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Scholé through the Eyes of Students of Pedagogy at the University of South Bohemia

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Abstract

A professional discussion on curriculum content in all types of schools is beginning to take off. This discourse is driven by the desire to make teaching processes more effective, but it emphasises less the ethical aspects of education. The research investigations aimed to discover the ideological background of the terms 'school' and 'scholé' among students of pedagogical disciplines at the University of South Bohemia. It is based on questionnaire surveys and analysis of the authors' essays, to gain insight into how pedagogy students navigate the original meanings of words in this field. The next step was to categorise the students' statements according to their way of thinking based on this information. The resulting categories raise issues both in terms of the preparation of future educators and in terms of meta-pedagogy.

Keywords: scholé, school, dialogue, essays, ethics of pedagogy, meta-pedagogy, phenomenon, authorial reading, qualitative research, narrative research

Introduction

In the methodological aspect, this long-term participatory research is based on the assumptions of the constructivist theory formulated by František Jiránek – relationships exist in reality, the individual discovers them through his activity, this activity develops from material activity into thought activity in connection with the development of abstraction, i.e., the ability to take positions towards the world conditioned more and more socially. For the work with language, this means specifically that the meaning of a word cannot be communicated by pointing at the design. The individual must arrive at it through his own activity, through cooperation with others, especially adults.[1] This article is therefore conceived as a narrative probe into the story of a researcher in a long-term participatory research project. In this way, I believe it is possible to explain more clearly the procedures, methods, motivations, and thought processes used in qualitative research.[2] For this reason, the study is written in the first person.

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1   František Jiránek et al., *Otázky psychologie učeni* (Praha: SPN, 1966), 28.
2   Tomáš Řicháček, Ivo Čermák, Roman Hytych et al., *Kvalitativní analýza textů: čtyři přístupy* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013), 75.

Motivation for research investigations

In 2005, as an assistant professor, I joined the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology at the University of South Bohemia Faculty of Education in České Budějovice. My studies, expertise, profiling, and interest in the department directed me to Pedagogical Communication, Personal and Social Development, and Creative Dramatics courses. I started to think about the meaning of these specialisations. I decided the basic common denominator was acting in a pedagogical situation, i.e., concrete action. And if one acts in a situation, one should have (at least could have) an idea of where one is coming from, what one's personal setting is – so that he can guarantee that his pedagogical activity is based on some deeper structures in terms of values or ethics, that he is not a mere applicator or executor of methods or exercises, which in their essence, fulfil a purpose supplied by someone.

So, I decided to conduct a kind of 'research' outside of my independent pedagogical activity. I was very interested in the awareness of contemporary teachers and educators about the meaning of education. I remembered Professor Palouš. In 1997 I experienced him as a lecturer at the conference Dialogical Acting as an Open Question at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. He asked us if we knew the original meaning of the word dia-logos. I was almost thirty years old at the time, and I had completed my university studies in education. I proudly declared that the prefix 'dia' is two, after all. That makes sense – there must be two for a conversation! And I was far from alone. The professor smiled, not that we often do not even know the original meaning of words, and discussed Socratic dialogue.[3] I realised with amazement that I did not know the original meaning of the word dialogue in the ancient Greek philosophical sense, and ... I was ashamed. It came into my mind how it was possible that a graduate student in education had no knowledge of the basic 'pedagogical' concept. And what about other terms widely used in pedagogy? What about pedagogy in general?

Research Investigation

I chose the word 'school' and the original Greek word 'scholé' for the first research inquiry. I organised a survey in class asking who knows the term and its meaning. Subsequently, I asked the students for a term paper with an assignment:
1. Search three different scholarly sources for the definition of the word 'school' and cite the source.
2. Search three different scholarly sources for the definition of the Greek word 'scholé', i.e., find the original meaning and cite the source.
3. Write an essay based on a comparison of the meaning of both words.

I repeated the question and the assignment in the following years with the first-year students of the Bachelor of Distance Studies in Teaching for Kindergartens at the University of South Bohemia. This was a group quite indicative of contemporary pedagogy. Most of them were graduates of secondary schools of education with several years of experience. Over the ten years from 2005 to 2014, 603 students submitted this survey and subsequent essays. In the next three years (2015-2017), I contacted 94 first-year undergraduate students in Social Pedagogy at the same university. Between 2019-2022, I repeated the survey with 102 students of the master's programme in

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3   Radim Palouš, 'K základům sokratovského dialogu', in *Dialogické jednání jako otevřená otázka*, ed. Eva Vyskočilová (Praha: Akademie múzických umění, 1997), 4–7.

Leisure Pedagogy. In 2022, I also administered the survey to 52 University of the Third Age (U3V) students at the University of South Bohemia interested in the education of deprived children. Not a single correct answer was recorded throughout the survey. As a result of the survey, it was therefore found that of the 851 education or allied studies (U3V) students contacted, no one was familiar with the original meaning of the word scholé. Considering that the age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 85 and the survey has been conducted continuously since 2005, I believe this is quite relevant and telling data.

After I collected data in the first ten years, I decided to share the results at teacher conferences. Gradually, I published the data at conferences of the Czech Association of Educational Research (Pilsen 2015; České Budějovice 2016), at conferences of the Czech Pedagogical Society (České Budějovice 2015; Ostrava 2016; Zlín 2019), and the plenary lecture of the QAK Qualitative Research Conference (České Budějovice 2023). The most exciting moment of all six lectures was the introduction, when I organised a survey for colleagues from the academic sphere with the same task as for students, i.e., on the original meaning of the Greek word 'scholé'. Only three senior lecturers answered correctly. For the other university lecturers, two hundred in all, the meaning of the word was as much a surprise as it was for the students. This was a very reassuring discovery for me, as I was in the same position as a graduate student in education. A quarter of a century later, I am coming to similar conclusions about scholé as Radim Palouš did about dialogue.[4]

Quoting the Word 'School'

The first step in the assignment was to locate three different scholarly sources defining the word 'school' and citing that source. The U3V students no longer undertook this investigation as I was not in semester contact with them with the possibility of final colloquia. At the beginning of the survey back in 2005, students were still going to libraries quite frequently, whereas nowadays most sources (and references to printed publications) come from the internet. I list the most widely cited definitions and sources at this point. It can be concluded that they are currently representative of the study literature for education students.

A social institution of which the traditional function is to provide education to pupils of appropriate age groups in organised forms according to specific curricula. The concept and function of school changes with the changes in social needs. It has become a place of socialisation for pupils, promoting their personal and social development and preparing them for personal, working, and civic life. It has gradually lost its monopoly on education, opening up more and more to the realities of life and converging with ~non-formal education and ~informal education.[5]

This traditional educational facility has been and continues to be a fundamental institution to help the multifaceted development of the creative personality. Its millennial history is a picture of constant change in connection with the character of society and the development of its ideological orientation, its science, technology and art, and its whole way of life, and is characterised by both extensification and intensification tendencies.[6]

4   Palouš, 'K základům', 4.
5   Jan Průcha, Eliška Walterová, and Jiří Mareš, *Pedagogický slovník* (Praha: Portál, 1995), 221.
6   Vladimír Jůva, *Úvod do pedagogiky* (Brno: Paido, 1995), 95.

School (Schule) – An institution, whether publicly (state) or privately owned, in which children and youth are imparted in systematic instruction the knowledge and skills which are intended to enable them to carry out independent life activities within the framework of the state and social order. Schools generally provide this at certain fixed times, are located independently of the rotation of pupils and teachers in the same place and are oriented towards appropriate forms of education and training. They strive for the realisation of the defined aims of education and upbringing.[7]

A cooperative institution serving to carry out the systematic and planned education and training of youth and adults. The organisation of schools, the aims, content, and methods of their work change with the development of society. The society has a class character. The unified school in the social. Society overcomes the socially discriminatory character of education, not only formally and organisationally, but above all by the fact that, based on the profound democratism of the social establishment, it fundamentally eliminates the various types of general education schools at the time of compulsory schooling. In terms of its content and structure, it ensures a smooth transition for all pupils from the lower to the higher levels. The task of the social school is to prepare all-round and harmoniously developed citizens, the builders of the communistic society.[8]

Of course, the quote from 1982 catches the eye with its emphasis on the unified school and the advantages of the socialist system. The other quotations, too, although dating from the 1980s and 1990s, are still the most frequent. The definitions of schools' aims, purpose, and organisation are no different. So, the following research question, arguably a meta-pedagogical consideration in this regard, would ask why this is so. And what message does this convey about contemporary educational scholarship and its reflection through the eyes of education students?

Quoting the Word 'Scholé'

Regarding searching for citations of the word 'scholé', here are the most frequently cited definitions and sources.
'Scholé – contemplation of the world (Aristotle), a higher leisure activity for attaining mental well-being.'[9]
The term scholé is often described as 'rest, respite, leisure, lecture, conversation.'[10]
Another dictionary says that 'school comes from the medieval scola, from the Latin schola, and from the Greek schole, meaning calm, vacancy (which was used to attend philosophical schools).'[11]
Or that 'the Greek schole. scholé, Lat. Schola, which originally meant emptiness, leisure, or to study. Later it was transferred to institutions of learning, schools in the present sense, which are scholé in the sense that no livelihood or service is involved.'[12]
There is also a reference to the quote by Radim Palouš mentioned above:

7   Jan Průcha, *Moderní pedagogika* (Praha: Portál, 2009), 481.
8   Miroslav Štěpánek, *Ilustrovaný encyklopedický slovník* (Praha, Academia, 1982), 496.
9   'ABZ Slovník Cizích Slov', ABZ.cz, accessed 19th March 2024, https://slovnik-cizich-slov.abz.cz/web.php/hledat?cizi_slovo=schol%C3%A9&typ_hledani=prefix.
10   Jan Rejzek, *Český Etymologický slovník* (Voznice: Leda, 2001), 752.
11   Josef Holub and Stanislav Lyer, *Stručný etymologický slovník jazyka českého se zvláštním zřetelem k slovům kulturním a cizím* (Praha: SPN, 1992), 483.
12   Gérard Durozoi and André Roussel, *Filosofický slovník* (Praha: EWA, 1994), 295.

The term school is derived from the Greek word SCHOLÉ, the literal translation of which is 'mental vacancy'. We are puzzled by this etymology: after all, prázdeň or holidays is a time when there is no school! The original Greek meaning points to a completely different school function than we understand and how the school functions in contemporary reality. The school holiday is a space where one is not preoccupied with the daily hustle and bustle of life's many acquisitions (ascholia), when everyday worries and joys, jobs and pastimes recede, and when a gap opens up that has a kind of 'magical' effect: the absence of busyness suddenly opens up a view of what is not every day, what is extra-ordinary, out-of-the-ordinary.[13]

On the Meaning of Essays

After looking up quotes and finding the meaning of the words 'school' and 'scholé', students were asked to write the essay mentioned above. I assumed that the unexpected discovery – after all, the meaning of 'school' and 'scholé' are opposite – would cause the students to pause, reflect, and critically analyse.

As time passed, I noticed some misunderstandings under continuous questioning and subsequent seminars that actually became further inquiries. A misunderstanding about understanding one's own statement, a misunderstanding about the meaning of the essay. This was mistrust of the possibility of writing honestly and openly in school without fear of being sanctioned for an opinion or a position.

The essay should be a kind of experiment, weighing words, a contemplation of facts, and pondering. However, in school, it becomes one of the essay formats that need to be discussed in the context of Czech. Moreover, it also needs to be graded somehow. Is there any time at school for contemplation, reflection, or attempting to express oneself? We have so much material to go through. We need to practise each piece of writing, mark it, and move on. There is a lot to learn. After all, there are plenty of online tutorials on how to write a technical essay. It is actually the form that you supply the content to: that is, an introduction, an essay, and a conclusion. There is more on this subject described elsewhere.[14]

You can even order and buy the essay online – order and buy your own authorial attempt to express and contemplate what really interests me. It is lovely, isn't it…?

Most of the students are women and at a very productive age. They have families and deal with their own children, often with housing, mortgages, marital cohabitation, and aging parents, but most of all, they go to work. Most female students (men are minimal in these fields) of the distance studies of Teaching for Kindergarten (hence Social Pedagogy) do their work in the helping profession. This is a job demanding time and attention. On top of this comes training, officiating, and reporting on activities. Higher education is either directly required by the employer or pursued by the students themselves out of concern for their employment position. They have to carve out space, time, and attention for studying, term papers, and commuting to school, often at the expense of children, husband, and family. They need to reach the goal of gaining a qualification efficiently and productively.

Well, there goes that obscure assignment – the essay. That is to say, it needs only one thing – enough time, space, and attention. In essays and subsequent seminars, students do not actually read the quotes. They collect them, roll their eyes, and formally recite them in the sense that scientists are somehow explaining to us in a complicated way what school is about: what we kind

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13   Radim Palouš, *Světověk a Časování* (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2000), 73.
14   Stanislav Suda, 'Autorské čtení jako fenomén osobnostní výchovy', *Caritas et Veritas*, 2/2020: 147–158.

of know. Added to that lack of time to think and express themselves is the desire to complete the task as they have always been asked to do. They need to gain credit so they can go on to do more assignments, more homework, and gain more credit.

For myself, during my investigations during classes and colloquia, this meant repeatedly reminding students that they would not be graded on the essay and would gain credit (or an exam) in the colloquium for finding citations and turning in any form. Even if they cannot write anything truly original, they would not be sanctioned. With these considerations in mind, I proceeded to another inquiry – whether, during their schooling, they had been asked to write a shape, a reflection, or a meditation on a topic of their choice. Whether they had ever been in a situation where they had led discussions about their texts, opinions, or attitudes at school without some danger of being graded and marked. The survey responses indicated that no one had. It should be added, however, that these teaching courses are attended mainly by graduates of secondary vocational schools, with 'grammar school' graduates being the exception. However, even among those, there was no positive answer.

Categorisation of statements

This phenomenological analysis of the texts aimed to understand how the student relates to the new findings. Subsequently, it regards how he works with them in the essay further towards critically analysing the terms and their relevance to the broader social context regarding values or ethics. Seminar papers needed to be read carefully and possibly queried for ambiguities in the colloquium. What emerged from this perspective?

It is a kind of developed spread-out fan of different statements, telling about the writers' attitudes. It may be a kind of semi-perpendicularity. On the one hand, there is a reasonably rigid statement that the concepts are not related at all, that there is no connection between them, and some long research does not make much sense. On the other end of the fan, or in the infinite possibilities of the semi-straight line, is the author's openness to discussion based on an unexpected suggestion. This is done through various forms of reflection, reflection on memories, and dialogue with the inner self. Between these certain typical attitudes, the authors of the seminar papers move with their statements. According to their similar attitudinal orientation, the essays can be classified into roughly five categories.

1. If I want to interpret a particular, more rigid group of similar considerations, they are typically expressed in the sense of 'it used to be this way, but now it is this way'. The terms are de facto unrelated. We cannot compare the time of ancient Greece and today. Today, people are held to a completely different standard. The subtext is the conviction of 'it would have worked!' These attitudes were recorded in 277 students (about 35%).

2. A very interesting and contradictory reaction appears in other related statements and reflections. On the one hand, the essays show that the authors are negatively affected by the school experience. The new view of the concept of 'school' disrupts the perceived notion of school. On the other hand, however, they are unable to respond to this as an impulse of an alternative view and prefer to return to a safe scheme of thought. They arrive again at a similar conservative assessment of the sounding, with the conviction in the subtext of the statement – that it is not really worth thinking like this. This was the attitude of 242 students (about 30%).

3. For some students, the statement is very personal. They see the problems either in their family background but more often in the unwelcoming atmosphere at primary and especially at secondary school. The question arises whether there were no real positives in ancient education. However, they prefer not to emphasise such considerations in the end. A kind of 'rational' reflection on the change of times prevails. There is a kind of sigh in the subtext – how nice it would be to include elements of scholé in education, but such are the times. There were 155 students (about 20%) who were closest to this category.

4. A certain group of students appreciates that they were given the opportunity to reflect on the original meaning of the word 'school'. The texts highlight negative experiences of their schooling, and often of their children. They express concern about whether they can write freely about what they think at all in the context of university education, so that they do not receive a bad grade. The schooling experience dictates going along with the teacher and their expected opinion and attitude. This was the opinion of 78 students (about 10%).
In this group, there was a fear of negative evaluation for the opinion expressed. I became interested in this topic and asked further questions after the grades were recorded. I conducted a de-facto follow-up survey. It turned out that, based on my experience of the way grades are given in school, the vast majority of students expressed this concern.

5. Still, there are a few students who turn in essays that are exploratory, reflective, and dialogic. Topics emerge that are related to the experience of discovering a new meaning of a word and developing the thought process. Some seek historical sources – compulsory schooling, its motivation, and the consequences. The form of the message itself is varied – reflections, reflections on memories, dialogue with the inner self, or questions about the meaning of the message of different authors. These are students open to discussion. Unfortunately, there are only a few of them in each group. This was about one in twenty students (47 students, about 5%).

Research Findings

So, what are the research findings of this eighteen-year investigation with students mainly in education?
Qualitative section:
The non-strictly categorised groups of essays document certain degrees of courage, openness, and the writers' ability to evaluate critically new information based on which the construction of thought patterns may change.
In the quantitative part of the investigation, the following data emerged:
1. Of the 851 students interviewed, none knew the meaning of the word 'scholé'.
2. Out of 200 university teachers, 3 participants knew the correct answer.
3. The majority of students expressed concern that they would be penalised for their opinion in the evaluation.
4. From the survey, follow-up discussions, and direct questions, no one claimed to have been encouraged to express themselves openly and freely in the form of essays on free topics in school.
5. About 5% of the students can let go of thought patterns and fear of evaluation, and are able to think critically about new findings based on new and unexpected information.

Discussion

What do these data or findings bring us on the level of methodology and content?
On the methodological level, I believe it is the functional use of experimental, narrative, and auto-biographical approaches to the research questions and the choice of methods. At the same time, it is a validation and verification of Jiránek's assumptions that we can only discover relationships (or phenomena) through concrete activity and reflection. Each reflection on the data obtained opens up further research questions for a broader understanding of the issue.

At the level of content, it is a testimony to students' individual experience and ability to respond creatively to new findings. Furthermore, it is a finding that ordinary education staff and those interested in studying pedagogy (higher education) have not encountered the conceptual apparatus of the original meaning of school and its purpose in their previous studies, just as the vast majority of academic staff in education have not encountered it. Further, the findings reveal a concern among students that they will be penalised for expressing an opinion or position. In this context, it appears that a culture of free expression, open dialogue, or mutual discussion does not seem to be fostered in secondary schools. These data and findings raise further questions that must be asked in a broader context.

Thus, students and teachers of education do not have information and awareness of the educational tradition of ancient Greece or Christian Europe, and they do not encounter these issues, discuss them, or attach importance to them. Free time, free discussion, and dialogue can hardly be accommodated in an institution

> where children and young people are systematically taught the knowledge and skills that are supposed to enable them to live independently within the framework of the state and social order. Schools provide this, as a rule, within a particular limited time, are located independently of the rotation of pupils and teachers in the same place and are oriented towards appropriate forms of education and training. They strive for the realisation of the defined aims of education and upbringing.[15]

However, if we do not know the roots of our own culture and way of education, what does this say about the current way of education? What goals of education and training are we pursuing? From where and to where is our educational system headed, and what is the ethical implication? The survey findings show that the majority of students are afraid and fearful of being sanctioned for expressing their opinions. It is related to another finding, i.e., the attitude of teachers and the relationship between teacher and student. Students do not feel encouraged to express themselves openly and freely in the form of essays on free topics at school. Instead, they are encouraged by the system to learn the knowledge taught, not to dispute it, not to argue, and not to create unnecessary problems with subsequent assessments.

However, in point five of the research findings, it appears that some students can think critically based on new, unexpected information to make sense of messages from different authors or thematic contexts (e.g., compulsory schooling, motivation for it, implications) and develop their thought processes. They are students open to dialogue and knowledge.

The question for discussion is whether these findings are a picture of something socially dubious.

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15   Průcha, *Moderní pedagogika*, 481.

For example, what do we mean by pedagogical training? How do we understand teacher education and how university teaching staff are prepared? How do we view the profile of graduate teacher education? How do we even conceive of school, teachers, and real education? How deep is the disconnect in pedagogy between general declarations and the individually lived and reflected experience of real education and knowledge? Where are we as a society coming from, and where are we going? Shouldn't we be paying much more attention to this meta-pedagogical level?

Conclusion

Many thanks are due to the students who participated in this investigation. Their testimonies help to capture a situation in which the practicality of school policy and the day-to-day running of schools has de-facto reversed the original meaning of an oft-used term.

This study is not intended to explore in detail the broader issue of the relationship between school, leisure, and the meaning of education. Instead, it is a probe into the mindset of contemporary education students. Analysing individual accounts may point to an unnoticed contradiction between the current socially determining approach of educational science and school practice and the original mission of education. On this basis, it attempts to ask fundamental questions in meta-pedagogical and ethical terms.

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