

Review of  
***GRAMMARS OF SCHOOLING IN THE POST-AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXT.  
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHANGING TEACHING PRACTICES IN ELEMENTARY  
EDUCATION IN CZECH, POLISH AND PORTUGUESE SCHOOLS***

a Ph.D. dissertation authored by Lucie Bucharová,  
written under the supervision of Professor Dr Hab Maria Czerpaniak-Walczak  
in collaboration with Professor Dr Maria Joao Mogarro  
and with the assistance of Dr Anna Babicka-Wirkus

The dissertation authored by Lucie Bucharova, under the supervision of Professor Maria Czerpaniak-Walczak, in collaboration with Professor Maria Joao Mogarro and with the assistance of Dr Anna Babicka-Wirkus is a PhD project which, while documenting the Law-stipulated level of the Candidate theoretical and methodological competence as meeting the criteria of the first research degree in the social sciences (specialty: educational sciences), at the same time contributes to scholarly discourse through the outcomes of the “scrutiny” of the changing educational situation from inside via the personal educational theories of teachers.

This contribution is multi-layered or multi-dimensional. One of its dimensions is associated with the **problem field** and **the site** where the research project was carried out. Because the dissertation was produced within the *European Doctorate in Teacher Education – European Joint Degree* project funded from the EU Horizon 2010 funds dedicated to research and innovation (Maria Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no 676452), it was possible not only to explore the “grammar” of school education in the post-authoritarian circumstances through the lens of a collective case study, with the participation of narrators from three countries (Poland, the Czech Republic and Portugal), but also to collect quality empirical data in the “natural” conditions and analyse (and interpret) these data with the support of international experts.

Another aspect of the project’s originality lies in its **conceptual framework**. By building on the concept of the “grammar of schooling” developed by David Tyack and William Tobin, which in keeping with the subtitle of their 1994 study (“Grammar of Schooling: Why Has it Been so Hard to Change”) explains the difficulty of transforming teaching practices in early school grades in the countries that are shifting from educational etatism towards education “in” and “for” democracy, not only yielded interesting findings in the form of micro-theories of political and cultural barriers to systemic transformation in education mounted even by innovation-welcoming teachers, but also carries an extraordinary potential for the development of the scholarly debate on teachers and teaching profession with the use of constructs developed in comparative studies. It is hard to overestimate the value of the dissertation’s **critical account of the grammars of schooling internalised and practiced by teachers!**

By opening the discourse of contemporary research on teaching and teachers to theories developed in other sub/disciplines (specifically, comparative education science), the dissertation indisputably contributes to the development of this scholarly field.

The methodological framework the Author constructed for her own research by combining **phenomenography and critical theory** (as developed by Paulo Freire) is another original idea used in the dissertation. The phenomenographic approach, in which subjects are believed to experience reality only within their consciousness, helped define the object of research (the way in which teachers experience the co/created educational reality), while Freire's concept of *conscientização* types on the one hand promoted focusing in interviews on teachers' educational interactions and relationships with the students' parents and on the other provided an interpretive key for analysing the compiled data (magical, mythical and critical consciousness).

Having outlined the value of the dissertation in terms of its scholarly merits, I will proceed to formulating formal remarks and assessments which are mandatory in the procedure. Following the "classic" approach in this respect, I will sequentially focus on: (a) stating in how far the content of the work corresponds to its title; (b) assessing the arrangement of the content, the structure of individual chapters and the completeness of the theses, while (c) evaluating the conceptual quality of the dissertation, including the "examination" of the theoretical and methodological coherence of the research project that underpins it; and (d) commenting on the formal aspects of the text under review.

The content of the dissertation fully corresponds to its title. In the title, the Author included the main concept organising her explorations and pointed to the methodological basis and the field of her research. The formulation *Grammars of schooling. Comparative study of changing practices in elementary education in Czech, Polish and Portuguese schools* unambiguously captures the object, the aim, the approach and the outcome of the study on which the dissertation is based, i.e. a collective case study yielding an account of grammars of schooling which are internalised and practised by early education teachers in Poland, the Czech Republic and Portugal.

With its nearly 300 standard manuscript pages, the structure of the work reflects the context in which the dissertation was produced, the course of the Author's explorations and her major findings. The dissertation consists of the "Summary" (In English, Polish and Portuguese), the "Introduction", two main parts which present, respectively, the theoretical and methodological frameworks underlying the research study ("Theoretical foundation" and "Empirical part"), a chapter devoted to the discussion of the research findings underpinned by selected theories ("Theories provide framework – discussion"), References, Tables and Charts and an Annex which contains selected tools and "raw" results.

The "Introduction" is conventional. Readers find out in it about the context in which the research was undertaken (EDiTE), the reasons behind the choice of the subject matter, the aims of the work, the research questions and the style of the research on which the work reports.

Part one is comprised of five chapters. The first of them presents the changing (socio-political) context of teaching practices in the post-authoritarian countries in which the study was carried out. It consists of two subchapters. One of them is devoted to post-communist countries (Poland and the Czech Republic) and the other to the situation in Portugal. This broad introduction is expedient in designing not only a collective but also international case study. It can (and does as evinced by the reading of "empirical chapters") serve as the source of categories used to scrutinise the collected data.

The subsequent chapters of the dissertation provide the theoretical framework of the conceptualisation of the Author's own research. Specifically, the second chapter discusses the current challenges in the sphere of professionalism and/or professionalisation of teaching. Here the Author builds, for example, on Donald Schon's concept of reflective practice based on a redefinition of theory and practice and the "new" typologies of teaching competencies that result from it. The third chapter deals with the eponymous "grammars of schooling." The

Author not only outlines and explains the major assumptions and the core of the concept in terms of tensions between tradition and challenges in contemporary teaching, but also places them in the context of discussions on education reforms, drawing on Michael Fullan's theory of change and inquiring into the foundations of the teacher's authority and the links between his/her autonomy and innovations that sometimes cut across the existing reality (i.e. grammars of schooling). I regard the selection of these concepts as entirely justified by the aims of the work. They are shown as a response of theory to the changing situation in schooling. One of them opens up the space of different (post-traditional) thinking about teachers and about the essence of their professional pursuits, arguing that professional competences must be redefined. The other shows the relevance of that which, though not necessarily explicitly named, is internalised and considerably affects teachers' classroom practices. The socially constructed, politically and culturally anchored and formally "structural" grammar of schooling – like the grammar of language as theorised by Chomsky – works as a specific filter of changes: as the source of resistance to or reinforcement for innovations. This discussion finds its complementation in the fourth chapter, which engages with critical theories of education. The Author not so much evokes in it the major assumptions and the core of critical and emancipatory pedagogy, building of Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux and Paulo Freire, as rather portrays this discourse as a tool for shuffling off the oppression/enslavement of entrenched grammars of teaching. In the fifth chapter (the last one in this part of the dissertation), the Author returns to the context of her research. She sketches the distinctive character of elementary education in the countries she studied, the system of education, training and professional development of the teachers who work in them and juxtaposes the "philosophy" of the changes currently implemented in schooling with John Amos Comenius's "didactics" as the foundation of traditional teaching.

I do not question the selection of the theoretical framework for the study. I wish only, at this point in my review, to notice that the chapters which make up the first part of the dissertation are rather short and in a way choppy. Some of them only consist of 4-5 pages. Considering the way in which the second part of the dissertation is structured (with the disproportion being evident here), I would like to suggest that if the dissertation is submitted to publication, these short chapters should be turned into subchapters.

The second ("Empirical") part consists of **only one very long chapter** (150 pages as compared with the forty pages of the first part, which – let me repeat – contains five chapters). Titled "The Methodological foundations of research," the chapter is comprised of six subchapters. The first of them presents the research problem, the second the aims of and the specific questions investigated in the research study, while the following three address sampling, ethical considerations and the methodology of data collection. Such structuring and division of the content of these subchapters (6.1 – 6.5) fully complies with the canonical standards of writing reports from social research and implies that the Author is well prepared for carrying out research studies. Based on a solid literature survey in the scope of qualitative social research, where a special place is of course given to phenomenography, the subchapters are fully convincing as to the choices and selections made by the Author throughout the stages of her work. This concerns the justification of and the methods of defining the (cognitive, theoretical and practical) aims, the formulation of research questions, the sampling (a few schools of varied formal status and geographical location in each country and several teachers-narrators working in them). In this respect, the design of data collection and recording should be appreciated. Specifically, it involves the "qualitative triangulation" which includes semi-structured interviews with teachers, their free narratives and observations of interaction episodes in classroom. Emphatically, the Author had to cope with considerable challenges she encountered at this and not only this stage of the study. All interviews were administered and transcribed in the native languages of the narrators and then translated for

analysis, description and interpretation into English – the language of the dissertation. What also deserves underscoring is the Author's self-awareness of (also ethical) limitations caused by this fact, which is expressed in the following subchapter.

The sixth subchapter is devoted to phenomenography, which Bucharová adopted as her main theoretical position in the qualitative research she undertook. The way this subchapter is entitled and located in the works seems a bit problematic. The point is that the choice of the position determines (as it were) the formulation of research questions, and opting for phenomenography as a theoretical position in the original research (as is stressed in the dissertation a few times) was a direct extension of its conceptualization. If the internalised grammars of schooling mirrored in actual practices were supposed to be the object of research, then the choice of the research perspective that puts at the centre consciousness, i.e. the way in which people experience phenomena, obviously seemed the most relevant one here. Consequently, I believe that situating this subchapter at this particular place in the dissertation results not so much from the actual sequence of steps used in the research procedure, as rather from an effort to somewhat puristically apply the rules of working with the empirical material which are "obligatory" in this approach. And so, the subsequent chapters are devoted to data analysis, coding that develops so-called outcome space, analytical tools, and the construction (adoption, establishment) of categories of description for the interview data (a key element of this approach).

Returning to my previous reservation about the disproportionate division of the dissertation's content and having in mind the logic of argumentation (the imperative that things presented later result from those presented earlier), I believe that the content of this subchapter does not quite align with what is customarily included in so-called methodological chapters. What is actually presented in the second part of the dissertation in the subchapter entitled "Phenomenography" forms in fact the result of the research and, as such, could easily be placed in a separate chapter of its own. This chapter would anyway be quite long, given its six subpoints, for as it stands now it presents so-called categories of description (i.e. the schools' common features – space, time, and evaluation – derived from the analysis of transcripts), interpersonal relations at school (among students, between the teacher and the student, with the school head, among colleagues), as well as typical utterances (meanings) concerning teachers' personalities (critical attitude to authorities, attitude to the curriculum, hidden curriculum), inclusion, changes (tradition and innovation) and analyses of data from observations and free narratives.

Devoted to research findings, the following (seventh) chapter – the last one of the dissertation – caps the conception of the operations of grammars of schooling in post-authoritarian countries, such as the Czech Republic and Poland as well as Portugal, which was constructed in the previous chapters (in sections 6.6.4 - 6.6.6). The conception is comprehended here, consistently with the phenomenographic approach, as a fundamental way of understanding the studied phenomenon, i.e. the perception of mechanisms of the influence exerted by culturally entrenched *structures* and *rules* in the expected (recommended in the new political situation) change of teaching practices in early education (a shift from the tradition based on Comenius's didactics towards an interactive model grounded on democratic relations among all the education shareholders).

Announcing in the title of the chapter ("Theories provide framework discussion") the formula of presenting **the concepts of "grammars of schooling"** which appear in the consciousness of early education teachers in the selected post-authoritarian states, as found in her research, the Author first describes how the teachers "think and act" in the situation of transition from tradition to "small" innovations in the areas of early education singled out in

earlier analyses,<sup>1</sup> subsequently discusses how far their consciousness of the changes embodies the consciousness types distinguished by Freire,<sup>2</sup> and finally depicts how they understand and what actions they undertake in educational practices at school and in contacts with their students' parents. Richly quoting the teachers' words, the chapter shows how educational policies sometimes doom and often hinder transformation of the teaching culture and thus answers the main research question, i.e. what kind of grammar is internalised and practised by early education teachers in Poland, the Czech Republic and Portugal.

The dissertation ends with "Conclusions and recommendations" (not included in the Table of Contents), the "References," the "List of Tables and Charts" and an "Annex." In this basically conventional conclusion, the Author tries to sum up her research findings and point to their various implications. Importantly, she outlines **the relevance of her findings to practice**. What I find vital here are the observations which **free teachers from the sense of guilt** for failed applications of "new" strategies suggested or recommended not only by education scholars. The strong emphasis on **their "dissonance" with the systemic solutions** (if not the lack of such solutions in the first place), together with obsolete parental cultures, can not only brand the "squandering of time" in the aftermath of "revolutions" or political shifts in the studied countries, but first and foremost provide the starting point for development projects.

The bibliography consulted by the Author is very rich. The References list over 140 items, including sources from the leading discipline of the dissertation and publications affiliated with other social and humanistic sciences (cultural anthropology, sociology and philosophy). Critically compiled and used in various parts of the dissertation, they are – alongside the correctly formulated assumptions and problems as well as effectively selected (and applied) methods – a testimony to the Author's considerable conceptual and methodological competence and capability as an independent researcher.

Emphatically, the Author carefully documents her research and analyses. The resources included in the Annex, broad but carefully selected (exemplifying the consecutive stages of the procedure), additionally attest to the Author's methodological solidity and ethical sensitivity.

Shortcomings of the dissertation are mainly of editorial character. As already mentioned, some objections can be raised not so much to the major outline of the dissertation (arranging the argument in two main parts, the theoretical and the empirical ones, is justified) as to the structure of content division. Some criticism is also invited by the narrative of the chapters which present the research findings. The lengthy verbatim quotations from the interview transcripts and the elaborate tables which present the levels of analysing the collected empirical resources certainly do not make the reading of this text any easier, though admittedly, they comprehensively and reliably document the processing of the data (on various levels or at various stages).

In the concluding paragraph of this review, I would like to stress that the remarks listed above are polemical rather than critical and are meant to help the Author improve her text when preparing it for publication, which I believe will happen soon. Considering the opinions and assessments presented above, I state that the doctoral dissertation written by Lucie Bucharová, MA, under the supervision of Professor Dr Hab. Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak addresses an important research problem and solves it in an original way. In view of this fact, I recommend that Lucie Bucharová be admitted to the public defence of her dissertation. **The dissertation meets the requirements defined in the Law on Scientific**

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<sup>1</sup> To recall, they are: space and time, evaluation, collaboration with parents, interpersonal relationships at school, coping with the tension between the self-critical stance and the urge to retain authority, the attitude to curriculum and hidden curriculum.

<sup>2</sup> That is, magical, mythical and critical types of consciousness.

**Degrees and Titles and on Degrees and Titles in Art of 14<sup>th</sup> March 2003 (JoL No 65, item 595, with later amendments).** This assessment concerns the content, the methodology and the practical dimension of the dissertation under review. Because of the original conceptualisation, the way that the research study is theorised, the solidity of the methodological approach to the processing of empirical data and the applicability in practice, I also recommend that, when successfully defended, the dissertation be published in an abbreviated version.