Creativity studies
ISSN 2345-0479 / eISSN 2345-0487
2022 Volume 15 Issue 2: 316–331
https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2022.12887

TOWARDS A RITUALIZED PUBLIC SPACE ABOVE DIVISIONS: CREATIVE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN'S RITES OF PASSAGE

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Received 4 June 2020; accepted 20 May 2021

Abstract. The article refers to anthropological, sociological and pedagogical aspects of reframing – in a creative way – the rituals addressed to children at the threshold of puberty. Based on a presentation of a new ritual of farewell to childhood, the paper is a theoretical reflection on the need of introducing new rituals that create ground for animation-educational practice. This practice – by revivifying creativity in areas considered so far closed and exclusive – makes it possible to overcome socially unfavourable structures of performance, and the inceptions of new, legitimized and empowering forms of subjective representations. Ritual's creative qualities – in Victor Turner's conceptualization – have inspired the authors to emphasize the need to replace a hegemony of thinking with a heterogeneity of thinking about the rites of passage. This undertaking is directed towards creating a space in social consciousness for rituals that are other than religious ones. Following Gert Biesta's thinking, we argue that the farewell to childhood in the form we propose can be seen as an expression of pedagogical interruption and a practice of commonality which is a common good, one endlessly fragile and requiring cultivation. The secular children's rite of passage and other secular rituals that arise not in opposition to religious rituals, but alongside them, are such common goods.

Keywords: children's rites of passage, creativity, equality, politics of interruption, public space, rituals.

Introduction: reframing rites of passage

In 2016, both authors of this text met on account of an event that was to take place in Gdańsk, Poland in early June. The event, called *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny*, an inclusive children's rite of passage, was to be a response to the First Communion tradition, typically celebrated all over Poland at this time of the year. The Roman Catholic rite of First Communion is so deeply ingrained in culture, that it is not limited to religious practices, but affects also secular educational institutions, societal and family traditions, and individuals'

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juvenescence experiences. As a result, submission to the religiously (Catholic) oriented rite on the threshold of puberty has become a permanent element of growing up in Polish society. Since this celebration had displaced the Slavic tradition reaching pre-Christian times of native religion, which was meant to mark the moment of entering the puberty age, the First Communion is commonly perceived not only in its religious context, but also as a borderline between early childhood and puberty. In contemporary Poland, children, whose families are not adherers of the Roman Catholic Church – a significantly dominant religious group in Poland – have rather no opportunity to celebrate the threshold of puberty, thus may feel deprived of an important experience, common among their peers.

Being convinced that the need of such experiences is not (and should not be) limited to the religious experience, starting with just an outline, we have created the idea of a ritualized passage from childhood to puberty. This idea pertained to a celebration free from divisions based upon religion, social or economic status, ethnic identity, or political standpoint, *etc.*

The proposed – created by the authors – universalized ritualization was to constitute a contribution to new forms of *co-vivendi*, a concept that refers to the ideal of public space that is co-created in social relations based on freedom, equality and social justice. The authors believe that in the midst of a crisis in relations among different social groups, new, creative ways of connecting people by joint celebrations of commonly shared turning points in their lives might conduce to practicing democracy and counteracting social injustice.

Emerging from these ideals, it is crucial to acknowledge the central position of the person – in this case a child – participating in a particular ceremony, rather than their religion, ethnicity, or their parents' social position. This concept, grounded in an idea of a joint world that neutralizes and counteracts disparities, draws on the theory of ritual within a perspective that creates a space for concepts aiming at changing petrified ways of social coexistence. Among those concepts are rituals designed to celebrate turning points in individual and collective lifespans – such as the above-mentioned passage from early childhood to puberty. Not connected to a particular social group, this ritual creates a space for animation-educational practice, which – by revivifying creativity in areas considered so far to be closed and exclusive – makes it possible to overcome socially unfavorable structures of performance, and makes possible the inceptions of new, legitimized and empowering forms of subjective representations.

1. Methods: autoethnographic approach

The aim of this paper is to present the role of children's rites of passage in a society – also a contemporary society – and to lay the grounds for introducing new, more inclusive, creative secular rituals. The study is based on the case of Poland, where the tradition of religious rites of passage is well-established in the society.

As advocates of engaged sociology, we did not want to limit ourselves to bringing into attention the situation and needs of children, who are deprived of the commonly acknowledged celebration of the threshold of puberty. We have decided to also introduce a solution, by creating a new – however inspired by native traditions – rite that could connect people from diverse social groups.

Therefore, in this study of our attempts to implement a more inclusive new ritualized passage, embracing all children, beyond religious or any other social divisions, we have adopted an approach inspired by autoethnography (Ellis, 2003). Trying to "think through and beyond polarities such as researcher-researched, objectivity-subjectivity, process-product, self- others, art-science, and personal-political" (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008, p. 450), we have referred to personal experience and connected it to wider social circumstances. Thus, by embracing personal participation to better understand the social context we were studying, we connected "the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2003, xix).

2. Religious and social dimensions of a ritualized passage from childhood into puberty

Rites of passage at the threshold of puberty as well as at its end have always been an inevitable element of both spiritual and social life in many traditional societies (Weisfeld, 1997, p. 28):

> "Puberty rites […] can be ceremonies, rituals, tests, or simply periods of instruction that provides individuals with the knowledge or abilities needed to occupy a new status and privilege. […] [These] ceremonies were deemed necessary for successful transitions to a more mature social and physical status" (Levesque, 2018).

Depending on the culture involved, such rites would traditionally apply to young people between about eight and eighteen years of age, and would usually take place when the adolescent showed signs of puberty (Weisfeld, 1997, p. 45). Yet, "it is appropriate to distinguish between physical puberty and social puberty" (van Gennep, 2019, p. 68) and stress that – according to van Gennep (2019, pp. 68–69) – puberty rites would more likely pertain to the latter.

It is notable that while many puberty rites are intended to signalize a person's incorporation into adulthood, there are also rites that have been developed to usher the initiate into adolescence not adulthood (Weisfeld, 1997, p. 47). Rites dedicated to this turning point in children's lives also exist in the contemporary world, often in the form of ceremonies associated with certain religious communities, like Bar and Bat Mitzvah, Khitān, or First Communion:

> "Modern society has nothing that corresponds to a full adolescent initiation ceremony that marks the total social transformation out of childhood. One could argue that transition rituals exist within certain domains, however. For example, the modern bar mitzvah has little effect on the way the adolescent boy is treated in society, but it does mark the end of childhood within the religious sphere […]. [Similarly], a feast given to celebrate a young adolescent's circumcision" (Schlegel & Barry, 1991, p. 35, 28).

While discussing the theoretical context of creating a children's rite of passage, the institutional-building meaning of its temporal aspects should also be mentioned. Theoreticians of ritual emphasize its relative time. As has been noticed by Pierre Bourdieu, ritualization is a time-shaping mechanism, making it possible to bring time under control by ushering certain events into its spatiotemporal area (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Thus, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), ritualization institutionalizes habitual social practices and, therefore, results in the formation of institutions. Probably, it was in this way that the formula

of religious rites for children was established. Our newly emergent rite is not aimed at deconstructing this formula, but at gaining a legitimized coexistence in the social world, thus making it more equal.

The desire to undergo a ceremony that marks the threshold of puberty might be individual and dependent on a given child's family culture. Yet, both authors of this paper believe that in contemporary societies too, ceremonies that combine a performative, social and festive aspect of celebrating lifespan turning points are needed:

> "Social life proceeds somewhere between the imaginary extremes of absolute order, and absolute chaotic conflict and anarchic improvisation. Neither one nor the other takes over completely. There is endless tension between the two, and also remarkable synchrony" (Falk Moore & Meyerhoff, 1977, p. 3).

Thus, in some milestone and lifespan turning points,

> "With such a view of culture and social life in mind, collective ritual can be seen as an especially dramatic attempt to bring some particular part of life firmly and definitely into orderly control" (Falk Moore & Meyerhoff, 1977, 3).

What is more, spiritual needs – met by invoking various rituals – are not inevitably embedded only in religious beliefs, and may be experienced in a secular sense as well (Maisonneuve, 1995; Durkheim, 2008). It is the emotional aspect that is crucial in individual and collective experience of either the existential (Durkheim, 2008; Malinowski, 1948) or epistemological (Lévi-Strauss, 1971) meaning of rites, including rites of passage.

Recognizing that, in their cultural setting, available children's rites of passage have been traditionally addressed only to certain religious groups (First Communion, celebrated by Roman Catholics, is a nation-wide festivity in Poland), the authors of this paper decided to establish a new, universal rite that would be inclusive for all social and religious (as well as non-religious) groups. Consequently, all children and their families who experience a spiritual, emotional or epistemological need to foreground this threshold moment would be given an opportunity to participate in it.

The very idea of devising a new ritual for children at the threshold of puberty was inspired by personal circumstances. One of the authors – a social scientist and a social activist, but also a mother of two children who were approaching at that time the age of puberty – decided to bring to life a rite for those children who did not participate in the First Communion celebration (yet, without excluding those who did so). Another author – a social pedagogue interested in ritual in the context of social change – creatively gave this inspiration the shape of a ritualized event, grounded mainly in Turner's theory of the rites of passage. Turner was fascinated by the creative quality of the ritual (1988, 2001, 2017). As he showed, "ritual is not just a conservator of evolutionary and cultural behaviour", it is important as "a generator of new images, new ideas, and new practices" (Schechner, 1993, p. 309).

Thus the ritual was to be a newly created rite of passage, not anchored in any religion, in an attempt to encompass all children, regardless of their religious, social or ethnic background. Yet the very name we chose relates to ancient Slavic traditions of *Postrzyżyny* (first haircut) and *Kosopleciny* (*Zapleciny* – hair braiding), dedicated to boys and girls at the threshold of puberty. The body of the ritual has a culturally universal character, and its consecutive

stages pertain to common features of ubiquitous children's rites of passage. However the name draws upon a Slavic ancestral heritage with the purpose of highlighting the idea of continuity through change. The intention behind the name was to point out that creative solutions for the present or the future can be brought to life without dissociating oneself from the past – just as embracing a new stage in life though a rite of passage is not necessarily predicated on rejecting experiences from the previous one.

This a-religious rite (*i.e.*, encompassing children from both religious and non-religious families), inclusive for all social and ethnic groups, was meant to constitute a bridge above divisions. And the intended reference to a wider cultural heritage was to highlight a relationship between individuals and their sociocultural contexts: "how conventions emerge from groups of people, and how people are influenced by the conventions of a domain" (Sawyer, 2012, pp. 431–432).

3. The need of a creative approach to rituals that make public space

Let us begin this part by setting out the focus and purpose of the task that we undertook. The task was to invent a ritual in response to Polish needs – a ritual accessible to all eight- to ten-year-olds, and not just to Roman Catholic children, who within the framework of their own religious practice – the institution of First Communion – experience something on an individual level that is not just spiritually but also existentially important. The context here is shaped by the cultural domination of Roman Catholicism in Poland. In this country, if mention is made of "children of communion age", everyone knows that eight- to ten-year-olds are meant. "Growing up out" of their earlier stage of childhood, these children are permitted to receive Holy Communion during mass, that is, they are permitted to be involved in a religious practice inaccessible to small children. This cultural universalization means that in Poland no one notices that the ritual of First Communion is interwoven with a growing up (that is independent of religion) of eight- to ten-year-olds out of previous childhood. From a broader perspective, not paying attention to this is to ignore the needs of other children at this age, who also require a marking of the existential importance of this growing up and need support for getting through this difficult time. The ritual (of which we write below) that fulfils these functions is splendidly appropriate to this end. Furthermore, a non-confessional ritual, one that is independent of religious practices, in the context of a cultural domination such as exists in Poland, serves the general public good (that is, it is a generally available good), one that, *inter alia*, implements democratic ideals and ideals of equality and social justice.

Two matters were key ones in our invented ritual. First, there is the feature that brings together children, the addressees of our undertaking that is, their age and, connected with that, the end of an earlier phase of childhood and also the end of so-called early education, the first classes in school. Thus, the ritual that had to be invented was called "a farewell to childhood", especially that phase of it that is usually called early childhood. Of course, a farewell also marks a welcome, an opening to the next phase of life. In reference to the local roots of this kind of farewell and welcome, which in Poland may be echoes of Slavic traditions (as we wrote earlier, change does not destroy the past), our ritual took the name *Postrzyżyny-*

Zapleciny (hair-clipping, hair-braiding/plaiting). In traditional communities, hair-clipping (for boys) and braiding of hair (for girls) were used in a ritual process symbolically to mark out children who were departing from anti-structure constituted by the land of childhood (defined by closeness to the mother and her care, hierarchically unstable and fluid) and who were entering into structure – a systematized space of social roles, of fulfillment of duties in accord with social expectations, *etc.* Further, combining these two rituals in a linked phrase – *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny* – was intended to emphasize the intention of suspending in our ritual the division into male and female. This intention is clearly indicated in the script, in which both hair-clipping and braiding include boys as well as girls (there are more details of this below).

The second key issue relates to the principles adopted, which create the ethical basis of the undertaking. *Inter alia*, this ethical basis is shaped by the findings of social-educational research, which stress the link between changes in social links, on one hand, and ritual enactments that make dynamic or stabilize the shape of the social. Both are educational activities (Mendel, 2007). The research indicates that as a society we are not condemned to follow some and distance ourselves from any other ritualized forms of social symbiosis. It is possible and necessary to create new rituals replacing those harmful ones or change rituals that exclude and – in very general terms – hurt people by leading to suffering; it is possible and necessary to invent them afresh so that they do not harm anyone (Mendel, 2007). We concur with this position, and, thus, in our ritual of farewell to childhood we have adopted this kind of ethical and egalitarian perspective. As a result, we were completely convinced when we began our work of the necessity of changing the status quo by creating a new ritual, quite different from the existing one inasmuch as it is open and admits all children who are approaching the end of early education and who are passing the threshold of early childhood.

According to anthropological theory, crossing a threshold (in Latin: *limine*) is a component of every ritual (van Gennep, 2019; Turner, 2017). Being in the state of transition – liminality – is always an experience that is difficult in some way, and that is why it is enacted in ritual. Rituals help people to experience something that is not easy. Frequently they quite simply make it possible to survive difficult states, including those that seem to be unbearable. By suspending normality – including, normal time – they call up the presence of the *sacrum* (Eliade, 1987); they "sanctify" what occurs within them, in other words – at its most general – going beyond the borders of typical behaviours, ones that are inadequate in relation to the state that is being experienced and that bring no resolution to it. Ritual helps, and is rationalized as making it possible to return to a better normality. It helps as a sanctified deviation, an exception protected by the presence of *sacrum*, an excess that takes place outside time and that serves as a threshold, the crossing of which offers strength, reduces fears of what is unknown, and opens out into the new.

In work on inventing a ritual of farewell to childhood, one can assume that rituals – as generally understood – are collections of symbols, and not just of objects and devices, but also of specific acts, performed more or less systematically, and of specific, interrelated, somehow difficult situations (see, for example, Kostera, 2003, p. 168). In creating a conception of a ritual of farewell to childhood, it was necessary – in view of its object – to hold to a classic

understanding of rituals, according, among others, to van Gennep (2019) and Turner (2017). It is a matter of an approach that stresses their meaning as culturally reconstructed transitions and threshold crossings. In van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, as developed by Turner – a theory that, according to those authors, is relevant to all areas and fields of social life – ritual is seen as always taking place in three phases: transition from status to status, from role to role, from one state to another, and from one social world to another, *etc.* (van Gennep, 2019). In short, the successive rites – the phases of every ritual – can be represented as: 1) the preliminary phase – an exclusion from the state up to that point (separation); 2) the liminal phase – a marginal, transitional period; and 3) the post-liminal phase – inclusion, consisting in preparation of a new status, a role, and entry into a new state and another world. Accordingly, a conception of a ritual of farewell to childhood is based on the assumption that it must consist of three phases of the above kind.

It must also take account of a feeling of the sacred, which is not only experienced within religious practices. In rituals, whether religious or not, participants experience the presence of *sacrum*, which – according to the theory of ritual – is not an absolute category, but a category manifested in specific situations (van Gennep, 2019). In explaining this category, van Gennep distinguishes the status of the traveler and stresses the particularity of the *sacrum* in the context of the journey. He argues that the human being who lives in their home or clan exists in the reality of the *profanum*. They enter the *sacrum* when they leave on a journey and, as a stranger, find themselves in the vicinity of an unknown place (van Gennep, 2019). Such changes disrupt social life and the life of the individual, and, thus, van Gennep (2019) understands rituals in terms of their function in mitigating these disruptions. From this perspective, one can observe the succeeding argument that speaks in favour of the need to invent a ritual of farewell to childhood so that this mitigating function may be enjoyed by all children and not just those taking First Communion.

But how to invent a secular ritualization of transition in which sacredness would be embodied? In response to this question, it proved productive to draw on the idea of the communal character of a ritual of farewell to childhood. The sacred nature of passing a threshold lies in its being an exceptional time of forming exceptional communities, of creating links that are other than normal ones. Turner based his description of communities of this type on research into the individual and social experience of a transitional state, sanctified by exclusion from existing orders. Liminal conditions and persons living in them elude the classification network that usually marks out location for states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are not present either there or here. They find themselves between positions designated and organized by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner, 2017). The period for which they last is a period in time and beyond time, a time that links the sacred and the ordinary. Anthropologists – since Turner – call this communality *communitas*. Thus, *communitas* constitutes – it must be recalled – a community experienced by individuals, who experience the happiness (sometimes the unhappiness too) of freedom in a feeling of being removed from routine orders and disciplines. It constitutes a community of persons who are equal in status because they are temporarily deprived of status (or possess it in a given time in a vestigial fashion (Turner, 2017). It is an unforgettable experience gone through in a sacred time that is felt together with others and remembered as different. In planning a

ritual of farewell to childhood, it was certain that people who participate in it along with the children play a very important role – parents, families, relatives, close friends, and others. The experience of "growing" up out of childhood is an experience gone through both on an individual and a social level. The ritual is intended to help both the child who is crossing the threshold of childhood and their parents, families, and relatives who cross this threshold along with them.

One can understand ritualization as a *conditio sine qua non* of the existence of our world. Without ritualized social activities, there would not exist what is shared, what is at the same time differentiated (in the majority of cultures) and stable in form. Turner argues this, focusing on how ritual process is a machine for introducing new behaviors or undermining established systems (Turner, 2017; Schechner, 1993, p. 312). Thereby, ritualization ensures order in the world, creating a vision of social order and assuming at the same time its transformation (Mendel, 2007). This is where is the source of the generalizing understanding of ritualization as a process that is marked by features of rites of passage. No subject – either on an individual or a social level – remains the same as a result of ritualization. The subject becomes different from what they were before the ritual appeared (Leach & Greimas, 1989). By fulfilling their negotiating functions, in social life rituals play the role of bringers of social change. This is the central point of our aim. Our ritual of farewell to childhood is an expression of our work in the cause of change, towards freedom, equality, and social justice. This work is, thus, to a large degree educational, but also political.

4. A ritual of crossing the threshold of childhood: how children's rites of passage work universally

The metaphor of the tree was of key importance in creating this ritual. The metaphor was drawn from several sources. One of them consists of studies on theories of children's minds, in which scholars and scientists use the metaphor of tree-rings to express children's constructs, for example, the development of new representations of states of mind in relation to existing ones. It is important that research shows that the metaphor of the cross section of a tree with its rings that develop in time making the tree thicker, making it wiser, greater, and "more grown up", is understood by children (Białecka-Pikul & Żarska, 1996). Another source of inspiration that was important in inventing a ritual of farewell to childhood was the "theory of the tree", which Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig – Protestant minister, pedagogue, historian, and poet – formulated in the mid-19th century, while advocating a patriotic education for Danish peasants. According to his ideas, "schools for life", later called "folk universities", were to work, on one hand, for the development of local culture and the advance and departure from poverty connected with that development. On the other hand, the activities of the schools for life were to preserve folk traditions. The growth of a tree's core marked by rings, which is visible in the cross-section of a tree, is a metaphor of development that is simultaneously survival. This applies equally to individual persons and to the culture of a region or a country. Children who cross the threshold of childhood appear to need an expression of these two options: the growth and survival of what is past and of what they are now growing out of. Although these options appear mutually exclusive, a glance at tree-rings

reveals this to be a superficial impression. The cross-section of a tree trunk, with its rings that widen in the course of time, splendidly expresses the idea of development as progressive change and yet simultaneous retention of what is gone, that is, the survival of the past. When we thought of children who, while bidding farewell to early childhood, do not wish to lose it, but who simultaneously feel that they are growing and that something unknown and new is opening up, it seemed promising to employ the metaphor of the tree as understood above. Confirmation of the validity of this approach came when we noted that the metaphor of the tree is used in a similar way in developmental psychology in the work of Hamachek (1985). Hamachek uses a metaphor of ego growth rings, much like the growth rings of a tree, to facilitate an understanding of how an adolescent integrates the self in relation to contextual conditions when constructing an identity (Craighead & Nemeroff, 2001, p. 723). It appears that this aspect of integrating oneself in relation to change (crossing an age threshold) may be clear and helpful for a child participating in a ritual situation, one made visible by the cross-section of a tree and its clearly visible rings.

In accordance with the assumptions and aims set out above, our ritual of bidding farewell to childhood was detailed as tri-partite structure of rites of passage: a pre-liminal phase (separation), a liminal phase (suspension), and a post-liminal phase (aggregation). The following is a brief description of each of these phases, drawn from the script for the ritual.

4.1. The pre-liminal phase – exclusion from the existing state (separation): *Postrzyżyny* (hair-clipping)

Greeting: the children with their parents gather slowly, and a "mistress of ceremonies" (in this case, *Pani* (Mrs./Ms.) "Maja" introduces herself and her "retinue" – that is, two adults, volunteers. Pani Maja invites the children to form a circle on the floor (and parents/guardians are asked to take their places surrounding it).

Pani Maja speaks of something "warm, unforgettable" that she wants to share with the children, giving them "it" into their hands. There is a round of "pass-it-on", in which the children pass that "warm, unforgettable" thing from hand to hand. At the end Pani Maja asks what they received (although, in reality, they had nothing in their hands). Having listened to them, she sums up that they have been describing her own childhood, memories of which they had held in their hands.

Moving on, mention is made of the fact that according to some, childhood is here (pointing to the tree trunk) because throughout our lives it grows in successive rings. She points out in the cross-section of the tree where she herself is, where the children's parents are, and their grandparents (she asks one of them to point to this). She asks the children where they are and asks one to show the place that is appropriate to their age. It turns out that it lies at the edge of the first tree-ring, and that means that they are closing the first part of their lives. In this context, Pani Maja stresses the purpose that unites all those gathered there and she says: "We have met in order to see this TOGETHER and to go through this TOGETHER".

She goes on:

> "Long ago when children went through this time, they had their hair cut or their hair was tightly braided so that it did not get in the way of the work that was beginning".

She says:

> "You know how hair – long bangs – gets in the way – don't you? – when you're writing, for example. […] So, in memory of this important time, in the presence of all of us in the room (who will help you and always remember this event), you can place a lock of your hair into a little box. It will stay with you throughout your whole life. […] So, do you want to do that?".

Pani Maja asks the children to go to their parents/guardians. Standing, in pairs, mum/dad-child, the symbolic clipping takes place. The children place the lock into the box and close it firmly and decisively.

4.2. The liminal phase – the time of suspension in transition, *rite de marge*: transition

Pani Maja leads the children to a "barrier" of colourful ribbons and says that since the box now holds what it should, we can go on in this direction (she points to the "barrier" of ribbons). The children go through the "barrier", holding the box in their hands:

> "It's important – as we saw in the disk, the cross-section of the tree trunk – to entwine firmly what you have brought. Thanks to the strength that you have shaped yourself, but also that you've got from your parents and others that are close to you, this first ring will certainly be very strong […]. If you twine well what is behind you, that means that you'll go strengthened towards what is before you. And later without anything getting in the way – beautifully like a tree – you'll become more grown up, growing in new rings, and your childhood – a great treasure of warmth and good – you'll always have it deep inside yourself".

"Each of you, take three ribbons": The children choose one on their own (because from now on they will be making many choices on their own); the parent/guardian chooses a second (because for a long time still the growing child will be supported by the family); the third is a matter of chance (fate, for it symbolizes what we have no influence over).

4.3. The post-liminal phase – aggregation, inclusion, preparation for the new state: *Zapleciny* (braiding)

Pani Maja invites the children to sit at a table and – along with parents and others close to them – to braid the ribbons together, as a sign of combining the powers with which they are to enter the next part of their lives: "And now", she continues,

> "wrap your box up so you can take it away with you, carry it onwards with you […]. When you're finished, take your first steps in this direction (she points to the place where the volunteers are standing). There you'll get something that will be a very useful souvenir of today's Event. You can have it with you all day every day!".

One volunteer directs the children to a raised spot where they receive a little pendant with a drawing of a tree. The awards are made by the mistress of ceremonies assisted by her retinue. Then farewell is bid individually to each participant in the event, and they receive wishes "bon voyage!".

Together with their parents, the children leave the room, perhaps posing afterwards for a joint photograph. In another version of the ending (which we considered), as they are leaving, the children are stopped by a new volunteer, a "reporter", who asks them: "What do you have there? What is it?" (the volunteer asks this while pointing at the box). If the child and the parent agree, the answer can be recorded and given to them later "in memory" of the event.

5. Implementing a new ritual

The ritual of *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny* took place for the first time on 4 June, 2016. Its participants – children and their families – had learned about the ceremony through an invitation posted on social media. Our announcement informed them that:

> "[…] the ceremony is targeted at 8–10 year old children who would like to experience – along with their families – a memorable ritual of entering into a new stage in their lives. This event will be secular, integrating people of different (or non-) religions, different backgrounds, ethnicities and/or worldviews. Crucial in this ceremony will be the passage, when children in a symbolic way will part from one stage of their lives and embrace another […]".

A group of children from the city of Gdańsk and the nearby area participated in the ceremony that took place on the premises of a local non-governmental organization. Starting with the following year, the ceremonies have been organized in the glamorous space of the historic Gdańsk Town Hall.

Since parents of the initiated children started spreading information about this rite of passage, the event soon caught the attention of the media. After a few articles published in widely-read Polish periodicals (Kozłowska, 2016a, 2016b, 2018; Olejniczak, 2017; Bury, 2017), more and more families with children at the threshold of puberty contacted the organizers, expressing their interest in this particular rite of passage. *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny*were also discussed on internet forums and in social media.

However, alongside the articles written by journalists who actually contacted the organizers and talked to the families whose children had taken part in the ritual, there were also articles – published by the right-wing, conservative media – the authors of which neither saw the event, nor talked to anyone engaged in it, but nonetheless had a fixed opinion about the initiative (Terlikowska, 2016; Wałach, 2016), an opinion embellished with false facts and unrelated photos. Generally, media and social attention predominantly came from three social environments: right-wing conservative circles, left-wing liberal circles, and the Rodnovers (*i.e.* Slavic Native Faith adherents). The right-wing conservative voices opposed the very idea of the ceremony, perceiving it as an anti-First Communion endeavor, interpreted its areligious character as an antireligious intention, and criticized this rite of passage for its inclusive nature. Left-wing liberal circles, largely supported the initiative and advocated it. However, there were also single voices among this group of people that questioned the very need of undergoing any rites of passage in a contemporary society, perceiving ritualized expressions of spiritual needs as backwardness. *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny* also aroused controversy among the Rodnovers. Noting that the name of the ritual draws upon a Slavic ancestral heritage,

some Rodnovers sympathized with the initiative, while many other strongly opposed the name, for exactly the same reason: that it was recalling the ancient ceremonies of *Postrzyżyn*y and *Kosopleciny*. The latter group's statements focused on a discussion as to whether rites of passage might be experienced in a non-religious way, and who was entitled to a Slavic cultural heritage.

After four consecutive years of organizing the ceremony, the growing interest in *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny* and the social make-up of children participating in this rite of passage have proven the validity of the original organizers' assumptions, that is, the need for an inclusive secular rite and its role in building connections over social divisions. As intended by the organizers, initiated children come from different social, religious, and non-religious groups. Their families have different cultural and economic backgrounds, and belong to different political and ideological persuasions. Some children take part in the *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny* rite instead of First Communion; some do so in addition to participating in the First Communion celebration[1]. For others, it is a contemporary, secular addition to the Rodnovers' traditional children's rites of passage. *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny*has become an event where and when people – who on other occasions would rarely make personal contact – meet together and cooperate in a non-judgmental atmosphere. In this way, the dream of building connections above social divisions – that are based on religious, ethnic, political, or other differences – has a chance to become reality through a ritualized ceremony.

Because of the growing interest in this new ritual, in the fifth year of its existence, it is planned to organize the *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny* event concurrently in several localities all over Poland. The originators have decided to share the ceremony script with other people who are interested in hosting this rite of passage in their area. However, three conditions have to be met in order not to distort the authors' intentions: 1. the organized ceremony and preceding workshops for participants must follow the original script and its message; 2. the event is to be inclusive to all and organized in a mutually accepting atmosphere and 3. the event – in the same way as the ceremonies organized hitherto – is to be non-profit and neither the organizers nor the master/mistress of ceremony can have any remuneration.

Conclusions: a new children's rite of passage as politics of interruption and pedagogy of interruption

A reality in which it is not obvious that crossing the threshold of childhood is an experience known to all children, and not just to believers who are prepared to receive their First Communion, is based on a blindness that has been inculcated through a long-term formation of social life within the framework of religious life. However, every human endeavour is only partly foreseeable, and this blinding, blinkering universalization may turn out to be reversible. In this article, we draw attention to conditions that may lead to this. Above all, we point to a need to replace a hegemony of thinking with a heterogeneity of thinking about the ritual crossing of the threshold of childhood. This is to a substantial degree an educational undertaking and is directed towards creating a space in social consciousness for rituals that

[1] Intentionally, to enable Catholic children's participation in *Postrzyżyny-Zapleciny*, the event is organized in June, after the traditional time for First Communion celebrations (which is in May).

are other than religious (church-based) ones. If we accept that public space takes the form of relatively stable relations, concentrated around specific issues, phenomena, and ritualized social practices – it is necessary to undertake educational work to disturb these relations in a manner that makes it possible to attain the kind of being-together in public space in which action is possible and freedom may appear (Biesta, 2012, p. 693). This is the approximate way in which Biesta, drawing on Hannah Arendt's ideas, describes what he sees as the best version of public pedagogy (Biesta, 2012)[2]. Arguing that becoming a part of public space and that helping, thereby, to co-create it, relate to the quality of inter-personal links, Biesta points to the constant possibility of educational interruption, for example, via various ways of staging *dissensus*. He writes that

> "To 'stage' *dissensus* is to introduce an incommensurable element – an event, an experience and an object – that can act both as a test and as a reminder of publicness" (Biesta, 2012, p. 693).

Following Biesta's (2013, 2017) thinking, we argue that the farewell to childhood in the ritualized form we propose can be seen as an expression of pedagogical interruption. Seeing an act of dissent (*dissensus*) in learning and in teaching, Biesta stresses the role played by interruption in subjective identity formation, in self-creation. Interruption is meant to a manifestation of *dissensus* in relation to the ego-logical version of being, which is concentrated on the individual "I". Biesta describes such teaching that is open to interruption through the prism of common good and social justice, and points out that it has an important spatial dimension. For example, in answer to the question of the meaning of the task that is education, he concentrates on being and resistance, a combination that continually takes place "somewhere" and never "nowhere" – "we are *somewhere*, not just anywhere" he notes. He insists that any required interruption takes place in conjunction with "existence in and with the world – [it] is possible and literally *takes place*" (Biesta, 2017, p. 14). According to Biesta, this is one of the most important expressions of the meaning of teaching, and one that must be discovered afresh. Developing his ideas, the author draws attention, *inter alia*, to the dialogue as a form of required existence. For Biesta, dialogue is a form of being-together, one that demands energy and constant attention to maintain it. He writes that this possible existence, one that literally takes place in the world and with the world, is embodied in dialogue, insofar as we see it not as conversation, but as an existential form, a way of being-together that aims at the just treatment of all partners involved in it (Biesta, 2017, p. 14):

> "Dialogue is in this regard fundamentally different from a contest. A contest is an existential form aimed at bringing about winners and losers. Also, a contest comes to an end once someone has won, whereas dialogue is an ongoing, never-ending challenge. An ongoing, never-ending 'Aufgabe', we might say. A contest requires a confined burst of energy; staying in dialogue requires ongoing and sustained energy, attention and commitment" (Biesta, 2017, pp. 14–15).

[2] The author also distinguishes the following versions of public pedagogy: pedagogy for the public and pedagogy of the public, both of which subjectivize and instrumentalize the relations that create public space (Biesta, 2012).

We believe it necessary to see our ritual of farewell to childhood from this point of view. It is not a contest, but a never-ending task of dialogue, dialogue seen as a practice of community. The secular ritualization of the childhood experience of a threshold is an entry into a space of dialogue, which – as opposed to struggle – makes it possible to achieve communality as a common good, one endlessly fragile and requiring cultivation (Rosanvallon, 2013). This and other secular rituals that arise not in opposition to religious rituals, but alongside them, are such common goods. This is a good that grows out of dialogue, which expresses not only existence in the world, but also for the world – existence that literally (physically, materially) takes place (Biesta, 2017). In other words, dialogue is a way of being-together in a place, implementing existence in the world and for the world. The justice practiced within such a dialogue – a justice practiced by all the partners involved in it – is its irreducible feature, a feature that relates both to the individual and collective "I", to subjective self-creation on an individual and collective level. Such a dialogue "automatically" interrupts situations in which justice is absent, contesting such a reality and, at the same time, reconstituting it as a space of justice. This aspect of our understanding of dialogue makes it the fundamental basis and principal form of the pedagogy of shared space, a basis and form that implement interruption in an educational and pedagogical sense (Mendel, 2019).

The politics of interruption are understood as democratic practices in the world of social inequalities that are unbearable (Omotoso Stovall, 2016) or – from another perspective – as narrative intervention within one's own self, which is subjectively constructed by the interruption of oppressive reality (Berman, 2016). A pedagogically oriented politics of interruption expresses both these meanings, linking itself with learning and co-creation of knowledge. This knowledge is dynamic and makes it possible for new qualities, subjectivities, and policies of representation to emerge within these politics. An education that is accomplished jointly first emboldens people to interrupt oppressive conditions, in order, later – at further stages of action that is far-reaching and aims at achieving common ends – to ensure a chance of planning new solutions, turning away from limits that inhibit thought and action. Among such limits belongs the dominance of religious ritualizations of threshold experiences that are not necessarily religious, such as a farewell to childhood, entry into a marriage union, or death.

In closing, we would like to emphasize the importance of the socio-cultural significance of the ritual and its creative quality, which was emphasized by Turner. The research experience we describe in this article shows that inventing new rituals has significant social meaning. We agree with the position that

> "the future of ritual is actually the future of the encounter between imagination and memory […]. Ritual's conservatism may restrain human beings sufficiently to prevent nuclear or ecological extermination, while its molten, creative core demands that human life-social, individual, maybe even biological – keep changing" (Schechner, 1993, p. 318).

We are also aware that – as the sociocultural theory of creativity points out – creativity of any novelty is unavoidably determined by social groups, with a reference to certain cultural context (*e.g.* Amabile, 1983; Glăveanu, 2015, 2020; Hawlina et al., 2019): "Novelty isn't sufficient; the creation must also be appropriate, recognized as socially valuable in some way to

some community" (Sawyer, 2012, p. 9). What is more, "creativity is almost never a solitary activity but that it's fundamentally social and collaborative" (Sawyer, 2012, p. 387). A person may be the source of novelty, but it is the social embedment and need, that legitimizes the novelty as creative, and decides whether it is preserved and disseminated to other members of the society.

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