

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT FOR ESTONIAN GENERAL COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOLS: CONTEXT, CURRICULA AND SCHOOL PRACTICE 1991-2016

Urve Läänemets

Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Tallinn
Estonia

Abstract. *The issues of selection of the content for general comprehensive schools has become a highly debated issue in the 21st century and several countries have turned special attention to it. Estonian experience of curriculum development has shown, how important different contexts have been influencing educational reforms. The processes of educational policy making and research in the field of specification of the content in 1991-2016 have been analysed using Crawford's specification of different contexts: the context of global, regional and local influences; the context of text production (production of curriculum documents) and the context of practice. General as well as subject specific principles can be used for selection of the content of traditional as well as new/emerging schools subjects and there should be rational proportions between the traditional and innovative content of learning for general comprehensive schools. Ahistorical and non-theoretical approaches can become counterproductive considering the school culture within a particular society.*

Keywords: *curriculum development, content of learning, principles for selection of the content, socio-political context influencing reforms.*

Introduction

25 years seems to be a long enough period to cast a look back on developments and reforms in general comprehensive education all over Europe and beyond, in which the experience of post-socialist Estonia could be instructive. The issues of curriculum design and selection of the most relevant content have come to the fore after a long period of focusing on the process of learning and related methods of teaching/learning in many countries. Although the design of curricular documents remains culture-specific and time-bound historically, it is necessary to be aware of the chronology of policymaking and changes in the mentioned field globally, regionally and locally. The development of curricula for general comprehensive schools that provide the desired knowledge and skills for the entire population is of crucial importance in light of its social implications, especially with regard to identity building and social cohesion, preparation for the labour market, and opportunities for social mobility. There have been far-reaching and fundamental changes in all fields of education, especially in educational policy making, which in turn influence all educational practices. It is common knowledge that all political innovations start with new ideologies, are based on new values, and result in new priorities with regard to the distribution of resources, usually financial. This article attempts to provide a short overview and

discussion of developments in the content of learning for general educational schools specified in different Estonian national curricula (NC) and related research. In the main, it follows the structure developed by Keith Crawford according to which the cycle of curriculum policy making and implementation can be analysed from three points of view: *the context of the influence(s)*, *the context of text-production (production of curriculum documents)*, and *the context of practice* (Crawford, 2000:615). Reflections on the social results of educational reforms as well as new aspirations in 2016 deserve particular attention.

The context of influences on educational reforms in Estonian comprehensive schools

Since the Teachers' Congress in 1987 and regained independence in 1991, due to new and multiple means of communication, novel educational ideas and values have become the object of wide discussion. This has led to multiple reforms and developments in both educational legislation and curriculum development for different types of schools in new circumstances.

The first and most influential factor that gave rise to a different context for all educational institutions was the introduction of new values, which in turn led to new ideals. Freedom, democracy, decentralisation, and the omnipotence of the market economy achieved unanimous assent as principles upon which to restructure the existing system of education. Neo-liberal ideologies came to the fore in both the economy and education, and were enthusiastically supported by various foreign entities - the Soros Foundation in particular. The need for a new educational paradigm was expressed, but a model for future policy-making was not specified. The main aim related to the development of independent personalities and was expressed by aspirations to inculcate competitiveness at all levels of education. A new approach to decision making was understandable considering the great political change. The new social agreement based on the changing values was first manifested in the field of language policy. The first language law of 1989 also changed language learning in general comprehensive schools, demoting Russian from its position as the first foreign language, and giving students the opportunity to choose their preferred language to learn, putting English, Russian, German and French on an equal footing. For small nations, language issues are especially sensitive as they are directly related to the sustainability of a particular language, and in Estonia this had political implications, as Estonian became the sole state language.

In Estonia, where the demographic proportions had greatly changed and about 1/3 of population is still Russian-speaking, it also raised the issue of general comprehensive schools with instruction in Russian. Several laws and decrees affecting those schools have been passed since the middle of 1990s, according to which 60% of the curriculum has to be taught in the Estonian state language.

However, it has never become entirely clear how to calculate that percentage. The schools usually count the number of lessons and there have been official recommendations from the Ministry of Education and Research for particular school subjects (history, civics, literature and music) to be taught in the state language. To enhance the state language skills of students, immersion was declared to be the optimum method of language learning and has been well financed to the present day.

The second most influential factor was the restructuring of central educational institutions, as it was deemed necessary to abolish anything and everything from the Soviet times. The Institute for Educational Research, established in December 1959, was closed in April 1992, and information that had been collected by monitoring educational developments all over the world ceased to be available to politicians for informed decision-making. The In-service Teacher Training Centre, established in 1922 and restructured in 1989 as the Estonian Education Centre, which provided teachers with in-service training courses, was closed in March 1993. Universities were expected to assume responsibility for research and educational innovation, and in-service training courses were to be chosen from those provided by the free market. The role of the Estonian Academy of Sciences became marginal and has remained so in terms of issues regarding general comprehensive schools.

The third most influential factor shaping the new context was the privatization of property, which has led to the establishment of private educational institutions as well as several NGOs dealing with educational issues. Numerous (46) private colleges sprang up in the middle of the 1990s, most of which have closed down because of financial problems and inability to guarantee the required standards of education. However, the number of small private primary and basic schools (grades 1-9) is constantly increasing at the moment, as parents seem to be dissatisfied with the education provided by so-called ordinary schools. Private publishing houses have been producing textbooks and other study aids, with the paramount innovation of the moment being e-books on different school subjects.

Some NGOs have been extremely successful, especially the Jaan Tonisson Institute, which has organised the majority of courses for the introduction of democratic values and citizenship education but also turned attention to experience of curriculum development in 1917-1940 (Läänemets 1995).

The fourth factor to be considered is the influence of test-driven assessment at different levels, e.g. the introduction of National Exams in 1997, international testing according to the PISA and TIMSS programs, and cooperation with the OECD. OECD reports have always been used as the basis of new initiatives for local policy making, which in practice has led to the compilation of numerous strategy documents and a permanent status of change brought about by never-ending reforms.

And last but not least, there are considerable changes with regard to new learning environments brought about by ICT. The program „Tiger Leap” initiated in 2000 has been providing schools with access to the internet and new educational technologies, methods and techniques. Today ICT devices are used in almost all homes, schools, coffee shops, trains, etc., which guarantee access to any kind of information anyone considers worth learning. Suffice it to say that the majority of schools cannot conceive of carrying out their daily activities without the use of virtual learning environments.

It can be concluded that there have been both negative and positive aspects to the changed socio-political context: research and in-service training institutions were closed down and many knowledgeable people were no longer able to contribute their expertise to the field of education, while at the same time new vistas for wider international cooperation opened and new learning environments became available.

The context of curriculum production

According to Crawford, it is imperative to determine the *power base of educational innovation and the process of professional curriculum development, if the aim is to design a relevant for the society document for general comprehensive schools* (Crawford, 2000, 622). The adoption of each new curriculum document should be considered a result of an educational reform, specifying the content and organising the process of learning.

The Estonian Ministry of Education is the institution that decides who will be commissioned to write the curriculum. In 1991, three institutions – the Institute for Educational Research, the Estonian Education Centre and the Ministry’s general education department – were given the task of providing new versions of the curriculum by the end of 1992. The opportunity to design holistic curriculum documents instead of separate subject syllabi (called programs in the Soviet era) was immediately seized by the Institute of Educational Research. By the end of 1991, the Institute had submitted for field-testing and subsequent implementation a three-stage plan for the production of curriculum documents for Kindergarten to Grade 12 that was acknowledged to be both relevant and professional. Following reorganisation of the institution, new versions of the curriculum for the nine grades of compulsory school were produced by the Estonian Education Centre in 1992 and for upper secondary schools in 1993. This was a new type of document for which the authors – all specialists in their respective subjects – had made extensive use of research in the field of curriculum theory and practice.

As the work of the renowned Estonian-born American professor of pedagogy Hilda Taba had been “rediscovered” in 1988, her theories and other influential classical research (e.g. by Tyler, Lawton, Goodson, Petersen, Hameyer, Kelly, Pinar, etc.) were able to be used in compiling these versions. However, they were

rejected on political grounds and the first officially recognised document – the National Curriculum, which was produced by the newly established School Board, did not appear until 1996.

In 2000, a specialised Curriculum Centre was opened at Tartu University. It was expected to write all the new curriculum documents for the various educational institutions. However, it has not done so to date, and the Ministry decided to take a pragmatic project-based approach to compiling curricula rather than one based on research. In 2002 a new introductory section was commissioned from a small task group, and in 2002 the second version of the National Curriculum (NC) containing the same subject syllabi as the first was adopted. The third NC for general comprehensive schools was adopted twice – once in 2010 and again in 2011 following the enactment of a new law affecting such schools. The most recent NC has been divided into two separate documents – one for compulsory schools (Grades 1-9) and the other for gymnasias (upper secondary school, Grades 10-12).

An analysis of the content of the NC during that period reveals some changes to the list of school subjects and in the number of lessons. The NC of 1996 was the first to assign to schools responsibility for specifying the learning content (using the subject syllabi as the framework) and for writing their individual curricula. Each school could determine the number of lessons for a particular subject within the limits specified in the NC. Health education and human studies were introduced into basic schools; philosophy, psychology and family education were introduced into gymnasias. Gymnasia subjects were recast as courses (each course equalling 35 lessons). Schools were expected to develop competency-based integrated curricula, and to organise the studies following the four three-year levels as specified in the NC. The maximum number of lessons for different school grades as well as the time allotted for optional subjects was specified. In 1997 national examinations (NE) were started before the curriculum had been enacted in full scale.

The introductory section of the 2002 NC introduced several types of competencies students were expected to possess after they had studied the subjects contained in the NC of 1996.

The curriculum documents of 2010/2011 have a new structure. Both levels of general education share the same objectives – eight competencies that are consistent with the European key competencies (Europe 2020). An attempt was made to organise subjects by what were termed fields of knowledge, and some new subjects were introduced. The new approach mandated specific physical learning environments for learning particular subjects. The common optional subjects specified for compulsory schools and gymnasias are religious studies, informatics, and career and entrepreneurship education; for gymnasias there is also defence education. Religious studies and defence education must be taught as described in the NC. All upper secondary students are required to write a research

paper or perform a creative task, and a special subject – Foundations for Research Work – has been specified for that purpose.

The NC of 2010/2011 for gymnasias was amended in 2014 following changes to the NE. Instead of the previous opportunity to choose five NE from 14 different subjects, there are now three compulsory exams for all graduates, a research project, and an examination organised by the school. The most remarkable change was the increase in the number of lessons a school can allocate to optional studies. Of the 96 compulsory courses 63 must be taken from the NC; schools can develop 33 courses or use some of those specified in the NC. This increased diversity requires reconsideration of what constitutes academic achievement, and necessitates universities' reorganizing and rewriting their entrance exams, which entails additional resources in the form of time and money.

Research on the development of the content of learning for general comprehensive schools is scarce. There are two MA papers (Pöldvere 2003, Tomingas 2005) dedicated to the analysis of content for learning German and English. There are some doctoral dissertations related to the content of particular school subjects in the current NC: one on visual arts by Edna Vahter (2014), one on technology education by Mart Soobik (2015), one on history by Anu Raudsepp (about the Soviet period), and one forthcoming by Heikki Haljasorg (summary published in 2016). The monograph by Katrin Kalamees-Ruubel (2014) on the content of learning Estonian language and literature as the mother tongue deserves particular attention: the in-depth analysis of language policy documents and NC from 1917 to 2014 reveals an immense decrease in the number of lessons dedicated to learning these subjects. All the above mentioned and the doctoral dissertation by Imbi Henno analysing the learning and teaching of the sciences according to the PISA and TIMSS programs could also be useful for the development of new professional NCs and syllabi.

The context of practice

The context of practice – what actually happens at school – has been the subject of numerous opinion studies. These have been carried out by means of questionnaires that aim to determine how teachers compile curriculum documents at the school level and how satisfied they are with the NC guidelines for practical instruction.

The collected data revealed several problems, often insurmountable: the NC documents do not provide integrated content, and teachers can only develop work on a project basis, or attempt to take an integrative approach when organising the process of learning. Unfortunately, meaningful integration of the content of learning (usually at the level of theories, concepts and facts) is beyond the ability of most teachers and schools.

The most recent innovation in Estonia in 2016 is the development of a „new approach to learning” (www.hm.ee.en), which is described as “ *an approach to learning that supports each learner’s individual and social development, the acquisition of learning skills, creativity and entrepreneurship at all levels and in all types of education. (Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy, 2020)* ”

In fact it is referring to considerably wider use of new virtual learning environments (I-pads, smartphones, media for distance learning) and constructivist approach towards knowledge acquisition. However, the introduction of new technologies always requires intelligent and balanced usage.

What could be used for future developments of the content for learning at general comprehensive schools?

The following principles for the selection of the content of learning could be helpful for future curriculum development. According to Taba (1962) and Sowell (2005), the basic **principles for all subjects** are the following:

- *validity and significance of the content for the intended purpose of education;*
- *learnability of the content by students for whom the curriculum is planned;*
- *appropriateness of the content for the needs and interests of these learners,*
- *consistency of the content with the realities of society and culture.*

As one can see, **the general principles for the selection of the content of learning** are mostly based on the culture, society and learner. However, there are also **principles for selecting the content for particular subjects**. Sowell has developed criteria for selecting the content for math (Sowell, 2005), Kalamees-Ruubel for Estonian and literature (2014), and Kokkidou (2009) has developed a model for analysing the content of music education, which could also be used to design a curriculum for music education. A systematic approach using models such as IDEA and SCOPE could also be employed (Laanemets, 2003).

Hilda Taba wrote in her seminal book “Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice” (1962, 42): *Knowledge and learning need to be selected and organised that they will provide a young adult with a sense of unity, of meaningful relationship between himself and his world.* She also made a shrewd remark on cultural differences that give rise to particular educational needs and requirements: *Not all cultures require the same kinds of knowledge, nor does the same culture need the same kinds of capacities and skills, intellectual or otherwise, at all times (ibid, 10).*

Accordingly, modern technological and non-technological cultures require different learning content despite globalisation. Societies with compulsory primary education alone would not include a course on world literature in their

curriculum, but they have to provide their learners with the knowledge, skills and values that allow them to manage in their particular natural, cultural, social and political environments. Here is another prescient quote from Hilda Taba in 1962 that bears reflection today:

If education is to be a countervailing power in a technological culture, it needs to cultivate a conscious commitment to democratic values and a sense of personal and collective goals that lends new meaning to individual effort and achievement. Education must help people think collectively about social ends, since we no longer can count on collective goals emerging from an “accidental coincidences of individual goals”. (Taba, 1962:45)

Conclusion

Discussions about the content, scope and social impact of curricula in the 21st century are the topic of the World Yearbook of Education 2011 “Curriculum in Today’s World: Configuring Knowledge, Identities, Work and Politics”. The acquisition of different “literacies” or competencies (in addition to the traditional three Rs) such as cultural literacy and computer or digital competency is essential to individual socialization. Although everyone treads his or her own path to socialization, basic competencies are acquired by learning experiences mainly provided by national educational systems that impart the knowledge and skills selected according to the society’s generally recognised values and ideologies. Changing circumstances require new common knowledge despite the diversity of ethnic, cultural, and other types of groups within all societies today. Experience gained in Estonia over 25 years has shown that an approach to the development of curricula for general comprehensive schools that underestimates historical experience, educational theories and school practice may lead to results counterproductive to democracy. This can and must be avoided.

References

- Crawford, K. (2000). The political Construction of the ‘Whole Curriculum’. In: *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 26, No.5, 615-630.
- Estonian lifelong learning strategy - 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.hm.ee/en/estonian-lifelong-learning-strategy-2020>.
- Europe 2020. *A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth*. (2010). European Commission, Brussels.
- Haljasorg, H; Läänemets, U. (2016). History as a school subject in national curricula for Estonian general comprehensive schools in 1874-2015. In: *Society, Integration, Education*. (77–85). Rēzeknes Tehnoloģiju akadēmija: Rēzeknes Tehnoloģiju Akadēmija.
- Henno, I. (2015). *Loodusteaduste õppimisest ja õpetamisest Eesti koolides rahvusvaheliste võrdlusuuringute taustal*. (About learning and teaching sciences in Estonian schools in

- the background of international comparative research). (Doctoral thesis in Estonian). Tallinn University.
- Kalamees - Ruubel, K. (2014). *Eesti keele ja kirjandusõpetuse roll eesti õppekeelega üldhariduskooli õppekavas 1917-2014. Ajaloolis-analüütiline käsitus*. (The Role of Estonian and literature in the curricula for general comprehensive schools with instruction in Estonian in 1917-2014. Historical-analytical approach). (Doctoral thesis in Estonian). Tallinn University.
- Kokkidou, M. (2009). *European Music Curricula: Philosophical Orientations, Trends and Comparative Validation*. Thessaloniki, G.S.M.E.
- Laanemets, U. (2003). *Learning for the Future in Estonia: Content Revisited and Reconceptualised. International handbook of Curriculum Research*. (Ed. by W. Pinar). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Mahwah, New Jersey, London, 285-299.
- Läänemets, U. (1995). *Development of the content of education and curricula in Estonia (in Estonian)*. Tallinn: Jaan Tonisson Institute.
- National Curricula (in English). Retrieved from <https://www.hm.ee/en/national-curricula>
- Põldvere, M. (2003). *Saksa keele õppe eesmärgiseade ja sisu areng Eesti üldhariduskoolides 1919-2002*. (Development of the aims and the content of learning German at Estonian general comprehensive schools 1919-2002, in Estonian). Tallinn: Avita
- Raudsepp, A. (2005). *Ajaloo õpetamise korraldus Eesti NSV eesti õppekeelega üldhariduskoolides 1944-1985*. (Organisation of history teaching at Estonian general comprehensive schools in 1944-1985). (Doctoral thesis in Estonian) Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus
- Sepp, A. (2014). *From music syllabi to teachers' pedagogical thinking: a comparative study of Estonian and Finnish basic school music education*. (Doctoral thesis). Helsinki University.
- Soobik, M. (2015). *Innovative trends in technology education. Teachers' and students' assessments of technology education in Estonian basic schools*. (Doctoral thesis). Tallinn University.
- Sowell, E. J. (2005). *Curriculum. An Integrative Introduction*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, Columbus, Ohio: Pearson Merrill/ Prentice Hall.
- Taba, H. (1962). *Curriculum development*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Tomingas, M. (2009). *Saksa keele õppe eesmärgiseade ja sisu areng Eesti üldhariduskoolides 1919-2002*. (Development of the aims and the content of learning English at Estonian general comprehensive schools 1919-2002, in Estonian). Tallinn Pedagogical University.
- World Yearbook of Education 2011. (2011). *Curriculum in Today's World: Configuring Knowledge, Identities, Work and Politics*. (Ed by L. Yates and M. Grumet). New York & London: Routledge.