The Attainment of the Ideas of Handicraft and Home Economics Syllabus in School Reality

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Abstract: Today, technology is increasingly becoming a part of our daily experiences and there are domains of life where human hands have no function in the creation of a product. All this raises the question how much or whether at all should one be able to make something by hands, and, therefore, perhaps is craft as a school subject outdated and should be replaced by the theoretical discussions about the technological processes? Surely, the content of craft education cannot be the same as it was in the beginning of last century. New standards arise in the handicraft and home economics instruction: it is not enough for students to merely acquire skills and the ability to make something by imitation; but the whole process has to be connected with pupil's meaningful creative action, ethnic experience, innovation and modern technology. This is the direction pursued in Estonian syllabus development. But it is quite another situation, when it comes to the content of the subject and the activities chosen to promote the learning in the reality of school practices. A study was carried out to learn in what extent are subject teachers able to adjust their teaching practices according to the syllabus? The handicraft and home economics bachelor's degree students were asked to write an essay describing their subject-related learning experiences in comprehensive school. The short writings of university entrants of three different academic years were analysed according to the phenomenographic study analysis theory. Results showed that, unfortunately, subject teachers have difficulties in altering their habits and this shows the need for syllabus based in-service training.

Keywords: school education, handicraft, curriculum, ideas, reality.

Introduction

The aim of the article is to discuss the syllabus of craft and the realization of its ideas in the real school life of Estonian general education. Craft as a general educational subject has been included in the Estonian Curriculum for General Education School since 1894. At the time teaching was based on the principles of the so called labour school (*Arbeitsschule*) principles, which state that including craft in the curriculum should aid students in becoming more independent and the school in becoming more viable (Lind, 2009). With a few exceptions craft has been a school subject from the given period up to today; the development of its content and aims has been influenced by the changes in society, different trends in pedagogical theories and the content and teaching systems of the subject in other countries (Lind, 2012). Surely, the content and organization of craft education cannot be the same as it was in the beginning of last century.

The conception of the Estonian national curriculum for basic and upper secondary schools implemented in year 2002 (Põhikooli ja… 2002) differed substantially from earlier curricula. The centralized *Lehrplan*-type curriculum that concentrates on subject and content by indicating precise tasks was replaced by the student-centred curriculum that is more indicative, giving general guidelines (Ruus, Veimer, 2011). For teachers, this shift brought along following changes. In the centre of subject teaching was no longer a detailed description of the subject content (with a predetermined number of lessons allocated for a topic and a list of practical outputs), instead the emphasis was put on learning skills and general competencies. In the previous curriculum that took effect in year 1996, the competencies were already noted, although cursorily and in an elementary manner. Therefore, there had been a limited exposure to the concept among Estonian teachers (Jaani, 2004, 11).

In the curriculum of 2002, the craft subject's syllabus was flexible and enabled schools decision-making possibilities when choosing what, in what extent and how to teach in craft subject (Ainevaldkond…, 2006). The main goals of craft education were outlined: execution of pupil's creative ideas; sustainable use of materials; knowledge of terminology and an elementary technical

literacy; information search, analysis and adaptation; maintenance of national heritage; the ability to work alone and in collaboration; and appreciation of the traits necessary for work. In the teacher's discretion was how to achieve the goals – which technologies were learned and skills developed.

Characteristic to education is its dual nature – it is simultaneously conservative and innovative, maintaining cultural heritage and trying to solve future challenges (Aizsila, 2012). This is a contradiction that all educational stakeholders are facing. J. Husu (2002) noted that restructuring school curricula and pedagogical practices is of little value if it does not take teachers into account. According to J. Husu (2002) and T. Autio (2012), the teacher is in the centre of making, developing and redefining the curriculum. However, teachers do not only deliver the curriculum. It is through their professional judgment that makes curriculum acted and not just implemented from above. What teachers think, what teachers believe and what teachers do in schools is what ultimately shapes the kind of education young people get (Husu, 2002, 14). Craft teachers' daily work and direct contact with adolescents creates and carries mainly the subject's meaningfulness for pupils.

Methodology

The aim of current study was to find out in what extent handicraft and home economics subject teachers are able to adjust their teaching practices according to the curriculum. The study follows phenomenographic research approach. Phenomenography is aimed at the study of variation of human experiences of phenomena in the world (Limberg, 2008). According to Marton (1981, 180), phenomenography studies the ways of understanding and experiencing the physical and social world, F. Ornek (2008) has said „phenomenography is the empirical study of the different ways in which people think of the world".

The target group for this study was first year handicraft and home economics bachelor's degree students from three different academic years (2008, 2009, 2013) who were asked to write an essay titled "My experience of handicraft and home economics education during my studies" describing their subject-related learning experiences in comprehensive school. The data consisted of 29 short writings (accordingly 7, 16 and 6). The difference in the number of essays from year to year is due to the number of students enrolled to the course. Given years were chosen based on the length of studies conducted on the basis of the 2002 curriculum: pupils who graduated from school in years 2008 and 2009 had experienced the transition from the old to the new one – last three years of their basic education were based on new curriculum; those who graduated in 2013 studied the entire basic school under the new syllabus. Thus, by the time, the teachers had to already be accustomed with the new curriculum.

The research questions focused on exploring how students evaluate the content and organization of the experienced handicraft and home economics lessons, teacher's work (including the use of different methods of instruction), the overall necessity of the subject and the timeliness of the practical outputs. The preliminary assumption was that, despite the societal changes and its effect on the evolution of syllabus, the traditional content based approach to the teaching of handicraft and home economics subject is relatively slow to change.

The analysis of 29 short writings was carried out according to M. Huusko and S. Paloniemi's phenomenographic study analysis theory (Huusko, Paloniemi, 2006, 167-169). In order to ensure the anonymity of the authors, each essay was given a numeric code. The aim of the analysis was to find structural differences from the dataset that explain the relationship between the concepts related to the phenomenon under investigation. The respondents' most characteristic views are presented to illustrate the results.

Results and Discussion

Students' writings provided rich data regarding their experiences in handicraft and home economics education. In connection with the topic, the main results related to the syllabus will be discussed here: subject content and practical outputs, the aims of the subject, teaching methods and learning arrangements.

Subject content and practical outputs. Handicraft and home economics are taught as an integrated subject in comprehensive schools in Estonia. Since the beginning of last century, the content of syllabus of handicraft has been distributed on a large scale between four classical themes: crocheting, knitting, embroidering and sewing. However, the demands and expectations for craft education alter in accordance with the changes in society. In the curriculum of 2002, 21 optional theme units were added (e.g. felting, quilting, silk painting, frame weaving, home decorating etc.) from which the teachers were required to choose at least one per year by considering pupils' interests and local possibilities. The intention of adding the optional theme units was to modernize and diversify the content of syllabus, add creativity to the subject and bring the subject closer to the applied arts (Põhikooli ja…, 2002).

The difficulties in implementing the 2002 curriculum (especially in the transition from one curriculum type to another) allowed to arise the situation where teachers were unable to follow the reform and the instruction stayed similar to the times few decades ago (Ainevaldkond…, 2006). When recalling the content of the craft lessons, students describe mainly the lessons of crocheting, knitting, embroidering and sewing. Appears that it was especially difficult for older teachers to leave the accustomed routine and implement new topics in their work.

2009-8: "Although life has moved on, nothing has really changed."

2008-5: *"I made the same kinds of things as my mother did in school. All crocheting, knitting, sewing and embroidering was composed according to a certain standard. For fun, one of my classmates presented once the teacher exactly the same work that we were making, only it was made by her mother thirty years ago."*

2009-8: *"In general, not much has changed during last ten years. My little sister is still making almost the same kind of things as I did."*

2008-3: *"There were so many optional technologies and they seemed really exciting and something that adolescents would enjoy learning. However, when looking at this list I had to admit that we were not taught almost anything like this in our school. Instead, we had a lot of lace-making and tablecloth hemming."*

Besides the inability to follow the curriculum change, there have been teachers who simply do not like or master a certain technique and decide to ignore it despite the syllabus.

2009-6: *"Our classroom was well equipped with sewing machines and other necessary tools, but by the end of basic school I did not even know how to change the thread on a sewing machine, we did not sew once. As I understood it, the teacher could write whatever she wanted in the school diary and nobody checked whether the lessons were like this or not."*

Alongside the rather negative experiences, students reported positive examples as well. They described teachers who knew how to make the subject content appealing by choosing interesting activities and focusing on the creativity.

2009-2: *"I remember one sewing project we made. We had to creatively sew different fabrics between base fabric and tulle so that finally formed a fabric collage. The outcomes of each pupil were really interesting and picturesque."*

Emphasizing the creative process in making should be a natural part of the handicraft and home economics subject. According to the syllabus (Põhikooli ja…, 2002), this school subject develops pupil's creativity and aesthetic taste and s/he learns to appreciate the fulfilment of creative possibilities offered by manual activity. In the assessment guide, teachers were recommended to evaluate pupils' creativity and the wholeness of the prepared artefact in addition to the application of the knowledge and skills obtained. Students' writings showed that more attention was paid on the creativity and the

use of different kinds of materials and technologies in schools that follow special programmes (such as art schools or Waldorf schools).

As mentioned earlier, handicraft and home economics is an integrated subject in comprehensive schools. The amount of lessons dedicated to the topics of home economics was left to teachers to decide autonomously. The syllabus stated merely that textile work and home economics are given every year (Põhikooli ja…, 2002). Home economics is often understood as mere "cooking lesson" among teachers, pupils and parents (Tamm, Palojoki, 2012, 185). This confusion has caused the situation where there were no home economics lessons at all in some schools, because they require a special learning environment – learning kitchen – and those lessons are labour-intensive both to prepare and carry out for teachers. As pupils really enjoy the home economics some teachers even have, unfortunately, used this part of the subject to manipulate students.

2009-9: *"Our teacher used the home economics lessons as a tool of manipulation although we really enjoyed those lessons and wanted to cook. If we did something she did not like then she replaced home economics lessons with handicraft."*

However, home economics' part of the syllabus included several topics besides cooking (e.g. basics of nutrition, hygiene, etiquette, home maintenance, budget etc.). Despite the fact, only few students mention those themes to be addressed in home economics lessons.

2009-8: *"We discussed food and nutrients, vitamins, menus, food preservation and lots of other things in home economics lessons."*

Students admit that they did not find the theoretical home economics lessons appealing.

2008-6: *"Our teacher wished to carry out lectures but pupils were not interested in those. Therefore, throughout the basic school we had only a couple of theoretical lessons."*

Subject content is closely related to the practical outputs in handicraft. Sadly, there are teachers who do not take into consideration pupils' interests or what is currently popular. Instead they tend to stick to their old conventions. In retrospect, students express their criticism in this respect.

2008-3: *"Why couldn't sewing an apron or a pillowcase be replaced by something more necessary and interesting?"*

Making outmoded items can make pupils work only to earn the positive grade. This in turn diminishes the meaningfulness of the subject and causes reluctance among adolescents.

2009-2: *"After getting the necessary grade I have not used or worn any of the items I made."*

Earlier syllabi provided teachers with recommended practical outputs. Teachers of long service had been following those recommendations for years and with the transition to new curriculum it was probably convenient to continue the usual practice instead of introducing themselves to something new.

2009-3: *"We weren't left much choice – everybody had to knit mittens and socks, sew aprons and pot holders. The only thing we were left to decide was the colour."*

Students proposed in their essays some topics that they would have found interesting or necessary to learn and make. For example, how to recycle and upcycle materials, customize sewing patterns and clothes, and learn about style and fashion.

The aims of the subject. Craft-making has many benefits for pupils. The curriculum of 2002 stated that the main goal of handicraft and home economics subject is maximum possible promotion of pupil's personality and preparation for independent adult life. Teachers surely keep this goal in mind

in their work, but the question is what it means for them to manage in life and what kind of knowledge and skills do they find significant.

2008-3: *"As our teacher told us – handicraft is exact science – we didn't need much creativity during these years. Everything was strictly in place what to do, how to do it and how the final result had to look like."*

The intervening years have not changed some teachers' understandings, unfortunately: "*We were not expected to be creative or use our imagination. It was more about acquiring basic knowledge and performing given tasks"* (2013–5).

One positive aspect is that students are able to see the beneficial side of the subject, even if the teacher was *„old-fashioned and rigorous*": *„I need these skills in life and I'm sure that these years we spent learning handicraft in school were not totally useless"* (2008-5).

Students have expressed the aim of the subject as they see it in their writings: *„Young people learn by knitting, sewing, cooking and working with metal and wood about the nature and origin of things that surround us"* (2013-4); *„Craft-making fosters our ability to think logically and this ability is something that we need in life"* (2013-6).

Teaching methods. The repertoire of teacher's teaching methods depends on many things – from teacher's own learning and teaching style as a part of her personality to the teacher training, school and classroom's material possibilities. Pupils' lack of interest in relation to the subject has to be at least partly linked to the dull lessons and the little use of active learning and other "non-traditional" teaching methods. It is hardly doubtful whether pupils are able to adequately evaluate the interestingness of the teaching. However, the question arises whether pupils are at all aware what new learning style is if teachers do not discuss it with them (Sarv, 2008). One possibility to evaluate the methods is to compare them with the ones used in other subjects. A study conducted in Estonian schools has shown that teachers tend to be highly interested in subject didactics but they show a little interest in active learning methods. Consequently, subject teaching is seen rather traditionally and therefore Estonian school is a relatively subject-centred environment for development (Ibid.).

Handicraft and home economics syllabus recommended first of all learning how to design and plan, choose and use the materials and tools, work according to written instructions and blueprints, and use different information resources. All this expects different approaches to the learning from both teachers and pupils.

Students' memories of the instruction in craft lessons are at large similar. First, the teacher gave the theory and pupils often had to take notes or rewrite teacher's words. Next, the teacher demonstrated step-by-step a new technology and after that the pupils practiced the technology on some swatches. Finally, pupils started making the practical item and teacher helped those who asked. This was the routine lesson after lesson. Students are quite critical of this procedure: *„due to this teaching method many students did not get to fully participate in the classes"* (2009-16). Besides that, some students emphasize that the most tedious experience in the handicraft was making a swatch for each crochet stitch.

2009-1: *„Theoretical part was minimal. Most of the time we were just chatting and our teacher was walking around the classroom and helping us. /…/ Our teacher could have at least discussed costume history or something like that while we were pottering at our items. /…/ Instead of monotonous knitting from lesson to lesson we could have had more home economics."*

Several students have been in the role of „assistant teacher“: *„The teacher always left the classroom and we had to make most of the things on our own. I was most skilful in our class and I was always helping others"* (2013-4). At the same time there are students who recall with gratitude „*interesting and varied lessons*" (2009-14) and several of them point out that „*those lessons were good tension relievers"* (2009-8).

As previously noted, in many schools, home economics comprised mostly cooking. Pupils were divided into groups and they prepared food as „families". But there were teachers whose approach was exactly the opposite – they dealt with home economics only theoretically. Pupils had to write down various information: from practical information to that *„how big the pieces of potatoes have to be"* (2009-6).

2009-3: *„We even had to learn how to lay the table with the help of textbook, because we were never required to do it properly in learning kitchen."*

2008-5: *„Our learning method was mostly the one of pen and notebook. And so three weeks – only writing."*

The same student expresses hope that *„due to new teaching methods and modern approaches has everything handicraft and home economics related become a little bit more enjoyable."*

Learning arrangement. Until 2002 craft education was organized according to the historically rooted principle, where handicraft lessons for grades 1 to 3 were given simultaneously to both, boys and girls. Starting from the 4th grade, pupils were divided into two gendered groups: girls studied textile works and home economics, boys learned wood and metal works. In 2002, an amendment was introduced to the syllabus according to which the pupils were to be divided into groups without respect to the gender but in accordance with pupils' interests and wishes. Additionally, the teachers were suggested to change in the mutual agreement study-groups so that handicraft and home economics group would get to participate in technical workshop and, at the same time, the other group would get some knowledge in home maintenance and cooking. The exchange of study groups was optional in the 2002 curriculum so that teachers would get acquainted with the idea. In the currently valid curriculum (implemented in year 2011) it has become a compulsory part of studies (Tamm, Palojoki, 2012).

Students note that pupils were not informed about the possibility to choose between the textile works and wood and metal works. Two students asked to change the group, but sadly they were turned down in a humiliating way.

2013-1. *"Once I raised my hand in handicraft lesson and asked why we, girls, cannot participate in wood and metal works. Unfortunately, I have forgotten the teacher's answer, but I know that it was something like this: why would girls even want to do something like that. Laughter followed."*

The exchange of study groups depended on two parties – the teachers of both groups. If one of them was not interested in such work arrangement then the exchange did not take place. It can be concluded from the essays that girls would have been highly interested in working in workshops and boys craved to cook in the kitchen. Nevertheless, only five students mention that the change took place in their school, more precisely year 2008 – 7 essays and 2 mention the exchange; 2009 – 16 essays, 2 exchanges; and 2013 – 6 essays and 1 exchange. Consequently, in this case it cannot be argued that becoming accustomed with the requirements and recommendations of the new syllabus actually changed the way learning was arranged. In conclusion, if there is an idea formulated as recommendation in the syllabus, it will remain so.

As mentioned earlier, the exchange of study groups has been made mandatory in the currently valid curriculum of 2011. However, the most significant curriculum change to be considered is the direction from teacher centred to student centred instruction and learning. This sets a challenge for teachers to replace their accustomed methods with new ones. Further studies are needed to indicate whether and how teachers cope with that challenge.

Conclusions

New standards arise in the handicraft and home economics education due to the changing and challenging world around us. It is not enough for pupils to merely acquire skills and the ability to make something by imitation, but the whole process has to be connected with pupil's meaningful creative action, ethnic experience, innovation and modern technology. This is the direction pursued in Estonian syllabus development. Current study shows that to amplify the meaningfulness of handicraft and home economics education in general schools, it is not sufficient to simply update the syllabus. The latter might be as timely as possible but its interpretation and the actual work in the classroom depends largely on the teacher. Current study shows that if there was a contradiction between the syllabus and the classroom reality, it appeared throughout all aspects of the teaching.

To conclude, the curriculum of 2002 was not fully implemented in the school reality and the actual work was based on out-dated principles. Results showed that, unfortunately, subject teachers have difficulties in altering their habits and this shows the utmost need for syllabus based in-service training.

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