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FROM TIMES OF TRANSITION TO ADAPTATION: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE CURRICULUM REFORM IN ESTONIA 1987-1996

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to research the important process of the history of the educational development of Estonia, the reform of the national school curriculum which began after the teacher's congress in 1987 and ended in 1996 when government approved the document. That reform was carried out in the context of thoroughgoing and dramatic historical changes that deeply affected the whole Estonian society. The distinctive features of the Estonian model of general education became more visible with the nascent space for liberalization caused by the Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the Soviet Union in the middle 1980s. Although Estonians already had certain autonomy to teach and learn in Estonian and use Estonian textbooks, it was just after the collapse of the Soviet system that abolished Soviet traces in the framework of the Estonian school curriculum.

Introduction

Prior to World War II Estonia was an independent country and had its own national school curriculum. After the World War II, Estonia came under Soviet rule that meant the imposition of the Soviet school curriculum (more of the model of the learning plan) up to 1991. Profound modification of curriculum from 1987 until 1996 was one of the innovations in Estonia in order to get rid of the Soviet heritage.

Here the effort will be made to employ some of the most recent and advanced theoretical discourses in studying history of education. So, the aim of this study is to position the example of Estonian curricular development into the broader international, theoretical, historical context. Thus the main research question is:

What characterized the process of Estonian curriculum planning from Soviet time to the first national version of 1996 in the context of Western curricular development?

Estonian experience is interesting because it indicates that “/.../ curriculum reform is successful when there is support from both educationalists of all kinds and the general public can also be mobilized, using the strategy and tactics especially developed for implementing this process” (Ruus & Sarv, 2000, p. 141).

Discussion

Author argues that the Estonian case can be put in the frame of social construction theory, which implies that changes in society would necessarily reflect in curriculum planning because of “the tension between: social efficiency, child-centeredness, and social reconstruction” (Hendry, 2011, p. 172). The same which Professor Stephen Hazlett considered much earlier – “the commonplace premise is that the school curriculum is, or should be, responsive to the society and its movements, trends, „needs“, and aspirations” (Hazlett, 1979, p. 129, original

emphasis). The notion (or concept) is important not only in the area of curriculum studies but more generally in sociology of education and social sciences. More broadly Estonia has tried and is still trying to employ as much elements as possible of the Western (more British-American) curricular thinking and tradition. Certainly it is not as simple as it seems. There remain some paradoxical similarities between neo-liberalism and socialist tenets; “/.../ ironically the neoliberal and original Marxist positions share the same basic assumptions /.../” (Beck, 1999, p. 22). Now in the neoliberal guises of the same, often hatred but culturally familiar Soviet practices of surveillance, monitoring and assessment can occur. Based on this, next question emerges: How can we balance the challenges of reclaiming the new independence without reproducing the Soviet mentality that helped to get rid of it? This question is left for future studies of the author.

Social change or conflict and its linkage with curriculum have often been emphasized. That is why for Professor Ivor Goodson “the social conflict within the subject is central to understanding the subject itself” (and hence relations among subjects) because “the continuing dominance of the competitive academic curriculum is the result of a continuing contest within school subjects” (Goodson, 1992, p. 67). Thus exploring social change in curriculum history is very important. For Professor Brian Simon, the leading historian of education in Great Britain in the second half of the twentieth century, it is „a crucial issue to which historical study can and should make a direct contribution, is that of the relation between educational and social change” (Simon, 1994, p. 9; see also McCulloch et al, 2007, p. 406). However, at the level of schooling curriculum development can be seen more in terms of “ideology, power and economic resources” (Apple, 2004, p. 47), along with the “relationship between educational, social and political change” (Simon, 1985, p. 22).

The Estonian curriculum reform started in the conditions of liberalization induced by Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. Professor Jagdish Gundara admits rightly that:

The collapse of the Soviet Union was partly the result of the way in which Russians dominated the languages and cultures of the other nationalities and republics after Stalin. It has led to a narrow nationalistic and linguistic reaction within a number of ex-Soviet and Baltic States (Gundara, 2005, p. 244).

Goodson claims that:

The most interesting points for [historical] inquiry /.../ are when different layers of historical time coincide; for it is at such point that inclination towards /.../ change and reform are strongest, they can be seen in key moments of educational history and change (Goodson, 2004, p. 17).

Author thinks that this assertion corresponds well to the situation in the USSR and in Estonia during the *perestroika* and its reforms.

Some words about Soviet learning programs. According to Professor Edgar Krull and Senior Researcher Rain Mikser (2010):

The long isolation from western educational thought meant that many ideas and concepts relevant for curriculum development, like aim-oriented learning ideology, changes in understanding the nature of learning and teaching, and

many other innovative educational ideas remained unknown to Estonian educators for decades (p. 44).

Soviet teaching programs in history of Estonia of 1945-1988 were really ideological documents with Soviet style explanatory letter and learning plan. But the Baltic countries had their own hidden curriculum in teaching. It was characterized by “changing of learning material (abbreviation, excluding of some problems and events or interpret them in its useful way of thinking), by nonverbal expression (mimics, gestures), by ignoring of forbidden (using national symbolic in dressing, our own school uniform) etc.” (Nagel, 2006, p. 152). Also, “Estonian educators and teachers, understanding that the authorities did not tolerate any refusal teaching communist ideology, became used to including in their instructional subjects and educational addresses ideological slogans of which the overwhelming majority of them really did not believe” (Krull & Trasberg, 2006, p. 3).

According to Australian curriculum scholar Professor Murray Print “curriculum presage” is “an effective commencement point in any curriculum development” (Print, 1993, p. 25). The teachers’ congress of Estonia in 1987 was a starting point. For Estonia this event was revolutionary. All innovative ideas, including new curriculum started from that event. So, events are extremely important and we have to do right conclusions from the ideas of these kinds of events and we have to lead these ideas into appropriate directions of common good. Second, there is the phase of institutionalization in curriculum change (Print, 1993, p. 231). In Estonia the institutions which dealt with curriculum development were the Pedagogical Research Institute and later Curriculum Laboratory of Tallinn Pedagogical University and the Center of Educational Planning of Estonia. For Murray Print curriculum planning is the “process of implementing and evaluating learning opportunities intended to produce desired changes in learners”. He also states that developing has to be preceded by conceptualization “through the process of planning and incorporating a curriculum design /.../” (Print, 1993, p. 23). Another Australian Professor Colin Marsh sees the same stages but adds resource materials planning and their review (Marsh, 1986, p. 89). Both teachers and experts have to be involved in the process, the better way is to organize them into working groups. Now in Estonia the idea started that representatives of parents had to be involved as advisory body.

According to Print there are three phases: organization, development and then application (Print, 1993, p. 84). But in Estonia it went differently: the Estonian Teachers’ Association was restored only as late as 1991. So the curriculum planners decided to divide teams by subjects (physics, language teachers, history teachers) not by organizational distinctness as usually. In Estonia there was a vision that we need general part with key competences and cross-curricular subjects. But Latvia went another way – it modified only subject syllabuses.

Why is it significant to overview curriculum development historically? „Why there have not been more historical studies of curriculum making?” asked Hazlett in the end of 70s (Hazlett, 1979, 131). Goodson goes even further; he says that in a longer time perspective “we may provide a reconceptualization of the mode of curriculum study that will allow us to connect specific acts of social construction to wider social impulses” (Goodson, 1992, p. 67). Knowing and researching history is important part of the development of Estonian society as we always can learn from

historical events. The genealogy of the curriculum planning and exploring its theoretical framework provides us with better understanding of the social and political complexities of curriculum making. It can also offer useful insights particularly in the extreme turning points of history as to the complex ways curriculum is constructed and negotiated. And finally, employing some of the most recent and advanced discourses in curriculum theory/history gives ability to intellectually map the discursive shifts leading to the first official 1996 national school curriculum. The period of the first national curriculum planning after restoring of independence of Estonia is interesting also because during the same period UK's parliament voted for approval of its Education Act and its central feature the National Curriculum 1988.

But what about curriculum history? Curriculum history started to evolve in the 1960s in the USA. As Professor Barry Franklin (2009) puts it:

Although curriculum history has become a worldwide scholarly endeavor, it emerged first as a distinct and clearly identified field of study in the USA in the late 1960s and has developed more fully in that national setting than in many others (p. 295).

It was the influence of launching Soviet Sputnik in 1957. USA started to change its educational system after being felt to be behind the Soviet Union in space exploration. "The history of the school curriculum began to attract broad attention in England in the 1970s in response to the complexities of curriculum reform and the insights of the "new" sociology of knowledge" (McCulloch, 2011, p. 83, original emphasis).

According to Professor Thomas Popkewitz:

The task of curriculum history is to explore the shifts over time in the relevant knowledge and ideas that comprise the curriculum and make an effort to identify their impact on the social construction of educational events. It is the lineage of these curricular changes that, according to Popkewitz, constitutes the historic regulative or controlling role of the curriculum (Franklin, 1999, p. 473; see also Popkewitz, 1997).

Conclusion

Why history is important in curriculum development? According to known Estonian originated US education scientist Professor Hilda Taba (1999) "it is the task of progressive curriculum planning to extract from our heritage of knowledge, ideas, and thought" (p. 259).

Second, Professor William Pinar has stated:

Scholars are acutely aware that curriculum work occurs in time, in history, and this self-consciousness regarding the historicity of curriculum work, theoretical or institutional, has helped support the increasing interest in historical studies of curriculum (Pinar et al, 1995, pp. 42-43).

There are different stages of the curriculum development in Estonia which is the important process of the history of the educational development in any state.

And finally, Professor Gary McCulloch (1987) has written:

In general we may say that curriculum historians interpret the curriculum as a social and political construct, and curriculum processes as inherently historical. It might be concluded also that curriculum history is most likely to remain established as an area of academic interest in those places where it makes efforts to be accepted not only as an approach to the study of the curriculum, but also as an integral part of social history (p. 314, 318).

Author argues that Estonia is such a country.

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