

GENIUS LOCI: THE RIGHT CONCEPT FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATION?

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Abstract

The paper deals with the phenomenon which, when grasped in a suitable way, can become an integral part of teaching in Czech schools: it is *genius loci* and related instruction. In the context of ongoing discussions on the new form of the curriculum, on the rapid changes in society over the past two decades and especially on the outlook for the future development of (not only) the Czech natural environment, we recognize the importance of the development of knowledge of the landscape. All existing processes, phenomena and landscape in general provide wide range for evaluation and cognitive part of children's personality. The environmental dimension, ranging from local aspects to global challenges and problems, also extends the personal and subjective conception of the place. Finally, practical experience and the development of competencies, in addition to knowledge, complete the use and application of the place by pupils in the intentions of locally grounded learning. The paper is divided into two parts, the first is devoted to the theoretical background, introduction of the key factors of both phenomena and their risks, and the second follows the context of curricular documents, teaching and place-based education on examples of pedagogical practice. Finally, the paper focuses on the view of outdoor education and place-based education as tools for student participation in the formation, consolidation and preservation of the *genius loci* in the level of knowledge, values, community cooperation, shared memory and common traditions.

Keywords: *Place, elementary education, curriculum, genius loci.*

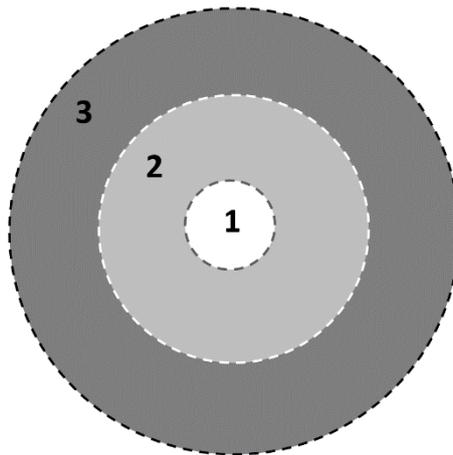
1. Introduction

With these words, cartographers once filled the so-called white spots on maps. They were called localities unknown to the people at the time, hiding new knowledge, civilization and possibly risk (hence the lions mentioned). It is the concept of place that has been found to be one of the key terms in geographical education (IGU, 1992) and is reflected in many disciplines: architecture, history, linguistics, culture, etc. Finally, the word geography itself hides the term place in its essence. - similarly to geographers and environmentalists - about the next level of foundation, we inevitably come across relationships between individual elements and phenomena, at present almost always in the context of human existence and its influence on given elements or phenomena (Gruenewald, 2003). In this respect, we can proceed from the theses of the IGU (1992, p. 10) on the interconnectedness of the physical nature of the place with its cultural potential. In its review, Betrand (1998) provides a basic amount of information on the eco-social approach to education, which permeates the synergies of the environmental space and the social dimension of education, and should thus aim at sustainable behavior and desirable activity of the pupil as an informed and responsible individual. This is a return to mythological harmony with the landscape, as outlined by Machovec (1998, pp. 74–76), when one of the foundations of the catharsis of the contemporary world is seen in renaissance of the unity of nature and man from the level of matter (source of raw material and livelihood) to the level of nature (man is part of the landscape). Kohák (2011, p. 66) adds that with the loss of the natural environment we lose the ability to behave naturally. In the spirit of Naessian deep ecology, Kohák develops several layers of the relationship between man and his environment, which offers a deeper level of knowledge of the place. Norberg-Schulz (1994) outlines the philosophical dimension of place as a phenomenon that forms an integral part of existence: without place, an event cannot be interpreted. In the overall historical image of Central Europe, we reveal the very varied and complex structure of any place with this lens, which is reflected in many media images. Even from this point of view, the place seems to be a multidisciplinary and multifactorial concept, which can be described seemingly only by a holistic principle and used in the same spirit (Betrand, 1998; Sobel, 2013a, 2013b).

2. Place and genius loci

The knowledge of the place itself is a purely individual process, which is moreover differentiated on the basis of the development of the knowing individual. If we take into account the gradual development of the human psyche, Vygotsky's thesis on the zone of proximity is offered (Bertrand, 1998), which we apply to the lexical definition of a place and at the same time to the spatial delimitation. Vygotsky links the development of children's cognition to the development of speech, and through that zone of proximity he understands the closest possible attainable area of cognition that the child can actually know. A similar scheme can be derived for spatial orientation. Sobel (2013a) notes that personal experience is reflected in the knowledge of the place with regard to the age of the individual in the size of the place (Fig. 1). The degree of internalization of space remains a question for research practice.

Figure 1. Boundaries of cognition of space.



Sobel (2013a) presents three phases for the development of children's conception of the local region, graded according to age and area of movement. The early (1) phase takes place at the age of up to 7 years near the house, the middle (2) develops the age of 8-11 years within the street and in the periphery of the hitherto known area. The peak phase (3) follows from the age of 12 and covers the places of social ties within the municipality and the region. The boundaries between the individual phases are not precisely defined and sharply defined in space. The place as a space known and cognized thus directly affects the identity of the individual when it affects the psychological structure of the personality. Within the community, the society in a given space, we then talk about the collective influence of shared cultural consciousness, which co-creates social identity. Marek (2020) summarizes the concept of the region as a social construct with regard to Paasi's social-geographical theory.

3. Place to education

The genius loci is often translated as the spirit of the place. In an extended metaphor, we can also speak of the soul of a place, aware of all the dimensions of a given space (Vecco, 2020). Norberg-Schulz (1994, pp. 11-13) extends the terminology to the character of the place, which denotes "the overall atmosphere" and at the same time "everything that is actually present". It should be added that just as it depends on the structure of the place itself in terms of its strict multifactorial characteristics (geographical, historical, economic, sociological, etc.), the key to other places, persons and events that enter with a defined place is also crucial. interaction (Norberg-Schulz, 1994; Schama, 2007; Sobel, 2013b). The College (2013) focuses on landscape the breeding transmission part is roofing. He defines the very concept of genius loci as "a symbolic spatial pattern of the landscape given by imaginary and real events" (Kolejka, 2013, p. 57). Vecco (2020) follows the hidden meaning of the term; he understands it as a transferred historical heritage, respectively as an identification framework of society. Without (re)interpretation of a place and its significance, community cannot be built (Vecco, 2020; Schama, 2007). If we continue to expand the definition, we come to the meta-concept of genius loci, which consists of a sum of soft and hard skills. These determine the subjective (personal, eg feeling) and objective (measurable, eg altitude) nature of the place (Vecco, 2020). Within each value, the individual layers of the place can be further interpreted into arbitrary levels in the geographical understanding of space (Kolejka, 2013, pp. 59-61)

In addition to objective (hard) values, however, the indescribable layer of place, which is based on cultural capital, is also very evident. Schama (2007, p. 272) describes the search for the roots of belonging between people in different environments based on myths natural phenomena and elements. It therefore implies constant human-environment interaction. Moreover, in such a relationship, we must constantly consider changing conditions, because there is no terminal, eternal structure in nature. However, Vecco (2020) takes this as a significant benefit, as it actually allows for the constant transmission of the genius's cultural capital and its reconstruction within society. Based on historical experience, it can be argued that the greater the importance of a given place in the so-called great history, the greater the social impact and impact of this process (Stradling, 2001).

3.1. Curriculum with genius

The environment of the Czech school offers the concept of genius loci unique possibilities in the trans-mission of the overall tradition. The curriculum directly encourages the reinterpretation of the place where we live, with an emphasis on "practical knowledge of local and regional realities" (MŠMT, 2017, p. 42). The current range of methodological materials for the pedagogical public presents the benefits of many methods and forms that meet both the requirements of the curriculum and the philosophical dimension of the concepts of place and environmental education. Among them we find conceptual materials (Svobodová et al., 2019), theoretical studies (Daniš, 2019; Sobel, 2013b), practical ideas for direct application in teaching (Kříž, 2017) or combined texts (Pluháčková et al., 2019). Sobel (2013a). Activation of an individual (regardless of age) brings enrichment to the place, although we may subsequently encounter problems in shared common memory during transmission. In this respect, the multidisciplinary of the genius loci emerges as a beacon that brings orientation. We can approach the place as a semi-structural entity, partially break down the unreliable human memory of direct witnesses and use the model of locally grounded learning (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2013b). It connects de facto all levels of knowledge in a seemingly holistic model of knowledge. It then depends on the specific pedagogical leadership in which direction the process of exploring the place will continue. Daniš (2019) argues that most (if not all) topics of education can be transferred to outdoor teaching. For example: From the introductory, purely geographical assignment of the complex characteristics of the place, the student can create a mental map, land art, literary work according to his individual abilities and experience. All of these practices will reformulate the genius loci on a personal level and share it with the group one level further.

4. Methods and research

In 2021 and 2022 two groups of 10-11 years old children were chosen for this research in one of the school in the city Ústí nad Labem (Czechia). The aim of the research was to identify place attachment and to compare qualitative impact of place-based education. The distance learning due to the pandemic of Covid-19 in 2021 transmitted the research from the form *in situ* to the online questionnaire which was distributed by class channels (Microsoft Teams). This first attempt was disrupted by low level of answers (n=6; identified reason from four interviews with children: low motivation). The second attempt after Covid-19 era was more successful with more than 85% returned complete questionnaires (pretest + posttest) which were fulfilled in the classroom (n=33).

The design of the research was transformed from original questionnaires used by Semken & Freeman (2008) or Williams & Vaske (2003) and modified for conditions of classes and natural context of the city. Then local differences (due to the state of community) were discussed with teachers for last modifications (e. g. social exclusion).

Children often found high value of natural parts of region (78,8%), appreciated their well-known neighborhood (72,7%) and marked more than three places as their favorites (average 3,2). With these conclusions with pseudo-random selection the extra research group was determined for next step of research: place meaning survey (PMS).

The method of PMS was originally introduced by Young (1999) and for this research was modified to local conditions again. Selected children (n=8; 3 girls and 5 boys) answered by 5-point Likert scale to the set of statements which rated their relationship to specific place in the area. With maximum of 60 points and minimum of 12 points the results seems to be average in whole group (n=8) as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of changing PAI and PMS with selected children.

Questionnaire	Girls (n=3)	Boys (n=5)
PAI (pre-/posttest change)	+4,2	+4,6
PMS	+2,7	+3,8

5. Conclusion

Sobel (2013a, 2013b) and Gruenewald (2003) published similar texts in different ways: locally embedded learning as a pedagogical grasp of place adds a social dimension to field teaching (Svobodová et al., 2019). The seemingly identical context (or principle) of the concept of place is personalized to each pupil in a certain way in accordance with the intentions of the framework educational programs and the development of pupil competencies contained in them. The knowledge base recedes into the background in favor of the pupil's prosocial, environmental and developmental dispositions: locally grounded learning in the areas of Man and Society, Man and Nature, Language and Linguistic Communication, Mathematics and its Applications and so on can be applied in current educational plans. On the example of the reconstructed synagogue in Hartmanice (Musil 2021), it is possible to observe the history of the building living in the place (formerly and now), the Hartmanice landscape, the local dialect or relations between the Czech-German border in the Šumava mountains, the geometry of the mountain synagogue. The specific elaboration of the pedagogical application of the selected place always depends on the requirements of the teachers, the monitoring of the fulfillment of the set goals and other parameters available to the place. The preparation certainly deserves a mention: although Sobel (2013b) states in several examples certain advantages of complete freedom in pupils recognizing and processing the site, the question is what should be the goal of the activity - a clearly defined and precise goal, or a path to it?

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