

Perceptions of the changes in the Finnish art education curriculum

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In this article, I discuss the need for curriculum changes in Finnish art education and how the new national curriculum for visual art education has tried to respond to contemporary artistic, social, cultural, and educational conditions. I describe the major changes in the Finnish National Core curriculum for art education in the future, and contemplate the possibilities of the boundary breaking phenomenon-based learning for the long-term plans in the future and beyond. The need for a shift in art education evolves from social changes and reflects contemporary art and cultural practices. I describe how the change from a mono-cultural society to a relatively multicultural society has been slower in Finland than in many other European countries, and how celebrated notions of Nordic democracy and equality are not as untainted by colonial legacies as is often assumed. I continue to discuss how increasing cultural diversity requires action from art educators.

Kulcsszavak: art and design education, curriculum design, phenomenon-based learning

The new curriculum for the visual arts

As this article was being written, the new national core curriculum for comprehensive schools and pre-schools in Finland for 2016 was being revised.¹ For a small country like Finland, the national curriculum is an important political text that describes the current notion of what is understood as important in teaching. Simultaneously, it is an important tool for teachers. As a text, the national curriculum is a framework to help with planning teaching, rather than any kind of given standard for teachers to follow strictly. Revision of the entire comprehensive school curriculum is carried out approximately every ten years.² Generally, art teachers value the curriculum and are interested in its contents and goals. This perspective on a national curriculum is somewhat different from the voices and critics that national level curricula or standards attract in some other countries. The positive attitude in Finland toward the national curriculum does not mean that it never receives criticism from the field. Quite the contrary, especially this time, when major revisions are included. This criticism is needed and most often offers important insights and possibilities for development. At the same time, some of the criticism shows resistance to ideas that try to change patterns of educational behaviour which have not been revised for decades, or perhaps ever. It is fair to say that this most recent art educational curriculum revision is the most radical compared to any other curriculum revisions in the visual arts before. Ultimately, these demands for the change reflect art educational changes at large, which in turn echo changes in Finnish society.

The revisions are targeted on several areas in the curriculum. While a quick critical interpretation of the revisions might seem to have to do with the new discourse that refuses to define specific lists for art materials or recommendations for the media used, the most important changes concern more diversified understandings of art and culture. In the new curriculum, it is possible to see the shift from modernism toward contemporary under-

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1. http://www.oph.fi/download/163777_perusopetuksen_opetussuunnitelman_perusteet_2014.pdf

2. The first national curriculum for comprehensive schools was written in 1970, when comprehensive schooling was first established in Finland. The curriculum has been revised in 1985, 1993 and 2004.

standing in arts, as well as to recognize a shift from *discipline-based art education*³ toward *visual culture education*, and even beyond. The need for national curriculum change in the visual arts stems mostly from Finnish cultural and societal changes. In this introductory section I will first briefly introduce the main reasons and needs, and their background, for the changes in the new curriculum. This is seen from my perspective as a member of the board for the visual arts curriculum for comprehensive schools and pre-schools 2016, constituted by the Finnish National Board of Education. On this board I represented Aalto University's art teacher education program. One of the main reasons behind the change, as I see it, is the inadequacy of discipline-based and other more traditional approaches to teaching art in contemporary Finnish culture. While all of these reasons for changes in the curriculum are inter-connected, in this article I will concentrate on the first need for change and discuss in depth where the needs for the change come from and what could be the possible consequences for art education.

First, the changes concern rapid societal change: Finland has been generally understood as being a monocultural society until the late twentieth century. Recognition, for example, of ethnic cultural diversity in education and policy has been relatively slow, compared to many other Western societies. While there has been academic discussion on the more critical viewpoints on Finland as a changing society among cultural researchers (Haikkola, Leander, Tanner & Pyrhönen, 2014; Keskinen, Tuori, Irni & Mulinari, 2009; Saukkonen, 2013) the need for changes in education has still been a dormant topic.

Second, the new curriculum has a strong need to recognize students' own visual sub-cultures. From the perspective of cultural diversity, each person belongs to several different sub-cultures, based on, for example, social status, age, ethnicity, sex, gender, place of living, language, and ability. In addition to these, other important cultural factors add on to the sub-cultures. These include, for example, areas of interests or commitments to communities that share a hobby such as art and music. Some people have a feeling of belonging to a culture that they share through a global network rather than to a local community. Local communities are perhaps easier to recognize and therefore more emphasized than more invisible engagements, such as virtual communities. From the perspective of cultural diversity, it makes no difference whether students identify themselves with local or virtual groups. In practice, many art teachers work with students to support their interests and involvement with local and global visual phenomena and networks, such as Manga, Cosplay, street arts, or, for example, different areas of digital gaming. It is also time for the national curriculum to offer space and possibilities to teach with a recognition of students' different and diversified visual cultures and visual engagements.⁴

Third, the need for a radical change in the national core curriculum also comes from the perspectives of contemporary art, and thus the contemporary times and contemporary culture and society. Contemporary art deals with rich content and layers, exploring social, political and cultural issues, among other topics, using methods and strategies, and choosing materials, differently and from different reasons than art teaching in schools has traditionally often done. In an issue-based approach to art education, similarly to contemporary artists, students are guided to inquire and explore their topic from different perspectives, learn from the topic, and collect visual

3. While the four disciplines (art history, art criticism, aesthetics and art making) were not as explicitly demonstrated in Finland as they were in the U.S., their influence on the previous curricula has been clear.

4. This idea of students' possible interests in different areas of visual culture should not be understood as pre-determined. Many students might be interested in working with traditional artistic media, such as painting or drawing, as much as being involved with digital tools, and, most importantly, not all school students are interested in any area of visual culture. However, taking part in visual culture and hyper-realities just by being a member of a culture that is overly visual brings with it involvements with visuals on different levels. While this might mean a passion for painting for one, for another it might be about watching movies, TV, using the Internet, seeing advertisements, comics, toys, fashion, or just entering and using virtual and physical spaces.

material. The notion of inquiry, or even *research* in this context, should not be confused with artistic and arts-based research methodologies practiced in universities, but more to the practice of curiosity, similarly to the way in which children explore their surroundings through their senses and varied knowledge. Contemporary artists often use strategies and tactics such as re-conceptualization, juxtaposition, and projection (Marshall, 2011). Learning to review, recognize and problematize these visual contemporary artists' strategies can be a key for students to review, re-conceptualize and problematize the entire visuality around them. Art education should try to clarify *how* contemporary art forms knowledge from the world. While there seems to be a big gap between how students learn in schools and how the strategies of contemporary art function, the methods of learning, the methods of getting knowledge about this world, could be similar to contemporary art practices. The idea of diversified languages, multi literature, as a base for knowledge – visual literature being one of them – allows the student to approach the world and construct knowledge from it, hopefully, differently than before.

The new national core curriculum emphasizes phenomena-based learning, multi-literacy, cultural diversity and ethical, aesthetic and ecological justice. In the visual art education curriculum, all these aims are quite welcomed and inherent in the language. The four main objectives of teaching are the same for each age group, but are given different sub-objectives for age groups 1–2nd grades, 3–6th grades and 7–9th grades: Perception and visual thinking; Visual representation, Interpretation of visual culture; and Aesthetic, ecological and ethical assessment. The main content areas of studies are grouped under three titles: Own visual cultures; Visual cultures of environments; and the Art worlds. The idea is that the classroom teachers and the visual art teachers will plan their local curriculum based on these objectives and content areas.

Changing society

While Finnish society has changed during the past twenty years from a mono-cultural society to a relatively multicultural society, the recognition of this change has been quite slow. The prevalent and homogeneous culture has been valued as being somewhat isolated from the rest of the world, but therefore less violent and troubled than some other cultures. Cultural notions are tied together with images of nostalgia and traditions. The narrations of sauna, forest, mushrooms, berries, snow, skiing, skating, and the white summer nights are learned as young children and repeated to every foreigner who is willing to listen. Even though they are told by different people, one might think the story is formed the same, word to word. Finnish cultural identity is based strongly on notions of nation and nationality. While this kind of identity building is somewhat understandable for a small and young country, unfortunately, the problems that this kind of thinking brings along with it are often bypassed.

Finland, just like other Nordic countries, is often described as an idealized nation "where welfare, democracy, and more recently economic competitiveness are seen to be highly developed" (Mulinari, Keskinen, Irni & Tuori, 2009, p. 1). The ideas of a democratic and equal society are so inherently valued that there has been little room for critical self-recognition on the 'national' and 'traditional' culture. Finland, like other Nordic countries, never went through a period of critique of colonialism, as did other European countries in the aftermath of the dismantling of the colonial empires. While the former colonial countries have had to formulate and rebuild their relationship to postcolonial politics, the Nordic countries have to represent themselves as outsiders in relation to colonial power relations. This is perhaps the reason why there is still a possibility to continue practicing non-critical politics. This 'pure' and 'innocent' bystander position has left room for the development of non-critical policies and practices. Although anti-racist movements and academic discussion on diversity have been part of

the Finnish and other Nordic societies since the 1970s, "these countries have managed to retain an image of themselves as untouched by colonial legacies" (Mulinari et al., 2009, p. 2).

One often gets to hear that there are no racial problems in Finland because people are all the same. I encounter this argument with art education students, who sometimes claim that there is not much cultural difference in Finland, and hence not that many problems either. This is, obviously, the stand of a middle class, white, prosperous, and able person with a rooted-Finn nationality, who is a member of the mainstream culture. From an art education perspective, it is important to pay attention to the fact that the majority of art teachers in schools and art education students in Finland seem to feel that they belong to the majority culture. Most students come from well-educated white middle class families, and many of them were skilled and gifted in several school subjects, especially art, during their comprehensive and upper secondary school years. While it is a common condition in the western world that teachers enjoyed going to school as children and had more positive than negative school experiences, it is important to problematize this enjoyment, ability and privileged condition, especially in art.

One of the problems arising in Finnish schools has been promoting national identity without recognizing students' diversified backgrounds. The current curriculum for visual arts, for example, includes learning from 'Finnish culture,' students' own cultures and foreign cultures. In-built in this concept is an idea of a solid Finnish culture, which is different from the other cultures. The Finnish comprehensive school has purposely tried to remain unaware of students' backgrounds. However, that is exactly the reason why schools have been unable to value all of the students equally. If the school cannot recognize differences and diversities, it tries to treat all the students as middle class, rooted-Finn, Finnish speaking, white, Lutheran, with a traditional Finnish identity. While the Finnish school system includes the entire population, schools are mainly designed for representatives of the mainstream culture. Schools hence give a misleading image of the societal values. Topics such as societal and economic inequality, poverty, ableism,⁵ violence, racism, and social exclusion are not often discussed in Finnish schools in depth. Difficult and topical social issues are discussed extremely cautiously or by-passed. However, in the classrooms there are children from families from all social classes with their different experiences (Tomperi & Piattoeva, 2005).

One example of this violent structure is a repudiation of racism that the 'rooted' Finns often have difficulty acknowledging. A few years ago there was a campaign to save Fazer's licorice candy wrappers because these wrappers were seen as a part of the *traditional* Finnish culture. Almost 14,000 people signed a petition to "save the licorice boy" in May 2007. As Leena-Maija Rossi (2009, pp. 189–190) clarifies, this "incident crystallized many problems in terms of Finnish notions, negotiations and struggles concerning multiculturalism, and of the Finnish nation's position within colonial and postcolonial processes." The represented imagery, an offensive caricature of a black face, belongs to the genre of imperial advertising and imperial kitsch, which was part of global mass-marketing, an imperialist system of signs, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, not by any means part of "the Finnish cultural tradition" and therefore worth protecting and saving. There is actually no tradition in Finnish history of representing black people. Arguing this is just an empty effort to keep on justifying homogeneous white Finnishness and promoting a racialized regime of representation by circulating offensive stereotypes of non-white people (Rossi, 2009).

Education plays a key role when discussing the significance of this kind of societal and cultural debate. Taking a critical educational stance on candy wrappers can make a difference in society. Interpreting representations

5. Ableism refers to an abled-bodied norm in society, which is akin to racism.

of visual culture is at the core of art education. Many art educators already include these topics in their curriculum. The new national curriculum suggests that teachers include a more diversified interpretation of cultural images than before. The interpretation happens through discussions and visual making. This kind of culturally activist teaching has been given different names within art education during the past few decades. While visual culture education is the most well-known approach, there are other attempts, such as art education for social justice and activism (Quinn, Ploof & Hochtritt, 2012), multicultural (Stuhr, 1994) and social reconstruction (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002).

Going beyond: Phenomenon-based learning

Finnish education seems to be moving towards phenomenon-based learning. While the new curriculum is based on the different school subjects, it might be that the schooling would not be organized around different school subjects in the future. The idea is to better serve students' needs in the contemporary society. Phenomenon-based learning challenges the idea that student's thinking needs to be organized around different school subjects, while the world seem to be much more complex than that. In phenomenon-based learning, teaching is organized around a real-life phenomenon and analysed and learned through an interdisciplinary approach. This type of working will require teachers' collaboration and a student-led investigation, with students playing an important role in recognizing their own needs in filling the gaps in their knowledge. Perhaps the most important perspective to the phenomenon-based learning is the collaboration of teachers, integration of subjects, and the interdisciplinary approach to teaching. The Finnish schooling system has not yet solved how to make all this happen.

For art educators and art teachers, the phenomenon-based learning brings along an interesting challenge: How do you represent the contents of learning of visual art education to the colleagues in other subject teaching? What would be the important areas to emphasize in visual art teaching? Quite often in the integration, projects from visual art teaching has been given a task of decoration to other subjects. That is obviously not what boundary-breaking phenomenon-based learning for visual art education should be about.

Conclusions

In schools, children learn to encounter, act, and interact with people who are different from them. They encounter ideas that are different from their own. They learn to follow and obey the rules in schools, which will follow them as they become adults. At the same time, schooling, from a social justice perspective, has a requirement for emancipation. The student needs to learn to think for themselves, and learn to be critical toward the prevalent power and its form of oppression. Within art education, students can learn to be politically critical and recognize their own cultural perspective, which might not always be included in the mainstream normative culture. This might mean students' cultural heritage tradition as well as their more contemporary engagement with a sub-culture.

The rapid changes in the Finnish mono-cultural society require actions from art educators. Art classes should provide room and space for problematizing and discussing societal topics, and increase students' awareness of cultural differences and different kinds of skills and abilities. Why are these issues, then, particularly important for art education? While I believe these questions are important in all aspects of education, I also believe that, just as contemporary art addresses societal and cultural questions, art teaching should critically ask questions about society and culture, on topics such as human rights and social justice. As contemporary art has evolved to

address the widest range of important topics, art education should not remain limited to traditional themes or forms of art.

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