

The Importance and Meaning of Learning at School in Students' Consciousness

Non sholae, sed vitae discimus

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Abstract

One of the most important functions of learning is the formation of identity. From a hermeneutical viewpoint the formation of ipse-identity is, to a large extent, based on the meaning of the learning experiences. The following questions guide our research: first, what meanings do Estonian and Finnish students gain from curricular facts? And second, what do students in the two countries consider important to learn for their future? The theoretical framework of the study is based on ontological and socio-cultural approaches to learning. Both traditions recognize a connection between one's personal agency as well as structural factors concerning learning contexts. It was found that in meaningful learning contents youth, on one hand, gain authentication of identity, while on the other, they feel the pressure of insecurity and coping with the idea of an uncertain future.

Keywords: ipse-identity, authentic identity, learning, school experiences

1. Introduction

Identity is one of the principal issues in education (Siljander, 2002; Uhle, 1997). The educational path of the younger generation can be seen as an identification process, or continuing self-definition, through relationships with different reality phenomena. The concept of identity integrates many important facets of the human existence. Identity can be seen as a specific theoretical-imaginary construct of the self, which allows particular ways of interpreting the world (Kuusela, 2006, Mason, 2001). Identity formation means creating a unified structure among various levels of the self-experience and external facts, in order to live one's unique and wholesome life (Straub, 1996). Of course not everyone agrees with such a narrow interpretation of identity formation as identity is a more complicated phenomenon than ever. Certainly in contemporary cultural erosion processes this concept needs further explanation. One's need for security is as great as it has ever been, because, with change being ubiquitous, the only place one finds continuity is with the Self (Hoffmann, 1997). What kind of education best suits the purpose of leading young students into adequate self-reflection? To answer such a question, we investigate the meaning structures students form regarding things they have learned, from the viewpoint of their own lived experiences and concepts of their personal futures.

Formulation of personal identity is an act of constructivistic learning. Learning, as a process that accompanies human growth and occurs throughout life, plays a central role in identity formation and can be consciously directed. As Illeris (2007) informs us, the process of learning for youth is oriented toward, and is best seen under the light of, identity formation. At school, especially since it is such a major aspect of a young person's life, one learns more than subjects of the curriculum, such as lessons about social, cultural, and especially personal insights. Ideally, a personal understanding develops regarding one's personal development in the context of one's life in general and about the meaning of what is learned – learning to be human, learning for life and learning from life. If these principles are studied in a proper pedagogic context there is an opportunity to determine which self-experiences and identification opportunities schools offer young people and how gain experience for life.

Generally speaking, characteristics of modern European school include consistent formats, similar logic of curriculum making, and organisational structure. Schools should also become a secure places for identity development. To what extent is this possible?

2. Authentic Identity as a Developmental Value

There are different kinds of identities. The IPSE-identity, derived from a hermeneutic approach is concerned with the mode of the self and the life path. The constituents of IPSE-identity are linked to self-evaluative questions: what kind of a person one is (evaluative identity), what activity orientations are chosen (practical identity) and what is the approach to life as a whole (biographic identity) (Laitinen, 2009).

The main question in identity formation is considered to be based on whether a person leads a happy life (Straub, 1996). In connection to that – relying on hermeneutic (Laitinen, 2007) and psychoanalytic traditions (Ferrara, 2002) some characteristics of successful identity have been formulated. Identity is considered to be successful when it achieves: 1) coherence – continuity, balance, sameness, wholeness, 2) existential value – whether one is able to create in one's goals a meaningful and good life, 3) openness and creativity – the ability to see and use one's opportunities, 4) vitality – the feeling of perfection of now, sincerity, self-trust, spontaneity, and 5) depth – the ability to become conscious of the dynamics and motivations of one's psyche. (Ferrara, 2002; Laitinen, 2007). The main premise of a happy life is considered to be identity authenticity, which gives confidence about the real existence of the Self and security without external frames (Taylor, 2000).

Authenticity, or finding one's own story, is considered today to be the central imperative of personal goals in life. It means that one's being is domesticated and recognised as one's own, that life is trusted. In connection with identity authenticity the existential qualities of being human are emphasised, like autonomy, ethics, responsibility, vitality, spirituality, and meaningfulness of life. (Ferrara; 2002, Laitinen, 2007, Mason, 2001, Saastamoinen, 2006; Taylor, 2000; Webster, 2005). The ideals of a valuable life, which have persisted throughout different ages, and one's aspiration towards them, are expressed in the current definition of authentic identity. Also, we find many traits of authentic identity in the ideology of Bildung-thinking, inalienability, autonomy, mentality, self-reflection ability, maturity (the latter have been mentioned by Hentig (1996) and Liessmann (2006).

Values are important components of identity. To Taylor, valuation and identity constructs (the main values of life) are central for the self- interpretation process and are therefore inextricably linked to a healthy childhood (Taylor, 2000; Laitinen, 2009). How can authentic identity be a goal for development in schools? To what extent can authentic identity development be accomplished in such a way that it will last an entire lifetime? Interest in these questions provides the impetus for this study.

3. Relationships between Learning and Authenticity from the Ontological and Socio-Cultural Perspective

From a holistic perspective learning is focused on experience, competence and identity. While learning, one also shapes one's identity, though imperceptably. Being and becoming are intertwined and human learning is the phenomenon that connects them. (Illeris, 2007; Jarvis, 2009/2010). IPSE-identity must also be seen as a reflexively organised endeavour, because it contains both the coherence and maintenance of one's life-story but also its continuous revision, the reflexive structured life and life-style planning (Illeris, 2007). Viewed this way, IPSE-identity and learning become ontologically congruent.

If we borrow the term "personhood" from existential phenomenology, we can see that our stereotypic definitions of learning, such as from the perspective of cognitive abilities, is too narrow because learning is rendered only as change in behaviour, claims Lehtovaara (1996). Lehtovaara equates learning among other experiences with the being in the world experience. Learning in the holistic sense is varied, wide, deep and undivided from an individual's relationship with the world or with an individual's life situation, where everything one encounters is represented. From the ontological point of view learning means the formation of new horizons of understanding, which in turn become the basis for new connections between what one has understood (*idem*). Learning always includes interpretation; I am the way how I understand things.

We see learning as the emergence of the human essence from human existence and the essence is formed through interaction with the world (Jarvis, 2009/2010). Similarly, Liimets views learning in ontological relations and refers to it as self-creation in the culture and creating culture in oneself. One widens the internal limits and fills one's potential deep structure with concrete content, which emanates contextually, from relations with culture. The world becomes concentrated in subjective reality. Something becomes domesticated, something becomes familiar. However, limits are also widened to the outside, towards inter-subjective reality. Taking oneself to the context of culture, one also adds something to it from his/her own unique perspective. We can say

that we encounter in the world only that which we recognise as our own reality. We might encounter ourselves when being in the world (Liimets, 2005). Meeting the world involves the process of ordering the world. We always create some framework withstand the world in which we act (Jarvis, 2009/2010).

Since authentic identity has to do with the deep structure levels of the personality – one looks for the self somewhere and relative to something – it is tightly related to the problem of sensibility and meaningfulness (Sinnfrage). According to the action theory of Alfred Schütz (2007), which follows the phenomenological tradition, a person's lifeworld is interpreted as an inter-subjective connection of meaning where all human activities are accompanied with subjective meanings.

Learning that creates new meanings directs a learner towards making sense about one's own being; where do I belong, who could I be, what do I consider important? Identity is formed in the intensity of different meanings, when the experience is focused on oneself. Looking at one's life in a certain meaningful horizontal, a practical identity takes shape. An evaluative identity is formed as well. What characteristics of one's identity can be deemed valuable? What does a certain fact of nature or culture mean on a personal level? Liimets argues that the meaning and meaningfulness of things is not formed merely through personal choice, but is formed in the mutual dynamics of cultures and persons. The decision to learn something expresses the mentality of a culture (2005). Fears connected to the learning context, and the evaluation of those in it, bring totally new motives to the genuine relationship between the learning contents and the learner. Figuratively speaking, a stranger gets involved, exerts power, and the main idea attributed to learning is no longer internally enriching.

Can we assess the sensibility of the content of learning according to the contextual imperatives of the students? That is, viewed by the socio-cultural approach to learning, learning requires personal engagement with the context of learning. Comprehending reality is related to various social practices. Learning is accompanied by the ability to decide what information, skills and concepts are important in a certain context. The nature of learning is situational, since a person acts within the limits of what s/he believes an environment permits. The problem of learning lies in what experiences an individual acquires in a certain situation, and what meanings, interpretations, and action models do they take along to other contexts (Säljö, 2003). Relating to a context creates a more basic negotiation: what is valuable enough to learn and what are the reasons to invest mental and other energy?

There are similar features in the aspiration towards authenticity and Theory of Transformative Learning. Accordingly, learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) and other sets of assumptions and expectations, to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change (Mezirow, 2009/2010). Associated goals of reflectivity on personal learning, self-concept and values is the prerequisite for a successful adult life. Such reflectivity should develop at school, during school age.

The context structures identity by creating frames for learning, whereas it also creates conditions for the appearance of authenticity, or refutes it, e.g., for the sake of security, conformity and normalcy. The pressure one receives from the environment regulates the how reflexive one can be with her or his learning, and based on this, the nature of learning can be more or less superficial. According to Illeris learning harmonises the different facets of the identity, since it concerns both social as well as individual areas of identity construction. There is an interaction between one's own story and the current set of contextual challenges (Illeris, 2007).

There are several interesting trials to classify learners according to rather meta-psychological factors, such as self-regulation or learning how to learn, some of which also give credence to the level of authenticity of their learner-identity. When thinking about the sensibleness of learning and the learning content in a certain context, the key factor is authenticity. For example, a learner's authenticity or non-authenticity becomes clearly visible in the definition offered by Liimets, where she classifies learners according to the relationship between the self and the world: gloomy learners, acquiring-mediating learners, and loyal learners. A gloomy learner is motivated by pressure for achievement and learning becomes a compulsive means, where one is unable to manage one's own development. One develops the mentality of overcoming the present. There is an obligation for development, which makes the learner gloomy and s/he loses joy in learning because the content is just a means for achieving a certain goal. Acquiring-mediating learning guides an individual towards acquiring a learning event, which should enable a new identity. However, acquiring and mediating maintain an unfamiliar predetermination, the contexts have different rules and the learner acquires the art of finding the right mask according to the situation. There is the danger, that certain masks achieve a leading position, and start determining the general mental situation. There is no more discovering of the world outside and of the self inside.

A loyal learner is able to free her or himself from the external pressures and move towards the deep structure, which enables depth to the different layers of meaningfulness (Sinn). Such a mentality enables one to discover

and observe oneself in continuity, to re-reflect and recreate, but to do this freely and through playfulness. One does not learn to learn, but lives through learning, since this becomes one's way towards achieving the self-world-entirety (Liimets, 2005). In such learning one fulfills one's authenticity. Knowing outside personal thought, only with the aim to collect and accomplish, stays in the consciousness as dead knowledge. Knowing as a living experience, where the learner's inner world transforms, is also related to the authenticity of being, since the main concern of learning is now not just coping with the situation, but the changing Self (Kuurme, 2004).

School, as a publicly organised and controlled socialisation process, should take identity concepts into account in their learning goals (Neumann, 1997). Pedagogically this would mean building curricula of genuine and authentic learning experiences toward which pedagogical reformists strive. For the sake of building authentic identity children should experience different action impulses without the fear of punishment, they should receive deep self-experiences and meaningful learning experiences, and try to evaluate situations from the point of view of the partner, to connect the norm and values system with their own ethical minimum, claim Neumann (1997) and Webster (2005). Personal identity should not develop through labelling systems. Studying should enable handling endangered and broken identities and practicing decision making in the giving meaning and values.

Children should be able to focus on questions such as, who am I and what is the meaning of my being? They should be aware that they are free to choose the way they want to be from among different perspectives. They should not be forced to passively accept the values of the society. Children should not be encouraged to ask questions such as what roles should I follow, but rather, what kind of a personality goals should I try to reach. Before asking specific learning questions, they should be able to observe the lesson in context, how they relate to the object of learning. They should have enough experiences to take personal responsibility (Neumann, 1997; Webster, 2005). For the sake of students' authentic identity, the role of school seems paradoxical – to help them free themselves from school, i.e. school dependency.

However, is it possible at all, since in its nature school is meant to be the agent of socialisation, even domestication, and its learning contents are in general subject to external goal setting by thoughtful elites? If the goal of school is socialisation, then schools are necessarily built on organisational principles of efficiency, consistency and economy, not on learner effectiveness.

4. The Probability of Authenticity Experiences in School-based Learning

Our study was motivated by the perceived contradiction between the realities of organisationally defined learning and the ideals contained in the associated learning for identity concepts. The subsequent discourse reveals the possibility that schools alienate young learners from authentic learning. According to critics, school ignores students' prior experience, focuses on standardised achievement, narrows content to a few chosen texts, excludes social and emotional substance, maintains a stifling status quo, places learning on a competitive basis, and precludes deep relations between a learner and the content as learning is metered out in consumptive fashion (Rinne & Salmi, 1999; Houtsonen, 2000; Säljö, 2003). Webster calls such an educational approach, one that focuses on training a mind to become an obedient passive receiver of second hand thinking, death orientation (2005).

The instrumental ethos of school includes competition, achievement, performance, motivation on the level of external compulsion-praise-punishment. The majority of children learn to live with double identities – the individual me and the external role of a student. The main issue of education is not to deal with the questions of truth, but to see problems in those who speak the truth (Besley, 2007, Kivinen et al., 1985). School context makes it probable that a non-authentic self is formed, a role-structured identity.

On the other hand, the impact of school on many students decreases. As many self-enlightened students demand authenticity the criteria of self-appreciation increases exponentially (Ziehe, 2009/2010). Schools create in children a variety of psychoses requiring the need for harmonizing the risk of identity contradictions and for ensuring ontological security. Self-actualising oriented learning could play the harmonization role here. (Illeris, 2007). Thus, we ask, is school-based learning disposable? To what extent does school-based learning contribute to, or hinder, identity and its aspiration of authenticity? What meanings are attached to the self in relation to what is learned?

5. Finnish and Estonian Students' Concepts about the Learning Content in their Whole Life Contexts

When comparing Finnish and Estonian students' school perception and their self-reflections, we set the following goals concerning learning:

- 1) What meanings do students take from the content of their studies and in the facts they consider important?
- 2) What do students consider important to study for the future?

- 3) To what extent does learning at school differ from learning outside of school?
- 4) How do the beliefs, values and aspirations of students evolve when they encounter meaningful content?
- 5) What is the default identity given to students from the modern curriculum?

Both Finnish and Estonian schools have been successful in PISA- studies. For many years Finnish children scored top in the world, owing to their knowledge and skills. Estonian children have placed in the top ten in the same rankings. At the same time, particularly in Estonia, children exhibit low school-satisfaction and lack of creative thinking. Estonia and Finland are neighbour countries and people speak similar languages but the history has been totally different. The 50-year Soviet occupation forced Estonian schools to be passive organisations. Consequently, the most important value became obedience toward the dominant ideology. During their long histories, neither country has experienced long stretches of independence. At least during the past 150 years, in both Estonia and Finland, however, education has been placed under national control, based on the languages of the people, and can in this way be seen as something of a religion. In Finland, pedagogical reform has been continuous, an expression of independence, since the 1960s. Estonia is only the beginning of this movement.

A comparative study was carried out between Estonian and Finnish 8th and 11th grades students' self-experiences. Interpretations about the self in school experiences were gathered by using semi-structured written questions from 161 Finnish and 185 Estonian students (77 were from high schools and 108 from basic schools). In both Finnish and Estonian education systems, primary school lasts 9 years and is compulsory. High school lasts 3 years and is oriented towards university placement. With this backdrop, students' self-perception in school was studied in 5 Finnish and 5 Estonian schools. Data were collected between 2008 through 2010. Students came from different school types: basic schools, high schools, country schools, private schools, Freinet schools and Waldorf-schools. The data were collected by two different independent researchers. After that they made general thematic categories. Both researchers had their own theoretical background that was discussed and converted. Using such triangulation the validity of the research was ensured. The collected texts were qualitatively analysed with a phenomenological method (Metsämuuronen, 2006, Laherand, 2008). The texts were categorised according to the different meanings they contained, based on participants' realms of experiences. Students' interpretations were "translated" into the language of the researcher and interpreted in scientific terms as subcategories were formed on the basis of the students' thoughts. Thereafter, from the basis of previous, more general categories were created (c.f. Metsämuuronen 2006). Presented below are the more general tendencies that emerged after working through the research material. The examples in the text originate from students of different schools.

This material may not be generalized to all Finnish and Estonian students' learning experiences and attitudes, but it points to several broad common tendencies regarding the phenomena under investigation.

Below are two questions students were free to answer in any way they wanted:

- 1) Which things have you learned that are useful to you, things that are of particular value to your life, at
 - a) school?
 - b) elsewhere?
- 2) What do you consider and the most important general things learn in life?

These questions were part of a larger research project School and identity.

What Important Facts and Truths have Students Learned?

We analysed the question, what important things have students in their own opinion learned so far at school as well as outside school. When analysing the short texts, the important items were divided into the following groups: 1) issues related to the changed quality of one's personality, 2) recognition of reality, 3) larger and more general truths of life 4) everyday strategies necessary for life, 5) knowledge, skills, erudition, 6) other people, communication and social skills.

The resulting categories enabled us to conclude that, to a large extent, young people are able to relate both learning and the leaning content with their personality and with the reality around them. Thus they gave an existential value to what they have learned and also hoped to support the continuity and integrity of their identity.

1. Qualities related to one's personality. In general, 68 (36.7%) young persons in Estonia (25 in high schools and 43 in basic schools) and 43 (26.7%) in Finland (5 in gymnasiums and 38 in basic schools) thought about the relations between learning and personal characteristics.

Young Estonians most often mention content related to personal agency, strength and subjectivity. Coping with life, independence, self-belief and self-confidence, valuing oneself, getting to know oneself, openness, courage, standing for one's principles, endurance, one's own viewpoint on things, decisiveness, persistence, self-discipline also were themes that emerged from the data.

In Finland the following ideas were listed: securing oneself for the future, skills, protecting oneself in the future, self-confidence, one's values, becoming aware of one's talent, initiative, making choices, using fantasy.

Intellectual capacity was stressed though in different ways. In Estonia emphasis was placed on logical thinking, but also mentioned were analytic skills, wisdom, understanding. These skills, as well as coping, were brought out especially by basic school students. In Finland, students noted intellectually related concepts such as understanding, argument, the ability to see things from different points of view, analysis and problem solving skills.

The data also show that many students learned to realise and differentiate the self and perceive that it needs certain provisions of strength in order to cope with the environment. In a surprising way there were no big differences between those qualities learned at school compared to those learned outside. Coping with oneself showed up in the case of Estonian youth among the qualities learned elsewhere, while intellectual competences were mostly developed at school. Independence and self-related qualities were more highlighted by Estonian Waldorf High School students.

2. Recognitions – this means various conclusions made based on the facts learned and on what can become useful in the future. They were mentioned among the items learned at school and elsewhere by 57 Estonian students (30.8 %), though the majority (42 students) expressed they originated from school. In Finland 49 students (30.4%) mentioned them. Of those students 30 originated from school experiences. The meaningfulness of school was most often pondered in terms of one's life and in general students found a justification for remaining. The main recognition was that that one has to study and that education is necessary.

Estonian students proclaimed, "I learn for myself," "knowledge is necessary for erudition," "grades don't indicate wisdom," "school is a good place," "where to start, it is like a small world where we live and where we have to cope," "everything I learn and do at school is necessary and useful for me in the future," "school has entirely directed my course of life," "without education one doesn't achieve anything." Students claimed that school can take over all areas of life—"the touch of reality disappears, because I think about the fact that school matters all the time."

Finland students noted, "school is really important," "most important is the general education received from school," "knowing more makes it easier to be admitted for further studies."

School, and the things studied there are seen as part of one's life and are strongly tied to one's identity. Maybe for this reason the content of what is learned is justified and creates few doubts. With age faith in school deepens. Surprisingly only very few students were critical of school.

For example, high school youth did not recognise as many critical aspects of school as basic school students did. Basic school students wrote more about the oppressiveness of school, protesting and doubting its meaningfulness more. In Finland students from elite schools and Waldorf schools were more critical, which can also be explained with the fact that students in those schools have learned to think more freely.

Estonian students said, "at school one has to stand for oneself, because others may overrule you," "some subjects should not be learned – it feels so pointless," "I have learned a lot of unnecessary material which I do not use in life."

Finnish students, on the other hand, exclaimed, "at school I have learned to sense the aroma of pretence," "my personality has certainly developed somewhere else than at school," "at school one learns to do what one is ordered," "at school one can lose freedom, school is not the only life."

Recognitions from outside school appeared to be minimal and were mainly related to disappointment in human relations and to realisation that one's wishes have limits.

3. Larger and more general truths of life. Under this theme we categorised the more general truths, which students learned more or less equally both at school as well as outside school. Only a small amount of young people named such general truths, 28 Estonian (15.1%) and 22 Finnish (13.6%) youngsters. These general truths

expressed the self-directed and even the moral stances of students, how they enjoy life, as well as the strong wish to experience many facets of life.

Estonian students said, "everything you do, you do for yourself," "if you really want something and try, then you get it," "persistence leads you to the goal," "live your life as if every day was the last," "change yourself, then the world will change too."

Finnish students differed somewhat, as they proclaimed, "one shouldn't try to be too proper, things should be taken more easy," "if you want something, you have to work for it," "expect, but never too much," "you shouldn't live over your limits, if you really want to cope," "you can loose freedom, but you can take it back," "you can't plan everything."

Many truths concerning interpersonal relations were found too. Most of them were acquired outside school.

Estonian students said, "if you help others, you too will be helped," "you don't have to be liked by everyone," "friends should not be let down," "things have to be seen also through others' eyes," "everything you do to others will come back to you," "people shouldn't be trusted too much," "love is most important, this is what we live for."

In Finland such truths were less frequent. As the students said, "do not trust others," "times are changing, but people do not," "one should choose carefully whom to trust."

In very few answers (6 students) one could see also playfulness and paradox:

Estonian students, "Not everything is as bad as it seems in the beginning, sometimes it's even worse," "rules are there to violate."

Finnish students said, "do not go to school, the system doesn't work," "everything is someone else's fault."

The general tone of life related awareness and wisdom is serious, strict towards oneself and calling attention to a sense of order. Life seems somewhat intimidating, but one is also courageously ready to meet its challenges. One feels uneasy about the fact that some chances might go by and that one would miss them. Compared to the seriousness of Estonian youth, Finnish students try to avoid excessive seriousness and stress and take life more playfully. One can hear the echo of the search for existential truths and perceiving life as an obligation. And there is almost no humour.

4. Strategies necessary for life, which are expressed by rules and guidelines for coping with everyday life. Such issues were brought out by 52 Estonian (28.1%) and 37 Finnish (22.9%) students, the majority of them from basic schools. Here clearer distinctions can be made between skills learned inside and outside school. Strategies learned at school are, for Estonian students, related to self-discipline, time management, making choices between subjects, getting by easier, coping with one's boredom, self-defence, competition and rivalry, etc. In the case of Finnish students, greater emphasis was placed on seeing things from different perspectives, learning from mistakes, and preparing for fast changes.

Outside school Estonian youth have learned coping in life, getting rid of stress, making choices, enjoying free time, handling money, feeling joy of life, making useful acquaintances, setting goals and limits in life, and manipulation of the system. To compare, young Finns have learned to not live above one's limits, coping, behaviour in different situations, functioning in the society, organising things in the order of importance, using common sense, enjoying life. The scale of what has been learned outside school was in case of both wider and more diverse. Pressure from the environment has made Estonian youth learn, both for coping at school as well as outside school, tricking the established norms. Finnish students possess a more sincere relationship with life, and truths learned both at school as well as outside school do not differ so sharply.

5. Relationship to other people, communication, and social skills. This theme elicited the greatest response. Of Estonian students 82 young people mentioned social issues, of them the majority (56) from basic schools. In Finland this was mentioned by 121 (75%) of the young people. The art of human relations is learned equally both at school as well as elsewhere. Coexistence with others is a strong motivator, and also an unavoidable skill. In order to enjoy going to school, one has to enjoy being together with others, even when it is difficult.

The most commonly repeating responses included learning communication skills, being with others, normal communication, communicating on an official level, communication with friends, communication with strangers, and communicating freely. The art of communication appears to be decidedly necessary and more so for the Finnish students compared to the Estonian students. Finnish students expressed attitudes such as taking others into account, tolerance, respect of others, honouring others. The need for taking others into account was stronger in the responses of high school youth. In addition to the latter, the answers of Finnish students also included

themes such as coming to terms with the existence of others, tolerating inconvenience and boredom, solving conflicts, trust and distrust.

A group of learned personal characteristics appeared, which the social space around an individual needs. In Estonia good behaviour, politeness, sense of duty, responsible attitude, carefulness, tolerance, openness, friendliness, helpfulness, respect, trust, straightforwardness, attention, listening skills, honesty, discipline (altogether 41 young people (22.1%), mostly from basic schools.

Finnish students also mentioned behaviour often, but stressed patience, punctuality, trust, courage, carefulness, sense of responsibility, obedience, openness, respect, understanding others, the ability to find new acquaintances and to see the world through the eyes of others as well. One young person from a Waldorf school found, “we learn the noble skill of dealing with others at school.”

Young people from both countries surprisingly mentioned teamwork and collective work seldomly (9 Estonians). However, teamwork was stressed more by high school students from a Waldorf school, whereas none of the basic school students mentioned cooperation skills. Cooperation skills were also not mentioned by anyone from elite school students. Basic school students stressed friendship, finding friends, being with friends, having new friends. High school students didn't mention friends or friendship a single time. Finnish youth mentioned teamwork only twice, friendship was mentioned once. From both countries one young person had learned to love, but not at school.

The foregoing account can be interpreted as an indication that social identity and its development are a challenge for a young person. As one attempts to develop the most positive social qualities in him or herself another person is at least explicitly of value to them. While the emphasis on communication points to external coping skills, there were not convincing references to relations. The young people are individualists and they do not as a rule believe they can accomplish much with others, such as through studying together. The meanings given by the students reflect a typical school context, where one is among others, but still alone and for oneself.

6. Knowledge, skills, experiences, erudition – this group confirms issues that can be characterised as the school capital that is useful for learning the subjects as well as other knowledge, skills, and experiences. All this was mentioned most frequently in comparison to other meaning groups, 144 Estonian students (77.8%) and 96 Finnish students (59.6%). Estonians named various types of knowledge as it referred to school subjects. The list of skills learned at school was short, mainly reading, writing, and arithmetic. Handwork, artistic and physical skills were not mentioned. In students' opinions school is predominantly a place for knowledge disguised in school subjects.

The meanings given by Finnish students differed significantly based on the content of meaning of whole life context. When talking about school subjects, their relationship with real life was well demonstrated, for example, with a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. Of special importance were domestic sciences, industrial arts and handwork. Moreover, cooking, planning financial, ironing, woodwork and sewing, preparing food, and other skills to be applied at home, were named.

Also outside of school Estonian students learned 41 items relating to erudition and knowledge, probably due to the strong influence of school. Finnish responses expressed the erudition and knowledge motive only in a couple of responses. Through travelling one learns about other cultures and at home the more practical skills.

Learning through hobbies was important for basic school students in both Estonia and in Finland but had little importance for high school students. In Finland students at both school levels stressed especially the diverse skills learned in several places such as repairing a motorcycle, driving a car, cleaning, general truths of life, increasing self-esteem, patience, making food, rules of conduct, playing a piano or an organ, driving, resisting smoking, the ability to recover from the hardships of life, riding a bicycle or snowboarding, and delimiting alcohol.

In the case of Estonians such skills were not worthy of mentioning, only one high school student and around ten basic school students referred to such matters as snowboarding, computer, skiing, playing on an instrument, driving a car, swimming, tying shoestrings, cooking, music, sports, table manners, performing experiences.

The differences between Finnish and Estonian youth were quite many as shown from the analysis of the content of the responses. Estonian high school students appear to be focused on school subjects and knowledge contained in them and the whole knowledge-skills competence is seen through the prism of school subjects. Other skills learned in life come mostly to the minds of basic school students. School awareness of Finnish youth intermingles flexibly with everyday life and they are open to learning various practical skills outside school. Surprisingly, television and Internet were not mentioned as a source of learning by students in either country.

Estonian students' perceptions were related more to their schools and school subjects, while the Finns are more down to earth, practical in life, and were also more detailed about their goals. Estonian Waldorf School students had a wider practical orientation to life. Surprisingly, the meanings which were given to learning by alternative school students did not differ essentially from the meanings given by mainstream school students. Also genders did not differ significantly, the answers of the girls were just more thorough. One 8th grade girl studying in an Estonian private school found that school trains your brain: "I think that everything one learns at school is necessary, although at school I only learn subjects, elsewhere I can get to know people, their nature, feelings, and themselves." This, of course, cannot be generalised to other Estonian students.

What in General is Important to Learn in Life?

With this question we asked the respondents to express what they perceive to be important concerning their future or what they perceive makes their identity sustainable. When categorising the responses as thematic wholes, almost similar theme categories to the previous could be fathomed: 1) characteristics related to the self, 2) larger goals in life, a more general relationship to life, 3) everyday strategies necessary for life, 4) other people, communication, social skills, 5) knowledge, skills, erudition, experiences. On the basis of this we can conclude that the learning experiences already received also strongly influence future trends. In other words, what is meaningful now remains meaningful in the future.

1. Characteristics related to the self. Such meanings became visible in the responses of 58 Estonian (31.3%) and 35 Finnish (21.7%) young persons, while in Estonia the majority of these responses were given by basic school students. The tendencies repeated themselves similarly to the previous question.

Generally speaking, in Estonia one wants to learn how to stay true to oneself, get to know oneself, cope with oneself, learn from one's mistakes, get to know the limits of one's abilities, make sure what I want to do at certain point. By contrast, in Finland one wants to learn self-respect, to be oneself, to be independent, loving oneself, trusting and understanding oneself, making one's own decisions, being satisfied with oneself, becoming aware of one's bad sides and limits, helping oneself, to be one's own master, to learn from one's mistakes. Finding the self as a future problem was mentioned by less than half of the respondents, but a strong wish for authenticity and striving for a successful identity can be reckoned here.

Also, hopes and patterns relating to intellectual goals were noticed, i.e., knowing as many things as possible takes one further in life, the ability to analyse, to think and act in the right way, think oneself, to have the courage to make decisions oneself, exemplify such responses. Only a few times were personal characteristics mentioned, those that relate to attitudes and ethic categories, such as honesty, sense of responsibility, sense of duty, carefulness, correctness, self-control, perseverance, judgement skills. Creativity and openness for new opportunities was mentioned only once. One elite school student considered it important to learn how to suppress one's will. Two young Estonians and one Finn found that one has to learn to take things positively. The Finnish responses included also diligence, making compromises, correctness, calmness, honesty, compliance, goodness, helpfulness.

Patterns of personal characteristics, expressed in both Estonia and Finland, in addition to authenticity aspirations, centered on hopes of social acceptance. Characteristics such as independence, creativity, originality, aspiration towards uniqueness almost did not appear. There were no significant differences between different age groups and schools.

2. Larger goals in life, a more general relationship to life. There were few responses in this category, only 25 in Estonia (13.5%) and 23 in the texts of Finnish students (14.2%). In Estonia, such responses were most frequent among gymnasium youth. In Finland the responses were divided equally among all schools.

The following pattern was repeated in both Estonia and Finland: reaching one's goals and living a full life, enjoying one's life and being happy, dealing with what is interesting. In Finland some answers also mentioned respect for life. In some responses also the wish to encounter the unknown and to discover the new was expressed.

To quote selected Estonian students, "to understand everything," "to learn to know people," "to learn what principles underlie certain functioning of things," "to experience something interesting that wouldn't otherwise be possible."

The regular youthful motive of finding the meaning of life, and the right values, was emphasised especially by Finnish students. One assumes that the right and the valuable is out there and just has to be found. As the Finnish students said, "it is important to find and be aware of those values that are really important in life," "how to live one's life and how to grow up well and wise," "to learn what the world is like," "it is important to find a deeper

meaning in life." Some Waldorf school students expressed a hope to shape one's life actively. "It is important to find a suitable life in the future and do what one wants," "finding one's own way and meaning of one's existence in this world. Joy, happiness, comfort, pleasure, having fun was brought out by a few. The emphasis on future is serious and binding. Students do not try to add here anything new nor do they try to change the world. Rather they try to find what is right and adapt to it.

3. Everyday strategies necessary for life. This category included those responses, which contained guidelines for concrete everyday life situations and life choices. This way of thinking was more characteristic to Finnish students: 69 Estonians (37.2%) and 76 (47.2%) Finns.

The most prevalent motive was getting along with one's life, the skill of succeeding in life. For that aim one needs to learn useful content one needs in the future. Estonian high school students said, variously, they "wish to learn how to stand for oneself," "cope with setbacks, but not to give up," "make the right decisions," "choose," "manipulate," "use connections," "come out of difficult situations," "be successful," "be able to lose." Among the more practical things several students mentioned was "planning one's time." Basic school youth were mainly worried about the choice of profession: "to get a proper work experience and live well, not to worry about falling short of anything."

Finnish students also relate to the work they will be doing in the future. They wished to learn something that makes sense, which helps to get along in life. Of more practical things they mentioned planning one's time, learning a profession, learning the art of life, coping financially, optimally good lifestyle. Many students expressed uncertainty and uneasiness: "one is not safe anywhere," "secure your home front," "it is good to learn to disappoint," "do not trust strangers." Finnish youth also included the resistance motive, looking for balance and for limits, not worrying about details.

What is necessary in practical life, as indicated by students from both countries, related to fears, possible injustice, disappointments, and misfortune, not excitement and hope. The subconsciousness is tuned to resistance. In some aspects one has already given up beforehand. One thinks that life has rules and meaning and if one figures it out, it is possible to live "in the right way."

4. Other people, communication, social skills. This motive is one of the most important ones when having in mind the future. Communication skills and various social qualities were mentioned by 60 respondents from Estonia (32.4%) and 59 from Finland (36.6%). The same issues repeated themselves, those patterns that were already mentioned among the important things one has already learned, including taking others into account, respecting others, understanding each other, and using appropriate civil. Coupled with the theme of wisdom of life, knowing when to trust a person becomes important.

Estonian youth did not focus on close relations. In Finland friendship was mentioned by only two respondents. It is interesting to note that Finnish students speak less about taking other people into account and more about accepting their contexts and lives. One can conclude that older students especially view communication, and issues relating to it, as skills as of instrumental value rather as qualities necessary for life or for satisfying a deeper inner need.

5. Knowledge, skills, erudition, experiences. This array of themes was mentioned by 68 Estonian (36.7%) and 50 Finnish (31.0%) youngsters.

The future "asks" for knowledge, thus it was found that more or less everything should be known to a certain extent. As one student put it, "everything I learn at school, is important." Various students from Estonia mentioned several subjects that one should learn for the sake of future. Other knowledge and skills that widen the horizons were mentioned significantly less, of those the principles of economics and society, domestic work, general culture, travelling, and ethics. Basic school youth named a wider range of skills. One young person from an elite school hopes for simple truths about people and culture. The extent to which students learn at school in terms of subjects limits their worldview and knowledge regarding these subjects.

In Finland students mentioned the subjects in wider contextual variation. In addition, the respondents considered it important to learn how to make money, but also to learn about other cultures, balance between work and fun, domestic work, how to search for information, applied skills, practical skills. When thinking about the future, there are more doubters and protestations among the Estonians.

Estonian students said, "school should have more developing subjects," "I wouldn't like to learn unnecessary things," "one should learn basic knowledge and concentrate on those subjects that are really interesting," "one should learn things that offer satisfaction." The critics originated mainly from language-based elite gymnasium students. Finnish youngsters did not raise such questions.

When thinking about the future knowledge, skills, and horizons, the Estonian students are strongly fixed on subject-centred thinking and to school in general. Basic school students seemed to be freer from school-centred learning. Finnish youngsters did not center on school subjects, by comparison, and emphasised the role of skills necessary for life.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Our main research question was: what is more important in the formation personal life viewpoints of students in schools in Estonia and Finland, is it the content of school learning or learning to enhance identity and its aspiration of authenticity? In both Finland and Estonia the answers point toward the conclusion that school learning does not mask the true meaning of learning to students' present and future. (Senge, 2003; Säljö, Besley, 2007)

The young people in our study were aware of the meaning of content they have learned, their mind is set on what relates to the main categories of the IPSE-identity. The things learned are viewed existentially from the perspective as one forms a life philosophy. On the basis of the existing learning experiences one can feel a strong intention to make general overarching conclusions about the rules that are important in life as well as about everyday living strategies and human relations. One important truth that has been learned and is worth learning is that the focus on discovering one's subjectivity, self-determination and strength is of paramount importance for a person to squarely face reality. Involvement in school learning in this way seems strongest in Estonian students.

The official rationale of school curricula especially dominates the Estonians: knowledge, skills, and erudition. Finnish students, on the other hand, emphasise human relations and social skills to a greater extent. Finnish students seem to value practical life more than the Estonians, considering many skills and everyday coping strategies to be important. The argument of Illeris can hereby be confirmed, namely that in the context of contemporary fragile identities and limitless possibilities, students' priorities in any type of learning is linked with their identity, or the ability to orientate oneself and not to waste one's life on misguided directions. This feature of the learning process appears to be more important and imperative than career orientation (Illeris, 2007). On the other hand, one is not aware of or does not want to admit that s/he has learned those patterns of compulsory identity of formal school that several theoreticians have referred to (Antikainen et al. 2000). These include personal academic success, the so-called general civil skills, mental abilities, hierarchy awareness and role patterns. The truths and recognitions in life, which were collected, bear witness to lack of trust, although on the other side also to a deep belief in the fact that school gives the best and the most necessary advantages for life. Critical self- and situation analyses was rare, however, the responses of Estonians expressed the need for double morality in certain contexts.

In several aspects, such as human relations and self-knowledge, the patterns and motives for learning in and outside school are similar. This means that one encounters what one is looking for, without depending on the context. The most apparent difference, in what Finnish and Estonian young people have learned, is the fixation of Estonian students on school subjects, and the relatively low value they appoint to life skills. Finnish students perceive a stronger connection between practical life and school subjects and they also learn a lot outside school. The subject-centred Estonian school has also left a mark on students' identities.

Those issues, which are generally considered important for the future, tend to repeat the same motives and hopes one claims to have already learned. Lessons and situations already experienced predetermine one's future mode of aspiration and experience. Self-directed reflections and hopes, which would help to perceive and establish oneself, remaining sincere and authentic. When interpreting other responses, one can claim that the main worry of young people is adapting to the unknown, unforeseeable and intimidating reality, finding the "right" pathway and living according to it. Very few students mentioned as important for the future such categories as creativity, activeness, freedom, ethics, and initiative. In the area of human relations students did not attach importance to deep relationships, but rather to coping with other people, with the premise of certain ethical attitudes. One can argue, that on one hand the learner aspires towards authentic identity, on the other he/she tries to guess and find out what would be the right thing to do in life, and then adapt to it with the help of the already acquired knowledge. Schools too have an orientation towards teaching the "right" content. Aspirations towards identity coherence, openness, vitality, and depth, the need to determine one's limits and flexibility, cannot be ignored. However, the coping orientation and the readiness to mobilise oneself ought to be pointed out with greater emphasis: one clearly perceives influences of external forces. The strong belief that what was studied becomes useful, is of value to students in that it creates a sense of hope. The pleasurable and joyful side of life offers opportunities to step away from the serious and tough mainstream ways, and this is something that Finnish

students allow themselves more than Estonians. There were no significant differences in the responses of students from schools with different pedagogic concepts, except for the slightly higher independence, activeness and critical mind of students from Waldorf schools.

Ziehe discusses the background of this school belief and claims that in today's uncertain world one notices in young people the longing for stable relationships, integration, normative clarity and rules for orientation. He considers it important that the young people could learn by experiencing stable structures (Ziehe 2009/2010).

In light of Liimets' concept of gloomy learners, acquiring-mediating learners and loyal learners, as described above, the young people in the current study appear to exhibit, on the basis of several categories of responses, characteristics of the first two. The same theme is indicated also by their search for living strategies under the pressure of coping. However, especially the focus on oneself, and the searching mentality, refer to the fact that there is an authentic and a loyal learner dwelling inside, who would only need to free oneself from the fears and recognise the dependencies to cross the border to authentic being. The instrumental ethos of school and its rigid frames can also surrender today when facing a sincere and pure longing for authenticity.

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