

Gender and children's culture: school *clubinhos* and the *trocinhas* of Bom Retiro

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Abstract

This study deals with gender and children's cultures, crossing the initial series *clubinhos*, analyzed in a research done at a school in the Borough of Pinheiros in São Paulo in 2001 with the *trocinhas* of Bom Retiro studied by Florestan Fernandes in 1942. In the search for microstructural aspects and for the effect of these interactions in the construction of different meanings of gender, questions emerged such as: to what extent do these groups manage to establish spaces of autonomy before the adult world?; what were the central points upon which the interplay of gender relations developed at each time and place? Based on ethnography, 28 field records of breaktime activities of children from the 1st to the 4th series were made. For the 3rd and 4th series only, 40 classes of 50 min each were attended (artistic education and physical education), and 29 boys and 26 girls were interviewed. At times excluding, at times aggregating, the *clubinhos* (either mixed or single gender) were observed to be the way children used to manage their relationships, either to allow mixed groups without conflict, or to keep the distance between the sexes in a peaceful manner. This study contributes to raise the topic of children's cultures in their main role associated to gender, and allows characterizing school as a contradictory space that can develop actions to support children in the expansion of their experiences.

Keywords

Children's cultures – Gender relations – Fundamental education – Initial series.

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Gênero e culturas infantis: os clubinhos da escola e as trocinhas do Bom Retiro

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Resumo

Este estudo trata de gênero e culturas infantis, entrecruzando os clubinhos das séries iniciais, analisados em pesquisa feita em uma escola do bairro de Pinheiros, São Paulo, em 2001, e as trocinhas do Bom Retiro, estudadas por Florestan Fernandes em 1942. Na busca de aspectos microestruturais e do efeito dessas interações na construção de diferentes significados de gênero, emergiram questões como: em que medida tais agrupamentos conseguiam estabelecer espaços de autonomia perante o mundo adulto?; elaboravam relações de gênero próprias de uma cultura infantil?; quais eram os pontos centrais sobre os quais se desenrolava a trama das relações de gênero em cada tempo e lugar? A partir da etnografia, foram produzidos 28 registros de campo do recreio de 1ª a 4ª série. Apenas nas 3ªs e 4ªs séries assistiu-se a quarenta aulas de cinquenta minutos (de educação artística e educação física), e foram entrevistados 29 meninos e 26 meninas. Ora segregadores ora agregadores, observou-se que os clubinhos (mistos ou de mesmo sexo) eram o modo como as crianças geriam suas relações, fosse para permitir grupos mistos sem conflito, fosse para manter o distanciamento entre os sexos de modo pacífico. Este estudo contribui para trazer à tona um pouco das culturas infantis em seu protagonismo relacionado ao gênero e possibilita a caracterização da escola como espaço contraditório, que pode desenvolver ações de suporte às crianças para ampliação de suas experiências.

Palavras-chave

Culturas infantis – Relações de gênero – Ensino fundamental – Séries iniciais.

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In the fieldwork of which this work represents an aspect¹, I analyzed how the social relations were constituted, within the particular situation of a school, between groups of children belonging to the initial series, and their relations with the adult world, in a process of production of their daily life (HELLER, 1985), and not as a preparatory or experimental stage for a future. I went out to the field imbued with the concern with the whole, but also in search of the microstructural aspects, and of the effect of these interactions of the children upon the construction of gender relations. To what extent did these groups manage to set up spaces of autonomy before the adult world? Did they create gender relations proper to a children's culture? What were the central points around which the play of gender relations is developed at each time and place?

In this search my attention was drawn to a form of organization of gender relations between children at school involving the so-called *clubs*. Although few children refer to the *clubs* at home, Julio², a 4th grade pupil, revealed his participation in a mixed *club* in his borough (Interview, November 2001). This child's testimony led me to look at the school context in a different way, and to reflect upon its possible relations with the work of Florestan Fernandes (1979), who, in 1942, analyzed the *trocinhas* of the borough of Bom Retiro, São Paulo, in a work published for the first time in 1944. I do not propose to derive the school clubs directly from the street *trocinhas*, but only to establish a reflective dialogue between and about them. They differ from each other in time, since half a century separates them, and in space, since the *trocinhas* are street organizations and not school ones. About Bom Retiro, it must be mentioned that in the 1940s it was a mix of industry and commerce with a population largely of Italian descent, although it already had a considerable Jewish community

due to World War II. From the 1950s onwards, the neighborhood witnessed a movement of Italian families towards neighboring boroughs, such as Pinheiros.

The idea for this article emerged from thinking about the geography of cultural relations – since my research had been with working-class and lower-middle-class children from a school located in Pinheiros –, and the analysis of its data sought to constitute somehow a modest dialogue with the work of Florestan Fernandes in his pioneering study of the sociology of childhood. Therefore, I do not intend to describe the *clubinhos* of the Luisa Mahim State School as a continuation of the *trocinhas*, but only to understand them and establish some possible relationships. To Fernandes (1979), the action of the *trocinhas* (boys groups) and *trempas* (girls groups) was a conduit for the folklore to realize its conservative influence on the roles attributed to men and women. The perspective I intend to bring in takes a different point of departure, considering the child as a co-producer of culture, not only child culture, but immersed in the interplay of influences with adult culture.

The school space

Located in the Borough of Pinheiros in the city of São Paulo, the Luisa Mahim State School offered in 2001 basic education to 670 students, having 40 teachers, two pedagogical advisers, one student inspector (a man) and three student inspectors (women). There were two classes per series from the 1st to the 4th grades (I keep here the classification of the time of the fieldwork), each one with around 30 pupils. In each class, 60% of the pupils were blacks (blacks and/or brown) and 40% were non-blacks³. Parents worked as civil servants, teachers at various levels of teaching, autonomous professionals, domestic employees,

1 - This article is part of a larger research developed by the author during her doctorate.

2 - The names of children, adults and schools are fictitious.

3 - According to the self-classification made by children within the research entitled *Fracasso escolar: articulações entre gênero e cor/raça* [School failure: articulations between gender and color/race] (CARVALHO, 2001, 2004).

industry workers, truck drivers, employees in commerce or shop owners.

The school courtyard was large and diversified: a playground⁴; a makeshift football field; a small volleyball court; an open area that served as a football court; a covered yard with eating tables to one side and an area for playing hopscotch to the other; a kitchen where the meals prepared by the Association of Parents and Teachers were offered; and a small cafeteria. Children circulated among gardens interspersed with areas of dirt and cemented patches. They chatted or played in an area full of large trees, some of them fruit trees, flower beds and some wild vegetation, which on its far end was bordered by a river. Despite the overall air of neglect, on the whole there was something of a street atmosphere and plenty of freedom. It took many visits before I picked up pencil and paper, before I became familiar with that open environment, like infinite scenes from the same movie vying each other for my look, until I finally felt as part of it, even if in the category of an occasional visitor. When entering a children's space such as the school courtyard I was concerned with finding a way of inserting myself as an ethnographer, without being perceived as an adult-looking-over-children and, at the same time, keeping alert about the ethical issues of the research.

Of childhoods and methodologies

Despite understanding, in agreement with Mariano Narodowski (1998), that childhood in the modern West bears the mark of heteronomy, of dependence and of obedience to the adult in exchange for protection, I take the assumption that spaces are full of contradictions, and that children do not respond passively to other people's expectations about them.

Children's cultures are not born out of a social void or from an isolated world of childhood, but rather result from different

4- The playground was deactivated soon after the start of the year because it was too deteriorated.

processes experienced by the children during their school institutional learning, from the organization of their free time, from family insertion and from their access to mass communication media (PINTO, 1997; SARMENTO, 1997). To reflect about childhood does not mean to search for a singular definition, but makes it possible to understand what are the different realities in which children are inserted and how they are structured into organized systems within distinct socio-historical and geographical contexts. School breaktime, in its web of relationships, is one of the sociocultural spaces in which children's culture and school culture are intertwined.

I employ here the sociocultural approach of school establishments, as described by Leila de Alvarenga Mafra (2003), for whom researching culture in schools means

to examine in the schooling establishments the specific features or sociocultural manifestations, or the diversity and striking ethnical-cultural differences between teachers and pupils. [...] Methodologically, these studies emphasize the processes, experiences, relationships and a systematic set of manifestations that reveal how different cultural expressions interact with each other in school daily life, and demarcate the distinctive identity of specific social groups at the cultural and symbolic levels. (p. 125-126)

During this process, when establishing social relations, children are at the same time produced by them, in a complex weaving that we call children's culture. Within such plot, they construct their own interpretations and rewrite or reproduce information from the adult world, whilst they act upon it and transform it (CORSARO; EDER, 1990; SARMENTO, 1997). About childhood, Manuel Pinto (1997) says:

Children have some degree of awareness of their feelings, ideas, desires and expectations; they are capable of expressing them and

indeed they do. [...] There are social realities which can only be uncovered, apprehended and analyzed from the point of view of the children and of their specific universes. (p. 65)

Treating the child as subject and on a par with the adult means to question the hierarchy that eventually transforms him/her into a mere object of research. Along these lines, by pointing out the ethical care of the research on childhood, Pia Christensen and Alan Prout (2002) argue that children are social agents, and they propose the concept of *ethical symmetry*, in which they highlight the difference between an *ethics for* and an *ethics with*, in the sense that symmetry implies a two-way path defined also *by* them and not just *for* them. In other words, we can do research *with* children and not just *on* children, by inserting them in the research process and keeping an ear out for what they have to tell us.

Because it is process-based, ethnography accommodates such care. In addition to previous explanations given to the subjects involved with the theme of the research, the gradual approximation and successive explanations about the fieldwork during the frequent conversations with the children helped to corroborate this ethical view. In ethnography, the construction of the problem is based on a gradual process of going out to the field with some guiding questions and becoming familiar with the situation and the subjects. When dealing with literate children, it makes it possible to show them notes during procedures that help to widen the connections and stimulate children's self-reflection in the process of recounting facts and clarifying doubts.

Being just a researcher in such a vast space, I wandered about the courtyard, giving priority to actions, but also talking with children about their experiences there. Fernandes (1979) analyzes the role of conversation during fieldwork as follows:

Such collaboration with the researched, by its turn, created many times conditions

favorable to engaging in conversations more or less extended with the members of the "*trocinhas*". It is clear that, in the present case, these conversations constitute real and complete interviews. When it is possible to guide them, as I noticed, they make it possible to clarify many important points. (p. 234)

In my case, I followed groups of children and, sometimes, single children. When situations repeated themselves, I observed them to see if there was some routine and any particular meaning for the children (COULON, 1995). Twenty-eight records were produced. With the purpose of getting closer to the groups, I attended forty 50-min classes distributed across the four classes of the 3rd and 4th series, and I gave priority to the disciplines of artistic education and physical education because they involved collective activities. The observations in the classrooms clarified to me aspects that had been observed during breaktime and moved me closer to the children.

In all, 55 children were interviewed from the 3rd and 4th series, 26 of them girls and 29 boys. The pairs of interviewees were always of the same sex, because relationships of higher trust and friendship in school are based on such belonging, as I could observe in other studies about best friends in school with children from the 4th, 5th and 6th grades (HALLINAN; TUMA, 1978), from the 6th grade (MEDRICH, 1982 apud THORNE, 1997), and with children between the ages of nine and twelve (BERNARDES, 1989). I interviewed the inspectors, and by the end of breaktime or classes I could also have informal chats with them that helped sharpen my view during fieldwork observations.

Gender: a concept under construction

The concept of gender, despite being relatively new and having different modes of appropriation, expresses the idea that the meanings of being man and of being woman do not follow

from nature, but from cultural processes that are present in every space and which, by their turn, are permeated by relations of power, hierarchies and inequalities. In other words, "it is not the moment of birth and the naming of a body as male or female that makes it a masculine or feminine subject" (LOURO, 2008, p. 18), but rather the culture in which it is immersed.

The body, at the same moment that it establishes itself as concrete meaning of body, acquires a meaning of gender. Along these lines we can say that the gender differences are not simply result of representations about the differences of sex (NICHOLSON, 2000). On the other hand, if it is possible to say that there is no body without gender, without meaning, the opposite may not be the case, that is to say, that there is no gender without the body or, in its more complex sense, without the subject from which it is derived.

Even if genders have their concrete origin in the relations between men and women and in the historically constructed meanings, it is clear that, as symbolic dimension, they can acquire a life of their own and serve as a reference for social practices. Conversely, detached from their original matrix, in various and perhaps odd combinations, we see them being used in communication media, in religious spaces, in the aesthetic norms etc. They have the founding power of changing the manner of acting of men and women in contexts different from those in which they originate, either by perpetuating old meanings for men and women, or by establishing in certain spheres practices distinct from those carried out by these same men and women in other spaces of their lives.

Nevertheless, in both of those senses, when needing to be incorporated by concrete (not passive) subjects in order to be manifested, genders reflect the contradictions of their incorporation or negation and, in a dialectic process, rebuild themselves into new meanings. Thus, gender relations imply relations – between men and women, men and men, women and women – mediated by the genders, but these are groups

of meanings. It follows from this that we cannot use gender as synonymous with women and men. There are subjects and there are meanings. These are not, however, neutral meanings from the point of view of power, since they express social inequalities based on belonging to a particular composition of sex/gender. Under such perspective, we can say that gender relations imply power and hierarchy in all levels.

In other words, I shall take genders as symbolic constructs of femininity and masculinity, seen in relation to each other or separately; gender relations will be evoked when I refer to social relations between men and women mediated by the genders. When talking, for example, about approximations between boys and girls in a mixed-sex game, I may take as equivalent the expression *approximation between the sexes*. The contents of this approximation, by its turn, may have consequences for the gender relations, building identities (mutable, not essentialist, cultural identities, resulting from disputes and mediations), or for the representation of masculine and feminine genders socially available.

When working with the multiplicity of genders, Connell (1995, 1997) makes use of the concept of gender configuration as a group of social practices (of work, sexuality, body experiences, affectivity, politics etc.) coherently linked to a given meaning of gender. Even if they can be constructed originally from individuals, these meanings only acquire the status of configuration when they are incorporated/constituted into the collective practices of given groups (such as masculinity/femininity of the world of workers union, or of the academic world etc.) and configure themselves as gender projects present in society. Such configurations can even persist beyond the existence of the group that created them, as they are incorporated diffusely into society and belong to the list of genders socially available. However, the existence of distinct configurations that are produced in a creative and inventive way does not imply neutrality

or even harmony between them, nor does it happen autonomously, since they are inserted into given social and historical power relations, such as class and race/ethnicity. These references allow us to question both the view that genders and gender relations are presented always as dichotomic and antagonist, and the role of the school as a reproducer of these models.

Turning my attention to the gender relations developed at the Luiza Mahim State School, in a process of constructing/decoding the elements of gender configuration present in the groups, I opted for finding the gender arrangements that permeated the groups of children, without structuring in a fixed manner the configurations of gender present in the school as a whole. The decision of avoiding combination with the categories of class and race/ethnicity was due to the fact that the latter did not found the criteria of assembling and working of the children's groups studied, although there were individual manifestations of racism in child-child interactions, which I analyzed in a separate article.

Modes of sociability at school

Despite the fluid forms of children's interactions, it was possible to group them into two modes of sociability: one of them, which I designated as sociability of the conflict, and that I analyzed previously (CRUZ, 2004), is linked to situations of interactions beset by frequent conflicts (one third); on the other, which will be detailed here, children established easy relationships on a common ground (two thirds). In these amicable activities, children played, ate or chatted, divided into three collections of similar sizes: girls-only groups, boys-only groups, and mixed groups. The separation between boys and girls was predominant in the 1st and 2nd series, but decreased considerably in the 3rd and 4th series.

The boys that took part in amicable activities with girls tended to prefer chasing games, avoiding games that could be attributed,

in their eyes, to traditional femininity; the same did not apply to girls, who took part in games traditionally regarded as masculine. This analysis coincides with the results of studies of similar situations conducted by Barrie Thorne (1997) and Eleanor Maccoby (1990), that attributed them to the smaller social pressure bearing on the girls from the fear of reducing their femininity for taking part in mixed games or games regarded as boys'.

In Brazil, I could find only one study, by Ileana Wenetz (2005), about gender relations and breaktime in initial series (and in adolescence); a study was carried out in a public school of Porto Alegre and presents a map of the composition of the groups. Although its focus is on gender relations, games and eroticism, we can draw here some correlations. In that research, equally, the author observed the existence of boys-only groups, of girls-only groups and of mixed groups (the latter varying as to the predominance of boys or girls) and analyzed that their composition was due to

gender, age, interests and, still, to other motives: neighborhood, friendship or the kinds of social relations that articulate meanings in the school daily life. (p. 116)

According to her, children belonged to non-fixed groups, and in them they experienced "both affective and harmonious relations, and hostile and aggressive ones" (p. 116), depending on their members and on the situations. Although her axis of analysis was on games and sexuality in breaktime, Wenetz (2005) presents us with elements about the child sociability similar to the ones I categorized in my research, which I designated as sociability of amicable or conflicting kinds.

By concentrating on the possible relations between kinds of amicable sociability and existence of mixed groups of groups of the same sex, I observed that many of these groups were organized through what children called *clubinhos*. Lastly, about the organization of the

clubinhos, I constructed the hypothesis that they were one of the modes of sociability existing in the child and school cultures of those children anchored, in this case, in a regulation of gender relations in which internal issues and divergences were dealt with in a consensual manner.

To understand the *clubinhos*, the main focus of this article, it is necessary to look closer at the criteria of their assemblage, of their working and, then, at the manner in which their members dealt with their daily relations.

Criteria of belonging and forms of organization of the *clubinhos*

The *clubinhos* of the Luiza Mahim State School varied in number from six or eight up to 20 children in three subgroups: boys-only, girls-only, and mixed groups. Unlike the other groups that formed and dissolved at any time, the *clubinhos* had quite rigorous rules for entry and permanence in them. Belonging to a club meant taking part in common activities, such as playing, chatting, occupying the same physical space in a protected manner, and even dating.

I meet with Livia, a girl from the 1st grade, who talks about the *club* she belongs to. I ask what it is: "It could be a bunch of people that pick up some sticks, put up a little house, keep working on it; just the boys who are such a bore do not help". I ask her if the group is always mixed, and she says: "No; it can be just boys, just girls, or mixed". (Field diary, 8 May 2001)

Larissa's 4th series group invites me to go to their *clubinho*, which is being assembled behind the banana trees. There I see a few girls playing tag while others have lunch. (Field diary, 23 October 2001)

And how were the *clubinhos* put together? There were rules to enter and other rules to stay in them. The *clubinhos* started from the age of seven and, more often than not, began separated

by sex (sometimes allowing the temporary entry of members from the other sex); they tended to get mixed, in fact, from the 3rd and 4th series onwards, with the growing sexual interest working as an approximation factor. Older children organized them in a more fluid manner, with a tendency for the mixed, which led girls from those series with a stronger desire to keep the distance from the boys to participate in *clubinhos* of younger (1st and 2nd series) girls.

It must be said that in terms of their working, the *clubinhos* did not differ from each other just for the fact of being composed exclusively of boys, girls or being mixed. What made a single-sex *club* different from a mixed one was that, in the latter, there no longer existed the criteria of belonging to the same sex. In the mixed *club*, *the gender characteristics also lost importance, and freedom was given to the expression of different masculinities and femininities, with the touchstone being the submission to the collective discipline, to which friendships, affinities and personal features were added. Contrariwise, in the same sex clubs*, the reason alleged for proximity was the preference for specific games, which could be separated into *boys' things* and *girls' things*, or personal affinities, all of them following the traditional pattern of associating sex and gender belonging into boy-masculine and girl-feminine.

Let us see now what Florestan Fernandes (1979) has to say about the composition of the *trocinhas* (groups of boys) and of the *trempas* (groups of girls). According to him, it is in puberty (from 12 years old onwards) that the circles are closed by sex, and that separation become stronger because, among boys, there was already "a group awareness, alive and consistent, expressed by the collective 'we' and by the expression '*troça*' or '*trocinha*'" (p. 237). The *trocinhas*, so called by the boys at the time, belonged to this latter group, and sometimes gave entry to younger children, as long as they submitted to the older ones. The author argued, also, that, in addition to seeking to stand out in their masculine abilities, keeping partially

the games and adding football to them, boys established sexuality as a founding element:

Since the contacts with the members of the group were equivalent to an initiation to malice, the differentiation of the groups by sex becomes even more extreme, the presence of girls being absolutely forbidden. The intergroup relations are defined around individuals of the same sex and the relations that any member of the group keeps with people of different sex and roughly same age are seen as purely individual acts of conquest (dating, for example). (p. 238)

There were, therefore, criteria of belonging to specific sex, gender and sexual orientation. Despite the importance of sexuality, the games in the *trocinhas* were defined around masculine abilities (sometimes games, but usually football), and in the *trempas* by feminine abilities (sometimes games, but usually circle dances, house and food role playing), which gave rise to the labels of *muleconas* (tomboys) for transgressing girls and of *veadinhos* or *maricas* (faggots or fairies) for the boys. There was a differentiation favorable to the masculine power when the punishment referred to sexuality and dating, because girls would get a *bad reputation*, whereas boys would, in a positive way, be considered to be *more of a man*.

I could observe at school that, at given moments, brief *clubinhos* of a single sex it would be formed due to relations of closeness between colleagues and the theme treated, which revolved around the desire for privacy to talk about feelings, including love and sex. In the mixed *clubs*, apart from the rules for the putting together of the groups not been linked to sex belonging, there were criteria such as how much intensity, rhythm or aggressiveness one could bear in the game; the negotiations about this produced intense gender discussions about rules to be applied during the game of tag, football or hopscotch. The criteria for division

by sex or by personal features were blurred in the school *clubinhos* since, in a certain way, the affinities were related to varied meanings and meanings of rupture about what it meant to be a boy or a girl for each one of those children, which included their extra-school references. Such affinities were associated to the acceptance or rejection of what I call dominant gender normativity (binary, antagonistic, and complementary) and heteronormative sexual orientation (based on heterosexuality).

With respect to the approximation between the sexes, I believe that the criteria of group assemblage reflect historical changes, since the school *clubinhos* tended to be mixed exactly when the love-sexual learning was expanded during the 3rd and 4th series. I could observe, also, an influence of the children from the 5th series with whom they interacted briefly during breaktime; they experienced more flexible gender relations, which were mentioned in the interviews as desirable models by many children from the 3rd and 4th series, particularly by those that rebelled against the forms of separation that they observed as persisting among them. The mixed *clubs*, a kind of grouping not found by Fernandes (1979), were relatively flexible in their conceptions of gender, basing their selection of the participants predominantly on general features, such as affinities and friendships.

As an autonomous form of managing their gender relations, children created in the school *clubinhos* rules for living without the intervention of adults. Such organization and the very designation of *clubinhos* found in the Luisa Mahim State School could be related to some aspects of the old forms of internal organization of the *trocinhas*. It was common to exist within the *trocinhas* football teams with well-defined rules, and thus the denomination of *club* may have appeared as a synonym for the group.

When the leader is not the formal boss, everybody considers him as the current boss, appearing in the same way as the soul of

everything. There may be other posts (where the members of the *trocinha* can contribute: if the leader doesn't keep the money, there is the need for a treasurer; the *coach*, *referee*, *team captain* etc. are chosen similarly) which the group members cannot refuse to assume, otherwise they may be punished. Actually, from what we could observe, these posts are even desired: therefore, it would be rare for someone to refuse them. (FERNANDES, 1979, p. 239, my emphasis)

Therefore, we can say that, in general terms, the relations between the members of the children's groups are guided by democratic patterns of conduct, with respect to nationality, to social class and to the admission of new members (p. 243)

Unlike what happened in the *clubinhos* (and even in the *trempas*), the fact that they were associated to football created intense disputes and conflicts between the *trocinhas*, although aspects such as the definition of leadership and selection of members were observed.

Rafael, a boy from the 3rd series, comes to the stairs and shouts to a girl: "Are you out of the group? If not, come on: there's going to be a meeting now!" In this same group, seven boys return and stay close to the girls. Rafael argues with a girl about who comes in and who goes out: "There's already too many people in the *club*!" I come closer to a girl that I know and I ask why the other girl cannot come in, and she says: "She's too forward, too much of a show-off!" [...]; and she concludes proudly: "Our *club* has a president and a secretary". (Field diary, 8 May 2001)

I am observing a circle of girls from the 2nd series playing with toy houses and dolls. Other small girls come running, saying that they need girls for the *club* against *club*. Presently, they throw themselves over

a group that was playing on the ground. They all get up and leave running together. (Field diary, 13 September 2001)

The division by age or series did not seem to me as a clear criterion for the assemblage of the groups during breaktime, just like the practice of oral presence checks did not seem to be strictly associated to presence control (Field diary, 17 May 2001), both elements existing perhaps only due to the adoption of similar practices in the classroom.

In parallel with the single-sex *club* present in the Luiza Mahim State School, which followed the *Little Lulu's Club* and *Tubby's Club* immortalized by the cartoons, there was the mixed club, which the children invented to experience gender relations without conflicts and with some form of management within the web of subjectivities present at breaktime. Whilst the existence of same-sex *clubs* guaranteed the internal calm of those who refused to mix, despite the external pressure of the children that wanted to come in, the existence of mixed *clubs* revealed a way of boys and girls being together consensually.

Not only Tubby, not only Little Lulu: the *clubinhos* in action

The internal tranquility of the *clubinho* was challenged by the individual action of boys and girls who wanted to get in it and play with one colleague in particular, irrespective of his/her gender, in a movement to try and break down the established borders. Such actions were, however, met with strong reaction in the form of small explosions of indignation, sometimes from boys, when some girl asked to enter their clubs, sometimes the other way round. At times, there was reaction from those unhappy with the determination of the *club* to keep them away, and at that moment the only thing left was to go after the adults, since their wish clearly implied going against the decision of not just an individual, but of

a group deliberately organized and regulated as a *club*, in which the predominant form of solving problems was collective. In such cases, the adult had to negotiate with members or representatives of the *club* on behalf of the child that was requesting entry. These daily, isolated activities acquired a collective dimension of a strong discussion of the meanings of gender. The big question put forward by the excluded children was why they were being rejected.

At times, it could happen that the *clubinho* with members of a same sex would accept the pleas of a student inspector and give temporary entry to a child of the opposite sex, although such attempts were almost always unsuccessful. The interview with inspector Rosa gives clear indications of the regulations of such groups:

In the *clubinhos*, sometimes, the girls do not allow boys to play with them: "Today I am on a fine day, so today they can play. Today I'm not on a nice day, so they cannot". [Laughter] [...] Then the girls run after us: "Mam, they are messing with our game!", and the boys would say: "Today we would like to play with them!" [Rosa said:] "Come on, boys. The girls want to play alone in peace; we could respect that, don't you think?" [And the boys would answer:] "Come on, Mam! We want to play!" Then I would say: "Sit down here for a while, and I'll get together with the girls and ask them what is the game they're playing and why you cannot play along with them". [And the girls would say:] "But, Mam, we wanted to play just us today". They do not give a concrete argument. (Interview, November 2001)

Rosa mediated the interactions and listened to the children's claims, sometimes preserving the interests of the single-sex *clubinho*, by convincing the others to accept the prohibition, sometimes trying to convince the group to review the denial of entry to

someone of the opposite sex. We can surmise that the expression *in peace*, used by the inspector derived from her gender view about femininity and the motivations of the girls, in the sense that, without the boys there would be less conflict. But what we can deduce clearly from this situation is that the inspector made an approximation effort by mediating the relations, questioning the non-entry rule of one sex or the other.

In the case described here, the differences in sex that gave ground to the group separation were presented to the inspector in an implicit and poorly elaborated manner by the girls. Behind these individual attempts by children not belonging to *clubinhos*, but who wished circumstantially to get in them, there was the need of the boys to participate in girls *clubs*, in activities whose gender tone was bent towards femininity, such as toy houses and dolls, or of the girls to take part in boys *clubs*, in activities with masculine features, such as play fighting. The fact that a girl could enter a boys *club* (and vice versa) created for an instant a rupture of the border between sexes, and could cause the breakdown of gender borders, by uncoupling the abilities of the gendered characteristics. Sometimes, the entering of a child of the other sex would ease the rigidity of the tie – *for a given sex, a given gender* –, but the *clubs* that were structured with members of a same sex aimed precisely at keeping *for a given sex a given gender*, and, therefore, were virtually irresponsive to such pleas.

In my view, the mixed *clubs* were the ones that broke down borders, using the collective identity of belonging to the *club* as a primary reference, and leaving free the question of abilities. To some extent, they grouped together children that wanted to act in less dichotomic gender relations, without having to enter in conflict for that.

The separation between the sexes in school is an issue present in many studies about gender relations in childhood. In France, it is a theme of the proponents of co-education (mixed

education), who, disillusioned, ask themselves: what good is mixed school if it continues to reproduce distancing between the sexes? what can be done to stop children from reproducing the dichotomies? does the school structure favor this distancing between the sexes, even without knowing it? Claude Zaidman (1994), when bringing the speech of a school principal to whom “the mixed regime is like a vinaigrette sauce: if you stop mixing it, it gets separated!” (p. 354), analyzes the contradictions of the mixed regime at school.

[...] it is illuminating to start with the observation of the courtyard during breaktime, a place in which the bodies come into play during the sex-laden games, before studying the relations in the classroom, the relation with knowledge. During breaktime, gender is the dominant factor in the definition of the situation. In the classroom, it does not enter into the official definition of the situation, albeit it intervenes widely at the level of the social practices through the biases of the stereotypes and of the differentiated behaviors of children⁵.

These are questions for reflection and research, for I could observe reports about children who during breaktime belonged to *clubs* of the same sex, and in family relations or with neighbors played in mixed groups, arguing that it was different at school. The separation between the sexes was described in a comprehensive assessment made by Thorne (1997) about the literature in English, in which the separation by sex in children from the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades was observed in 85% of the studies, with a difference towards smaller values in Luria and Herzog (1985, apud THORNE, 1997), who observed different numbers by social sector, with an 80% separation index

5 - The author utilizes at times the concepts of *sex relations* and *gender relations* as synonymous, and at other times the concepts of *sex* and of *gender* are used according to my approach.

among middle-class children and 63% among upper middle-class children. In the studies by Maccoby (1988) on North American schools, this separation included preschool and extended into adolescence.

The *clubs* of the Luiza Mahim State School, by carrying out their own regulatory action, reinforced the separation whilst producing the mixing of the sexes. However, this creation of the children faced obstacles during breaktime. Presenting in a simplistic way the principles of the mixed and universal school, inspector Paulo argued categorically that he defended a *single school for everyone*. He claimed to have a decided attitude against the *clubinhos*:

Paulo: [...] the things I see them doing most, boys' things, is swapping cards and playing football. Then, there is the *clubinho*, and they sometimes mark their territories over there.

E.: What is this *clubinho* for?

Paulo: It's like four or five students [...], but they already stopped, there were too many wood sticks lying around, so I threw them out [...]

E.: It's because they use the sticks to divide the *clubinhos*?

Paulo: Yeah. I think sometimes they cause too much trouble.

E.: Of what kind?

Paulo: If there is a girl that wants to go in and they don't let her [...]

E.: And when that happened, what did you do?

Paulo: We had to intervene, to dissolve the *club*.

E.: And you did dissolve it, Paulo?

Paulo: Yeah, the school is for everyone! (Interview, November 2001)

If Paulo apparently acted for the democratization of the spaces, in fact his action precluded any possibility of child autonomy, since both single-sex and mixed-sex *clubinhos* experienced requests for individual entry and employed spatial demarcation. Thus,

the inspector not only disrupted actions that favored separation between the sexes, but also actions that sought to approximate the sexes, by questioning the gender relations practiced there.

The spatial organization, one of the components of the *clubinho*, was part of the children's culture of that school, and circumscribed the limit of action for each group. Children played in spaces delimited by what was available to them during breaktime, such as trees or refuse made of wood planks, old chairs or plastic tape used in the restoration of the building, using such spaces as symbols of limits understood by the other children, even if they were not legitimized by the school.

Spatial limits, which seemed to reflect the children's need to construct and sustain their identity, was also found in the *trocinhas* and *trempas* of Bom Retiro, where there was an imaginary line along the streets, indicating proximity to home, or simply power relations between the boys that demarcated their areas of influence.

The same neighborhood can house several '*trocinhas*', the youngsters getting together anywhere: in the middle of the streets, on the sidewalks, in the fields, in wastelands, in large backyards etc. Girls, as a rule, do not go further than the sidewalks or their backyards (in some neighborhoods they prefer to designate their groupings by other phrases: '*trempa*' or '*trempinhas*'). Boys are highly aware of the meaning of property, accepting all members of the '*trocinhas*' or limits of each other's areas or 'zones'. Of course, they do not specify what those limits are. But there is among them a kind of tacit convention that prevents invading the 'zone' of other groups. With the determination of its 'zone', the '*trocinha*' received a name (that of the street it is in; or if there was more than one '*trocinha*' there, that of two streets: the '*trocinha*' of the Graça St with Correia de Melo St, for example). (FERNANDES, 1979, p. 241)

We find here a clear sex division of the spaces with an influence on dichotomic gender relations: the space of the home, of proximity, is for girls, whereas that of the streets, of the world, is for the boys, which happens by force of the learning of strength and power. Fernandes (1979) observes that children's cultures, within the context studied by him, are responsible for the internalization of the social norms not through an action of exact imitation of its nearby reality, but through the social functions of the adults' culture experienced by the children. Among other examples, he mentions the influence of colleagues of the same sex on the control to perpetuate the norms.

About the influence of colleagues of the same sex in the *clubinhos*, I transcribe next a brief report made by Patrícia, a girl from the 4th series:

Patrícia: [...] I like a lot to play with the 1st series, with children smaller than me, so there is a *club* with the 1st series, then Larissa and I play there [...].

E.: And this *club* is girls only?

Patrícia: There was a boy. Because it was only one, I think he didn't like to be in the middle of so many girls. I think his friends made fun of him, so he wasn't going any more. (Interview, November 2001)

In the form of the *clubinhos*, children try to manage autonomously their relations in mixed groups – in the case of those who enjoyed the reciprocal experiences protected under certain conditions – or in single-sex groups, to guarantee a radical separation between the sexes. In the latter case, the strategy of the *clubinhos* afforded a space reserved for girls who saw in the boys an aggressive (or, at least, uncomfortable) attitude, and for the boys who denied entry to the girls, thereby avoiding their interference in the way they played and related to each other.

Understanding the *clubinhos* allows us not just to know a facet of children's cultures

at a given time, but also to reveal the collective strategies for regulating the gender relations in a school at the beginning of the 21st century, even if such organization was not predominant there. The *clubinhos* also allow observing the child in his/her protagonism, interacting with inspectors in a game of reciprocal influences between the culture of the adults and the culture of the children, in a particular production of a school culture with respect to the gender.

Final remarks

This study is part of a movement in the sociology of education to consider the child as a theme for study as important as other social categories. Despite situating children within the social totality and within the temporality that permeates the meanings of human action, this work reflects a concern with childhood as a social space which is never empty, since it is successively occupied by the newer generations. Such outlook about childhood is not restricted to a description of its practices, but seeks also to understand the interactions within a given children's culture, as well as its strategies, dilemmas, and the game of reciprocal influences it plays with the adult world. The difficulty to find national literature about breaktime activities signals to the urgent need of studies about children and about their experiences in gender relations, not just at school, but also in the intersections between them and the relations of neighborhood and other spaces of sociability.

The choice of studying the space of the breaktime, pedagogically considered as irrelevant, revealed the existence of a lively child universe of laughter and tears, of inventions and traditions, of disputes and submissions that allowed me to (re)

learn it as a space of intense experience of gender relations. I associated the *clubinhos* with the studies by Florestan Fernandes (1979) about children's street practices in the city of São Paulo during the 1940s and I have established a dialogue with them.

One of the aspects that called my attention in the *clubinhos* was the importance attributed to them by the children as a way of bringing together or keeping apart the sexes with their own regulation, without intervention of the inspectors, even if, in their own way, each of them try to interfere, in processes of denial or respectful support – in the latter case, sometimes adding an action of criticism. In the *clubinhos*, when they want to play in a mixed mode, the children would break the division between the sexes and ease the gender borders, allowing themselves to participate in masculine activities, neutral ones, and occasionally, feminine ones. If the objective was the separation of the sexes, the single-sex *clubinhos* would close its doors so that, within it, girls could exercise their femininity and boys their masculinity. The form of organization of the mixed or single-sex *clubinhos* was the alternative constructed by the children to avoid conflicts, which were a source of anguish and dissatisfaction for many of them, in a process of self-regulation to manage their own interests.

With this incursion, I believe to have brought up a little bit of a children's culture, in particular, and also a characterization of the school as a contradictory space, which can develop actions of support to the children and, in so doing, expand the spaces of experiences for a critique of social inequalities and of the prejudices about issues of gender and other kinds of differences.

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