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A Values Perspective on Ethical Education for Grades 7 to 9 in Finland

Aksjologiczne przesłanki nauczania etyki w klasach 7–9 w Finlandii

Abstract: The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 underlined the need to treat each child as unique and valuable, and as a result, students are encouraged to enhance their self-images, self – efficacy, and self-esteem, which contribute to improvement of their learning skills. There is highlighted the emphasis on the joy of learning and promotion of pupil welfare. The main part of the study is thus an analysis of the Finnish National Core Curriculum, based on a review of the literature on secular ethics across grades 7 to 9 and the presentation of values in Finnish basic education.

Keywords: ethical education, ethics, values, values in education, curriculum in primary education.

*„Only thanks to true values can man become better and fully develop his nature”
(John Paul II, encyclical „Fides et ratio”, 1998, p. 43)*

Introduction

This article focuses on the development of values by means of curriculum design. The main part of the study is thus an analysis of the Finnish National Core Curriculum, based on a review of the literature on secular ethics across grades 7 to 9 and the presentation of values in Finnish basic education. This highlights the emphasis on the joy of learning and promotion of pupil welfare that is used to diversify learning content in that context. The article then presents those factors embodied in the objectives of ethics as a subject in the curriculum based on the key content areas from C1 to C3,

and examines how these develop students' knowledge and abilities based on pupils' experiences and their „search for an identity and worldview” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 443), encouraging them to absorb specific moral norms and values, which then become significant drivers of their actions.

Secular ethics education in Finland

Secular ethics, as a multidisciplinary school subject, is closely related to the topics of philosophy, social, and cultural sciences and it uses its links to these perspectives to incorporate various models of religious education (Tomperi, 2003, p. 10). Secular ethics lessons started in the 1920s to provide the 'history of religion and ethics' for pupils who were non-affiliated in terms of religious education (Saine, 2000, p. 2). The current subject of secular ethics followed in 1985 with the inauguration of a new subject, called *elämäntietäminen* in Finnish. Discussions concerning religious diversity should be developed in both religious and non-religious worldviews have obtained a central place in the works of Jackson (2014, p. 168-179) and Mediema (2014, p. 82-103). According to Jackson (2012, p. 168), religious education has never been revealed as widely as it is now.

Generally, secular ethics education includes four main content areas that are universal across the national comprehensive school curricula, defined in 2004 as „human relations and ethical development”, „self-knowing and cultural identity”, „society and human rights”, and „the human being and the world”. The basic objectives are to introduce not only critical skills for ethical action, but also to offer examples of tolerance, justice, and sustainable development. The objectives for the first five grades include the development of awareness about various cultures and human worldviews, while as of the sixth grade, the course is oriented towards developing students' knowledge of this variety of worldviews. The central function of this preparation is the attainment of cultural literacy supported by self-expressive and interactive intercultural skills (National Curriculum, 2004, p. 12-30). The National Curriculum of 2014, first implemented in the autumn of 2016, restructured, yet retained the objectives, the 2004 curriculum.

The National Curriculum for basic education 2014 was thus based on a concept of learning in which students are seen as active actors who prepare, set goals and solve any problems that arise not only alone, but in tandem with others as appropriate. This underlines the need to use varied physical elements, language types, and senses in teaching to promote the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in a positive and emotionally motivating learning

environment. This allows for an emphasis on the joy of learning and the promotion of the development of a range of learning competences. In this light, the curriculum can be seen rely on diversification of the learning content, time, and place, with each student is encouraged to promote and develop their own learning. This in turn accentuates the need for self-regulation for each child in the learning process. Learning at the basic education level is highly significant due to the fact that this is when students both learn new concepts and deepen their understanding of learned topics at the greatest rate. „Learning knowledge and skills is cumulative and often requires long-term and persistent practice” (NCC, 2014, p. 17); the NCC also notes that each student’s „self-image, self-efficacy and self-esteem” are the main factors which influence their studies. As a result, successful Finnish students can not only interpret, analyse, and evaluate a wide variety of information, but to construct new knowledge and expand on their previous experiences and practical knowledge. The NCC document thus suggests that students need only guidance and, importantly, teacher feedback to strengthen their confidence and scientific development in a proper direction.

The main priority of secular ethics education is thus to guide and support students’ growth and development, specifically their worldviews and philosophies of life. According to Niiniluoto (2006, p. 206), secular ethics education by definition involves not only a personal worldview, based on ethics and values, but also an epistemological view that can help students recognise and acquire knowledge. For Tomperi (2003, p. 11), the beginnings of secular ethics education must thus be based on knowledge and meaning as being tightly linked to students as human beings, rather than being linked to non-religious and secular worldviews. Tomperi (2013, p. 93) added that, as a subject, secular ethics presents values such as democracy, human rights, non-violence, and multiculturalism, but must be regarded as non-confessional.

An opposing point of view is presented by Poulter, Riitaoja and Kuusisto (2015, p. 2), who claim that the secular framework is inherently neutral, as education has been always incorporated into any particular culture and morality. This perspective is linked to the rationalist and scientific worldviews presented by Niiniluoto (2006, p. 68), in which the subject of ethics represents more than a single organised worldview, covering broad values such as humanism. In Belgium and Finland, this subject, which is offered as non-confessional ethics, as a „neutral” subject, or as a substitute for religious education, has initiated discussion concerning its limited humanist or atheist perspectives. Earlier research in the field of secular ethics as a subject

has also emphasised various structural problems in education (Salmenkivi 2013, p. 87-89). These problems included the use of unqualified teachers, insufficient textbooks or classroom space, and complications related to the ways in which teachers schedule classes. Moreover, students across different age groups also present a challenge for teachers, while a tendency was observed to marginalise this subject due to dominance of Lutheranism in the schools' culture.

Methodology and research questions

In order to investigate ethics education from a Finnish perspective, the following research questions were developed:

- 1) What values are included in the ethics curriculum in Finland across grades 7 to 9?
- 2) Does the national curriculum play a role in the globally acknowledged success of Finnish students in the twenty-first century?

Analysis of the curriculum, which forms the main body of this study, began with a review of the literature on secular ethics and values in Finnish basic education. The next step was an analysis of the curriculum, including identification of the links between secular ethics and pupil welfare. The relevant curricular guidelines and support for primary schools were also analysed. The chosen format of the study involved use of the problem method, along with critical discourse analysis, based on considering this as an educational phenomenon linked to particular time and within a particular (Finnish) society as a way to differentiate the various views current in Finnish education in the 21st century and to reveal the „macro-themes of discourse” (Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2008, p. 156).

Analysis of the selected documents involved emphasising „the constructive mechanisms contained in the arguments, ideas, or concepts” (Rapley, 2007, p. 194) in each case, as well as assessing the validity and reliability of the selected documents alongside their credibility and accuracy. The problem method was applied to the study of documents concerning secular ethics and values. The problem method derives from an educational phenomenon, here from Finnish education. From this perspective, it is important to contrast different views and principles about regularities of secular ethics and values. This included the collection of data for specific areas of secular ethics education. Primary rather than secondary sources and documents were given preference in this research, and all significant materials were accessed from the library at the University of Helsinki, where selections were made from a broader set of resources for final analysis. Discourse analysis, which

was applied after the initial sifting, allowed the development of contextual meaning, allowing analysis not only of linguistic meaning but also of all relevant conventions and codes important in the selected society, based on its culture and history (Hammersley, 2013, p. 12).

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education from the perspective of pupil welfare

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education uses the term pupil welfare in conjunction with the idea of „education provider” (Section 1[3] of the Pupil and Student Welfare Act [1287/2013]), and this term is closely linked to the mission of each school to implement education to the benefit of its pupils. In Finnish basic education, a cross-cultural cooperation is intended to promote pupil welfare and to establish effective educational institutions. Employees who work in the school community are thus all responsible for developing pupils’ welfare. Where any concerns related to pupils or the school community more generally arise, solutions are thus developed in conjunction with the students and their parents. Pupil welfare service, including psychologists, school social workers, and school health services are also available to help pupils and their guardians in an accessible and easy manner. This means that Finnish education incorporates coherent practices that support pupils’ „health, well-being and learning” (The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 82).

Communal pupil welfare is also a significant part of the school culture in Finland, being related to the ways in which the welfare of the school community, including both pupils and teachers, can be monitored, evaluated and developed. „Pupil welfare creates preconditions for community spirit, caring and open interaction in the school community. Operating methods that promote participation also facilitate the prevention and early recognition of problems and the organisation of the required support” (The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 83). The resulting peaceful and friendly school atmosphere contributes to a positive climate of school discipline in Finnish schools. Moreover, the school health services are obliged to observe students’ health and prepare information to support communal pupil welfare. In this light, individual pupil welfare is also supported by monitoring and promoting students’ holistic development in the context of physical and mental health, learning, and well-being. Students’ resources, skills, and needs are thus taken into consideration in the support offered to students every school day.

Descriptions of pupil welfare in the curriculum present the goals and operating methods for the implementation of pupil welfare at the level of education of interest. The relevant part of the document (The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 82-89) also highlights the connections between its plan for the well-being of children and the curriculum. In each school, the education provider must ensure that welfare plan not only supports, but also evaluates and develops pupils' welfare. Such plans should be prepared in close cooperation with the staff of each school, and their pupils and their guardians. After that, each plan must be approved by council of the relevant municipality. Each school is obliged to both estimate the general needs of student well-being and report how it aims to support this using the resources available to the school. The plan must also include the organisation of pupil welfare services in accordance with individual pupil development and monitoring.

School welfare plans in basic education in Finland thus include not only the relevant operating methods but also the intended practices of the school welfare group. Cooperation with organisations outside of the school is also required to promote student well-being, especially in the context of guidance counselling or future planning. Moreover, students' health and safety must be carefully considered in the context of the school environment and the well-being of the school overall. Observations and monitoring include levels of school absence, while future planning includes defining ways to prevent accidents and to keep tobacco products, alcohol, and drugs away from school premises. Furthermore, schools must prepare plans for safe school transport and „safeguarding the pupils against violence, bullying and harassment” (The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 87).

In Finnish basic education, individual pupil welfare is a key focus, leading to the monitoring of students' abilities and needs and promoting the organisation of treatment, special diets, and medication in case of illnesses. The schools also provide pupil welfare in the context of disciplinary requirements, preparing and filing reports about pupil welfare as needed. This focus on individual pupil welfare also explains the fact that students and their guardians are expected to participate in the process of planning, monitoring, and evaluating documentation required to create each individual welfare plan.

Values in Finnish basic education

Values are „everything that is valuable to people, everything that we want to engage our efforts and our will” (Homplewicz, 1996, p. 142). As

a result, „people learn specific moral norms and values which are significant drivers of their activities” (Chałas and Winiarczyk, 2018, p. 144). Values help people recognise what is good or bad (Łobocki, 2000, p. 72), and John Paul II noted: „only thanks to true values can man become better and fully develop his nature” (Jan Paweł II, 1998, p. 43). Chałas (2011, p. 18) emphasises that everything that is important and valuable for a man and worthy of a man leads to his integral development of humanity, while Albert Einstein added:

A man’s value to the community primarily depends on how far his feelings, thoughts, and actions are directed towards promoting the good of his fellows. We call him good or bad according to how he stands in this matter. It looks at first sight as if our estimate of a man depended entirely on his social qualities (Popova, 2012, p. 1)

From this perspective, Veugelers (2001, p. 199) claims that teachers pay attention to their own development to allow them to monitor their students’ values and development from the perspective of critical pedagogy. For McLaren (1994, p. 203), the central values inherent in this work seem to be equality, the right to diversity, and self-determination. Both authors thus analysed the works of Freire and Dewey (Suwalska, 2021, p. 212) based on an interest in the links between teachers’ and students’ values. According to Power et al. (1989, p. 332), moral development differentiates various stages of cognitive development in terms of understanding values and the abilities based thereon. Value education and moral development are further based on analyses of value and are related to approaches in cognitive skills.

According to Veugelers (2001, p. 38), „critical pedagogy”, which incorporates teachers’ moral values, encourages teachers and students to use communicative skills. Berkowitz (1996, p.1) added, however, that people do not need many values to develop morality in their judgments and actions; they need only certain central values such as justice and human well-being. Based on this, it is significant to note that moral development makes critical thinking more goal-oriented. The main aim of critical thinking must thus be seen as being to influence the development of wider reflections that should include values (Paul, 1992, p. 1; Ennis, 1994, p. 3). Veugelers (2001, p. 38) added that critical thinking and moral development are notions that relate to students’ learning activities’ and enable students to develop their values. These value dimensions are varied and must be incorporated into school curricula to develop each school’s mission; further, while people have a tendency to agree theoretically on the importance of particular values, in real-life situations, they may hold to opposite values and viewpoints.

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014, p. 15) states that each child is unique and valuable. This uniqueness, along with the right to improve their skills as a human being and as a part of a democratic society, is emphasised by educational values such as solidarity and justice, and regulative values related to order, behaviour, work design, development of self-discipline, autonomy, and empathy. A value is a judgement based on a predetermined statement of what is good and what is bad, rather than a personal preference based on taste; it may also, however, be a common-sense formulation, relying on additional or ordered ideas about a person's relationship to their environment. Teachers and students have sets of their own values, and must collaborate to incorporate these in education. Teachers who work in schools may thus wish to determine the values of their students as part of the function of school as a learning organisation. Open-mindedness and a respectful attitude towards various religions and worldviews on the part of teachers must thus constitute the roots of constructive school co-operation and interaction. Nowak (2019, p. 18) noted that "the teacher, apart from the pedagogical talent in showing specific values and causing the pupil's fascination with them, is also a significant support for the student and becomes his or her testimony of living with these values".

Values arising from tasks in ethics as a subject in grades 7 to 9 (C1–C3 content areas)

Values are constructs that enable people to decide what actions are good and bad when they seek to resolve problems, based on what they themselves believe in. This basic level of education has the same task as other levels: to facilitate the leading of a good life. Students study worldviews and human practices, and „the meanings attached to them are viewed as products of interaction among individuals, communities, and cultural heritage” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 442). In light of this, ethics lessons emphasise students' ability to influence their individual thinking, linking this to their learning experiences. Another task is to promote students' independence, open-mindedness, and responsibility in order to allow them to become full members of a democratic society in a rapidly changing world. In order to achieve these tasks, ethics instruction in grades 7 to 9, instruction should reinforce students' general knowledge and understanding of various worldviews and cultures, as well as developing their abilities to think and act critically based on strong study skills. For ethics lessons to succeed, students must improve their critical thinking skills, which can be seen as a self-correcting task involving the search for reasons behind particular

situations. Ethics lessons in grades 7 to 9 thus support students' transversal competences, „cultural competence, thinking and learning, interaction and expression skills, taking care of oneself and others, and managing daily life as well as participation, involvement, and responsibility” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 272). Students in grades 7 to 9 also receive support in their search for their own models of a “good life”, which are related to their reflective attitudes and open-mindedness.

The main focus of this part of the curriculum is on key content areas C1 to C3. These content areas and the development of students' knowledge and „ability is combined with pupils' experiences and their search for an identity and worldview” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 443). Viewed from this perspective, the C1 content area covers concepts of worldviews and culture. Students study world cultures in the form of “natural heritage protected by UNESCO and follow the manifestations of culture, for example in the media and art” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 443) to become familiar with other worldviews and stances. According to NCC 2014, students must also study in order to recognise the range of different theistic and atheistic worldviews prominent in the contemporary world, especially humanism, Christianity, and Islam. Events related to the history of these worldviews are thus examined, with comparisons made between them with respect to the realisation of equality and freedom of belief in different societies (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 443).

Content area C2, principles of ethics, familiarises students with various trends in ethics and presents the basic questions of ethical enquiry. The main aim of C2 is to familiarise students with „viewpoints of ethical evaluation of actions, such as the motive of the actor, and the deliberateness and consequences of the act” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 444). Students thus consider issues presented via social media and analyse them from a given ethical viewpoint (richness, rightness). Content area C3, human rights and a sustainable future, then presents the meanings of the „agreements, promises, rights, duties, equality, peace and democracy, both in different everyday situations and environments in the pupils' lives and in a wider sense” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, p. 273). Pupils thus become familiar with their rights and develop skills in the assessment of tasks related to particular contexts, as well as making plans and being cognizant of their consequences. By accessing C3 content, pupils become acquainted with the concepts of human dignity and a range of human rights and their violations, such as the Holocaust. Moreover, they

study equality among people and the varied viewpoints on the relationships between humans and nature, such as „humanist, utilitarian, mystical, and nature-centred views” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 273). Students also study relationships between „nature and a sustainable future for nature and the society as well as questions of environmental ethics” (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 273).

To guarantee a safe and open environment for the study of ethics, it is necessary to select appropriate working methods. In Finland, the construction of a learning environment based on groups appears essential for the study of the subject of ethics. Teachers then support students’ self-regulating skills in learning. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) emphasises that any learning environment is a combination of personal and communal interactions, reinforced by the use of various media and digital technologies (p. 444). The objectives of ethics in grades 7 to 9 include supporting pupils’ well-being, learning, and constant development, taking into account all school opportunities and various means of examining, structuring, and building students’ worldviews and identities. Moreover, teachers in Finland are obliged to provide guidance and support for students and to help them to participate in developing answers to ethical questions. At this level, students still need support for various life interactions and to develop their thinking skills. Teachers thus need to use varied teaching methods to develop an appropriate individual approach for each pupil.

Conclusions

Values are constructs that allow people to decide what is good and what is bad. Values are embedded in the conception of learning that underpins Finnish basic education, as well as being involved in the development of school approaches and the overall learning process. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 underlined the need to treat each child as unique and valuable, and as a result, students are encouraged to enhance their self-images, self-efficacy, and self-esteem, which contributes to improvement of their learning skills. The subject of ethics thus promotes students’ independence, open-mindedness, and responsibility in their learning environment, as well as helping them become full members of a democratic society in a rapidly changing world full of personal and communal interactions reinforced by the use of various media and digital technologies.

Values analyses allows for the assumption that the objectives of ethics teaching in grades 7 to 9, as well as the final assessment criteria, include offering students' guidance in the context of recognising and understanding the concepts behind worldviews. Students' familiarity with varied cultures and cultural heritage is also tested, while the final assessment evaluates students' awareness of both religious and non-religious worldviews and of rules of religious thinking, encouraging a critique of religion. Moreover, this assessment evaluates students' recognition of freedom of belief as a human right. According to NCC 2014, students must study in order to recognise different theistic and atheistic worldviews in the contemporary world, especially humanism, Christianity, and Islam, and students' various choices as linked to their worldviews, along with the individual or communal principles underlying them, are thus also examined (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014, p. 445).

The subject of ethics thus helps to develop school culture and supports the welfare of the students and teachers in Finnish schools. The priority of secular ethics education is to support students' growth and development, specifically with respect to their worldviews and philosophies of life. In the perspective presented here, individual pupil welfare in this context thus refers to the monitoring and promotion of each student's holistic development in the context of values, health and learning.

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