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PHOTOGRAPHY AS A PEDAGOGICAL DIAGNOSIS MEDIUM – AN ARTICLE ABOUT PUPILS’ SCHOOL REALITY

Introduction

School, as claimed by Aleksander Nalaskowski (2002), is a multi-layered creation that can be perceived from many different angles. Therefore, there are many interpretations of a school reality. It can be seen as: a meeting place, playground, theatre, temple or family. It can also be seen as barracks or a factory. It constitutes a peculiar amalgam of meanings that should be taken into consideration in order to understand its nature. School is a place where each human spends an important part of his life, that is the childhood time and the early and late adolescence. Because of this reason, examining the school reality from the perspective of its participants’ feelings becomes a crucial matter.

An important element of school is its space that should constitute a subject of thought of a professional teacher. Despite the fact that space has been a subject of interest for sciences such as anthropology or sociology for a long time now, in pedagogy it does not have an established position yet (Kwiatkowska, 2001).

Some interesting considerations for this topic have been drafted in Edward T. Hall’s book entitled ‘The Hidden Dimension’. A division into a permanent and semi-permanent space was created there. The first one can be seen, for example, in buildings which appearance and location are
dependent on the epoch and culture. The semi-permanent space is, on the other hand, an arrangement of the permanent space with various objects that can be freely moved around (Hall, 2005).

An inspiring definition has also been provided by Yi-Fu Tuan in his book entitled ‘Space and Place’. He claims that space is an impersonal being that constitutes a neutral set of events, subjects and dimensions. A human being, by giving them meanings, changes a space into a place which is a dimension filled with the essence of human existence (Tuan, 1987).

Ronald Meighan (1993) distinguished the following kinds of places in school: didactic, multifunctional, administrative, communicative and the space surrounding the school. This distinction is a space classification fundament that had been photographed by pupils in the process of a research that I have conducted.

From the perspective of the emancipatory pedagogy, school should show an individual the ways of overcoming an oppression which he or she experiences or will be experiencing. Because of this fact, the process of education should lead to shaping an emancipatory competence in pupils. Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak (2006:130) defines the emancipator competence as a “taught and dynamic ability of a (individual/group) subject, reflecting itself in perception and understanding the subjective limitations and deprivations, in conscious expressing of disagreement with them, in undertaking ways of overcoming them and achieving new rights and areas of freedom and in their responsible use in perfecting oneself and the environment”. Achieving this competence is important with regard to the human development. The possession or the lack of this competence may be visible in relations with the space in school.

**Research Methodology**

The conducted research is of a qualitative character. It was based on the assumptions of the emancipational pedagogy. The aim of the research was establishing the cultural differences in the school space perception by Polish and Norwegian pupils. The aim of the research was of cognitive character and it came down to diagnosing the cultural differences in perceiving the school space. The main problem of the conducted research was put in the question: How do the pupils perceive the school space? By particularizing the main problem I have distinguished the fol-
lowing detailed problems: 1) What is the pupil’s perception of the school didactic space? 2) What is the pupil’s perception of the school multifunctional space? 3) How do the pupils perceive the school administrative places? 4) What is the pupil’s perception of the school communicative space? 5) How do the pupils perceive the space surrounding the school?

In gathering the data I employed the visual method which included photography and conducting the interview based on the photography (Banks, 2009). The photographic and standardized interview techniques were the ones employed within this method.

The research was conducted from March to June 2010. The research group consisted of 35 Polish and 26 Norwegian pupils. One should take notice that the number of girls in the research group exceeded the number of boys (38 to 23, respectively).

The research was conducted in two stages. In the first one the pupils were asked to take two photos: one of the space they like and one of the space they do not like. The second stage was conducting the individualized interviews with the pupils about the taken photos.

One should take notice that the conducted research is not a representative one and that it had been conducted as pilot studies.

The Research Results

I would like to start the research results presentation by discussing the places the pupils like the most. Then I shall move on to those places that are not liked by the pupils.

The pupils named 11 spaces they like. Most often they photographed their school playground (7). Then they photographed the following: IT classroom (6), science and the environment classroom (6), art classroom (4), gym (3), tuck shop (3), football pitch (2). Several single pictures showed: a bench by a classroom, girls’ toilets, a corner by the locker room, a corridor situated at the landing in the school.

The school playground was described as the most liked place in the school. The pupils who photographed this place justified their decision in a similar way. The reason that was used the most frequently was that this is the place where it is allowed to act freely, i.e. talk with colleagues (not only from their school but also from the neighboring junior high school), walk and run around. This is the place I like the most – the school playground. In this place I often meet with other pupils from our school, I play
or spend time in some other way outdoors. I meet with my colleagues here. We skip rope and play other games here... (Pupil 9). Benches, where free conversations can be held, are found in this space. Teachers also function there (having their duties), however, their presence does not interfere with children. The teachers are peculiarly perceived there as the people who maintain the order.

The following places are the most liked by the Polish pupils: IT classroom, science and the environment classroom and art classroom. These places are liked not due to the space they cover but rather due to fondness expressed by the pupils towards the subject being taught there or the positive perceiving of the teachers working there. The children often underlined their interests in e.g.: information technology or art and justified their choice with their fondness of those subjects. "I like the science and the environment classroom because I like nature and learning about animals, people and other things connected with nature comes easy for me (P.7). I like this classroom because it's nice there and the subject taught there, that is nature, is interesting for me and some there are interesting things such as skeletons or leeches in the depository at the back of the class" (P.15).

Some of the pupils pointed out at some elements of the discussed classes' space that are attractive to them. One should notice that the pupils feel comfortable in all of those classes. The fondness of the art classroom partly derives from the fact that a nice and friendly atmosphere prevails there. "This classroom has a lot of «decorations» and it is colorful and joyful. I like these subjects and the teacher that teaches there" (P.33).

Some of the pupils state that they also like the tuck shop and the gym. In the case of the gym both girls and boys feel comfortable in this place because of the physical exercises practiced there. They like this place enough to want to be there more often. The atmosphere that surrounds the gym is described by them as nice and likeable.

The tuck shop is an interesting facility due to several reasons. It attracts the pupils of many grades during the breaks with its offer, and those standing in the queue, especially girls, can talk about what was going on during the lessons. It is also the time of discussing other pupils' behavior. The children feel safe there because the teacher on duty is always around, though he does not interrupt their talks. One of the school-
girls argued her choice as follows: “I like the tuck shop because many products that we need in school can be bought there, for example pens, if someone forgot the pencil-case, or sometimes a notebook, if we’re running out of free pages, a drink for P.E. and many other things” (P.20).

Two pupils’ photos showed the school football pitch. Boys like this place because they can play football and act spontaneous there. They often go there after school and have a good time. One of the respondents said: I like the pitch because I can live it up there (P.27).

The fact that girls’ toilets were named the favorite places in the school is also interesting. A schoolgirl justified her choice saying that it is a quiet place where she can feel freely because there are no teachers there. It is comfortable and spacious. The selected toilet, although it is located in the school basement, is a well-illuminated place. It is virtually all covered with bright- and dark-pink tiles. Girls often meet there to talk in private.

Summing up, one could state that in most of the cases the Polish pupils prefer open, well-illuminated and large-area spaces. They feel freely there because they are not under the strict control of the teacher.

When it comes to the least-liked places in school the number of those is almost the same as in the case of the liked places. However, one place is perceived by the pupils as definitely the worst one. This place is the locker room. It was indicated by 15 pupils. The following made it to the list of the least-liked places, respectively: history class (4), mathematics class (4), girls’ changing room (3), school entrance (2), music classroom (2), the gym corridor (2). The respondents also mentioned the landing corridor, art classroom and science and the environment class.

The respondents presented quite a long list of the reasons for their dislike of the locker room. Definitely the most often it was indicated that: the older pupils move our shoes and jackets around. We often can’t find our belongings (P.1). The sixth-grade pupils smudge our jackets with choke... (P.14). It is a cramped place that resembles a penitentiary isolation, fenced with a steel net. The conversations conducted with the pupils show that it is dirty and there is not enough light. The plaster on the walls is peeled and there are holes in the net. The place smells in a peculiar way that is not liked by my respondents. I don’t like the school locker room because it’s cold in there and it smells very bad (P.3). Although the school staff employees are on their duties there, they do not pay any special attention to the situations that happen there. One pupil stated: The
pupils often fight there but the teachers don’t want to notice it. (...) I don’t know why (P.31). According to the pupils’ account it is a particularly crowded place in the school, especially in the morning and afternoons. Sometimes fights happen there. One should notice that the pupils underlined that they spend only as much time there as it is necessary. They do not meet for social reasons in this place. When asked who would they like to invite to the locker room, the pupils answered the principal or the security guard that would restore order there. When asked about any suggestions for changes, separate boxes for each class were strongly emphasized. Shoe lockers would be installed in each of the boxes. The respondents would also dispose of the steel net fencing the boxes and replace it with colorful partitions.

Another disliked places in the school were the mathematics and history classrooms. The pupils do not like the mathematics classroom because it smells unpleasantly. One schoolgirl said:...I don’t want to sound rude, but some pupils don’t take care of personal hygiene... (P.29). This would suggest that the unpleasant smell is not caused by the space but rather by the people who, when stressed during the lesson, make the stench waft. Another accusation against this space is that it is stuffy there and that it is a small classroom. Its capacity is reduced by the rows of desks with computers placed by the walls. The pupils also do not like the mathematics teacher. When asked what would she change in the class, one schoolgirl responded: I would throw the desks with computers away because they only waste space. There’s very little space there and it’s cramped because of them. I would move the desks that stand in the middle of the class apart, arranging them in the same way they are in other classes (P.11).

On the other hand, the reproof of the history class is mainly about the fact that the pupils do not like the history teacher. Secondly, they are not satisfied with the desks arrangement which are thought to be situated too close to the blackboard. The unpleasant smell is also the case in this class, but here it is not thought to be caused by the pupils’ bad hygiene only.

A couple of schoolgirls indicated that they do not like the changing room in the gym. According to the respondents, this space is dirty and too small. They do not feel comfortable there. Such feeling is caused by the lack of privacy in this small place.

Two pupils indicated that they do not like the corridor linking the school with the gym. According to them, it is a dangerous place because
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one can bump into another person going back from the gym. The pupils do not feel safe there and would like to avoid this place. However, there is no other way to get to the gym from the school.

A small number of the pupils photographed the school entrance and described it as a place they dislike a lot. One of the photos showed the entrance door unaesthetically made from wood, while the second one showed the school gate. The first space was described as cramped, loud and dangerous. One should notice that teachers are rarely seen there. The schoolgirl who took this photo would want the door to be replaced with a new one. The school gate symbolizes the entrance to the *land of boredom*. The pupil who took this photo do not like to be in school because, in his opinion, it is boring and crowded there. I *like to learn, but I don’t like to be in school. It’s cramped there (...) I’d prefer bigger classrooms* (P.25). The same gate dramatically changes its symbolism in the afternoon hours when the pupils, by crossing it, enter the *normal world*.

Summing up, the Polish pupils do not like small and badly-illuminated spaces. The matter of the quality and way of furnishing and, as it turns out, the perception of smell of given spaces is of significant importance. The pupils also do not like the spaces where they do not feel safe.

Photos taken by the pupils from the Åretta school show a slightly different image of the liked and disliked spaces. When it comes to the most liked places, the pupils most often indicated the canteen (9). Other places included: a square with stone steps (5), school playground (3), school entrance (2) and the Norwegian language classroom (2). Individual pupils indicated the space next to the solar system model, the space outside the school, locker for their personal belongings, desk in a classroom and the music classroom.

The place that the Norwegian pupils like the most is the school canteen. It is a large space with the tuck shop, benches and tables. One should notice that it is located next to the entrance door. One of its walls is entirely glassed and the school playground can be seen through it. The pupils are very fond of spending their time there. They usually meet in the canteen during the longest break because they can eat their meal in peace and talk to their friends and classmates. The teachers are rarely seen in this space. When asked if they would change anything in this place, the pupils’ answer is usually ‘no’. One of the schoolgirls stated:
Well... maybe the windows. Yes, I would do something with the windows because when the sun is shining, it's very hot in there. I think some blinds would solve this problem (P. 52).

Another popular place in the school is a square with stone steps. It is situated outside the school and the pupils usually spend their short breaks there. It is also a place where they can talk to their friends in peace. There are generally no teachers in this space.

Three pupils indicated the school playground as the place they like the most because they can play football there. They often come to the playground after the school opening hours. It is a place where they feel comfortable and free. One of my respondents even said: I'm happy there (P. 47).

Two pupils indicated the school entrance as a space they like very much. They justified their choice by saying that they do not like school because it is boring there, whereas outside the school they can do many interesting things. In their statements, both pupils also emphasized that they feel free outside the school.

The next two respondents took pictures of the Norwegian language classroom. One of those pupils could not justify his choice, whereas the other claimed: Generally, I don't like school 'cause it's boring, you know... But this classroom is the coolest one in the building. (...) I'm focused there (P. 51).

The space next to the wall with the solar system model made by a teacher is also an interesting place in the school. One of the schoolgirls indicated this place as her favorite space. She is fond of it because she can relax and meet with her friends there. It does not bore her because there is always something going on in this place. I meet with my girlfriends here and we always meet here when we go out on field trips (...) There is always something going on here (P. 42).

To sum up, Norwegian pupils like capacious spaces where they can freely move and talk with their classmates. They preferably spend time outside the building because it is not as boring as inside the school. One has to take notice that the respondents emphasized several times the fact that boredom prevails at school and the life that goes on outside is much more interesting.

The Norwegian pupils also indicated eight places they do not like. The first place on that list is held by the toilets located on the ground floor (12). Young people also do not like the German language classroom (4),
the stairs leading to the basement (2), the board with the pupils’ works (2), the school entrance (2) and the corridor (2). Individual pupils indicated that they do not like the metal door-frames and boys’ showers.

The Norwegian respondents mostly dislike the toilets that are located on the ground floor and are old and untidy. The pupils claim that this place is messy and that they dislike the smell that wafts there. Some scraps of paper are often scattered around the floor. There are broken door locks and a cracked mirror in the girls’ toilet. Because of this, they do not feel comfortable there and they avoid those toilets. If there is a possibility, they use the toilets located in the more modern part of the school. The girls unanimously claim that if they have to use those toilets, they always go there with their girlfriends. *I hate going there and I never do this if I can use some other toilet. It’s dirty and it smells...* (P.62). One should notice that the pupils can see a chance of the improvement of the existing status quo. According to them, sanitation facilities and cabin doors should be replaced. Also, it would be a great idea to paint the toilets a different, more children-friendly color.

The pupils also dislike the classroom where they study German. In their opinion, it smells unpleasantly and it is dark there. One of the pupils said: *It’s stuffy and I often have a headache there. I don’t like this classroom also because when we use the computers, we often can’t connect to the Internet* (P. 39). Another pupil stated: *In this classroom I sit in a kind of recess with no good light. My desk is near the sink and there is a dustbin under it, so it smells there* (P. 58).

A small number of the pupils indicated the stairs as the most disliked place in the school. They are located outside the building and they lead to the old basement. It is a littered place and an unpleasant stench wafts there. That is why the pupils avoid this place. *I don’t like those stairs ‘cause it smells and I don’t feel good there. Nobody ever goes there ‘cause it’s a horrible place. Those stairs are just disgusting* (P. 38).

Two pupils took pictures of a board with their classmates’ works located in one of the school corridors. In the centre of the board there is a cardboard mask showing a human face. According to the respondents it is a hideous place because some pupils stuck chewing gum into its eyes, nose and mouth. As a result, it frightens away some of the pupils who do not like spending their free time there.
The pupils declared that they also do not like the school entrance. Their dislike for it is due to the fact that they are not fond of school. They claim that the school is boring and there is nothing interesting going on there. *I don’t like this door ’cause it’s the school entrance and the school is boring. There is nothing going on here… But there are so many interesting things to do outside* (P.53).

Two pupils indicated the corridors as the least popular place in the school. According to the respondents, they are crowded and one has to be careful not to bump into others. One can meet people whom he or she does not like there. One of the boys is not fond of a particular place in the corridor where there is always a lot of pupils’ shoes. It is a place where the pupils leave their footwear in order to enter the television classroom. According to this respondent, apart from the unpleasant smell, it is a dangerous place because one can easily stumble over the left shoes.

One of the pupils took photos of the boys’ showers. He does not like this place because the water temperature cannot be adjusted and it is always too hot. It is a place where he meets pupils he is not fond of, including his greatest enemy with whom he recently got into a fight. The fundamental disadvantage of this place is the lack of privacy, as a result of which, the pupils do not feel comfortable there.

To sum up, what follows from the photos taken by the Norwegian pupils, is the fact that the least liked places are connected with the peculiar smell in some parts of the school which the pupils dislike. There is a great need of modernisation of some buildings. One also has to take into consideration the repetitive statement concerning boredom which repels the pupils from this place.

An interesting comparison of the Polish and Norwegian school was done by a pupil who moved with his parents from Poland to Norway few years ago. Now I would like to quote his letter:

*Hello,*

*the schools are different because in Poland there is a ramble and the pupils shatter or destroy the work of adults and they don’t care that they can obtain education thanks to this school. In Norway, each pupil tries to care about my school. I don’t know if it’s the same in every school but definitely in most of them. There are some pupils that shatter a bit but not that much. The schools are different because they are practical. In Poland, schools are for the teachers and in Norway they are for the pupils and*
that's better. Last year we asked the principal for a skate-park for riding skateboards and he said that he wasn’t sure about that. After a week he hired a repair team and they built us ramps, hops and other stuff. The schools are built so we could spend our time nicely.

In Poland, if you don’t have some things, you don’t have friends. Only those true friends stick with me. To have friends in Poland, you have to show off or do other stupid things to be popular. In Norway, other treat you like best friends. There are so-called racists but there are only 0.3% of them, maybe less, and there are 2 or 3 of them in my school. When I first came in to the classroom, I was afraid that they won’t accept me or something but they came up to me and started saying how nice it’s going to be here and stuff... Not like in Poland where others envy you if you have designer clothes. Here, they will praise you, tell you that you look nice or something else.

When I lived in Poland and went to a Polish school, the teachers always inculcated the knowledge and there was no learning through fun or something else. In the Norwegian school, once or twice a week, we have some games and not like games for children but game lessons and they’re always fun. The teachers don’t yell here, unlike in Poland. They only yell when something happens, not in general like in Poland. In Norway, they teach very slowly, so we can understand and remember what we’re learning. In Poland, we had a chapter and we had to learn it in a week or we got bad marks or reproofs. I think that teachers are more relaxed and they have fun when they teach us and we have fun too.

It seems that the Norwegian school is a school of dreams but it’s true.

The letter above contributes a lot to the deliberation concerning the functioning of school in Poland and Norway. It presents the atmosphere of reality of both schools. The Polish school is portrayed as a fossilized institution which is full of tension and is created mainly for adults. The Norwegian school, on the other hand, is perceived as an institution focused on the pupil and his or her needs. It departs from the traditional forms of functioning. Also, the atmosphere of relations between the pupils and between them and the teachers is different. In the Norwegian school everyone address others by their name, which would be a difficult experiment in the Polish school reality.

Apart from this letter, the pupil also prepared aographical report concerning the school reality in which he presented the specific character of the Norwegian school which is geared toward the pupils’ movement. Many photos were taken in the space surrounding the school where the pupils not only rest but also take part in various activities.
Discussion of the Findings

The photos taken by the pupils of both schools suggest that there are differences in perception of the liked and disliked spaces in the school. However, a more thorough analysis shows many common points. The Polish pupils appreciate the space surrounding the school the most, whereas the Norwegian pupils mostly like the multifunctional space and the space surrounding the school. One should notice that both these space categories also meet the communication requirement. There is an unfeathered communication between pupils within their limits. They feel safe here. It is worth mentioning that teachers are hardly ever there and when they are, he or she is not the manager of the given space unlike e.g. in the classroom. In both types of the most popular spaces mentioned by the pupils, it is the pupils who have a greater autonomy than the teacher. At this point, there is a need of starting a discussion on the reflection concerning the perception of freedom and safety. The Norwegian pupils emphasize the perspective of the institutional restriction of liberty, whereas the Polish pupils do not mention it at all. What is interesting, the Polish pupils value privacy and comfort of the space and also emphasize the relation between order and the presence of the teacher. For the Norwegian youngsters, the sense of security and order seems to be independent of the teacher’s presence.

When it comes to the least popular space in the school, the Polish students definitely do not like the locker room located in the school basement. The Norwegian pupils, on the other hand, are not fond of the unrenovated toilets. I would categorize both these space types into the communicative space category. However, the communication disturbances which can be found here make the pupils dislike being in the places mentioned above. One should notice that in both cases the pupils emphasized that it smells unpleasantly in those places and they do not feel safe there. If they could, they would not use those spaces.

Some of the students’ photos showed didactic rooms. Their evaluation varied. Some of the respondents indicated the classrooms as the places they like very much. For others, however, they were the examples of places where they feel uncomfortable. One can conclude that the way the classrooms are furnished, including the colouring elements as well as the quality of ventilation and the general hygiene of the given place, is of fundamental importance in those spaces.
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Administrative space was not mentioned by the pupils at all. Thus, one can conclude that this space is not an important part of the school reality for the pupils. It is a kind of a different dimension of the school which should not be evaluated because it is assigned to administration.

The Polish and Norwegian pupils display an ambivalent attitude towards the didactic spaces in the school and it is related to their fondness or dislike of the teachers or the subjects taught in those rooms. The multifunctional space is positively perceived by the Norwegian pupils, whereas the Polish respondents do not mention it neither as a popular nor unpopular space. Thus, one can conclude that it is unimportant for the Poles. When it comes to the space surrounding the school, it is liked by both studied groups. The pupils perceive the school playgrounds and squares as places where they can relax and talk freely. The communicative space, on the other hand, is not liked by the pupils from both groups. Perhaps it is so because there are spaces located in the school building where one can meet people he or she is not fond of. The pupils often do not feel comfortable there. When it comes to the administrative space, it was not indicated by the students, thus one can assume that it is not important for them.

The school entrance is an interesting element which affects the perception of the school space. Making some absorbing and up-to-date architectural modifications could greatly influence both the Polish and Norwegian pupils' mood during their way to school.

When answering the fundamental question, namely: how do the pupils perceive the school space? one could say that they perceive it rather unfavorably. Despite the fact that the pupils indicated the same number of places they like and dislike, the ones they were fond of were situated outside the school building, whereas the ones they were not fond of were located in the school, mainly in unrenovated and neglected areas.

From the interviews conducted with the pupils I conclude that the majority of them does not have a developed emancipator competence. It was often hard for them to justify their choice of places they took photos of. Few were able to present concrete ideas for making changes in places they disliked. They unquestionably accept spaces they perceive positively and they would not want to make any modifications there. Also, none of the respondents did anything to change the reality which does not suit them for many different reasons. It is worth noticing that the Polish pu-
pils could provide suggestions for changes of the unattractive reality more often than the Norwegian pupils.

References


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