

Holistic philosophy based teaching approaches in Latvian primary schools: Primary education teachers' view

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Abstract: Current global tendencies in education highlight the need for a balanced and sustainable system of general education. The present paper summarises the findings from theoretical and empirical inquiry into the application of holistic approach to education, which is construed as a way of increasing the sustainability of the latter. Thus, the paper exposes the views of primary education teachers on the application of holistic approach in real and ideal pedagogical situations in Latvian primary schools as well as illuminates the teachers' perspective on the components of the teaching and learning process that are indicative of a holistic approach to the two above-mentioned types of situations. Quantitative empirical inquiry draws on survey data. The study involves 676 primary education teachers from different regions of Latvia, including rural and urban areas. Findings about Latvian primary education teachers' views on the application of holistic approach to shaping the teaching and learning process in primary school as well as insights from analytic readings of relevant scientific literature support the premise that holistic approach to shaping the teaching and learning process bears favourably on learners' spiritual and physical development in both real and ideal pedagogical situations. In addition, the findings from empirical inquiry corroborate the author's initial suppositions regarding the content of the components of the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: holistic approach, primary education, teachers' view, teaching and learning process.

Introduction

Latvian system of education is comparable with that of most European countries and aligned with the aims of the Bologna Declaration (United Nations..., 1998). The closing decade of the twentieth century was the time when normative documents that regulate the process of education in Latvia increasingly began to feature such concepts as sustainable development and holistic approach. In the course of the last five years, educational standards and curricula have been updated to include many topics, skills and concepts germane to sustainable development. In these normative documents (IZM, 2013; VARAM, 2002; VISC, 2013), sustainable development is construed as an approach that facilitates an education of skills, competences, values and responsibility and supports civic participation. Many scholars (Iliško, 2005; Garleja, 2006) argue that the learners' cognitive activity is inextricably embedded in their social environment. Hence, the present paper contends that the process of inquiry is grounded in each learner's personal responsibility and ability to know, comprehend, empathise and communicate; all of the above combine in an integral whole with other rational and empirical abilities, which means that the learner's inquiry is perceived holistically as an inclusive entity. Several studies (Beļickis, 2000; Salīte, 2002; Bundsgaard, Hansen, 2011) discuss holistic approach as an essential facet of sustainable development. It is argued (Beļickis, 2000; Miller, 2013) that holistic approach ought to be acknowledged as a viable methodology and learners' personal experiences targeted through natural inquiry into the subject matter with a view to making sense of the latter.

The urgency of the study stems from the need for a holistic approach to shaping the content of primary education, which would render the latter sustainable in terms of planning and implementation. The paper seeks to substantiate the viability of applying holistic approach to shaping the content of primary education by summarising the contexts and conceptual ideas regarding the essence of holistic approach that are proposed by representatives of different philosophical schools and scientific

disciplines. In addition, the study aims to appraise primary education teachers' views on the application of holistic approach in real and ideal pedagogical situations in Latvian primary schools.

Theoretical underpinnings of holistic approach

The holistic perspective is a comprehensively discussed topic in contemporary scientific discourse (Schreiner, 2005; Bundsgaard, Hansen, 2011; Ilisko, 2005) where it is considered indispensable for building sustainable societies.

According to Lemkow (1990), the bedrock of holism is the ecological and systems approaches, which are seen as a treasure trove of wisdom derived from the world's major spiritual traditions. Miller (1993) discusses holism in material, spiritual and biological contexts and highlights the interrelatedness of physical and social worlds by referring to Dewey's (1938) ideas about human existence. Many scholars (Nakagawa, 2000; Forbes, 2003) address the content of holism as a concept in the educational context and define the former as a dimension of integrated education: as a set of cognitive, economic, social and emotional features as well as a totality of quantitative and qualitative values. A.Kandavniece (2004) explores holism through the prism of comprehending wholeness, which involves appreciating a relationship of interrelatedness between constituent components of complex phenomena. F.Capra (2002) emphasises connections among life's biological cognitive and social dimensions and analyses the essential links between modern science, philosophy and social life. All of the above are examined as a whole, which is subsequently parsed to constituents according to the principle of random selection. F.Capra (2002) focuses on the principles of interrelatedness. Many other scholars likewise actively address the implications of new epistemological perspectives on human perception of nature (Lemkov, 1990; Nakagawa, 2000, etc.). S.H.Forbes (2003) examines holistic approach as an intellectual and social dimension by making use of different methodologies and integrating the insights of renowned advocates for humanistic pedagogy. J.P.Miller (1993) discusses holism in material, spiritual and biological contexts and highlights the interrelatedness of physical and social worlds by referring to J.Dewey's (1938) ideas about human existence. Holistic approach denotes a particular combination of related elements that allows for an integration of different spiritual and scientific perspectives and hence draws from romanticism, humanism and other alternatives to the trademark atomistic worldview of modernity.

Thus, the content of holistic education boils down to the following considerations: (1) interrelatedness, interaction, cohesion and integration; (2) biological, physical, ecological, spiritual, social, moral, aesthetic, intellectual and other aspects of human life and personality development; (3) conscious inclusion in education of knowledge, insights and perspectives from other disciplines; (4) development of the learner as a whole and their active participation in the global community; (5) critical perspective on dominant worldviews and practices within an alternative educational paradigm.

Holistic approach in the content of primary education: Conceptual underpinnings

The principles of sustainable development are grounded in a learner-centred, humanistic and democratic approach (Rogers, 1969; Helminga, 2006). However, the global movement and collective tendency in scientific research is orientation towards holistic education as a universal dimension of human life (Beļickis, 2000; Helminga, 2006). This stems from the need for learners to perceive, feel, explore and comprehend the subject matter holistically, which contributes to their spiritual and physical development, helps establish connections with the real life as well as develops learners' ability to evaluate their own oneness with the world and to understand it. I.Beļickis (2000) argues that seeking connections between the objects of learning, perceiving their content as essentially united and looking to pinpoint how seemingly discrete objects are related in an ultimate universal whole are the hallmarks of holistic approach. This requires an ability to summarise – identify links between ostensibly unrelated phenomena within a whole and make comprehensive connections between the objects of learning and the multiple aspects of their content. F.Capra (2002) and E.T.Clark (1997) also acknowledge the inherent relatedness of such concepts as 'systemic' and 'holistic'. Taking a systemic view on the actions of a multilayered personality suggests that the content of a systemic approach is essentially diverse. And yet, its chief principle is that of looking for the common grounds. These

common grounds are each learner's physicality and spirituality that are coordinated with the different forms that the manifestation of the learners' freedom takes.

Analysis of the aims and objectives of national primary curriculum (IZM, 2013; MK, 2006) exposes some glaring deficiencies. Not all school subjects have clearly spelt out criteria for generalisation of content. It means that no adequate system for differentiating between more and less significant material exists. Teachers are offered a wide choice of textbooks by different authors with different publication dates. These textbooks are expressly created for specific school subjects to be taken at specific stages of primary education (VISC, 2013). Holistic approach (Rose, 2005; Schreiner, 2005), however, posits there is no need to differentiate between the levels of conceptual understanding in junior and senior forms. Also, knowledge and skills development are not artificially divided in successive stages; rather, they are viewed systemically as wholes. Thus, by choosing the holistic approach, the teacher leads each learner to generalisation (Volša, 2002), taking care to consider the degree of each child's cognitive development. Primary education curriculum, meanwhile, tends to consider learners' cognitive development on a general scale.

By taking the view on a human being as an integrated set of body and mind, sensation and emotion, many scholars (Miller, 1993; Clark, 1997; Wilber, 1997) endorse the belief that the knowledge one accumulates in the course of one's life should function as a whole (i.e. serve the betterment of human existence), for education has but one subject – life in all its manifestations. It means that learners become discoverers and creators of knowledge who use themselves, each other and the environment rather than the teacher as main resources for knowledge acquisition. Holistic approach centres on conscious knowledge acquisition (Rose, 2005; Schreiner, 2005) that goes hand in hand with formation and development of skills, attitudes and values (Beļickis, 2000), which accompany achieving a holistic understanding of the world. These considerations concern not only the content of learning (the subject matter) but also teacher and learners' personality, abilities and cultural affiliations that colour their teaching and learning, because the whole that is sustainable education cannot consist of discrete, unrelated components of the teaching and learning process (Clark, 1997). Wilber (1997) claims that the curriculum can be planned to include teacher- and learner-selected topics that are chosen on the grounds of shared interests. He maintains that a thematic approach to teaching addresses the intellectual, social, emotional, physical and aesthetical facets of learners' growth. The abovementioned studies suggest that holistic approach can be described as an approach of integrated wholeness to personality development (Clark, 1997; Wilber, 1997; Rose, 2005; Schreiner, 2005) or, in other words, as one that seeks to facilitate the development of an integral individuality (Volša, 2002) while viewing human personality as a whole.

Advocates for humanistic pedagogy (Rogers, 1969; Helminga, 2006) use the model of holistic approach to describe the opportunities for child development and upbringing that respect the child's natural characteristics and the specific conditions of child-environment interaction. The tenets of humanistic pedagogy inspire a holistic approach to the content of primary education because its prime methodological concern is the child viewed as a whole and the teacher's attempts to understand the child's soul, behaviour and actions. Hence, in holistic education, freedom or autonomy (Little, 1991) denotes internal independence, liberty of spirit, self-expression and action. Meanwhile, a lesson is considered a balanced process of interaction between all the parties that is guided, not supervised, by the teacher (Beļickis, 2000). From a holistic perspective, the teacher's task during the lesson is to aim for wholeness of approach, which involves a dynamic interplay between physical, work-related, moral and aesthetic education with due consideration for the child's individual characteristics, abilities and age (Miller, 1993). All these aspects are regarded as equally important and complementary.

Sampling strategy and methodology

The empirical study relied on data from a written survey of Latvian primary education teachers (N=676). Non-probability sampling with the typical case method was applied. A standardised questionnaire was designed containing 22 questions – statements with multiple choice options. This instrument was used to obtain quantitative data. The respondents were asked to choose the approach (either formal or holistic) that best fits the real and the ideal pedagogical situation in primary school (Forms 1 to 9).

Adaptation of the questionnaire involved structural factor analysis and usability analysis of the indicators that describe the phenomenon under study by taking into account internal cohesion among discrete factors. Factor analysis of the internal structure of the questionnaire (its distinct parts) was exploratory. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the reliability of distinct items in the questionnaire. Factor analysis of the internal structure of the questionnaire involved factor analysis in the indicator space of different approaches. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) equals 0.964 for the real situation and 0.956 for the ideal one, which corroborates the viability of performing factor analysis of the questionnaire's internal structure.

The survey aimed to (1) identify the components of the teaching and learning process that are indicative of the application of holistic approach to facilitating the acquisition of subject matter and (2) ascertain the views of primary education teachers on the holistic approach in real and ideal pedagogical situations in Latvian primary schools.

Data processing and analysis of the results

Factor analysis corroborated the tripartite factor structure of the phenomenon under study. Interpretation of the factors was informed by specific indicators – those items from the 22 question set with highest factor loadings. The following key components of the teaching and learning process were inferred from primary education teachers who evaluated the application of formal or holistic approaches in real and ideal pedagogical situations: *the social component* (F1), *the organisational component* (F2) and *the content component* (F3). The social component (F1) emerged as primary from indicators that enable evaluating the respondents' attitude towards the following types of teaching and learning strategy: teacher and learners' social positions, adequate development of learners' self-appraisal during lessons and their acceptance of other learners; opportunities for learners to cooperate through different forms of learning (group work, pair work, etc.). This component also includes the teacher's readiness to adapt their position to the changing requirements in the educational setting. The organisational component (F2) emerged as secondary from indicators that concern the organisation of the learning environment, proper emotional ambience during lessons, an atmosphere of trust among learners as well as the dynamics of teacher-learner interaction; the teacher's ability to rely on the learner-centred approach; learners' developing a positive self-appraisal. The content component (F3) emerged as tertiary from the following indicators: usage of appropriate teaching and learning materials and innovative methods, lesson planning for holistic learner development (both spiritual and physical) – holistic approach to facilitating the acquisition of subject matter; usage of appropriate methods to promote a sustainable, positive attitude towards subject matter. The three abovementioned factors were evaluated by the respondents in terms of formal and holistic approaches to facilitating the acquisition of subject matter in real and ideal pedagogical situations in primary school. Mean, median, mode, standard deviation and other calculations of descriptive statistics were made with a view to procuring arithmetic means of relevant indicators for the three components and thus inferring the respondents' attitude towards alternative teaching and learning strategies.

Evaluation of the social component is the clearest in ideal situations (V) with scores below 2.17 from more than half the respondents, which suggests that they endorse the holistic approach. Meanwhile, 50% of the respondents are neutral when evaluating this component in real (R) pedagogical situations (social component (R): -0.33). At the same time, not least than half the respondents make negative evaluations of the organisational and content components in real (R) pedagogical situations (organisational component (R): -1.57; content component (R): 1.44), which implies preference of the formal approach. Conversely, in ideal pedagogical situations (V), these components are evaluated positively by at least half the respondents and receive scores above 2 from 25% of the surveyed teachers (organisational component (V): 1.29; content component (V): 1.11). Greatest variance (in percentiles) is observed in the social component in real situations (R): 50% of the respondent scores ranging from 1.5 to 1.67 with interquartile range 3.17 and mean squared distance 1.693. Lowest variance is observed in the social component in ideal pedagogical situations (V): 50% of the respondent scores range from 1.22 to 2.67 (percentiles) with interquartile range as mean squared distance (standard deviation) 1.414. Relevant statistical data are visually outlined in quartile diagrams (Figure 1). The obtained factor evaluations range from -3 to 3. Negative indicator values suggest that

the respondents endorse the formal approach while positive values imply endorsement of the holistic one. Absolute indicator values demonstrate the stability of the respondents' position. Values close to 0 mean the respondent has no principal standpoint relative to the issue in question (Figure 1).

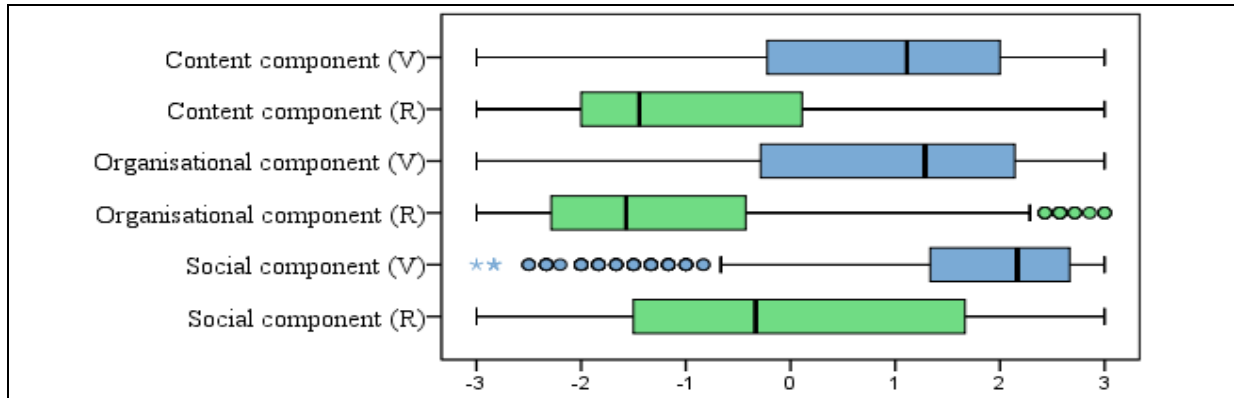


Figure 1. Quartile diagrams that illustrate the respondents' attitude towards the selected approach
Mean values can also be laid out in a diagram (Figure 2).

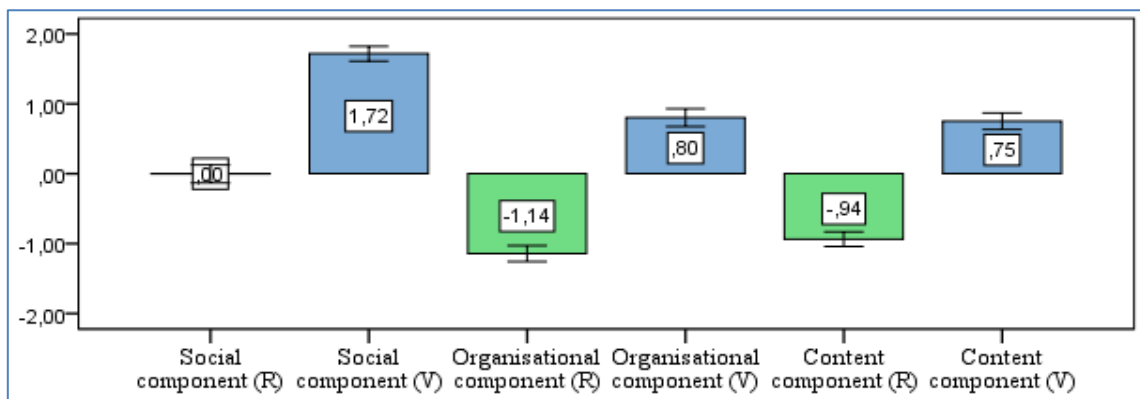


Figure 2. Mean component values that illustrate the respondents' attitude towards the selected approach

Mean values in Figure 2 denote primary education teachers' attitude towards strategic approaches to the teaching and learning process in real and ideal pedagogical situations. These data imply that in real pedagogical situations (R) the majority choose the formal approach to facilitating the acquisition of subject matter whereas in ideal pedagogical situations (V) the holistic approach is preferred: the social component (R): 0.00, the social component (V): 1.72; the organisational component (R): -1.14, the organisational component (V): 0.80; the content component (R): 0.94, the content component (V): 0.75. Comparative factor analysis of findings from primary education teachers' survey according to such factors as the organisational component and the social component suggests that the distribution of the teachers' views in real pedagogical situations (R) inclines towards the formal approach whereas in ideal pedagogical situations (V) sways towards the holistic approach. Meanwhile, primary education teachers' views on such a factor as the social component emerge as an exception in that the views appear almost equally distributed between the formal and the holistic approach in both real (R) and ideal (V) pedagogical situations.

Thus, the present study explored primary education teachers' views on the application of formal and holistic approaches in real and ideal pedagogical situations as well as identified three constituent components of the teaching and learning process: social component, organisational component and content component.

Conclusions

Analysis of germane theoretical literature suggests that holistic approach to shaping the content of primary education integrates relevant insights from sustainable development movement, systemic

approach, integrated approach and humanistic approach, and features the following tenets and fundamental conditions:

- respecting the learner's freedom or autonomy in the process of education;
- supporting the principles of sustainable development: a learner-centred, humanistic and democratic approach;
- acknowledgement and comprehension of all facets of sustainable development: economical, ecological, social and cultural;
- respecting the learner's individual experience in five dimensions of education that correspond to the five dimensions of learner's natural development: intellectual, emotional or affective, physical, social, aesthetic and spiritual;
- integration of different school subjects, thematic teaching, simultaneous focus on different areas rather than exclusive concern for isolated aspects;
- systems-oriented teaching and learning, seeking connections and regularities;
- learner development that subsumes facilitation of critical thinking, action competence, personal attitudes and values.

Meanwhile, empirical findings suggest that holistic education addresses the development of an individual as a whole and as a part of a community, including their physical, social moral, aesthetic, creative, spiritual, intellectual and professional development. Formal education however, is discovered to be cognitively-oriented and neglecting other essential dimensions of human life.

The study suggests that planning and implementation of the teaching and learning process that is shaped according to the holistic approach requires evaluating not only the structure of teaching and learning, but also the process of its organisation. It means considering the learner as a fundamental component of the teaching and learning process and rethinking its interplay with other components such as the teacher and the subject matter. In other words, one should reflect on how to shape such teaching and learning process where learners acquire specific subject matter that has the potential to inspire qualitative change in learner development, support their growth and contribute to their personality formation. Thus, holistic approach emerges as concern for prevention of wholeness and facilitation of connectedness; as shaping and evaluating specific actions, knowledge and skills that are viewed in totality without imposing artificial divisions.

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