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DOI <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36995-8>

CITATION Löffström, J., van den Berg, M. (2023). The Promise of Socio-Economic Education: Reflections From a Finnish Perspective. In: Engartner, T., Szukala, A., Weber, B. (eds) Sozioökonomie und Wirtschaftssoziologie im Spiegel sozialwissenschaftlicher Bildung. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36995-8_14

The promise of socio-economic education: reflections from a Finnish perspective

Jan Löffström, University of Turku & Marko van den Berg, University of Helsinki

Abstract

In the paper it is discussed why the concept of socio-economic education is relevant for developing economic education also in Finland. Reinhold Hedtke has emphasised plurality, multiperspectivity and criticality as central in socio-economic education. Also the curriculum for economic education in Finnish schools would need to be more informed by them so as to avoid the pitfalls of economy teaching where the homo oeconomicus is the central assumption. It is pointed out in the paper that with its aim to support citizens' self-determination as agents in society socio-economic education connects with the Bildung tradition that is familiar also in the educational traditions of the Nordic countries.

Keywords:

plurality, criticality, socio-economic education, Bildung, Finland

Socio-economic education and the Bildung tradition

In the book *Das sozioökonomische Curriculum*, Reinhold Hedtke characterises the essentials in the socio-economic curriculum, so that it is about applying perspectives of social-scientific education to the economic field. Doing that, it pays attention to the socio-economic life-world and experiences of young people and what their personality development entails is relevant in the economic education (Hedtke 2018, p. 11). The scientific content in social sciences and, more particularly, in economics is indispensable in socio-economic education, but it is not enough. In a comparison of idealtypical "economistic education" ("Ökonomistische Bildung") and socio-economic education, Hedtke states that whereas in "economistic education" conceptual and modelling knowledge is central, in socio-economic education it is knowledge to interpret and act (Deutungs- und Handlungswissen). In line with this, the agent in socio-economic education is a culturally constituted agent whose rationality is seen as a construct, whereas the agent in the "economistic education" is the homo oeconomicus whose calculating rationality is seen as a fact (Hedtke 2018, p. 103.). Socio-economic education is thus, we can see, a historically and culturally sensitive approach in educating citizens in economy. Attention is paid to both, what is relevant in developing the citizen's self-understanding and what is expected of the citizen in the framework of societal and also intergenerational obligations (Hedtke 2018, p. 17).

It is not explicit in *Das sozioökonomische Curriculum*, socio-economic education but in our view it is closely related with Bildung in the Humboldtian sense. Bildung is difficult to translate in English but for the authors of this paper, coming from a Nordic tradition of pedagogy and philosophy, the connotations of Bildung are familiar. The central thing is supporting citizens' self-determination, like in educating young people to ethically, politically and economically autonomous citizens with ability to make decisions that are socially, culturally and ethically sustainable. In school this could materialise in what Erik Ryen has called the classroom as a community of enquiry (Ryen 2020). In the same vein, Reinhold Hedtke summarises the ethos of the socio-economic curriculum so that "it takes seriously children and young as socio-economic main players, observers and commentators" (Hedtke 2018, p. 367).

In what follows we will discuss why we find the concept socio-economic education important from our perspective as Finnish researchers and teacher educators in social science education.

Multiperspectivism and plurality

In his work, Reinhold Hedtke has discussed the shortcomings of understanding economic behaviour as a reflection of the calculations of the homo oeconomicus. For example, in his notes on marketing and consumption he has pointed out that economic activity also often has communicative functions and decision to consume often connect with questions of identities and sociality (Hedtke 2019a, p. 131–135; Hedtke 2018, p. 339–344). Such a perspective on economic activity both underlines and illustrates the potential of a multi-perspectivist approach in economic education that, Hedtke points out, involves cross- and trans-disciplinarity. Analysing economic activity as acts of communication is connected with psychological, anthropological, sociological and historical perspectives that also Hedtke refers to in his work (Hedtke 2018, p. 59, 207). Human behaviour needs to be understood in a historical, cultural and social framework and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. It is of interest to us to analyse how this need can be met in economic education in the Finnish school.

In the lower and upper secondary school in Finland, the subject Social Studies consists of elements that reach to different academic disciplines: sociology, economics, media studies, political science, social policy and law. However, social studies teachers mostly are not specialists in social sciences but in history, which arguably can support economy teaching, where the social, political and cultural aspects of economic activity are given a prominent place. Yet the problem remains that the space to raise such aspects is limited: the authors of this paper have been involved in discussions on how to open the angle of economic education in the upper secondary school, where there is one mandatory course on economy, packed with topics that range from public finances and household economy to global trade and sustainable economy. Teachers have freedom to manoeuvre within the curriculum, but a multiperspective study of economy is difficult to materialise under such narrow premises. The political dimension of economy especially may easily fall outside the scope of the economics course (Löfström & van den Berg 2013). The current national core curriculum for upper secondary schools gives a little more space to this issue, but at a deeper level the solution would need to be introducing another course where topics like consumption, division of labour and income differences would be addressed, putting in focus the societal, political and cultural aspects of economy.

Multiperspectivism has also another aspect that Reinhold Hedtke has pointed out, the plurality of theoretical traditions in social sciences, also in economics (Hedtke 2018, p. 211–215). In Finland the structure and content in economic education is hinged upon a Neo-Classical conceptualisation of economic activity. The national core curricula do not explicitly rest on any particular strand of economic theory in how the aims and contents of teaching economy are described, but the central place of the concepts of market and price equilibrium gives an indication of the influence coming from the Neo-Classical tradition. (Löfström & van den Berg 2013). Hedtke notes that the situation is rather the same in Germany: there is lack of plurality in economy textbooks and the curricula of economic education (Hedtke 2019b, p. 156). We recognise his observation in Finland: the school textbooks explain economic processes with models that reflect a Neo-Classical understanding of flows of capital, goods, and labour in the various markets (Löfström & van den Berg 2013). The textbooks, authored by experienced social studies teachers and specialists of social sciences, could show a more varied picture of economy in society. This connects with a central point that Reinhold Hedtke has raised in his work, namely criticality.

Criticality

Reinhold Hedtke and his colleagues in the book *Was ist gute ökonomische Bildung?* (2019) point out that in economic education it is important to discuss also societal problems. This connects with the aim of supporting students' democratic citizenship. In the current national curriculum for social studies in Finland the importance of critical thinking is stated but there is "little flesh on the bones" in what it entails for example in discussing alternative social and economic systems. In the tradition of Finnish social studies teaching controversies in society were for a long time not problematised in the subject matter of social studies, but society and economy were pictured more like an engine that is geared to run smoothly (Löfström, van den Berg & Virta 2010). However, in the current national curriculum for social studies the idea is that answers to economic question need to be analysed from the point of what benefits who in economic policy and whose interests does economic policy serve.

Considering that Finnish social studies teachers often are not specialists in social sciences and not familiar with their epistemologies, criticality in the social studies classroom has to be founded on other disciplinary grounds. In most cases it is the history sciences, because these are the academic background of most social studies teachers. It makes it possible to problematise existing economic arrangements using a historical perspective which is one way of doing what Reinhold Hedtke and Gerd Famulla (2019) refer to as they discuss how to bring up the diversity in the understanding of market economy and not limit oneself to one prevalent view of it.

In a recent PISA survey of young people's economic literacy, the Finnish students scored very well (Laine et al. 2020). However, one can ask if the ability measured in the PISA survey covers also the dimension in understanding of economy, that relates to political ramifications of economy and how economy is a play of tensious interests. A study of Finnish upper secondary school students shows that they readily explain societal developments by economic necessity and allow a narrow space to agency and interpretation (van den Berg 2010). These two elements, agency and interpretation, are precisely something that is typical of socio-economic education, unlike of "economistic education" (Hedtke 2018, p. 103).

The afore mentioned connects closely with the topic that Hedtke repeatedly raises in his work on socio-economic education, namely what kind of view of human beings is supported by economic education activity. Hedtke has mentioned the question of lobbying as an example of what themes are worthwhile to analyse in economics lessons (Hedtke 2018, p. 79–81). We find this very important to raise. We recognise in Finland the situation that finance industry and institutions of business have promoted entrepreneurial education as a theme in school economic education, their argument being that the Finnish school does not encourage students to risk-taking and innovating which, the argument goes, jeopardises economic growth. This is controversial and there has been debate on how entrepreneurial education should be understood and, consequently, what should be taught and learnt in school: encouraging students' problem-solving and innovativeness as a general attitude and ability; or external entrepreneurship, like financial planning and business management? At some level, the question is to what extent the citizen is conceived as *homo oeconomicus*, an actor that is motivated foremost by financial gain and optimal investment and outcome?

The importance of criticality, multiperspectivity and plurality in economic education that Reinhold Hedtke has emphasised is compatible with how the current Finnish national core curricula outline the aims and content of social studies teaching generally. But despite the steps taken in the 2010's, the societal and political aspects of economy remain rather marginal in the curricula of economic education. Teaching the skills of managing one's own household economy is important, of course,

but it is also important from the perspective of education to democratic citizenship that economy is seen as societal activity that has societal foundations and consequences. Socio-economic education is a valuable concept as it focuses explicitly on the societal dimensions of economy. It can be seen as a corrective to the view that economic education is about managing financial assets rather than generating societal well-being.

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Jan Löfström, PhD, Associate Professor
Department of Teacher Education
Assistentinkatu 5
20014 University of Turku
Finland

jan.lofstrom@utu.fi

Marko van den Berg, PhD, Dozent
Helsinki University Normal Lyceum
Ratakatu 6
00120 Helsinki
Finland
marko.vandenberg@helsinki.fi