



# The use of rituals at primary school<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper presents school rituals and their possible use at primary school. Its aim is to show the options of use of rituals in teaching. The authors first define the rituals in general and then characterize the school rituals. Based on a survey they show how the rituals are being used in a school environment. First, they divide the rituals into welcoming, valedictory, educational and celebratory. At the end, they document the main advantages that the respondents see in the use of rituals in their practice. The study results show that nowadays the rituals are an integral part of education at primary school and point to positives, which brings the use of rituals. There is also mentioned possible drawbacks that are related to the research of school rituals.

**Keywords:** ritual, school ritual, primary education, school didactic, teaching approach

## 1 Introduction

Rituals accompany human life since time immemorial. Origin and evolution of the first rituals were mainly attached to existential situations, survival, fear and anxiety, major decisions (Zita, Stasova, 1999). A variety of activities can have a ritualistic nature. Therefore, many authors state various typologies of rituals in their publications, such as van Gennep (2004), Keller (1997), Zita and Stasova (1999) and others.

Rituals are symbolic behaviour, for which is typical repetition and stereotyping. They have their meaning in each stage of every individual life, they help to cope with anxiety, to find certainty and to overcome crisis. Similarly, they are an important part of society, each social group, which they

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consolidate and unify. Rituals give order to life, strengthen relationships, and as mentioned by Zita (1999, p. 103) "they contribute to social cohesion (rituals of family, neighborhood, school, academic, military, sports, civic, federal, rituals of major purposal organizations)."

The concept of school ritual is commonly mentioned in both professional and amateur circles. Usually, it is seen as a rite of passage ritual (eg Kascak, 2007; Babyradova, 2002, van Gennepe, 2004, McCadden, 2004 and others). In this paper, however, we conceive the school ritual as a didactic tool and we explore its use in teaching at primary school.

## 2 Theoretical background

In general, rituals and ceremonies are a form of social activity. Sociologists often refer to a ritual or religious practices that are repeatedly performed and in accordance with the rules, or in the sense of a deeper, shared meaning (Calhoun, Light, Keller, 1994, p. 350).

Therefore, rituals have a special place in the development of an individual. We meet them in early childhood, where they are linked to contact with our mother and the immediate surroundings. At the time it is small rituals that are focused on the repetition of bodily function and mastering of motoric skills, but they are still very important in a child's life. Through them, a child strengthens certain forms of behaviour that need to be managed for later life. For education there are inspiring rituals in the way of "children's spontaneous games." Which include repeated games, that look for ideas both in the normal adult world and ritual moments in fairy tales (Babyradova, 2002). Very important for the development of an individual are rituals in pre-school age and primary school age. As Kaufmann-Huber (2001, p. 44) states, at this age rituals are particularly useful for:

- supporting further detachment from parents (needed during the entire development),
- strengthening the autonomy,
- enabling the enjoyment of a certain performance,
- fostering positive attitudes to work,
- the support of endurance,
- facilitating contacts with peers,
- helping to resolve conflicts in fair way.

As already mentioned in the introduction, Czech and foreign experts (eg Babyradova, 2002; Quatz, 1999; Kascak, 2007) work with the concept of school ritual. Therefore, it is not a new term, but

according to our previous finding, it had not yet hit the critical interdisciplinary definition. We mean the value in terms of pedagogy, psychology, sociology and ethnography. At the moment, we will incline to the sociological concept and we will conceive the school ritual as a “strong collective way of behaviour that is standardised, that is based on involved or traditional rules, while its identical repeatable acts as a stabiliser of behaviour“ (cf. Grand Dictionary of Sociology, 1996).

## **2.1 Rituals in a school environment**

In the school environment, we can observe two basic types of rituals. Firstly, the rituals of a school, especially teachers, and then the rituals of the pupils. Pedagogically initiated rituals (Babyradova, 2002) are mostly used by schools, respectively the teachers, to motivate pupils to higher performance (McCadden, 1997). On the contrary, the rituals of the pupils generally support solidarity within the relevant social groups.

Educational rituals occur directly in Valenta (2007), who sorts them into the rituals which are specifically targeted. The school environment is an environment specific to a particular age group and every class or each teacher can create rituals which are original and "tailor-made" to a particular class.

Rituals help us to set boundaries for children, which are needed very important and for them. Clear rules are needed especially for children who are uncertain, dependent and disoriented. Adults are needed to set the boundaries to help the children recognise the rules, but also to respect their own defined borders (Rogge, 1996).

The above is supported by Evans et al (1997, In Laing et al, 2009), who say that pre-schoolers often need uniform procedures, persistence and attention to detail. On the other hand, the same author states that the significance of ritual behaviour in the course of development gradually decreases and then declines during adolescence. This is indeed also confirmed in the studies of Zohar and Bruno (1997, In Laing et al, 2009).

Receptive teachers are aware of the importance of rituals in children's lives. Therefore, they incorporate rituals into school culture in order to allow children to feel more relaxed and safe at school. Rituals help to promote a positive atmosphere, stressing the unique values of school culture and individual classes. As individual rituals reflect the culture of each school and class, although, their course and structure may differ. They still have much in common and often lead to the same

goal (Mullis, Fincher, 1996). The use of rituals can have a major impact on the social climate in classes, and also on the development of appropriate learning habits, which may reflect positively on the benefit of pupils (Skutil, 2005). Eg. when coming to a classroom, children have learned activities that they repeat daily. Most often these are morning rituals for keeping a child's attention, motivating factors and rituals at the end of the day.

### **3 Methodology of research**

The aim of the research was to find out what rituals are used in teaching at primary schools. It is therefore a descriptive research.

As a research tool a designed questionnaire was chosen, which included a total of 17 questions, mainly semi-closed and open (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2005). Before the administration, the questionnaire was subjected to preliminary research on a set of ten respondents. With regard to not completely clear terminology, we are aware of the limits of the investigation using the method mentioned, especially with the concepts of ritual, signal and command. We have tried to avoid this by defining what we mean by school ritual to the respondents at the beginning of the research. We are aware of the limits of this approach, but at present it is mainly focused on monitoring the use of rituals from teachers.

Questionnaires were administered to teachers in the second and third grades of primary schools in Hradec Kralove and Liberec. Selection of the research subjects was random (Gorard, 2001). A total of 240 respondents were interviewed, 116 questionnaires were returned. The return was therefore 48.3%.

### **4 Results of the research**

Based on the results we can divide the rituals into four basic categories, on which we will subsequently focus:

- welcoming,
- valedictory,
- educational,
- celebratory.

**Welcoming rituals** can be divided into three categories: at the beginning of the school year, week and the beginning of day. As shown in Figure 1, the most kept rituals are at the beginning of each day (85%), least at the beginning of the year (60%).

In the case of daily rituals, teachers mostly use a common greeting, common singing songs, a short chat about news or a common warm-up. This rhyme is shown as an example: "Hello, here I am again. I want to learn to read and write and to count at the speed of light. I do not have much time to rest, because I want to do my best. "

Similar rituals are also used at the beginning of the week, plus the insertion of regularly dividing of class chores. The beginning of the year is primarily associated with talking about the holidays, welcoming first-graders and playing games to get known each other.

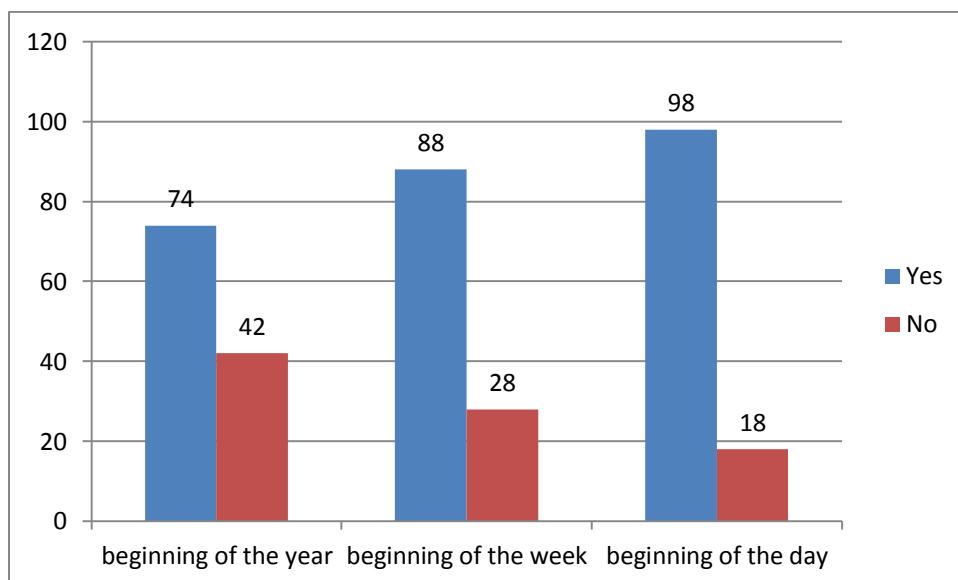


Figure 1 – Welcoming rituals

**Valedictory rituals** have an almost identical structure to the welcoming rituals - we can divide them into rituals at the end of the year, at the end of the week and at the end of the day. Figure 2 shows that valedictory rituals are used less when compared with welcoming rituals. They are mostly used at the end of each day (67%), the least at the end of the year (53%).

In daily rituals, the joint farewell and the wishing of a nice day are prevalently used and also a joint assessment of the day as well as to remind pupils of homeworks, some teachers express good meal wishes. Weekly valedictory rituals are represented by a common evaluation of pupil behaviour, wishes of a nice weekend and a farewell song. Valedictory rituals at the end of the year are usually a

mix of various joint activities, which do not correspond with our perception of rituals (eg, theatrical performances or a group walk for ice cream).

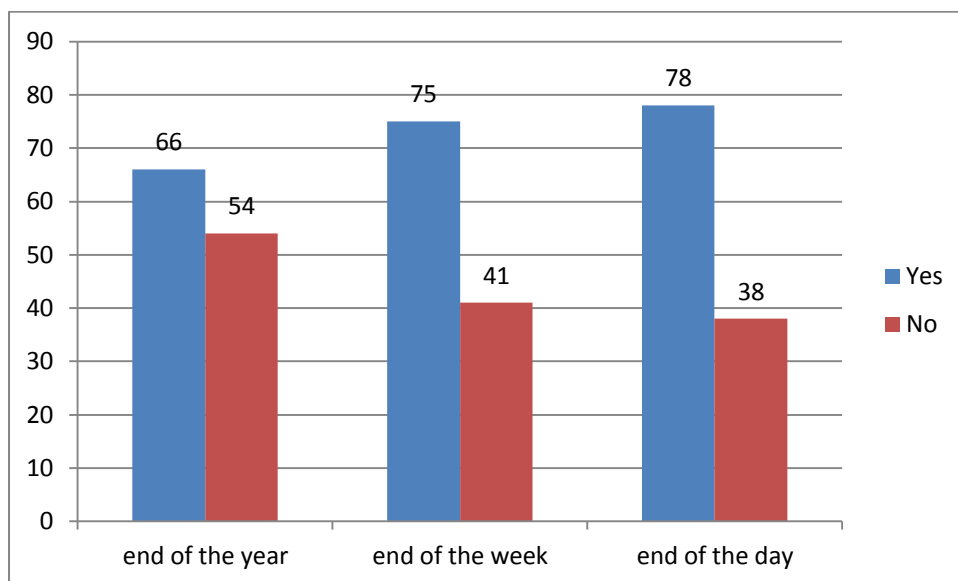


Figure 2 – Valedictory rituals

As a separate category, we have dedicated **educational rituals**, namely those that teachers use as a means of direct didactic in teaching.

Firstly, within this category it is possible to identify rituals that have more **incentive** and are independent of the subject, such as a song at the beginning of each lesson, rhymes or joint stretching. Then there are rituals that bind specifically to each subject. For example, we mention two observations of respondents:

- 1) "Every lesson of mathematics we begin with a short written practice exam. Kids are already so accustomed that when i didn't want to do the exam, they clamoured for it themselves."
- 2) "When we practise writing, we regularly start with a rhyme, which children already know and often start to say it themselves without being prompted. "

Specific categories, which belong to educational rituals, is a community circle, which the interviewed teachers use very often in their daily work. The reasons most often mentioned are that in the community circle they talk, explain new games and new rules, solve problems or finish a whole topic. There are also differences in the perceptions of the community circle, since its used well beyond the positive responses, which respondents answered to the question whether during

lessons they use the rituals in their work. It is obvious that many of those surveyed do not perceive the community circle as a ritual element.

Second, is the use of rituals **to get attention**. A total of 85% of respondents answered that they use these rituals, only 15% of answers were negative. At the same time, however, in our opinion, it is the most contentious category, since this is where most teachers mix rituals, signals and commands. Most of the teachers reported that they use raising hands, also audio signal (triangle, bell, whistle, clapping) or muting of their voice. Some teachers also reported counting from one to five or seven or ten, depending on need.

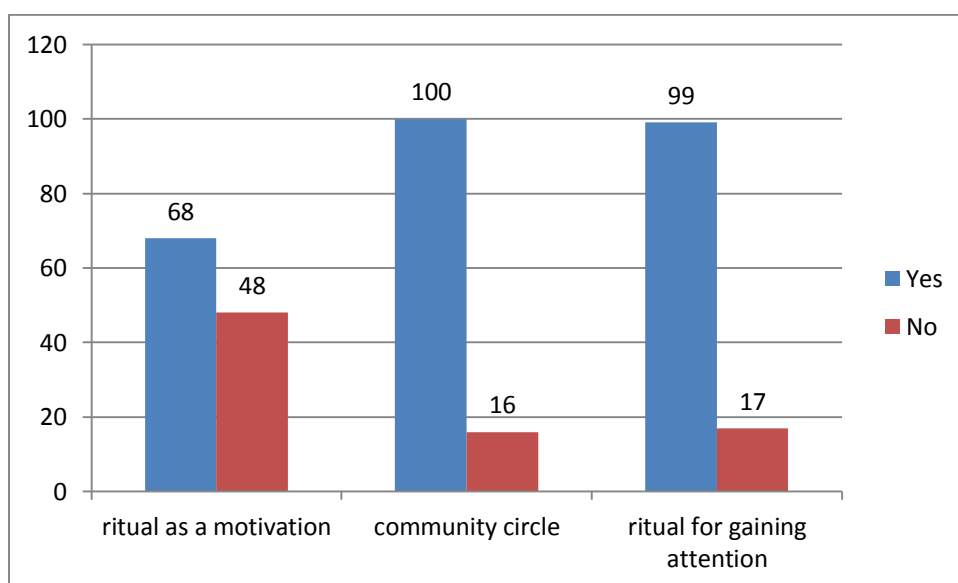


Figure 3 – Educational rituals

We have dedicated **celebratory rituals** as the final category, these are used by the vast majority of respondents (98%). Congratulatory rituals, based on additional responses can be divided into celebrations of namedays and birthdays, and celebrations of special days in a year. If it is the rituals associated with the celebration of namedays and birthdays, the respondents most often mention that the whole class give their greetings together, sing a song to them, give them a gift or even the “bumps“. In the case of rituals associated with important days of the year, the most often mentioned are Christmas, Easter, Children's Day and Mother's Day, when kids at school talk about the importance of that day, make gifts and adapt most of the school activities to the day.

How teachers perceive the use of rituals at schools? The vast majority (96%) agree with them and perceive them as an appropriate method of working with children. On the other hand, 15% of

respondents from their own initiative added that rituals should be used with caution in school and not too widely. As shown in Figure 4, the greatest contributions are considered as calming the children, making them feel confident and giving them a sense of belonging to the class.

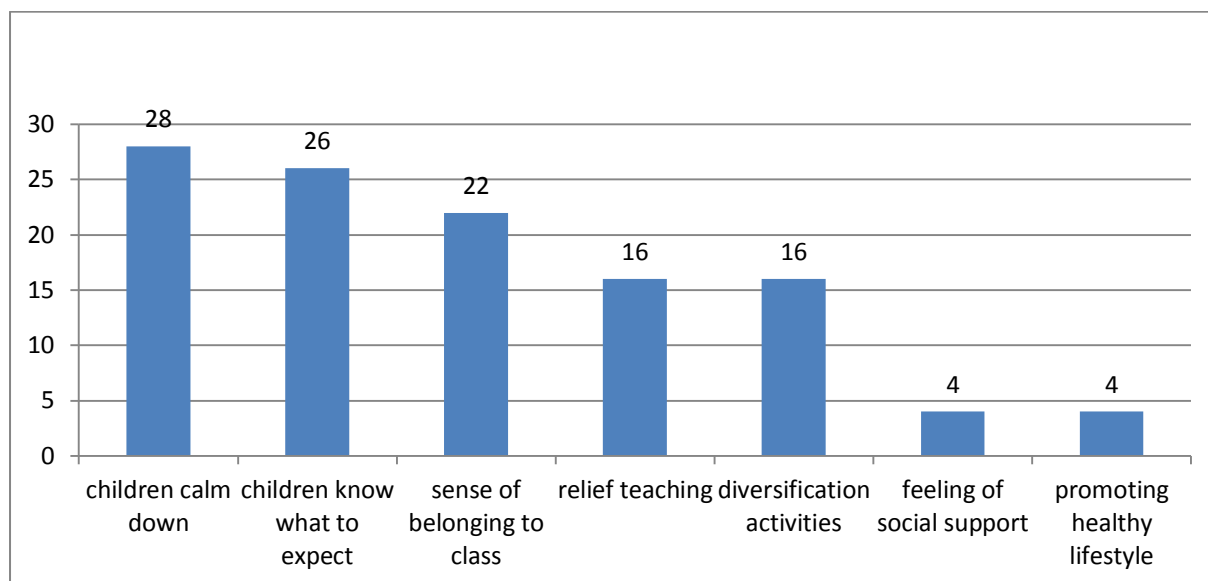


Figure 4 - The importance of rituals in the view of teachers

If we speak of rituals as a steady and repetitive behaviour, we should also mention the answers to the question of how long does it take teachers to form a new ritual? All interviewees responded that it always depends on the complexity of the new ritual. If it is a daily ritual and a ritual used during the day, 78% the children learn it within a week. If it is a ritual repeated with less frequency (eg, welcoming on the beginning of the week or a valedictory ritual at the end of the week) it usually takes 3-5 repetitions to remember, which was reported by 76% of respondents.

## 5 Conclusion

When collecting the data, we gained the impression that most teachers perceive the rituals as their assistant and use them in education. It is also obvious that the rituals help children in lessons and if teachers left them out, children would miss them. However, in this case, these are only results of short-term observations, which will be further empirically verified.

There is a problematic situation which we have already outlined earlier in this paper. Teachers cannot recognise the difference between ritual, signal and command, which is associated with lack of inter-disciplinary definition of the concept of a school ritual.



Past empirical investigation has shown that school rituals are an interesting and useful didactic element that teachers use in their practice. It also indicated the blank spaces that have not yet been adequately mapped in the discussed issue.

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