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**Citizenship education in the 'new' and the 'old' Europe: a plea for a rationalist epistemology**

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**Introduction**

Citizenship (or *civic*) education is essentially society-bound. According to Galston (1998, p 471), it is defined as education within, and on behalf of, a particular political order. Thus, all levels of citizenship education, from the consideration of its necessity to the detailed demarcation of expected outcomes, have social bounds. It is therefore sometimes tempting to conclude that there is nothing left for arguments other than socio-historical.

However, socio-historical arguments alone are not sufficient to cope with the overloaded and contradictory theoretical base of educational decisions. Gage (1994) contends that the ignorance of the educational sciences towards philosophy and epistemology has largely led to the decline of a commonly assured status for education as a discipline. The need for a different kind of legitimatised base is particularly urgent in the former socialist Eastern European countries, for the proliferation of divergent theoretical concepts here is perhaps more discernible than in any other part of Western cultural space. Historically influenced by German culture, and recently released from Soviet power, most of these countries are now undergoing an increasing impact from the English-speaking Anglo-American cultural space. All these different – and also inwardly divergent - origins are used freely for legitimating educational concepts. The adoption of contradictory Western concepts has led us close to a new parochialism, with different disciplinary communities pretending to share the same practical field, each based on a doctrine with some particular national or cultural origin, but mutually ignorant. Consequently, rational discussion on the boundaries of scientific communities is hindered. This is true not only in Eastern European countries, but also in advanced Western democracies. Previously I have discussed the mutual neglect of the concepts of social pedagogy and social work (Mikser, 2004). Another and perhaps most prominent example of this is the relationship between the concepts of didactics and educational psychology (Kansanen, 2002).

In this paper I focus on the variety within the terms linked to citizenship education, the endeavours of some to form a theoretical conceptual identity and the possible consequences for the theoretical base of citizenship education in Estonia and other Eastern European countries. I argue that stronger epistemological consideration is an inescapable pragmatic task if we are to avoid the infinite accumulation of rival concepts. I propose to apply the principles of critical rationalism initiated by Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos. While postmodernists, Kuhnians and most representatives of an interpretative paradigm do not favour any attempt at objective logic, critical rationalists regard this as a principal, though not an easily attainable, ideal.

**Legitimating diverse educational concepts in Estonia**

In each sphere, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s involved emulation of different extremes. Education was not an exception (Roberts, 2001). The initial enthusiasm for kinds of alternative pedagogies, characteristic in Estonia during that period, has now declined, but there remains much admiration for relatively newly-emerged theoretical concepts which often lack clearly assured status and systematic relation to general education. Most of their legitimatising basis is constructed of urgent practical challenges they pretend to answer. Consider the problem of juvenile drug usage, which has been handled within the framework of general education, as well as, for example, social pedagogy, school social work or other theoretical frameworks drawn from education or a neighbouring discipline. Virtually no institution could engage practitioners in the field: each randomly copied the functions of the others: this is why it is pragmatically necessary to examine these concepts rationally – and perhaps limit their use to specific applications.

Certainly there should be a place for theoretical alternatives. However, these cannot be legitimated without considering the other disciplines and paradigms in the field, and without considering the way their theoretical framework has been constructed. This is characterised by Thomas Kuhn:

> For reasons that are both obvious and highly functional, science textbooks … refer only to that part of the work of past scientists that can easily be viewed as contributions to the statement and solution of the text's paradigm problems. Partly by selection and partly by distortion, the scientists of earlier ages are implicitly represented as having worked upon the same set of fixed problems and in accordance with the same set of fixed canons that the most recent revolution in scientific theory and method has made seem scientific' (Kuhn, 1970, p 138).

In the light of Kuhn's notion, it is remarkable that educational concepts sometimes apply to eminent theorists who have never worked within the particular concept. This is not to claim that because they have never used the term 'social pedagogy', theorists like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Fröbel and Kerschensteiner therefore cannot be regarded as part of the history of social pedagogy. Yet without cross-paradigmatic rational debate any rival, even opposite, concept may build its identity on them, if only the suitable part of the heritage from these theorists is used.

Even taking Kuhn's notion for granted, there is usually more than one paradigm, or conceptual framework, available. Of Estonian authors, Kreitzberg (1993) gives perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the legitimation of educational concepts and offers possible selection principles. Though Kreitzberg sees no essential differences between the basic educational problems in Estonia and those in advanced Western countries, he regards Estonia as an inheritor of the Soviet tradition - mainly a stick-on positivistic paradigm with pre-fixed, expert-based educational aims, devised to give automatic solutions to practical problems (Kreitzberg, 1993, p 228). Kreitzberg holds that there is

still the belief in Estonia that we can substitute the former aims, set centrally, with another kind of pre-fixed aims which is automatically more 'correct'. Together with Grauberg, Kreitzberg explicitly contrasts foundationalist, expert-based *scientific legitimation* of education, with *democratic legitimation* based on negotiation between all sides in the educational process (Kreitzberg/ Grauberg, 1995, p 49 – 50).

> None of the paradigmatic notions about knowledge, man and his development, and society leaves any considerable place for democratic negotiations and will-formation. Thus, I would conclude that we follow two contradictory intensions – that of democratisation of education and scientific legitimation of scientific decisions (Kreitzberg/ Grauberg, 1995, p 50).

Kreitzberg repeatedly stresses rehabilitation of hermeneutical, critical, and constructivist paradigms as essential for the democratisation of the educational process at every level (Kreitzberg, 1993, p 229; 1999, p 159).

While many of Kreitzberg's arguments remain vital, the somewhat simplified dual distinction of the positivist and interpretative paradigm, with his explicit sympathy toward the latter, leaves us with no strategy to cope with the accumulation of rival theories. Whether we adhere to the positivist paradigm with its presumably theory-neutral empirical evidence for corroboration of a theory, or whether we turn to the interpretative paradigm with its belief in paradigm incommensurability, proliferation would still be unchecked. If we return to the previous example of juvenile drug usage, a qualified researcher with proper tools could find it equally possible to *verify* the effectiveness of social-pedagogical, or school social work, or any other intervention. It would also be possible to justify covering the same field from within the framework of citizenship education, civic education, social education etc. However, for pragmatic reasons we cannot accept all these concepts. Nor can democratic negotiation via Dewey – of whom Kreitzberg is rather fond – offer any better solution than surrender to the will of the largest community. To disregard the need of some qualified expertise is too extreme a position. Democratic negotiation may well be conjoined with scientific legitimation, at least if the term scientific is not taken in the narrow sense of scientism. In conditions of newly achieved democracy, this is however not a very fashionable standpoint.

## Diversity of the concept of citizenship education

The citizenship education conceptions of the Eastern European states are marked by notions such as democracy, multiculturalism, tolerance, critical thinking etc. In general these notions also run through the curriculum of Estonian citizenship education. Oddly enough, many of the same terms were also manipulated by the former Soviet regime as distinctive features of communist doctrine. Good analyses have been made of current controversial concepts of democratic citizenship and its educational implications within western democracies. Differing from the former Soviet concept of democracy and citizenship, these controversial concepts are now often very attractive to the new Eastern European democracies as well as in long-established Western democracies.

Variety within the terminology linked with citizenship education is widely recognized (Krull, 2001, p 230). Yet there are also notable claims of citizenship education and other relevant concepts to a theoretical conceptual identity. The following examples from recent CiCe publications will not be discussed exhaustively, but they illustrate the need for a critical rational assessment of rival paradigms.

Take the fashionable notion of 'citizenship education' set against the somehow older term 'civic education'. Fumat (1999) uncovers the evolution of the concept 'civic education' and its transformation into 'citizenship education' in France during the 1990s. Fumat (*ibid*, p 109–110) regards the change in terminology as a significant indicator of practical and theoretical changes in setting the aims and methods of citizenship (civic) education. Lastrucci (2003, p 355) explicitly detaches the concept of 'Education for Citizenship' from that of civic education, suggesting civic education is more traditional, formal and subject-centred than Education for Citizenship. While Fumat restricts her consideration solely to France, Lastrucci refers to the whole European Union context.

Not all authors, however, concede this sharp distinction between the two concepts. For a number of Eastern European authors, the main issues of 'citizenship education' *vide* Fumat or Lastrucci (to stick to the previous examples) are discussed within the framework of 'civic education' (Gocsal, 1999; Pecek, 2000; Masek/ Tykalova, 2000). Valdmaa (1999, p 97) also explicitly equates civic education with citizenship education. Were this merely a linguistic problem, consensus would not be so earnestly sought . In the Estonian language, for example, the distinction between the two terms is not even directly translatable. Complications arise, however, when both concepts are applied to some theoretical entity and ends are left open for the selection of legitimatising arguments. Two principle questions can be asked of these two vague concepts, both clearly crucial in the field

1. *should* we prefer one of these concepts to another or can we accept both of them?
2. is there any rational or objective base to prefer one of them?

For reasons previously mentioned, seeking for some selection principles is a thoroughly practical task: this is the answer to the first question. The answer to the second question would be as follows: the argument that in some other social or cultural context, preference has been given – or has not been given – to one or another of these concepts is a mistake too often already made in the history of Estonian education. Seeking for a strategy to analyse the advantages and disadvantages of these concepts is where critical rationalism comes into play.

**Applied critical rationalism**

From the mid-20th century onwards, the belief in theory-neutral inquiry has been generally rejected, at least in theory. By and large, two main anti-positivist schools were sketched out with the publication of Karl Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1957) and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). What Kuhn

and Popper have common is a belief that scientific identity cannot be drawn directly and exclusively by induction from empirical investigation of practice. Urgent practical needs alone, however decisive in determining the direction of further activity, can never form the identity of a scientific discipline.

Disregarding the other complexities of the Popper-Kuhn debate in the 1960s and 1970s, the central issue for common purposes is the commensurability of paradigms - historical fact as well as normative ideal - which Popper defends and Kuhn rejects. Popper suggests that frameworks of different scientific concepts can and should be rationally evaluated over the boundaries of language and cultural context (Popper, 1987, p 50–51). For Kuhn (1970, pp 94, 103), ways of evaluating competing paradigms cannot be logically objective, as each paradigm uses its own evaluation criteria. Another relevant issue is the community-based essence of science. Kuhn (1970, p 36) regards science based on a community of practitioners with shared beliefs and common criteria for achievement to be the solution of the scientific problem. Popper (1970, p 56) rejects the thesis that for successful scientific discussion participants need to share a common set of assumptions. It is important to remember that Popper and Kuhn disagree on what disciplines should be regarded as basic for determining the scientific knowledge and selection criteria between competing theories. While Kuhn (1970a, p 21) relies firstly upon psychology and sociology, Popper (1970, p 57–58) strongly rejects psychology, sociology and history for these purposes, on the grounds that they are apt to relativism, fashion and uncontrolled dogmas. In their place Popper proposes logic. For him (1987, p 43) the method of science consists of criticising a received explanation and then proceeding to a new imaginative story, which is in turn submitted to criticism. As Popper notes, this principle cannot lead to rapid success.

Prolonged rational consideration of a series of successive research programmes is the main point of Popper's follower Lakatos (1970). We can in principle always assess the extent and accuracy with which rival concepts are able to cover the field and explain the phenomena, although it would not be reasonable to overthrow any theory too precipitately.

**Conclusion**

It is obvious that the much-discussed Popper-Kuhn debate has clear relevance to the current position of the conception of citizenship education, particularly for Eastern European countries, where long-established tradition in the field is lacking. Much of the educational practice in these countries – and there is good evidence that this also applies in many Western European and Nordic countries – is implicitly based on theories legitimated in the Kuhnian manner: the existence of a scientific community with an unquestioned belief in the accuracy of the concept is all that matters. For citizenship education as a scientific concept, this means that to avoid a split between mutually ignorant or un-cooperative scientific communities, a balanced engagement of all the relevant disciplines, scientific conceptions and theories on the philosophy of science is essential. This is true for inner collaboration as well as for assuring the status of the discipline among the range of other subjects. Currently, more engagement of critical rationalist epistemology is needed.

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