

Characteristics of Schools for Girls: A Case Study

Monika Jakubowska-Mirek

University of Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

E-mail: m.jakubowska@uw.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3450-172X>

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Abstract

Single-sex schools account for a minimal percentage of alternative forms of education in Poland. Debates around such institutions focus on the issues of work efficiency in the context of academic achievements and dilemmas related to the social functioning of students. Most research on single-sex education is based on the positivist paradigm and uses quantitative methods. However, there are no monographic descriptions that consider the interpretative paradigm. In response to this gap, the author conducted a study of the culture of the girls' school using qualitative methods – a case study based on the method of ethnography.

The aim of the research was to conduct an in-depth study of a selected institution and describe its culture applying anthropology-based concept. I was interested in what image of the institution emerged based on individual interpretations of its members.

The aim of the study. The main research questions concerned the specificity of the functioning of the staff in particular – the relations and key program assumptions. I tried to find out which aims are declaratively important and which are implemented by members of the school community. An important topic was also their perception of social relations and the style of working of the staff. The next task was to analyse and interpret the meanings that my interviewees attached to selected aspects of the school's operation. The actions taken can be defined as constructing and reconstructing the model of the studied reality. The main aim of the analysis was to hear the "voice from the field" in order to understand better the meanings that the interlocutors attach to the everyday life at school.

Research methods. The basic procedure for collecting data were interviews, partially structured and in-depth, as well as observations of various school situations (both formal and informal). I interviewed parents, teachers, representatives of the board, and other school employees, I conducted focus group interviews (FGI) with students, I shadowed the headmaster, and analysed the documents. I used Atlas.ti software for the data analysis, which facilitated assigning and classification of codes and then combining them into broader categories.

Conclusions and recommendations. Research has shown that adult respondents interpret the school reality in a similar way. Both parents and school employees emphasized the importance of values in constructing the school's working style and the unique climate of families connected with the school. Social relations and emotions accompanying them were a significant problem, which on the one hand was a challenge for everyday work, and on the other hand, the expected style of functioning. The female character of the school manifested itself mainly in these dimensions. To a lesser extent, it was reflected in the style of work that would be in line with the stereotyped interests of the students. *The results of the study* apply to the specific case of the studied school. The methodology can be used many times in relation to any institution of this type.

Keywords: school culture, girls' school, single-sex education, case study, school relations, values.

Характеристика школы для девочек: Тематическое исследование (пример из практики)

Моника Якубовская-Мирек

Варшавский университет, Варшава, Польша

E-mail: m.jakubowska@uw.edu.pl

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3450-172X>

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Аннотация

На раздельное обучение мальчиков и девочек в Польше приходится небольшой процент альтернативных школ. Дебаты вокруг таких учебных заведений вызваны социальным функционированием студентов и вопросами эффективности труда в контексте академических достижений. Большинство исследований обучения детей в однополых школах основано на позитивистской парадигме и использует количественные методы. Монографических описаний, учитывающих интерпретативную парадигму, нет. Нами проведено исследование культуры школы для девочек с использованием качественных методов – тематическое исследование, основанное на этнографии. Целью исследования было изучение работы выбранного учреждения и описание его культуры с использованием антропологических методов. Нас интересовало, как складывается образ учреждения на основе индивидуальных интерпретаций его членов.

Цель исследования. Основные вопросы исследования касались специфики функционирования объекта, в частности его взаимосвязей и ключевых программных допущений. Необходимо было выяснить, какие цели декларируются членами школьного сообщества, а какие реально преследуются. Важно было также понять социальные отношения и стиль работы персонала. Ещё одна задача – проанализировать и интерпретировать значения, которые мои собеседники придают отдельным аспектам работы школы. Предпринятые действия можно определить как построение и реконструкцию модели изучаемой реальности. Основная цель работы – определение значений, которые участники придают повседневной жизни в школе.

Методы исследования. Основной процедурой для сбора данных были интервью, частично структурированные и углубленные, а также наблюдения за различными школьными ситуациями (как формальными, так и неформальными). Были опрошены родители, учителя, преподаватели совета и другие школьные сотрудники, проведены интервью с учениками в фокус-группах (FGI), изучена работа директора школы (shadowing), проанализированы документы. Программа Atlas.ti использовалась для анализа данных, что облегчило присвоение и классификацию кодов, а также объединение их в более широкие категории.

Выводы и рекомендации. Исследования показали, что взрослые респонденты одинаково интерпретируют школьную реальность. И родители, и сотрудники школы подчеркнули важность ценностей в построении стиля работы школы и уникальный климат семей, связанных со школой. Женский характер школы проявился в таких сферах, как социальные отношения и сопутствующие им эмоции. Здесь возникало немало проблем, которые были вызваны спецификой образовательного учреждения и требовали постоянного внимания в повседневной работе. В меньшей степени это отразилось на стиле работы с обучающимися. *Результаты исследования* применимы к конкретному случаю изученной школы. Методика может быть многократно использована применительно к любому учреждению подобного типа.

Ключевые слова: школьная культура, школа для девочек, раздельное обучение мальчиков и девочек, тематическое исследование, школьные отношения, ценности.

Introduction

Single-sex schools in Poland are rare. In the years 1945-1989, so from the end of the Second World War up to the period of transformation, there were only a few female and male institutions. There were Catholic schools, run by religious orders, schools run

by dioceses and schools run by associations. Nowadays most of these institutions switched to a co-educational system. For most Poles, co-educative education is the only known model. Therefore, it is not surprising that Polish society is distrustful of the idea of single-sex school. However, in the last decade or so, schools educating in the model of personalized education arose and have been developed in Poland since 2005. The inspiration for their creation came from Spain, from schools from the *Institució Familiar d'Educació* association. Today, 14 girls' and boys' schools function using this model. Setting up and maintaining a single-sex school at a secondary level (for students aged from 16 to 19) is the greatest challenge. Some authorities dealing with the development of personalized education offer single-sex education in primary school (for students aged from 7 to 14) and a co-educative secondary school. This is due to the low interest of young people/adolescents in learning at single-sex schools and consequent economic issues. For this reason, it is easier to organize and maintain a single-sex school on the first level than on the second level of education. This is the opposite to what occurred 100 years ago, when in European countries co-education in elementary schools was acceptable (although contentious) whereas it was very controversial in secondary schools. Mixed schools were a necessity due to the need to provide education to as many children as possible. In poorer or less populated regions, because of the costs of maintaining the premises and ensuring adequate staff, they were the only option. Doubts about the establishment of co-educational schools at the second stage of education were dictated by educational reasons. Learning in these schools fell on the period of adolescence, shaping personality and worldview, which required an appropriate atmosphere and support from the educators (Dorus, 2004). Currently, the legitimacy of the single-sex school at the first stage of education is explained by the specific interests of children, a learning strategy typical for a given gender, and the style of establishing relationships. In case of adolescents, there are arguments related to the provision of optimal conditions for shaping the personality and character of a young person. All single-sex schools in Poland are associated with education in the spirit of Christian values.

The author examined one of the girls' schools where a personalized education program was implemented. The goal was to study the culture of this institution. To this end, a research project was conducted, based on the assumptions of the interpretative paradigm. It took over two years. The chosen research method was a case study where ethnographic research played the major role – observations (including shadowing), interviews with teachers, management, parents, and students. An analysis of documents, existing data, and written statements was also carried out.

Review and classification of the literature on the subject

Research on school culture is most often carried out based on the functionalist or radical structuralism paradigms (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The conclusions contain specific indications for changes in the surveyed institutions and serve to improve the quality of their work (for example, Deal & Peterson, 1999). Less common is school culture research based on descriptive paradigms that focus on the characteristics of reality and are free from judgments or recommendations.

A significant number of school culture researchers refer to organizational culture and analyse the effectiveness of school work in a manner analogous to the functioning of enterprises or corporations (for example, Hoy, 1990). Quantitative research procedures and hierarchizing typologies of organization of quality, etc. dominate here. The exceptions include the ethnographic analysis of the elements of the organizational culture of the girls' school in New Zealand (Mak, 1998).

The concept of organizational culture is broader, as it tries to express everything that a given institution considers important and with what methods it works. Among the numerous concepts of organizational culture, one can distinguish those that focus on: employees as members of a given organization; groups as internal structures of organizations; values and attitudes of employees of a given organization, ethos, change and reforms, success, etc.

Among the publications on single-sex education, topics related to the effectiveness of gender-differentiated schools are dominant. A report, commissioned by the US Department of Education, reviews 40 publications based on correlation studies (Mael, et al, 2005). Assessment of the school climate came up among other reported effects. The authors of the report were cautious about the analysed studies, noting their flawed methodology. The questionable value of this meta-analysis was additionally weakened by the criticism of Signorella, Hayes and Li (2013). The meta-analysis by Pahlke, Hyde & Allison (2014) enables us to assess the effectiveness of single-sex schools in 10 selected domains, including: math results and attitudes towards mathematics among boys and girls. The effectiveness study was also investigated by Jackson (2012), who analysed instrumental variables, such as the rules of selecting students for second-cycle school or students' preferences. With regard to the study of the effectiveness of single-sex schools, Park's natural experiment (Park, Behrman & Choi, 2013) seems very interesting. They analysed the results of students in Seoul, where the enrolment of students in schools (single-sex and co-educational) is random.

Definition arrangements and the purpose of the research

In an anthropological sense, school culture is manifested in customs, rituals, symbolism, history, and language, that is, cultural artifacts. It is created by people and it means as much as their consciousness determines. The units that make up the school community give meaning to various elements of the school's culture. Everything that happens inside the school is potentially significant. Using White's definition of culture, the author's own definition of school culture is that: *school culture is the organization of people, objects, activities, ideas and attitudes whose meaning is rooted in the minds of its members.*

While analysing the school's culture, three aspects of culture were used as distinguished by Kłoskowska (1983): the subject aspect of culture (products-artifacts); internalization of culture (assimilation of its normative models and values or values through the consciousness, experience, or habits of people); norms, rules and cultural values. This allowed a description of the individual elements of culture in relation to a given aspect as well as characterize the integration between the aspects. The intention was to find coherence and inconsistency between the meaning of artifacts, patterns of functioning and the axiological basis of the model of the studied school. The second task was to search for differences and similarities in the description of the school reality and the meanings assigned to elements of school culture by representatives of the school community: girl students, teachers, parents, representatives of the management and management body and non-teaching staff.

Prosser's (1999) concept of school culture, reflecting the diversity of interactions between individuals and groups as well as between the school culture and the subcultures that exist in it, has marked an important thread in the research. According to Bruner (1996), culture is an affirmation and cult of values expressed in social choices and individual experiences. It shapes the mind, provides people with tools to create a concept of themselves and their abilities. School culture not only expresses, but above all shapes those values that its community considers important. According to Douglas (1973),

what is important in a given culture is not communicated directly by members of its community. Therefore, it is necessary to study implicit meanings, not limiting it to what is conscious, but going deeper into the depths to place the meaning of each symbol in a holistic vision of culture.

The aim of the research was to describe the phenomena observed in the studied school and to convey the interpretative knowledge of members of its community. On this basis, the author tried to recreate the image of the culture of the studied female school. Detailed research questions concerned elements of school culture (including priority activities, declared, and realized values, typical behaviours, etc.). I was interested in getting to know culture on its own terms, i.e., from the point of view of its participants (Kostera M. & Krzywrzeka, 2012). I adopted the assumptions of symbolic interactionism, trying to discover what meanings my interlocutors give individual elements of the school's culture.

Characteristics of the examined school

The researcher took a close look at one of the girls' schools where a personalized education program was implemented. A year after the end of the research, the facility merged with the school for boys run by the same association and is now co-educational. The educational program of the examined institution assumes that the school is not only a place of intellectual development of students, but also of developing their character. In line with the assumptions of the "School Educational Model", personalized education "treats each student as a special and unique person and gives her the opportunity to acquire knowledge, develop skills and shape virtues to the extent that guarantees the fullest possible use of her personal potential." A distinguishing feature of the school was the real cooperation with parents in relation to the implementation of the educational program. The tool enabling this cooperation was mainly family tutoring, involving systematic conversations between the girl student's tutor and her parents.

At the time of starting my research, the school was functioning for its sixth year, so it was in the process of creating its culture. It was a small institution with eight class divisions (there were two classes at the zero level), with a total of 120 students. According to the adopted assumption, the classes were conducted by women. The school was established as a continuation of a kindergarten established 10 years earlier by parents interested in this type of education. The leading body was an association which, apart from the girls' school, also ran a boy's school and two kindergartens (one in the same building as the girls' school). The facility was located 25 kilometres from Warsaw, on the outskirts of a small town (over 10,000 inhabitants). It was poorly connected with both Warsaw and the surrounding towns, which influenced the recruitment of teachers and students. The school building was one-story, oblong, and impractical (it was not designed for a school).

Research method

An anthropological approach was used. Therefore, there was no theoretical framework or resulting hypotheses. It allowed the researcher to be as fully open as possible to signals coming from the field. I focused on "the description of the studied case and explaining it in separate, specific categories identified during the analysis" (Creswell, 2009).

A partially standardized interview was used, which allowed comparison of the answers in the selected areas. At the same time, however, I tried to reject the initial assumptions and look for what constitutes the culture of the examined institution, and not what would confirm it.

The study of the school's culture lasted two years, during which I conducted observations, interviews and document analyses. I conducted 50 semi-structured interviews, focus research with students in grades IV-VI (separate for each class),

observations of pedagogical staff and the board of management, training courses, meetings for parents, school lessons and activities, teachers' behaviour in the staffroom, school events, shadowing directors, document analysis.

During the data analysis, I applied problematization using open coding (Atlas.ti software; <https://atlasti.com/>) and then carried out analytical induction. The assumed purposive analysis allowed characterization of the coherence of the school's culture within three aspects and the examined perceptions.

Findings

There is insufficient space here to describe the most important areas of the culture of the studied school and so this paper is limited to listing the dominant categories selected in the process of analysing the data collected.

The most frequently appearing category (defined on the basis of detailed codes) was educational values. Parents emphasized the importance of religious education at school and the shaping of moral attitudes. They appreciated the specific solutions of the educational program, the teachers' attitude, and the school's cooperation with parents (in particular, the possibility of using tutoring). The analysis of the observation results shows that during school activities, topics related to the behaviour and attitudes of students as well as ethical dilemmas often appeared. At each of the meetings of teachers and the governing council that were observed, there was a topic related to the implementation of the educational program (even when the topics discussed were apparently not related to it).

For many parents, the coherence of upbringing values realized at home and at school was also of key importance: "I mean, what makes things easier for me is the fact that we have consistency with the school, and I know that we have the same goal." [mother of two students: grades 3 and 5]. The teachers pointed out the need for cooperation with parents: "the goal I set for myself when working with my students ... to help raise them up according to values which are consistent, to support the family, to keep in contact with parents, talk, help ..." [teacher]. The students' statements indicate acceptance or submission to educational values. At the same time, the girls questioned some school rules, judging that they were restricting their freedom. The obligation to wear school uniforms was the most controversial. Some of the students also criticized the form of implementation of some elements of the educational program (e.g., contact with a tutor or moralizing talks).

Another frequently appearing category was relationships. Long-term presence at school allows me to describe the observed relationships as positive. Of course, there were moments of tension, stress, or misunderstandings among the school community. However, a friendly atmosphere and mutual support prevailed daily. Positive relationships between families were also visible. I could observe them when parents picked up their students after school and during the school holidays. "For me, contacts with parents in this school are of great value, it is really..., for me it is particularly important. And certainly, in the previous schools my children attended, it was certainly not on the same level as here." [The father of a 6th-grade student]. Teachers and parents emphasized the importance of the atmosphere in the classroom, showing mutual respect and caring for each student. Most of the parents admitted that the school does a lot in this regard. Parents assessed that school relationships were safe and felt free from threats such as contact with drugs or their daughters' early sexual experiences: "So school is such a pillar for us that girls identify themselves right here, with this place, with these friends." [Parents of the student, grade II]. The observation of the students allows us to recognize the atmosphere in the individual classes as positive. During breaks, the girls played in smaller groups but showed no hostility towards other peers. In one case, however, I noticed the mutual unfavorable

attitude of the two oldest classes. The teachers emphasized the positive relations that prevail among them and the awareness of mutual support. At the same time, they pointed to shortcomings in relations with parents and superiors. Schoolgirls showed similar trends. Ensuring appropriate relationships is especially important to all members of the school community. There are also concrete actions in this area (possibility of individual talks, respect for intimacy, joint projects, etc.). At the same time, it does not always meet the expectations of individual entities.

One of the most controversial aspects turned out to be the unisexuality of the school. Some parents and teachers expressed concerns that female graduates may find it difficult to find themselves in a co-educational environment. The teachers also pointed to a specific tension characteristic of female societies. They expected or assessed that in co-educational classes this is eliminated by the presence of boys. On the other hand, many parents and teachers emphasized that the lack of boys at school allows girls to focus on their studies and helps them safely progress through adolescence. The students' opinions about the single-sex nature of the school were divided. Several times it was noticed that the female environment is more prone to conflict. Parents drew attention to the high emotionality of their daughters: "When there are girls themselves, there are certainly more such quarrels, conflicts, complicated situations that this one said this, and the other said it again, two days she has this friend, and in two days she chooses differently." [Mother of 2nd and 5th-grade students]. The problem of exceptional sensitivity/emotionality of the students was also emphasized by the teachers, who indicated that it sometimes makes the work during the lesson difficult. This observation was confirmed by my observations. Parents assessed the curriculum offer and teaching methods at school as universal. None of the interviewees stated that interactions and school proposals are related to the existence of gender stereotypes. On the contrary, they gave examples of non-stereotypical activities (e.g., a football league). Based on the results of the research, I can say that the educational proposals of the institution resulted from the needs of a specific group of students and not from the fact that it was a girls' school.

Conclusions

Social relations turned out to be a crucial element of the examined institution, not so much as a cultural fact (social relations are by definition an element of school culture) but as an important feature of the examined institution. Everyday school life focused on existing and created relationships. This created an interesting link between what was expected and what was already there. The studied female school is both a school of relations, a school-based on relations, and a real challenge for interpersonal relations.

A high coherence of values declared as desirable by representatives of individual groups of the school community was noticed in the surveyed institution. Adult respondents indicated that this was largely due to the recruitment process, which allowed them to learn about the axiological foundations of the school. Another element responsible for the coherence of values important for the school turned out to be tutoring.

Opinions about single sex schools are divided. Supporters emphasize the safety of the course of development and the effectiveness of education, while "moderate sceptics" fear that students will find it difficult to adapt to a co-educational environment. It was difficult for the interviewees to point out presence of typically female elements of the school.

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