

Introduction

An international research project on the modes of use of social spaces in São Paulo, Brazil

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Apart from their physical-geographical character, spaces are always social spaces, i.e. historically created spatial and social contexts related to the social behavior of a particular group at a particular time and place, a “chronotopos”, which is shaped and modified over time.

A modification process of this kind is built into pedagogical, participatory and symbolic spaces and relationships. The nature of the process depends on how those who directly or indirectly use such humanly relevant spaces take possession of, modify or restructure them. In principle this applies to every culture and to any geographical region.

In the early years of this century's first decade Brazil went through a major change in its political conception of education. A shining example of this took shape in the giant metropolis of São Paulo, where a social experiment began with a view to establishing institutions of sustainable education.

In São Paulo 46 so-called CEU's were set up⁴. A CEU is a centre specially constructed on the outskirts of a favela to provide a comprehensive range of educational, cultural and sport activities to the people living there. Thus the CEU's have the potential to address extreme social tensions. Each CEU provides several thousand children and adolescents with lessons, cultural activities and meals every day. These cultural centres were a political response to the needs of a neglected social class, whose possibilities of contributing to society were severely restricted. This serves to underline the fact that the project transcends the classical notion of “school”, moving more in the direction of being a place of individual development, also seeking to contribute to the genesis of responsible citizenship.

These current documentations show that people's lives have been educationally enriched in ways that would have had no chance of ever happening, if they had not spent several years attending a CEU. This brings up the question of the individual and social effects of these centres. How have the opportunities offered by these cultural complexes proved so attractive to children, adolescents and young adults? How do they interact with the teachers and coaches involved? How do the activities reflect back on the community, in other words, the fringe districts of São Paulo. What tensions and objections stand in the way of realizing these centre's aims?

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4. On the history, genesis and realisation of CEUs see the dissertation thesis by Maria Aparecida Perez (2010). *Soziale Inklusion über die Erziehung und Bildung: Eine Studie über das Programm „Vereinigtes Bildungszentrum“* (University of Siegen, Germany).

To subject these questions to systematic analysis, or perhaps to arrive at answers opening up further avenues of enquiry, an international research group formed in São Paulo in the spring of 2018. It consists of teachers from one of the CEU's together with lecturers from the Mackenzie University (São Paulo, Brazil), the University of Siegen (Germany) and the University of Arts and Social Sciences (Alfter, Germany). Of the 46 existing cultural centres the Butantao CEU was chosen – after a complicated municipal approval process – as the focus for the research. This provided the basis for a representative, empirical case-study, which would document the educational biographies of children and young people from a variety of perspectives.

The following articles are the beginning of a series of publications, which can be seen as the outcome of the research. So that they might reach a wider public the studies are appearing in various places and media formats. They represent both the empirical evaluation of the data and the socio-political reflections conducive to understanding the impulse of educational transformation behind Brazil's CEU's.