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Book Review

Katarzyna Gawlicz (2020): Szkoły demokratyczne w Polsce: Praktykowanie alternatywnej edukacji [Democratic Schools in Poland: Practicing Alternative Education].

Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej, 2020 (307 pages). ISBN: 978-83-65408-39-6

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Democratic schools, or free schools, are a relatively recent (first schools established in 2013) and niche phenomenon in Poland. Dr Katarzyna Gawlicz focuses on practices employed in democratic alternative schooling and provides an important systematic analysis of ethnographic research that fills the void in the academic literature on the subject. The author argues that a closer look at democratic schools in Poland is needed, which can reveal how democracy can be understood in the context of educational practice.

The conceptual framework used in the analysis borrows from theories of social practices, particularly by Theodore Schatzki, and the theory of practice architectures by Stephen Kemmis and his associates. The analyzed material is the result of the ethnographic research conducted within the scope of the project “Democratic schools - a sociopedagogical study of new educational alternatives” in the years 2015-2019 by researchers from the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław and the Educational Research Institute. The research took place in eight primary schools in cities in different parts of Poland with varying numbers of students. The analysis focuses on general practices rather than specific institutions. The main ethnographic methods used were participant observation and interviews with parents, staff, children and the school leaders, with supplementary analysis of school documents, online presence, media publications and legal literature. The book consists of an analysis of the ethnographic research using the stated conceptual frames, direct quotes from the interviews, and a few photographs of the schools taken by the children.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to the analysis of practices in democratic schools, which Gawlicz divides into four major categories: founding practices, identity practices, community-building practices and learning practices. Democratic schools are analyzed in "dis/connection" to the "system" or "systemic schools" [systemowe szkoły], that is, a relation of simultaneous disconnection (through alternative practices) and connection (through sociopolitical architecture and some shared practices) with the mainstream school system through which they are defined.

Founding practices describe how the schools are created. Gawlicz's research shows that they are grassroots initiatives lead by the parents and people interested in alternative education, created through collective work and supported by personal funds. The participants are brought together by informal networking in related groups, already existing institutions and online spaces. The motivations often cited for establishing democratic schools are the desire to escape "the system", bad experiences of their children in "systemic" schools, parents' bad experiences with their children's and their own schools, and parents' ideas about education they want to see realized. As described by one parent and a member of the staff, "[i]t was just natural, that if we see that there is a place which doesn't fully meet our expectations, there is no new place like that [which would meet them], and we know how to do it, well then it just happened" (p. 67). Gawlicz also pays special attention to the architecture(s) (a term borrowed from Kemmis) that organize and facilitate those practices - the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements.

Identity practices refer to practices related to the meanings, values and visions for democratic schools. Gawlicz's research shows that defining what democratic schools are is difficult even to the parents and staff involved in their creation, and instead their meaning seems to come from practices. Freedom, equality and self-determination were important concepts for all research participants, but there were debates and disagreements on how to define them in practice. One member of the staff stated, "we met and, which was amazing, everyone had a different vision of a democratic school" (p. 126). In two cases the visions were irreconcilable and led to schools splitting. Common discursive constructions organizing school identity were "school as a live organism", "school as home" where one can "be yourself", "not a bell jar" but "real life". Gawlicz describes the dynamic and evolving nature of the identity practices and the architectures organizing them.

Community-building practices are a major point of difference between democratic and systemic schools. Democratic schools consider themselves not just a place for following "the core curriculum" [podstawa programowa] but a community first; they are intentionally built on respect and strong relations between the members. A repeated sentiment was that "there is no education without relations" (p. 153). The practices include numerous meetings held on important issues, negotiating how to take care of the shared spaces, and collectively deciding on community rules. Democratic schools aim to foster competences related to decision-making and conflict resolution without violence, negotiating power relations, and emotional intelligence. Community-building practices are interconnected with other practices, particularly learning (and teaching) practices, as all learning is meant to come from the relation between the adult and the child.

Learning practices in democratic schools are both those that are unique to them as well as some that are (to a various degree) present in systemic schools. The practices are organized around the concept of learning as a "natural" process in which adults can "accompany" children, and the principle of self-determination and trust awarded to children. There is no compulsion placed on children to participate in any or all activities. Instead there are various activities available to children that they may opt in or out of; they may be scheduled or spontaneous, one-on-one or in mixed-age groups, peer tutoring, or workshops by people from the "outside". Play is encouraged, as well as "by the way" [mimochodem] learning in some schools. Learning takes place not only on the school premises but also on the frequent trips to the city and into nature. One parent and a member of the staff remarked that "[l]earning is a completely natural process but only when it stems from some need, or comes from within, from this internal motivation, and it's this self-perpetuating process. And kids are capable on their own, you really don't have to stand with a whip over that kid and tell them that you have to learn this or that, because this just makes no sense" (p. 201). At the same time the legal architecture demands that children pass the exams on the core curriculum, which is a source of conflict begrudged by children and adults alike. Democratic schools also place an emphasis on the learning of adults: learning democratic education, developing their skills and realizing personal development. Learning practices are inextricably interconnected with identity (as they are shaped by the common values and shape them in return) and community-building practices (since strong community ties are seen the basis of learning).

In the concluding chapter, Gawlicz poses the question whether democratic schools can have a transforming effect on the educational system, the wider community and society as a whole. All the schools in which she conducted her research, while still at very early stages of their development, aspired toward systemic change and integration with their communities. Referencing Wright's Assessing Radical Education (1989, p. 114), she argues that democratic schools, firstly, allow some children to experience alternative education; secondly, prove that it is possible to conceptualize education differently; and finally, are a "laboratory" where "radicals" (Wright's term) can test their theories in practice. Gawlicz also suggests that democratic schools can be a blueprint for a universal democratic school system. At the very least, these schools offer an alternative answer to the question of what the role of education is and how it can be practiced.

Gawlicz's ethnography gives a comprehensive, clear and thought-provoking analysis of democratic schools in Poland. It is doubtlessly important for academics interested in education and anthropology of education, but furthermore it can be a useful tool to parents or staff interested in creating or joining democratic schools. It is a good introduction to a person unfamiliar with the subject and it can provide new insights for a veteran of alternative education. One limitation of the ethnographic research is its small sample size, which however is understandable given that democratic schools are still a marginal phenomenon in Poland. Further research documenting the development of these and new schools, and following the students as they enter new stages in their education could provide illuminating results.

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