The Epistemological Fundamentals of Social Pedagogy in Question (Lectio praecursoria[1])

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Introduction

The basic concern of the current thesis is my discontent with the confusion regarding the theoretical foundations and the existing governance practice of Estonian educational sciences. More precisely, I focus on the adoption of foreign theoretical constructions into Estonian educational discourse and the confusion among educational disciplines, which it has caused.

From early 1990s onwards, Estonia and many other post-communist Eastern European countries have gone through enormous social changes. Education is not an exception. Estonia and other post-communist Eastern European countries have eagerly attempted to get free

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from the negative relicts of the Soviet period and to seek for qualities that underlie the Western educational discussion.

Yet for the post-communist Eastern European countries, a persistent problem that underlies many other problems is that the Western tradition itself has always been fulfilled with diverse theoretical and practical constructions (e.g. Roberts 2001; Scott 2002). In many areas of education, diverse Western models have collided and formed integrities in the Eastern European countries, which quality assessment mechanisms lack clear criteria and which nobody was prepared to manage. In Estonia, probably the most striking example from early 1990s was the enormous diversification of higher education institutions and the variety of curricula within these institutions (Priimägi 2002).

Social pedagogy on the background of conceptual confusion of Estonian educational sciences

As I have argued in chapter four in my thesis, there are many mutually intertwined reasons in Estonia, which have caused the emergence of conceptual and disciplinary confusion in educational sciences. In short, these reasons comprise the insulation of sciences from public control mechanisms, scarcity of high-quality publications, mutual neglect of educational sciences and educational politics, and scientific self-absorption and fragmentation. As a result, there is a lack of clear understanding and agreement in most fundamental legitimacy criteria of sciences and scientific concepts and disciplines. This situation has seriously inhibited an adequate solution of many educational problems in Estonia, such as funding of educational research projects and composition of university curricula of educational sciences. This is the core of the first proposition of my thesis (see Mikser 2006, 15).

Social pedagogy – the first conceptual framework of my own academic research practice – is a characteristic example of the boisterous adoption of foreign theoretical constructions into Estonian educational discourse. In curricula of educational sciences of the University of Tartu, social pedagogy is delivered as an independent discipline and theoretical framework, alongside with many other disciplines such as *school social work*, *special education*, *Youth work at school, sociology of education*, and *philosophy of education*. With these disciplines, social pedagogy has partly overlapping field of application, which has made the mutual relationship between them disputable.

By the curricula of educational sciences in Estonian higher education institutions, it emerges that the problem is not unique to social pedagogy alone. Many disciplinary frameworks are struggling with their identity among the other concepts and disciplines. In the curriculum of teacher education in University of Tartu, the most prominent example is the vague relationship between the concepts *Educational psychology* and *Didaktik* (see Mikser 2005). Meanwhile, it even seems that some relatively newly emerged and popular disciplinary frameworks, albeit with a questionable amount of critical research tradition and professional literature in the field, tend to supersede the more traditional educational sub-disciplines. Most prominently in Estonia, this is the case of the concept *multicultural education* (e.g. Asser et al. 2004). It is less than clear, however, whether the popular concepts such as *multicultural education* and *inclusive education* can be regarded as educational concepts and disciplines in their own right (Hegarty 2001; Piland et al. 1999; Slee 1998).

The description of the current situation in Estonian educational scientific practice is not to claim that any educational topic should be concerned as property of only one single theoretical framework. The problem is rather, on which base a theoretical concept or discipline develops its identity: is it done rather by unquestionably accumulating its corrobo-

rating evidence or by enhancing critical discussion with rival concepts and disciplines.

The conceptual confusion in educational sciences in the post-communist Eastern Europe

By the relevant literature, it became evident that the conceptual and disciplinary confusion is not merely a result of bad practices of Estonian educational sciences. Investigating the relevant professional literature of the countries, which have gone through the most similar social changes during the last decades, it emerged that at least partly, Estonia is just an inheritor of some more general tendencies.

As argued in the 5th chapter of my thesis, most post-communist Eastern European countries possess certain common characteristics, which have inhibited the critical account and the dissolution of the conceptual and disciplinary confusion. Most generally, these characteristics amount to an unhappy marriage between boisterous decentralisation and fragmentation and – on the other hand – the Soviet remnants of psychological and instrumentalist bias of educational sciences, which resulted with narrow specialisation of educational sciences and neglect of wider theoretical background (see e.g. Temple 2003). As argued by number of Eastern European investigators in the field, there is an increasing fragmentation of educational sciences, uncontrollable proliferation of educational concepts, scarcity of fundamental theoretical research, biased and oversimplified relationship between theory and practice, and unbalanced relationship between the basic disciplines of educational sciences. In epistemological terms, this is an odd reconciliation of blank empiricism and postmodernism. On one hand, these countries inherit the Soviet approach, which reduced educational sciences to prediction of students' psychological abilities and elaboration of technical solutions.

This tendency still discourages the interdisciplinary cooperation of educationalists and the concern with wider theoretical background. On the other hand, there is increasing but unsystematic preoccupation with novel popular concepts, which are legitimated on the basis of the empirically warranted instant practical utility and which, again, neglect the wider theoretical background and normative account of sciences. The interplay of these two tendencies has resulted with fragmentation and mutual disinterest of educational concepts and disciplines.

It is clear then that the resolution of the conceptual and disciplinary confusion cannot be drawn solely from within the educational scientific practices of the post-communist Eastern European countries, which mostly struggle with the same problems as the Estonian educationalists.

Conceptual confusion in Western educational sciences

Eventually, by investigation of the relevant literature about the Western educational scientific tradition, it emerged that Western countries also struggle with the problem of over-accumulation and confusion among the theoretical concepts and disciplinary constructions within educational sciences (e.g. Blake et al. 2003). As argued at length in the 6th chapter of my thesis, the discipline boundary debates, temporarily touching upon the most fundamental epistemological issues, have gone through the most recognisable basic disciplines of education right from the beginning of their formulation. Thus the confusion is not reducible merely to poor practices of certain discipline or to a single cultural or social context within which a concept or discipline is rehearsed (e.g. a single country). This led to the second proposition of my thesis, according to which certain common tendencies lay at the root of the theoretical and conceptual confusion in educational sciences in many Western countries (Mikser 2006, 15).

The epistemological essence of the legitimacy of science and scientific concepts

From this overtly pessimist account, there appeared a question, is this really the case that each discipline and scientific community has to wrestle with these problems by its own – and by its own rules of game, each time beginning from the point zero? Or is there something more general from which all the disciplinary debates can benefit? Is there a scientific framework, which were primarily concerned with questions such as *could* and *should* these different theoretical constructions exist simultaneously? Is there any objective reason to prefer one theory, concept or discipline to another and if so, on what grounds it should be done? On what base a scientific concept or discipline can be held as legitimate? And ultimately, who, and on what grounds, is legitimate to govern the science and knowledge production?

The scientific framework having such questions as these as its major concern is *epistemology* – most generally defined as theory of knowledge (Mikser 2006, 22). Thus it became necessary to get familiar with the basic literature on epistemology and philosophy of science.

It became clear soon to me that an absolute consensus regarding these questions has never existed and never will exist. Yet in actual governance of scientific practice, certain epistemological presuppositions, albeit often implicitly, always dominate over the others. Thus analysis of these seemingly highly theoretical matters appears to be an urgent practical necessity.

In my work, the major concern was to ascertain the most adequate epistemological framework (or frameworks) according to which development of educational sciences should be governed in a democratic society. More specifically, I attempted to elucidate an adequate epistemological framework for comparative assessment of legitimacy of educational concepts and disciplines (Mikser 2006, 14–15).

My interest in epistemology amounted to the following points: general standpoints about the essence of knowledge and the validity criteria of truth claims, criteria for demarcating scientific knowledge, methods of attaining scientific knowledge, and classification criteria of scientific disciplines if offered (Mikser 2006, 25, 53).

As philosophical positions are not good in themselves but only in relation to what they oppose (see Fuller 2003, 472), it appeared to be necessary to delineate a thorough historical development of the Western epistemological schools. This task I knew from the beginning inevitably remains incomplete, but necessary to depict the epistemological position which proponent I regard myself to be. In page 53, I have delineated the reasons why I regarded a thorough historical development of the Western epistemological schools necessary.

Steve Fuller's version of social epistemology – a proper epistemological framework for science and knowledge production

By the thorough delineation of the Western epistemological schools, I have demonstrated that there have always existed fundamental discrepancies in regarding the essence of knowledge and the validity criteria of truth claims, criteria for demarcating scientific knowledge, methods of attaining scientific knowledge, and classification criteria of scientific disciplines. Within the current Western epistemological discussion, there is the most obvious opposition between the proponents of certain versions of postmodernist epistemology (more or less explicitly inspired by Thomas Kuhn) and the proponents of certain derivations of critical rationalism (more or less explicitly inspired by Karl Popper).

In chapter 7 in my thesis, I have provided argumentation for the Steve Fuller's version of social epistemology as the most adequate epistemological framework for governance of educational scientific practice

in Estonia and elsewhere. This epistemological project is inspired by the critical rationalist epistemology and sharply opposes postmodernism. According to Fuller, history of scientific practices has proved the scientific knowledge to be fallible in essence. Nevertheless, the normatively appropriate ends and means for science should be articulated, and science's status as exemplar of higher rationality for society should be assured. Together with Fuller, I argue that cross- conceptual and interdisciplinary critical scientific discussion *can* and *should* be more articulated in the educational sciences. This discussion is committed to emancipate scientists, students and practitioners from uncritical taken-for-granted admission of a theoretical construction whatsoever, and thus to contribute to democratic scientific model in its true meaning. Eventually, this comprehensive discussion is committed to provide a normative framework for governance of scientific practice in whatever disciplinary framework. This is the core of the third proposition of my thesis (p. 15–16).

For elucidating the legitimacy of rival scientific theories and concepts in educational sciences, I have also argued that the Fuller's project of social epistemology should be supplemented with a methodology for comparative assessment of the most important qualities of scientific theories and disciplines. To that end, the most promising methodology is Imre Lakatos' methodology for evaluation of scientific research programmes. This methodology conforms to Fuller's project of social epistemology, while both Lakatos and Fuller are based on the critical rationalist epistemology of Karl Popper. The methodology of Lakatos comprehends a critical historical analysis of development of scientific theories, detecting the existence of their inner continuity and progressiveness during expanded period of time. Eventually, this analysis provides a basis for comparative assessment of scientific quality of rival scientific theories and concepts, which in turn is a proper basis for applying these theories and concepts as frameworks for practical activities. This is the core of the fourth proposition of my thesis (p. 16).

The German concept of social pedagogy – explication of the Fuller's epistemology and Lakatos's methodology

By number of indications, it is evident that the concept *social peda-gogy* inherits identity problems not only in Estonia but in other countries as well (see the first chapter in part 2 of Mikser 2006). Getting first familiar with the basic literature on social pedagogy, I was convinced that social pedagogy was an intensive integrity also in its homeland, Germany, and that its relationship with the neighbouring disciplines, particularly with that of *social work*, is ambiguous.

In the second part of my thesis, I have first argued how the Fuller's version of social epistemology and the Lakatos's methodology for evaluation of scientific research programs are relevant for investigation of the legitimacy of the German concept *social pedagogy*. I have argued that for strengthening the legitimacy of the concept, it should be subject for an ongoing critical rational evaluation, taking the historical development of the concept into account. Thus application of the Lakatos's evaluation methodology appeared to be relevant.

My analysis of the German concept social pedagogy embraces three stages. First, the historical development of the concept *social pedagogy* in the German-speaking tradition was outlined (see chapter 3 in part 2 of Mikser 2006). Secondly, certain papers on the concept *social pedagogy* written by the most eminent classics of the German tradition of social pedagogy were introduced and referred (see chapter 4 in part 2 of Mikser 2006). The aim was to exemplify the diversity of how the most eminent authors in the field have argued about the essence of the concept *social pedagogy*. It was also intended to provide characteristic examples of how the current confusion with the concept *social pedagogy* has progressed in course of time. Thirdly, current discussion about the concept *social pedagogy* in German- speaking discourse was referred and

analysed. Basing on number of considerations, I grounded this analysis on papers on the concept *social pedagogy*, which are published in the journal *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (chapter 5 in part 2 of Mikser 2006)**.**

Conclusion: Insufficiency of the continuity and progressiveness of the German concept of social pedagogy

In basic terms of the Lakatos' evaluation methodology, I have argued that the German concept *social pedagogy* is insufficient in two aspects, which are essential to consider a concept as legitimate. Firstly, the concept possesses insufficient *internal continuity*. This means an insufficiency of its *hard core* – a complex of statements, which were kept irrefutable and unchangeable in the course of development of the concept. Within the German concept *social pedagogy*, it is difficult to determine a complex of statements, which were kept irrefutable and unchangeable by the methodological decision of its protagonists. On one hand, it is evident that there exists *continuity* (*hard core*) regarding the most important classics of social pedagogy. The current discussion still largely bases on the ground of interpretations of Natorp, Nohl, Bäumer, Fischer, Mollenhauer, Thiersch, and some other classics of social pedagogy. On the other hand, it is questionable, whether there is anything in the *content* of this heritage, which would constitute a commonly accepted ground for the current theoretical discussion and which would serve as a tool for resolution of the theoretical controversies. Against the background of the current discussion, it emerges that there is no more unity in the theory of social pedagogy than it was in the end of some previous developmental stage – say, in 1933 or 1990. It appears that there is no observable pursuit of a certain path of previous theory of social pedagogy, which would integrate the current discussion into a theoretically unified entity.

Secondly, the German concept *social pedagogy* has insufficient theoretical *progressiveness*. To consider a concept as *progressive*, some of the basic problems of its previous sub-theories should be regarded as resolved for the current sub-theories. Within the German concept *social pedagogy*, there are virtually no crucial controversies of the previous theories, which were regarded as resolved for the current theorists. Still there persist the same fundamental disagreements in regarding the basic constituents of social pedagogy as a conceptual and disciplinary entity. There are the same fundamental discrepancies regarding the definition, philosophical and disciplinary position, aims, methods, client groups, institutional arrangements and – most regrettably – its own historical and theoretical roots of social pedagogy. Indeed, as argued by some authors, there is an observable *progression* in application of the concept *social pedagogy* in many spheres. Yet this progression is much attained at the price of gradually abandoning the internal continuity – the *hard core*. In fact, the empirical expansion of the concept has complicated rather than clarified its identity.

Suggestions for further investigation

Eventually, I have argued that similar kind of critical self- re-examination should be undertaken by all educational theories and concepts pretending to the legitimate status of scientific quality. Unless this is done and unless there is evidence that certain conceptual framework clearly surpasses that of *social pedagogy* in the most basic qualities, abandonment of the concept *social pedagogy* is not justified.

In the final part of my thesis, I have made two substantial suggestions for further investigation, which are aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the German concept *social pedagogy*. These suggestions directly follow the epistemological and methodological position espoused in the thesis.

Firstly, the German concept *social pedagogy* should reconsider and clearly articulate its overarching scientific ideal. First of all, it means to participate in the most general discussion about the normatively appropriate ends and means for sciences. Most importantly, this is to resist the epistemological doctrines which relativise science and knowledge to its psychological and sociological conditionality. Indeed there are observable tendencies in the current discussion in Germany, which indicate the risk of relativising the meaning of the concept to German language area. The true insight that social pedagogy must be sensitive towards differences in social and cultural context should not be confused with an unsound epistemological position, according to which pursuits towards unity and objectivity should be abandoned. To warrant its legitimacy in the eyes of the rival conceptual constructions originating from different cultural spaces, proponents of the German concept *social pedagogy* should intervene in the international educational discussion as vigorously as possible. It would be essential to the German concept *social pedagogy* to present itself to educational discourses of other cultural and national origin and to take a lesson from the critical requests it would inevitably encounter. It would mean to engage the representatives of other conceptual and disciplinary constructions to the legitimacy debate of social pedagogy and to take a benefit from their contribution, making the concept more transparent and self-critical about the fundamental questions of its legitimacy.

The second substantial element of reconsideration of the German concept *social pedagogy* is the methodology, according to which its own internal coherence is to be continually reconsidered and improved. In current thesis, it is argued that the methodology for evaluation of scientific research programmes, first elaborated by Imre Lakatos, is a promising methodological basis for that enterprise.

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