

THE CHILD FRIENDLY SCHOOL: AN IDEA VERSUS REALITY

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to question the concept of a 'child friendly' school, which sounds democratic, but is an unclear term. The problem is that with 45-minute lessons and 30 pupils in the classroom (as is often the case in Estonian schools), it is not possible to focus on each child. In 2005, a new basic school was opened in the countryside in the middle of Estonia – for only 24 students (some of them were children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties). The method of research was educational ethnography. Result: the strict rules sometimes seem bad, but life is safer with them. It was interesting to recognize the importance of routines from ordinary ('old fashion') schools. Children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties need even more discipline than others, because this can be one part of the therapy. Education for sustainable development must not always be 'child friendly'.

Key words: general education, learning and behavioural difficulties, rules.

Introduction: the Historical Background

The concept 'child friendly' sounds nice but unclear. One can define it as general happiness at school (or 'easy study') - such as a dialogue between the teacher and the student, with a lot of creativity and positive emotions, and without hard study-work (at home). But how is it possible to focus on each child? The aim of this research was to investigate an educational experiment in context of 'child friendly' school.

During the Soviet times Estonia developed a well-functioning network of the so-called elite schools (mostly foreign language based), which were very popular among parents, and where students were accepted only after passing a test. The prize, however, was tempting, since those who finished elite schools were accepted to universities without difficulties. On a scale academic versus child friendly, elite schools could definitely be found among the most academic ones. Such strict style was appealing to parents: let the child put more effort into education, in order to have a better future. Shortly: school and study has been important for Estonians – partly as a tool for better life. During the Soviet period the school system aimed at high academic results, studying facts played an important role, the evaluation system was rigid and conservative, methods of force were in use and pupils were freed from responsibility (Taperson, Haljaste, 1998; Kera, 1998). New law of education in Estonia (1986) emphasised creative thinking; in a Conference on Education in Tallinn (1988) the concept 'educating a free personality' was introduced (Kera, 1998). Several educational innovations were experimented (Leino, Männiste, 1996) with rather sparse knowledge about the background of these methods (Leino, Lahelma, 2002). By the end of 1980ies the concept 'child-friendly' entered in to educational discussions.

During the last 20 years the situation in the educational system has been slightly confusing (Leino, 2002): some parents like (old fashion) schools with just hard work; but some parents appreciate alternatives. This kind of polar thinking is obvious among educational researchers as well as officers. There is no consensus in Estonia about the question: how happy must the pupil be at school. According to an international study (including 38 countries) in 1994 it was

found that Estonian teachers value conservatism, harmony, power, and hierarchy (Realo, 2002, p. 34). Thus, changing the schools has obstacles on several levels. At the same time the new era creates a feeling that something should also be changed in education. Looks are turned towards successful countries, whose model should possibly be followed. One of the discussed topics is the academic school that is based on the authority of the teacher (as it was generally customary in Soviet times) *versus* the child-centred, democratic version (Leino, 2002). One can argue that since school is a preparation for life, the rough society (where the social security system is not perfect yet) and a child-friendly education do not even fit together. School can be softer in more developed societies, because the rich state is able to take care of each person (even the unemployed).

Theoretical Perspective

A well-known sociologist Z. Bauman wrote about two worlds: the first one is inhabited by the wealthy, who control their time (and life), who are always in hurry; the poor of the second world rather spend their time doing nothing, until the time slowly kills them. He called the first group *tourists*, who consciously change their locations according to their own free will; and he called the other group *vagabonds*, who in the absence of better possibilities continue their life course without any purpose. (Bauman, 1998, p. 88). Such distribution among other things creates associations between the subject-centred and the (so-called) child-centred school; in the former life is planned very accurately and there is a constant shortness of time, since the capacious curriculum puts a pressure upon the school lesson, and homework creates tensions in the personal free time. *Vagabond* associates with bohemianism: everything comes at its own time or later – most important are the peace of the soul and happiness, while the rules of the material world (including the strict curriculum) do not have much importance, since they could molest one's well-being, and especially one's freedom. It is not easy to be wealthy enough to control your own time and life - educated people have more opportunities here. According to Delhey, the connection between satisfaction and income is greater in the poorer countries (Hämmäl, 2007, p. 36). In Estonia the influence of income on satisfaction was remarkably high, the highest in the observed countries (Ainsaar, 2006, p. 116). For Estonians (both students and parents) the high level of wellbeing and success is so important, that the competition begins very often from childhood already (Pener, 2010). One believes that a good education provides more opportunities in life. Learning is something people can do themselves for a better life, and according to fresh PISA results Estonians are really eager to prepare the future with good knowledge. It is important to emphasize that the education in poorer countries is not necessarily worse (as is obvious in the fresh PISA-results) (Tamm, 2010).

One can argue: the larger the social guarantees of a country, the more humane (milder, friendlier, softer etc.) can be the school, because the risk to die of hunger in case of a failure in life is minimal. Fukuyama argues that the community is based on shared values: the more authoritative and widely held those values, the stronger the community and higher the level of generalized social trust (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 90). People need the security: for *vagabonds* everything is open, which makes the life interesting but hard. Some closeness adds security. According to Kruglanski and Fishman (2009, p. 348) the factors of Need for Closure Scale (NFC) are 1) the desire for order and structure, 2) discomfort with ambiguity, 3) decisiveness, 4) desire for predictability about the future, and 5) closed-mindedness. Studies have shown that the factors consistent across a variety of national and international samples (Kruglanski, Fishman, 2009, p. 344). Participants high in NFC produced a higher proportion of task-oriented responses and a lower proportion of positive social-emotional acts than participants low in NFC. (Kruglanski, Fishman, 2009, p. 348). The continuing popularity of the so-called elite schools (with strong academic emphasis) in Estonia shows that parents still prefer the 'old way'

or the subject centred education. Order and structure make life and future safer. (Especially in a state where the social security system is still in the developing stages.)

Methodology of Research

The research focus and main purpose of this study was to find out children's opinion about child friendly school. The research method was educational ethnography, which is, according to Walford, sometimes disparagingly characterised as 'hanging around' and writing about what is seen and heard (Walford, 2009, p. 273). But, the ethnographer does much more than this. Observation does not occur just once, but activities are observed at different times of the day, week and year. (Walford, 2009, p. 273). *Ethnos*, a Greek term, denotes a population, race or cultural group. When *ethno* as a prefix is combined with *graphic* to form the term *ethnographic*, the reference is to the sub-discipline known as descriptive anthropology – in its broadest sense, the science devoted to describing ways of life of humankind (Vidich, Stanford, 1998, p. 46). By entering a social environment the ethnographer studies how people live there. S/he participates in everyday routines, communicates and notes down all that s/he sees and hears. The aim is not to define the truth but to uncover different truths (Emerson, Fretz, Shaw, 1995, p. 1-3). Ethnography is a method of social research, which uses several information sources (Pösö, 1993, p. 28).

In 2005 in the middle of Estonia a new basic school was opened. There were 24 students in three classes: the 1st to 3rd years were together, 4th to 6th and the 7th year were separately. Part of pupils (12) were local "normal" children, and the rest were from other schools over Estonia with learning and/or behaviour difficulties (mostly based on the social background of their homes). They lived in the school buildings 5 days a week (local children lived at home). The author of this article collected rich data through participant observation and interviews. She observed from the back desk classes, and social life in students' home (located in the same building), participated in after school activities, conversed with the students, teachers and principal. The researcher took original notes in notebooks and later analyzed them in context of research questions. All together the author spent 102 hours during the first school year with students and teachers of this school.

The school building was situated in an old countryseat in middle of a nice park and near a forest. Children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties got extra social inputs after school: there were no TVs or computers, but a lot of time for walking, talking and thinking; for art and other activities. In the beginning the school staff had no clear idea about the pedagogical methods, only the aim was fixed: the principal of school wanted to improve children's behaviour through love and peaceful study environment (through the so-called child friendly school). The hypothesis was: if the ordinary school caused problems for some students, the solution must have come from a different (opposite) school type. The observed school was the very last possibility to get the obligatory general education in an ordinary school system for these children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties. The next step would be the hospital of mental illnesses or the special school with very strict rules.

Results of Research

The most important part of this observation was connected with the routine and rules (or *vagabonds*-like absence of it). For example – there was no school bell. Classes/lessons started and ended when students were 'ready' - and/or when most students in the class did not want to study anymore. Or when it became too noisy in the classroom. This experiment made the work of teachers difficult (or impossible): after the brake teacher had to find each pupil inside or outside of the school, and ask him or her politely whether class could start again. And – if one

class went into the break earlier than others – the school building became so noisy, that nobody wanted to continue the study. From the very beginning the leader of school wanted to make a new (child friendly) institution – it means: different from other ‘old fashioned’ schools. But one girl said to the teacher: “*It is so strange to be without a school bell.*” Teacher: “*Would you like to have a bell?*” All children answered: “*Yeeees! And it would be nice if students themselves could ring the bell in turns.*” Teachers had regular discussions about the situation in the teachers’ room: there was a complaint in September already, that the students do not have a sense of time without a school bell. This part of experiment finished by the end of the October, when a school bell (and fixed rhythm) arrived at this small, new school.

The next example is about homework, (or absence of it, like *vagabonds* do). At first children studied only during the school day (and not at all after lessons). In September/October there was no marking system being used as well as no textbooks (for younger children), in order to complete this child friendly experiment. One boy commented: “*What kind of school is this where you do not have to study and no textbooks are used?*”.

After the first school week the researcher asked one ‘problem’ boy whether he like this new school or not. The answer was surprising: for him everything was too easy – he wanted to work/study more. Pupil’s evenings were empty, without TV and/or computer. But children are too young for meditation yet – so, there were many conflicts in the school dormitories, mostly because children were bored. Homework always gives some routine and content to the day (even if it is demanding), and especially the children with learning and/or behaviour difficulties need a fixed routine. After a few months both the marks and textbooks were introduced. At first the pupils’ works were only commented on (instead of being marked): accepted or not. The teacher allowed that if somebody wanted a real mark, it would also be possible. All students started doing homework in this school from October onwards. And even the most problematic students liked it, which was unexpected result for many teachers. Starting from October a test was introduced in the 7th year - it was a short test (about 10 minutes) in the beginning of every lesson.

It was interesting to recognize the importance of routines from ordinary (old fashioned) school. Two girls complained to me, that the principal was too kind to badly behaved boys. The comment of the principal was that “*there is no competition in badness; the trump of this school is goodness*”. But this was a strong sign that pupils themselves were not happy without strict rules. For example: if a ‘bad’ boy made a big noise in class, very often other students themselves were angry and asked him to stop. The strong need for fixed rules was obvious in every aspect: if the teacher promised something to pupils, even the smallest thing, and tried (a little bit) to change it later, children started to complain loudly. Borders were safe on every level. For example on Monday mornings there was a joint activity: all children were together in one room and shared the experiences and feelings about weekend. Even ‘very bad boys’ had respect to others joys and sorrows, and they even talked themselves. All children calm down and enjoyed the 30 happy minutes together. It was like a small brake between weekend at home and week at school; between social problems and social care. And every Thursday there was a fairy-tale-club, when an evenings-educator just read some stories really very expressively. Next to 7-8 years children even the oldest boys (with behaviour problems) were sitting and listening there without any behaviour problem at all. Traditions are part of borders, and they usually ‘taste’ good.

Nobody liked a situation without any rules: one young girl came to the teachers’ room for help: “*The boys are using the window of the classroom to go out of the school and come back in.*” In the beginning of December (3 months after the opening of the school) one teacher confessed: it seems that a stronger hand is needed - being nice is not enough for children with such serious issues. The school began to undertake small changes towards the systems of ordinary schools. For primary school children, the teacher even wrote some rules on blackboard:”1) *I don’t run in*

the class, 2) I talk quietly, 3) If I want to say something I'll rise my hand, 4) I'll stand up in the beginning and the end of the classes, 5) I am friendly, 6) I am helpful, 7) I am always polite and careful." And when these rules were broken, all students had to read them out loud.

The final sad examples are about social backgrounds influence. One boy was very angry to his mother who did not wake him up on the very first school day (just because she was drunk). So: there was no *new beginning* for this boy; and he kept talking about this sad day quite often.

The father of one other boy promised to arrange transport for all students from capital on Monday morning to the school in his minivan (and back to Tallinn on Friday evenings). The boy was so happy and proud of his father. But in October already problems with the transport occurred. And by the end of October there was no transport anymore by this minivan at all. The boy got a hysterical attack: "*My father did not keep his promises once again.*" Earlier this boy used to come to class as an ordinary pupil, but after the attack he started to miss classes: he just walked around the school building for most of the time. Finally he left this school before the end of the school year.

Discussion

Socialization is quite a general process by which the human actor acquires the skills and values that enable him to function as a member of a social system. The term applies to both pervasive social tactics and to designated social roles. It refers to both purposeful and incidental learning. (Campbell, 1975, 78). During this research, it was obvious that students would want traditional rules and a fixed routine in their school days. The so-called old school type might be a good therapy for children with learning and/or behaviour difficulties, because they just need some more security. Tapio Puolimatka, a philosopher of the University of Helsinki, adds a thought-provoking idea, that in a school where a pupil's individuality is respected unconditionally, and where communication takes place at person-to-person level, an emotional and trusting atmosphere is formed, but a very trusting person, however, is easily manipulated. The result might be a deficit of privacy and autonomy. Paradoxically it is not excluded that the society takes over this dominating role, thus beginning to influence also the person's deepest feelings (Puolimatka, 1999). He continues that especially the so-called traditional, academic school is a weaker socializer (in a positive way), since it maintains the distance between the teacher and the pupil; thus, the borders are clearer, and positions more concrete. In the so-called progressive school, that values individuality, children identify themselves easily with the teacher and socialization takes place more intensively. Since public authoritarianism is avoided in the new, child friendly school, they use much more hidden force games. However, anonymous power shapes human consciousness unobtrusively, without consciously perceiving any influences, stresses Puolimatka (1999). Anonymous power is hard to fight against. The trump of a subject-centred school is the publicity of intentions: the child can oppose him/herself to school, but s/he knows what it means to be a pupil. According to Keltikangas-Järvinen, professor of the University of Helsinki, the aim of education is not so much to stress individualities, but rather to design/create similarities, for coping together in one society. The similarity should go so far that people can predict the behaviour of others (Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2006, p. 52).

Conclusion

In this case the idea of the child friendly school was mixed with special education, but teachers were not prepared for it (they were not special teachers). Probable partly because of this the children with learning and behaviour difficulties did not get the best possible help they needed. The so-called problem children need more discipline than others, because this is one

part of the therapy. If there is no order at home, the school should compensate it even more. There are many positive aspects in 'old fashioned' school, and 'new time' does not mean that everything has to be new. The strict rules seem bad, but inside the rules life is safer. So the conclusion is, that the concept of a 'child friendly school' is confusing and should be used carefully, till the meaning of it is unclear. And: it is obvious that pupils' opinion about child friendly school (partly) differs from teachers' opinion – before new experiments one should always ask from target group to fix the aim together.

The Researcher's Role and Ethical Considerations

The author has used only generalized (anonymous) information about this school and students – with all respect. Teachers and pupils trusted the researcher, because the general idea of this work was to improve the innovative school and educational processes in it.

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