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## **Implementing social scientific theories in curriculum and social (civic) studies: Experiences from Estonia for the future of Europe**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper elaborates social scientific theories for curriculum development (Autio, 2006, Dillon, 2009, Kelly, 2009, Kridel, 2010, Pinar, 2009, Ross, 2000, Young, 1998, etc.) and puts forward a social scientific model for this field. Formerly, the author has promoted a sociological system of concepts for social studies (democracy education – Haav, 2006-2010). Now, this system has been extended (Biesta, 2006, Connelly, 2008, etc.) and proposed as a model for other subjects and the whole curriculum.*

*In this framework, Estonian national curricula (1996, 2002, 2010) and curriculum policy will also be critically analyzed. Estonian educationalists have dealt with curriculum development for more than twenty years. Still, this process has denied sociological theory any role. The general parts of these Curricula have remained isolated from subject syllabi, including those of history and civic studies. The latter have remained isolated from each other and social scientific theories of society. They rely on an absolutist concept of (explicit) knowledge and promote authoritarian national and European identities. The authoritarian relations and absolutist knowledge enable the manipulation of students and people. The paper will contribute to development of the sociological and deliberative curriculum theory for Estonia and European Union. The author challenges the manipulative theories in curriculum development and policy in Estonia so far.*

**Keywords:** *Absolutist and socially constructed knowledge, sociological model for curriculum development, integrated and isolated concepts of individual, society and culture*

### **The sociological curriculum theories**

E. Durkheim considered knowledge as social, cultural and historical phenomenon. Sociology of knowledge studies central relations between people as social beings and their knowledge (K. Mannheim, M. Weber). Knowledge is linked with social interests and is ideological. This is especially true for social sciences that serve the power groups. Antonio Gramsci is even more critical, arguing that the academic elite actually produce the ideology to manipulate with masses (in Antikainen, Rinne and Koski, 2009, p 147).

Post-structuralism understands that the human world is a world of language. Both theory and practice are discursive realities. In this view, theory is practical. Practice is theoretical (W. Pinar et al. 1995, in Autio, 2006, p 143).

Michael Foucault (1980) has elaborated the most sophisticated theory according to which power and knowledge are interrelated. Power determines dominant discourses and the latter define knowledge. The power groups disseminate their ideology to others not by force, but by discourses. People accept the discourses and think that they follow the dominant ideology by their own will.

The new sociology of education started to challenge the absolutist knowledge in England since 1970s. Michael Young argued (in 1971, see 1998) that all human knowledge is socially constructed and one must study its social and sociological construction. He revealed how curriculum distinguished between high and low status knowledge. The former was abstract and scientific knowledge. The latter covered personal knowledge and students' everyday social practices.

Sociologists have investigated who defined the goals, content, methods and evaluation of education. Basil Bernstein has found that these studies reveal the actual power structure and methods of ideological control. The curriculum is a tool for social control and reproduction of social relations (1996).

Knowledge is socially and linguistically constituted. It is neither timeless, nor objective, nor God-given. Such understanding reveals the political manipulations with education already during the last two centuries. Power groups struggle for the right to impose their concepts of knowledge and values. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) argues: 'Knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?' Ivor Goodson and Albert Kelly have revealed the reification of school subjects in the discourse of objective knowledge. In fact, they are creations of some interests groups (in Autio, 2006, pp 144-145). The curriculum scholar should study the methods of this creation.

Ivor Goodson (2005) demonstrated that school subjects are in fact creations of interest groups whose prime concern has been with maintaining and extending their own status. These groups reify knowledge and treat human beings as passive. Students are denied the right to negotiate meanings, to interpret and reinterpret their own experiences and to develop their own system of values. These groups impose their ideology through politically controlled education system to all students. Their version of knowledge is a form of social control and a threat to all major freedoms in a free and democratic society (see also Kelly, 2009, pp 39-40).

In a free and democratic society, education must be founded on an open and democratic view of knowledge. People should constantly challenge, critique, dialogue and debate their practices of democracy and freedom. They should reveal and resist the attempts to manipulate with them using the absolutist concept of knowledge and subordination of individuals to collective and to the state (Kelly, 2009, p 54).

Education and curriculum studies have conceptual and methodological independence. They take advantage of other disciplines (psychology, sociology, ethics, economics etc.), but they are not sub-branches of these sciences. There is a constant need for theorizing educational experience in order to rescue education from vulgar instrumentalism. The concept of core curriculum focuses on mutual needs of students and society, not on a

number of subjects (Pinar, 2008, p 698, Kriedel, 2010). The focus on relations (between individuals and society, students and teachers) is of principal significance. Different subjects (sciences, languages, arts, music etc.) are part of these main relations between people, culture and nature. They are parts of culture, society and education.

Kelly has developed a democratic and educational curriculum, but failed to introduce it in England and Wales (Kelly 2009). The British National Curriculum 1988 had little to do with educational theory, it was instrumentalist and elitist (Kelly 2009: 256-259). In 1998, Kelly started to develop an alternative curriculum.

Since 1980s, New Right Governments in Britain and USA started to influence educational policies. They have used economic terms like efficiency, competition, quality control, market mechanisms etc. These concepts have been combined with that of individualist personality like in behaviourist and humanistic psychology (A. Maslow, C. Rogers, E. Fromm). The concepts of society and individual have remained separated. The self-actualizing person has been self-contained, true to own nature and ruled by the laws of his or her own character. In this framework, curriculum has remained instrumental (Autio, 2006, p VIII). It has stressed assessment of objectives and monitoring of individual performances. IMF and World Bank have supported this ideology, especially in Latin America and Eastern Europe.

The mainstream educational and curriculum scholars have failed to recognize the development of human knowledge in the 20th century.

### **The Soviet ideology and National Curricula 1996, 2002 and 2010**

Theories of knowledge are linked with political movements. An absolutist epistemology leads to an acceptance, even an advocacy of, totalitarian forms of government (Kelly, 2009, pp 43-44). This epistemology dominated through works of Hegel and Marx intellectual thought in the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century. This century has seen emergence of many totalitarian regimes: Lenin and Stalin in Russia, Mussolini in Italy, Franco in Spain, Hitler in Germany, Mao in China etc. Kelly concludes that any political regime which embraces the absolutist concept of knowledge and ignores its problematic nature moves away from democracy towards the totalitarianism (2009, p 45).

The Soviet education system and policy were totalitarian as was the whole system. It combined utopian ideals with totalitarian control. Instead of curriculum, there were isolated study programs of various subjects and a special program for communist education. Since 1960s, there was introduced a new subject of social studies. The textbook outlined Marxist ideology, tasks of socialist development and communist education of people. These texts hindered any understanding of real social processes. In short, the Soviet ideology relied on an absolutist concept of knowledge, subordination of individuals to society (Communist oligarchy) and isolation of social theory and practice.

These concepts have not changed in the last two decades in Estonia. The absolutist concept of knowledge still dominates. According to educational laws, education is

considered as a collection of knowledge. The concept of knowledge is not defined and the subject groups define the knowledge for their subject syllabi and textbooks. Concepts of individual and society are not integrated any more, they are now isolated from each other. In social studies, theory and practice are still isolated. The social studies syllabi and textbooks are not sufficient to understand democratic or oligarchic processes in society.

The isolation of theory and practice has been typical for the all period of curriculum development. All curricula rely on an absolutist concept of knowledge and of the humanist individual. The general parts introduce a managerial system of objectives and outcomes. All syllabi define their study objectives and outcomes, too. In twenty years, the classifications of objectives, principles, competences and values have altered (Haav, 2009b, 2010b, c).

All National Curricula (1996, 2002, 2010) have failed to link subject knowledge and student development. In general parts, they declare good intentions, humanistic and democratic goals.

Unfortunately, none of this is introduced into the subject syllabi, as their phraseologies enable it to avoid these intentions. The subject groups developed their syllabi without reference to educational and curricular theories and student development. All the 1996, 2002 and 2010 documents are collections of subject syllabi and of a general part.

The Estonian educational scholars argue that their studies rely mostly on the social constructivist approach (Ruus, 2008). Educational practice in Estonia and in other countries is still dominated by simple behaviourist models (information delivery). Some scholars develop and use theories of social and professional identity.

The social critical theories of education, school administration and educational policy enable us to explain the stagnation of Estonian curricula. Subject groups have the right (monopoly) to decide the necessary knowledge in the area of their competence (governance). The curriculum experts have the right (monopoly) to do the same in the general part. This explains the total lack of open theoretical discussions in the extension of a number of subjects under the nick-name of curriculum development in the last two years in Estonia.

The main problem in Estonian curriculum policy is a lack of coherence between educational theories and practices. The educational ideology relies mostly on the humanist and individualistic theories, and ignores the roles of sociological and political ones. In educational practice, alas, political and administrative theories dominate. The educational and psychological theories are neither known nor used. As in other countries, there have been power struggles between interest groups on the national level (and between actors in schools). These struggles have been hidden behind the declarative educational slogans.

### **The development of sociological curriculum theory**

Knowledge is socially constructed. Students participate in this construction. Teachers take advantage in their professional knowledge, attitudes, values and experiences and share all these with their students. This process is mutual, although unequal. Teachers are more experienced and enabled to understand and influence their students. Still, they rely also on students' former knowledge, values and experiences in knowledge creation. Curriculum theories are part of educational theories. They are a core of these theories. As theories of education, they are also linked to theories of society, politics, ideology and culture. In hierarchical and stratified societies, some groups (elites) are more influential than others. In educational practice, curriculum policies are determined by some interest groups more than by some others. These groups may take advantages from political, administrative, ideological and psychological theories more than from educational ones. To do so, they use the concept of knowledge in specific narrow discourses.

The narrow approach hides the administrative and political problems of education and curriculum behind the individualist and psychological ones. The broad approach reveals how some interest groups use the concepts of individualist psychology and absolutist knowledge to hide their social, political and economic interests.

The narrow technical approach focuses on learning aims, objectives and outcomes in absolutist knowledge. These aims and outcomes are defined in terms of different sciences. As a result, they lose their links to the main aims and outcomes of the curriculum: development of students and their understanding of the relations with culture, society and nature. The focus on the knowledge content hides the essence of knowledge as socially constructed, as part of social and cultural development of individuals and societies.

Basic sociological and educational concepts like individuals and society, students and teachers, culture, language, knowledge, sciences, arts, education, Curriculum and school subjects are interrelated (see also Autio, 2006, pp IX, 15, 162).

Sociological theory enables to link and integrate individual and society, social actors and structures. This theory enables also to integrate other subjects with student development. Various subjects reflect different aspects of relations between individual, society, culture and nature. A. N. Whitehead argued already in 1932 that "There is only one subject-matter for education and that is Life in all its manifestations" (in Kelly, 2009, p 253). In my own words, there is only one subject – that of the student. There is only one textbook – that is teacher. In sum, there are as many subjects as students and as many textbooks as teachers. This idea has been elaborated by identity theories: education is mutual formation of identities of teachers and students (Haav, 2004b).

It happens, if different teachers generalize their subjects and link them with concepts of individuals, society, culture, education and nature. If they realize these general and abstract relations, then they are able to develop similar understandings of their students. In this way, acquisition of subject knowledge becomes integrated with student development.

Teachers of different subjects focus on various relations. In natural sciences: between people and nature. In history and social sciences: between people and society. In languages, arts, music etc.: between people and culture. Different textbooks are collections of abstract symbols (words, concepts, theories). Teachers explain how these symbols are linked to the external objects that students can perceive (see, hear, smell, touch etc.). In literature, art and music education, the symbolic knowledge (history and theory) is linked to figurative knowledge (art objects, musical pieces). Pieces of art and music are limited models of the unlimited world (Lotman, 2009). In these pieces, people express their holistic attitude to the world and other people. Arts and sciences are different but complementary ways to discover the world and oneself.

If teachers realize this, then they can explain students how their subject knowledge is linked with other subjects (sciences and arts), with culture and society. Students start to link their perceptions, cognitions, feelings and activities with abstract knowledge (words and concepts) and figurative knowledge (pieces of art and music). People develop, when they deepen their understandings of these mutual relations. It is a source of creativity.

Sciences explain the reality by a number of concepts and theories. A particular phenomenon can be described by a small number of concepts and theories. Social sciences can use a small number of basic concepts and theories for description of particular organizations, communities and societies. These are social subjects and structures, social effectiveness, equality, justice and discrimination, value orientations, ideologies and theoretical assumptions. Formerly, I have described the set of concepts in more details (Haav, 2008, 2009a).

In social science education, the participation of students in classroom and school management is vital (Biesta, 2006, Haav, 2008, 2010a). The school life depends heavily on national education policy (curriculum, examinations, financing, evaluations, and teacher education) (Haav, 2004a, 2005).

Deliberative education focuses on the links between educational theories (including both teaching and learning, and management and policy) and practices (described in terms of psychological, sociological, cultural, organizational and political theories).

### **Some conclusions**

The paper elaborated social scientific theories for curriculum development and proposed a social scientific model for that. Formerly, the author has promoted a sociological system of concepts for social studies (integrated concepts of individual and society, social actors and structures, social equality, effectiveness and justice etc.). Now, the framework has been expanded and it covers also relations between individual, society, culture and nature.

The paper contrasted absolutist and socially constructed knowledge. The mutual social construction of knowledge and identities by teachers and students is a basis for individual, cultural and social development. The integrated concepts of individuals and society and culture enable individuals to use social resources (policies) for social

development. It may also challenge and diminish the misuse of resources by the power groups.

The paper proposes this framework also as a model for other subjects and the whole curriculum.

In this framework, Estonian national curricula (1996, 2002, 2010) and curriculum policy have been critically analyzed. They still rely on absolutist concept of knowledge, isolation of individual, society, culture and nature, theory and practice. The general parts of these Curricula have remained isolated from subject syllabi, including those of history and civic studies. The latter have remained isolated from each other and social scientific theories of society. They rely on an absolutist concept of (explicit) knowledge and promote authoritarian national and European identities. The authoritarian relations and absolutist knowledge enable a manipulation with students and people. The author has challenged the manipulative theories in curriculum development and policy in Estonia so far.

The paper has aimed at contributing to the development of a sociological and deliberative curriculum theory for Estonia and European Union.

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