

Stimulating Milieu to Learning and Teaching at Today's Czech Schools

A Contribution to the Recognition of the Culture of an Essential School Process

by Milan Pol, Lenka Hloušková, Petr Novotný, Jiří Zounek
Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Brno, the Czech Republic, <http://www.phil.muni.cz/ped/indexA.htm>

Abstract

This contribution deals with the most important area of school operation, the learning and teaching environment. Several weighty circumstances of its functioning are herewith examined, such as the operation of the school as a manifestation of its culture, the relation between learning and teaching, and paradigms of the school as specific organization or the school as community. Such contexts are considered as objective pre-conditions for the existence and operation of the area under observation and its development. Subsequently, data obtained through our empirical research at Czech schools are related to the subject. Some general conclusions are derived from both sets of findings, contributing thus to better recognition of the culture of this essential process.

A stimulating milieu to learning and teaching in the context of school development

Education in the Czech Republic is undergoing a variety of far-reaching changes, and probably will keep on doing so in the nearest future. Some of these changes will deeply affect the roles of schools and the expectations related thereto. Schools and schooling will be in a completely new situation if fundamental reforms, like the establishment of a general educational programme, with all its consequences, become reality. It will be much more important for schools to be able to organize their work and, especially, create apt conditions for the essential process of their operation, the learning process (mainly the learning of pupils but, in consideration of individual and collective/organizational learning, even that of adults at the school). Also, in regard to a meaningful development of schools, the processes of learning and teaching will have to be much more evidently exposed to general attention.

The following contribution deals with what we have labelled, for the sake of our examination, **stimulating milieu to learning and teaching**. It is an area related to the basic schooling process, learning, and to another process, teaching, which is supportive and complementary to the former. We think that the culture of this particular area is probably the most crucial point for the assessment of school culture as a whole. Our analysis employs data we have obtained from a project called *Culture of the Czech School and its Development Strategies*,¹ using a pre-research probe, interviews, a questionnaire survey and, obviously, analysis of relevant literature. Our exploration is focused on basic schools² in the Czech Republic.

Based on the study of relevant literature and on our pre-research, we had identified five principal areas of school operation: consent in main principles of school operation, vision of the school, openness of the school towards its outer environment, school

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² ISCED I & II, pupils aged 6 to 15.

management, and, finally, the area we are exploring here, stimulating milieu to learning and teaching.

We intend to interpret our findings in a few dominant contexts to be explained first:

- school operation as a manifestation of a certain school culture
- learning and teaching as complementary processes
- school as organization versus school as community

School operation as a manifestation of school culture

As indicated above, *the operation of the area under observation*, as interpreted from the viewpoint of the quest for school culture, is the first relational framework of our contemplation. What does this mean?

In case of learning and teaching, things may be observed from two different perspectives. One of them is based on the determination of the target situation, say in the form of the signs of an accomplished and efficient school. It is evident that many a sign of an efficient school may be perceived as straightforward manifestations of school culture. Let us mention, for instance, Mortimore's (1998) list, containing the following signs of efficient schools: academic influence (teacher's expectation of student's success), learning strategy, rewards and sanctions, conditions of school life, and opportunities for students to participate and bear responsibility. Each of these signs is directly tied to the values, standards, and behaviours shared at the school.³

Another possible perspective is departing from the contents of the term *school culture* and, then, defining its components. This is what, for instance, Finnan & Levin do (2000), concluding that an integral part of school culture is a set of convictions and hypotheses related to "what schools are to teach; how children are to learn; who is to learn what, who is to teach, how school are to operate and be organized; how students are to be divided into groups/classes; and what the role of a school is if addressing wider social subjects" (p. 89).

Can we be talking about something called *culture of learning and teaching*? In a certain sense we certainly can, but in the context herewith outlined it seems to be rather risky, which is probably why such term is not established in literature.⁴ The risk, that is to say, is in the union of learning and teaching, these two being activities of two groups of people with whom different cultures are usually associated. Also, such term would be — as is e. g. school culture — largely general. It could be understood as the culture of the pupils' work (e. g. with the dimension of active–passive), the culture of the teachers' work (say with the dimension of individualistic–cooperative), the culture of the teachers' profession (see the discussion on teaching as a profession or a semi-profession), and so on.⁵

Learning and teaching as complementary processes

The second relational framework of our contemplation is the perception of learning and teaching as complementary processes. In this respect, learning is fundamental. Teaching as a set of conditions and upholding processes is supportive, from the viewpoint of learning, and essential, from the viewpoint of the conditions materialized by the school.

³ For the sake of completeness, it is necessary to add that Mortimore speaks then separately about *school ethos*, rather in the meaning it has in British literature, i. e. as a set of internal cultures.

⁴ Hargreaves (1982), for instance, uses the term *teaching culture*, not precisely defining it, though.

⁵ We do not want to disregard the didactic category of teaching, in which both processes, learning and teaching, usually become one.

We are aware of the fact that the area of learning and teaching, at its general level, is determined by certain discrepancies, mainly between the ideal image of adequate conditions for learning, and those appearing in reality. A basic discrepancy of this kind is the one between the individual nature of the learning process and the collective organization of such process at school. However, a school is organized with the focus on intentional learning, which means the creation of conditions for learning, i. e. for the teacher's occupation. Yet, successful learning cannot be enforced just through a good organization of the learning and teaching processes themselves but through the overall arrangement of conditions of school life.

Importantly, the processes of learning and teaching are dynamic and reflecting many an influence, of which the major part is arriving from outside, not from the milieu of the school. This also means that the needs of the learning and teaching processes are changing, and no arrangement of conditions at school is ideal or permanent.

And, this is where a direct relation between the learning process and the development of the school is originating (compare Altrichter, Elliot, 200, Glover, Law, 2002, Louis, Kruse, 2000). Such relation generally follows the line of **pupil's learning as an essential process of school operation — teaching innovations as supportive and complementary process to the process of learning — teacher's individual learning — (organizational learning) — development of the school.**

Nevertheless, such path has got its risks. One specific feature of the school is the individualization of teachers' work. Sometimes even a culture of individualism or a professional isolation is referred to (Bakkenes, 1996, Hargreaves, 1982, and others). This is also why we have cited organizational learning in brackets, for despite many authors' persuasion (such as Ben-Peretz, Schonmann, 1998, Louis, Kruse, 1998, and others) organizational learning or the inception of informal learning communities is by far not obvious.

The solution of such discrepancies, and the manner in which the complementary relation between learning and teaching is materialized, is largely a matter of school culture. After all, values entering the everyday decision-making, fixed and conventional standards, and other "culture-creating" elements decide to a large extent about the arrangement of the environment of learning and teaching.

School as a specific organization versus school as community

Another relational framework, inevitable for our discernment of the subject, is the perception of school through two different paradigms: *school as a specific organization* and *school as community*. Literature is not comprehensive in the statements to such difference, sometimes persisting in a sphere of vague terms, but what can generally be deducted is this: *school as community* is featured by stress on mutual relations, respect, solidarity, and alike values. On the contrary, *school as specific organization* is characterized by rational values, such as responsibility, efficiency, objectives, and results. Not all signs of such double approach are contradictory but, by and large, they are not quite identical nor compatible.

As is observed by Sergiovanni (1994, p. 4), certain practice may make sense in one of those arrangements while it hardly does so in another. A school perceived as a specific organization, i. e. accentuating efficiency, fulfilment of objectives, and formal regulations, hardly absorbs any vagueness and contradictions of objectives and the non-measurability of results. On the other hand, school as community is sometimes reluctant to solve problems of strict coordination, stability, and operation targeting.

It is probably impossible to say that just one of these attitudes is correct. The affinity to school as specific organization or to school as community is a matter of the arrangement

of values and priorities, often related to values of school education itself and to a plenty of circumstances.

Empirical research

Now, let us look at the current situation of the *stimulating milieu to learning and teaching* at Czech basic schools, as seen by the head-teachers of our research batch. Through our questionnaire survey of 168 head-teachers of basic schools throughout the Czech Republic,⁶ we have been finding out about the cultivation of the learning and teaching environments at Czech schools, both in regard to the extent of importance it is associated with and to the extent of its materialization.

The importance of the area of stimulating milieu to learning and teaching

In comparison to other areas of school operation, stimulating milieu to learning and teaching seems to be the most important. In a scale of importance where 1 means “essential” while 9 means “pointless”, the average score is 1.63, which represents a very clear result (other areas scoring between 1.69 and 2.62).

The materialization of the potential of stimulating milieu to learning and teaching

Unlike the importance of this area, fully indisputable, the materialization of its potential is much more problematic. When our respondents were to indicate to which extent they succeed in the materialization of this area, the average percentage was 65 (averages in other areas oscillating between 64–75 %).

Endeavouring to specify the head-teachers’ idea of this area, our question was worded as follows: **What at schools is especially apposite to focus on when creating a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching?**⁷

Merely three items of our capacious offer were chosen by more than a half of our respondents: *pupils’ motivation, milieu of confidence and partnership, and teachers’ creativity*. We think that the choice of these three items is largely motivated by important social transformations which do not avoid schools: the newly emerging consideration of the school, as from the viewpoint of a client, is connected with item one, pupils’ motivation. The formerly authoritarian relation of teachers toward pupils has weakened substantially, and the previously important model of external motivation through marking goes less and less efficient. The disappearing traditional perception of the teacher-to-pupil relation as a relation of superiority and subordination has much to do with item two — the need of confidence and partnership in such relation. Finally, the necessity to react to the new, distinctively dynamic, changeable, multileveled and often internally contradictory reality, is what has a lot to do with item three, expressing the need of teachers’ creative approach. In this respect, it is also interesting to observe the position of methodical innovations: they are in a pack of items chosen by approximately one fourth to one third of the responding head-teachers.

Chart 1

What to focus on when creating a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching

⁶ Methodological aspects of the questionnaire survey were described in our contribution for the Lisbon ECER 2002 conference. Those interested will find the text on www.phil.muni.cz/ped/indexA.htm

⁷ The responding head-teachers were asked to choose maximum five items of an offer of eighteen.

Item	Responses in total	%
Pupils' motivation	137	81.5
Milieu of confidence and partnership	119	70.8
Teachers' creativity	92	54.8
Organization of the teaching process	53	31.5
Methods of evaluation and marking	51	30.4
Teaching methods	50	29.8
Interaction in classes	42	25.0
Physical environment of the school	38	22.7
Satisfaction of pupils' needs	35	20.8
Teaching aids and materials	32	19.0
Unity of teachers' actions	32	19.0
Pupils' rights and duties	29	17.3
Objectives of schooling and education	28	16.7
Contents of the curriculum	27	16.1
Teachers' leadership in classes	27	16.1
Efficient usage of time	23	13.7
Rules and regulations	5	3.0
Others	1	0.6
Respondents in total	168	

Another question we have asked was **who should belong to those participating in the creation of a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching?**⁸

The responsibility of teachers and the managing staff, obviously, appears among the items chosen by more than a half of our respondents. Two thirds of them have mentioned pupils, too.

Chart 2

Who should participate in the creation of a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching

Item	Responses in total	%
All teachers	142	84.5
Head-teacher and the managing staff	137	81.5
Pupils	113	67.3
Establishing entity	78	46.4
Parents	66	39.3
Experienced teachers	44	26.2
Heads of subject teams	40	23.8
Non-pedagogic employees	28	16.7
School council	24	14.3
Superior educational authorities	18	10.7
Relevant subjects of the municipality	14	8.3
Inspection	4	2.4
Others	3	1.8
Respondents in total	168	

Still another question was about what schools successfully manage to do in the area of the stimulating milieu to learning and teaching. The wording of the question, to be answered freely, was: **What in this area has been accomplished at your school?** Prevailing among

⁸ The responding head-teachers were asked to choose maximum five items of an offer of thirteen.

the head-teachers' answers was response regarding the material environment, most frequently the equipment of computer classrooms, purchase of aids and furniture, gym equipment, occasionally the improved aesthetic look of classrooms and the school's premises. Less frequent were accomplishments in methodics (project teaching, application of knowledge and skills obtained from in-service training, etc.), in change of relations (mainly between teachers and pupils, both in formalized manners, such as through pupils' parliaments, or informally), alterations of the staff (mainly its rejuvenation), and so on.

However, for the relation to the conditions of learning and teaching, there is very probably some unused potential. That is why we have asked another question: **Is there anything in this area you can see unused reserves in?** The answers were dominated by financial and material support (money, materials, source employment, teachers' remuneration). Following closely were reserves in the school's methodical undertaking (work methodics, new teaching strategies, teachers' approach), relations among all the agents of school life (teachers, pupils, parents, non-teaching staff, establishing entity, municipality). Other replies were scarce.

The set of answers to the question about development opportunities in learning and teaching, worded **Which are the ways, in your opinion, of supporting the schools' efforts to create a stimulating milieu to learning and teaching?**, was very much complying with the previous question: prevailing was once again the financial support (including opportunities for justified remuneration) and improved equipment. Also, there were answers remarking the development of relations among those involved in school life (teachers, pupils, parents, non-teaching employees, establishing entity, municipality), the development of work methodics, and the enhancement of the staff (through rejuvenation and in-service training).

Discussion on head-teachers' response

Based on the analysis of the response, it seems that what we have explored is an extraordinarily important field, both from the viewpoint of current school operation and from that of future developments. However, the potential within this area is barely fulfilled, and the situation of schools is rather far from being ideal.

Also, our analysis shows that head-teachers know that the arrangement of the environment for the essential schooling process, learning, is a circuitous task. We deduct this from the items describing the contents of the area (pupils' motivation, milieu of confidence and partnership, teachers' creativity) and from the items labelling the main groups of agents of this area (all teachers, managing staff, pupils).

It is interesting to compare such conclusions with the exploration of success or reserves of school operation. Certain contradictions can be seen, possibly expressing the tension between values (as advocated by the agents) and the operational practice (probably smothering them). In the latter set of questions (success, reserves), the head-teachers' perspective seems to be simplified down to the material a financial basis, which features their perception and methodical procedures of everyday teaching practice. Certainly, this confirms that though schools struggle for the means for their operation, it is after all easier to obtain money than to change the immaterial component of school culture, such as values, people's approach, or conventional rules.

Yet, it is necessary to differentiate among what the respondents accentuate. Observing closely the varied accents on our items, we could identify two groups of head-

teachers, advocating different priorities⁹ and representing two kinds of approach to the stimulating milieu to learning and teaching.

One of them is featured by a typical focus on *all teachers, pupils* but also the *non-teaching staff* as the main agents of school life, while superior authorities and school councils are mentioned rather scarcely. In the question of the contents of the stimulating milieu, *confidence* is much more frequent than the contents and methods of teaching.

This approach to the matter may be considered as the materialization of the concept of schools being conceived as communities: all the main agents, including pupils, are supposed to have their word in this area of school operation. Even the learning and teaching environment is perceived more like a space for living than a space for specific activities.

Typical for the other kind of approach (rather less frequent, yet) is more stress on *superior authorities* and *establishing entities* as major agents, rather than *all teachers* or, say, *school inspection*. As for the contents, more stress is put here on educational and teaching objectives, methods and contents of teaching, rules and regulations, and material outfit too.

This approach is rather accentuating values which are typical for the concept of schools as specific organizations. The school environment is pragmatically perceived as a place where the teaching process is being performed, with a specific technology thereof.

The dichotomy between *community-specific organization* is very markedly manifested in the position of pupils within the essential processes of learning and teaching. On one hand, there are pupils as clients, who will not be creating the milieu for learning and teaching but will be attended to by the school. On the other hand, there are pupils as agents of school life and members of a community. The affinity of the majority of head-teachers to the latter of these models, supposing pupils' participation in the creation of a stimulating milieu to learning (as an essential process of school operation), means a withdrawal from the concept of school as a specific organization.

To conclude

The situation of the area of *stimulating milieu to learning and teaching* at Czech schools, as presented by its pre-conditions and our partial empirical findings, should by no means be taken for universally granted for each school. Yet, the above findings represent a valuable identification of major tendencies within the culture of an essential process of school operation. A better knowledge of a specific school culture — or of the specific culture of an essential area of a specific school's operation — is what individualized research methods can generate. What we have chosen is case studies which are now being finished.

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⁹ These are two independent sets of mutually correlating items.

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