

I. Education in Baltic Cities

EAST – From Socialism to a Market Economy

The change of the political and economic system in former socialist countries in the Baltic Sea Region was very sudden and rapid. The school system suddenly found itself in a new, democratic and market oriented society that was to a large extent unknown.

The general aim of the former school system was to produce citizens that would fit into the socialist society. Learning and accepting hard facts was considered more important than the ability of freethinking. The school system was generally very authoritarian. The school also took care of the moral and political education and influenced the pupils and their families also outside regular school hours.

The school system produced citizens with generally good knowledge and education, but with minor experience of free discussion, self-expression and ability of free search for new ideas and learning.

The sudden change also changed the expectations of the future life for the young. For many, the ideals became very materialistic – to get rich and to become businessmen. This tendency is today not so strong as it was the first years after the change and the ideals of the eastern youngsters do not differ fundamentally from these of the west.

Western Ideas Are Spreading

Nowadays the general political and pedagogical aims in the former socialist

countries do not differ substantially from those in the west. The tendency to more process-oriented education where the pupils are thought to think freely and solve problems, the change of the teachers role, the introduction of modern technology and computers in schools, the working process in the class-rooms etc. is supported by the school-politicians. The main difference is the level of the starting point in the development of school system. The economic possibilities are smaller. Also the way the schools are managed is in general much more authoritarian in the east.

There are some differences that have their source in the old system. For example, in the former system, the schools were active also outside the official school hours. The concepts of education and upbringing were not separated. This was manifested in pioneer or other young communist movements. Whatever one may think of them, they played an important role and left an empty space for the young when they were abandoned. There was really nothing to replace the activities of the communist youth movements, like camps, festivals and other activities.

In the former school system, practically everyone went to school. If a pupil did not fit into the normal school, there were special schools that took care of the less favoured, like invalids, less gifted or children from difficult family situations.

The aim today is to integrate these pupils into the regular school. The process is very difficult and has in many places created dropouts, which was earlier never heard of. Today you can even find children in many cities that hardly do not go to school at all. The new school-system has minor possibilities to deal with that problem.

There is a clear tendency of increasing differences of quality levels between schools. Within the same national public school system, there are low standard schools, often in the countryside and in

low-income areas in cities, and better schools in other areas. Private schools is also a new phenomena.

The Teacher

One specific problem in the east is the fall of the social position of teachers. They were rather highly esteemed in the former system, and had also relatively high wages and a good social position. The wages have not followed the wage level in general and today a teacher gets even less than a semi-skilled manual worker does. This has had bad influence on the recruitment of new teachers. A very large part of new teachers do not even enter the teachers' profession. Young teachers also tend to leave schools for better paid jobs outside. The median age of teachers is rather high and rising. The intellectual development of teachers has weaker support.

The education of teachers have generally not changed very much yet. In some of the eastern countries, more attention is given to complementary education to active teachers in order to bring new ideas into the school system than change of teaching methods in teachers colleges.

The main contents of the education has not changed very much, except obviously in some subjects like history. Russian language has lost importance. Now English is the first choice of most of the pupils. The language skills of English teachers have grown considerably, due to more western contacts, and this has risen the quality of English language education. Earlier the stress was on grammar. Now conversation is considered at least as important.

Also in the east, the "soft" subjects are losing importance. The pupils should mainly get knowledge in order to pass exams to attend higher education, for example universities. Concentration is on mathematics, languages and other "hard subjects", but subjects like art, music and physical exercises loose their importance.



WEST – From Industrial to High-Tec society

Parallel with the fundamental changes in the former socialist countries in the Baltic Sea Region, there is a rapid development also in the EU countries of the region.

We are leaving the industrial society that honoured virtues like stability, loyalty and order. The new high technological society honours virtues like independence, flexibility, curiosity and life-long learning. The hierarchic system is replaced with networking and direct communication. The importance of the ability to express oneself in writing or by mouth is increasing.

There is few working-places left for unskilled labour. You need a good education almost regardless your profession. In the industrial society, the employees in a high degree tended to stay at the same work place for the rest of their lives. Now they must be prepared to change careers and professions several times during their professional life.

How can the school system meet these demands? Changes do not show quickly in the educational system. In classrooms of today, the pupils' desks are still facing the teachers' desk and the blackboard, just like when the public school system started. It is now possible to see the advent of basic changes of classroom structure as the educational methods change.

Changing Pedagogic Methods

One example is the introduction at large scale of process oriented pedagogic. This concept means that the pupils freely shall search for knowledge and present the results. The role of the teacher as knowing everything and to spread this knowledge to the pupils is decreasing. Instead the teacher will function more as an advisor and give inspiration to the pupils in their search for knowledge.

The education will still be based on specific subjects, like mathematics, languages etc. However, there are many examples of new and thrilling combinations of topics as single or groups of pupils' carry out various projects under guidance of a teachers team from very different subjects.

Another tendency is stronger stress on the "hard" subjects, like mathematics, natural sciences and languages. In the

process, the "soft" subjects, for example creative arts, have lost importance. On the other hand, there is a debate on the concept of intelligence, which traditionally focuses on "hard" abilities in various IQ-measuring tests. Many argue that ability in "soft" experience is as important as the "hard" facts in a future society based on interaction and communication and may therefore not be forgotten.

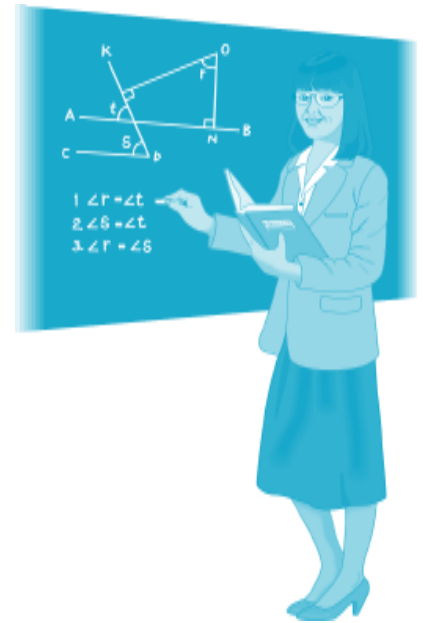
The introduction of computers in the classrooms is changing the education methods and the role of the teachers very much. The teacher cannot have knowledge of everything anymore. However, he must still have the main responsibility of the learning process. Computers also change the structure and function of the classrooms considerably. Pupils move freely to pick up handbooks, discuss with others in the group and go to the computer to find or compile information. In the classroom there may be many different activities going on at the same time. For an old-timer it may seem as chaos, but the teacher still must guide the processes going on in the classrooms.

In many places, there is a strong discussion on the role of the school not only as a place to learn facts but also to foster the pupils. Moral and ethical issues must be treated in school as well as at home. Very often both parents have jobs, and many argue that family ties are looser now. Issues like racism, neo-fascism and other extreme ideologies must be fought also in schools.

An interesting aspect is the great influence from pedagogical examples in the Soviet Union of the twenties and early thirties when dealing with children from less favoured families with social problems. Aspects such as learning by doing where the pupils take social responsibility in a broader aspect than in the traditional schools are a result of these impulses and have proven to be more efficient than the regular educational systems for this difficult category of pupils.

Towards the 21st Century

If we want to understand the society of the twenty-first century, you have to look at the values of the present young, because



they will be the grown-ups of tomorrow and their basic values of today will not change fundamentally when they are middle-aged. Today's young distrust authorities, value an interesting job more than a high paid work, they believe in the individual's capacity to create their own destiny, they travel and like to work abroad and wish the nature and the environment to be protected.

We can see an outline of the school in the twenty-first century. Subjects will be changed, classrooms will be different and the role of teachers will be another. But the role of the school will not change. The school system will maintain the task of giving the pupils a generally good foundation that makes it possible for them to be good 21st century citizen.

by Juhan Janusson,
UBC Project Manager
e-mail: juhan@post11.tele.dk

Valuable comments by:
Ulrika Hardt, Copenhagen, Denmark
Anu Pink, Turi, Estonia
Jutta von Götz, Lübeck, Germany
Ib Hansen, Kolding, Denmark
Zofia Stanek, Szczecin, Poland