International Handbook of Migration, Minorities and Education

Understanding Cultural and Social Differences in Processes of Learning
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Chapter 44
Ethnicized Youth Subcultures and “Informal Learning” in Transitions to Work

Vitor Sérgio Ferreira and Axel Pohl

Introduction

Young people who or whose parents have moved to another country are one of the key topics in debates surrounding educational achievement, labour market integration and integration into European societies at large. While one strand of research and public debate focuses on these groups under the angle of the assumed threat to social cohesion (Cheong et al. 2007) and regards primarily young males as potential perpetrators, other strands stress the continuing inequality facing racialized and ethnicized groups especially in the education system and labour market in particular (Geisen 2007). While the first perspective tends to interpret cultural or “ethnic” identities as a factor of self-exclusion (Terpstra 2006; Skrobanek 2007), the latter often tends to over-emphasize structural aspects where young people’s ways of coping are seen as simple reflections of imposed disadvantageous situations. While much of the research relates these situations to young people’s class background (Devadason 2006; Machado and Matias 2006), youth research often emphasizes the cultural heritage of migrants’ descendants as a starting point for the explanation of subjective meaning-making (cf. Phoenix 2004).

Taking this phenomenon into account, the aim of this contribution is to use the notion of subculture to discuss the youth cultural orientations of young migrants and descendents from an agency perspective in order to observe what innovative potential is hidden in these social contexts, which are often only viewed under the angle of social deviation and/or reproduction of social inequality. As argued below, this view may well reveal subcultures as potential social contexts for agency and learning of young people with ethnic or migrant backgrounds, where we might observe closely their active process to commit to the demand for individualization.
characteristic of late modern European society, and to connect with some kind of modern youth life world.

This contribution stems from the larger context of the EC-funded research project “UP2YOUTH—Youth: Actor of social change”. The project was concerned with young people’s agency in the context of social change. While their transitions to adulthood are structured by risk and uncertainty, young men and women develop coping strategies which in turn affect social structures, namely work, family, and citizenship which were the key topics of the UP2YOUTH project. However, whether these strategies contribute both to social integration and subjectively meaningful biographical perspectives depends on the scope of action provided by societal structures.

UP2YOUTH applied a methodological approach which could be labelled as a qualitative meta-analysis, combining country reports based on literature reviews and secondary analysis of mainly qualitative studies with explorative and evaluative workshops with policy-makers, practitioners and researchers from all fields concerned with transitions to adulthood. This chapter draws mainly from the discussions of the UP2YOUTH working group on “Transitions to work of young people from an ethnic minority or migrant background”, consisting of research teams from Denmark, Spain, Germany, Finland, Romania, and Portugal (cf. Morch et al. 2008).

Formal and Informal Structures of Transitions

In all the countries under analysis in this chapter, the research finds that newcomers and descendents often have many problems with the education system, and evince higher school failure rates than their “native” counterparts (Morch et al. 2008; Heath et al. 2008). The dominant trajectories or traditional pathways of young people with an immigrant or ethnic background through the education and training system—being African in Portugal, Latin American in Spain, or Turkish in Germany or in Denmark, for instance—are marked by massive and cumulative failure, as well as premature and unqualified drop out. At the same time, only the more unqualified segments of the labour market are open to them, in conditions of precariousness and/or underemployment (Heath et al. 2008).

Such weak school performances are not just because of poor language skills concerning the countries of residence, or the lack of familiarity with the school system and its formal culture. It is also because these young people very often experience the school as imperfectable to their ethnic experiences, to their migrant history perspective, to their practices and forms of expression (Moldenhawer et al. 2009). Feeling neither identified nor supported or positively recognized by the school system, they experience discrimination and exclusion in the school territory (Downey 2008). Regarding the variable gender, all studies carried out in Portugal, for instance, point towards the fact that, in keeping with the pattern that has been consolidating itself in most developed countries, not only do girls have, on aver-

age, a higher level of education than boys, but they also have lower failure rates (especially in terms of multiple repetition), achieving better school results than boys (Casa-Nova 2005; Martins 2005).

In this scenario, many young people search for positive challenges and identities in places other than school, work, or family. To be young, nowadays, is not just a time of transition to adulthood, dominated by family and school; it is also a social condition that has its own lifestyles and life worlds. As young people, with or without any kind of ethnic or migrant background, they find other particular worlds where they can escape from disciplinary and traditional controls of school and family, where they can find some social protection, recognition, and celebration, and where they can share a feeling of equality and reciprocity in social relations. Their distance from school, the labour market, and familiar cultures can be compensated by other meaningful social contexts, like youth subcultures or youth scenes.

As many studies have pointed out, many young people who have difficulties of integration into other formal social structures frequently participated in these micro-cultural contexts (Bennett 1999; Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Muggleton 2002 [2000]). For those young people with an ethnic or migrant background, subcultures often function as a social support structure for those who, as a newcomer or outsider, feel alone or not “adapted” to the formal structures of the social world, not having many positive social references to construct their own identity and self-esteem, and/or are confronted daily with increasing social risks, insecurity, and hostility.

Considering gender, subcultures started as mainly male cultures, taking into account the relative marginality that girls have traditionally had within these social networks (Frones 2001; McRobbie and Garber 1976). As noticed before, young migrant women and comparable native women use parallel forms of coping with school and the passage from school to work, much more committed with mainstream school life. They prefer to invest their strategies in more institutional spaces, such as schooling and training, trying to achieve higher competencies and skills for dealing with the double challenge of being a woman with an ethnic or a migrant background. However, some recent studies have noticed the increase in girls’ presence in subcultural spaces, sometimes even creating particular forms of feminine subcultures as a strategy of social negotiation and emancipation of their female position in their life worlds, as happens with the movement of the RIOT GRRRLS—Revolution Girl Style Now (Gottleib and Wald 1994). The Latin Kings in Barcelona, for instance, have a girl as leader (Melody Jaramillo) since they acquired the status of legal cultural association. And they also have the Latin Queens, a segment for girls only inside the movement (Feixa et al. 2008). The hip hop culture, namely among rappers, currently has plenty of girls as members in Portugal as well, as in other national contexts (Guevara 1996; Simões and Nunes 2005).

Even if these micro-cultural youth contexts present themselves as authenticity enclaves, the scenes of young migrants or young people with an ethnic minority background frequently (re)ethnicize themselves (as a way of dealing with discrimination and with the challenges they are confronted with in late modernity) and are (re)ethnicized by others, many times in a stigmatic sense. The social image of

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1 This chapter was partially presented and discussed as a paper in the 4th Conference Young People & Societies in Europe and around the Mediterranean, Forlì, 26–28 March 2009.
these contexts is usually marked by stigma, much more produced, reproduced, and generalized by the media based on specific situations, than by interpretative and systematic ground knowledge. The fact is that false beliefs can produce real effects, many times perverse effects, such as discrimination, racism, and xenophobia. But the micro-cultural networks, or the subcultural capital (Thornton 1995) that these structures can provide, might also contextualize the transitions from school to work in an integrative or self-exclusion way, providing some skills, competencies, and even employment dreams, expectations, and opportunities.

Ethnicized Subculture Contexts and Agency

The transitions of young people of ethnic minority are, in fact, sometimes supported by marginalized social structures, locally and informally organized, created in the “streets” (MacDonald and Shildrick 2007) and culturally oriented towards their own social interests and values. Despite being strongly criticized, one can see this kind of structures as subcultures, a concept which stresses the power relations between socio-cultural forms. This concept has been seen by sociological tradition as minority and subaltern social affiliations (which might be based on age or generation) considering the hegemonic cultural model (which might be based on class or adulthood, for instance).

They correspond to underground youth networks, produced in a voluntary and informal way, more flexible and convivialist than the formal associative structures, without any kind of institutional frame or unidirectional ideological orientation. Their participants share a set of aesthetic and ethical affinities and emotional affectivities, representative of interests, which are more expressive than instrumental (Ferreira 2009). And they frequently present themselves as an alternative and dissident way of living youth life, considering the dominant patterns of youth life styles, which are more mainstreamed in the occidental consumer culture (Morch and Andersen 2006).

Within those micro structures, cultural forms of reaction to the problems that their members are facing in everyday life are projected and elaborated, often as the result of structural tensions between minorities and hegemonic cultural forms. Considering the analytic tradition developed by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of Birmingham University, for instance, the youth subcultures that emerged after the Second World War were seen as functional answers towards transforma-

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2 The “street” designation corresponds to a metaphorical place constructed against institutional places such as “home” (ruled by parents) or the “class room” (ruled by professors). When the young people refer to the “street” usually they mean the exo-domiciliary and interstitial contexts where they live in their neighbourhoods or around.

3 For a discussion about the heuristic validity and productivity of the subculture concept in contemporary society, see Redhead 1997; Bennett 1999; Muggleton 2002 (2000); Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005.


5 See, for instance, the first research produced by the Chicago School, such as the studies of Thrasher (1963 [1926]) or Whyte (2005 [1943]).
However, if youth subcultures may sometimes be the stage for some cases of violence and illegal activities, they quite frequently function as a crew, an expressive and sociability structure where some young people can find emotional ties, friendship, commitment, positive identity, recognition, autonomy, creativity, and a sense of participating and being a protagonist in the social world, around some specific cultural practices, as producers and/or consumers. That is particularly true for those young people who feel culturally distant from the ethnic references of their parents and, at the same time, experience a sense of “otherness” in contact with the hegemonic culture of the country of residence. Some of them feel misfit in their own homes, in their schools, and in the labour market. Many of them find their own space in the public sphere during their leisure time. That is why these socio-cultural spaces of “youth subcultures” might indicate the dimension of social exclusion of many young people from the more normative trajectories and models of citizenship.

Even not knowing their parents’ home countries, descendents can find in their ethnic roots relevant sources and resources (symbolic, material, and pragmatic) for the construction and expression of a positive sense of social and personal identity, as well as a sense of social agency and autonomy as young citizens. It is the case of resources such as music, dance, gastronomy, clothes, or even discursive language or slang, among others. The resources that they claim from their supposed origins, however, are not mobilized in their original “purity” or “authenticity”. They are not just transmitted from one generation to another, but reinvented and rediscovered, in one word (re)ethnicized (Skrobanek 2007), by each generation, in its own context of production and reproduction.

(Re)ethnicization constitutes a strategy to emphasize or rather differentiate in-group specific—as opposed to out-group specific—cultural, social, or economic group properties and resources, to (re)gain social recognition or their valued group distinctiveness, i.e. (re)gain a positive social identity in comparison with the out-group they are discriminated against. The construction of ethnic identity can be considered a special form of social identity and allows a more or less clear differentiation between various groups, constituting a basis for comparison between groups. Furthermore, the subjective significance of ethnic identity for an individual appears within the scope of his/her evaluation of such an identity. The (re)ethnicization strategy affects both social and personal identity (closer to the group of origin) and sociabilities (the group boundaries are less permeable to others outside the ethnic group).

Data from many studies suggest that the tendency towards (re)ethnicization should not be interpreted as merely a lack of willingness to integrate. The (re)ethnicization strategy was used by groups such as the Turkish Power Boys in Germany (Tertilt 1996), as well as the Latin Kings in Spain (Feixa et al. 2008), or by the crews of the Hip Hop “black” movement in Portugal (Contador and Ferreira 1997; Contador 2001; Fradique 2003; Raposo 2007), to react and to cope with the situation of socio-economic deprivation and feelings of marginality with reference to the dominant group. If these subcultures emerged and developed in restricted territories (the first in Germany, and the last ones in the USA), they are now transnational and de-territorialized, real, and virtually displaced and spread all over the world, acquiring hybrid specificities in each social and spatial context (Raposo 2007; Simões 2006).

It is the case of rap culture in Portugal, for instance. Despite being an expressive form imported from the Bronx (United States), reproducing many of its rhythmic and linguistic mannerisms of origin, the fact that most of the rap produced in the streets of the degraded neighbourhoods of Lisbon is sang in Creole creates a specific social bond between their protagonists: it culturally localizes them in Portugal and gives them a strong power of social identification and connection (“it motivates more because it connects much more, it feels like it’s done by us and for us”) (Raposo 2006).

At the same time, it provides them with a sense of separation regarding the white Portuguese population: “I don’t have to sing in Portuguese, they also didn’t give me Portuguese nationality, although I was born in Portugal”, says one of the protagonists of the documentary Nu Bai (Raposo 2006). Despite a Cape Verdean language system, the Creole brings together all young black people (and even some non-black, also residents of the neighbourhoods and sharing the same youth hip hop scene) with several ethnic and national backgrounds (Angolans, Cape Verdeans, Guineans, Mozambicans, etc.) under the umbrella of “blackness”, “all blacks together”.

On the other hand, even if the Creole is a cultural reference inherited from parents—who often try to avoid its reproduction to their children in order to promote the learning and use of Portuguese—the language system that those young people use in their lyrics and sociabilities is not exactly the one that those parents speak, which is emblematic of the continuities and changes between generations and the (re)ethnicization process. If the use of Creole shows the strength of the parents’ cultural heritage, it also reveals a distinct appropriation from the adults’ use. The Creole that young people use in their daily practices is a mix of words from American and Portuguese slang and “street neologisms” from everywhere in the world. In fact, the knowledge of the English language among these young people is very good, especially among those that sing rap. The need to understand the message of their favourite bands promotes the proficiency of English skills among young people even without much schooling.

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Crews of music rappers or DJs, break dancers, B-boys or painting writers/graffitiasts.
Subcultures as Arena of Civic Learning

Subculture networks create some solidarity among disadvantaged young people living in marginal neighbourhoods, often resulting in hostile rivalries between neighbourhoods. Even after compulsory re-housing, where long-standing socially structured bonds between residents are destroyed, rap, for instance, is able to “reunite what was dispersed, not allowing people’s conscience to become divided” (Raposo 2006). It gives their members a feeling of ontological security and social comfort regarding the risks that they confront daily due to their public visibility: on the one hand, it provides them with a feeling of shared identity; on the other hand, the “group” can function as a defensive community (McDonald 1999, p. 203), in a context where the need for protection started to be real, considering the subcultural tension between some “neo tribes” (such as rappers and skins, or the Latin Kings and Netas y Maras, for instance) or even between groups of young people from different neighbourhoods.

At the same time, the subcultural memberships provide their participants with a sense of pride and respect about their own ethnic, socio-economic and territorial difference: being together, they can learn moral codes as resources and as references to build up a positive social identity, and find a support structure for mutual legitimation and recognition of their complex identities as (poor and discriminated) minorities. In these social contexts, young people with an ethnic background can construct and positively share their sense of “otherness” towards the dominant outer world and a special form of self-defence or self-protection, which create an identity.

They mostly want to gain “respect” and positive social recognition. Therefore, the strategies of the “Arabic youth” seem to be formed as a mixture of attack at the outer world and a special form of self-defence or self-protection, which create an antagonistic identity. This also applies to the Turkish Power Boys, a German youth gang founded by young Turkish people of the Mainkur-Comprehensive school (Ter-tilt 1996); the principle of friendship, the Turkish concept of honour and the cultivation of “Turkish slang” are the main strategies to enhance a positive social identity, and find a support structure for mutual legitimation and recognition of their complex identities as (poor and discriminated) minorities. In these social contexts, young people with an ethnic background can construct and positively share their sense of “otherness” towards the dominant youth models and life styles. As Bouchet (1999) mentions regarding the Arabic or Palestinian youth in Denmark, they see themselves as “proud” of their origins and ethnic identity.

In this perspective, youth subcultures may function for these young people as a civic arena, where they can find not only a large frame of aesthetic and expressive references, but also a large frame of ethical and intervention resources of action and reaction, of critique and reflexivity, in order to think about their social place in the world and how to be a protagonist in their “host” societies. These scenes project their participants in a symbolic and social scenario where they find themselves as active subjects of their own lives and trajectories, providing them with the opportunity of (re)inventing their own social and personal identity in a positive way, in subjective conditions of freedom, pride, respect and dignity.

In these subcultural contexts, young people with an ethnic background living in poor living conditions can find themselves more as citizens than as victims, more as subjects of their own biographies than subject to standard and pre-existing destinies. There they can find stimulus and recognition for their own creative initiatives, for their agency as actors of social change. The “street rap” is perceived by its performers as a social intervention “weapon”, as a way of “giving voice to people that never had a voice”. Its purpose is to “transmit[ing] the power of the word” in the recovery of positive cultural and ethnic references (Raposo 2007, p. 164), as well as in the public criticism and denouncement of the degraded living conditions and discriminatory situations that their performers face in their daily life. Thus, it is a form of musical and literary expression characterized by a transforming reflexivity, to the extent that its purpose is to give visibility and vindicate to bring about change, to “make revolution” (Raposo 2007, p. 81). Through their expressions and performances, these young people feel that they hold some power over themselves, not letting others decide their own destiny.

These (re)ethnicized youth micro-cultures are not just contexts for cultural expression, but also for political and civic socialization and action. The resources that they provide are frequently used by young people to denounce, demonstrate and reclaim their specific perspectives on their spheres of life and identity, as well as on their current social problems.10 We have to take into account that many of those young people are disaffected from and disenchanted with the formal political sphere, namely through voting. If some can vote, many cannot, not only because they are not old enough, but also because that they do not have the country’s nationality or are illegal in the country.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that these ethnicized social networks are far from traditional governance, negotiating and decision-making powers, often ending up working as social networks relatively isolated from the world outside the degraded neighbourhoods, stigmatizing and classifying its residents and their social capital (for reflections on the convertibility of “subcultural capital”, cf. Jensen 2006). The neighbourhood protects and provides its young people with a feeling of trust that is not found outside (the territory that rap Portuguese young people call “Babylon”), but at the same time might enclose their respective life world, since these are neighbourhoods that offer little employment, education, and leisure opportunities.

Subcultures and Skills

In a more pragmatic way, more than a stronger sense of positive identity, these micro-social structures might also give young people, despite their position of socio-economic disadvantage, conditions to develop confidence, specific skills, ambition for future career planning (which can involve re-engaging with school or some kind of training scheme) and even some opportunities for their transition to the labour market. Being underground networks, where deviation is the norm, their protagonists found some space to create inventive and original ways of dealing with the cultural resources and the aesthetical affinities that they share. Offering opportunities

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9 As opposed to “commercial rap”, more elitized, whitened and “domesticated”.
to engage in a number of creative and performative activities, often these contexts feed the professional dreams of these young people, dreams that can sometimes turn into reality, in the form of professional projects that dribble pre-standard social trajectories: to become a musician, a show producer, a singer, a writer, a technician, a dancer, a sport player, a performer, a web designer, and so on.

Some studies present these social contexts as real creative experimental laboratories (Feixa et al. 2001, p. 298), or cultural laboratories (Melucci 1989), where young people can experience new visuals, new music forms, other new kinds of performative and communicative expressions and skills. The initiation of the younger ones in the music and lyrical forms of rap, for instance, takes place informally from a very young age, a mechanism of inclusive socialization (Drilling and Gautschin 2001, p. 313) carried out through osmosis and conviviality. The practical experimentation and observation are the main forms of apprenticeship in youth scenes, sometimes with the orientation of an older master. Following more formal pathways, training or workshops, for instance, might occur at a later stage, when the related expression is thought of as a potential career (Simões 2006, pp. 422–428).

In some neighbourhoods, youth associations and community rehearsal rooms, together with other services and amenities, are organized, bringing together MCs, writers, B-boys and DJs from several neighbourhoods, raising their awareness of and making them follow rules regarding work organization and planning, behaviour, schedules, etc., and, at the same time, providing them with the opportunity to come into contact with an assemblage of technology, knowledge, and people that, otherwise, would be very difficult for them to have access to. Some even have organized libraries, with books and films about their ethnic roots, information that often young people do not find in their schools (libraries and curriculum). These youth scenes can, therefore, not only provide some expression abilities, but also organizational, technical, historical, and collaborative skills that can change their life, being a way of integration that does not follow the traditional forms of parents’ labour reproduction, so many times offered by traditional schemes of training for disadvantaged youth (carpentry, construction, and other low-qualified manual work).11

In some countries, some national and local organizations started to explore and to invest in these micro-cultural expressions as a way of intercultural communication, giving young people better conditions of production, development, and diffusion of their products and (informal) skills.12 At the same time, some try to seize their

11 About the social engagement of disadvantaged young people through artistic programmes and activities and its articulation with youth policy, see the research findings of Roeper and Savelberg 2009.
12 In Portugal, for instance, Escolhas [Choices], a national State programme, had a pioneer role in that task. In its first phase of implementation, which took place until December 2003, it primarily focused on Youth Criminal Prevention and Integration in the most problematic residence areas of the districts of Lisbon, Oporto and Setúbal. At the end of this period, and giving up on a discourse based on the threat of criminality, initially quite stigmatizing for the Programme’s target audience, the new phase of Escolhas aims to promote the social inclusion of children and young people from the most deprived and problematic socio-economic contexts, giving support to youth collaborative projects and associations.

leaders or protagonists as cultural and/or social mediators, as a means of establishing contact between the formal world of institutions (school, migrant associations, unions, local, and national powers, etc.) and the “street world” of informal groups of young people.

This was the Danish case of the “Wild Street Workers” (Mørck 2006), which is about four ethnic young people who were given the possibility of working as street workers and helping their local community in Copenhagen, having their own embodied and biographical competences as street boys as main skills (street wise). But it was also, in a much larger scale, the case of the institutionalization of the Latin Kings and Queens in Barcelona as a legal cultural association, a task that was done with the collaboration of the City Council and Youth Council of Barcelona, among other institutional powers. This process entailed mainly giving positive visibility to the Latin population and their cultural expressions in that city and in the media, to have young interlocutors represented in decision-making processes of the local authorities concerning the Latin population living in Barcelona; and, at the same time, to have a formal platform close to this population, providing help and support (legal, counselling in school or labour affairs, competencies recognition or learning, etc.) to migrants (Feixa and Canelles 2007; Feixa 2008; Feixa et al. 2008).

Conclusions

As has been argued elsewhere (Pais and Pohl 2003), the world of labour increasingly depends on the capacity of its participants “to organise and structure their own working lives and to develop the personal and social competencies needed for this” (op. cit., p. 223). This development occurs at the same time as profound changes are affecting education and training systems. Due to the de-coupling of educational achievement and labour market integration, these systems are less and less capable of producing these competencies themselves, but depend on the outside world to provide young people with resources like meaning, subjectivity, and motivation (Pohl et al. 2006; Walther 2009).

Considering the scenario drawn, the increasing informal subcultural sociabilities reveal an extensive power of attraction and implication among young people—namely among young people with a migrant or ethnic background—being lived as social spaces of social participation and socialization on citizenship, learning, and work practices.

In this chapter, we have shown that (re)ethnized youth subcultures are not a case of “ethnic revival”, but a symbolic solution young people find to certain social situations marked by experiences of marginalization and exclusion (cf. Lang 2007, pp. 232–233). These solutions may constitute a case of coping with/idealization of their own marginal situation and hence contribute to processes of self-exclusion, which in certain constellations can become real “traps” (Spindler 2007). But, it can also be seen as a case of articulation and active self-positioning. The “objective” outcome of this strategy can only be determined empirically on a case-by-case examination.
Both academic and political institutions that deal with young people have given minor importance to the social role of these spaces on the margin of the established channels for political involvement and commitment, as well as, consequently, in adapting to proposals of social participation “from the ground”, from the everyday dimension of life.

Both the sociological reflection on the action of young people in “public life”, and the institutional political instances that outline and regulate this action, have been ignoring or demonizing some of the real contexts of social participation and citizenship practice of young people, thwarting the potential of social intervention that frequently misaligned and subterranean arenas provide them with.

“Youth subcultures”, “youth tribes”, or “youth scenes”, whatever the theoretical paradigm under these concepts, function as a social support structure for those who feel alone or not “adapted” to the mainstream social world—as “newcomers” or “outsiders”—who do not have much more positive social references to construct their own identity and self-esteem, and/or who are confronted daily with more and more social risks, insecurity, and hostility.

The social image of these contexts is usually marked by stigma, much more under domination of criminological and moralistic stereotypes produced, reproduced, and generalized by the media from specific situations, than by interpretative and systematic ground knowledge. The fact is that false beliefs can produce real effects, many times perverse effects, such as discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and even physical violence.

If youth subcultures may sometimes be the stage for some cases of violence and criminality, they quite frequently function as a defensive structure for those who feel insecure and frightened, and where some young people can find emotional ties, friendship, commitment, positive identity, recognition, liberty, autonomy, creativity, a sense of being an agent in the social world. In one sentence, subcultures may be social contexts where young people can find sources and resources to exercise their own agency as actors of social change.

Despite being micro-spaces, subcultures correspond to a global phenomenon, mainly urban, that usually emerges in social contexts defined by different forms of social exclusion (from school, work, citizenship, etc.) and discrimination (class, ethnicity, culture, “race”, etc.), which they signal and reveal. The cultural practices and resources mobilized by young people in their scenes express a form of re-action on the part of those who early in life experience hostility and constraints from broader society and its formal structures. Through their social participation in subcultures, some young people can have a subjective way of exercising social power and trying to change their own living conditions.

It is in everyday life, particularly in interstitial social spaces where leisure and cultural production happens, that youth citizenship is often exercised, reinvented in its meanings, objectives and traditional modes of action. Actually, nowadays the institutional and organizational scale of youth citizenship cedes ever more to a micro scale, structured in micro-cultural networks, from which it emerges mainly as an expressive form of construction, exploration, recognition, and social preservation of personal and collective identities, namely (re-)ethnicized identities.

In many of these informal interaction networks, there arise effectively implicated cultural conflicts and claims, based on the sharing of specific distinct and distinctive forms of identity, providing their protagonists not only with a strong sense of inclusion and demarcation, but also of existence and intervention. These are social spaces where many disadvantaged young people feel like someone, subjects of their own biography more than subject to standard pathways.

However, the education systems in all countries of our study do not recognize these spaces and confine them to a kind of “outside world”. A fact that is especially problematic for boys and young men. The practical examples show how non-formal education can be used and at the same time give some value to the life worlds of ethnic minority young people and their subjective self-positioning and to overcome the boundedness of subcultural social positioning.

This integration is also linked to the development of a fully reflexive education system in the sense of Giddens’ “institutional reflexivity” (Giddens 1991, p. 35) that prioritizes not only formal competencies but also training in diversity as a key tool to avoid exclusion processes. Or, as one expert in an UP2YOUTH workshop put it: “You have to decide whether you want to be a German school—or a school in Germany.” (quoted in Foitzik and Pohl 2009).

References


