produced in these contexts? What training processes take place in them? How are their experiences in these groups interpreted, appropriated and integrated in the education of these young people? What role do the leaders of the

groups play? These issues motivated the development of a doctoral research project focused on the participation of young people in Catholic groups and their effects.

The doctoral project is a mixed methods research with a survey, participant observation, interviews and focus groups. In this paper we will present the results of the online survey that has been applied to 761 young people participating in youth catholic groups in the north of Portugal (dioceses of Aveiro, Braga, Bragança-Miranda and Porto), with focus on the effects of the participation in the leaders. The data collected is being analysed using the program IBM SPSS Statistics, version 24.

Despite the fact that this research is still ongoing, a preliminary analysis of this survey allows us to identify some trends: 1) independently of being a leader of the group or not, young people consider that participation in these groups differentiates them from other young people in dimensions of personal transformation such as of helping others, forgiveness and honesty, 2) these groups are spaces for reflections and discussions on aspects that are significant for those young people; 3) there is a significant difference in the quality of participation of the leaders that show more learning opportunities compared with the other participants, 4) more than 80% of the respondents are involved (at different stages) in the development of various initiatives in the local communities several times per year (such as fundraising, cultural events, sports, evangelization and others);

Key words: informal education; youth; communities; catholic groups

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