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Graded assessment of pupils' conduct as a research object. Discovering a hidden school upbringing curriculum

ABSTRACT

In the text, I raise the issue of a hidden curriculum. I refer myself to the course and results of my own research concerning marking pupils' conduct at lower secondary schools and I look for answer to the question: What is the content of the hidden curriculum of the schools that I conducted my research at? In order to answer this question, I start by quoting the research results, I refer myself to the course of the research and finally I make an attempt at interpreting the research material gathered within the fame of this article.

Keywords: hidden school upbringing curriculum, graded assessment of conduct

In the text, I raise the issue of a hidden school upbringing curriculum. I refer to the course and findings of my own research concerning graded assessment of pupils' conduct at lower secondary schools¹.

¹ My PhD dissertation entitled *Ocena z zachowania w doświadczeniach gimnazjalistów* [*Conduct Mark: Junior High School Pupils' Experiences*] was written under the academic supervision of Prof. Maria Dudzikowa, PhD, in the School Pedagogy Unit at WSE UAM in Poznan. The project was awarded a supervisor research grant (N107 033 32/4282) and was financed from that source. Research results are presented in my book entitled *Ocena zachowania*

GRADED ASSESSMENT OF CONDUCT AND A HIDDEN SCHOOL UPBRINGING CURRICULUM

When designing the research, I assumed that it was possible to analyse school reality from the perspective of school assessment. Paraphrasing a popular saying, one could say that “a school can be judged by the way it assesses pupils”. Where does the assumption come from? First of all, school marking is the fulfilment of external requirements imposed on schools (e.g. by the Ministry of National Education) through methods characteristic of each school (school culture). Secondly, the process of assessment is a unique type of interaction between a teacher, a class and a pupil that is assessed where various factors come into play, such as, e.g., class atmosphere, group norms, the style of educational leadership preferred by the teacher. Thus, by analysing this process there is a lot one can learn about the teacher and their class as a group. Lastly, choosing the perspective of school assessment to analyse schools is a common practice in the public discourse on schools. Actually, it is possible to get an impression that schools exist only to assess and to be assessed. In the times of “test mania” and “ranking mania”, teaching and learning must be measurable, and the measure are points and school marks. For these reasons, I assumed that asking pupils about their experiences regarding school assessment was a promising research approach.

A special place in the parametric reality of schools belongs to conduct assessment. It is a real phenomenon; on school reports, next to pupils’ subject marks, there is a mark on how a pupil behaves taking into account the following areas: 1) performing pupil’s duties; 2) acting in keeping with the interests of the school community; 3) caring about the honour and traditions of the school; 4) caring about the beauty of the mother tongue; 5) caring about one’s health and safety and that of others; 6) admirable, cultured conduct at school and beyond; 7) showing respect towards other people². The conduct mark is a delicate matter. One can say that while school marks show to what extent a pupil has mastered a given subject, the conduct mark measures their good

w doświadczeniach gimnazjalistów [Conduct Mark: Junior High School Pupils’ Experiences] (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań 2009).

² These areas are defined by the *Regulation of the Minister of Education of 30 April 2007 on the conditions and ways of marking, classifying and promoting pupils and students, and running tests and exams at public schools.*

manners and their level of commitment to their own development, the development of a group and the entire school community. At least such are the assumptions regarding this assessment. The regulations on conduct assessment which are written down and applied point to an education ideal of a school and to ways of achieving it. The function of this mark at school, its position, the fact of whether it is to encourage personal development or serve as a threat – these are some sensitive diagnostic points of each school reality. For this reason, conduct assessment appealed to me as an interesting issue to explore. On the other hand, comparison of assumptions that can be found, e.g., in documents regulating conduct assessment at schools with opinions of lower secondary school pupils (the assessed) can contribute to discovering a hidden school upbringing curriculum. Such will be the perspective that I will apply to the findings of my research in this text.

According to A. Janowski, who introduced the concept of a hidden upbringing curriculum in Poland, its essence is “what the school does (instils, teaches, gives) to young people that attend it although this >something< has not been planned at all” (Janowski 1989, p. 63). The hidden curriculum is “a particular plan of action covering all the elements present in an educational institution” (Pryszmont-Ciesielska 2010, p. 15). It is everyday school life, unwritten rules of pupils’ and teachers’ behaviour that is influenced by the context (institutional and environmental) of the operations of a given school (Nowotniak 2007, p. 191). It is also possible to talk about a hidden curriculum in educational documents and course books, i.e., about what may be read “between the lines” of text that is part of the overt teaching and educational programme (Janowski 1989, p. 66). Apart from overt content, e.g. of educational nature in case of school course books, these texts also carry hidden content, for example a preferred picture of social reality (which contributes to the creation and maintenance of gender stereotypes (see: Pankowska 2009, Gromkowska-Melosik 2011), among others). The content of a hidden curriculum is not to be understood as something that someone deliberately hides away from someone else (although this can also happen). Rather, the hidden curriculum is beyond the awareness of those involved in education. Teachers, head teachers, pupils as well as parents may be completely unaware of some elements of their school reality. More or less consciously, the participants of school life learn the rules that regulate this life. The marking system may serve as an example. It is not only about whether a pupil has mastered the material presented by their teacher to the required level. As R. Meighan claims, good

pupils are those who are aware of requirements. They know which fragments of the material are the most important, which form of knowledge presentation is desired by a given teacher etc (Meighan 1993, p. 182). These are skills that go beyond the ability of acquisition and knowledge reconstruction; these are related to efficient recognition and functioning in the hidden curriculum. Marking at many schools is thus an answer to the question of the extent to which a pupil has adjusted to school rules and as such it is an element of a hidden curriculum (Janowski 1989, p. 75).

What is the content of the hidden curriculum of those schools where I conducted my research? In order to answer this question, I will start by quoting the research findings, I will refer to the course of the research and finally I will make an attempt at interpreting the research material gathered within the frame of this article.

HOW IS PUPILS' CONDUCT MARKED AND WHAT IS THE CONDUCT MARK USED FOR? RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research was conducted among 122 lower secondary school pupils at 6 schools (two schools from the lowest, the middle and highest ranking schools on provincial level). I enquired about experiences related to conduct marking at school. The surveys were of a diagnostic and relational character.

First of all, I asked lower secondary school pupils how (by whom?, in what circumstances?) their conduct is marked. According to school regulations, the whole class, their teacher and the assessed pupil should participate in the marking. Pupils are entitled to receive information and a comment on the grade they were awarded³. And how are lower secondary school pupils marked? It turned out that the conduct mark is influenced by the class tutor almost as much as it is by other teachers, and not so much by classmates (it is the case of 4 out of 10 respondent). A vast majority of pupils (over 9 out of 10) are informed about their conduct mark by their class teacher in the classroom, during a lesson. In most cases, basic conditions for marking are fulfilled, al-

³ School regulations on marking conduct vary among schools. Yet, ministerial orders that regulate this area of school operation always function as a point of reference. Thus, there are constant common points.

though each class should participate in the marking to a larger extent. An average respondent hardly ever assesses their own behaviour at school and in this respect, school practice is at variance with theory.

Secondly, I was interested in learning what the functions of conduct mark were, according to lower secondary school pupils. The least frequent answer (3 out of 10) was that the mark is linked to an informal group structure, i.e. one's friends depend on the mark (social function). It turns out that to a large extent pupils are convinced that the conduct mark has a decisive function, i.e. the higher the mark, the better secondary school they will be able to be admitted to (as many as 9 out of 10 respondents think so). This goes against the ministerial order where it is stated that *conduct mark does not influence: 1) subject marks; 2) admission to the next year or school graduation*⁴ and the mark is not summed up with the points whose total influences which secondary school a pupil can be admitted to⁵. Many schools either inform that they only admit pupils with an A or A+ conduct mark, or grant extra points (for the highest marks) anyway. From my interviews with pupils that I conducted during the research, I have learnt that class teachers use conduct marks as a bugbear (*Do as you like, just remember that you won't be admitted to a good secondary school with a B for conduct*). It is also worth emphasising that only every second respondent believes that the conduct mark has an educational function, i.e. encourages self-inspection and self-development. Thus, every second pupil fails to analyse whether they deserve the mark they are given (irrespective of

⁴ Order of the Minister of Education of 30 April 2007 on the conditions and ways of marking, classifying and promoting pupils and students, and running tests and exams at public schools. In 2006 (i.e. at the time when I conducted the research), a regulation was introduced on a possibility of not promoting a pupil to the next year if they had been given an annual F conduct mark for two consecutive years. Yet, this regulation did not refer to the link between the conduct mark and the possibility of choosing a secondary school.

⁵ According to the Order of the Minister of Education of 20 February 2004 on the conditions and procedures of admitting pupils to public preschools and schools, and moving from one type of school to another, candidates are admitted to the first year of secondary schools based on the criteria included in the school statute, i.e.: marks in Polish and three selected educational subjects, other achievements of the pupil listed in the lower secondary school leaving certificate (especially: graduating from a lower secondary school with honours, participation in contests at least at a provincial level organised by the chief education officer, sport or artistic achievements at least at the national level), number of points achieved at the exam in the final year at lower secondary school.

whether it is a high or a low mark) or think about what they should work on and what their good sides are.

The respondents also answered questions on the content of the conduct mark (desirable and undesirable behaviour at school). It comes as no surprise that almost all lower secondary school pupils claim that negative conduct marks are given to those who do not obey school regulations on conduct marking. Yet, it is interesting to have a closer look at the behaviour of those "awarded" high marks. Most respondents (over 6 out of 10) think that schools promote conformism and an A+ pupils are those who adjusts themselves best and are not disruptive. Thus, obedience is of more value than involvement. Based on my research, it seems that girls are treated differently from boys when it comes to conduct marking. For a girl to deserve an A+ grade, she generally has to refrain from disturbing the teacher, whereas a boy has to stand out because of his active attitude. Girls are punished for passivity (they are lazy, they do not do what they ought to); boys are punished for activity (they fight, use foul language or prohibited substances). Thus, it is possible to draw a conclusion that girls' conduct is analysed within the frame of passivity and boys' behaviour within the frame of activity. The respondents have also clearly indicated that it would not be appropriate for a girl to have an F in conduct, whereas some boys would be ashamed to receive an A+. Girls claim that generally speaking they are treated 'better' than boys by teachers when it comes to assessment.

I also asked pupils about their emotions related to the fact that their conduct is assessed with a grade. They defined their emotions as rather positive than negative. However, a good reaction to the conduct mark is rarely reflected in the willingness to take action. Also, few pupils find this good feeling encouraging to increase their self-confidence. Few subjects (1% of those who pointed to positive emotions) attribute their good well-being at the moment of being given the mark with the feeling of trust towards those who make the assessment.

Due to the fact that one of the variables in my research was a type of school with respect to its position in rankings, it is worth analysing the findings taking this variable into account. Pupils from top schools are not assessed in bathrooms and changing rooms; their privacy is respected. They are encouraged to make self-assessments more often than others. They claim that they are critical towards their school, but on the other hand they know that the A+ mark in conduct is awarded to conformists. They are treated as partners by

class teachers and parents, they participate in a dialogue and negotiations on problem solving. They believe that their conduct marks influence the final outcome of secondary school they will be admitted to. The fact that their behaviour is marked is linked with negative emotions more frequently than in the case of pupils from other types of schools. On the other hand, pupils from schools that are the lowest in rankings are observed in bathrooms or changing rooms more often than pupils from other schools. They are not encouraged to make self-assessments. They claim that they are conformist. They believe that subject marks are related to the conduct mark; for example, someone who is not an A student, will not receive an A in conduct.

Different schools mark their pupils in different ways, although they all adhere to the same ministerial guidelines in this respect. I was also received in different ways as a school researcher at the schools participating in the research. I will now go on to present the course of research, as it provides important additional information on the topic of the hidden curriculum.

A RESEARCHER AT SCHOOL

I conducted the research in the 2006–2007 school year at six lower secondary schools in the region of Great Poland. I had planned to involve groups of the same number of participants from schools that had top and low positions in provincial rankings, boys and girls, pupils with low and high conduct marks. It turned out to be an tall order. In some schools I was refused the possibility of conducting my research. These were schools from the top and bottom positions in the ranking. The reasons for their refusal were similar: lack of time, dislike for “strangers hanging around at school” etc. I came across the largest difficulties at schools that held the top positions in the ranking. If the head teacher gave their consent to conduct the research, parents refused to give theirs. Finally, I managed to conduct my research in one class at a lower secondary school that came first in the ranking, in two classes at a school that held a top 10 position, two classes at schools that were midway in the ranking, one class from the last 10 and three classes at a school that held a penultimate position in the ranking. I suppose I was directed to “the most polite class” in each of the schools. One of the head teachers even told me that openly (*I will not let you meet class X; the results would be really terrible!*). Pupils (6–12 from

each class) were selected by class teachers, who followed my guidelines (i.e. selection according to gender and conduct mark). This is where I faced problems again. As teachers wanted to “do well” in the study that was indirectly related to their style of work (I was to learn how they assess pupils’ behaviour), they wanted girls rather than boys and A students rather than F students to participate. It may be due to the fact that teachers perceive girls as “more polite” and causing fewer educational problems (Pankowska 2005, p. 102), similarly to A students, of course. Finally, I managed to get 122 pupils involved, so that the group met the criteria I had defined.

What were the pupils that I researched like? *Bored Geniuses, Winners of Some Cups, Recruits, Traditionalists, MP3-people ...* When I conducted the research, these were the working names I gave pupils of some classes and schools. This is because at each of them there were different customs and a distinct atmosphere, pupils behaved differently towards one another, towards their teachers and me, the researcher. Each school was different in terms of behaviour on the part of the head teacher, teachers, their attire and manners, their way of spending time with pupils during breaks, as well as in terms of decorations in corridors and classrooms, the fact of whether the psychologist or school pedagogue’s office was open or closed. This all contributed to the fact that the schools I visited many times during my research were so different. At top-ranking schools pupils approached the research in a way that can be summarised with the words: “It is no problem for us, we can cope with more difficult tasks”. They treated the study as a competition for the fastest and most interesting answer. They were in a hurry so that they could prepare themselves for the following classes – just like they would do during break, which they told me about. Some pupils from those schools were not interested in the research. Filling out questionnaires was a duty for them, a banal task that they had to “complete” (bored geniuses). Some classes I would call first-class co-workers due to their relation with the teacher and me as a researcher. When during the study someone said something unrelated e.g. to their classmate, the group would discipline them (e.g. *Now get down to the questionnaire. We’ll talk later*). One of the classes at the lowest-ranking school can be called MP3-people. When I first came to meet the class, I saw that during breaks most students would stand by the classroom doors with headphones in their ears. The class was not difficult to cooperate with, but each pupil would behave as if they lived in their own world (headphones in their ears being an external indication of that state). The group was not homogenous and definitely did not form a community.

The concept of a „community” best reflects the atmosphere of a school that proved to be exceptional in many different ways. It is a big school close to Poznan; its position in the ranking is quite low. That school goes against the common conviction that a good school is among the top ones in rankings. I was warmly received at that school, the head teacher was involved in the research I conducted. A meeting with the school psychologist was organised; the head teacher gave me access to school documentation. During those meetings, I was introduced to pupils' achievements and problems, as well as to the characteristics of a big school out of town. The main problem pointed out by the head teacher was transport to and from school, which often made it impossible for pupils to take part in extracurricular classes. I was shown charts presenting pupils' progress in learning – higher and higher positions in rankings based on school leaving examination results. However, that progress did not satisfy the teaching staff. It was the lack of opportunity to take part in extracurricular classes that teachers blamed to be responsible for the results that were below their pupils' abilities. Pupils are involved in various projects, but – interestingly – not in those that are the most popular. For example, the school did not participate in the “Szkoła z Klasą” (Classy School) contest. It was the only school I researched where no video surveillance was used. The head teacher reluctantly owed to it, stressing that she knew that it should be introduced. When we talked about it, it turned out that the cameras had not been installed for non-financial reasons. ‘I do not have to keep my pupils under surveillance,’ the head teacher said. It was precisely that school which did very well in the research. It is characterised with a way of conduct marking that is beneficial to pupils' development. Also, it was the only school I can refer to as being truly open to research.

DISCOVERING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Publications on the hidden curriculum often point out to its dimension that is connected to treating pupils as clay which can be shaped in any way and to thought conformism, passivity and imitation. Schools do not create favourable conditions for the development of emancipation competences, described for example by Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, which denote “perceiving and understanding limitations and deprivations, expressing a conscious disapproval towards them, choosing ways to overcome them and achieve new rights and

freedom fields, as well as using them responsibly in order to improve oneself and the world around” (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2006, p. 130). According to Czerepaniak-Walczak, educational situations that favour pupil’s emancipation have to fulfil the condition of “allowing risky behaviour, free of dominance, tradition and information coming from the system” (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2006, p. 171), among others. Yet, as my research clearly indicates, schools want their pupils to be conformist (although most schools declare that they would like to have graduates who are capable of independent thinking). The conduct mark is principally used for this purpose. Schools that base their reputation on high achievements of their pupils are the first to exaggerate the meaning of school marks, the conduct mark included.

It is conformism that elite schools promote. They cherish the conviction that marks (conduct mark included) have an enormous influence on the future of their pupils. This in turn influences the emotional state of those assessed; they are stressed by the fact that they are assessed and they consider a worse mark as a huge life failure. On the other hand, elite school pupils are treated better by the teachers who assess them. Their right to privacy and dignity is respected, they are encouraged to make self-assessments more often than in other schools involved in the research (generally speaking, lower secondary school pupils are encouraged to make self-assessments, yet marks for conduct do not motivate them to develop).

Among the elements of the hidden curriculum, the top ones include those related to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by schools. The hidden gender socialisation programme is widely discussed in publications on the subject. The results of my research confirm these tendencies. An exemplary girl is passive, meek and polite. An exemplary boy is an activist involved in school and class issues. Most often than boy pupils, girl pupils feel that it is their duty to be awarded A+ and A grades.

Although it is difficult to call the research findings that I have presented positive, I think they are more positive than in reality due to the sample selection. Despite my efforts for the sample to include pupils with various learning results and conduct marks, I am aware that at some schools I was allowed to meet “exemplary” classes. Schools that could have made an interesting contribution to the research refused to participate (or even failed to let me in through the gate). The words “conduct assessment” used in my research met with suspicion and dislike among head and class teachers. If something is supposed to remain hidden, why let uncover it?

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