

MEDIA EDUCATION AS CROSS-CURRICULAR THEME IN ESTONIAN SCHOOLS: REASONS OF A FAILURE

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Estonian schools have some experiences with teaching production of written media genres, but very limited understanding of what actually is media literacy. Although since 2002 Media education has been a cross-curricular theme in Estonian national curricula, there has been no constructive development towards understanding media literacy. I suggest that the reasons of current situation are following:

- *Teachers have no cognitive model of media literacy, and therefore they tend to see media education as extra load;*
- *Curricula are overloaded and assessment is oriented on factual knowledge, not on critical reading skills;*
- *Teachers do not have skills of critical reading, nor the methodology to teach critical reading;*
- *Media literacy is narrowly understood as producing news stories or as ability to use internet;*
- *School culture does not support cooperation of teachers*
- *Generation gaps (teachers of different age, teachers and pupils) in the field of media usage is huge; different generations live in different media environment.*

I suggest that one of the ways for the effective improvement is to overview the teacher's pre-service programs from the point of view of media literacy, and actively increase the elements of critical media usage and integrating different subjects.

Key words: media literacy, media education, national curricula

Introduction: Education in Estonia

Estonia is a small media rich country in Norden Europe. Several indicators place Estonia in the top positions by media usage of youth and adults. Although we have beautiful success stories (like the Tiger Leap), media education does not reach all our children; even more so – there is no common belief that media literacy is an important part of life skills. The boarder between success and failure is not always clear and may cause a lot of arguing. In order to understand our problems with media literacy in

curricula, I would like to start with a short explanation about Estonian society and educational system.

Estonia is a republic with approximately 1.3 Millions of inhabitants. About 900 000 of them speak Estonian as a mother tongue, 400 000 belong to several nationalities but use mostly Russian as their primary language. The Republic of Estonia was established in 1918, and occupied in 1941 by Soviet Union. In 1992, Estonia regained independence and has developed rapidly since. Although the economical growth has been one of the highest in Eastern Europe, Estonia still ranks low in a large number of topics relative to most other countries in the Better Life Index of OECD.

Estonian children start mandatory education at the age of 7, and stay in school for at least 9 years or until they are 17. In reality, most of pupils graduate after 12 years in school. The reputation of vocational schools is low, but growing; most graduates try to continue their education in universities. Primary and secondary education is free, for tertiary education half of students have to pay. Estonia is a high-performing country in terms of the quality of its educational system. **88% of adults aged 25 to 64 have earned the equivalent of a high-school diploma**, much higher than the OECD average. **The average student scored 501 out of 600 in reading ability** according to the latest PISA student-assessment programme, higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2011) . However, Estonian schools have problems with pupil's self esteem, early leavers, with secondary education in Russian, and with curriculum development – to name only few. The main problem is perhaps that Estonian kids find school uninteresting, stressful and/or boring (Rebane, 2010).

Youth in media rich environment: EU Kids Online II

Major research project “EU Kids Online II” indicated that practically of Estonian children in age 9-16 use the Internet, and that 96% of children are doing it at home. 82% of our children use the Internet on daily basis. Estonian kids start using the Internet early (at 7 or 8 years) in comparison to other European countries (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2010) (Kalmus & Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2010). Approximately half of our children claim that sometimes they have had problems because they have been too long online: lack of sleep, neglecting of other responsibilities etc. Digital literacy of Estonian children is slightly higher than average in Europe (they know 5.1 proactive activities out of 8). Exposure to the

risks in Internet is high and parental mediation rather reactive than proactive or protective.

The EU Kids Online II included only a few questions about school as a mediator of media literacy. Yet, several research projects have indicated the gap in the internet usage of different generations (Ugur, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Lauk, Raudvassar, & Metsoja, 2008), (Rebane, 2010): teachers do not understand how young people use online environments and services, and young people do not comprehend the Internet using habits of teachers. There is one particular online-environment that is used by pupils, teachers and parents equally - the eSchool system that includes all the information about curricula, grades, homework, assignments for classes, and in some cases additional learning materials. This service is today the main communication channel between school and parents, and most frequently used e-service in Estonia. In other words, it is almost impossible to graduate any school level without being a daily Internet user. The families that can not afford computer or internet connection may relay nation wide on free-access Internet points in public libraries, youth centres or schools.

Media literacy in Estonian curricula

Media literacy occurred explicitly into Estonian National curriculum 2002. This curriculum includes skills and knowledge related to media literacy in the curricula of mother tongue, social sciences, foreign languages and occasionally in the curricula of other subjects, and as a cross-curricular subject (Põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi riiklik õppekava (National Curriculum for Primary and Secondary Schools), 2002). Mostly the emphasis is on creating media texts according to unidentified genre conventions, and on using media as a source of information. As many teachers have experienced, learning outcomes described in national curriculum are unrealistic, since there is no time resource or teacher's competency that would guarantee these outcomes. In national curriculum 2002 the cross-curricular theme "Media education" is oriented for school levels III and IV (grades VII – XII), and written as a basis for voluntary subject. As the concept of cross-curricular themes was introduced to Estonian schools

only in the National Curriculum 2002, the schools struggle in implementation of all these themes¹.

In September 2011 the new national curriculum will be implemented. There have been some developments concerning media literacy: cross-curricular theme “Media literacy” is replaced with the theme called “Information environment”. This change should diminish the current misunderstanding that media literacy equals with ability to write news stories and draw more attention to the communication processes we participate on daily basis. However, new curriculum includes a mandatory mother tongue course for 11th grade called “Media and propaganda” which puzzles all the teachers and seems to be a unsuccessful example of curriculum development.

Media literacy in Estonian school praxis

Although media usage of Estonian children is well studied, there is only a little reliable data about media education in schools. We can not trust the curriculum analysis, since this does not indicate what is actually happening in classes. Even the analysis of teaching materials is not sufficient, because teacher is free to choose what parts of materials to use. Since children come to school with different media skills, media habits and attitudes, it is hard to determine, what is the influence on schools or teachers as mediators of media literacy.

Many gymnasiums are using their freedom to use a few hours to teach a subjects of their choice. In many cases, this subject is media education. However, today there is no overview of what is taught in those classes. Mostly it depends on teacher’s views and preparation, and usually there is no or very little control over the content or quality of teaching. Usually, the emphasis is on teaching journalistic genres - news, feature, interview, etc –, especially for written press. In many cases, school boards expect the existence of school newspaper on school radio, but rarely there is a discussion, whether production-oriented media education actually supports pupil’s media literacy in the media environment they live in.

Media education as cross-curricular theme: main results

¹ The cross-curricular themes in Estonian national curriculum 2002 are Safety, Environment and sustainable development, Media education, ICT, and Career planning. In 2011, three additional themes will be introduces and Media education will be replaced with the theme Information environment.

First reliable research project of the implementation strategies of cross-curricular themes in Estonian schools was conducted in 2009 – 2010. In the sample there were ten schools from different parts of country and with different size. The research project consisted of several elements:

1. Analysis of school's curricula and other documents
2. Semi-structured interviews with school's staff
3. Teacher's survey
4. Pupil's survey
5. Lesson observations

During the research project were measured teachers' and pupils' knowledge, skills and attitudes connected to all cross-curricular themes. During the interview many teachers claimed that cross-curricular themes verbalize some natural aspects of education:

Teacher 1, school 17: Well, these cross-curricular themes are like...when they occurred I was happy to recognize that it's something I have always done. It's kind of natural, to talk about these things. We always did it, only we did not have this fancy name.

Seeing cross-curricular themes as a very natural part of education, teachers admit that they actually do not pay very much attention on their own words and do not worry about the learning outcomes:

Teacher 1, school 10: And I say it again: never mind, if there are four themes or fourteen. We deal anyway only with the things that we find important, never mind how they are put in the curricula.

In some cases, cross-curricular themes were mentioned in teachers interviews as "little chit-chat" or "time-consuming small talk about the news children had noticed". This allows to assume that even if the Estonian teachers spend some time for cross-curricular themes, they do it half-consciously, which is hardly the proper way of doing it. Although Estonian teachers agree that all the cross-curricular themes are important and need more attention, they tend to externalize the reasons, why they can't do so themselves. As the analysis of collected data indicated, majority of teachers would like to give more attention to the cross-curricular themes, if they had more time, more support and more knowledge. When it comes to themes *Safety*, *Environment and sustainable development* and *ICT*, teachers mostly mention the lack of time and/or school board's support and/or to the need of concentrating on the final tests. Cross-curricular themes *Media education* and *Career planning* showed different results: teachers claim that they do not have enough **knowledge** to use these themes in

classroom. It was a little bit surprising that teachers of mother tongue both admitted that they are lacking knowledge and did worse on knowledge tests than the teachers of social sciences – since teachers of mother tongue carry the hardest load of media education. Today we have to admit that when it comes to media literacy, Estonian teachers are not ready to act as educators, although they may be there for pupils as trusted adult conversation partners (Kõiv, 2011).

Altogether, the research project of cross-curricular themes in Estonian schools came to the conclusion that in sample schools the idea of integrated learning had not succeed. Yet, since media literacy is one of the key competences, the situation demands further analysis. Based on my own doctoral thesis and several other studies, I will suggest some of the reasons, why media education as cross-curricular theme has yet not succeeded in Estonian school system:

- **Teachers have no cognitive model of media literacy, and therefore they tend to see media education as extra load.** Mostly, Estonian teachers have pre-service training that does not include any media education, and since teachers belong to different generations, their attitude towards media may be very ambivalent. In soviet period, all the media was strictly censored and used as a tool of communist propaganda; generally, every person was able to see that the media are lying and could not be taken seriously. Yet, younger teachers have grown up in the times when media played a great role in regaining Estonian independence. They tend to trust media, but do not understand the need of critical reading of media messages. Since teachers have no theoretical basis for reflexive media usage, they understand their media relations as a part of personal, not their professional selves.
- **Curricula are overloaded and assessment is oriented on factual knowledge, not on critical reading skills.** Estonian national curriculum 2002 was created by the specialists who did not cooperate too well. As a result, curricula of different subjects are really overloaded with facts, but does not leave much time to find the connections between items learned. Since competition between Estonian schools is rather high, most schools make an effort that ensures pupil's best performance in tests; pupils are not seen as personalities who desperately need certain life skills. Media is sometimes used as source of additional teaching material, but not analysed critically – perhaps

because teachers themselves are not able to critical reading, and usually critical media analysis is not graded in tests that determine schools “quality”.

- **Teachers do not have skills of critical reading, nor the methodology to teach critical reading.** Tradition of educational media (textbooks, copybooks, educational movies, etc) are in Estonia usually created in the manner that does not support critical analysis: the important facts are emphasized, the right answers given, the exercises are designed for drilling certain skills (e.g. grammar or multiplication). Critical or analytical questions about the trustworthiness of information or mediator’s biases are rarely asked. For example, if textbook says that the Earth is flat, students are encouraged to memorize it, not to question it. The media texts are used in the same manner, which obviously does not enhance media literacy. Estonian teachers are very conscious about the quality of learning materials they found from internet, but rather ignorant when it comes to media materials, which are not controlled or even quoted correctly (Ugur, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Lauk, Raudvassar, & Metsoja, 2008).
- **Media literacy is narrowly understood as producing news stories or as ability to use internet.** In Estonian context, term “literacy” is mainly understood as ability to read and write. During twelve school years, pupils come several times across with the task of writing a news story, and for many teachers, this seems to be sufficient. In reality, the term ‘media’ is much broader than written journalism, and so is the concept of media literacy. Another misunderstanding is caused by the rapid development of new media. In 1990s, the Tiger Leap Foundation equipped all Estonian schools with computers and internet connection, and organized many teaching programs for pupils. This created a myth that Estonian children know everything about internet, at least they do know more than adults. As a result of adult’s insecurity, our children are left on their own: Estonian parents and teachers react on children’s unpleasant experiences in the internet, but tend not to take proactive actions (e.g. explain the risks in the internet) (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2010).
- **School culture does not support teachers’ cooperation.** Concept of cross-curricular themes, e.g. media literacy demands creative cooperation between educators. Estonian schools are used to the system where teachers are

obligated to fulfil the demands of curricula, and pupils are the ones who have to deliver desired learning outcomes. In fact, under the pressure of competition and overloaded curricula one may forget children's best interests. Learning child should be in the centre of every school system, and teachers must be able to combine their competences and cooperate in order to create best possible learning environment. This is a problem that touches deeply the ideology of education, and needs attention of every school and every teacher. Since media combines so many aspects of life – education, entertainment, relations, hobbies, involvement in political processes etc – it makes media literacy a common value that should be developed in vivid cooperation.

- **Generation gaps (teachers of different age, teachers and pupils) in the field of media usage is huge; different generations live in different media environment.** It is evident that young people tend to absorb the changes in media environment more rapidly than older adults. Digital divide between generations is in Estonia broader than the gap between people with different socio-economical status. Media habits define age groups (with many individual differences, of course) and in some cases it can be hard to find common language. Martin Lindstrom (Lindstrom & Seybold, 2004) has pointed out that younger generation processes media messages differently than their parents, and understanding demands hard work from both parties. If adults do not trust their knowledge of new media or show openly their negative attitude towards youth culture, and young people do not comprehend what kind of media literacy or social skills they are missing, the educational process may be unsuccessful.

Ways for development

Based on the assumption that media literacy is a constantly developing competency that enables a person's active participation in social processes, I suggest that the implementation of media education (as an activity that leads towards promoting media literacy) must be understood as a constant process rather than as a product. The cycle of reflective learning can be effectively used as a basis for media education system. Figure 1 indicates the main steps in implementing media literacy to the system of formal education.

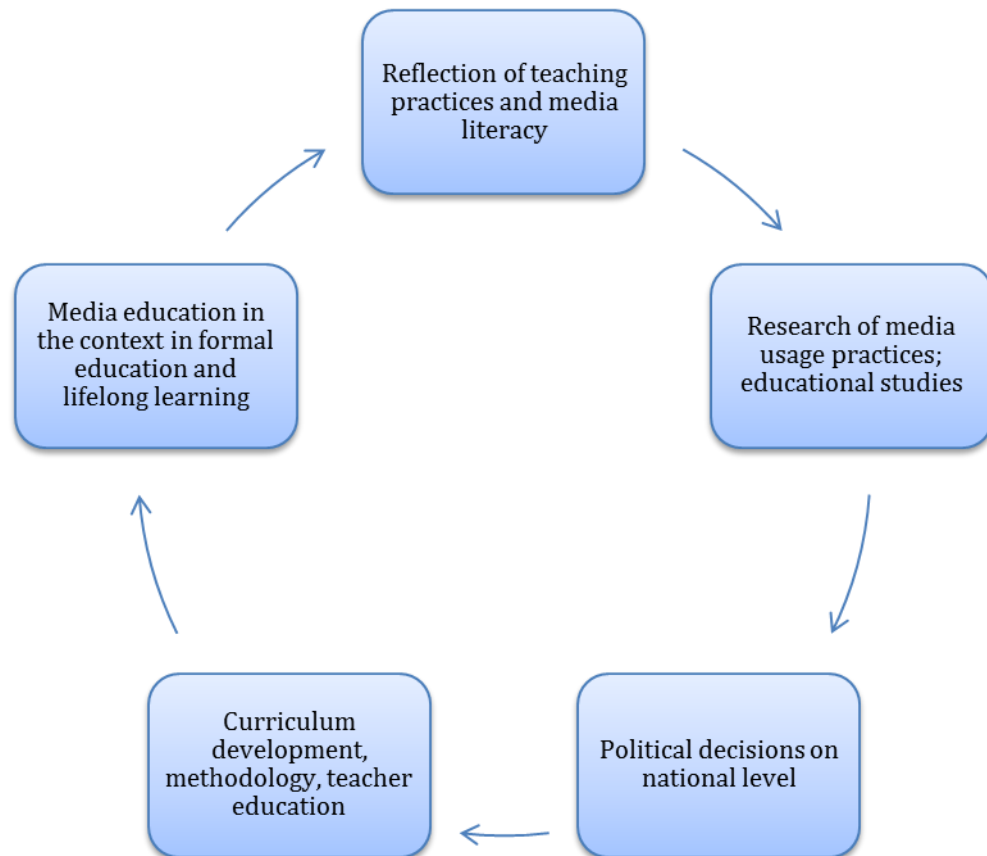


Figure 1: Implementation the concept of media literacy into education system

It is hard to identify one particular starting point of the process: different disciplines may enter the discussion with their own intentions and theories, which is normal in developing a cross-curricular theme that aims to children’s educational needs.

- **Research** of media, media usage practices, media content, monitoring of several processes in media and society, complemented by educational research, is crucial in order to create the background for media education. Dissemination of research results enables educators to indicate the points where content or methods of education need updating or even replacing with more necessary content. A constant dialogue between different disciplines is needed to understand, which processes are so important and relevant, that the changes in content of media education are required. Dialogue between social scientists, media and education researchers is also needed, since the outlet – school lesson or pedagogical activity – is a common activity. The results and ideas of different disciplines help to define the most important learning outcomes in the particular situation, and find the optimal implementation

methods. Since schools are responsible for their own curricula, dissemination of research results must reach school leaders.

- **Political decisions** about education are important, since they influence financing of development. European education policy provides significant freedom of decision to the member countries about the priorities of developing the educational system. Media literacy has received a lot of attention in the policy documents of the EU and UNESCO (UNESCO, 1982 and 2008, European parliament and Council, 2010, European Parliament, Committee on culture and education 2008) leaving the decisions about implementation to the member states. There is a possibility that some issues of media literacy (for example safety in the Internet) are getting significant priority, leaving other issues out of the discussion (for example critical reading skills). This raises the issue of identifying the stake holders and interest groups in each particular country that are interested in media education as a whole. Many countries are experiencing difficulties in finding the agents who could stand for media education in general, not only supporting several elements of it. The absence of the understanding the complex vision of media education has slowed down the discussion about implementing media education.
- **Curricular framework** and teacher education should build the concrete forms of media education. In the process, depicted in Figure 1, the development of the curriculum and teacher training should “translate” scientific conclusions and political decisions into school practice. Today, the Estonian national curriculum enables different forms of media education, and the new curriculum takes the concept of media education to a new level: but since teacher training does not cover media and communication literacy, the implementation of the national curricula is not guaranteed. I argue that occasional in-service training is not sufficient for creating a teacher’s own media literacy and understanding how to promote pupil’s media literacy, nor can in-service training provide adequate understanding of the inclusive teaching methods that are necessary in media education (Buckingham, 2003). The parallel process to curriculum development must be development of higher education curricula, in order to provide teacher pre-service training at the level that enables them to benefit from additional methodological

materials. Another issue that must be defined in the process of curriculum development is the question of mandatory and voluntary content of media education. This question has ideological, but also practical features (how many lessons are required, what amount of in-service training teachers need, what kind of teaching materials are necessary, etc). Those parts of media literacy that are considered to be less relevant or not relevant for all pupils, will have a place in extra-curricular activities, voluntary educational programs, youth programs, media clubs etc, and financed from different sources.

- **Reflection and assessment** is the least studied part in the process of media education. There are some tools to assess a school's or a country's activity in organizing media education and methods to describe an individual's media usage, but no trusted tools for assessing a person's media literacy. This is natural, considering that media literacy is understood as a continuum that develops accordingly to the media environment. However, it is necessary that a pupil acquires the ability to reflect on their own media usage and media literacy. At the same time, critical self-reflection and self-evaluation is necessary for each teacher and each school, as long as they take partial responsibility for developing a pupil's media literacy. The process of self reflection indicates the areas that need scientific attention: new usage practices, new attitudes, unsatisfactory results in some areas of media education, changes in media or in the society that challenge current media education etc.

Conclusion

Estonian education system has faced and solved many problems, but the critical questions about media literacy have not been in the centre of attention yet. Accordingly, media education in Estonian schools is occasional and out of date, does not reach all pupils, does not respond to pupil's questions and does not support all aspects of media literacy – despite the fact that minimal curricular settings are created. In order to be updated with the changes in the media, development of media education must be a constant process, that includes all the necessary elements described as reflective cycle. This task can not be fulfilled sufficiently, until we only have limited resources for in-service training of teachers. Positive attitude towards

media education can successfully be created during the pre-service training, and supported with the periodical in-service training programs.

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