

Lucie Bucharová

*Early Stage Researcher, MCS Fellow, University of Lower Silesia, Wrocław, Poland*

ORCID: 0000-0002-1335-185X

## Grammars of Schooling in the Post-Authoritarian Context: A Comparative Study of Changing Teaching Practices in Elementary Education in Czech, Polish and Portuguese Schools

**ABSTRACT:** This paper reports on my dissertation research, a phenomenographic analysis of how elementary teachers in three countries did or did not change their teaching practices in response to the transformations of their cultures and societies. Data come from in-depth interviews with 28 elementary teachers from Poland, the Czech Republic and Portugal. The concept of the “Grammar of Schooling” proposed by Tyack and Tobin in 1994 was used to understand and explain how outdated conceptions of the aims and functions of school can exert a durable influence on teaching practices.

**KEYWORDS:** elementary school teachers, “Grammar of Schooling,” post-authoritarian countries, critical consciousness, educational change

---

Kontakt:	Lucie Bucharová bucharovalucie@seznam.cz
Jak cytować:	Bucharová, L. (2019). Grammars of Schooling in the Post-Authoritarian Context: A Comparative Study of Changing Teaching Practices in Elementary Education in Czech, Polish and Portuguese Schools. <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 31(1), 125–134. <a href="https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2019.1.8">https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2019.1.8</a>
How to cite:	Bucharová, L. (2019). Grammars of Schooling in the Post-Authoritarian Context: A Comparative Study of Changing Teaching Practices in Elementary Education in Czech, Polish and Portuguese Schools. <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 31(1), 125–134. <a href="https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2019.1.8">https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2019.1.8</a>

---

## INTRODUCTION

As a veteran teacher in early childhood education who experienced the democratic transition in what once was Communist Czechoslovakia, I was interested in exploring the possibilities for educational change in the aftermath of political transformation. For my research, I selected three countries that had recent experiences with authoritarian regimes, whose fall had created an opportunity to remodel their societies and adapt the schooling system to changed social conditions by installing new democratic principles in education.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

After three years of research, I know that putting transformative democratic education into practice is not easy thing. While education and schooling are social microcosms in and of themselves, as well as mirroring the larger social body, teachers are expected to respond to changing social and political conditions by transforming their professional practices. Teachers are crucial players in creating school cultures, with considerable influence on students and other participants in children's learning process. In my research, I drew on critical pedagogy to understand and describe how teachers responded to sociopolitical change in their professional practice. In attempting to grasp their attitudes and reactions to change, my main research question was: What kind of "Grammar of Schooling" (GoS) is internalized and practiced by teachers in Polish, Portuguese and Czech schools?

As my research focused on teachers' consciousness of change at the elementary level of education, I formulated more specific questions: To what extent do teachers carry the post-authoritarian burden? How do they relate to tradition and innovation? Are they willing to apply new teaching approaches in their daily practice, and if so, in what ways do they do so? I divided the potential changes in education into two groups. One included policy-driven top-down changes influenced by general developments observable across the European Union's member states. The other comprised changes teachers could implement on their own within the existing school

system, building both on the primary (policy-driven) changes and their own practical insights and experience.

#### RESEARCH AIMS

My research project had two major goals. First, I wanted to identify and explore the content and structures of the “Grammar of Schooling” (Tyack and Tobin, 1994) in the awareness of early-education teachers. With this purpose in mind, I established a range of phenomenographic categories, which I used to capture teachers’ prevailing opinions and perceptions of changes, and the different practices of teachers’ involvement in these processes. Second, I wanted to understand why and how the “Grammar of Schooling” stimulated or inhibited teachers’ openness to the democratization of relationships among the various subjects and participants of education.

#### RESEARCH SCOPE AND RESULTS

##### **Background and Significance of the Study**

I carried out my research in Poland, the Czech Republic and Portugal, three countries that in recent years have coped with the consequences of decades-long authoritarian rule<sup>1</sup>. These consequences have been acutely felt in education, which the authoritarian regimes had used to promote uniform political allegiances to the political systems and loyalty among their subjects. The political ideologies strongly affected people’s morality and civic attitudes. In these social and political orders, teachers found their options and choices severely limited: they were pressured into obeying rigorously defined curricular demands, which severely constrained their autonomy. Given these historical conditions, studying teachers’ awareness of and attitude toward changes at schools and their preparedness to re-invent their own teaching practices in the post-authoritarian context can relevantly contribute to our knowledge of the mechanisms of the “Grammar of Schooling” and educational change as such.

##### **Key Concepts and Theory**

The conceptual framework of my project was inspired by the “Grammar of Schooling” metaphor proposed in 1994 by David Tyack and William Tobin. They defined the “Grammar of Schooling” as “the regular structure and rules that organize the work of instruction,” including standardized organizational practices, such as “dividing time and space, classifying students and allocating them to classrooms (grading) and splintering knowledge into ‘subjects’ ” (Tyack and Tobin, 1994, p. 454). While all these features and arrangements come to be taken for granted and viewed as natural by children, teachers and parents, it is legitimate to inquire whether they

---

1 Linz (2000, p. 159) defines authoritarian regimes as “political systems with limited political pluralism, without sophisticated and leading ideology, but with a typical mentality, without extensions or intense political mobilization (except for some stages of their development), in which the leader or his small group applies power within formally poorly defined but predictable borders.”

are appropriate and relevant to today's world, or whether they should and can be replaced. Tyack and Tobin attempted to explain why some educational reforms took strong hold, whereas other efforts to change the "Grammar of Schooling," i.e., the ways in which the schooling process is organized and proceeds, remained unsuccessful.

For teachers, the challenges of change seem enormous. While some adapt readily to altered sociopolitical circumstances and the ways these affect their professional practice, others feel more comfortable sticking to teaching and schooling practices to which they are accustomed, despite the changed context. The tension between the comfort of the customary and the challenge of innovation is one of the sources from which the "Grammar of Schooling" derives its power and efficacy. In my work, I chose to expand the framework with the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, namely his concept of teachers' consciousness, which refers to their ability to recognize and reflect on the established and traditional paradigms of schooling and education. According to Freire (2005), teachers often endorse myths and stereotypes about school education, and they do not necessarily realize that they find themselves in the situation of oppression, serving the existing system. As my research approach, I combined Freire's critical theory with phenomenography because phenomenography is specifically designed to investigate the content of consciousness, i.e., the ways subjects think of, conceptualize and represent particular phenomena.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

As a qualitative research method, phenomenography relies on interviews and observations. The phenomenographic interview focuses on how interviewees understand the concept under exploration, and they are encouraged to reveal their qualitative understanding of the phenomena under study. In phenomenographic research, the processes of conducting and reading interviews are important, and the quality of research depends on the initial acquisition of the interviews and their transcripts. Transcription is a transformative process that links interview and analysis across data. As explained by Dortins (20002, p. 207), "[t]he critical aspects of interviews as living conversations can be identified, namely that they are productive interactions in which the data is constituted, that the interviewee and interviewer negotiate on several levels to produce a shared meaning, and that meaning production in interviews is achieved through language."

According to Bowden and Walsh (2000), researchers can use two common kinds of questions in phenomenographic interviews. One type includes open-ended and diagnostic questions through which different ways of understanding the phenomenon under study are revealed. The other type consists of what the authors refer to as "What is X?" questions (Bowden and Walsh, 2000, p. 8), which elicit responses about the researched topic but do not address it specifically. The successful application of the phenomenographic approach hinges on the characteristics of both the researcher and the interviewee. The researcher's skill in asking the right questions at the right

time is pivotal. In this, phenomenographic interview somewhat resembles the ethnographic process, asking such questions as “Could you explain that further?” or “What do you mean by that?” and “Is there anything else you would like to say about this problem?” (Bowden and Walsh, 2000). At the same time, the respondent’s personality, in the sense of openness to interviewing and readiness to offer candid responses, is crucial.

In my research, teachers were briefed on what they would be asked about and asked whether they were willing to continue with the interview, making sure they were not pressured to participate. I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews: 10 in Poland, 4 in Portugal, and 14 in the Czech Republic. I asked the teachers to describe important changes in their practice, e.g., how they adapted to top-down changes (implemented by the system, the Ministry, and/or the school administration), and what changes they made in their own practice, in their approach to work and their teaching. In the process, I was hoping to learn about early-education teachers’ prevailing opinions concerning changes and their involvement in them.

I analyzed my data manually. For every interview, I prepared special charts in which I searched for codes and subsequently created subcategories – pools of meanings. In my coding procedure, I always started by creating a range of codes based on the first interview (36 in my first interview in the Czech Republic), then moved on to the next interview. I added the codes to the table and assigned them to the pool of meaning, collecting 50 codes after the first reading of interviews conducted in the Czech Republic. Subsequently, after going through all the codes, pools of meanings from first and second readings, and charts I had drawn up in my analysis, I selected central issues and created categories and subcategories common to all three countries. Figure 1 below lists examples of my pools of meaning, on which I drew to create the descriptive categories and subcategories.

Figure 1. Pools of meanings

<b>Emerging main categories and subcategories</b>	<b>Pools of meanings</b>
<b>1. MAIN FEATURES OF THE COMMON GRADED SCHOOL – CHANGES WITHIN GoS</b>	
<b>A. Space</b>	Hidden space in the classroom Small collective – advantages Shifts in Poland Changing classroom Changing teachers in the class Group and project work, individualization Changing the school as a workplace
<b>B. Time</b>	Children at school – all day Obstacles to changing time units Time for teachers – meetings Extracurricular activities
<b>C. Evaluation</b>	Grading, unfair evaluations Parents' meetings Only positive grades Testing, selection of students Physical education, music, weak students and evaluation Homework – influence on assessment Individualization or democratic rules Written assessment, low-achieving students Negative evaluation Teacher evaluation Purpose of evaluation Grading – strong tradition
<b>D. Relations with parents</b>	Finding out about and meeting the families Creating community – teachers' efforts Parents' help for school Parents' meetings Problems with parents Homework Examples from teachers' own lives Parents' competitiveness Divorced parents Teachers' responsibility – for what
<b>2. RELATIONS IN THE SCHOOLS</b>	<b>Pools of meanings</b>
<b>A. Among students</b>	Collective, tolerance Parents' influence Strong lifelong friendships Family-related influences Conflicts in the classroom
<b>B. Teacher-student</b>	Influences from teachers' childhoods Better and worse classes Elementary teacher as the next authority figure Teacher's decision – why elementary teaching An individual approach to children

<b>C. Relations with the administration and among colleagues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers help one another</li> <li>Bad relations</li> <li>Head teacher</li> <li>Improving relations</li> <li>Large schools</li> <li>Psychological or other assistance</li> <li>Number of teachers in classroom</li> <li>Sabbatical</li> </ul>
<b>3. THE TEACHER 'S PERSONALITY</b>	<b>Pools of meanings</b>
<b>A. Self-criticism authority, self-confidence versus authorities'</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-esteem</li> <li>"Reflective practitioner"</li> <li>Personality and professionalism</li> <li>Authority, self-confidence</li> </ul>
<b>B. Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overloaded or inadequate curriculum</li> <li>Missing knowledge in curriculum</li> <li>Changed curriculum</li> <li>Individualization</li> </ul>
<b>C. Hidden curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relations with parents</li> <li>Relation to evaluation, grading</li> <li>Selection for gymnasium</li> <li>Insincere communication</li> </ul>
<b>4. INCLUSION</b>	<b>Pools of meanings</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dividing teachers' time among able-bodied students and students with disabilities</li> <li>Mainstream school or special school</li> <li>"Problem children" – is it inclusion?</li> <li>Assistant teacher</li> <li>Repeating the school year</li> </ul>
<b>5. CHANGE, YES OR NO</b>	<b>Pools of meanings</b>
<b>A. Tradition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inherited teaching methods</li> <li>The teacher's authority</li> <li>Town or village school</li> <li>Old tools</li> </ul>
<b>B. Innovation = new tradition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training and self-education opportunities</li> <li>Individual innovation</li> <li>Headmaster's autonomy</li> <li>Examples from abroad</li> <li>Too many changes</li> </ul>

---

Side by side with interviews, I also relied on narratives that I asked my respondents to produce in writing on their own time. My research participants actively responded to my requests, and I appreciated McEwan and Egan's insight that sharing stories may make the participants feel their lives are important and they are heard. At the same time, when people tell a story, it helps them spot and understand themes they need to process (McEwan and Egan, 1995). Another advantage of narrative research is that giving opinions is a natural part of life because everyone has stories

to share or tell others. In this way, narrative research is familiar to individuals because it generates data through a common, everyday activity (Creswell, 2012).

At the center of my narrative research was the concept of “change” as it was reflected in individual teachers’ careers. The written assignments contained only two questions, in which teachers were urged to assess whether they had reacted positively or negatively to the changes they had undergone in their careers. Teachers could describe their “personal” changes in either the approach to or the perception of specific pedagogical situations and cases. In this section, teachers very often described the problems at hand in their countries or at their schools.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

The major finding of my research is that the “Grammar of Schooling,” i.e., the traditions internalized in the consciousness and practices of Polish, Portuguese and Czech teachers, are influenced mainly by educational policy, teachers’ personal experiences and roles, and their relationships with parents, who are very often perceived as obstacles to change. On the whole, teachers are willing to make many changes in the areas I coded as my categories of description (space, time, evaluation, parenting, in-school relationships, authority, self-criticism, curriculum, hidden curriculum, inclusion). Nonetheless, teachers often follow traditional approaches or adopt changes only temporarily. They admit that they often do not receive clear signals from the school leadership indicating that they are encouraged and allowed to make changes and alter their teaching practices. Consequently, teachers either do not believe that they have a free hand or indeed lack the autonomy or the conditions to launch teaching innovations in their classrooms, perceiving educational policies as forcing them to abide by overloaded curricula.

In all three countries, the reasons teachers adopt negative or passive attitudes toward change are similar. The frequent explanation of why teachers are passive is that they are tired. In Poland, teachers are tired of frequent changes in fundamental rules. In the Czech Republic, they are tired because of low income, continuing social criticism and general underappreciation of the teaching profession. In Portugal, they are tired of increasing bureaucracy and competitiveness within the profession, which are engendered by the system and exacerbate workplace relationships. In their responses, teachers reported that their working conditions were not improving as fast or decisively as in those in other professions, and they perceived the prestige of their profession as low. They believed their work was often questioned and criticized, while at the same time they were “expected to perform miracles.” While undoubtedly involving personal bias, many of these complaints may certainly be attributed to the systemic conditions in which teachers work. In my dissertation analysis, I described and assessed teachers’ attitudes toward and engagement with changes through the lens of Freire’s theory, and highlighted how critical consciousness among teachers promoted the democratization of education. At the same time, naïve consciousness was also to be found among teachers who, for various reasons, adhered to old meth-

ods of teaching. They cherished nostalgia or did not believe in the emerging possibilities to teach differently, disaffected as they were with the plethora of top-down changes whose implementation consumed their time and resources.

In my research, I also sought to grasp how the new features of mainstream schooling in the three countries differed from post-socialist (Poland and the Czech Republic) or post-authoritarian (Portugal) education models. I compared traditional and innovative methods and approaches used in schooling. In doing so, I relied on the features enumerated by Tyack and Tobin (1994), especially on the characteristics of the graded school (some of which are included in my first category of description: space, time, **evaluation**, parent relations), and added other aspects to explain what changes teachers were willing to make or accept. Figure 2 below contains relevant examples.

Figure 2. Grammar of Schooling: Evaluation – examples from research

Traditional	Innovative
<p>Teachers have clear rules for assessment/grading. They evaluate students based on their knowledge, most often using standardized tests. They compare them to one another. A child who does not succeed – cannot handle the curricular demands for a given grade – repeats the class.</p>	<p>Teachers try to individualize teaching because children have different personalities and abilities, which teachers should take into account. Teacher professionalism is measured by how the teacher balances the interests of the individual and the interests of the entire class, abiding by democratic rules. Elementary schools need not only to evaluate and measure knowledge, but also to motivate children to become involved in different activities. Many teachers succeed in doing so. In this respect, the aim of evaluation is different from that in regular school subjects, where performance is most often supported and evaluated by grades.</p>
<p>Some teachers and parents regard grading as a necessary form of motivation. Standardized tests also serve this purpose. Their results offer guidelines for parents who need to monitor and compare their children's results; teachers need them to establish what their students have learned and where they need to work more; and they are useful to head-teachers and administrators for different comparative purposes.</p>	<p><b>CR:</b> Formative assessment is often applied only to children with disabilities, and as an exception to other children upon parents' request.  <b>PL:</b> Formative assessment is applied across the board in elementary schools; grading is no longer used.  <b>POR:</b> Descriptive written assessment was introduced. Until recently, children's results and grades had been posted publicly on the walls and boards in schools. While this practice persists in some places, in other schools and school clusters it is slowly being phased out.</p>

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of my research was to identify the content of the “Grammar of Schooling” as internalized by teachers in the Czech Republic, Portugal and Poland, and to explore how it influenced the generation of practice-relevant ideas about teaching in different cultures under systemic change. I addressed and raised questions about country-specific transformations relevant to the educational sector, pointing out the shortcomings and strengths in the educational systems of the respective national

sites. Through my work, I sought to contribute to the debate on educational policy and possibilities for implementing change toward innovative and transformative teaching for better student learning in the emerging European context.

#### REFERENCES

- Bowden, J., and Walsh, E. (Eds.) (2000). *Phenomenography*. Melbourne: RMIT University Press.
- Creswell, J.W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed). Boston et al.: Pearson.
- Dortins, E. (2002). Reflections on phenomenographic process: Interview, transcription and analysis. In A. Goody, J. Herrington, and M. Northcote (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2002 Annual International Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society Australia* (HERDSA) (pp. 207–213). Canberra: HERDSA.
- McEwan, H. (1995). Narrative understanding in the study of teaching. In H. McEwan and K. Egan (Eds.), *Narrative in teaching, learning, and research* (pp. 166–183). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Books.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Fullan, M., and Levin, B. (2009). The fundamentals of whole-system reform: A case study from Canada. *Education Week*, 28(35), pp. 30–31.
- Linz, J.-J. (2000). *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*. London and Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Tyack, D., and Tobin, W. (1994). The “Grammar of Schooling”: Why has it been so hard to change? *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(3), pp. 453–479.

#### GRAMATYKI SZKOLNICTWA W POSTAUTORYTARNYM KONTEKŚCIE: STUDIUM PORÓWNAWCZE ZMIANY PRAKTYK NAUCZANIA W EDUKACJI WCZESNEJ W SZKOŁACH W CZECHACH, POLSCE I PORTUGALII

**ABSTRAKT:** Artykuł przedstawia raport z badań fenomenograficznych podjętych w ramach pracy doktorskiej analizującej, jak nauczyciele edukacji wczesnej wpisują zmiany swych praktyk w procesy transformacji kulturowej i społecznej. Dane pochodzą z pogłębionych wywiadów przeprowadzonych z 28 nauczycielami z Polski, Czech i Portugalii. Tytułowa koncepcja “gramatyki szkolnictwa” (Tyack i Tobin, 1994) została tu wykorzystana do pogłębienia rozumienia wpływu przestarzałych podstaw celów i funkcji szkolnictwa na praktyki nauczania.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** nauczyciele edukacji wczesnej, “gramatyka szkolnictwa”, kraje postautorytarne, świadomość krytyczna, zmiana edukacyjna