

PARENTS' SPOTS IN SCHOOL – CHALLENGING PLACE – CONSCIOUS PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

The way schools work may be grasped with various methods and frames of reflection. In my paper I am focusing on the analysis of school space, in which the “parents’ spots” are discovered in the context of democratisation of school life and the lack of physically and mentally understood basis of fostering the parental culture in Polish school space. The mostly semiotic and critical analysis is grounded in Edward Hall’s conception of cultural meaning of space.

Most parts of the text refer to the questions such as: What kind of place exists for the parents at the school of their children? Is it a friendly place for them? If it is, why, if it is not friendly – why is it so? Are the places that are visited by parents in school under control? Are there any power relations in school possible to be seen on the basis of the analysis of the distribution and monitoring of a school space? What are they, if there are any? Etc.

In the conclusions I am appealing to consolidate efforts and to create a new shape of school reality, in which parents as school-community partners would have an opportunity to develop their own culture – a condition *sine qua non* of democratisation of school life. It would be achieved if parents did not have merely the spots in school but real partner place in its space.

Key-Words: Home, school, and community partnerships; Parents’ involvement; Place-conscious education.

Resumo

O modo como as escolas funcionam pode ser compreendido através de vários métodos e quadros de reflexão. O meu texto focaliza-se na análise do espaço escolar, no qual os “lugares para pais” [*parents’ spots*] são descobertos no contexto da democratização da vida escolar e da falta de uma base de compreensão do desenvolvimento físico e mental



de uma cultura parental no espaço escolar polaco. A análise maioritariamente semiótica e crítica baseia-se na concepção de Edward Hall do significado cultural do espaço.

A maioria das partes do texto remete para questões como: que tipo de lugar existe para os pais na escola dos seus filhos? É amigável? Se sim, Porquê? Se não, porque é que isso acontece? Os espaços visitados pelos pais na escola são controlados? É possível detectar relações de poder com base na análise da distribuição e supervisão do espaço escolar? Que relações são essas, se é que existem? Etc.

Nas conclusões faço um apelo à consolidação de esforços e à criação de uma nova forma de realidade escolar na qual os pais, enquanto parceiros da comunidade escolar, teriam oportunidade de desenvolver a sua própria cultura – uma condição *sine qua non* de democratização da vida da escola. Isto seria possível se os pais não se limitassem a ter lugar na escola, mas um verdadeiro lugar de parceria no seu espaço.

Palavras-chave: Parceria escola-família-comunidade; Envolvimento parental; Educação para a consciência do lugar.

Jerome Bruner (1990), who examined people's lives treating them as the narratives, wrote about the significant meaning of a PLACE that shapes and limits such the stories. As he noticed they could not be told without the place.

According to Bruner (1990, p.12), not only is space a 'piece of geography' but also a complex construct and its language dominates in narrators' thoughts. Places in his research 'allow something, let something, make something possible', places 'occur' creating a space for analysed heroes to act. It is easy to notice in this light the value of reflection about social and self-creative areas of space in which we act.

What kind of a place is a school for parents? What do they notice when they are acting as parents, in other words playing the role of parents within a construct of teachers and other *school people*. What does the space say to them and what does it say about them?

According to this kind of social analysis it is possible to define meanings of spaces which are parents' spaces or more precisely places for parents. What presumably arises will probably be some kind of semiotic stylisation which emphasizes the cultural meaning of distance within spaces, expressing the character of human relationships placed in a critical perspective. I place all the analyses on a *constructionist* basis which is visible in the



understanding of the place I have taken from Bruner. However, the analyses' conceptual frame is based on Edward Hall's theory of space.

From this basis I will present a version of a few searches in the field of anthropology of the language of space in the context of school and parents in school's reality.

Hall writes that man created a new cultural aspect and it is partly proxemics. A link between man and cultural aspect is one of those relationships where both man and his environment take part in forming each other. Socially constructing knowledge about reality through continuous confrontation, negotiation and common provisions its image concerns and includes places which are understood geographically as territories of human action. Our knowledge about the place of our activities is a social creation a dynamic system which creates itself as well as creating a general reality and an individual and social identity.

We can find out what kind of space school is when we analyse individual concepts concerned with space including in our research all the potential actors who create the knowledge about it. It is not possible in this cursory study as I have previously mentioned. I will therefore focus on parents and that specific space-construct which school is for them.

The concept of proxemics which I find interesting as a reference point in the analyses of 'parental' spaces within schools can be defined with a statement: SPACE SPEAKS. The physical distance we create between ourselves and other people, who we are in a relationship with has its meanings differentiated by culture (Eco, 1972). Concentrating on school culture and parent-school /teacher/ principal/ other workers relations we can try to define meanings of this space for parents using Hall's conception of semi-lasting space which may provoke or reduce susceptibility for forming bonds between parents and school or his idea about the space of informal systems disclosing the distance by the means of how a school interacts with parents. There are three types of space distinguished by Edward Hall (1978): lasting space (the way of organising individual and group acting which may be seen in buildings which are grouped and internally divided and that is in agreement with culturally determined models); semi-lasting space (including things which are able to be moved or changed and that movement change does not affect the space itself. It can be *pro-social* – friendly to close interactions and making bonds – or *antisocial* – which makes creating bonds impossible; informal space or space of informal relations – which is a set of socially approved kinds of physical distance.

Analysing the issue of parents at school I will point out problems, concentrating on two out of the three types of space by Hall. These are semi-lasting space and space of informal relations which appear in a school's reality.



Pro or Anti-parental Character of Semi-Lasting Space at School?

To understand the information formulated by school in discourse with parents it is worth to look at the results of research analyses and a number of examples from everyday reality. Those results and examples that were widely presented by researches into the relations between school and home: Rogala (1989), Winiarski (2000), Segiet (1999), and others.

It follows that school is not a friendly place for parents, they do not feel comfortable there and generally: they come to school only when they have to. That is why researches single out parents' passivity towards being pro-school (Winiarski, 2000) and search for its reasons. Researchers, from various points of view associate them with permanent mutual dissatisfaction of expectations, teachers ignoring parents and vice versa (Rogala 1989, Segiet 1999, Mendel 1998; 2000; 2001) and continuous pauperisation of society on one hand and evolving consumerism on the other also changes in family lifestyles which result from new needs created by new situations.

Many of the examples I have searched for in this context are provided by Nalaskowski's (2003) book which is an original analysis of 'school's spaces and places'. On the basis of the author's experiences as a parent and principal we can follow how school space 'speaks' and how the speaking indicates directly the power relations which characterises that reality. According to Nalaskowski (2003) 'school space orders' teachers and principals to treat parents as if they were pupils. The space infantilises, it is saturated with immaturity which means that it creates all those situations where parents cannot act like mentally mature people or find it really difficult. It manifests itself in simple rituals such as sitting parents during the meetings at tables which are too small for them. On this example we can try to explain parents' passivity. Analysing that passivity as a lack of activity we can quote the author's further conclusions derived from the research of Banka and others (1999) and claim that it is a result of a link between students' activity (in this context also parents') and their space in the classroom. It turns out that psychological comfort connected with being situated is really important and the differences between students in this field may be up to 300%.

Saturation with immaturity Nalaskowski writes about is also visible in a school's decor where everything must be didactic and arbitrarily arranged as colourful, pleasant, and happy.

One could ask: For who? Who are they that prompt and estimate receivers' tastes and why? According to this principle doors are decorated with paintings of little houses which suggest some kind of fiction of a land of happiness taken from tales and so-called 'board bulletins' are hung high up and changed twice a year not because students or parents treated like students want it. They are because they are created by teachers or by students



who were told to do so. Set in some kind of timeless stereotype of behaviour, without any rational basis; without a sensible reason for this type of procedure.

Analysis of semi-lasting space in a context which is interesting for us can be done when we take into consideration the aims with which parents come to school. Usually parents want to go to the place where their child is (classroom, common room, sports ground) or look for the school staff: teacher, principle, caretaker etc.(staff room, principle's room, changing room, reception) There is no more aims basically because there is no other audience. Parents go to school because of their children and their children's teachers.

There is no other parent in this system. There is no place a parent can go to meet another parent. There is no place which allows parents to be with or without other people, to be among people, which is a condition for creating a subculture according to Cieslikowski (1975).

A Parents' Subculture? An Amazing Thought in Our Reality but Why Not?

In the light of formal and legal relations, created according to current legislation, it is necessary to state that a school is a social system which contains a subsystem of *people at school* (teachers, school staff), a subsystem of pupils and also which is very important, a subsystem of parents.

If we stick to this formal side we must admit that a parents' subsystem cannot develop. It cannot take root both in a metaphorical and literal sense.

If we cross institutional borders in thinking about this situation, we should notice that spontaneously, according to some kind of hidden curriculum, in a very limited range, a parents' community is actually created. Places where it is created tell us a lot about it. It is the part of the corridor near the classroom door, forecourt just outside the main entrance, somewhere near the cloakroom or common room entrance. Parents spend their time among each other, literally: waiting outside.

The fact that parents have no public place at school which would function for them causes parents to find an alternative, often hidden solutions which are sometimes pathetic (I know a group of parents who used to meet near the street lamp outside the school gate). They are forced because parents need to be in touch with each other and they all wait for an opportunity to meet and use any possible occasion to do it: walking their children to school, official class meetings etc. They do not have time to meet *after school* at home for example. It would be different; a more personal formula would happen in a *private sphere* (Hall, 1978).



Parents however in their behaviour show clearly that they need contact in a social sphere, a publicly functioning community. Therefore if parents had their own place at school parental forms of self-organisation and social activity would increase.

A lack of parents' own territory, an exterritorialisation of them at school does not allow parental culture to develop. Culture which development conditions fulfilment of legislation intentions and real school's socialisation which – as I proved – directly make progress of civilisation, development of forms of social life, and its democratisation.

School in the light of these analyses, appears as a place of *its people* (employed there) who are more privileged than students and parents. Employees are allowed to be everywhere, the rest (students and parents) are only there where they are visible, where they cannot hide from authority (Foucault, 1993). An authority which is not interested in creating conditions for developing a parental cultural community subordinate parents, makes them act under control in places which are informally pointed to them although being observed all the time.

Unfortunately this causes the exclusion of parents from school society and teaches them to be silent. If we link it with Freire's *pedagogia*, we can state that because of a lack of parental space and *exterritorialisational practices* parents are taught not to speak for themselves and forced into a *culture of silence* (Freire, 1993).

We can therefore claim that that semi-open space of school has an antisocial character; it is anti parent pushing them away rather than drawing them in and does not encourage them to create bonds.

Are We Far from or Close to Each Other? The Space of Informal Relations between School and Parents.

One of the types of space described by Hall (1978) as a *space of informal relations* is a system of socially legitimised distances which are determined by a measure of perceptibility of warmth of the person's body we communicate with. There are four types of distance: intimate (with a closer phase of direct touch and further phase – 15-20cm), personal (closer phase – 45-75cm, further phase – 75-120cm), social (120-210cm and 210-360cm), public (360-750cm, over 750cm). This classification is a more detailed version of another of Hall's thesis (argued by an analysis of animal behaviour,) which suggests that every animal is surrounded by two spheres: personal and social (public) which code potential relations. They are connected with a sense of territoriality which is according to Hall a human feature and people create many methods of defence, defending everything they consider to be their



country, field or space. There is also a distinction between private property, which is an individual's territory and public property, which is the territory of a group (Hall, 1978).

Is school a territory for parents? Can they feel that school is – according to present legislation – also their own place?

School causes the distance for parents. This kind of generalisation became very popular among people writing about parents at school, it is present among scientists who create this issue, commentators who express their opinions about our educational reality (Kropiwnicki, 1998). It is also a statement made by parents who feel that they are being used and talk about the distance school creates and its institutional rigidity causing exploitation. School speaks to them with a code of regulations and instructions; at school everyone *must do* and rarely *can do* something voluntarily and for fun (Mendel, 2002). This is a general description of distance between school and parents.

Considering the issue of parents-school distance in detail and choosing proxemical depiction, we can take into our consideration what is the space in which there is parental contact with *school people*, what kinds of distance are in their relations. We need to concentrate on forms of school-parent contacts. I will use my own classification of these contacts which I created a few years ago on the basis of empirical analyses (Mendel, 1998). I called these forms *typical* because of their popularity and conformity with results from other researches in this field:

1. Being in touch with a teacher (correspondence, parent-teacher meetings, occasional meetings, etc.)

Parent-teacher meetings are events which take place in a social sphere of a particular environment. The distance is definitely public but physically, as a result of a lack of space in classrooms, the distance between parent and teacher is about 120 cm, which, according to Hall is a social distance and only partially public (I phase). There is no doubt about the fact that distance is public. The teacher during meetings keeps a kind of 'altar' arrangement of his space, speaks from his teacher's desk not mentioning described by Nalaskowski a habit of squeezing parents into chairs which are too small for them... they act as subordinated listeners, executors of orders they get from *the top*. Another form of meetings are individual consultations which are usually a result of calling parents to school in connection with their child's bad behaviour or lack of progress. Sometimes this call is a result of parental absence at a class meeting or take place when a meeting is over in connection with a need of less official discussion of a student's case (calling



parents to stay for 'a short consultation' is an embarrassing and sometimes humiliating sign that their child has problems). During individual consultations the teacher usually sits at his desk and the parent stands or sits nearby. The teacher is 'at home' and the parent is *the stranger: guest or intruder*. Proxemically, the distance is social in its closer phase (approx.120cm). In this case the distance describes relations which are not personal like in business or contacts with office workers. It seems that teachers and parents sometimes play with that distance making it closer or further in accordance with current aims or gaining specific benefits (for example, using specific methods of solving problems with the use of *credits of trust* or *gentleman's agreements*). It is easy to notice who is in charge and also that authority and power is on the teacher's side, who having power over children (i.e. children must go to school and study and nobody asks them whether they want it or not) subordinates their parents, the teacher has the power and they can distribute privileges. Discursive character of such reality provokes to think of it in a perspective of *practice of repartition* – the way Foucault (1993) described the practice of manipulating and managing people.

2. Taking part in and organising school trips, parties etc. Co-operating with the school parents' act as *useful teachers' helpers* or *paraprofessional help*, as Meighan (1991) characterised it. Analysing the space, where roles are being played, to talk about one type of situation or event is difficult. The nature of this space is open and dynamic; distance is sometimes personal and sometimes becomes public which is connected with changeable and various activities. This fluidity seems to be valuable from the perspective of aims concentrated on partnership. It allows 'a getting to know one another' and creativity in shaping co-relations. Arbitration and all kinds of power give up their place in order to come to agreement. What is necessary is effort and an authentic co-operation of all interested parties, which helps to create partnership and very often becomes a partnership spontaneously.

Aims which are realised by parents and teachers together bring them closer no matter what their position is. It seems that it is the teacher who is *commander-in-charge* and even if parents initiate the interaction subordination appears automatically because of the teacher's privileged position and as a result of this everything concentrates on making him happy.

3. Working for the class and school (driving children to the swimming pool, paying for shopping, redecorating classrooms etc.) In this form parents also appear as *useful teachers' helpers*, they are useful for the school solving some of its problems. Regarding the problem of school funding it is clearly visible that parents' gifts are a



useful solution (these are parents who build gyms, revitalise playgrounds and equip computer classes with computers). According to proxemical analyses parents working for a school very often are not in contact with teachers, there is no legislative distance. Parents 'do what they've been told', for example take children to the swimming pool, and very often don't even meet their teachers. Even in this form of contacts with school they are subordinated (*If we want our children to use swimming pool there must be someone who will take them there. And teachers? Unfortunately there is not enough money to pay them for extra hours*”).

What follows is that the most common distance between parents and 'school people' is social distance, described by Hall as space of informal relations and public distance which is more official. Creating those distances takes place in relations of power where teachers and other school workers are privileged. The fact of keeping parents at a distance which is popular in common opinions is in the light of such opinions becoming less ambiguous. Schools prefer being rigid and full of official reserve towards parents. While adhering to typical forms of contact with parents a school does not encourage parental involvement and prefers complaining about their passivity towards being pro-school (Mendel, 2001).

In previous analyses the exterritorialisation of parents at school appears to be an important area of research. Without their own territory, kept at a distance, dominated in a reality whose frameworks are created by teachers they do not have a chance to develop their cultural community which they finally create by not taking part in school's official life.

They cannot encourage the socialisation of school, cannot take part in creating its shape. Using legislators' rhetoric we can call them co-hosts but unfortunately with no space. Parents at school are not at home, school is not theirs despite the fact that they work and provide for it.

Intentions which are the basis of present legislation which could make parents rightful members of a school society is not being realised.

According to this it seems that an amendment of the present legislation and constructive and methodical aspiration for changing social mentality will work for changing the practice of everyday life.

Socialising school cannot be done only by statements. Socialisation is not a holiday but desired shape of reality, made with an effort of all participants. Therefore, concrete methods of changing reality by changing people attitude are necessary.

Among those conclusions it is worth to prefer as a base of concrete tasks those conclusions which change the meaning of school space and can shape it as a place of



interactive development of students', teachers' and parents' cultures. It could really be a space created by everyone, a construct free from an authority of any privileged group.

School should be a place perceived from an inter-cultural perspective, where there is no boundary between those who control that space and impose the shape of this social construct and those who are being dominated and have no other choice but to accept that construct in silence.

Parental culture is hidden and still *wearing nappies*. It could develop in interactive exchange with other cultures (students, *school's people*, local institutions and groups) and take on that challenge which is socialising school through pro-active parties of these societies with in its life.

Being conducive to development and aspirations for legitimization of parental culture is in my opinion the most current and the most important issue in actions taken up by pedagogues in the field of realisation widely understood social politics in Poland.

Acting is described by me way seems to implement legislated and promoted by the reform ideal of socializing school through activating parents-members of school's society. Socialised school which doesn't exclude but welcomes parents at its territory it is OUR school. If in accordance with the proposed approach, school will become a place of social and individual self-creation, construct which joints people in space these features will characterise it.

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