

## Practices of Including a Student in the School Space Based on the Example of Selected Visual Representations

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### Abstract

The main subject of this work is the school space considered from the perspective of including a student in it. A starting point of the analysis is the assumption taken from Erving Goffman and Anthony Giddens that the space defines the social situation at school and imposes the framework for interpreting the behavior and interactions that occur within it. In this perspective, the term "space" refers not only to physical space, but also to the psychological space of life. People strive to personally organize it by placing their own works/creations there so that they can give it their own meanings and symbolic senses, identify with it, and thereby transform the untamed/unknown space into their "own"/tame place. The main aim of the work is to determine how much of the school space is the space of the students and for the students, and to what extent it is transformed into place. In this context, the authors take into consideration the pedagogical practices that involve students in the school space. They are illustrated with selected visual representations, indicating both constructive practices aimed at actively involving students in the school space as well as feigned (and as a result exclusive) activities. The methodology of work is based on visual ethnography to recognize the visual image of the school, its culture, and on the use of photographs that refer to the anthropology of the picture (following R. Barthes, H. Belting, S. Sontag, P. Sztompka, J. Nowotniak).

**Keywords:** space, place, including, excluding, school

### Introduction

#### Towards School as a Student's Place – Reggio Emilia Approach

The main assumption of our work is a belief taken from E. Goffman and A. Giddens that the school space is an important factor in the learning process (initiating, as well as blocking certain forms of student activity) which also defines social relations (by imposing rules of behavior and interaction patterns between people). The arrangement of school space, its colors and furnishings, are the carrier of meanings created by the dominant school culture. Thus, the analysis of the school space can provide important information on the tension between attempts to democratize it and the relationships of power and subordination, or on the rivalry of social actors for the definition of situations and phenomena (Janowski, 1995; Parsons, 1959; Durkheim, 1956). From this perspective, the importance of school space goes back to the processes of constructing human identities, because as A. Bańka points out, "architecture exists both in the form of physical space and in the intangible form of human behavior, in the psychological space of life" (Nowotniak, 2002, p. 69). In this context, what is revealed is the importance we attach to the student's participation in constructing the school space, to his inclusion in

organization of his own place. We perceive this practice as something significant from the perspective of co-defining the world, legitimate ways of satisfying needs, desirable ways of behavior or communicating with others and treating each other (Barker, 2005).

An interesting exemplification of this practice is found in Reggio Emilia system of (early childhood) education. This approach is valued as an important alternative to traditional education and an important source of inspiration for reforms in the space of educational institutions for pre-school and younger school-age children (Śliwerski, 1992, p. 9); however, due to its nature it can be shifted onto the education of older students as well.

The origins of this extremely interesting idea reach the constructivist idea of J. Piaget, L. Wygotski and J. Bruner which boils down to the belief that there is no permanent and unchanging idea of the school. Therefore, Reggio pedagogy is not a formal model of education (such as, for example, Waldorf education or Montessori schools in which there are well-defined methods, standards and certificates for teachers, or accreditation processes). It is also not a ready-to-use model, but it is subject to constant changes depending on the needs and for this reason it is sometimes referred to as pedagogy as a project (Malaguzzi, 1993; Gandini, 2012). The special mark of Reggio's pedagogy is a new image of a child as a full subject, endowed with the potential and ability to wonder; a strong, intelligent, competent, creative researcher-explorer, contributor and participant in the communication process. From birth, a child is considered to be strong, open to the world, capable of creativity and construction (of knowledge), and his competences in these areas find realization in interaction with others, in interpreting reality and the world, in giving them their own meanings, or creating their own art and theory (Malaguzzi, 1998). The child is therefore treated as the owner and co-creator of rules (Malaguzzi, 1993a).

Adopting such an image of a child requires an adult's absolute respect for his identity, individuality and otherness. That is why one of the most important features of Reggio's pedagogy is to maintain an intense and permanent dialogue between adults (teachers, parents) and children. This dialogue is rooted in their changing experiences (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 58). It is argued by the key assumption of Reggio Emilia that a child must have control over the direction in which his/her teaching/learning is heading (Rinaldi, 1998, pp. 51-52).

In this context, the environment (also the school environment) with which the child remains in a close relationship is particularly significant. Reggio Emilia thinks about space as a "container" that is conducive to children's social interactions, exploration (of the world), learning and creativity. The space conceived in such a way has an educational "content" – it contains an educational message and it is loaded with stimuli for mutual experience and constructive learning (Gandini, 2012, p. 320). Space is treated as a kind of a "third teacher" (after the teacher – a guide and parents). That is why Reggio pays close attention to what the environment "teaches a child".

Transferring this idea into the physical dimension of the school space, Reggio Emilia creates a space for students, in which their interests and creativity are constantly and naturally stimulated. The design of each institution is the result of a deep reflection and dialogue between teachers, parents and the architect. The central place in the building is usually occupied by an internal courtyard (piazza), available to all students in the school, and which includes areas for common play and working tables where students of all ages can work together. This place also serves school celebrations and meetings with parents. Smaller rooms located around the piazza are separated only by glass walls, which fosters a sense of community. Each classroom has studio spaces (in the form of a large, centrally located studio) and several smaller mini-ateliers (designed for group work). In each classroom, there is also a place for art classes, a special construction corner, a place for playing games, a place for resting, a library and letterboxes. Even the canteens and bathrooms are designed in such a way as to encourage children to searching and interactions (The Reggio Emilia Approach ... 2006).

Every wall plays an important role in Reggio Emilia schools. As Loris Malaguzzi (an initiator and creator of these schools) pointed out, the walls "speak and document". They are a place of permanent or temporary exhibitions (illustrating the

educational process) that present not only various works of the students, but also the opinions of the teachers, descriptions and reports of photographs and projects carried out by the children. Thanks to them, one has a chance not only to admire students' works, but also follow and reflect on the process of implementing the projects, which initiates everyday interaction and communication between the students, teachers and parents (Gandini, 2012, p. 41).

Carefully thought through and organized activities include the integration of each class with the rest of the school, and the school with the outside world<sup>1</sup>. This huge importance attributed to (school) environment has its source in the belief that the children can all the better create the meanings of the surrounding world, the more the environment supports complexity, diversity, the more it sustains and transforms relationships between people, the more it takes into account children's imagination, a world of experiences, ideas and the multiplicity and diversity of expressing them (Malaguzzi, 1998). The attention of educators is therefore directed towards such organization of the school space that allows students to use it creatively and to arouse certain feelings (The Reggio Emilia Approach ... 2006). The school space is organized in such a way to be rich in possibilities and to encourage students to be creative, to explore the world and to solve problems (usually in small groups where cooperation and discussion intertwine). Children's art is present at every step – on the walls, windows, ceilings (hanging works) and tables. When visiting Reggio Emilia school, an observer has no doubts that these schools are a place of widely understood authentic students' creativity, and not a place of reproduction and transmission (of knowledge) (Bonar & Maj, 2015, p. 45).

All the elements of school environment constitute a space that is often subject to re-arrangements, and in the whole building, an effort to create opportunities conducive to children's interactions, learning and creation is visible (Bonar & Maj, 2015, pp. 45-46). After the visit in Reggio Emilia school, Jerome Bruner wrote: "What struck me in Reggio Emilia is the way imagination is cultivated there, while strengthening the children's sense of what is possible (...). This imagination is what saves us from the obvious and the banal, from ordinary aspects of life. Imagination turns facts into presumptions. Even a shadow cast on the floor is not just a shadow: it is a mystery. Try to draw it and you will understand" (Bruner, 2012, pp. XVII-XVIII).

Reggio Emilia Approach has become an inspiration for us to search in Polish state schools for traces of practices of including students in the organization of the school space.

### **Methodological Assumptions of the Research Project**

The methodological layer of the work was based on anthropology of visual image and visual ethnography used to recognize the visual image of the school's culture from the perspective of practices involving students in shaping its space (Barthes, 2008; Belting, 2012; Sontag, 2017; Nowotniak, 2012; Sztompka, 2017). We follow the assumption of Susan Sontag and Hans Belting that photography, although it cannot explain anything itself, is a perfect basis and inspiration for deducing, speculating and reflecting on the world. Photography does not reflect reality as it is, but it is able to synchronize a human view of the world with the world itself, it allows the creation of internal images of the world, out of the horizons of the photographed place, object or situation. Each visual view of the world is connected with evoking of human imagination to

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<sup>1</sup> Schools modeled on Reggio are bathed in natural light, full of diverse plants. All classrooms open to the inner courtyard, the glass walls in the kitchens provide a view of the nearest neighborhood. At the entrance to the building photographs are presented, children's works provided with transcriptions of projects and discussions they run. The same applies to classrooms in which project exhibitions are usually varied with a wide range of items and materials. Elements of documentation of children's works (drawings, sculptures, etc.), various "treasures" collected by children during walks are arranged in such a way as to attract attention and focus interest of both children and adults.

transcend to human memories and images (Belting, 2012; Sontag, 2017; Barthes, 2008). In this context, collecting photographs can be considered to be the same as collecting the meanings of our world.

Our research project has been located in such a context and is focused on searching for visual traces of practices of involving students in the creation of school space. We perceive these practices as potentially significant from the perspective of transforming the institutional space of the school – untamed and strange – into domesticated, tame and own place, thanks to its organization and management of students' own activities, their own works and products.

The heuristic database was a collection of several hundred photographs of spaces in Polish state schools which were analyzed from the perspective of their form, content and constructed meanings. The analysis allowed to distinguish three basic types of practices of including students in the creation of school space: an actual inclusion of the student in the creation of school space, a feigned inclusion and a mediated inclusion.

### **Practices That Actually Involve the Student in Creating a School Space**

Practices that really involve the student in the creation of school space are usually limited to making accessible a small fragment of the school space (a table, some part of a wall), on which the products of their activity are temporarily displayed (Fig. 1, 2). The nature of this space is conducive to the makeshift nature of the products (blackboard paint which covers the walls enables easy wiping of the chalk; works on the board can be easily removed and replaced with new ones). This element of provisionality can, however, be seen as a way to protect the school authorities from the non-standard use of them by students. Sometimes, the use of the classroom space to make it available to the students is surprising with regard to its unconventionality (Fig. 3).

We perceive the presented practices as inclusive because the pupils can use this small space in their own way, which facilitates the activation of their creative potential. It is visible in products that become transgressive in relation to rigid frames typical of works created under the teacher's control. Students seem to go beyond the routine of school rules connected with performing certain tasks, and their products vary in accordance with the features and ideas of their creators (Fig. 4, 5, 6).

The space managed independently by the students also has the hallmarks of interactions between them, which is visible in the case of works of collage type (Fig. 7, 8). They illustrate the exchange of associations, ideas and meanings between students, which leads to the creation of a coherent work. We perceive this type of practice as particularly significant from the perspective of constructing identity of the student who, together with others, creates the common space. The process of its production, and more precisely its transformation into a place, requires not only an activation of an individual creative activity but also the discussion, negotiation, an effort to agree on the perception of the world, attitudes towards it and the meanings given to it. Skills of this kind are crucial for the student's social development, as they constitute training in determining their position in relation to other social actors.

Practices that really involve the students in creating the school space, despite their limited and incidental character, are treated as a significant leaning out of the school in the direction of recognizing the subjectivity of the student as a person being capable of self-determination on space intended for him by definition. They have a constructive nature in the pedagogical sense because they encourage students to independently create their own place, to express themselves, their feelings, emotions and thoughts, to create autonomous meanings that transcend school schematism. Places created by the students themselves show the productive dynamics, creativity and originality of their products. Therefore, they serve to activate the broadly understood potentials embedded in them.

### **Practices That Seemingly Involve the Student in Creating a School Space**

The analysis of the empirical material revealed that in the culture of the Polish state school, the practices that only seemingly involve the student in creating a school space appear more often than the ones that really do it. However, they are of a very diverse nature: from discreet and implicit disciplining of the student's seemingly autonomous activity through insistent unification, to total mimicking of the students' participation in creating the school space. Each of these practices can be said to trigger a controlled, or at least externally controlled type of student activity, but it is still only seemingly involvement and presence of the student in transforming the institutional space of the school into a place of the student. This type of space usually includes class newsletters, very often used by the teachers who make use of thematic works of students created for this purpose, or occasional installations placed in the corridor cabinets, made by the teacher with use of his own elements or produced by the students under his/her strict control (Fig. 9, 10).

The first type of space distinguished in this group is represented by rather unusual photographs of the side walls of the teacher's desk that was made available for the students to independently utilize it (Fig. 11, 12, 13). As it can be observed, the students actively used the space, filling it with various statements. Some of them are clearly critical, others are based on humor and paradox, others serve as a sign of presence, or they serve to express oneself.

The first photograph (Fig. 11) shows the part of the desk from the teacher's side, with the inscription "Headmaster", which seems to be a somewhat ironic indication of students' awareness of the relationship of power and subordination in which they participate. In the context of this photograph, it seems that the students, by exposing the superior position of the teacher, reveal ostensibility of the autonomy granted to them, and the disciplining and control practices concealed behind it.

Another photograph (Fig. 12) presents the side wall of the desk and the sentence "Do not write on the desk", which seems to have a humorous effect, achieved through the use of the paradox. However, it is complemented by another message: "Big sister is watching you" and there is a drawing of a big eye which again refers to the relations of power typical of the school's culture. The author of the message exposes the practice of constant observation that has occurred in the school for a long time (Foucault, 2009), and recently refined by school monitoring. In addition, the feminine gender used in the statement seems to point directly at the teacher who made the walls of the desk available to the students but – according to the author – she did not renounce to control the ways of its usage. This photograph seems to expose the seemingness of this practice of including a student in creating a school space.

Students' statements placed on the front wall of the desk, visible from the students' side, are the most cautious (Fig. 13). It is most often filled with the students' statements, but these are inscriptions of a "commemorative" nature ("Madzia" – as a shortening of a name "Magda"); impersonal references to subcultures ("Punk"), or some types of worldview declarations ("I am free"). They lack a reference to the culture of the school, criticism of its rules and rituals, there are no references to the interactions or interactive rituals. This seems to indicate the mechanism of self-control operating in the case of developing the most visible space, peculiar care for not exceeding the normative order of the school.

The next practice that seemingly involves the student in creating a school space, meaning class newsletters with students' works on it, is definitely more expressive and unambiguous (Fig. 14, 15, 16, 17). Its key feature is the student's complete lack of autonomy in the choice of content or form of the product, manifested in striking similarity and repetitiveness. They are completely devoid of individual characteristics of their creators, and this effect is achieved by using the same matrix, tracing paper. On the one hand, this model of student inclusion can be considered to facilitate learning and organizing the surrounding world, introducing the child to a specific community order and culture in which they live, or even as something therapeutic thanks to reference to the habits, similarities, rituals that make it easy to get accustomed to the world and express emotions (Loose, Zarbock, Graaf, 2017). However, dominating the student's activity by patterns, observed clearly in the school space, gives rise to the suspicion that the purpose of their common use is to channel human activity into the

normative school order. This is supported both by the subject matter and the form of the works – the dominant aesthetics, expressed in the selection and sequence of the color and shape presented. A large number of almost identical works creates the impression of staticity, monotony, uniformity and schematicity. There is no place for unconventional perception of the world, for creating its images, and only completely unified works, one proper version of reality.

The spaces presented in the photographs indicate simulated practices that involve students in their creation<sup>1</sup>. In fact, they are expositions of the aesthetically and semantically imposed order which reveals the relations of power and subordination typical of the school's culture. Students are treated in this context as unable to take responsibility for their own space, to co-create it, even dangerous for the dominant normative order. At the same time, however, the didactic process and the image of the school requires the creation and presentation of their works. Hence, there are clichéd, indistinguishable creations that speak more about the culture of the school than about their creators.

### **The Practice of the Student's Mediated Participation in Creating a School Space**

The last practice is of a very special nature because it is based on a complete removal of a student from a direct participation in organizing his or her own place. This type of practice was mainly identified in school corridors (Fig. 18, 19). The characteristic feature of this practice is a strong concentration on shaping the image of the school through documentation of students' achievements (displaying the cups and diplomas). This presentation has a ritual nature (Goffman, 2000), and possible interpretations direct attention towards the rules of neoliberal culture, in which proper autopresentation is an important element of a local educational fair (Potulicka, 2014). What is striking in the way of presenting is the poverty of form and the symmetry which make the impression of scrupulousness and orderliness, vital from the perspective of building a school's brand (position). The display serves to create a conviction about the effectiveness of educational activities, documented through the cups and diplomas. However, it is completely devoid of any impact on the created space.

### **Conclusions**

Our attempt to explore the space of Polish state schools in search of the practices of including students in its creation, ended with an almost complete failure. Among the analyzed visual representations, there is an overwhelming domination of those which indicate only seemingly participation of students in organizing the school space rather than their actual participation in it. Few examples point to attempts made by teachers to provide students with small fragments of space that they can develop in their own way. However, what is important is that these are spaces that allow only limited forms of activity/creativity; in addition, their nature most often allows only a temporary exposure, which is not without significance from the perspective of having control over it.

Reggio pedagogy, accepted as a model pedagogy, in this context is a practice completely unknown in Polish state schools which are based on different philosophical assumptions concerning the concept of childhood, human learning and, above all, are characterized by a deep distrust towards students. Hence the few fragments of space in which students' works appear, and they document rather exclusionary practices than including the student in creating his/her own place. Students' work is controlled so precisely that the products are simple, uncomplicated and extremely unified.

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<sup>1</sup> Students' attempts to be included in the school space can be treated here as acts of aesthetic violence, visual pollution of public space, and even vandalism.

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Figures



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19