

Child Cultures, Education and Technologies: interactions in the net m-ICTE2005

M. Jacinto Sarmiento^{*,1} and C. Almeida Tomás^{1,2}

¹ Institute of Child Studies of University of Minho, Avenida Central, 100, 4710-229 Braga, Portugal

² Institute of Child Studies of University of Minho, Avenida Central, 100, 4710-229 Braga, Portugal

In this paper, we intend to establish a connection between a broader concept of culture, namely the notion that children are able to construct culture, and technologies, as essential means for promoting and advocating that same notion. Our analysis shall be focused on childhood cultural production and on how important it is in promoting children rights. By doing so, we shall also try to consider the possibility that children may feel like citizens and co-constructors of culture and that they may even be acknowledged as such in a world dominated by an existing hegemonic culture. The discussion shall be based on a research project called “**As Marcas dos Tempos: a Interculturalidade nas Culturas da Infância/Signs of the Times: Interculturality on Child Cultures**” (started in 2002). This project is aimed at interpreting and explaining the symbolic modes of cultural exchanges (by using digitalisation and telematic communication; a web-site made available through the University of Minho), in school environment, carried out by children from different social and geographical contexts (Portugal – Barcelos area and the Azores – and Brazil – State of Santa Catarina) and from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Its main goal consists in studying interculturality as a symbolic process of cultural exchanges and in promoting real strategies for an interculturality and inclusion pedagogy, and, therefore, acknowledging that School is a privileged setting for offering and promoting a more pluralistic notion of citizenship.

Keywords Child cultures, education and technologies

Child cultures, Education and Technologies: interactions over the net

Signs of the Times – Interculturality on Child Cultures (MATO)

We live in a complex and paradoxical world. You have enhanced information and communication technologies (ICT's) which offer you the chance to make contact with other individuals in the blink of an eye, on one side, and the promises of modernity at a safe distance and hard to keep, on the other.

We live in an age of *social Darwinism* [1], that is to say, we watch the increase of unbridled, at-any-cost, competition between states, social groups, individuals, for rights and resources, when the fittest and the powerful are trying to gain more power over others and when those that lack decision-making ability or economic and financial assets are kept in or led to different kinds of exclusion and marginalisation, whether it be from work, politics, culture, and so on. This same exclusion is alluded to in discussions over contemporary opportunities of globalization (even if it includes not only, or predominantly, opportunities, but also obstacles and restrictions...), its impact on different areas and dimensions [2] and actors involved. For instance, children are mentioned when debating the dissemination of new technologies and mass communication, but they are never or hardly ever heard about it [3]. This is not about saying that children should be treated like adults, it is rather about respecting their views, as a social and generational group. The point, here, is to know whether children participate as citizens, or adults manage somehow to “adopt those practices and turn them into means of their own making” [4].

1.Characterisation of project MATO

The contextualisation of the research project presented in this paper – *Signs of the Times, Interculturality on Child Cultures (MATO)*¹ - is based on the need to reinvent common assumptions about childhood.

Increasingly multicultural societies, such as the Portuguese society, which comprise different cultures and ways of seeing and thinking the world, result in the urgent need to promote acknowledging policies (for

* Corresponding author: e-mail: sarmiento@iec.uminho.pt Phone: +351 253601217; ctomas@iec.uminho.pt Phone: +351 253601204

¹ This project is jointly promoted by the Institute of Child Studies of University of Minho, the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, and the University of Azores. In order to run this project in continental Portugal, the University of Minho has established a partnership with the Centro de Recursos e Apoio Pedagógico (CRAP)/Resources and Pedagogical Support Centre of Barcelos.

either equality or diversity) - and not “tolerance programs” – about diverse cultural identities, and to promote redistribution policies, which involves reinventing the concepts of citizenship and pluralist social justice [6].

As far as this matter is concerned, school seems to be the perfect setting for offering and promoting the right conditions to develop a more pluralist and active notion of citizenship. Project MATO aims at interpreting and explaining the symbolic modes of cultural exchanges, in school environment, carried out by children between 3 and 12 years of age (pre-school to sixth grade), from different social and geographical contexts (Portugal – Barcelos area and Azores; and Brazil – Santa Catarina State), and from different ethnical and cultural backgrounds. The project’s main goals can be briefly summarised as follows: 1) to develop innovative teaching practices designed to foster (inter)cultural exchange, in order to create an interculturality pedagogy based on the real exchange of knowledge between children from different geographical, social, ethnical and cultural contexts, in the community of Portuguese speaking countries (Portugal and Brazil); 2) to learn about how children produce and reproduce culture and to identify the symbolic processes made active through the appropriation and reinscription of “other people’s” culture in their own specific knowledge and means of conveying reality; and (3) to develop a set of tools and materials to be used for didactic purposes in the early stages of basic education, on behalf of the promotion of an active interculturality and inclusion pedagogy.

The Project, which is being developed since 2002 as a research-action project, is based on a survey about the original *cultural forms* and their symbolic backgrounds, and on the exchange of the respective researches with other children from differentiated contexts. It aims for its reinterpretation and reinscription in a way that those same forms may become part of their respective symbolic capitals. By cultural forms we mean the iconic and plastic signs which characterise a given culture (Native American drawings or their body painting motifs; artisanship figurines or decorative patterns of Portuguese tiles; African pictorial motifs or the drawings on their printed fabrics; urban *graffiti*, and so on), as well as the legends, narratives and sagas which constitute verbal depictions of ancestral values and knowledge.

By choosing the denomination “*Signs of the Times*”, the Project manages to point out the historical, sedimentary and reproductive nature of cultural backgrounds, and, at the same time, determines its subject-matter: the material, artifactual and iconographical elements of those backgrounds – “the signs”. As far as the subtitle is concerned, “*Interculturality on child cultures*”, it explicitly refers to an active and projective dimension – cultural exchange itself – and highlights the generational nature of the exchange: cultural forms listed and exchanged in the child’s cultural modes specific context.

In the current stage of the project, we are exchanging the materials produced in school environment, mostly through the project’s web-site: www.promato.net.

It seems we have always seen childhood through a somewhat biased and rather specific lens. In a sense, this gave us a narrow vision of things which prevented us from discriminating this generational group conceptual autonomy and from analysing children’s actions in their multiple dimensions and their relationship with others and the world. For all this, we believe childhood is a field of study which should be considered from a multi and interdisciplinary point of view [7], and built on a pluriparadigmatic basis. Accepting children’s plural voices and inscribing childhood in an interdisciplinary field is not a synonym of any methodological lack of order or chaos, not even of acritical eclectism, rather the genuine expression of the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon itself [8]. Therefore, the analysis on the products is done accordingly to the theoretical guidelines provided by the Education Sciences (specially, the Sociology of Education, Information and Communication Technologies and Art Expression), by the Sociology of Childhood and by Anthropology.

2. Childhood’s Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is an inherent feature of social and educational realities of late modernism. Even if the multiple cultural exchanges result from the contemporary cosmopolitanism, the migrations of impoverished and expropriated populations from peripheral or semi-peripheral countries and from the diffusion of the multiple cultural expressions within the complex forms of collective cultural diffusion, multiculturalism is not necessarily a synonym of inclusion. On the contrary, we ought to actually add new forms of “benign multiculturalism”, concerning the promotion of exclusion of minority social, ethnical and cultural groups, to societal *apartheid* and conservative assimilationism. In fact, these new forms are nothing but a fetishist and folkloric way of labelling people who are different as exotic, rather than as citizens in their own right.

Interculturality pedagogy cannot, then, be dissociated from the analysis on the political and symbolic impact of cultural exchanges [9]. It is, therefore, important that you stand up for equality every time difference generates inferiority and that you stand up for difference every time equality means the de-characterisation of cultural identities [10].

Project MATO seeks to learn about how those exchanges occur, through the pedagogical work of children. In this sense, it interprets interculturality by cross-sectioning multiple societal and community cultures, and child cultures.

The notion that children are cultural constructors, inherent to the project mentioned above, presents an obvious opposition to the prevailing theses which present children as mere passive recipients and beings who depend on reason, rules and values imposed or impressed upon them by adults. Childhood is still understood according to the parameters of a minority status, as a period in life when individuals need protection, because they have lesser knowledge, maturity and strength, compared to adults; protection means provision, which, in its turn, means uneven power relationships [11]. When took to extremes, these thoughts express two categories introduced by Ariès' [12] relating the "sense of childhood": "irrational" and "*bibelo*" children. Nevertheless, for some time now, there is this idea that children are capable of creating processes of meaning concerning action and of establishing specific and genuine ways of monitoring. Scientifically speaking, the study of childhood's cultural practices, namely within school or community-based activities, has several and quite rewarding effects [13, 14]. It is also known the global impact of child cultures on societal cultures [15]. Finally, in a *consumer-driven life* [16], as the one we live today, the existence of children-oriented cultural forms created by adults – products such as Lego or Matell toys, comic books and cartoons, video and computer games – constitutes one of the most impressive aspects of children-directed global market [17]. For instance, since the day it entered the Portuguese market, less than three years ago, Erich Brodheim, a company that commercialises children's clothes for brands such as Timberland, Burberry, DKNY, Elle, Kenzo and Nike, had an increase of 30% in sales and was expected to sell around ten million euros, in 2003. According to the American Toy Industry Association (TIA), this market has rendered more than 20 million dollars in 2002. This childhood cultural industry, increasingly more powerful - the numbers speak for themselves – apart from the economic impact, has yet another dimension: the social-cultural one. "It has been conveying, almost as in an attempt to close the negativity circle, the idea that children do experience a precocious and reversible adulthood process and, consequently, live the age of *non-childhood*" [18].

In this case, the point is to know how autonomous are child cultures compared to adults'. As a matter of fact, child cultures feed from the exchange between their own representations of the world and the prevailing "adult" ones. The "*two cultures*" [19] – specifically childhood's and society's – which work together towards the build-up of child cultures, towards diversity, plurality and even towards the contradiction that internally shapes the two of them, serve as reference for children's world and as context for their specific action. This project's purpose is to characterise this plurality and these interceptions, contributing, hence, to better knowledge and pedagogical action.

3. The project's current status and main conclusions

The development of cultural exchanges, within the range of the theoretical concepts mentioned above, carried out by children from different social and cultural contexts, is running, like we said, at full speed. We have used technological means to achieve this, namely a web-site which includes the final products that are used as permanent source of information and classroom work tools, and video-conference which makes direct conversation possible. You can also use more traditional means, namely conventional mail, exhibitions and the exchange mediated through interpersonal contact with teachers and researchers. Conclusions for accomplished actions, even if incomplete and brief (after all, this is an ongoing work), should include:

- Children continually take part, interpret and rebuild cultural information, which comprises values, social rules, ideas, beliefs and social representations, often expressed through stories and narratives, legends, images, games, toys and play activities, and other cultural artefacts.
- The construction of children's symbolic universes results from the interaction between children, and between children and adults. It includes cultural elements derived from differentiated circles of symbolic production: a culture of globalisation (quite evident in the production of children's cultural industry); national cultures and their school-based filtering, which summarises the "social validation of knowledge passed down to younger generations"; local, community or

ethnic cultures for a contextualised inclusion of children; and, finally, peer cultures, which result from the interaction between children.

- Child cultures should be interpreted in the light of the *symbolic puzzle* made of the significant juxtaposition of cultural elements deriving from multiple sources. There is no such thing as unblemished childhood culture; the same way there is no ethnic culture free from the influence of other cultures, just like we are taught in post-colonial studies. To say child cultures is equivalent to say an *in-between culture* [20].
- Children become aware of other people through the set of expectations their cultural insertion allows them. Bias, refusal to accept what is different and an attitude of superiority are manifest when they express a certain detachment from the cosmopolitan status and from the social chauvinism present in the symbolic references of belonging. Discrimination can be determined based on visible features such as skin colour, name, physical appearance, nature perception, language, and so on. But reversing bias and the refusal to accept the other are also significant features of children's interaction with other children. In this sense, to learn about difference means a chance to acknowledge equality. Pedagogical work seems to have developed evident political and moral dimensions;
- ICT's may be tools designed for an active interculturality, provided that the people in charge of pedagogy allow children to use them as dialogue and interaction instruments. They are not just a source of information or some sort of playful way to learning. They are an arena, a mean of communication that may be able to overcome physical barriers and exclusion. This is not, then, a matter of assuring access to ICT's, but of using them to build truly democratic and inclusive relationships;
- Children's participation is absolutely essential for an active intercultural education. The child learns about differences, respect and citizenship, because he or she gets actively involved in his or her own experience of knowledge and life. But participation does not work by itself. It requires some pedagogical action, which favours children's exercise of their decision-making abilities. Participation using ICT's requires a pedagogical work of facilitation and mediation, capable of preventing the possibility of choice regarding access to technologies (there are different approaches to this, depending on the uneven terms and access habits of children from working and middle classes to ICT's), and permanently alert to the dangers of letting adults in charge of the use of the existing languages (namely, verbal and computer-based language).

In short, we can definitely state that the analysis on child cultures and their articulation with childhood institutions – especially school – plays a significant role in educational and sociological studies on childhood today. This significance results from the fact that there was a change from a paradigmatic perspective which emphasised social reproduction and considered children mere recipients of educational policies and adults-oriented pedagogical practices, to another paradigmatic perspective which considers that childhood, as a social category, is susceptible to be analysed in itself, which sees children as social actors in their own right and which interprets children's world in the light of the multiple symbolic interactions they establish between them and with adults.

Project MATO is aimed at developing two major fields of research concerning childhood and education: child-child, and child-adult cultural exchanges, and the construction of an interculturality and inclusion pedagogy.

Articulating children's imagery and social knowledge and adopting childhood's cultures as a central issue regarding the *referral of terms and possibilities of learning processes* may contribute to the reinvention of public school. This means seeing school as a world of life, as *children's home* [21], where you learn about the world by living in it. ICT's play a role in that reinvention because they are perfect at running the intercultural dialogue and because they are a highly motivating factor of children's cultural expression. It all comes down to the pedagogic line of work you adopt. The deepening of knowledge about children depends, necessarily, on the children themselves and on their relationships with other people. If the perspective is correct, school shall change. It is this "originality" that may bring children about some *emancipatory potential* [22]. For it to come true, adults need to accept they must negotiate principles and discourses about and with children, and that, as a result, educational action and intergenerational relationships shall have different meanings.

References

- [1] Dahrendorf, R., *A Quadratura do Círculo*, (Edições 70, 1996).
- [2] Rizzini, I., “Infância e Globalização. Análise das transformações económicas, políticas e sociais”. *Sociologia, Problemas e Práticas* **44**, pp.11-26 (2004).
- [3] Fass, P. S., Children and Globalization. *Journal of Social History*, **Summer**, 1-14 (2003).
- [4, 5] Santos, B. S., Poderá ser o direito emancipatório, *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, **65**, pp. 3-76 (2003).
- [6] Araujo, M.; Pereira, M. - Interculturalidade e políticas educativas em Portugal: reflexões à luz de uma versão pluralista de justiça social. *Oficina do Ces*, **218**, pp.1-17 (2004).
- [7] Prout, A. *The Future of Childhood*, (Routledge Falmer, 2004).
- [8] Cf. Pascual, I. R., ¿Sociología da la Infancia? Aproximaciones a un campo de estudio difuso. *Revista Internacional de Sociología (RIS)*, **26**, pp. 99-124 (2000).
- [9] Stoer, S. e Cortesão, L., *Levantando a Pedra*, (Afrontamento, 2000).
- [10] Santos, B.S. e Nunes, J.A., - “Introdução: para ampliar o cânone do reconhecimento, da diferença e da igualdade”, in B.S. Santos (org.), *Reconhecer para Libertar: os caminhos do cosmopolitismo cultural*, (Ed. Civilização Brasileira, 2003)
- [11] Mayall, B., *Towards a Sociology for Childhood, Thinking from children's lives*, (Open University Press, 2002).
- [12] Ariés, P., *L'Enfant et la Vie Familiale sous l'Ancien Régime*, (Seuil, 1973).
- [13] Jackson, P. W., *Life in Classroom*, (Rinehart and Winston, 1968).
- [14] Willis, P., *Aprendendo a ser Trabalhador. Escola, Resistência e Reprodução Social*, (Artes Médicas, 1991).
- [15] Gonçalves, E., *A Arte Descobre a Criança*, (Raiz Editora, 1991).
- [16] Pais, J. M. *Sociologia da Vida Quotidiana. Teorias, Métodos e Estudos de Caso*, (Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2002).
- [17] Steinberg, S.R.; Kincheloe, J. L. (Ed.), *Kinderculture. The Corporate Construction of Childhood*, (Westview Press, 1997).
- [18] Sarmiento, M. J., Sociologia da Infância: Correntes, problemáticas e Controvérsias. *Sociedade e Cultura, Cadernos do Noroeste*, **13**(2), pp. 145-164 (2000).
- [19] Corsaro, W. A., *The Sociology of Childhood*, (Pine Forge Press, 1997).
- [20]. Bhabha, H., *O Local da Cultura*, (UFMG, 1998)
- [21,22] Sarmiento, M. J., Imaginário e Culturas da Infância”, <http://old.iec.uminho.pt/promato/index.php>.
- [23] Santos, B.S. e Nunes, J.A., Op. Cit.