



This paper is taken from

*A Europe of Many Cultures
Proceedings of the fifth Conference of the Children's
Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2003

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 369 7

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
 - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
 - a official of the European Commission
 - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

Mikser, R. (2003) Equal opportunities: competing paradigms in Estonian education, in Ross, A. (ed) A Europe of Many Cultures. London: CiCe, pp 189 – 194

© CiCe 2003

CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of DGXXII for their support and encouragement.

Equal opportunities: competing paradigms in Estonian education

Rain Mikser

University of Tartu (Estonia)

Introduction

Equality of educational opportunity has been regarded as an essential social consensus in Estonia since independence. Comprehensive schooling - the primary instrument of equal educational opportunities - was adopted as a basic educational principle immediately after the fall of the Russian Empire in 1918, and the unification of the curricula of different school levels, with free progression from one level to another, was the core of the Estonian comprehensive school. Elementary schools (grades 1-6) were both compulsory and free of charge. Special mother tongue classes were established for national minorities. Despite some legislative controversies in following the comprehensive school principle – particularly in the mid-1930s – Estonian schools remained comprehensive throughout the first period of independence.

Estonian independence was split by the Soviet occupation 1940-1991. Equality of educational opportunities, which was also as a principle of Soviet education, remained (theoretically at least) - albeit largely through near absolute unification and centralisation (Nikolayeva, 1989; Heyneman, 1997; Roberts, 2001). Free and equal educational opportunities in the Soviet republics, including Estonia, were aspired to by variety of types of secondary education institutions. There was a division between general academic education and different types of vocational education, but the free transition of students from one school type to another was relatively common. However, a general academic education remained somewhat more prestigious, as it had been in Estonia during the first independence period.

In 1991, after the end of Soviet occupation, the Estonian Republic was legally restored. The Estonian Basic Law and the Law of Education, both established in 1992, defined the right to education for all, and the obligation of the state to provide this. The Law of Education included the opportunity of continual studying for all. Secondary education in public institutions was free of charge, and mechanisms to provide equal educational opportunities for orphans, children of national minority groups and for children with special needs were defined.

Political factors defining equal educational opportunities

Despite the legislative aspiration for equal educational opportunities, practice during the 1990s was contradictory. There was no explicit opposition to the principle of equal educational opportunities, but different concepts of equality were put forward. The confusion was largely caused by the rapid changes Estonia witnessed during 1990s: the collapse of the Soviet system put Estonian education into paradigmatic crisis and an ideological vacuum (Grauberg, 1994, p.156).

From a variety of different and often antagonistic definitions of equality in education (Benson, 1977), the liberalist-meritocratic concept has become most influential in Estonia, particularly in the early 1990s. Extreme liberalism emerged as a reaction to the recent totalitarianism: like most other ex-communist Eastern European countries, Estonia rapidly moved from a unitary state to an extreme example of an unregulated market

economy. The turnabout in the early 1990s from welfare ideology to neo-liberalism in the Nordic countries, particularly in Finland (Ahonen, 2002), contributed to the spread of a non-egalitarian conception of equal educational opportunities. The neo-liberal ideology interpreted 'equality' as 'freedom for individuals'. The decline of the vocational education system, the establishment of private schools with tuition fees and rapid stratification of the state secondary school system, both in terms of resources and human potential, were the practical consequences of these liberalist changes. The principle of *per capita* funding of public schools, legislatively established in 1994, also contributed to better opportunities for schools in the larger cities as compared with those in countryside.

Legitimation of an egalitarian educational ideology revived in mid-1990s, when equality of educational opportunity came to be identified more as equality of access to education. There was criticism of the elitism and overstated utilitarianism of the school system (Kreitzberg, 1993; Grauberg, 1994). Grauberg (1994, p.157) suggested that the law on basic and secondary school education meant that the state had only taken on the obligation of providing people with a basic education free of charge. Although secondary education had been declared free of charge, controversy arose because there was no obligation for public secondary schools to enrol all the basic school graduates, as by law they were no longer obliged to attend school. Grauberg held that this was a severe threat to the principle of egalitarian education. Another concern of egalitarianism was that the more prestigious secondary schools were usually situated in the larger towns, so access to them was limited for students from rural areas because of the indirect expenses such as food, transport and accommodation. Grauberg maintains that this limitation of equal educational opportunities by material resources is particularly threatening to a small nation like Estonia. He held that the emphasis on national unity inherent in the manifestos of Estonian rightist political parties does not in practice match their overwhelmingly liberal political ideology, and makes their educational aspirations contradictory.

Paradigmatic divergence in defining equal educational opportunities

In addition to the directly political implications, there are more fundamental reasons for confusion about the concept of equal educational opportunity. These lie in the divergence of Western educational-philosophical paradigms emulated in Estonia during the post-communist era.

A diversity of foreign educational models has been characteristic of Estonia throughout history (Tomiak, 1992). The principle of comprehensive schooling was adopted following the ideas of Komensky and Pestalozzi. In the 1920s, the early years of independence, most current Western educational movements became familiar in Estonia. The principles of experimental pedagogy as well as the recently emerged and more philosophical progressivism were introduced. Reforming pedagogy and, in particular, *Arbeitsschule* as overall pedagogical principles gained much popularity in Estonia in early 1920s, mainly via Dewey and Kerschensteiner. It is said that these authors, representing Anglo-American and Continental European tradition respectively, were the two foreign educational authorities most often referred to in Estonia during the first period of independence. Critical analysis of both was emerging in Estonia by the late 1930s. Generally Kerschensteiner's conception, however influential in fighting the formerly prevailing Herbartianism, overstrained intellectualism and verbalism, was found to be too state-centred and therefore undemocratic, limiting the equality of opportunity to develop individual capacities. Dewey's interactional conception, on the other hand, was held to be

more democratic. It was a characteristic of educational debate in Estonia between 1918 and 1940 that the Anglo-Saxon and Continental European educational models were relatively balanced, with no dominance of one tradition. Historically, however, Estonian education has been developed more by the German than by any other cultural model (Trasberg, 2001, p.124).

During the Soviet era free discussion of Western educational philosophy was restricted: the Western implications remained implicit. However, the incorporation of communist education within the Western context was, by and large, on a basis of generically Germanic or Central European theory, particularly in those former socialist republics culturally and geographically closest to Germany (Roberts, 2001).

Contrary to some expectations (Roberts, 2001), most ex-communist Eastern European countries did not adopt the German educational model after the liberation from Soviet power. In post-communist Estonia the Anglo-American has been the most influential of the different educational models (Grauberg, 1994, p.156). In this paper I follow the prevalence of Anglo-Americanism in the Estonian discussion of equal educational opportunities in three dimensions:

Liberalism and non liberalism

As noted earlier, emulation of liberalist ideology in Estonia after the fall of communism was expected for several reasons, the foremost being political. Even if not directly referenced, neo-liberal philosophy, particularly that of Friedman, was echoed in the programmes of Estonian Rightist parties. Anglo-American liberalism, an ideological counterpart to German corporatism, was influential in moving educational discussion in Estonia towards the Anglo-American model. The concept of equal educational opportunity as freedom of opportunity for individuals spread in Estonia, corresponding to the increase of liberalist philosophy. This meant an increasing disparity in academic secondary education and vocational education – the latter had been inadequately financed and undervalued for years. Students underestimated the difficulties in using vocational schools as a springboard to enter higher education or gain professional qualifications (Priimägi, 2002, p.22), and as a result the less academically-oriented students tend to be in a less advanced position. The principle of a parental choice of school, inherent in Friedman, contributed much to the establishment of alternative educational institutions. However, the alternative education movements mostly found their pedagogical principles not in Anglo-American philosophy but in Continental-European phenomenology, for example, through Steiner's philosophy of pedagogy (Priimägi, 2002, p.23). More recently, however, the popularity of alternative schools has declined as numerous problems with the principles of parental school choice have emerged in Estonia and other Eastern European countries (Heyneman, 1997).

Positivism and humanism

Another dimension of Estonian discussion of equal educational opportunities is the positivist – humanist debate. Positivism has been particularly influential in the Anglo-Saxon educational tradition, whereas most strands of the humanistic paradigm have their roots in Continental philosophy (Husen, 1997). Of the few Estonian theorists concerned with this debate, Kreitzberg (1993, p.228; 1994, p.98; 1999, p.156-157) regards educational thinking in Estonia as still overwhelmingly positivistic. According to him (1994, p.99), the current positivistic approach is a heritage of the communist past, where

educational theory was reduced to developing effective methods and techniques, instead of encouraging individual reflectivity or posing questions concerning the foundations of educational ideology. I consider that the relevance of the issue in current discussion also reflects Estonia's teacher training programmes: many foreign educational concepts, such as Piaget's theory of intellectual development or Kohlberg's theory of moral development, are introduced without any concern for their philosophical background and are therefore vulnerable to rival paradigms, especially from interpretative ones.

Sceptical of what may be defined as the unity thesis of paradigmatic debate, Kreitzberg (1994, p.106; 1999, p.159) calls for shift from the positivistic paradigm to more hermeneutical and critical ones. He views a paradigmatic shift as essential in the democratisation of educational process at every level, including involving students in negotiation over the principles and core values of educational policy. The positivist – humanist debate in Estonia cannot be reduced simply to the Anglo-Saxon – Continental European dimension. Kreitzberg himself keeps from using such a national dimension to paradigmatic discussion, and relies much on Dewey in discussing democratisation of education (1993, p.81). However, calls for a paradigmatic shift and the powerful influence of continental philosophers like Habermas and Derrida on Kreitzberg do allow a cultural- paradigmatic dimension to appear.

Social work and social pedagogy

This debate, while not explicitly educational-philosophical, is probably the most characteristic example of divergence from foreign paradigms in the Estonian debate on equal educational opportunity. The issue is related to increasing level of insecurity among many Estonians during the years of independence (Vaisanen, Kraav, Niemela, 2000). Guaranteeing equal educational opportunities for those most in danger of social exclusion is an issue here.

The concept of social pedagogy (*Sozialpädagogik*) was first presented in Germany in late nineteenth century as an educational response to dramatic social changes. From the late eighteenth century Europe had faced a decline of traditional class society, increased urbanisation and industrialisation, and new family relationships (Mühlum, 1996; Böhnisch, 1997; Konrad, 1998). The social changes were similar to those taking place in Anglo-American countries. In the Anglo-American tradition, however, social work became the dominant concept. No explicitly pedagogical movement within this tradition emerged (Lowy, 1983, p.18; Niemeyer, 1999, p.13). In Germany, on the contrary, social work has been handled largely within a pedagogical framework. The concept of social pedagogy is in common use. The particular political reason for this has been held Germany's conservative political system in late nineteenth century and the state's interest in channelling social problems from the political sphere into the pedagogical. Within the more liberal political system of the USA, social work had more opportunity for political activity (Lowy, 1983, p.242–247). The rise of the social sciences paradigm, as well as contemporary debate over Herbartianism in Germany, contributed to spread of concept of social pedagogy for scientific reasons (Winkler, 1988, p.43 – 44).

In Estonia, the concept of social pedagogy became familiar in the early 1990s as an attempt to meet social challenges with educational means. More recently social pedagogy as an academic discipline, as well as a practical institutional network, has spread in Estonia. Compared to institutional social work in the past, social pedagogy prioritises educational rather than material help for those threatened by social exclusion. One of the

most peculiar traits of the German concept of social pedagogy, the fundamental educational-philosophical attitude, has been emulated in Estonian discourse, whereas Anglo-American social work has concentrated more on technical and instrumental solutions (Hämäläinen, Vornanen, 1996, p.14). Common elements of the positivist-humanist debate with the social work - social pedagogy debate are explicit: the main similarity is a concern about whether guaranteeing equal educational opportunities for those in danger of social exclusion needs more emphasis on methodological and technical issues or more on fundamental educational-philosophical issues. At the time of writing the relationship between the concepts of social pedagogy and social work is by no means clear in Estonia. The two conceptions overlap in theory as well as in practice, often causing misunderstanding among practitioners.

Discussion

Rapid social and political changes during the last decade have thrown up serious underlying paradigmatic controversies in Estonian education, which - more or less explicitly - have national and cultural roots. Geographically part of Eastern Europe, Estonia is one of the former socialist republics and inevitably has common traits with educational system of other such republics, but historically, Estonia belonged to the German cultural sphere and much of Estonian education rises from German roots. During the decade of independence, both Anglo-American cultural and educational paradigms have gained a dominant position in Estonian educational thinking.

Different approaches to equal educational opportunities have emerged from paradigmatic divergence. Despite an apparent consensus in principle for equal educational opportunities, Estonian practice has been controversial and has been influenced by different interpretations of the term. The most influential national educational paradigms in Estonia have been the Anglo-Saxon and Continental European paradigms. Overall, three dimensions of discussing equal educational opportunity along these paradigms can be discerned in Estonia. The Anglo-Saxon paradigm is more likely to converge with liberalism, positivism and the paradigm of social work. The Continental European paradigm, which is largely German, is more likely to converge with corporatism, humanism and the social-pedagogical paradigm. It would seem that the Anglo-Saxon (Anglo-American) paradigm has been more influential, leading the debate around equal educational opportunities as well as many other fields of educational debate. However, the more sophisticated Continental European paradigm has recently gained in strength.

References

- Ahonen, S. (2002) From an Industrial to Post- Industrial Society: changing conceptions of equality in education, *Educational Review*, 54, 2, pp 173–181.
- Benson, R.E. (1977) Defining Equality in Education, *Educational Studies*, Summer 1977.
- Böhnisch, L. (1997) *Sozialpädagogik der Lebensalter. Eine Einführung*, Wienheim München: Juventa Verlag.
- Grauberg, E. (1994) On paradigmatic Changes in Society and its Reflection in Education, in Sting, S. and Wulf, C, (eds) *Education in a Period of Social Upheaval: Educational Theories and Concepts in Central East Europe*. Münster/ New York: Waxmann. pp.148–158.

- Hämäläinen, J. and Vornanen, R. (1996) Social Work and Social Security – Theoretical and Practical Challenges in Changing Society, in Hämäläinen, J. and Vornanen, R. (eds) *Social Work and Social Security in a Changing Society*. Augsburg: MaroVerlag. pp.7–29.
- Heyneman, S.P. (1997) Educational choice in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: A Review Essay, *Education Economics*, 5, 3, p 333.
- Husen, T. (1997) Research Paradigms in Education, in Keeves, J. P. (ed) *Educational research, methodology, and measurement: an international handbook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp.16-21.
- Konrad, F. M. (1998) Sozialpädagogik. Begriffsgeschichtliche Annäherungen – von Adolph Diesterweg bis Gertrud Bäumer, in Merten, R. (ed) *Sozialarbeit, Sozialpädagogik, Soziale Arbeit*. Lambertus- Verlag. pp.31–62.
- Kreitzberg, P. (1993) *The legitimation of educational aims: Paradigms and metaphors*. Kompendiet-Göteborg.
- Kreitzberg, P. (1994) Democratisation of Education: Search of New Educational Metaphors, in Sting, S and Wulf, C. (eds) *Education in a Period of Social Upheaval. Educational Theories and Concepts in Central East Europe*. pp.97–108.
- Kreitzberg, P. (1999) Denaturalising of the Discourse on Educational Aims, in Liimets, A. (ed) *Quo vadis, Kasvatusteadus/ Quo vadis, Educational Science*. Tallinn. pp.154–176.
- Lowy, L. (1983) *Sozialarbeit/Sozialpädagogik als Wissenschaft im angloamerikanischen und deutschsprachischen Raum*. Lambertus-Verlag.
- Mühlum, A. (1996) *Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik. Ein Vergleich*, Frankfurt am Main.
- Niemeyer, C. (1999) *Theorie und Praxis der Sozialpädagogik*. Münster: Votum.
- Nikolayeva, A. (1989) New Concept of Soviet School Education, *Education*, Winter 89, 110, 2, p 169.
- Priimägi, S. (2002) School diversity: democracy or meritocracy, in Kuurme, T. and Priimägi, S. (eds) *Competing for the Future: Education in Contemporary Societies*. Tallinn: TPÜ Kirjastus, pp.20–27.
- Roberts, K. (2001) The New East European Model of Education, Training and Youth Employment, *Journal of Education & Work*, Oct 2001, 14, 3, pp 315–328.
- Tomiak, J. (1992), Education in the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, *Comparative Education*, 28, 1, p33.
- Trasberg, K. (2001) Development of the Idea of National Education and Common School in Estonia during the 19th century, in Ahonen, S. and Rantala, J. (eds) *Nordic Lights: Education for Nation and Civic Society in the Nordic Countries 1850 – 2002*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. pp.123-135.
- Vaisanen, R., Kraav, I. and Niemela, P (2000) Insecurity related to working life by age groups in Finland and Estonia in the 1990s, *International Journal of Social Welfare*, July 2000, 9, 3, p158.
- Winkler, M. (1988) *Eine Theorie der Sozialpädagogik*. Stuttgart.