

Social Policy and Science Twisting with Early Childhood Education System

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Abstract

Finnish early childhood education (ECE) is commonly known to be high-quality being also interested by other countries. However, while looking at the whole phenomenon through analytical studies by insiders the problems are revealing. The central concept of early childhood education, studied through the corresponding Finnish concept of “varhaiskasvatus”, is earlier analysed in a series of several studies by the author. This is done from a large Finnish and international textual data by content and concept analyses. Many analytical simulation models, found to be systems like, were found about the concept of early childhood education. It was also revealed that institutional early childhood education should be named pedagogics. The study on hand makes a qualitative conceptual and textual survey on the basis of some of the mentioned studies, selected ones seen in the references. In connection to it, impacts between the power of science and the power of societal policies will be discussed. The conclusion will point how political impacts are strong in swimming even to every corner of the whole pedagogical systems. Professionals in early childhood education ought to know deeply new scientific theories in order to stick up for their rights when in front of them are social and political disagreements.

Keywords: early childhood education, social policy, pedagogical systems theory, qualitative research, content analysis, concept analysis

1. Introduction

Theories are meaningful tools to teach teachers for educating children at an early age. Largely question is about the meaning of science. Science adds knowledge and understanding that professional persons need in working with children and parents as it is usually told. Not so often it is told about interrelations with societal quarters. However, acts, curricula, basics, upper principles and many decisions are planned and written earlier higher up. This kind of societal thought-life has its power to make decisions though it is political material, not scientific. However, it is commonly told, even written, that education must be based on science. Science could have its power if they both are known and understood. But where else social policies can be found from? All of it is not there higher up, away from eyes and ears.

2. Methodology and methods

In this case, methods are told already before the theoretical part. Arguments for it can be provided. By the way, this kind of organisation is a normal and needed way, for instance in special theoretical research (for instance Härkönen, 2003 a). In the study in hand consists of the pedagogical theory, created by the author (see some of Härkönen’s publications in the referee list) and texts and knowledge about social policies found from the documents, books and scientific articles. The pedagogical systems theory forms a theoretical reference. The theory is methodologically basing to objective hermeneutics, where interpretation of language and the idea of real practice are combined through meanings of language (Karjalainen, & Siljander, 1993; Öevermann, Allert, Konau, & Krambeck, 1983). Text analyses and concept analyses have been often used as methods while developing

pedagogical systems theory of my project. The same kind of text analyses are needed also in this study. The extra aim and the focus of this study is to serve by testing the pedagogical new theory and at the same open the real ECT practice from the political views. (Niiniluoto, 2002).

3. Theoretical main text

3.1 About the quality of Finnish early childhood education

In this chapter the attention is especially in scientific, historical and socio-political phenomena of the Finnish early childhood education (ECE), which celebrated its 130th anniversary in the year 2018, namely the first kindergarten was founded 1888. In addition, the years 2017 was the 125th anniversary of kindergarten teacher education which had begun in 1892. (Härkönen, 2021.)

In Finland, the new act, the early childhood education and care Act, came into force on 1 September 2018. It speaks by the new concept of early childhood education and care, no more about day care. The newest curriculum is the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care (2018). It is issued by the Finnish National Agency for Education.

In the mentioned documents goal orientation, systematic planning, the holistic character of education, teaching and care, including the highlighted *pedagogics*, are now seen as important principles in Finnish ECE. Pedagogies such as Froebel, Montessori, Steiner and Malaguzzi (Reggio inspired practice), and others like Freinet and Freire have been accepted in Finland. (Härkönen, 2003 b; 2021.)

Kalliala (2009) has written that a lack of pedagogical competence is the greatest problem in Finnish ECE. Kalliala (2012) raises concerns over pedagogical change which is eroding in Finnish day care centres. She says that pedagogical practices are thrown away and this is justified only on the basis of non-analytical and shaky argumentation. In spite of this real problem some pedagogical ideas have received honour also during the late decades (see Hakkarainen (1990), Helenius (2008), Hännikäinen (1995), Härkönen (1993) and Kalliala (2012).

After a period of losing pedagogy, the new question is aroused today: what does pedagogy mean? The question is justified but indefinite. The current unknown situation in Finland is excellent for neo-liberalistic free market, competitive actions, and for so-called political and dominant discourse. (Hilpelä, 2007.)

It is often written in Finland that ECE must be based on scientific research, acknowledged also by the Trade Union of Education... (2017). Science can add both pedagogical awareness and understanding and at the same time social and political conscience. *Science* and *research* could have the power to develop ECE and *pedagogics* to a new level.

3.2 Societal and political influences in Finnish early childhood education

Though the history of ECE research and science is not long in Finland it has strong international roots which have offered a wide societal, cultural, historical basis for early pedagogics in Finland.

It is usually stressed that Finnish pedagogy has come from Germany because Friedrich Froebel's pedagogy is the basis even for our today's pedagogy. It is so, but our historical, socio-cultural and also political influences have come from many countries, most of them in Europe, but also from Russia, North America, South America, nowadays also from Australia and from New Zealand, as seen as follows:

German Friedrich Froebel (1782—1852), Austrian Rudolf Steiner (1861—1925), American John Dewey (1859—1952), Italian Maria Montessori (1870—1952), French Célestin Freinet (1896—1966), American Helen Parkhurst (1887—1973), Russian Vasili Suchomlinsky (1918—1970), Englishman Aleksander Sutherland Neill (1883—1973), Italian Loris Malaguzzi (1920—1994), and Brazilian Paulo Freire (1921—1997).

Finland has followed Swedish pedagogical theories like Dialogpedagogik (Schyl-Bjurman & Strömberg-Lind, 1976) and Ansvarspedagogik (Bladsjö et al, 1984), and also political and other movements. During the 1970th also Soviet Union pedagogy became familiar for us (e.g. Suchomlinsky, 2016). During the last twenty years, Finnish professionals have had contacts and projects with colleagues in Baltic countries (e.g. Peterson et al., 2016). Te Whāriki pedagogy from New Zealand has become known in Finland (see Giardiello, Häikiö Karlsson, Härkönen & McLeod (2019).

Finland is a small country and is politically situated so-called between east and west. Common political emphasizes are felt, but in the documents of ECE, political texts are very short. The main aims and principles are

gathered to the concepts of democratic society, multi-cultural society, and tolerance (see National core curriculum for early childhood education and care 2018; Early childhood education and care Act, 2015/540 (2018)).

3.3 Scientific power in Finnish early childhood education

One example of a new scientific-pedagogical tool in addressing the deficiencies in the current Finnish pedagogical climate is the pedagogical systems theory by Härkönen (e.g. 2009; 2011; 2013). It is a theoretical systems analysis that connects through a historical pedagogical perspective to the complexity of ontological, epistemological and social principles and supports also what Pulkkinen (2012) says in relation to developing action models to involve the public, politicians, and media both nationally and internationally.

Härkönen (e.g. 1993; 2006a; 2006b) has found the very central categories and their contents which each pedagogue has thought during developing their own views on ECE. Because the same categories were found from pedagogues, it reinforces that the founded categories of the theorists must be a central part of pedagogical thinking. On the basis of found results, Härkönen (2006a; 2006b; 2008; 2009; 2011; 2013) has created a new pedagogical systems theory meant for modern democratic and pluralistic societies. Systemic means that for instance, any selected view on the world (Härkönen, 2021; Luttinen & Härkönen, 2018) influences on all the other categories and their contents. Also, every category has systemic influences all other categories. Because the theory is multilayer, divergent, systemic, complex, its linguistic- and thinking-based character is able to offer a deeper awareness and also political understanding of ECE. (Evans, 2018; Giardiello, 2018.)

In Finland, it is not usual to discuss openly political issues in the ECE field. Though we have multiple-party system and we have different religions in the country these issues are kept as individual or family-centred opinions (see Pulkkinen, 2012). However, historical famous pedagogues have always taken these issues clearly to belong inside their theories. And the main thought of them is that namely the values inside world views, views on society, views on human beings, and views on knowledge form the strongest influence – just political, ethical and religious influences – on all other parts and decisions of ECE. (Härkönen, 2013; Virkki, 2015; Kettukangas, 2017.)

According to Härkönen's theory (2003 b; 2008; Kettukangas, 2017; Kouvo-Suutari, 2016) laws, curricula, and many political, economic, and religious documents comes from a societal area. They all have very strong and deep power to influence in all the other areas of ECE. I see that ECE science must be created as a strong independent science. It must be taken into account as a more determining factor than it is happening. As to what I told about the importance of science, also Pulkkinen (2012) sees that “--- an important issue to be discussed in Finland and elsewhere is how to connect the science of child development to public policy in order to promote supportive, nurturing, and child-friendly communities.”

3.4 Children between science and social policies

Now politics and funding are dominating market positions. They have a strong influence on all the other extensions of ECE. According to Pulkkinen (2012, 328): “Unfortunately, the trend toward calculating the short-term cost-effectiveness of education has spread into Finland. This has resulted in large schools and cuts in schools' resources. Such policy changes take place irrespective of research results about their effects on children.” In ECE, by the amendments to early childhood education and care legislation 8.5.2015/580 in 2016, it was meant to get financial savings but not at the expense of the quality of ECE or the benefits of children. However, according to the research by Puroila and Kinnunen (2017), the legislation has in several ways affected a deteriorating quality of ECE.

In this kind of society, we nowadays have, it is common to wait for more and more results from children, teachers, and citizens by a smaller amount of money. It ought to be the trade that pays. Test-basing standardization has come also to the Finnish ECE area and to schools. Pulkkinen (2012) says: “In Finland, we try to stand up for our educational philosophy and resist pressure for standardization and test-based accountability.”

Due to the school readiness, there is a pressure for children to begin formal schooling at six rather than seven years of age, and preschool at the age of five (Fourth part of 5-years to the free early..., 2018). These plans are twisted together. In Finland, many professionals and educators have not warmed to these pressures. In Pulkkinen's (2012) article *Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood* she writes: “In Finland, children start their nine-year basic schooling in the fall of the year when they turn 7. This is the highest school starting in the OECD countries.

From the point of brain development, age 7 is the proper age to start teacher-directed learning.” Pulkkinen sees this thing as the first pillar for a good childhood in Finland.

4. Future implications for social policy and pedagogical science

ECE and alike early pedagogics are challenged also by deep global and national aims. In Finland as in other western countries democracy consists of the rule of the people. In the Constitution of Finland, 731/1999, (2000) there are written the rights children have. Among others, they have the right to participate and influence in things that impact them. (Virkki, 2015.)

ECE and preschool are laying foundations for educational processes, a participatory democratic society and for sustainable development. In educating the teachers for small children, the theories of education have an immense impact on how the educators see the phenomenon of education and its connections to society, democracy, pluralism, and the broader issues of sustainability (Bae, 2009; Härkönen, 2006b).

In a democratic society like in Finland pluralistic (Flathman, 2005) and diverse views on educational theories and practice exist and are seen as acceptable and useful (Härkönen, 2003; 2006b). In a civilized society high-level education, scientific theories and basic research results are needed in order to create a good pedagogy. There are a lot of things that come from societal and cultural directions. A huge amount of information voice is heard in discussions in media, in news, in papers, and so on. From their mass, a dominant discourse can be distinguished. Issues may prove to be political, economic, religious, and also lies. The dominant discourse (Moss, 2018; 2019) begins usually follow the thoughts in the position of power. Some thoughts, at least in changing times, may cause conflicts and stress for educators. At the same time, the aims and challenging expectations are directed to educators who work near children in practice.

Pedagogical systems theory (Härkönen, 2008; 2009; 2011; 2013) and systems thinking (Georgiou, 2007) will offer help students and educators on organising views on world, human being and a child, society, knowledge and on the whole complex pedagogical systems. It will be useful to learn to make differences between them, between the contents of them, and between researched views and dominant discourse. So political, ethical and sustainable principles are possible to select, understand and adopt for defending humanistic principles and scientific reasons. (Härkönen, 2006b; 2009; 2013.) Freire's (2000) ideas are significant for today as well because it is important to focus on social justice and participating democracy as well as on a critical approach to ECE. Critical pedagogy is ruled by ethical ideals, such as justice, freedom, emancipation, pluralism, democracy and non-violence.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Here it is concentrated on the meaning of pedagogics as a science, theories and clear concepts. The role of social contexts has gotten a great part of the results.

In my mind, social policy and its atmosphere prevent the results of ECE and pedagogical science come true to advance the development of children. Social policy and traditional thoughts form obstructions.

As to the mentioned situation, the gap has been structured between ECE practice and already reached high-level possibilities in ECE. In my mind, the enormous amounts of resources are to be pinned and already invested scientific human capital is wasted.

However, optimistic expectations for future teachers are analysed here with the hope that young person's could own deep cognitive and emotional will to learn to make a difference between participating democratic values and oppressing dominant discourse (Moss, 2018; 2019). It requires them to understand that also pedagogics for small children is a political issue. New pedagogical systems theory can open a large and deep understanding of ECE and social policy.

Validity and ethics. Ethical rules are taken into account through the study. The topic of the study has been critical and comparing survey, but the focus has been always to find real points with the truth, justice and honesty. Though the focus of the study has been large and constructed, commonly said, from three big issues: social power and science power and early childhood education. However, it has meant to constantly keep clear, in which place and in which way the twisting reality and story of the study is proceeding. In that way, validity and reliability have been in mind during the whole process. It is reasonable to mention that the author has studied and created her pedagogical systems theory for a long time. The theory is different from the former ones. This kind of article has had a task also to act as a critical tester for the theory. So, the small study in the article and the large new

pedagogical systems theory and language in texts critically control each other during the whole process. Reliability and validity, in their basic character, are essential also in qualitative research.

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