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**Semiotics of cultures:  
The notion of elementary education: classroom activities in Belgium and  
Estonia.**

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## Summary

In our work we are focusing on the culture of primary schools. Our aim is not to ask if the activities in the classroom construct a culture of its own, since this question is already answered. In the EPSCO Academic Search Premier database, “classroom culture” is a recognised keyword for searching articles. So assuming that everybody could more or less imagine that any classroom has the culture of its own, we are trying to show how this culture could be defined and made transparent in the viewpoint of semiotics, and to establish the similarities and discrepancies of that culture in Belgium and Estonia.

We will try to define the elementary education using the four main definitions of culture: culture as a system of knowledge and values, culture as a set of cognitive strategies, culture as symbolic capital and culture as a historical form with a evolutionary dynamic. We will also look at some of the sign systems present in elementary education and the language culture peculiar to it. In most cases we will give a general introduction to the subtopic and then view the situation in Estonia and Belgium.

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## 1. Introduction

Cultural tools are indispensable part of cognition, over centuries humans have invented devices which have transformed their thinking (the number and writing systems, geometry, informatics etc.). But each child does not reinvent these systems. Cultural tools are passed on across generations.

Semiotics are very important in the teaching process as the teachers will use all of our senses: sight, hearing, tactile, emotions, voice inflections, body language.

Though “teaching” is usually equated with schools, education covers much more general situations in which someone works with a child with the aim of guiding the child's behaviour and improving the child's competence. This could be a parent, another adult, or even a more competent peer. The most important goal of education as such is to pass on cultural values and know-how to the next generation. The importance given to official education may vary from one state to another and from one community to another. In Belgium and Estonia it is given priority and it is coordinated on the state level in Estonia, and on the community level in Belgium<sup>1</sup>, which is a federal state. In our work we will concentrate on the official primary education, and view it from the point of view of semiotics. We try to establish the characteristics of classroom activities that constitute it as a culture of its own and see what different sign systems are used in a classroom.

The term “school culture” is also very often met in literature, in pedagogical newspapers and journals, both on-line and printed. It is considered a culture of a specific organisation and what is meant by it usually is not only the conduct of pupils, but also that of teachers (Kerstna, T., 2001). Organisational culture at its simplest is defined as a way in which things are done in a given organisation<sup>2</sup>. Or as Maaja Vadi, a lecturer on the subject of the University of Tartu puts it “Organisational culture is the face of the organisation”<sup>3</sup>. So, on the one hand, schools are institutions called into being in a specific culture, yet, on the other hand, they are institutions with their own organisation, roles and specific aims, that is to say – with their own culture. First we will look how schooling is organised on the state level.

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<sup>1</sup>The French / German community - the organising authorities set school times. State school programmes are set by the ‘Education Programme Committee’. Private school education must be approved by the Minister for Education. The Flemish Department for Education issues a model timetable for guidance. Programmes are developed by subject working groups. Final decisions are made by the local authorities.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Corporate\\_culture#Deal\\_and\\_Kennedy](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Corporate_culture#Deal_and_Kennedy)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.director.ee/?director=14&juhtkiri=lahti>

## 1.1. Definition

Primary or elementary education is the first years of formal, structured education that occurs during childhood. In most Western countries, it is compulsory for children to receive primary education (though in many jurisdictions it is permissible for parents to provide it).

Typically, primary education is provided in schools where (in the absence of parental movement or other intervening factors) the child will stay, in steadily advancing classes, until they complete it and move on to secondary schooling. Children are usually placed in classes with one teacher who will be primarily responsible for their education and welfare for that year. This teacher may be assisted to varying degrees by specialist teachers in certain subject areas, often music and physical education

The major goals of primary education are achieving basic literacy and numeracy amongst all their students, as well as establishing foundations in science and geography.

## 1.2. General education framework

### **1.2.1. In Belgium**

The three Belgian communities (Flemish, French and German), have their own regional authorities for education. Education in the pupils' native tongue is considered 'a fundamental freedom and a basic human right'. In practice the languages used in schools are Dutch in Flanders, French in Wallonia, German in some schools in small areas of East Belgium and Mixed provision in Brussels. There is a freedom to choose between religious or secular (laïque) education. All schools, including private schools, are entitled to benefit from government subsidises, and there must be free provision. For entitlement to a subsidy, schools are expected to comply with regulations relating to their organizational structure, security, health standards and courses. Education is the responsibility of the three communities, though the state controls such things as teaching structures, salaries and overall standards. The Belgian Constitution provides that everyone has a right to education, with respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms. With a view to secure this right to all children, education is compulsory, at least until 16.

## 1.2.2. In Estonia

In Estonia the main principles are quite similar. Education is provided free for all and it is compulsory until the 9th grade or the age of 17<sup>4</sup>. The Russian minority in Estonia is entitled to primary education in their mother tongue, but the organisation and curriculum of schools is in main principles coordinated by the Ministry of Science and Education. The pupils may choose between the state schools or private schools, some of which are using different pedagogical principles (e.g the Waldorf school). There may be a fee for education in private schools. All schools must follow and cover the curriculum set by the state, but it leaves them some liberty as far as the organisation of classes and activities are concerned. So, in fact, each school works out its own curriculum that is based on the curriculum set by the state.

Curriculum subjects in Belgian and Estonian schools:

| Belgium   | Estonia  |
|---|--|
| a. Mother tongue - reading, writing, language skills.                     | a. Mother tongue – reading, writing, language skills.            |
| b. Mathematics.   | b. Mathematics.  |
| c. Geography, Belgian history, natural science.                           | c. Geography and history of Estonia.                             |
| d. Arts - drawing, singing, aesthetics.                                   | d. Arts and crafts.  |
| e. Technology / crafts.   | e. Natural science, road safety, social skills.                  |
| f. Physical education, hygiene, road safety, social skills, civics.       | f. Physical education.   |
| g. Religious education.   | g. Second language in some schools                               |
| h. Second language in some schools, (especially in the German community). | (mostly English or German; Estonian in Russian primary schools). |

## 2. Culture and education

The students represent a rich array of different backgrounds and ways of thinking. Myths, taboos, things learned from the families, friends, and teachers, all are part of cultural influence.

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<sup>4</sup> Estonian Education Act 1992.

One cannot train teachers without making ideological choices. According to the model of society and human being that one defends, the finalities assigned to the school will not be the same, therefore the role of the teachers should be defined according to the society.

(Democracy through the introduction of election and staff meetings of delegates etc.)

So we cannot also easily dissociate the finalities of the education system and necessary competences of the teachers. The same figure of the professor is not appreciated according to whether one wishes a school which develops autonomy or conformism, the openness on the world or nationalism, the tolerance or the contempt of the other cultures, the spirit of research or dogmatism, the direction of the co-operation or that of the competition, solidarity or individualism.

### 2.1. Elementary education: classroom activities as a cultural practice.

In order to show that elementary education and the classroom activities construct a culture of its own, we will look at the cultural practice of elementary education in Belgium and Estonia from the point of view of the four principal definitions of culture.

#### **2.1.1. Culture is a system of knowledge and values**

As a system of knowledge and values, the culture of elementary education would comprise not only the knowledge of teachers on the specific subjects, but also the strategies to teach and communicate the knowledge, and also the values they hold.

In Belgium

The constructivist approach<sup>5</sup> is pruned in our society, the teacher sets up problems and monitors student exploration, guides the direction of student inquiry and promotes new patterns of thinking. Classes can take unexpected turns as students are given the autonomy to direct their own explorations.

A good teacher will promote the self-confidence and the development of each child, he leads the children in order to make them able to apply the acquired knowledge and to acquire the competences which will permit them to learn all their life and to take an active place in the

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr point 4: *Culture is an historical form with an evolutionary dynamic.*

economic, social, and cultural life. He will also prepare his students to be responsible citizens, able to contribute to the development of a democratic, interdependent society, pluralist and opened with the other cultures<sup>6</sup>. He will push his students to reflection, dialog, he will teach with a smile and through games.

## In Estonia

The main principles of education in Estonia are outlined in the official curriculum, and in this sense education is only a part of the national or state culture. The curriculum states that it “stands for the preservation and development of the Estonian nationality and culture, it supports the identity of the minorities in Estonia, and the understanding between the different cultures and takes into account the aim of Estonia to be integrated in Europe”.<sup>7</sup>

The general aim is to support the development of an individual, who is respectful of others, cooperatively-minded, supports the democratic development of the society, respects the law, identifies with the Estonian nation, Europe and humankind, respects different cultures and the nature, is responsible for his/her decisions, is ethical, values beauty, healthy life-style, is a creative and critical thinker and motivated to learn and work. In other words, these could be considered the values of the state it wishes to pass on to the young citizens. And these are also the values all classroom activities should aim at.

The system of knowledge and values is also outlined in the official vocational standard for teachers, that sets forth the main characteristics, the basic competences and educational standards of a good teacher. For example, the National Development Plan for Teacher Education 2003-2010 stresses the changes in the expectations in the role of the teacher. It states that a teacher is an ethical and active citizen, a specialist able to integrate different fields, an instructor and former of learning skills and a member and leader of team. It also states the attitudes and values a teacher should respect and the competences he or she should have in addition to the knowledge in a special field. He/she should be able to motivate, cooperate and communicate, he should be respectful of students’ dignity, culture (his/her own and other cultures), he/she should value sustainable development, cooperation and self-improvement and follow universal ethical and democratic principles.

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<sup>6</sup> Decree of 24 July 1997 defining the priority missions of Fundamental Teaching and Secondary Education and organizing the structures suitable to reach them.

<sup>7</sup> The State Curriculum adopted by the Decree of government no 56, 25.01.2002.

### **2.1.2. Culture is a set of cognitive strategies.**

In this sense culture is a problem-solving resource. It may seem difficult for us to notice that the cognitive strategies promoted by the elementary education are in fact very specific. Reading, writing, memorising, mathematical problem solving, foreign languages are only examples of the cognitive processes promoted by our school systems, and may not be important in another time, another place and another environment.

#### **In Belgium**

The aim is to familiarise children with life in society, to promote their mental and physical well-being, to teach them to express themselves correctly, and to encourage them to participate in musical and artistic activities are the major aims promoted through cognitive processes in schools.

The education given will be as global as possible, the teacher is given a wide freedom, only basic objectives distinguishing cognitive, affective and motor skills are set by the authorities. During all the school years, the children are required to possess prerequisite skills before that a subject can be tackled.

The culture influences the cognitive strategy used in the teaching process, but we cannot forget that most of the classrooms in the cities are multicultural, which required an adaptation from the teachers. Students not only enter the classroom with a wide range of cognitive abilities they also bring unique cultural and social experiences that influence their learning.

The growing diversity in the nation's classrooms highlights the need for a greater emphasis on multicultural education and recognition of students' cultures and backgrounds. When teachers are aware of cultural differences, they can use instructional strategies that are compatible with the learning styles of diverse groups of students. Additional factors found to deeply impact student learning include a student's socioeconomic status, level of parental involvement, and quality of the relationships between teachers and students.

#### **In Estonia**

The elementary education in Estonia takes into consideration the general development of the child before he or she is considered ready for school, so that the child that comes to school is ready to accept and learn the cognitive strategies promoted by the school. Every child's

physical, socio-emotional and mental development is taken (or should be taken) into consideration when he or she enters a school. There are also competences and cognitive strategies that the child should acquire by the end of the first level of schooling (i.e. elementary school). These include knowledge of how to cope with traffic and to walk on the streets, how to use the basic programmes on a computer, how to study and plan his/ her time, what it means to be a good companion, respect for nature and order, being polite etc. All these could be considered characteristic of the given culture.

### **2.1.3. Culture is a symbolic capital.**

Schools and elementary schools usually have their own space: a house with classrooms fitted for the purpose, and often also a playground. The organisation of these areas could follow a certain pattern of communication (to be discussed later).

Culture as a symbolic capital is also connected with the status of the social actors. Here we could speak about the status of elementary school teachers or that of the students. Since it is obligatory to go to elementary school, no special status is gained by the mere fact of attending elementary school. Though this could depend also on the age of the pupil. Since the usual age for pupils to start school is 6, a significantly older pupil only beginning elementary education might be at a disadvantage. Also attending some prestigious schools would give the pupils a special status in their later life.

### **2.1.4. Culture is a historical form with an evolutionary dynamic**

Education in Europe has not always been as important as it is now, but it has followed a certain evolutionary dynamics.

#### **2.1.4.1. Overview of the historic evolution in education in Western Europe**

The first teaching's traces were found in the Indians and Egyptian civilizations, 6 millenniums BC. At that time, education is reserved for the highest classes of the society.

In the days of the Gaul, the druids are in charge of the instruction of the children, they teach the sacred stories, how to cultivate the land, the cooking, poetry, etc. The students have to learn by heart because at this time there wasn't any written supports.

At the Roman's time, the students were taught reading, writing and grammar of Greek and Latin outside on the public places during the morning, the afternoons were dedicated to sport practise and resting.

At the middle-age, the children are taught by religious, the reading instruction is based on the religious texts. The elementary schools are taking place in the churches, where the major subjects taught are reading, writing and counting, but those schools are very poor and the children are learning by writing on the floor with a piece of coal. They are the so called "public writers" who are reading and writing for the others who can't.

The Renaissance is the name of the great upheaval of intellectual activity, which may be taken as the close of the Middle-Age. It was a revolt from the severe and subscribed monasticism of mediaeval times: a longing for free thought and a return to the larger liberality of Greece and later Rome. The revival of the study of these ancient classics, and of the languages in which they were written, was the intellectual revolt against mental restraint, but side by side with this was the spiritual revolt against ecclesiastical dogmatism. But probably what had the greatest influence in furthering the revival was the fall of the Eastern Empire, which sent thousands of Greeks, well read in their own language and literature, into various European cities to help in its development.

The theory of associationism emerged with Aristotle, who noted how the mind makes connections between what may seem unconnected things. Associationists in the latter 1800s, distilled this down to two elements: stimulus and response, of which, you can't have one without the other. Association evolved into one of the most effective techniques for learning everything from mathematical formulas, to where a person left their glasses.

Public education as we know it grew from a desire by 18th century monarchs to mold more malleable subjects. Pupils were not primarily supposed to learn reading, writing, arithmetic or anything else, but were meant to become obedient citizens<sup>8</sup>. In Austria, Empress Maria Theresa made use of Pietist pedagogical methods as a means to strengthen her hold over Austria. The German reforms in education spread quickly through Europe, particularly after the French Revolution. A fateful trip by the school reformer Horace Mann, who toured German schools in 1843, ensured that Pietist pedagogy traveled to America.

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<sup>8</sup> Visser Michel, Public Education versus Liberty: The Pedigree of an Idea, [http://www.tysknews.com/Depts/Educate/education\\_versus\\_liberty.htm](http://www.tysknews.com/Depts/Educate/education_versus_liberty.htm)

In the last half of the 20th century, psychologists became more interested in the cognitive theory, which involves thinking, perception, memory and problem solving. The cognitive “revolution” as it became known, was sparked in part by the invention of the computer: an unparalleled stand-in for the human mind in terms of how it processes and retrieves, information.

#### **2.1.4.2. Education and school psychology**

At the end of the 19th century, two major theorists of educational psychology<sup>9</sup> confronted their theories known as cognitive development (Piaget) and social-cultural learning (Vygotsky).

Piaget<sup>10</sup> theory highlight particularly the role of maturation (simply growing up) in children's increasing capacity to understand their world: they cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so. Piaget's approach is central to the school of cognitive theory known as "cognitive constructivism": others, known as "social constructivists", such as and Bruner, have laid more emphasis on the part played by language and other people in enabling children to learn. In this second approach, education process will be more present in the construction process of a child's intelligence, communication skills, psychological tools.

Vygotsky<sup>11</sup> differentiated between our higher and lower mental functions. Lower or elementary functions are genetically inherited; they are our natural mental abilities. In contrast, our higher mental functions develop through social interaction, being socially or culturally mediated.

Vygotsky sees the teacher's role as central in the development of children's intelligence which is defined as “the capacity to learn from instruction”.

So the knowledge is 'constructed' and "not just a copy of reality" (Piaget, 1964)

Like Piaget, Vygotsky saw active participation as being crucial for learning. But whereas Piaget focused on the child, Vygotsky emphasised role of both teacher and child.

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<sup>9</sup> Educational psychology is the psychological science studying how children and adults learn, the effectiveness of various educational strategies and tactics, and how schools function as organizations.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a biologist who originally studied molluscs (publishing twenty scientific papers on them by the time he was 21) but moved into the study of the development of children's understanding, through observing them and talking and listening to them while they worked on exercises he set.

<sup>11</sup> Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky is a Russian psychologist (1896-1934), He began his career as a psychologist in 1917 and only pursued this career for 17 years before his death from tuberculosis in 1934.

### 2.1.4.3. The current situation and trends

In Belgium

Freedom of education is a constitutional right in Belgium. In other words, every natural person or legal person has the right to organise education and establish institutions for this purpose. Individualistic freedom is a value pruned by Belgium, as by many other occidental countries. This will be reflected through the educational working system policy, that have tried to stimulate education by giving the education providers greater responsibility and making the users accountable as well, as far as possible. This process of local accountability has been introduced at every level of education and on the other end, therefore, the development of the child in respect to his own rhythm is pruned.

The role of the teacher is considered by the Belgium society and the educational administration as the one who should extend and challenge the children to go beyond their current level of competence. Therefore, the approach pruned by our culture is the constructivistic one.

The goal of the primary education is to conduct each student to his own intellectual, physical, and personal self-accomplishment. The student is take in charge and there is a constant evaluation which enable to detect any insufficiencies and to cure all that is likely to slow down the development of the pupil. The education should ensure all the pupils of the equal chances of social emancipation<sup>12</sup>.

In Belgium, the activities that enable discovery, production and creation will be more privileged. There will be an articulation of theory and practice in the training. Even though sportive activities are held in all primary schools, they are not so developed.

For the last decade, one of the authorities priority is the achievement of desirable standards of quality and performance in the school system. This is made possible through reference to specific knowledge and skills. In order to do so, a decree called the “Mission Decree” was issued in 1997 that defines the general aims of compulsory education for all educational sectors, divides progress through education into stages, and specifies that certain knowledge or abilities should be attained at the end of each stage. Since the start of the 1990s, the French-speaking Community of Belgium has introduced a number of measures aimed at combating school failure and dropout. Following up the ‘Mission’ Decree parliament adopted

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<sup>12</sup> Decree of 24 July 1997 defining the priority missions of Fundamental Teaching and Secondary Education and organizing the structures suitable to reach them.

a more detailed Decree in June 1998, whose aim has been to increase the likelihood that all pupils ‘will have the same opportunities for social and career advancement’. This Decree brings together a number of provisions, some of which had been in existence for several years. By so integrating them, it aims to ensure that the resources awarded are used to better effect, and that policies are more transparent and easier to assess<sup>13</sup>.

## In Estonia

The Estonian educational system during the Soviet period in Estonia was submitted to the general government in Moscow, but still it managed to retain its stress on the Estonian language and culture. Changes in the totalitarian teaching system began in the 1980s when the teachers and parents took a great interest in renewing the curriculums. Since 1992 Estonia has developed its educational system as an independent state with an aim to reach international standards. The laws regulating education, the contents of education, and the system of institutions for education have been changed to a large extent. The Ministry of Science and Education has started a programme “Education of the 21st century”, with an aim to guarantee the quality and accessibility of education, the effective usage of resources and clarity in the area of responsibility. It also deals with improving the curriculum to meet the different needs of individual children<sup>14</sup>.

### 2.2. Elementary school as a society of social actors

The school is an institution influenced by a great variety of social actors who are interacting and who influence the teaching process and transmission. This is even more true as knowledge is co-constructed : child’s mind grows through interaction with other minds. To manage a progression, to imply the children in their training, to work in teams, to imply the parents, all these competences appear through situations of interaction. To manage situations problems by adjusting them with the possibilities of the children, to manage the heterogeneity of the group classifies, to develop the co-operation between the pupils, to set up a council of delegates in classes, to negotiate with them contracts (of communication), to manage conflicts, to animate conciliation meetings between the various actors in teaching process (colleagues, parents, institutions, partners public or private), to lead talks, - all these situations

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.see-educoop.net/education\\_in/pdf/eurypres-bel-misc-t05.pdf](http://www.see-educoop.net/education_in/pdf/eurypres-bel-misc-t05.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Education in the 21st Century, called into being in 2004.

imply that the various actors of teaching interact. But the innovation lies rather in the fact that all these practices in interaction are regarded today as practices of reference in education, that competences which govern them "are recognized like priority in the training of teaching and the teachers". Examination results supplement this formative assessment. The decision as to whether pupils have satisfactorily completed their school year is taken by the class teacher, often in consultation with the school head and, sometimes, the other teachers.

The interaction between the social actors can also be illustrated through the implication process of the parents. Indeed, the actual trend is to involve more and more the parents into the school lives of their children. In order to achieve that, schools reports are sent to the parents to inform them about their children's results and progress at school, as well as their attitude and approach to learning and the development of their personality.

### 3. The characteristic sign systems in elementary education

Cultures differ in the sign systems they use, therefore we will have a look at some sign systems in elementary education. And speaking of sign systems we could differentiate many communication and information sign systems, identity sign systems, territorial sign systems, object sign systems, historical or mythical foundation signs etc. We shall look at some of them in a more detailed manner.

#### 3.1. Communication and information exchange sign systems

The most important and notable of those are the textbooks used in elementary classroom. When we spoke of the values that an elementary classroom teacher should promote, then those values are also strongly present in textbooks and texts used in a classroom. The texts used often include moral stories of "good" and "bad" and stories to endorse tolerance and kindness towards others.

In Belgium, there is the well-known legend of St. Nicolas, which is separate from the Christmas holidays, and occurs during the 2 weeks prior to December 6th, which is St. Nicolas's day (or Sinterklaas in Flemish). Referring to his book that lists all the good and bad children, St. Nicholas will deliver presents to all the good children, but watch out if you've been bad because "Père Fouettard", or as they call him in Flemish "Black Pete", disciplines bad children with a spanking.



In Belgium, the reference to Catholicism is often very present, for example, the reading of the Bible in the classroom is common in Catholic schools during the religious class. Of course the children attending the first years of primary education are too young to make this kind of readings, but it is in common use after the first three years. The expressions of Catholicism is made also through the morning prayer in the most religious schools, and the Catholic “cross sign” should be made after the prayer of the morning and in some schools, before the dinner. The decoration of the classrooms and the school could also be considered a sign system to communicate something.

In Belgian Catholic schools, it is common to hang a cross in each classroom. This sign reminds to the new generation the Catholic roots of our culture. In Estonia, which is a Lutheran and not a very religious country, there is no such tradition.

In Belgian schools, the attachment to the monarchy is expressed through a portrait of the royal couple in the entrance hall and in the head master’s offices. This constitutes a federal obligation across the country. Once again, there is no similar obligation in Estonia. On the one hand, in a newly democratic country as Estonia is, the president has not very much executive power. On the other hand putting up pictures of people in authority could be considered a Soviet heritage and is therefore resented in Estonia. So in fact, the absence of pictures like that could be considered a means to communicate freedom in Estonia.

What is also specific to elementary classrooms is that trying to make them fit for children and comfortable to be in, happy light colours are used and often colourful pictures are hanged on the wall. Most classrooms also have a place to display works of the pupils.

### 3.2. Identity sign systems

Those may include special kind of clothes, and for example uniforms. The tradition of wearing a uniform has vocation to install a sense of belonging and pride. For his defenders, it can also

be seen as helpful to promote a feeling of belonging to a special group of people, it saves arguments about what a child wants to wear, it avoids children coming to school in undesirable fashions and it encourages children to maintain a neat and tidy appearance. For its oponents, wearing an uniform squelche personal choice and freedom of expression. A study carry out in the US shows that making students wearing the traditional kilts and blazers actually reduces school crime<sup>15</sup>. In 1995, parents in Long Beach, California, decided that putting schoolchildren in matching clothes would steer the classroom focus away from sporting the right shoes and back to learning. The numbers agreed: since they mandated uniforms five years ago, overall crime in the school district has dropped by a startling 91%. Suspensions are down 90%, sex offences have been reduced by 96% and vandalism has gone down 69%. Arnold Goldstein, Ph.D., head of the Centre for Research on Aggression at Syracuse University, believes uniforms work by promoting a sense of community, allowing troubled students to feel part of a supportive whole.

#### In Belgium

Most of the schools do not have a uniform. However, some catholics schools and especially in primary schools imposed an uniform. Most of the time, it consists of a white or sky blue blouse, and blue navy skirts or tousers, with a waistcoat of the same color.

#### In Estonia

The Soviet Regime subscribed a common uniform for all. So after the independence of Estonia, there was also a surge for wearing one's own clothes in schools. Many schools established "a code of decency" i.e. some instructions of what kind of clothes were acceptable in a school environment on which occasions. Most schools in Estonia still do not have a uniform, but many schools (especially very prestigous schools and some private schools) are introducing some articles of clothing (e.g. hats) or whole uniforms (usually not compulsory on average schooldays) to promote the feeling of belonging. Therefore they could be considered object sign systems.

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<sup>15</sup> Uniform Improvements - school uniforms reduce incidents of school crime in Long Beach, CA - Brief Article - Statistical Data Included, in Psychology Today, Sussex Publishers, Inc., Sept, 1999.

### 3.3. Territorial sign systems

Since teaching and learning in the official educational system is mostly confined to classrooms (with the exception of some subjects and field-trips), these refer to the allocation of space in a classroom. In most Estonian and Belgian classrooms the desks for students are still organized in a rather traditional manner – in rows all facing the desk of the teacher. This kind of organization can be considered to enhance the status of the teacher (McKay et al, 1998).



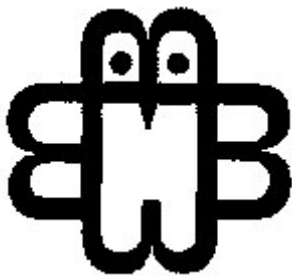
Usually children can choose where to, and next to whom to sit, but teachers could exercise their authority in the classroom and put students who do not listen or are not disciplined enough in the first row or ask the students to change deskmates. This is still a common way of disciplining children in classrooms in Estonia. Though, of course, there are also classrooms with different spacial organisations (e.g. desks in a circle, so that the teacher can see everyone, or some desks grouped together). The spacial organisation of a classroom in both countries is usually up to the teacher, and depends upon her preferences and teaching style. It should be add that in most Belgium schools there is a stage in the front of the classroom, this small elevation of about 1 meter large in the first part of the room. It may be seen as a common way to ensure that the teacher and the board are well seen by the student. But it could also represent the “territory” of the teacher, where he has his desk and to a certain extend the “authority”, with a teacher who is elevated in front of the class.

### 3.4. Object sign systems

Object sign systems would refer to the sign systems of the school to promote its identity.

In Both Belgium and Estonia, most schools have at least their own logo, but to which extent it is promoted in the classroom depends on the school. Schools may also have their own flag, motto and hymn, usually used or referred to at festive occasions. Most prominent schools usually try hard to establish their own identity by using certain articles of clothing, certain procedures, certain paraphernalia. Different holidays and the ways the holidays are celebrated, as well as special holidays of some schools can also be considered sign systems characteristic of those schools. In Estonia for example, there is a day in October, celebrated as teachers day in most schools. On that day the teachers become the pupils and the oldest class in the school gets a chance to be teachers.

Below, we can see the logo of the Belgian school I attended, this represents an owl in a very modern way. In French, the word “owl” (chouette), also means nice. The logo is printed out on all the gymnastic uniforms and the school's documents.



### **3.4.1. Time allotment**

While speaking about elementary education, we cannot leave out the peculiarity of time allotment in most schools. The time spent in the school is organized into classes and recesses, and the classes are always dedicated to special subjects.

In Belgium, the school year starts in the first working day of September and ends the last working day of June. In order to maximize the concentration of the children, the time is split into periods of 45 to 50 minutes each. There are also a morning break at approximately 10 am, which permits the children to eat a collation, a break for the lunch time, and a third one between 3 and 4 pm, depending on the schools. During those breaks, the children are allowed to go outside, there they play and take some fresh air.

In Estonia the school-year starts on September 1, and lasts until the beginning of June. The classes begin 7.45 or 8.00 and usually last until 13.00 or 14.00 in case of the elementary

schools. Some schools also provide after-school activities. The duration of a class is 45 minutes and the recesses are organized according to the policy of the school.

#### 4. The language culture peculiar to classroom activities.

Language used in elementary school classrooms has been quite widely studied, but mostly from the point of view of teacher effectiveness. Some of the language peculiarities in the elementary classroom are probably due to the developmental stage of the pupils. Talking to small children, the speech of teachers is quite simple and very articulate, usually also clear and with a good intonation. Since teachers are also role models, the language they use is usually very proper. The smaller the children the more attention is given to oral speech, so in the first classes oral speech dominates and as children become more competent in reading and writing, written language gain importance.

One of the special skills used by teachers in classes is story telling, which has been found to motivate and engage students and improve their reading skills (Groce, 2004). In order to facilitate pupils learning, the language used should be also figurative (Holt & Ratcliff, 2004). In order to provide better understanding teachers should (and often do) provide visual aids (in elementary school context these are often pictures), use familiar language and alter the tone of their speech, activating prior content knowledge and avoid talking too fast (Long, 2002).

Also some techniques that teachers use in interacting with children have been studied, mostly also from the point of view of teaching effectiveness. Suzanne Mandel Gazer suggests that teachers should not draw undue attention to children, not ask simple yes-no questions and in order to support child's talk repeat the three last words of his or her utterance followed by "and" (1996).

By the fact that these peculiarities have been studied, we can assume that the language of the teachers in the classroom has some of those characteristics. Unfortunately the studies of what the language of a elementary school teacher in reality is are rare.

#### 5. The intercultural dimentions in the primary school classroom

In order to see the peculiarity of primary class-room culture we could plot it against for example the culture of the institutions for higher education. Here the special character of primary class-room activities and instruction become most clear. Even if one could argue that the aims and goals of the two different cultures (that of primary classroom and higher

education) are the same, then the strategies used and the language spoken is quite different. In institutions of higher education the stress is mainly on the written language. Also values presented by an institution of higher education are somewhat different and in any case are not so articulate. Based on that it would be reasonable to argue that, for example, the primary classroom cultures are more similar to each other in Estonia and Belgium (and why not all over Europe) than to the practices of an institution of higher education in either country.

## 6. Conclusion

In our work we have dealt with the primary school classroom activities. First we looked at them from the perspective of the definitions of culture, and concluded that primary school class-room activities can be considered a culture of its own, since it has its own knowledge and value systems, there are typical cognitive strategies at work and it has a special evolutionary dynamics. Secondly we looked at different sign systems that primary education uses and discussed some of them in more detail. And finally we also discussed to some extent the language culture peculiar to primary education classroom.

We also set the culture of primary-school classrooms against that of institutions of higher education, and concluded that the class-room culture in different countries (in this case, Estonia and Belgium) can be considered similar, especially if compared to the culture of institutions of higher education in either country.

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