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

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Citizen's alternatives for participation in Finnish social studies textbooks for compulsory and senior secondary schools

Arja Virta

Department of Teacher Education in Turku, University of Turku (Finland)

This paper draws on an analysis of Finnish social studies textbooks and their image of alternatives for participation in society, a theme that belongs to the core content of the social studies curriculum. The data derives from analysis of the books of Grade 9 of the compulsory school, and of the social studies course in the senior secondary school from the 1970s to about 2005. In this pilot study, the books were analysed by using a checklist which included such questions as how the textbooks describe ways of participation, and whether they describe also informal models of participation in society.

The books for Grade 9 in particular are written in a general style, while senior secondary school books discuss more profoundly the issues of democracy. The greatest differences between the books, both between old and new books and between school levels, are in their way of discussing the various forms of having influence. Older books are more institution-centred, and see parties as central channels of participation, but the most recent secondary books describe some forms of direct action and civil disobedience.

Social studies as a school subject in Finland

Citizenship education is a broad multidisciplinary theme, and social studies is only one of the many school subjects involved in it, although this subject has a special importance as it gives a systematic presentation of the power structures and of the channels of influence for ordinary citizens in these structures. In Finland, social studies belong to the curriculum of the compulsory school for Grade 9, when pupils are 15 years old. The compulsory school curriculum has been reformed in 1970, 1985, 1994 and 2004. As a rule there have not been any remarkable changes in the contents, although in 1994 the schools were enabled to plan their curricula autonomously, while the national curriculum only gave frameworks. In the senior secondary school the curriculum has been based upon courses (each about 30 hours) since 1981.

Social studies had only one course at first, but since 1994 there have been two courses, one in political and the other in economic content: the latter was optional. In the latest reform in 2003, both of these courses were made obligatory for all pupils. As a school subject, social studies has the role of socialising the new generation to the society. It provides on the one hand basic information and life-skills for ordinary citizens, and on the other hand it consists of elements drawn from several social sciences. Because of this duality, it is a somewhat incoherent and ambiguous subject. (cf. Seixas, 2001; Vernersson, 1999; Löfström, 2002.) It may also be difficult to combine the diverse goals of this subject: on the one hand to orientate the pupils to the society and the existing structures, and on the other hand to prepare them to be critical and active citizens. If social studies is seen only as a tool for socialisation, it may have the character of a rather conservative subject, with teaching mainly about structures, norms and formal channels. However, it is no longer sufficient only to pay attention to the citizenship of a nation state, but to that of the global community, and of civil society.

The contradictory role of social studies is also seen in the results that Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith and Sullivan (1997) reported from the United States in their study of social studies teachers' conceptions of the goals of this subject. Teachers' conceptions were categorised as critical thinking, legalism, cultural pluralism, and assimilation. Some of the teachers believed that primarily they should mediate the norms of the society to their students, while others wanted to familiarise them with different ideologies and encourage them to make their own minds.

Consequently, it is worthwhile to ask how the textbooks are written and how they deal with issues related to power and citizen.

Data and analysis

The research question in this paper is to examine how Finnish social studies textbooks describe elections, political parties and alternative channels for citizens' participation. This paper gives only a summary and discussion of the findings. For this paper, I analysed 33 social studies books, 16 of which were for compulsory school and 17 for senior secondary school. For both school levels, the books are from different decades and follow different curricula. A fairly representative choice of the books enabled us to follow the development of the theme in the books. The analysed books are related to school curricula as follows:

Compulsory school curriculum

Year	Number of books analysed
1970	3
1985	4
1994	5
2004	2

Senior secondary school curriculum

Year	Number of books analysed
1963	1 (publ. 1974)
1981	8
1004	5
2003	3

In part, the following analysis is based upon the author's previous work within the Finnish sub-study in the IEA Civic Education Study. In this qualitative study I analysed nine compulsory school social studies textbooks from the late 1980s and early 90s (Virta 1996; Ahonen & Virta 1999). The present analysis, although broader, is only a pilot study focussing on one aspect of the change in Finnish social studies content.

Discussion on the means of social and political influence in general

There are major differences in the textbooks' perspectives on the forms of citizens' social influence. Most of the earlier or more traditional textbooks focus on the formal

institutions and describe traditional activities (voting, standing as candidate) in representative democracy as the ordinary citizen's means of influence. All the books present democracy as their indisputable basic value, and all describe political parties as central channels of influence. The books usually describe the structure, forms of activity and financing of political parties, but the most recent senior secondary books emphasise that parties are not the only channel.

Elections are given extensive attention in all the textbooks analysed, but there are differences in how detailed the information is. They all emphasise the significance of elections in a democracy, where people have the right to choose their representatives, and elections are also described at all levels, i.e. in municipal, national and now also on the European level.

Main trends in textbooks for Compulsory school (15 year olds, Grade 9)

The books in the 1970s and 1980s (based on the curricula 1970 and 1985)

One of the early books reviewed had very little factual information but instead presented tasks where pupils had to acquire answers, and diagrams describing the system.

One of the books used a central figure, an ordinary citizen called Matti Meikäläinen, and described his alternatives in the society. If Matti wanted to have influence, he could join one of the political parties, and voting was his most important method. He was also advised to join labour unions. However, the book focused on Matti's opportunities in acting in the formal and established channels. This emphasis on individual activity makes a difference, in comparison with other books, and the emphasis on citizen activity can be seen as a reflection of the political atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s. These tendencies are absent in the books of the 1970s and 1980s, with minor exceptions.

All other books can be described as institution-centred, describing voting and membership in political parties as the main channel for ordinary citizens, although one of the textbooks has a story in which people in a city district take the initiative on an environmental issue. Also the work of various associations is dealt with as a channel of influence. The text takes a normative stand about political activity: 'If you wish to influence, you'd better take the floor and accept positions of trust that are offered ... Passive people have to content themselves with what others decide. Hardly anyone can affect decisions alone'. The textbook presents many ways in which a citizen may participate and influence matters, from village committees and sports clubs to political parties. The more traditional older textbooks do not present direct influence separately but they are dealt with in association with the citizen's freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, for example.

The books in the 1970s and 1980s (curricula 1994 and 2004)

In 1994, the comprehensive school was given a new curriculum which did not define the syllabus of social studies (or any subject) in detail. In one of the books which was published after this, there was a clear change in the contents related to the citizen's forms of influence in the social and political systems. The book 'Nyky aika' (Modern Times, 1995) gives a fairly extensive presentation of means of direct activity and presents them as useful skills for a modern citizen, even expressing a normative tone. The text does not make any reservations as to the possibilities for an ordinary citizen to affect real changes. The textbook gives a fairly detailed description of complaints, motions, and appeals as

means of influence at the local level. The earlier and more traditional textbooks only mention these forms. As to other forms of direct activity, this textbook describes squatting, activity in environmental movements, and civil disobedience; these are also illustrated in many pictures. The book especially emphasises young people's opportunities for action, and the pictures present youngsters submitting a petition or taking part in a demonstration.

The books that were written after the mid-1990s for the 15 year old pupils most often describe fairly broadly the alternative channels for parties as forms of political influence. They describe the forms of civil society and associations as a guarantee for democracy. The books may describe the citizen's right of participation, and give several examples of direct activity such as environmental issues, protection of old cultural buildings or activity against nuclear energy. They also present consumers' opportunities to have influence. The books are, however, rather cautious in commenting on illegal direct activities. Some of the books also describe international arenas for participatory movements (Red Cross, Amnesty International). The text strategy can, however, be characterised as giving lists or examples, not going in detail or reflecting.

Senior secondary school textbooks about active citizens

The development of the contents of the senior secondary social studies books is similar to that of compulsory school books, although the timing and the breadth of the new theme differs.

The books published in the 1970s (there were not many alternatives) were mainly basic descriptions of the social and political system (parties, electoral democracy and other established channels), and this style was also predominant in widely-used books in the 1980s. The earliest books that followed the 1985 curriculum were written in a more theoretical manner, and they also went into more depth than the comprehensive school books.

Two of these early books (both published originally in 1984) differed from the main trend in that they described direct forms of political and social influence. Their main emphasis was on the parties, but one of these books paid much attention also to alternative movements, and to citizen disobedience. This book also mentioned that this tendency was world-wide, and perhaps 'the missing link between an individual and the political organisation', and that its role was perhaps to give more self-confidence to citizens. The book suggested that it would be worthwhile to examine why people did not find the traditional political channels satisfactory. The other of these less conventional books presented different forms of activity, and asked whether political parties actually corresponded to ordinary citizens' opinions. In the mid-1980s, however, these more questioning books did not gain much popularity, and were soon substituted by more traditional books more like handbooks of the established political system in Finland. If they had a chapter about participation, it was more like categories and lists of different movements, not reflection or questions of alternatives.

The change in the textbook contents took place in the mid-1990s, a little earlier and in a slightly different form than in the compulsory school books. The senior secondary school books have more thorough descriptions and more discussion about alternative models for action. The curricular reform behind these new books also gave more autonomy to textbook writers, and did not define the syllabus contents. The new syllabus had a whole

course about 'State, power structures and the individual': economics was separated from the compulsory course and formed an optional course. Thus, all the new books, which were based on the 1994 curriculum discussed citizens' alternative forms of having political influence, and described parties as only one alternative. Two of the books, modified from earlier versions, briefly mentioned the new movements with such comments as 'traditional forms of activity are not satisfactory for all'. Around the turn of the century, the new books devote several pages to alternative and less traditional forms of activity. They present such forms as hunger strikes, animal activism, and environmental activism as extreme methods, and as a new emphasis, global citizenship participation, the purpose of which is to work for peace, equality, democracy and to fight against hunger and poverty. Global democracy and young people's opportunities to participate in these movements are also discussed. Parties and elections are not neglected either. However, the authors have obviously tried to give a balanced description about what is appropriate and about what is really taking place in the society.

Why the interest in alternative channels of influence?

A few years ago I criticised the comprehensive school textbooks for their neglect of the alternatives to established forms, and also for their objectivistic way of presenting the society (Virta, 1996; see also Ahonen & Virta, 1999). This criticism is no longer totally relevant. The social studies textbooks have been rewritten in a more diverse manner, and they seem to give a more diverse presentation of the channels for the ordinary citizen's activity in society. The change seems to have happened in the books published by several publishers, and thus it is not a question of exceptions, although it is difficult to predict how stable this trend will be.

What is the explanation for the change in tone? The picture may be rather complex. The world around us has changed, and in the media we see more and more examples of active citizens protesting against war and poverty, and also the effects of globalisation. This has become visible in textbooks as well. Another reason may be the curricular changes in Finland. The latest curricula (for the senior secondary level 2003, and for the compulsory school 2004) include a cross-disciplinary area about active citizenship (together with entrepreneurship education). Additionally, the present government of Finland, and its predecessor, have had an official agenda of encouraging citizenship participation. The government and leading politicians seem to be worried about the sinking electoral activity, and perhaps also about the results of research related to young people's disinterest in political issues. A had no interests in political issues, although in the cognitive dimension they managed very well (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001; Suutarinen, 2002). School textbooks seem also in this respect to serve the political power and mediate the so-called official knowledge (Apple, 2000; Cherryholmes, 1988); as textbooks as a rule project the ideology of the society and the image of legitimate political activity they also serve as a means of political control.

The new trend may be an attempt to find new perspectives as an answer to young people's well-known alienation with politics. One could suggest that the new focus of the textbooks is furthermore an indication of the textbook writers' strategy of appealing to young people by showing young participants in various political or societal activities.

Finally, the books seem to balance conventional political forms and structures, and dynamic, unpredictable and changing societal phenomena. This may also lead to ethical

discussions in the classrooms, and teachers may have to answer their students' questions about the legitimacy of all the forms that are presented in the textbooks.

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