

The Grammar of Schooling as an obstacle to emancipation in modern schools

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1. Focusing on primary schooling, I would like to explain what Grammar of Schooling means to me, since this is a main part of my Ph.D. research.

The metaphor “Grammar of Schooling”ⁱ refers to firmly rooted rules and methods of schooling that have been commonly used without significant changes in most public schools since compulsory schooling was established. Pupils, parents, teachers – all of society – perceive the school this way. If society wanted this paradigm to change fundamentally, it would probably spark a revolution in education. The “Grammar of Schooling” metaphor compares the source of rooting in school systems to the rules of grammar in language. We do not consciously follow the rules of grammar when we speak, but they're always in the background.

The authors of this metaphor, Tyack and Tobin, specialize in the history of education and American cultural history. In a 1994 article, they described two institutions where reforms endured and three others where . they described reforms that endured in two institutions and those in three others where the changes were only transient attacks on the “Grammar of Schooling.” Why has it been so stable, and why did most challenges to it fade or become marginalized?

One strong, long-standing example of “Grammar of Schooling” is the established “banking system” in the schools -- passive acceptance of knowledge and opinions of others -- which actually kills children’s awakening to their ability and the perception of their own uniqueness.

2. Are the changes necessary at all? In what time frame should changes be made?

I will mention John Dewey’s motto, which I have seen in my “research school”: IF WE TEACH TODAY AS WE TAUGHT YESTERDAY, WE ROB OUR CHILDREN OF TOMORROW.

Dewey was an ancestor and a paragon for many younger educators who later spread his thoughts, just like Paolo Freire or our Czech reformer in the last

century, Příhoda. Dewey knew that changes in education, other ways of education, were necessary in his time.. I like his way, his solution – a journey between traditional and progressive pedagogy. He rejected both and instead proposed that educators recognize the relationship between experience and education. His solution was **experiential education**, an education philosophy based on the idea that learning occurs through experience and requires hands-on activities that directly relate to the learner's life.

Alternative methods or fragments of various alternative schools inspired the creators of “other” schools. We have experimental schools all over the world. Synonyms for this kind of education can be alternative schools, innovative schools or „authorial“ schools. (The term „author’s“ schools, classes are often used in Poland.)In these kinds of schools, I perceive **the emancipatory potential** in possibilities for teachers. Alternative schools emphasize the necessity of the teacher’s freedom. Teachers must not be officers, tied to bureaucratic rules. Instead, they must be free beings with conscience, responsible not to politicians, but to their nation.ⁱⁱ

But, have “author’s classes” and authorial schools¹ been successful **in Poland, for example**, in disrupting the “Grammar of Schooling”ⁱⁱⁱ? It might seem that the post-Communist countries had the best conditions for major changes in the 1990s. However, reform was not so easy for newly established democracies, and the development of education in recent years has been rather criticized. Even teachers’ enthusiasm may have disappeared since the early 1990s. Frequent changes of government and ministers of education have also had negative consequences for society.

Tyack and Tobin describe individual examples of why certain types of new schools “survived” after changing and were accepted by society, and why others, on the contrary, failed by experimenting with new rules designed by the creators of new systems, then disappeared. Both Tyack and Tobin and Sliwerski, creator of “author’s classes” in Poland, agree it is necessary to inform parents, insiders and the public. It is necessary from the beginning to realize the benefits of these changes, not just criticize their shortcomings.

Parents and the public should be involved and inspired to spark new ideas to create community on the basis of shared goals: their children's education, mutual assistance and time pleasantly spent, all current requirements of the rediscovered humanistic approach in schools.

It could be the rule that, if teachers are given freedom, they can give more freedom to their pupils. Many contemporary educators say that by using democratic principles -- i.e., more freedom for pupils, more open access, choices of activities -- teachers awaken and develop in children a sense of responsibility for their actions, their studies, their education. (I wish it were true.)

Teachers are actually victims of "Grammar of Schooling" because most of them have personally gone through this conventional system, obediently attending as pupils and then being educated at universities for their future profession in a similar paradigm of traditional schools. Many may have chosen teaching as a profession because they recognized this established system, and liked it. This could be one reason they don't want to think about changing the current situation. According to Freire's theory, they don't even know they are at a certain stage of oppression and serving the existing system.

Freire wanted to help students, who, thanks to education, could become independent, active and responsible members of society and, in the future, change it. How do critical pedagogues see school nowadays? It is not only a place of oppression, but also a place of liberation. Some authors' classes are efforts at liberation. But I think it is important to emphasize that even in traditional schools there are places for resistance, for change that could lead to emancipation. We can see teachers who are critical or, at least a divergent in their thinking using their own voices, progressive methods of learning, project learning, learning poses problem, relations with parents, efforts to create communities, etc.

3.The potential changes in education can be divided into two groups. The first group comes from above -- suggested by politicians, influenced by general changes throughout the EU or other countries, on behalf of emancipation, equal opportunities, etc. That kind of Grammar of Schooling is an effect of bureaucracy (administrative decree). Changes from above are addressed to

everyone and are the same for everyone. They should be new rules of "Grammar of Schooling," followed by all teachers, students, parents and education authorities. They do not take into account the specific nature of the environment or the potential of teachers and students. Therefore, they may be (and usually are) obstacles to emancipation.

Recently Czechs have in this way identified a need for inclusion -- social inclusion in educational environments, creating a heterogeneous atmosphere. These changes come from the top down and are now applied in everyday school life. We should see very soon how these changes will be adopted in schools and in society. The major change is being prepared for the next school year in Poland. I have recently collected opinions on this situation from teachers in the Wroclaw schools involved in my research, and they are usually afraid of these changes.

The second group of changes is those the teacher can realize alone within the conditions in school, in the system. They are often based, unfortunately, on the above primary changes or those to which teachers progressed during their practice, when they could change their attitudes toward teaching for other reasons: actual classes, particular conditions in the school, parents, new methods in pedagogy. It is important to know what kind of "Grammar of Schooling" is in the minds and practices of teachers, especially primary school teachers -- for example in the context of Freire's thesis (Freire: Teachers should be teachers and not coddling parents, 2005:28).

10 minutes

ⁱ David Tyack and William Tobin, “The ‘Grammar of Schooling’: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?” *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (1994): 453-479.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tyack and Tobin define “Grammar of Schooling” as “the regular structure and rules that organize the work of instruction,” including standardized organizational practices such as “dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms and splintering knowledge into ‘subjects’ ” (Tyack and Tobin, “The ‘Grammar of Schooling’: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?” 454).