

## Crossing home – school border as *rites de passage*

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We can analyse home – school discourse in accordance to Arnold van Gennep's theory of the rites de passage (Van Gennep, 1986). Its essential three components (rites) might be perceived in the process of children's and parents' home – school transitions. Assuming that children and their parents transit from one to another social status quo we can see the basis for ritual forms of transition that are typical in such processes.

We can also indicate binary oppositions that describe these statuses, e.g.: child vs. student, parent vs. parent of student. Thus, after van Gennep, we are able to name the following rites: rite of exclusion, rite de marge (marginalisation), and rite of inclusion in the home - school transition.

The paper presents selected landscapes of school life, in which ritual pattern of transition (rites de passage) are indicated and analysed in the context of potential opportunities of changes in the ways of parental involvement and democratisation of social life in Poland.

### Introduction

Edmund Leach remarks that "change of status (...) at the level of concept is the change of category but at the level of action it demands the rite of crossing social borders, which are situated in nobody's time"<sup>1</sup>. "Crossing borders and thresholds is always accompanied by rites, just as moving from one status to another"<sup>2</sup> Paraphrasing this thought we can state that although acquiring a new status (for example by martial act or matriculation) is a simple change of name (a spouse, a student) in social practice, however, it indicates the process of passing from one social group to another. Interestingly, it is situated in some space-time continuum suspense between them and is accompanied by specific behaviours representing ritual character.

The change of status: a child – a pupil demands crossing social borders of two micro systems namely, home and school. It seems that in our everyday life it proceeds to some extent 'naturally', irrespective of current redefining concepts such as school and education. Since it belongs to cultural universals it is fairly thoughtlessly maintained in many diversified forms which are likely to be discerned only by critically oriented analyses whose rigidly assumed distance leads to comprehension of the reality. Facing the transforming reality and recently altered, at least in the statutory intentions school it is worth distancing ourselves from 'crossing its threshold' which seems to be deeply-rooted in the sphere of language and expresses significantly ritualised character of this human activity. When a child "crosses the threshold, the school doors are closing". Such expressions do function in the language and – it is worth noticing that – they are not only metaphors. Except for its presence in the symbolic behaviours, ritual marking with words, gestures and ways of using, the threshold of a school is also a material and clearly visible (sometimes spectacularly stressed) element of the school space.

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Describing a school threshold in both symbolic and material dimensions, recognising it in people's behaviours as well as in the manner of designing this space and also its social significance, constitutes the aim of this paper<sup>3</sup>.

In the fulfilment of this aim I am going to refer to – a productive in the context of undertaken issue – theory of *rites of passage* by Arnold Van Gennep and its development offered by one of the structuralist who employed it<sup>4</sup>. Although, rites de passages theory by Van Gennep arouses some reservations owing to its simplified applicability to every, not only 'liminal' rite, it constitutes an element of the communicative approach toward culture, employed by those researchers who analyse the reality and decipher the meanings through semiotics.

Leach synchronized Van Gennep's theory with his structural systems procedure "owing to which the anthropologist doing participant observation can venture to decode messages included in the examined phenomena as a whole"<sup>5</sup>.

Being a not-anthropologist and researcher not doing participant observation I apply Leach's procedures to the further presented analyses and I decode messages referring to the phenomenon of crossing the school threshold, label all my findings in this area with significant *it seems that* my research material embraces casual observations, common knowledge and deeply-rooted conviction in its hegemonic shape in relation to among others the question of form that those messages are supposed to take on and their meaning in social transmission. Its starting point constitutes invariably subjective sensations, the books I read and my experience. As such, they do not lay the foundations for empirical research and any other established concept, although they constantly refer to the 'field' observations and the elements of reality situated in defined time and space. Therefore, this survey should be treated as a record of reflections, binding literature study with my own evaluation of reality. As Leach writes: "if the form belongs to me, so does the meaning"<sup>6</sup>.

Immersing in the issue of crossing school threshold as the rite of passage, it is possible from the beginning to consider rites which (according to A. Van Gennep theory) comprise a ritual transition from one social status to another, from being "a child of its home" to being "a child of an institution – school" a pupil. It is also possible to attempt to answer the question of the rites of passage between home and school which as I am concerned, intriguingly marks the meeting point of private and public sphere.

It is worth emphasizing that this meeting does not concern only and exclusively an individual – a child crossing school threshold but also embraces his/her family (mainly parents) being significant for his/her shape and quality of life. Being a mother, a father of a pupil is a new identity of a parent, which we often seem to forget. Rarely, are we informed about the educational offers for parents, hardly anybody teaches parents how to be the parents of a pupil; school appears not to notice the freshness of their new status, narrowing its expectations down to not uncommonly completely incomprehensible requirements<sup>7</sup>.

Considering crossing school threshold we should focus on particularly compound subject of this activity that is a child and its parents, family and immediate surroundings. Crossing school threshold a child brings into it his/her own background. The school operating on the principle of simple consequence would redefine its previous attitude toward pupils, their education, which in this light would stop be restricted to child – teacher relationship. Organization of school work would look differently since taking into consideration as natural partners, parents, family and the immediate surroundings of child, school would 'dissolve' its walls and it would become a public institution open for local community in which it would be located not only geographically.

The structure of rites of passage – according to Arnold Van Gennep's theory – is tripartite and it is composed of rites of separation (*rite de separation*), margin (*rite de marge*) and aggregation (*rite de agregation*)<sup>8</sup>. Victor Turner distinguished also the time-space aspects of these rites naming them as follows: *preliminal*, *liminal*, *postliminal*<sup>9</sup>.

#### *Rite of Separation*

Rite of separation is directed toward specific removing the initiated person from his/her previous background. A groom is separated before the wedding by a stag party, which locates him only among members of the same sex, in unnatural background which has not surrounded him before the separation. A woman in labour in order to become a mother is separated from her former life by going to hospital or other clearly indicated isolation. Whereas, a child crossing a school threshold is – so to speak – 'stripped' of its home.

Magic acts constituting the rite of transition according to Leach's study based on religious analyses of Van Gennep are characterized among others by logic of victim (killing the gift, it means separating metaphysical

idea from its physical body) and mutilation of body (removing of the impure)<sup>10</sup>. The home inside of a child is killed and the child is separated from its parents in order to gain a new status perceived as a sanctification and social advancement attainable only by rejecting 'hampering roots' – parents who stay at the closed school doors.

Separation proceeds sharply, it uses forms which should be defined as brutal, although nobody name them as such because the shape of this rite seems to be extremely strong. We just say that it is necessary and that we have also undergone it and humbly, without any objections we accept those practices which – nobody knows why but without any doubts – make a child and its family suffer.

In the rite of separation a child gets mostly one message: *now alone* and to grasp the moment of this occurrence, a child must to move out his/her hand from the hand of a parent.

I am not sure whether this 'must' is justified. Approaching this event critically, it is easy to notice that it could proceed differently, especially as the parents – as I mentioned before – also change their status and cross the school threshold with their child. Opting explicitly for school and secondary socialization which can be achieved with the significant contribution of school I believe that its threshold could look differently. It should not rise in front of a child and its parents as a mountain but dissolve in extended in time activities shared by children, parents and teachers. For instance, following the example of the adaptively oriented activities offered by Veronica Sherborne's method<sup>11</sup>.

Why does home-school transition stress so strongly a high threshold instead of a gradual one, shaped by long-lasting adaptive activities? I do not know the answer to this question; however, I do remember a story about Little Ola. In her first weeks at school she used to stand hidden behind the curtain manifesting in this way her objection toward, as I defined earlier, *the must of being now alone*. Little Ola was not dragged out and at the same time she was present because her peers talked to her. One day she 'crossed' school threshold by rising the curtain and joining the play. She decided herself when and how to do it and her surroundings not imposing certain forms of behavior did not raise the high threshold she was supposed to cross.

Indeed: *she was supposed to* or maybe *she wanted to* cross it. This seems to be another interesting issue in those considerations. Little Ola had to but also wanted to go school 'as everybody' since neither her relatives nor she herself ever imagined that it was possible not to go to school.

This activity is a duty, not only a legal but also a cultural command. We have to attend school but we also want to go school because there is no other way if we would like to live and develop among other people. This type of socialization now seems to be the only available rationality, and undoubtedly it powerfully dominates the contemporary reality. Severe battle for home schooling can serve as a good example since its advocates are still treated as apostates and weirdoes because in the conditions of hegemonic cultural structure they are anarchists disobeying the frame of dominating system<sup>12</sup>.

Perhaps school as an institution formed in the Enlightenment rationality as a place of 'light' transferred to the 'fatheads', strengthening this interrelation, protects its privileged position of a distributor of knowledge, thereby – the formula of social advancement which is in this context a passage from home to school. Leach notices that "the material property of topographic space (created by human and natural) in which ritual activity takes place – it means buildings, paths, trees, bridges (...) constitute a sign system for metaphysical oppositions such as this/that world, low/high status ..."<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, it seems that ritualization and frequent overemphasis put on the activity relating to this passage constitute characteristic mainstay of prevalence and power relation which shapes the relation of those two environments in a child's life. Relation which is, beyond doubt, dominated by school. An opposition formed in Enlightenment tradition: enlightened school (an institution of education) versus ignorant home, may lay foundations for contemporary social mentality which naturally perceives home and school as antagonized environments despite long lasting and attempting to change this initial meaning rhetoric of school-home cooperation aimed at so called child welfare.

This opposition is visibly maintained also by compulsory school education laws formulated for the first time in 1825 in Prussia<sup>14</sup>. The rules that accompanied it can be recognized as clear rite of passage showing separation, margin and aggregation. Parents statutory obliged to send their children to school, had to sign 'contracts', confirming in this way that they 'give' their child to school and leave it at the disposal and under the rule of school<sup>15</sup>. Child's transition from private sphere of home to public sphere of school probably owing to this administrative formula became a not easy threshold either for a child or his/her family. It bound the procedure of sending a child to school with stripping a child of all signs of home.

The rite of separation seems to demonstrate its grand manifestation. A child crossing school threshold becomes physically and emotionally separated, he/she is excluded from its life and culture. A child puts on appropriate clothing, not necessarily a school uniform yet the clothing always meets the demands of school. Everything is new for such a child and this newness signifies that he/she should forget about home and focus on new requirements (sit, raise, talk at the opportune moment etc.). Being shown his/her 'own' chair or desk a child is located in a place like school but at the same time he/she is dislocated from a place like home. Our way of thinking about school is not oriented toward the simple fact that a pupil does not come alone but brings in his surroundings. School treats him/her as a deprived of own context 'single' who requires special treatment.

#### *Rite de Marge*

School closes its doors after him/her but simultaneously in front of the community he/she has come from. A child separated from his/her roots, enters new reality with fears and lack of trust, perceiving school as an environment of chaos. This can be described as rite de marge, the liminal state in crossing home-school border, *rite de passage*. It is a social atmosphere when the pupils do not master the roles of a new world. Everybody is expecting something but no one knows what they are exactly waiting for. As Bernie Neville marked in his study of the social atmosphere of a classroom, the level of fear is very high in an environment of chaos whereas the level of trust is extremely low. Empirical research conducted by Elzbieta Marek also confirmed this assumption<sup>16</sup>. Regardless of practical jokes and other carnivalesque activity performed by children, chaos imposes a great discomfort. Pupils are or are not told the rules but because the rules are new they cannot be immediately digested.

Although children are shown their new place it is still strange and untamed, it lacks familiar elements of reality close people and things. The state of transition, keeping a child in nobody's space and time since he/she is no longer the person he/she used to be and at the same time he/she has not become the person that – inevitably (a cultural dictate) – is going to be, rite de marge in school embodies in chaos.

Edmund Leach presenting an Euler diagram with two inseparable sets: A (this world) and not-A (that world) and one binding common part being an ambiguous transitional sphere, emphasized that the common part represents a sacralizing character and it is a sacred area and a taboo subject<sup>17</sup>.

"With reference to ordinary mortals, at this stage, an initiate is 'contaminated with sanctity' and being in sacral state he/she is also dangerous thus "impure"<sup>18</sup>.

Chaos surrounding children during their transitional state makes them "saints". First-graders in their first days at school are those who but also whom everybody is afraid of. They arouse curiosity; everybody looks at them not far away but with distance. It is known that something happens around them but it is a tacit practice, a taboo. Being marked with ritual caps, small bowknots which distinguish the class, first-graders always follow their teacher and keep close to the walls during walk in school corridors. They are little and funny, lovely and grotesque, attractive and ugly, however, they are mostly the others; those who remain specifically saint because at the same time they are "impure" and present a taboo subject.

#### *Rite of Aggregation*

It seems that in the rite of passage from home to school, the rite of incorporation follows the settlement of a child in a particular place – *proximity* perceived school space – a child is entirely embedded. It means that he/she knows how to be a pupil and obeys certain rules. He/she has an own desk and obediently comes there back, he/she moves in designated areas (it is worth noticing that everything occurs under a 'close eye', under control and all of these places are open to the teacher). As far as the detailed activities of the rite of incorporation are concerned, "they are often similar to the activity of the initial rite of separation but they are inverted it means that the participants of the procession move in the opposite direction (...)"<sup>19</sup>.

A child in this procession due to the rite of separation 'stripped' of home is reversely 'attired' in school. Binary coding visible in school behaviours and clothing used to manifest itself extremely spectacularly in the usage of opposition: informal – formal. School used to dress and sometimes it dresses today, when in order to stress the elitism it raises the threshold marked pupils - as I have mentioned before - with white blouses and shirts, navy blue and black aprons, uniforms, pleated skirts etc. Children after crossing the transitional stage look like other pupils, they are not wearing distinguishing bowknots, caps etc. They behave properly, they can raise two fingers if they wish to say something, they stand up when a teacher enters a classroom and they are obedient and finally they are 'appointed to be pupils'.

As we can see, hear and feel the internal discipline, Foucauldian sign of subordination and

power constitutes the determinant of the rite of aggregation.

### Discussion

School, such a needed and important institution in the process of secondary socialization is based on the discipline. It always used to be like this but is it a sufficient argument to let it be unchanged? Is school valuable socializing activity (an institution of secondary socialization whose importance cannot be unappreciated) possible to act differently? School identity expressed clearly in the above described rite of passage is actually the allegory of violence related to a pupil and his/her parents who are ostentatiously not noticed and left behind the doors. School doors are locked up tight when the lessons begin but also they are locked symbolically as many Polish staff rooms are equipped with only one inside handle.

Between 'this' and 'that' world, exists a transitional area. A sacred area because if we divide any space or time into categories we stress the importance of borders; we mostly pay attention to differences, not similarities and this leads us to the conviction that determinates of borders have special value, they are sacred<sup>20</sup>. There is a social threshold between home and school – a sacred transitional area from which a child starts to reach the status of a pupil seen from the power relation as higher. This may reinforce the oppositional codes, serving as description of home-school relations; informal – formal, dark – light, stupid – wise etc. They express cultural universalization contrasting both worlds, although they are situated at one side. This is a side of a child who connects them and builds with them one ontological existence, shaping him/herself either at home or at school. If those systems have in fact as they declare one common aim then the depicted oppositions are at least partly absurd. Obviously, the threshold as an area of transition from private to public sphere exists and by no means can it be removed, what is more it is not the point. It leaves, however, disturbingly open issue of the aims creating the rite of this passage, which is characterized by violence and subtle forms of closure for parents and its subjects and people responsible for a child.

Transitional area is a particular place of ritual activity. It is a place perceived as a space of completing a ritual, a sacred area. It seems that noticeably in the light of questionable success of numerous reforms – school resistance to changes, finds the basis in the culturally universalized sacredness.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, *Rytual i narracja*. [Ritual and narration] Warszawa 1989, PWN, p.47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> About school space and a its places designed for parents, among others in: Mendel M. (Ed.) (2006): *Pedagogika miejsca [Pedagogy of Place]*, Wydawnictwo DSWE, Wrocław

<sup>4</sup> I mean the analyses conducted by Hanna Czerwinska-Burszta and developed by Michal Buchowski's references in: E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, *Rytual i narracja*. [Ritual and narration] Warszawa 1989, PWN, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, *Rytual...* op.cit., p.22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> More about those challenges and suggested solutions in: M. Mendel. *Edukacja społeczna. Partnerstwo rodziny, szkoły i gminy w perspektywie amerykańskiej*. [Community education: Family, school, and community partnerships in the American perspective], Torun 2001, Adam Marszałek Publishing House.

<sup>8</sup> E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, op.cit., pp. 81-82.

<sup>9</sup> Turner V. (1969): *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anty-structure*, Chicago

<sup>10</sup> E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, op.cit.,pp. .67,83.

<sup>11</sup> M. Przasnyska, B. Kisiel, M. Bogdanowicz, *Metoda Weroniki Sherborne w terapii i wspomaganiu rozwoju dziecka.[Veronica Sherborne's method in therapy and assisting child's development]* Warszawa 2003, WSiP.

<sup>12</sup> M. Budajczak (2002) *Edukacja domowa. [Home schooling]* 'Rys Studio', Poznan

<sup>13</sup> E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, op.cit.,pp. 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> S. Woloszyn, *Kultura umysłowa i reformy szkolne w epoce Oświecenia.[Culture of the mind and school reforms in the Enlightenment period]* In: Z. Kwiecinski, B. Sliwerski (Eds.), *Pedagogika. Podrecznik akademicki [Pedagogy. Academic textbook]* Warszawa 2003, PWN, p.135.

<sup>15</sup> I was told about it during the lecture delivered by professor Janusz Homplewicz entitled: *Wychowanie szkolne w srodowiskach lokalnych we wspolpracy i symbiozie z zalzzeniami wychowania rodzinnego* [School education in local communities in the cooperation and symbiosis with home education principles] during the conference organized by University of Rzeszow: *Edukacyjne aspekty wspolpracy i partnerstwa w srodowiskach lokalnych* [Educational aspects of cooperation and partnership in local communities] Czudec, 18-19 November 2004.

<sup>16</sup> E. Marek, *Udzial komunikacji edukacyjnej nauczycieli w kreowaniu klimatu spolecznego klasy szkolnej. [Participation of teachers' educational communication in the creation of social atmosphere in a classroom]* „Zycie Szkoły”[Life of School] 1999, no 1, pp. 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> E. Leach, A.J. Greimas, op.cit.,p.48.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p.81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p.82.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p.48.

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