

Public Abstract

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Title:THE SPACES IN BETWEEN AT ORBIT HIGH: AN ANALYSIS OF TEENAGE BEHAVIOR DURING BREAKS AT SCHOOL

Most public schools in the United States were designed and built in the second half of the last century. Their buildings typically consist of classrooms and narrow, locker-lined hallways. The former clearly belong to the teachers and best support lecture-style instruction. The latter are the locations for social interaction between students during their breaks. Many educators, administrators, and researchers worry about teenage behavior in high schools. Student peer culture is commonly understood as problematic. In response, break times typically are minimized, supervision routines are designed to be seamless, and educational policies regulate disciplinary institutional responses to acts of violence between students.

This research study investigates teenagers' break behavior in a contemporary school building that is unlike the institutional school buildings most current educators are used to and experience as "normal". The ethnographic case examines the relationships between high school student break behavior, local disciplinary practices, and a school building designed to blur the boundaries between lounge-like social spaces and informal educational spaces. Over the course of six months, the researcher spent 42 school days with Orbit High's teenagers in the spaces in between. Primary sources of data were field notes, log entries, behavioral maps, and open-ended interviews with 24 purposefully chosen participants.

The findings provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon of student behavior that occurs in the spaces between classrooms during the breaks at school. The design of the school building under investigation promoted social encounter between students and offered opportunities for a wide variety of learning activities. But adult stakeholders believed that their role was to enforce a school environment that eliminated opportunities for misbehavior and conflict. Therefore, much of the behavior-prompting potential of the architecture remained unexplored by its community. Instead students were not allowed to use the courtyards, the doors to the think tanks for the most part remained locked and the school library was barely used. In response to minor rule violations adults relied on surveillance camera footage to identify the responsible teenagers.

Students experienced their school place as overly controlling, surveilled and, because of the very brief times available to move from one classroom to the next in combination with the spaces not accessible to them, also as crowded. The only supportive aspect of students' school experience during break times was the informal social space they created with their friends in the hallways. The value of teenagers "hanging around" in the "spaces in between" classrooms during breaks at school was perceived as main source of social support by students and underestimated by teachers and school administrators.