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School culture as a common good. Is it possible? How?

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to indicate the potential of using the category of *common good* for the interpretation of everyday school reality. This has facilitated an initial overview of the heterogeneous, often contradictory nature of school relationship as well as relationships between school and broadly understood environment, and has made it possible to reflect on school culture, i.e. its internal and external preconditions for functioning.

KEYWORDS:

School, school culture, common good

Identification of the problem

Mutual interactions implemented and experienced at school, as well as schools with their broadly understood environment, can be seen as complex structures permeated by macro and micro factors. They always manifest themselves on multiple levels, which results from the fact that school culture as an assemblage of dominant values and procedural norms is comprised of artefacts related to surface structure, to declared and implemented values embedded within the deeper structure – subsurface and the deep structure, i.e. assumptions or dogmas about people and the world (Tuohy, 2002). When analysing what is visible, one can often reach the hidden layers, which in turn, may justify the use of the category of common good.

Common good refers to the most tangible component of school reality. These are natural, material and social resources of a community such as school with its

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pupils, teachers, parents and administrative staff, which collectively generate, exploit and assume responsibility for them, but also a community which is "located" in social resources of common good (e.g. in social and political conditions of school functioning). Therefore, school community constitutes both a source and a product of the resources of common good of school and at school.

Following this lead, I would like to, firstly, point to the potential of the use of the category *common good* and, secondly, to make an attempt at perceiving school everyday life through the prism of this very category.

Therefore, in this paper I will present the category by isolating its distinctive features as well as by revealing the potential of their application. This will facilitate an initial overview of the heterogeneous, often contradictory nature of the relationship in school and the relationship between schools and their broadly understood environment, and thus a reflection on school culture, i.e. internal and external preconditions for its functioning.

An outline of the category of common good

I will refrain from a theoretical discussion on the various perceptions of the category of *common good*, limiting myself to an allusion that in communist Poland this concept was severely politically distorted and dutifully eradicated from social consciousness and language, and now is often obscurely used in the sense of "common, hence nobody's" or "common, hence to be used without moderation". This is rooted in the misunderstanding of common good as a so-called "calamity on shared pasture grounds", as described by G. Harding: "imagine a shared pasture, where every shepherd will try to rear as many animals as possible. Such an approach may work for hundreds of years if tribal wars, thefts and diseases maintain the number of people and animals below the borderline of pasture capacity. Ultimately, however, the day of counting sheep arrives, a day when the expected social stability becomes a fact. From then on, the logic of a common pasture inevitably leads to a tragedy. Every shepherd, being rational, tries to maximize his personal profit. Openly or secretly, they deliberately or unconsciously ask themselves: «What will be my advantage if I add another animal to my herd?»" ... A rationally thinking shepherd will come to the conclusion that the only sensible approach is to add more animals to the herd. However, all shepherds who use the common pasture will come to the same conclusion. And hence the tragedy. The system prompts each participant to increase his stock without restrictions, yet within the limited space of the pasture. Thus, each shepherd has his individual profit in mind within a community that promotes free access to the common pasture. Inevitably, this common pasture brings everyone to ruin" (cit. in: Bollier, 2004, p. 28).

Such an understanding of common good, particularly present within the structures of conservative economies, led to erroneous perception of this category as detrimental to resources. Nevertheless, such thinking is plagued by one fundamental error. Well, such a pasture is no less than an open resource available to everyone, whereas common good – as seen by David Bollier – “has boundaries, rules, social norms and sanctions against imposters. Common good calls for the existence of a community acting as a conscious, collective guardian of its resources” (Bollier, 2004, p. 24).

Thus, what are the characteristics of common good? (Bollier, 2004, p. 17). Its essence consists in the practical paradigm of self-management, resource management and decent life. Therefore, common good is a paradigm linking a given community and a set of its social activities, values and standards used to manage the resource. A stable system for managing shared resources by means of fair methods for the sake of mutual benefit of all participants is a must, which should be additionally combined with the so-called principle of “diversity in unity”.

Therefore, common good may be defined as a sum of resources within a community that uses and creates these resources and a set of social protocols, i.e. norms and principles according to which and through which a given community manages and uses the common good.

School as a common good

In reference to the area of school functioning, its culture and its location within the culture, I refer common good to:

- 1) the assumption that school constitutes a complex common good of culture,
- 2) school is a system of common good, so many individuals may cooperate in the relationship between learning and teaching or education and self-education,
- 3) it is a complex ecosystem of many smaller common goods, such as sports fields, libraries, common spaces, or mutual interpersonal relations,
- 4) and above all, school is a public space for the production of social capital resources, which is strongly associated with the vitality of democratic culture.

School is always immersed in culture and at the same time constitutes a type of culture which it creates. Pupils and teachers “develop” their own pattern of basic assumptions that makes it possible for them to deal with the tasks of external adaptation and internal integration (Tuohy, 2002). This means that their mutual relations are strongly connected with what results from external conditions of the functioning of an educational institution.

Such an understanding of school facilitates identifying the mechanisms of its functioning and functioning within it. This, in turn, requires perception from various theoretical perspectives, two of which I will hereby relate to. On the one hand, we may see school as a symbolic institution that “instead of – as P. Bourdieu writes – promoting docility and oppression, reproduces the existing power relations in a gentler manner, i.e. by producing and spreading a dominant culture that tacitly confirms what it means to be educated” (Bourdieu, 1977, cited in: HA Giroux, 2010, p. 113); thus, an institution which through symbolic violence shapes in an individual the kind of general attitude “which can be applied to a legitimate culture” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 32) in force at school. On the other hand, in accordance with the assumptions of J. Bruner (2006) regarding the model of the learning/teaching relationship in the cultural context, it may be viewed as part of a broader world of cultural meanings and practices (Giroux, 2010, p. 117).

The combination of both perspectives makes it possible to see school as an organisation reflecting what happens within its surroundings, i.e. external phenomena and processes, but also as an organisation that constitutes a specific set of values, traditions, aspirations, beliefs and attitudes that are its essence and at the same time decide about its social climate, and hence the conditions and relationships experienced within it (Huntington, 2003). This allows to analyse the “school culture in a dialectical relation with facts, phenomena and processes occurring in its immediate social, economic, political, but also natural/technical” environment (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2018, p. 13).

School as a culture of common good?

In reference to the analyses of researchers (Teisseyre, 2012; Hardin, 2009; Putnam 2005) attributing a key role to institutions in creating or maintaining social order based on the principles of community, mutual trust and the logic of common good and looking for analogies to schools’ role in creating effective incentives and conditions to commonality on the level of interpersonal relations, I would like to emphasise some basic preconditions that would be indispensable at school.

Firstly, common good is produced by democratic institutions, i.e. credible establishments acting on clearly defined principles, where their members must be able to create or co-create manageable principles. At the same time, although school is located in democratic political conditions, it is based on scoring, rankings and rivalry, in which both teachers and pupils are immersed. Business-based methods, in which competition and competitiveness count the most, are transferred uncritically. Such an approach is also advocated by the Ministry of National Education, which publishes rankings and promotes schools and educational projects mainly on the basis of quantitative data. This is conducive to competition and – as Piotr Sztompka warns – creation

of the culture of cynicism (Sztompka, 2007), and as such, it blocks collective activities, teaches individuals to reject civic values or mutual cooperation, and promotes pragmatism, which facilitates functioning in education managed like a company. Teachers and head teachers live in almost constant fear of liquidation of their school, class or position. Parents choose schools or classes for their children based on quantitative rankings. Teachers and head teachers are subject to classifications of schools, classes or employees, which are annually announced and “scrutinised” by the Ministry of Education. Pupils are involved in testing procedures when concluding each educational stage. There are competence tests concluding the primary and lower secondary levels, as well as a key-based matriculation exam at the end of the upper secondary level. As indicated by a research team supervised by Maria Dudzikowa and described in subsequent volumes of the series *2005 High School Graduates as Students of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań* (Dudzikowa & Wawrzyniak-Beszterda, 2010; Dudzikowa, et al. 2011; Dudzikowa, et al. 2013), this results in growing rivalry, danger, work overload or stress related to test results at subsequent educational levels. The obtained data demonstrates that in order to meet school requirements, every upper secondary level pupil was forced to use additional tutoring. This deprives both the teachers and the entire educational system of trust and leaves teachers and pupils “connected” mainly on the level of formal relationships in which they are deprived of the possibility of joint commitment for the common good (Bochno, 2011 a, Bochno, 2011 b).

In addition, in the situation of constantly blurred, strictly political changes in school, the precondition for building a community for the sake of common good is rendered impossible. We suspect that the top-down political changes will lead to further atomisation and dissipation of school community, followed by the same processes outside the school, which will eventually launch even more advanced competition mechanisms. As Ostrom writes: “If external representatives of the government assume that only they have the right to set rules, then in the long run it will be very difficult for local users to maintain a stable system of managing shared resources” (in: Bollier, 2004, p. 28).

Secondly, democratic institutions require civil disobedience, i.e. continuous grassroots social control. At present, despite the declarations of politicians, we are experiencing a gradual but continuous limitation of both individual and collective autonomy at schools. Such a situation of mutual control is additionally aggravated – as also indicated in the research and analysis by B. Śliwerski (2017) – by almost non-existing self-government at school. Local governments in schools still perform façade functions. This is often related to ill-conceived pupils’ rights. There is immense ideological anger related to the issue. Increasingly, false myths thrive that giving rights will make pupils boisterous. Meanwhile, wherever there are well-functioning local governments, there is more cooperation and better communication, as well as activities promoting coop-

eration become further reinforced. This unacceptance of grassroots civil disobedience on the part of authorities directly clashes with the logic of common good, which must have clearly defined boundaries but requires its users to monitor how their shared resource is used and to develop a system of penalties for those who break the rules.

The third issue is connected with partnership between education entities, individuals, classes, schools and ministerial authorities. Therefore, in strengthening a culture based on common good, it becomes necessary to organise an educational policy (its model, work, relations) in which there will be a reference to culturally determined factors, such as social standards, trust, and the occurrence and type of civic organisations. Methods uncritically transferred from the business world onto the functioning of the teaching-learning relationship are certainly not conducive to a favourable outcome in this respect, as achievements become “marketed”, and schools become embedded within the space of growing corporation-like competition. Furthermore, such solutions require a great deal of bureaucracy. In pursuit of further levels of professional advancement, teachers “collect” certificates confirming their competences. They fill out numerous reports assessed by the Ministry of National Education. Almost everything requires “a receipt”. It intensifies the sense of control, and thus mutual distrust, and limits the time and need for mutual interaction or joint commitment. It also limits activities for the sake of common good.

Fourthly, the culture of common good in institutions depends, in addition to issues related to the sense of security, on post-materialist values. This, in turn, involves a critical attitude towards the institution and oneself. Meanwhile, many teachers do not see the need to change their own methods of work, relying on objective standards resulting from external control mechanisms or hierarchical interpersonal relationships at school. It is a safe assumption that with the growing control and commercialisation of education, with the constant focus on results, with the ever-growing culture of conformism, there is a threat of launching mechanisms of amoral familism (deep rooting in a small group and low autonomy). It is connected with the mechanism of tightening internal group ties and perceiving others as threatening in the situation of rivalry between individuals, groups and schools, which in turn activates egoistic tendencies.

These merely outlined problems show that the path to creating a culture of common good in school is rather bumpy.

School as a common good – how to tackle it?

Work for the common good at school requires a change in educational policy towards understanding schools as “co-learning communities” (Dudzikowa, 2008), that is, communities in which relations are based on a specific relationship formed on the founda-

tion of shared values, experiences and initiatives both inside the classroom or school (interaction with pupils and teachers) and outside – in contact with pupils' families or the local community. We should strive to change the direction of thinking about school – from school as a teaching institution towards school as a teaching and educating institution, in which these two functions will be treated jointly.

It is necessary to reverse the tendencies to rivalry and ranking-based functioning by strengthening team activities that take advantage of the social nature of education. This postulate should be treated as a priority, because it is of fundamental importance in the quest to change school culture (at all levels). Therefore, pupils must be given opportunities to participate in public life at school, for example, by expressing their own opinions in school media or tangible participation in self-government activities at class or school levels, e.g. participation and decision-making during the work of school councils, parents' councils or staff meetings (at least in the part of their activities that relates to pupil-related affairs). Pupils must be encouraged by teachers to embark on community action, for example to undertake social, charitable or joint research projects and present their results on class, school or local community forums.

Finally, one more recommendation, mainly addressed at self-government authorities, school supervision bodies, but also head teachers and counsellors: we should support initiatives related to the Movement for Small Schools. Creating smaller schools would allow them to be located as close as possible to pupils' place of residence. On the one hand, this would allow pupils to reach their school more conveniently, and on the other hand, cooperation between the school and the local community would be reinforced. It would also help to reduce the time of school work and present an opportunity to create an additional offer for pupils or teachers. Such activities would additionally strengthen the sense of school community. At this point, one may ask: is this possible in the face of current financial condition of education, with its centralised management by the Ministry of National Education? When considering only the political or financial perspective, probably not, but numerous studies confirm that in small schools or classes it is easier to make direct, individual interactions.

Only in the conditions of education for democracy, but also through democracy and within democracy is it possible to experience a community of learners based on a specific relationship created on common values, experiences and activities, and to build and multiply social capital at the level of individuals, groups and institutions.

Because we must remember that whereas an egoist will win with an altruist within the group, groups of altruists will win with groups of egoists.

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