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Wake up and smell the Culture!

What kinds of processes of learning and identification are activated through participation in international youth exchange programs?



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Why study youth-exchange programs?

1. Learning to live together is one of the overarching goals for all education in Europe (Delors, 1995).
2. "Global Learning" claim that education becomes meaningful for youth only when it manages to succeed in creating connections between global and multicultural challenges and the individual's everyday life (Suárez-Orozco & Satting, 2007).
3. «Follow the EU money»:
4. From elite youth to "young people with fewer possibilities"





YOUTH IN ACTION

My study – taking departure in an “Youth” exchange.

Framework of research

- A learning arena in change: new focus group and new challenges.



A qualitative research design

- Ethnographic methods in general (Heath & Street, 2008; Holland, et al 1998), and interviews, participant observation both with and without video- camera, in particular.
- The total data- corpus is complex. I have during a period of ten months spent approximately 70 hours at the out-of-school center.
- Interviews represent a total amount of 18 hours audio data. In addition I have audio- data from informal conversation with the out-of-school manager and staff, and the young informants.
- From the youth exchange in Brazil, I have about 15 hours video- recordings, as well as photos, audio- recordings and field notes from participant observation and informal conversations.

The concrete study

- This is an ethnographic study of six young people's experiences of learning in two different contexts. However the intercultural youth encounter is in focus.
- The three girls and the three boys who constitute my study-group did for one year participate in the out- of- school center. During this period they went on an international youth exchange to Brazil for two weeks. In Brazil they met other young people from Chile, Slovakia, Portugal and Brazil.
- What primarily characterizes my study, in contrast to previous studies, is that it is aimed to respond issues and challenges highlighted by researchers, youth-workers and young people from within the European youth sector (Gomes, 2009; Gomes & Cunha, 2008; Otten, 1997, 2009; Ramberg, 2009, and Titley, 2005, 2008).
- The attention is directed towards experiences and learning situations young people themselves consider being essential and important within a longer learning trajectory and consequently it includes more elements than those which traditionally have been labeling "cultural learning".

Theoretical framework

- A new critical hermeneutic orientation within intercultural communication theory (Dahl, 2006; Jensen, 2004; Illman, 2004; Svane, 2004; Nynäs, 2001). Here learning, meaning-making, and symbols are perceived as key elements in communication, and cultural differences are understood as subjectively perceived, socially constructed and changeable.
- The close connection between learning and identity has been highlighted within the sociocultural tradition (Gee, 1999; Lemke, 1990; Wenger, 1998; Wortham, 2006). Social identification and theoretical knowledge is interrelated processes involved in an individual learner- identity (Wortham, 2006).
- The dialogical perspective provided by Bakhtin emphasizes the "other", or the difference, as essential for individual learning and identity development (Rommetveit, 2004).
- Intercultural learning is about making meaning across different life skills and experiences.

Empirical Findings (i)

- The social environment at the international youth exchange did represent a complex experience of differences and cultural resources, and did to a greater extent than the out-of-school center affect the young people's learner identities in a positive direction.
- They report increased self-confidence, enhanced self-understanding, a more reflective view of their own role in social interactions, and a stronger sense of themselves as someone who is good at something to be a direct consequence of their participation in the youth exchange programs and finally decisive for their conviction that they will manage to complete upper secondary school.
- Differences that geography, language or ethnicity were experienced as no important for the informants when it comes to categorize the "other" as different from or similar to themselves. Similarities and differences at the individual level were defined by the informants around issues like interests, manners and style.

Empirical Findings (ii)

- A lack of questioning and reflection on differences both at the out-of-school center and at the youth exchange.
- Activities at the program and off the program did have different approaches towards culture.
- The youth initiated off- program activities did rather relate to global popular youth culture and shared interests taking departure in the young people's various life-worlds.

Conclusions (i)

- Organized intercultural youth- encounters have the potential to be effective learning contexts for development of social-, communicative, - and cultural knowledges and skills related to learning to live together in a multicultural world.
- Participation at international youth exchanges may contribute to increased motivation for learning, enhanced self-understanding and personal growth. These kinds of knowledge are relevant in all 21st. century education (Binkley et al, 2010; Hart Meyer, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Satting, 2007).
- However there is need for specific goals and an educational policy providing sufficient conditions for their realization in order to develop the intercultural youth work, otherwise one could only hope to succeed by pure chance (Otten, 1997).

Conclusions (ii)

- Trainers and youth workers in this field must be able to cope with these realities and develop skills to explore differences together with the youngsters, in order to equip young people with knowledge about what significant differences may be, and provide them with tools to deal with differences and explore them in their everyday-life.
- Making use of organized intercultural youth encounters as alternative learning arenas for young people at risk of dropping out of education will strengthen the opportunity for these individuals to experience themselves as learners in new and more positive ways.

Thank you for your attention!



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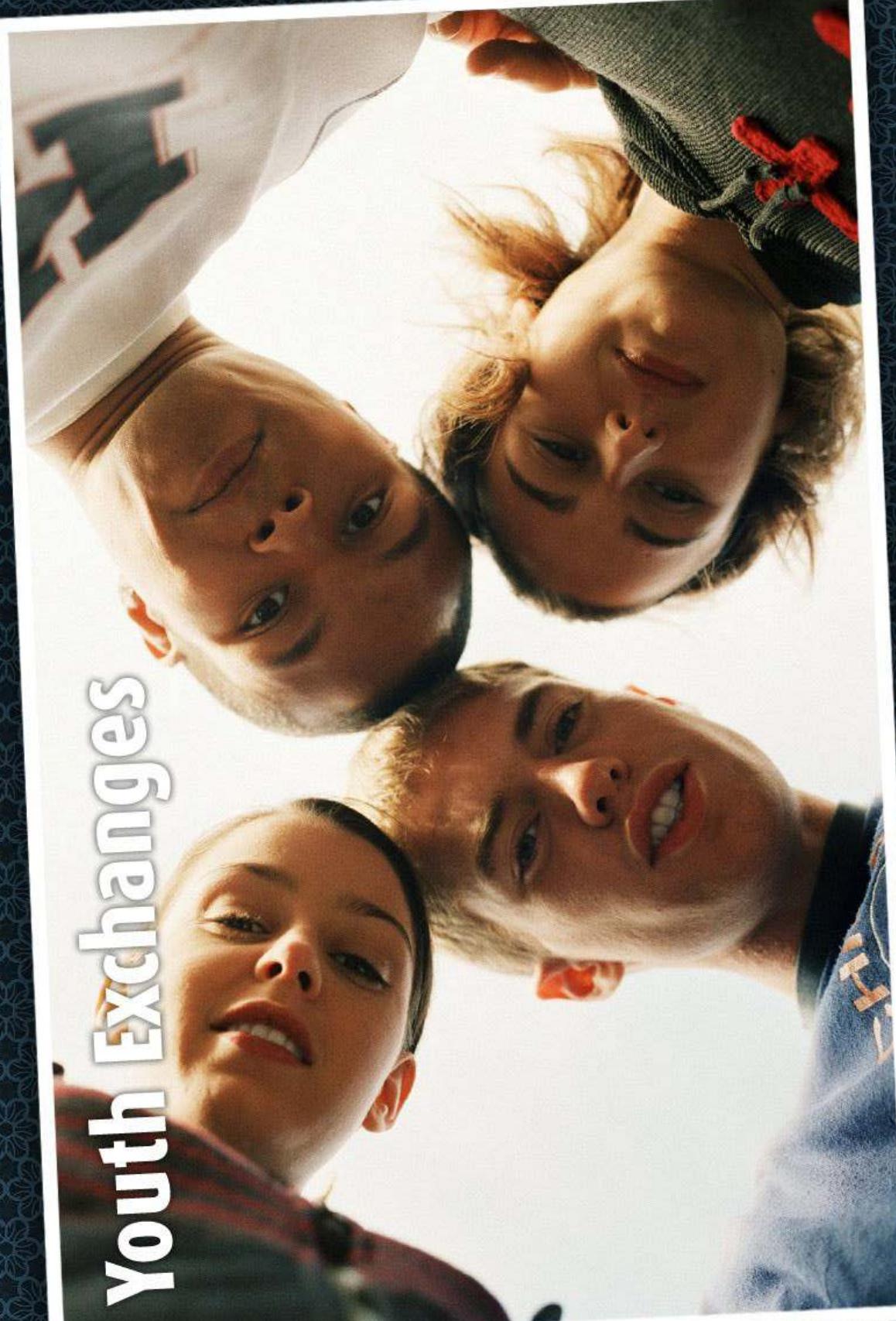
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Action 1.1



Youth Exchanges