

Ilona Wysmulek  
Research assistant  
Polish Academy of Science  
ilona.wysmulek@ifispan.waw.pl

## **Do, ut Des: Gift Giving in Educational Institutions in Ukraine**

### **Abstract**

The main purpose of the following essay is to analyze the informal practices of gift giving, based on the data gathered from observation and interviews with gift-receivers, the teachers. The analysis is made in the context of social differentiating practices, describing the 'living law' of the institution. The data gathered in one Western Ukrainian school has the illustrative character and aims at awaking the debate of gift giving practice on the wider comparative scale. The paper starts with theoretical introduction of the standpoint, underlining the context of post-communist countries in transition and actors' strategies in it, presenting the gift giving practice among such network of actors as parents, children, teachers and school staff. The practice is presented through such subcategories as the scale of phenomenon, main occasions of gift giving, the gift typology, declared changes in practice and interpretation of practice. The paper finishes with the propositions of the hypothesis and further research questions for the developing the topic in greater scale and comparative level.

### **Introduction. Gift Giving Practice**

Out of a complex mix of formal rules, informal norms, ethical codes and hidden programs that coexist in school practice, this paper concentrates on one of the important elements of a school every day functioning, which is a gift giving practice. This is important, because 'in real life, some informal codes ... seem more efficiently enforced than any formal rule' (Ledeneva, 2006, p. 17) and gift giving is one them. In this case, we deal with the unwritten logics of relationships, the highly symbolical act of giving and receiving, the commonly 'felt' expectations, which, though, seem to function 'outside conscious control and discourse' (understood along the lines of Bourdieu's *sens pratique*, 1990). Unlike the available analysis of gift-giving practices in Ukraine (i.a. Polese, 2008; Kolupajeva, 2009), I present the perspective of gift-receivers - teachers, which are not only active players of practice, but also are expected to transfer the knowledge (or rather share the intuition) of appropriate behavior to the next generations, their students. I aim to understand and describe the 'living law' (Pospíšil, 1978) of school environment, the labeling process of defining the group of 'us', the group that we can trust. In this explanatory study I address the gap in our understanding of scale of the phenomenon, its diverse character and actor's interpretation of it.

Some norms and rules of behavior in Ukraine, which partially have their roots in practices of communism, seem to be a part of everyday routine even 20 years after the regime change. The cultural dimension of transformation is undoubtedly a time-consuming process, but how long can it take and what direction does it take? The question arises, thus, whether this is a peculiarity of countries of transition or a specific relatively stable cultural logics of the country itself. I agree with the research standpoint that in order to study the complexity of post-communist countries, we need to refer to 'the logic of micro' (Rychard, 1998, p.42). Previous studies on countries after the communist regime change revealed that in the context

of unstable formal rules, actors are forced by circumstances 'to scheme up the solutions' (Pawlik, 1992). However, those studies usually concentrated on analyzing shade economy and political sphere of life, but not on such a cultural-economic sphere as gift giving. Referring to cultural perspective, such researcher of transformation as Tarkowska (1994), after the close examination of post-communist countries, stated that we deal here with 'cultural chaos', with no clearly articulated cultural schemes and high level of uncertainty of actors. Although, as to Hirschman (1970), we can expect at least some 'unchanging level of rationality' of actors living in this 'cultural chaos', which are trying to rationalize, explain and interpret the observed reality. Empirically checking those theories, this paper concentrates on the case specific analysis of actors attempt to understand and interpret the observed practice of gift giving, that functions in the common discourse as both negative and positive phenomenon.

Based on the data gathered, I discovered that gift-giving practice functions in educational institutions between two network of actors: parent-child-teacher-school staff and teacher-peer teacher-school administration- state. Due to the limited space, this paper concentrates on one of these networks, namely 'parent-child-teacher-school staff', and presents the practice of gift giving through such subcategories as:

- ▷ **occasions** (days and holidays when gifts might be received),
- ▷ **scale** of the phenomenon (maximum and minimum values of how respondents perceive the practice in terms of commonness and expected actors),
- ▷ gift **typology** (including good and bad examples of gifts),
- ▷ declared **changes** in practice (due to respondents observations),
- ▷ **wish list** (references to the future or to expected changes in practice),
- ▷ and **interpretation** of practice (with special attention on how respondents themselves understand motivations and reasons of it).

## Research method

The peculiarity of informal rules and norms lays not only in the fact that it is not written and cannot be assessed through research using available data, but also in the fact that respondents themselves are not eager to talk about informal behavior, either because they find it not that important, or they are not sure what is the 'correct answer' and right behavior, or they think (or know) that this informal behavior is on the edge (or in conflict) with formal rules. Facing the challenge of studying informal practices, I have chosen the qualitative methods of data gathering, namely participant observation and non-structured interview. It seems that this is a good starting point in order to signify the existing opinions on the subject and to try to understand the particular case in order to make the further conclusions on how to expand the research.

For the study I have chosen the school in the medium-size city of Western Ukraine, where, through personal recommendation, I have contact with one of the teachers. This was a linking person for me to get into the school environment. In the school, I have made the participant observation of the beginning of the 2013 school year (first week of September) and eight recorded interviews with teachers, coming from a diversity of disciplines and different levels of schooling. Using Lofland's recommendations (1971) of field research, despite recorded interviews, I have made extensive notes on my conversations and observations. During the recorded interviews and conversations, I invited all interviewees to talk about the holidays that they celebrate at school (the holidays for which they can expect

flowers) and also asked them to share stories about their gifts at school that were interesting, meaningful and/or extraordinary, which came either from children, parents or school staff. The interviews were unstructured and conducted in a friendly and conversational way, because the idea was to ‘put respondent at ease, so that he will talk freely and fully’ (Selltiz et al. in Denzin, Lincoln, 2009, p. 64) and does not feel stress of control of anti-corruption inspection. Due to the dualistic nature of the phenomenon, it was not obvious for respondents what is the ‘right’ and expected answer, which makes these interviews and conversations an interesting and rich data for analysis.

## **Case Study**

### ***Context. School Characteristics***

The school in which the research took place is a relatively small and old educational establishment. It has a small number of students, 302 children all together. During the conversation with school administration and staff, such peculiarities of school were highlighted, as a small number of students in each class (from 15 to 27, as compared to 30-35 in other schools), highly qualified teachers (22 out of 33 educators are with the highest teaching category), and high satisfaction of parents from cooperation with school (in 2013 the school has got the city award of best parent- friendly school). It is believed to have a family-atmosphere, being ‘*a village school in the city*’<sup>1</sup>. In 2013, there were 18 families that have two-generation graduates from this school, and have brought this year the ‘third generation’, their grandchildren. The analyzed school is district-oriented and has no selection process of entrance. What seems important is that in the same district, five minutes from the analyzed school, there is another public school which is very prestigious and has entrance interviews. There are only few block of flats in the district. Privately owned houses and little pieces of land dominate, which is Western Ukrainian context usually means people working hard in gardens. There are more unemployed, self-employed and house-working people in such area, which was characterized by interviewees as often traditional, but not always religious people. ‘*They are more kind, more sincere, these children. Some of them may be poorer, but (...) they are ahead in human qualities. Who knows what will be more important in future: high intellect or family?*’

### ***Gift Giving Occasions***

All respondents agreed that there are occasions for which children usually bring flowers and/or small gifts. Each occasion has its own specificity and differ in kinds and scale of gifts that could be given. The most important school holidays with biggest gift expectation are Teacher’s Day and Women’s Day. If this is a graduate class, the End of the School Year is also a big holiday with big presents. It is important to mention here that the definition of a graduate class, that respondents gave, was more expended and included not only the end of high school (11<sup>th</sup> grade class), but also the transfer classes such as 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> class. The next big holiday seemed to be the teacher’s birthday, although teachers were not comfortable in underlining it and always highlighted that children/parents should not bring presents on that day, however, they usually do. There is always a person in parent’s committee responsible for gaining information about the date of teacher’s birthday. If the birthday is in summer, there are three options for parents: not to give a present (rare), to give a present before summer holidays, or to give a present in the beginning of the school year. The Beginning of School

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Here and further on in this paper the quotes from interviewees will be presented in double quotes and in italic. The translation from Ukrainian to English was made by the author of the article.

Year, also known as Knowledge Day, and the End of the School Year (for not graduate class) are the occasions where flowers are the most given gift. Similarly, Mother's Day is also the occasion for flowers, in this case for a special kind of flower –the lilies of the valley. The New Year on contrary is the occasion for sweets, fruits and small hand-made presents. Additionally, through conversation it could be understood that the small presents could also occur on such personal teacher's occasions like the birth of a teacher's child, for example. The religious holidays, such as Christmas, St. Nicholas Day and Angel's Name Day for example, are not included to such gift-giving occasions in school.

### **Scale**

As to teachers' responses, the practice of gift giving is a wide-spread and common phenomenon. They say that from their experience rather each child brings something symbolical to highly mentioned occasions, although they claim that not a big attention is paid to who brings what. *'I have taught here for 29 years and have never had a child that would not bring a flower to teacher. I did not have such big conflicts with children.'* Another teacher, with almost 20 years of teaching practice, recalled only one class that did not congratulate her with birthday. *'This was my first year in that school, and those children did not even know, but later they felt uncomfortable, probably they have noticed that others congratulate me or that I am dressed up in a special way. They gave me a present on the next day.'* While describing the practice, a majority of teachers mentioned that it is not only in their school. Compared to other schools they think that their presents are rather modest and symbolical. Some respondents underline that giving flowers to teachers (which was more comfortable to talk about than giving presents) always happened, some said that this is a tradition that everybody knows, some mentioned that they do not imagine school without this practice. For one teacher, imagining school without gift giving practice was treated as a joke, and she reacted with laughter.

This practice is located in the context of the wider scale of gift exchanges that happen in school environment. One teacher recalled a positive example of a student, that brought *'a flower to all girls in his class and all his teachers on 1 September this year'*. Although in this paper there is no place to get deeper in the other networks of relationship, it is important to mention that gifts in school are not only given from parents and children to teachers and school staff, but also from children to children (soft toys from boys to girls in the class for example), from teachers to co-teachers (flowers and present on birthday, for example), from teachers to principle (a book for Teacher's Day, for example), from school administration to teachers (flowers on main occasions described above), from teachers to school staff (*'sweet table'* for personal holidays), to name the few.

There were some differences in describing the main actors of gift-giving practice for some occasions. The minimum number of actors for whom children/parents bring flowers and gifts is a main teacher (in primary school) and a form teacher (in middle and high school). For some holidays, like Teacher's Day, the question appears whether to give presents only to the main teacher, or to all teachers that teach children in this school. The maximum number of actors would include all teachers of the school, together with those that do not teach a child, as well as school principle and his/her assistants (who are usually also teachers by profession). For Women's Day, the number of actors whom children are expected to greet extends to all female school staff, including cooking and cleaning personnel.

### **Typology**

During the interviews, I have invited all respondents to tell about their favorite, interesting or/and unusual presents that they received at school. Based on their stories and

their own language labels, I have discovered that there is a hidden typology of possible gifts that can be given in school environment. They can be divided into three categories:

- the sign of attention
- the symbolical present
- the gift

The borders between the categories are highly contextual and fluent. However, by using the examples of respondents, I would try to illustrate the diversity and financial scale of each category.

The sign of attention – these are undoubtedly flowers, bouquets, dried flower compositions, and flowerpots. Self-made small presents, such as self-made cards, are also considered to be ‘signs of attention’. However, they seem to be less popular. Despite flowers and self-made cards, this category is also extended to something small, that usually cost the gift-giver less than its actual price. For example, Oriflamme cream from someone who works in Oriflamme would be ‘a sign of attention’, but from someone who bought it, it would be rather ‘*the symbolical present*’. Moreover, a decorated classroom with balloons and a blackboard full of wishes is also treated as signs of attention, to which teachers have a special sentiment and ‘*remember it with tears in eyes*’.

The symbolical present – this is a very wide category, which includes fruits (from pears (from own garden), to big baskets of different fruits and sweets (from chocolate box to big cake in form of heart), alcohol (champagne, wine, cognac), coffee, umbrellas, vases, books (from one book to the whole collection of volumes of Grushevski), and photo print gifts (photo of the whole class on puzzles, mugs, car key chains and T-shirts). Some symbolic presents are very personal, like in the case when a pregnant teacher said to the class that she wants a girl and parents gave her a bag of clothes for a baby girl. The respondent was laughing that later on it appeared that she gave a birth to a son, not a daughter.

The gift – this category includes bigger presents, given to such occasions as the Teacher’s Day, the Women’s Day and teacher’s birthday. The examples that the respondents gave were: the envelope with money (approximately 300-500 hrn, which is one third of teacher’s month salary), golden jewelry (golden brooch, golden cross), kitchen accessories (blender, glassware, tableware, cookware, table cloth), towels, and even an artificial Christmas tree for New Year.

Some teachers said that the most popular gifts are symbolic presents, such as flowers with the bag in which there are chocolates and coffee (or champagne); others said that flowers and an envelope (with money) became quite popular. It should also be mentioned that the type of presents is closely connected to the type of occasion, so that for New Year’s no one expects gifts. For example, ‘*For the New Year the presents are usually not material, such as sweets*’. That quote was said by one of the respondents and illustrates that ‘material’ are considered to be only ‘gifts’, but not ‘symbolic presents’ nor ‘signs of attention’.

What is also very interesting, is that some teachers revealed the stories about their bad presents. In one case it was the present of three chocolates packaged with a sticker that noted it was buy one, get two free. For the teacher it was quite funny, but also humiliating, and she did not know how to interpret such an ‘occasional’ sign of attention. The other present awoke deeper emotions. One teacher remembers how her colleague was crying because she have got (in her opinion) a highly symbolical present for Teachers Day, which included the big

bouquet of flowers and a bag with vodka, sausage and a jar of caviar. *'This was such a group of parents, really. I was deeply shocked. If it was me I would give the bag back! There was not a bottle of champagne, nor wine or cognac, there was a real vodka! Who do they think we are?'* This example illustrates that not the financial values of the present matters, but the message that this present sends, and its cultural interpretation.

### **Changes**

As to the observation of one teacher, there is a trend of bringing less individual presents and more organized presents from the group. Another teacher mentioned that gifts now are given less often, but they are more expensive. *'Although in this school almost every child has his own garden with flowers, they all usually buy bouquets. I don't know why but it seems that now children bring somehow more expensive flowers and presents.'* Some teachers highlighted that now there are more occasions for gift giving. For example, the extension of the tradition of graduation to the big celebrations of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> transitional classes, with 'sweet table', scenario, expensive outfits, and greetings to teachers. They also mentioned the difficulties in communication with 'modern parents', which express less respect and gratitude to the teacher, and express their attitude by (at best) no presents or (at worst) sarcastic presents. All teachers agreed, though, that despite the individual cases of conflict relationships, and despite the minor changes in styles of bouquets and trends of gifts, - the practice of giving remains important and unchanged.

### **Wish List**

There were the diverse and categorical opinions about what teachers wish to change in the future in school, and how they see the ideal gift giving practice. There were three patterns of answers on the topic observed. One group was the 'passive complainers', they claimed that without presents it would have been easier for them, although they do not think that this practice would ever change: *'The functioning of the school is far from ideal, but we are used to it and it is difficult for us to change it. Not everything depends just on our wishes'* The second group were 'passive supporters', throughout the whole interview they did not think that this is something new and interesting to talk about gift giving, it just happens to be like it is and there is no need in changes of this practice: *'I don't understand why it is so interesting to you, it is like tradition to cook 12 dishes for Christmas Eve, everyone knows it, not everyone obeys it, there is nothing good or bad about it, it just happens to be as it is.'* The third group were the 'active shapers' of tradition, they wish to teach children to make appropriate presents, to say verbal greetings and not to be ashamed to express feelings of gratitude to someone they like. They are sure that there are some elements to change in the practice. They gave a number of examples of gifts that they did not take (like envelope with money) and 'talks' that they have made with parents and children to explain their opinion on the gift-giving practice. One respondent, that in my opinion also belongs to 'active shapers' of tradition, have also expressed the opinion against group presents: *'To my point of view, this little collection of money by children to one present from whole class is somehow humiliating. If someone wants to give a present he or she should feel free and without the pressure of a group. This is what I try to teach my class.'*

### **Interpretation**

Judging from the data collected, the gift-giving practice in common understanding is located somewhere between the tradition of expressing gratitude to teacher and discourse about corruption. The frame of meanings connected with the tradition is absolutely positive and, needless to say, corruption is viewed in an absolutely negative way. Paradoxically, gift-giving practice swings in between both positive and negative visions and strongly depends on contextual interpretation of players.

Teachers usually tried to explain and persuade during their interviews that gift-giving is an old Ukrainian tradition (presumably dated back to XVII century brotherhood schools), and the mission of teacher is to transfer this tradition from generation to generation as an expression of gratitude and respect. In the school schedule teachers have a special 'educational hour' (*vyhovna hodyna*) planned and this is the right time to talk about gift-giving. However, quite often teachers underlined that this practice depends on parents' attitude. Some teachers on the first parent meeting usually say their attitude and expectations connected with gift-giving. Moreover, there is a parent committee chosen, which also has a chance during the school year to ask some additional questions about gift-giving and to verify and transfer expected behavior to other parents, and then to children. In practice, this understanding of gift giving practice becomes one of the major (if not the only main) task of parent's committee.

Teachers interpret the present as the symbol of parent's and children's attitude to their work. They underline its moral dimension. *'Gift giving is the expression of respect not only to other person, but above all to yourself. It is the expression of how you live with people around you. It is the expression of your inner richness, which does not depend on material status. It can be taught only by example, not by words.'* However, interviewees had problems in interpreting big gifts. Due to the low salaries of teachers, it is humiliating to accept and difficult not to accept big gifts. Not accepting the gift is treated as a strong sign of rejection, the expression of a hidden conflict, the refusal of a gratitude, but not of the rejection from one exact gift (because it is too expensive, for example).

The above mentioned explanations of gift-giving traditions and practical complications connected with it were often said in relation to the discourse on corruption and in the context of state demand inter alia to stop bringing flowers on examination days. The anti-corruption discourse in educational institutions was intensified together with the new Ukrainian Anti-Corruption Law, which entered into force on July 1, 2011. 'The New Law prohibits a person covered by it from receiving a gift in exchange for any decision, act, or non-act that is committed in the interest of the person who is giving the gift, or where the giver of the gift is subordinated to the covered person receiving the gift' (§ II, art. 8.1. in Hitch et al. 2011). Thus, the question arises whether the gift given to a teacher is expected to be given back. For example, if the teacher is expected to give the student the better marks, lesser demands or greater attention. As to teachers, they were oversensitive during the interview in justifying that gift-giving is not corruption but gratitude. On the other hand, the same teachers, when asked if they as parents bring presents to their children's teachers, had at times such slip of the tongue, as for example: *'Oh, we never give presents because my child has no problems at school'*. It illustrates that there are cases of both gratitude and corruption in educational gift giving practice, and also that there is a big confusion in differentiating between two in practice.

## ***Discussion***

The gift-giving practice is Janus-faced: on the one side this is a sign of personification of relationships, a sign of respect and gratitude that seems to have deep cultural background; on the other side, though, this is a highly unregulated practice that might be a component of indirect discrimination and is located on the edge of corruption. In this paper I have described the perception of gift-giving practice by gift receivers, teachers, which have revealed the untypical perspective on phenomenon. The case analysis of a gift-giving practice presented shows the existing pattern of behavior in the studied school, which, as to the logics of qualitative research method, might but should not appear in other context (Denzin, Lincoln,

2009). This is a starting point of the debate for further verification of whether the observed trend exists on the wider scale.

The main conclusions for further verification are the following:

- In the observed school there is a clearly defined list of occasions when gifts are expected. It is interesting to compare those occasions on cross-national level. The intensity and specificity of celebration of particular holidays seem to be a rich data for cultural identity analysis, and might help to understand the processes of transformation.;
- Some teachers observed that the kinds of presents and types of occasions are changing. Is the growing financial value of presents - a specificity of changing relationship between parents, children and teachers? Or is it a sign of a wider process of consumptionism, in which generally the financial limit spent on presents extends?
- In the teacher's discourse there appeared three labels for presents, namely signs of attention, symbolical presents and gifts. Do parents have the similar frame of meanings associated with each of these types? Is the type of present closely connected to the occasion, or does it differ within one occasion and thus sends a 'hidden message'? What kind of message does it send from the parent's perspective?
- Based on the attitude toward the change in gift-giving practices, I have distinguished three types of actors among teachers, namely 'passive complainers', 'passive supporters' and 'active shapers'. In the school analyzed, there was no 'active rejection' from the gift-giving practice. The cases when presents were not accepted were rather exceptional. How representative is it on the level of country? What types of actors can be identified among parents and children?

Overall, the case analysis of one school in Western Ukraine illustrates that the gift-giving practice in educational institutions in Ukraine is highly informal and formally unregulated. It strongly depends on actor's relationships, and thus leaves a wide ground for individual manipulation. The formal attempts to fight corruption in school does not take into account the whole complexity of gift-giving process and thus is practically rejected. It also has a strong positive perception in the eyes of teachers, which claim that this informal practice creates the closer ties, fosters the atmosphere of trust, recognition and reduces risk of uncooperative behavior. However, it has great consequences to the functioning of institution itself. In the situation when informal bonds and dealings among teachers and parents are becoming stronger, the borderline between public and private educational institutions becomes less vivid. It takes the direction of the hidden privatization of schools, and the bottom-up change of main actors in educational institution. While this process is very much socially consequential, the highlighted phenomenon is in an urgent need for further research.

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