

Philosophy of education in Norway

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Abstract

In Japan as well as Norway we experience growing interests and discussions about education. The main reason seems to be the fact that education has become more important than ever before. At the same time, most educational systems seem to face problems adapting to the rapid changes caused by globalization of values and cultures. Therefore, discussions about education not only involve new technology or alternative teaching methods, but also fundamental issues related to philosophy of education. In this article we present a short introduction to philosophy of education in Norway.

1. Introduction

Education can be studied and discussed from many perspectives. Most theories about education include three main aspects: Philosophy with main focus on values and principals, a material perspective with main focus on content, and finally a formal perspective with main focus on methods. In times of educational reforms, discussions have to include basic ideas about our present society, and what kind of society we want to make in the future. Both the Japanese and the Norwegian society have changed dramatically over the last 30 years (Horio, 1997; Steen, 2000). Some even use the term “Earthquake” to describe these changes (Steen, 2000). Therefore, in this article we chose to discuss education from a philosophical perspective. However, philosophy of education also involves overall ideas and arguments about content, methods and evaluation as well.

2. Learning for life

“*Learning for life*” is a term that frequently has been used in Norway and Scandinavia to express the main purpose of education (Steen, 1999). The expression simply means that the every day life and the well being of children and teenagers are more important than what is written in the national curriculum or the school textbooks. Learning for life is also a way to emphasize that our local community, and how we make our living and our society, offer many realistic opportunities for learning. Therefore, a school should not be an arena isolated from our society, but integrated with the local community and take part in the development and improvement going on there. In our time, the idea of learning for life is probably even more relevant



Fig 1 “Sinnataggen”
(Gustav Vigeland)

than ever before because our society and living conditions changes very fast. At the same time curriculums, and what is written in textbooks, easily become old and may not be so relevant for our lives any longer. However, it should also be mentioned that some voices still argue that schools should primarily help children to learn basic knowledge related to traditional school subjects. Consequently, we may also see a trend towards what use to be called “back to basics” in education.

Education is not only for our intellect - for our heads - but also our emotions. Therefore, we chose to use a picture of the famous sculpture “Sinnataggen” (fig. 1) by Gustav Vigeland to emphasise that aesthetic education, and to help students make emotional experiences in schools, has become more important over the recent years. Subjects and activities like arts, music, drama and sports has been given higher priority because emotional experiences are supposed to be very important to help every student to develop a whole and mentally healthy person.

3. Humanism as ideology and basic values

After ww2, Norway had a comprehensive discussion about the future direction of development. The Labor party, that had majority for many years, developed a cultural program based on the idea of human rights. Four basic values were listed, which still is regarded as fundamental: Truth, Freedom, Solidarity and Beauty (Bergh, 1987, s415).

In Norway and Scandinavia the idea of solidarity and beauty may have been emphasized more than in most other countries. Solidarity has not only been limited to sharing money or property, but also applied for education and knowledge as well. Knowledge has been regarded as a common “social capital” that should be shared and easily accessed by everybody, independent of ability, social status or family income.

The idea of beauty may appear a little rare. However, we already mentioned emotional experiences as something very important. Emotional and esthetic education has been looked upon as values for everybody, not only for the upper class in the society. Therefore, esthetic education also became a way of liberation of the working class.

Ideology is another relevant perspective related to educational ideas, which can be made into three main categories:

- Utilitarianism, emphasizing freedom and especially competition
- Critical (influenced by Marxism), emphasizing equality and liberation
- Humanism, emphasizing humanity, human development and ecology.

Education in Norway has been influenced from all three perspectives (Østvold, 1986). However, the main and dominant position in Norway has always been Humanism combined with Christian ethics. For almost hundred years this position was also mixed with and governed by social democratic ideas with emphasis on solidarity and equality. During the 1970's the “New Left” and a more radical ideology brought some new perspectives into education, which can still be identified in curriculum as well as practice. However, over the last years we have experienced a new trend towards utilitarianism and neo-liberalism. The main reason seems to be the fact that globalization and neo-liberalism are very powerful world wide today, especially through global economy and business. The challenge and dilemma for Norway, and the Scandinavian model, will probably be to face this challenge by balancing different trends while still maintaining basic values of humanity and dignity for everybody.

The results of the mentioned policy can easily be proved by statistics about education. One effect of solidarity and education is that all education in Norway is free for everybody and paid by the state. Therefore Norway has very few private schools. However, in the years to come we will probably see some more private schools in order to bring more variety and freedom of choice for the students. Another effect is that students can choose the kind of education they like, and transfer between different kinds of schools has been made easy. Equality between vocational and academic schools has also brought more students into vocational courses because they know they can easily change directions and transfer to academic studies at university if they want. Finally, we see more and more men and women going back to school or university after some years of employment.

4. Knowledge and content

“The forest of adventure” is the name of a painting by Edward Munch (fig. 2), which may bring some relevant associations about education. We do not see the faces of these kids, but we can still imagine all

their questions about what can be experienced out there in front of them. They can hardly wait to go there to discover and to make their own personal experience. Some may be filled with excitement and even a little fair, but still motivated to continue and to carry out their intentions.



Fig 2. "Eventyrskogen" (Edward Munch)

Edward Munch had a dramatic change in his career before he developed his style of expressionism. He said: "I do not want to make copies of humans and nature any more. I want to paint humans of flesh and blood, with fears and dreams, hopes and desires in their lives". This we think is also a good ideal for education: The schools and the teacher should not make copies of humans, but help individuals to develop their own personality and capabilities in a best possible way. Therefore, the focus of education is now more towards the students rather than the school curriculum.

Compulsory education in Norway started as Christian moral education about 260 years ago. At that time, Norway was a homogenous nation. At least we believed so. However, over the last 30 years there became a lot of discussion whether this idea should be continued or changed. The reason is that Norway gradually became a multicultural society and also more and more involved with the global society. The idea of moral education was therefore changed in the favor of helping students to develop meaning of life and identity with our culture, rather than to copy the culture as it already exists.

Education in Norwegian has almost the same subjects as most other countries (KUF, 1997). However, interdisciplinary activities, problem based learning and projects have become more important in recent year. Creativity has also been given higher priority by the present school reforms. However, some also criticize this philosophy and claim the schools don't have time to learn any necessary facts any more.

5. Methods: From teaching to learning

The Danish Philosopher Soren Kirkegaard, one of the greatest in Europe, once expressed the idea that education and teaching is a helping process. Teaching is not to fill empty brains of young students with some fact they should be able to memorize for the next test or something like that. Based on this idea, counseling rather than teaching has become very important in teacher education. Based on the previous idea, learning is also a social process including communication and interaction with others (Bruner, 1990). Good learning processes should therefore include both (fig 3). 1: Expression, which means to develop ability to express personal ideas and opinions. 2: Impression, which means to develop awareness and sensibility. 3: Critical reflection, which means to make questions and to evaluate arguments of self and others.

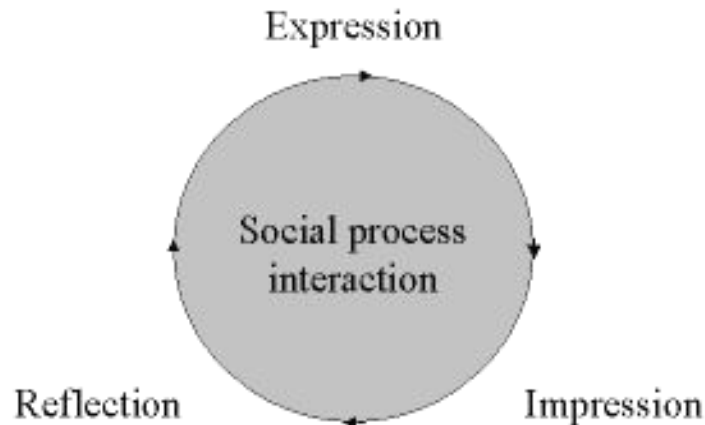


Fig. 3 Learning processes, (Aakre)

When the present curriculum was set up there was a lot of discussion about the role and function of play. Some argued that play is the first and basic way of learning, and that play should be valued more also in the schools. This argument was accepted and today education in Norway is organized into five learning methods (KUF, 1997):

- Play
- Interdisciplinary studies (themes)
- Individual and in depth subject studies
- Projects and entrepreneurship
- Practical work

6. Evaluation

Evaluation has been discussed very heavily since the 1970's. The reason is that the methods of evaluation are very powerful. Without changing the methods of evaluation you will hardly be able to change the way of teaching and learning. Today, the evaluation process tries to include different types of knowledge and competence, not only facts, but also creativity, expression, reflection and ability to access new situation. In Evaluation there is also more focus on the learning process and not only the results of learning (KUF, 1998). There have also been more discussions about how we can be better to adapt to our education for the future. How can we make evaluation that brings our focus to sustainable development?

Conclusion: Learning to learn

Only the future can tell for sure where the direction of education in Norway and Japan will be. May be both countries will experience even more from the present trend of more control and "back to basics". However, personally we think that education in Japan and Norway rather should learn from each other and to combine system with creativity. Our hope should be to see happy children and students who enjoy life and learning. May be the idea of creativity and "*learning to learn*" can be a new ideal for our schools?

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