Analysis of Barriers for Creative School Culture in Baltic States

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Abstract: Students’ creativity is an important objective of 21st century education. There is lot of knowledge about the creativity. Strategies of its development are well researched and widely available. Nevertheless, stakeholders of education admit that promotion of students’ creativity is not a self-evident component of school culture in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. The aim of the study is to identify barriers for expanding the creative school culture in Baltic States and analyze the opportunities of teachers, school managers and community members to cultivate creativity in schools. With this reason, mixed methods were used. 8 focus groups discussions were organized in order to find out experiences and opinions of various educational actors (teachers, school administration and teacher education representatives, students and parents) in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Interviews with representatives of good practice schools specified the problems and shared educational solutions. Results of data analysis highlighted the most essential barriers for the development of students’ creativity in schools and identify responsibilities of each actor of educational process in this respect. In conclusions, guidelines for teacher educators and school communities are summarized.

Keywords: creativity, school education, school culture.

Introduction

There is an overall agreement among educators, parents, school administrators, researchers and educational policy makers, that students’ creativity is an essential outcome of contemporary education. There is lot of knowledge about the creativity. Strategies of its development in schools are well researched and widely available. Nevertheless, despite vital needs of society, rational arguments and obvious possibilities, stakeholders of education admit that promotion of students’ creativity is not self-evident component of our school education. There is still too much to do for cultivating of creativity in schools. From these statements the purpose of the study aroused – to answer the questions: “What is a cause?” and “What can we do?”

There are many researches about promoting the creativity in classroom and in organization, but this study pretends to be the first investigation of creative school culture as complex and interdisciplinary phenomenon in Baltic States.

The aim of the study is to identify barriers for expanding the creative school culture in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania and analyze the opportunities of teachers, school managers and community members to cultivate creativity in schools.

Searching for the way, how to identify both manifested and latent reasons that impede / hinder promoting the development of students’ creativity in school, the questions arise: 1) how do students’ creativity relate to school culture; 2) what actual barriers for the development of students’ creativity are identified by different educational actors - teachers, school administrators, students, parents and representatives of non-governmental organizations; 3) what problems are met by innovative good practice schools; 4) what is a responsibility of different groups of educators for successful cultivating the creativity in schools?

The research is done in a framework of Nord-plus Horizontal project “Creativity needs nurturing: enhancing school culture for creativity through cross-sectional network” (№ NPHZ-2013/10110 and № NPHZ-2014/10018) (About Project, 2017).

Methodology

According to M. Fullan, school culture can be defined as the guiding beliefs and values evident in the way a school operates. ‘School culture’ can be used to encompass all the attitudes, expected behaviors and values that impact how the school operates (Fullan, 2016). School culture is formed by ideals, principles, priorities, evaluations, identified and latent goals, identities, behaviour and activity habits and the related choices (Олінорг, 2002; Столович, 1999) of all the responsible persons and groups involved in school education - teachers, parents, school managers, school and municipal employees.
Like the larger social culture, a school culture results from both conscious and unconscious perspectives, values, interactions, and practices, and it is heavily shaped by a school’s particular institutional history. Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other staff members all contribute to their school’s culture, as do other influences such as the community in which the school is located, the policies that govern how it operates, or the principles upon which the school was founded. So, the school culture relates to different disciplines – educational sciences, leadership, pedagogy, psychology and cultural studies.

As values are the key concept of school culture, the creative school culture can be defined as learning environment, where student’s creativity is appreciated highly. In creative school students and teachers (Bebre, 2012; Beghetto, 2007; Chiksentmihalyi, 1990; Sternberg, Kaufman, 2010):

- feel free and secure;
- reveal and purposefully develop their individual creative abilities;
- meet challenges, take risks and are engaged in meaningful life experience;
- relationship between students, teachers, parents, school administrators and community is full of honor, understanding and mutual favor.

To investigate the creative school culture means to investigate the relationships between all inner and outer participants of school life in the dimensions of creativity – individual (creative personality/freedom, contextual (creative product)/ interaction and professional (creative process)/needs (methodical aids?).

The idea of the empiric research is to clarify a problem by collecting as possible wide range of opinion in order to recognize the main problems of enhancing the creativity in schools and responsibilities of different groups of educators.

In order to find answers on these questions, a field research was carried out. Mixed methods design was used for flexible investigation of a problem. Qualitative methods - focus groups discussions, interviews and questionnaire helped to figure out the experiences and opinions of different groups involved in the process of education. To collect the possible variety of experiences, the group discussions of the various educational actors (teachers, school administrators, representatives of teacher education and NGO, students and parents) in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were organized. Point of view of students was represented by first and second year students from teacher education programs. Results of the discussions were specified in interviews with participants of project workshops, administrators and teachers of good practice schools and NVO. Interviews with innovative school managers and teachers help to identify the real problems in their practice as well as solutions. Respondents were selected by teacher educators of Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian university faculties of teacher education, in accordance with their permanent activities for inventing innovations in their schools in cooperation with researchers and communities. After eight interviews, the ideas become to recur; it allowed to conclude that all essential ideas are covered (Huber, Roth, 1999). Respondents from all involved countries had become to the same range of statements; that is why interviews of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian educators are not analyzed separately.

Results and discussion

Analysis of focus-groups discussions

Focus groups discussions were arranged in November 2013 in Latvia, in February 2014 in Tallinn, and May 2015 – in Siauliai during the Project conferences and seminars. The results allowed to identify the persons involved in educational process, which are responsible for maintaining the creative school culture. They are students, peers, friends, teachers, local community, parents, family, and guest specialists. Nobody mentioned researchers/ teacher educators as responsible actors.

The generalization of focus groups discussions identified several aspects of barriers in each group involved in school education, and the opportunities to cope with them, as well (Table 1).
Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Reluctance, distrust, poor attention, often – no sense of responsibility, lack of motivation, unable to meet the time limits, lazy, unpredictable, low self-esteem.</td>
<td>Student’s choice and the opportunity to influence events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lots to do for themselves, to take responsibility.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To be aware of aim.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>The authoritarian style.</td>
<td>Creative teacher.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The teacher's mind-set.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The teacher's lack of motivation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adherence to traditional methods because it is more convenient and comfortable.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the process of learning</td>
<td>Too many rules / no option, overload (three Olympics per year); Time limitation.</td>
<td>Extracurricular involvement of specialists, dance, art teachers, creative circles.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More different classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting, integrated learning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Ranking the students.</td>
<td>Supportive assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflicting values/ criteria in school and in family.</td>
<td>Transforming the error in effect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inappropriate assessment criteria and methods.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exaggerate the importance of the processes, not caring about the creating of meaningful product.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents/ Society/ Community traditions</td>
<td>Public stereotypes, lack of understanding.  Keeping the” frame” - customs and traditions – is comfortable.</td>
<td>School adopts and supports all the new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education policy</td>
<td>Educational standards.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical environment</td>
<td>Discouraging, poor environment.</td>
<td>Creative example of adults support tours, IT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of technologies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All groups recognize, that student’s attitudes - openness, freedom, expressivity, courage, interest, the choice needs interests, goal, and desire to act are suggested as important criteria of creative school.

**Teacher** as a key person in school education provides the attitude (used for negation), style (authoritarian), educational aims and behavior (for example), tradition (methods), mind-set, emphasis, motivation.

**School management** - accepts, approves or does not want (to do anything new), support or not (students’ ranking), interprets the old traditions as a canon or looks for their essential sense, prevents the psychological climate of insecurity and distrust or does not.

The respondents see the responsibility of community lays mostly in financial support, which is necessary for providing the rich and aesthetical physical environment, extracurricular activities of students and cultivating traditions. Social stereotypes of parents and other community members either supports creative activities or rejects them as unnecessary or socially unacceptable.

**Analysis of experience of innovative school teachers and managers**

Interviews with innovative schools’ practitioners show another accents in problem. Experience of practitioners allow to state, that the origin of promotion of creativity is mostly subjective and cultural factors – teachers’, parents’ and school managers’ understanding of creativity, believes about desirable
behaviors and students’ chances to be creative. It fits with finding of J. Hattie about the role of educator’s personality for reaching high learning outcomes (Hattie, 2012) (Table 2).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Responsibilities/ barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School management</td>
<td>To guarantee teacher cooperation, life-long education and creativity supportive assessment criteria. As a dominant problems teachers’ individualism, concurrence, tradition to cope with difficulties independently there are mentioned.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher’s personality</td>
<td>Teachers’ mind-set, rejecting the step out of a comfort zone, low self-esteem and avoidance from responsibility about creative decisions. School managers see the problem to cope with conservative teachers, but creativity-oriented teachers have experienced conflicts and lack of support from conservative school managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s professionalism</td>
<td>Knowledge of creative thinking techniques and their teaching strategies It is important, that there is not a lack of methodology; problem is the channels, how educators can reach them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaningful learning</td>
<td>Connecting the content of learning with real life by integration of content of different subjects or project method asks for teacher contribution in preparation of learning process, but it allows to save time and rise student’ motivation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is remarkable that good practitioners do not mention students’ responsibility in enhancing the creative school culture. They do not complain about educational policy (standards) or too saturated demands, or fragmentary of content of learning, too. Almost all innovative school managers have find a productive contact with communities and parents, so relationship outside school is not regarded as a problem.

Results of the survey

Is survey, respondents were asked to assess the significance of different educational aspects of creative school culture; “In order to promote students’ creativity better, I need...” in Likert scale. 11 expressions were completed in relation to the barriers for creativity, identified during interviews with innovative schools’ practitioners. Two of them (“more knowledge about creativity” and “creativity assessment methods”) are related to poor understanding of creativity. Other two (“more courage and self-confidence” and “possibility to learn and develop teacher’s own creativity”) characterizes creative teacher.

![Figure 1](respondents-need-for-better-promoting-the-students-creativity.png)

Figure 1. Respondents need for better promoting the students’ creativity.

Four expressions (“more time”, “accessibility of methodic aids”, “support of school management” and “teachers’ cooperation”) characterize the responsibility of school managers - organization of the process.
of learning). Two expressions relate to the support for creativity outside the school (“support of parents” and “support of community”), but the last one (“students’ motivation”) declares the responsibility of students. Figure 1 shows the results.

Survey shows, that teachers:
- are eager to learn and cultivate their own creativity;
- are open for more active cooperation with other teachers.

From this respect – they are open to the developing of creative school culture in context of their professional life.

The barriers for enhancing the school culture towards creativity can be seen in following discrepancies.
- From the idea “if students’ motivation would be better”, I can promote their creativity better” follows, that educators avoid the responsibility about students’ creativity motivation, or they do not believe they can impact it. But teachers believe results in effective or not-effective teaching (Hattie, 2009). Representatives of innovative school did not mention a lack of students’ motivation, at all. They believe, that students’ interest in creative activities depends on educators’ professionalism.
- Respondents see the opportunities mostly in increasing the resources from outside – contribution of community and ready, prepared methodical materials, not so much in increasing their own knowledge about creativity and its assessment methods (what is crucially important in context of culture as system of values). In contrast, experts of creative school culture find the solutions inside the school.
- The main problems identified by experienced practitioners and research (Skiba, Tan, 2015) are one-sided understanding of creativity and problems of its assessment are recognized as a barrier for promoting students’ creativity, but respondents of a survey do not feel the necessity to obtain deeper knowledge about it. It is discusssable – does it means that they understand the creativity phenomenon very well, or they want to protect themselves from feeling uncomfortable. The idea about the culture as subjective and irrational aspect of social and professional relationship, allows to interpret, that the second possibility is more appropriate.

From these findings, the possible educational activities for teacher initial education and professional development in order to expand creative school culture in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, follow (Hattie, 2012):
- the development of educators’ own creativity;
- the development of understanding the complexity of creativity, its’ criteria and evaluation methods;
- strengthening the teacher’s believes about their impact on creativity as students’ learning outcome.

Conclusions

There are several levels of barriers for promoting the creativity in schools in Baltic States, indicated by the study. They could be related to different components of pedagogical process (students’ activities, teaching methods, content of learning, communication within school), and reasons outside the classroom – school management, financing, relationship with community, teachers cooperation. It means that each educator has particular responsibility in this process.

The most essential barriers for the development of students’ creativity in schools lays in school culture – educators’ attitudes towards traditions/innovations as a values, teachers’ believes about their ability to impact students’ creativity and readiness of all involved persons to contribute into working together.

The study identified the main directions for teachers’ education. In order to appreciate creativity highly and promote it consequently, teacher needs:
- clear understanding about contradictios features and different manifestations of creativity.
- nurturing of teacher’s/ parent’s/ school leader’s own creativity, openness, self-confidence;
- obtaining the principles and practice of integrated learning; creativity assessment strategies; critical thinking; skills to organize psychologically safe environment; cooperation with colleagues.
Bibliography


