

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

RNDr. Hana Svobodová, Ph.D.

Habilitation thesis

Outdoor education as a powerful way of teaching and learning

Reviewer

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The cumulative habilitation thesis consists of two parts: a collection of six published papers (part 2) and a commentary of this collection (part 1). The six papers were published between 2016 and 2021. Two of them are book chapters, four were published in journals. According to the applicant, one of the papers was published in the “student’s section of the journal” (p. 46).

Content

The applicant addresses the teaching principle of outdoor education in a refreshingly non-ideological manner. Her aim is not to show the incompetence of teachers in the light of some great ideas. Instead, she is looking for a thorough understanding of the perspectives of the major stakeholders, such as the legislators, the teachers, the pupils and the parents (papers 1 and 3). The investigation leads to several results that will not necessarily be welcomed by some of those involved in the process. On the one hand, it was at least implicitly shown, that the internal processes in the educational institutions can almost be compared to Chinese whispers: Everybody is doing their best with due intents and still the outcome in the classroom differs from the abstract ideas formulated in ministerial departments. Unfortunately, in paper 1 the applicant’s approach is more descriptive than explanatory, hence it is hard to tell, how exactly the teachers refer to the curriculum, what they criticize, what they alter and what they reject for which reasons. On the other hand, the perspectives and interests of those who meet “on the ground” differ considerably. Hence, they may talk about the same thing, but mean different things, which at some point must lead to frustrations on either side. Having said this, the applicant seems hardly aware of the possible impacts of her research and does not discuss possible educational answers to her findings.

This may be due to the overall lack of a theoretical debate relating to outdoor education. The applicant quotes ample literature on definitions, the supposed merits of outdoor education and possible methodological approaches, but there is no hint at possible explanations that could underpin the findings. This lack of theory leads to deficiencies in argumentation. For example, in paper 3 the applicant claims that the critical attitudes of the teachers towards outdoor education are reflected in the answers of the older pupils. This directly contradicts the reason for which she has chosen to conduct her research at this specific school: that this school was more engaged in outdoor education than other schools surveyed. If this was the case, then the teachers would also have a more positive attitude towards outdoor education than teachers at other schools, hence the older pupils should reflect this attitude which obviously they did not. Had the applicant used theories relating to changes in attitudes with age or attitudes depending

on so called milieus, she might have come to different and at the same time more convincing explanations.

Besides the perspectives of different stakeholders on outdoor education the author discusses other aspects such as the contribution of outdoor education to physical well-being (paper 4) and the possibility of interdisciplinary teaching (papers 6). Unfortunately, the link between these aspects and the analysis of stakeholders is not argued well. It remains unclear, in how far the knowledge of these aspects contributes to the understanding of the perspectives of the stakeholders in outdoor education.

The role of the two book chapters in the compilation is even less transparent. Paper 2 describes a teaching unit, that in another context or contextualised properly would probably be of benefit, but standing more or less alone in the context of a work whose aim it is to show the scientific merits of the applicant stands somewhat aloof from the other papers. Paper 5, which compares the possibilities of integrating PE and Geography in three different countries, is probably the most tenuous of all papers, but is also the oldest one according to the year of publication and as such reflects the state of international research in the field of (subject) education at the time. Other than the natural sciences, educational research (like legal studies) is highly linked to national approaches to education. This makes international approaches difficult. Hence, they often stop at the mere description of the different frameworks, as can be seen in paper 5. Paper 6, that has been published three years later (in 2019) and by only two of the originally three partners, takes these efforts a step further to interpretation, juxtaposition and comparison (see model approach on page 870 of paper 6) by giving the comparison a theme, in this case the question of how interdisciplinary teaching is realized in different environments.

Methodology

Judging from the structure of the overall argumentation papers 5 and 6 can be read as preliminary findings, that led on to the research presented in papers 1, 3 and 4. Hence, the research design and the methodology have to be interpreted in this light.

The research methodology of papers 5 and 6 comprises a content analysis of the legal frameworks of the subjects PE and Geography in different countries and a questionnaire for teachers. Thus, there is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods that allow a comprehensive insight into the Chinese whispers taking place in the respective countries. Unfortunately, the power of this approach is only used to its full extent in paper 6, which – as stated earlier – may be due to the difficulties of international research in subject education mirrored in paper 5.

In the papers 1, 3 and 4 this methodological approach is broadened and thus differentiated. In paper 1 the applicant mainly uses similar research methods to those in the previous research, i. e. content analysis of national and school curricula plus this time structured interviews with teachers. In paper 3 the structured interviews are supplemented by questionnaires for pupils and parents and in paper 4 direct measurements of the physical activity of pupils during outdoor education is measured. Theoretically, this last measurement points back to the previous international research giving it a new stance that to my knowledge has not been followed before.

Overall, the applicant shows that she can use quantitative and qualitative research methods accurately and knows of their respective limitations. The application of these research methods is combined in a mixed-method approach that allows the author to answer questions that arise from previous research results and thus advance the understanding of the topic in question.

Quality of the research

The six papers show a varying research quality. The three papers published in peer reviewed journals (papers 1, 3 and 6) certainly meet international standards. The presentations are mostly concise and precise. The description of aims, research design, data collection and interpretation are all accurate and hence transparent. This is also true for paper 4, which has been published in the students' section. It is not true for the two book chapters. Paper 2 does not offer any research, but a teaching unit for teacher trainees. Paper 5 first presents a lengthy description of the Czech educational system including the reproduction of curricula content. This is followed by a descriptive table whose content is literally repeated in the text. In summary, one third of the papers does not meet international standards for a habilitation thesis, but two thirds do.

Considering the possible contribution of the four papers that meet the quality standards to the national or international debate, it has to be concluded that in a field that is often highly charged by different ideological approaches, there are several aspects that can de-emotionalize the debate. This is true for the presentation of the views of the different stakeholders as all valid respectively and also for a pragmatic view of the interdisciplinary teaching of PE and Geography in the applicant's more recent work.

Applicant's contribution

On pages 43 to 48, the applicant states her contributions to the respective papers. Interestingly, for papers 1 (four authors), 3 (four authors), 4 (two authors) and 5 (16 authors) she claims a contribution of between 70 and 100 percent (in respect to paper 5 this relates to the respective chapters, but for the research direction of the book she still claims 40 percent). These percentages seem somewhat high, considering the number of authors involved and are not confirmed by those authors. Astonishingly for paper 6, which is based on paper 5 and develops its ideas further, the applicant only claims 50 or even 40 percent contribution, which is still high considering that there are three authors, but seems to indicate that the development of these ideas has been pushed forward by the other authors who were involved in the project. For the rather non-scientific paper 2 (two authors) the applicant claims 50 percent of the contribution, even in the category of "research direction" although there is no research visible.

Furthermore, especially for paper 2, published in 2017, there are some doubts about authorship among several sources. For example, the introductory text on Wilson Park (p. 118f of the article) can also be found on the website quoted on page 20 of the commentary (<https://www.ped.muni.cz/fine/sjezdovka-wilsonuv-les.php>) and on page 37f of a student diploma thesis (Vesely 2016; https://is.muni.cz/th/mhfwl/DIPLOMOVA_PRACE.pdf). The same is true for the tasks in the group work section: they can be found on the website (<https://www.ped.muni.cz/fine/worksheet.php?s=sjezdovka-wilsonuv-les&l=en>) and in the diploma thesis (pages 76 and 77). Also, some of the results of the group work are used in the diploma thesis and in paper 2 (see figure 7.2 on page 124 of the article and figures 6 and 7 on page 439). The diploma thesis of 2016 is not quoted by the applicant and hence it is not clear, whose contribution these parts really are. Apart from that, it seems striking, that the same material is handed in for a diploma thesis and a habilitation thesis by different authors.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

- (1) In paper 3, one of the author's findings is, that pupils often view outdoor education more as relaxation than education. From experience or the literature, are there any indications on how to deal with these findings other than sacrifice education for edutainment?
- (2) Also relating to the measurement of pupils' attitude to outdoor learning is the question whether, as in all over educational fields, these attitudes (and also learning outcomes) may be depended on the learning styles (e. g. Kolb or Gardner) of the student. Do you know of any such studies? If not, do you see a potential for research here? If you see a potential, which outcomes would you expect of such research?
- (3) In several places, the author states or implies the advanced state of fieldwork mainly in the English-speaking countries. At the same time, she uses older Czech publications to define relevant aspects of outdoor education. Hence, the question is, whether traditional ideas on outdoor education are maybe more tangible than newer, so called "constructivist" ideas?
- (4) Relating to the case study of the ski slope: A lot of information that, a few decades ago, you could only gather by going outside is now available online (e. g. through Google Earth). How can you make sure that students really work with the outside surrounding instead of reverting to the internet?

Conclusion

In a German or Austrian context, the remarks on the applicant's contribution would probably have legal repercussions. As I am not familiar with the Czech legal provisions that may or may not be applicable, I can only share my observations. As for the content itself, there are strengths (papers 1, 3, and 6) and weaknesses (papers 2, and 5).

The habilitation thesis entitled *Outdoor education as a powerful way of teaching and learning* by Hana Svobodová **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Pedagogy.

Date: 29. 08. 2023

Signature: