

Ethnic Diversity in Czech Classroom through the Lenses of Interaction-Ritual Model

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Abstract:

This paper deals with non-rational aspects of hidden curriculum, specifically with ritual dimension of classroom interactions. It considers rituals to be important aspects of culturally underpinned behaviour which can be problematized in ethnically diversified classrooms. Using the interactionist perspective, the aim of this paper is to present analytical model of rituals applicable to empirical research of classroom attended by Czech and Roma minority pupils. Despite strongly embedded segregation of Roma children in the Czech educational system the author concentrates on Roma pupils educated in a mainstream public school. The author suggests different types of pupils' behaviour, coping strategies and other aspects of classroom community life which could be analyzed using the presented model in her developing ethnographical project. Conceptualizing school classroom as distinct social group with its own dynamics, this paper discusses the advantages of interactionist perspective reflecting the drawbacks of prevailing theories of cultural and social reproduction in education. This paper was supported by the Czech Science Foundation, under the terms of the research project „Educational Strategies of Migrants and Ethnic Minority Youth“ (P404/12/1487).

Keywords: Interaction Rituals, Roma Ethnicity, Inclusive Classroom, Czech Context.

Introduction

It is almost one hundred years ago since Max Weber (1997, 2009) predicated the disenchanting character of the still more and more secularizing and rationalizing modernity. However, in recent decades, increasing number of scholars started to doubt the self-evident relationship constructed by most of classical sociologists between modernity and eradication of any form of irrationality, mysticism and belief. They recognize that modern experience, next to its rational component, also encompasses unconscious, symbolic, bodily and emotional aspects. Often these authors share the common interest in rituality of modern life (Alexander, Giesen, Mast 2006). According to Jenkins (2000), we can observe re-enchanting tendencies even in the lives of big bureaucracies (such as schools) where myths, legends or rituals are constituents of everyday lives. In the field of education, there are certain explicit aims to feel life more sacral (as in some alternative pedagogies – e.g. Waldorf education, environmental education through the discourses of deep ecology, etc.) and therefore rituals are established which can resemble their tribal predecessors (Durkheim 2002). Nevertheless, this paper is interested in more subtle forms of ritualizations present in everyday life of a school classroom. Despite the expanding field of ritual studies, there is not so much knowledge concerning social and cultural roles of rituals in education (Quantz 1999). Furthermore, the authors dealing explicitly with the topic frame their approach predominantly by the theories of social or cultural reproduction (McLaren 1999), limiting new insights which can be gained as will be shown later in this paper. The paper deals with rituals as well as their role in maintaining multicultural classroom collectives – specifically those attended by Czech majority and Roma minority pupils. The research problem is focused on the hidden dimension of education, i.e. rituals which are part of the expressive school culture (Bernstein, Elvin, Peters 1966). If the identity or pupil's commitments are ignored or not met, we can expect with Quantz (1999) that not much learning will occur. Before presenting the theoretical underpinnings of the research project and introducing the interaction-ritual analytical model, it is necessary to familiarize the reader with the context of Roma children education in the Czech Republic.

Roma Pupils in the Czech Educational System: Defining Relevant Case

In the year 2007, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg declared that the Czech Republic discriminated the group of minority Roma pupils by categorizing them as mentally handicapped and placing them into special (in lay discourse called „practical“) schools. Such schools provide restricted curriculum and as a result less quality education. The educational gap between Roma and majority children has become hot issue. On the one hand, in public discourse (academic, NGO's and to some extent political), there are strengthening initiatives to discuss the relationship between educational segregation of Roma children and reproduction of their low socio-economic status. On the other hand, there is persisting and widespread unwillingness of majority parents to educate their children together with the Roma. Therefore, after five years of Strasbourg court verdict, Roma segregation remains widespread practice (Human Rights Council 2012) and the public image of Roma is even worse (in August 2013, approximately fifteen anti-Roma marches were held in Czech cities, initiated by extreme right wing followers). However, there exist certain mainstream (non-segregated) public schools integrating Roma children in mixed classrooms with majority pupils. The study is designed as ethnography of individual classroom from individual school in a chosen smaller Czech border-town. The sampling strategy was subjected to theoretical criteria: The research is conducted in a town which put inclusive local policy into practice few years ago to prevent Roma from segregation. This unique local policy is intended to fight against the white-flight (Nekorjak, Souralová, Vomatsková 2011) by evenly distributing Roma children to all

schools and respecting the inclusive rule – no more than three Roma pupils can be educated in one classroom. Until now, ethnography of the locality has been conducted by the researcher (history of Roma migration into the region, history of Roma segregation into one school and challenges brought by implementing the new policy). In addition, interviews were realized with several relevant participants (school directors, town representatives). It is important to look at the relational dynamics of the classrooms. Furthermore, the role of ethnicity as the lived experience of the pupils is crucial for their further (not only) educational careers. Since the ethnography of the classroom hasn't been commenced, this paper concentrates on the conceptual resources of the project without presenting empirical examples based on data analysis.

Advantages of Interactionist Perspective in Classroom Ethnography

Since most of the Czech studies dealing with the education of Roma children are concerned with the „external“ factors such as the value of education in Roma family or the life in socially excluded localities and its impact on the attitudes and school ambitions (Němec 2009, Bittnerová, Doubek, Levínská 2011), the author wants to contribute to the expanding knowledge in this field by exploring the life of ethnically mixed mainstream classroom from the inside. Doing that, the research is strongly inspired by interaction ritual perspective. With the help of the perspective of cultural production, there will be an opportunity to capture the shapeability of minority identities as well as the possibility of producing new cultural forms. Furthermore, it will be possible to go beyond widespread (and in the field of sociology of education maybe dominant) theories of social or cultural reproduction as well as cultural deficit theories. To overcome the structuralist temptations to explain all differences in children's behaviour and identities by the amount of economic and cultural capital they were endowed during socialization (compare with Bourdieu, Passeron 1990), inspiration will be drawn from the symbolic interactionist paradigm. It considers the actor being able to bring new symbols into interactions (Blumer 1969) and thus opens the possibility of change of meanings and interpretations in classroom relations. In addition, it brings the author to question the idea of stable and coherent ethnicity as determining social category. And more importantly, it enables the researcher to conceptualize classroom collectivity as distinct social group of children with its own dynamics as well as moral and cultural systems. Being aware of the advantages of interactionist approach, the author needs to reflect the criticism of micro-interactionist perspectives. Simultaneously, it is necessary to integrate aspects of power, domination and class relations into the author's analytical advancement (see Levinson, Foley, Holland 1996). The researcher is going to try to avoid the drawbacks of the micro-interactionist paradigm by reflecting conservative effects of rituals, the way they deepen the asymmetric relations in the classrooms as well as the manner in which they essentialize and paralyze the possible ethnic differences.

Three Pillars of Interaction Ritual Theory

In the ethnography of pupils' interactions in the classroom, the author will concentrate on interaction rituals. Since the research is highly inspired by the work of Erving Goffman, his key ideas, presumptions, concepts and points of intersections with the symbolic interactionist paradigm are going to be analyzed. Goffman's grounding presumption is that social situations are ritually organized. He considers the situation itself as reality sui generis (Rawls 1987), distinctive sphere of reality, specific boundary maintaining system. In other words, there are situational obligations (more precisely obligations of interaction order) in play which have to be followed to protect the sacred face of the actor (for example an individual has to follow one topic and cannot switch too quickly to another, to accept the frame of humour, otherwise the situational pressure to consent is present). " One must accept and honor the selves projected by the other participants" (Goffman, 1967: 105) because "one's face then, is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to

sustain it is therefore a ritual one" (Goffman, 1967: 19). According to Goffman, the interaction order produces its own kind of obligations necessary to sustain the social self and one's face. The self is highly performative and is constituted as a dramaturgical effect (Goffman 1999). On the other hand, the notion that the ritual organization of the interactions depends as well on the cultural norms and morality produced by the whole society is possible to be found in several instances in Goffman's work. Therefore, he can state: "The gestures we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all." (Goffman 1967: 91). Hence, ritually sustained interaction orders serve on the one hand as moral cement of the society and contribute to its stability. But on the other hand, they can provoke resistance against dehumanizing effects of the institutional orders as Goffman (1991) brilliantly captures in his study of the life of hospital for mentally ill patients. He thinks of ritual as an instrument for honoring something socially highly appreciated. "This activity, however informal and secular, represents a way in which the individual must guard and design the symbolic implications of his acts while in the immediate presence of an object which has special value for him (...)." (Goffman 1956: 478). In Goffmanian approach, rituals of deference and demeanor are highly important. The rituals of deference can be comprehended as performances which establish respect for certain objects transformed into the holy symbols. Goffman recognizes presentational rituals and rituals of avoidance as the types of rituals of deference. Rituals of avoidance are characterised by keeping physical distance, avoiding improper topics which can be hurting or surprising for the interaction partner. During presentational rituals, actor indicates what is his perception of other person and his relationship to them. Interaction ritual is then characterized by mutual cognitive and visual concentration of the actors, shared definition of the situation, sense of solidarity and system of ceremonial punctuations which serves for recovering potentially deviant acts. In compliance with Goffman (1967), the author is also interested in the ways the actors try to recover the lost ritual balance of the situation – for example by humour, resistance or by stigmatizing the other individual. The actor who produces situational ritual instability feels ashamed, is embarrassed and this has many empirical manifestations which can be recognized (stuttering, sweating, irresolution etc.).

Another inspirational theoretical source of author's project is the work of Randall Collins. His accent on micro-interactions and integration of Durkheim, Goffman and Garfinkel contributions to ritual theory makes him outstanding in the field of interaction rituals analysis. To the knowledge of the above mentioned theories, the double stratifying nature of rituals is added by Collins. Rituals firstly stratify communities between each other and at the same time, they stratify participants composing one community between themselves: some individuals (sociometric stars) are at the center of rituals while others stay rather on fringes, some of them are ritual initiators while others are ritual followers. Collins conceptualizes the individual as the "interaction ritual chain" (Collins 2004: 5) which demonstrates his anti-essentialist position and emphasis on the situational rules and processes. The model of Collins' interaction ritual resembles that of Erving Goffman and is comprised of physical proximity, mutual focus of the participants, their shared mood and resulting increasing group solidarity, group as well as individual emotional energy, strengthening moral sentiment and finally, the attachment to symbols. Collins stresses the role of emotional energy in everyday relationships which expands from high levels of enthusiasm to the lack of initiative and depression. The collective emotional engagement is, according to Collins, recognizable in rhythmical physiological harmonization of bodies. This kind of synchronization is also tangible in the ritual organization of conversation and speech. Generally said, his analysis is focused on the subcognitive and unconscious dimensions of ritual experience.

The author is further inspired by the work of anthropologist and educational theorist Christoph Wulf who supervised the *Berlin Study of Rituals and Gestures* research team. He defines ritual as an "activity to be recurring interactive patterns of behaviour that create and transform the boundaries, structures, values and norms of a group or community" (Wulf 2010: 13-14). Wulf and his colleagues concentrate on transitional phases of rituals when children leave one social status

(e.g. being a pupil) and transform it into another one (e.g. being a mate). During these liminal ritual phases (Turner 1969), we can observe the playful appealings, transformations and dramatizations of the existing symbolic meanings attached to particular social roles and statuses in classroom community. They are usually occurring in so-called performance areas (door threshold, the space in front of the board). During these processes, the existing communities are strengthened and new ones are emerging. Ritualizations set the boundaries which create different communities (according to the age of the pupils, their ethnicity or classroom affiliation) and perform and strengthen differences (Göhlich, Wagner-Willi 2007).

Towards the Interaction-Ritual Analytical Model

Here, the author would like to firstly, synthesize common characteristics of the rituals presented in the previous text and secondly, introduce the interaction ritual model which is suitable for empirical analysis of the ritual events in the classroom which is attended by majority as well as Roma minority pupils. Next to the formal and orchestrated rituals which form an important part of the school year cycle (e.g. the beginning of the school year, Christmas celebrations), the researcher's interest is predominantly in the micro-rituals of everyday life in the classroom. The author would like to begin with performative aspects of the events in performance areas, such as repeating gestures, face expression of the actors, shared emotional mood and produced moral sentiments. Next to the analysis of aestheticalbodily and emotional situational features, the ritual nature of the speech is going to be analyzed, i.e. ritualized beginnings and endings of the conversations, turn-taking rules, the intensity of rebukes and praise articulations, etc. Considering the conversations, there is also the importance of rhythm, tone of the voice, fluency, intensity of breaks or emergence of certain strange noises. We can expect to observe different conversational styles with regard to different cultural backgrounds of the pupils. At the centre of the analysis of the heard, the spoken and the visible are ways of displaying (dis)respect. In such situations, there exists danger of ritual profanations such as ceremonial contempt (there could be inappropriate respect in play), playful profanation (making fun of somebody), interaction breaks or rituals of punishment (using gestures which are not in compliance with the normative rules, playing inadequate roles). In the analysis of embarrassment, it is important to ask what categories of people are repeatedly embarrassed, in what kind of recurrent situation is it the case. In compliance with Goffmanian perspective, we can further deal with the prevailing techniques of impression management (Goffman 1999). Less competent pupils will be probably more often ritually punished to recover the interaction order. Although during everyday micro-rituals, the intensity of emotional engagement is definitely lower than during big formal ones (e.g. a pop concert), we can observe the level of rhythmic and physical harmonization of interaction partners, intensity of laughing, joy, resistance or protest. Enthusiasm as well as passivity are indicators of actor's emotional engagement. The relational web demonstrates itself in the extent of each pupil's popularity.

To sum up, the author's interaction ritualist model presupposes that the ritual can be enacted if firstly, there are two or more individuals physically present, secondly, if they share common attention, thirdly, if respect is displayed to some object in such situations and finally, if this produces positive or negative emotions and feelings of solidarity with or feelings of exclusion from certain existing school or classroom community. The model includes emotionality, corporeality, conversational structure and produced or re-produced morality. It can serve as a basis for ethnography of multicultural classrooms. The author presupposes that ethnicity represents very important factor in the character of interaction rituals. At the same time, the researcher conceptualizes the classroom as a space for identity negotiation and changes of the ritualized forms of interactions.

Reflecting the analytical ritual model presented above, the author puts the following research questions:

Are there differences between school institutional culture and classroom culture? Are there any subcultural forms of behaviour in between the classroom collectivity?

Do the rituals contribute to the enhancement of classroom community?

In what ways and by which occurrences is respect ritually displayed in the classroom interactions?

In what ways are classroom interaction rituals stratified (along the axes of ethnicity, age, reputation and so forth)?

Are there ruptures in the interaction order (what, when) in mutual interactions? Does ethnicity play any role during the interactional breaks and incidents? How is the interaction order re-established?

What kind of impression management is present in classroom interactions?

Conclusion

This paper concentrated on interaction rituals in ethnically diverse classroom. Using three theoretical approaches, the author develops multi-dimensional analytical model of school ritual interactions and suggests several criteria enabling to recognize rituals in pupils' behaviour. Conceptualizing ethnic differences as cultural resources which can be possibly mobilized and are tangible in different conversational and interactional styles of majority and minority pupils, the author expects to observe certain possible shapes of interaction rituals in the researched classroom in her following ethnographical research. Cultural differences in ritual interaction styles can be equalized through the assimilating pressure of dominant culture, or they can persist and produce certain forms of resistance, stigmatization and tensions; or certain manner of crossing over can be present – by producing local interaction style and rules of conduct that dwell on specific local cultural structure. It is the third interpretation of classroom local culture which seems to be most promising for uncovering of new interactional forms which can be produced in ethnically diverse classrooms. Such interpretation opens new horizons in studying classroom culture transcending the established cultural and social reproduction paradigm.

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Bio–data of the writer

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