

## **Lectio praecursoria**

Dear listeners,

Why does education need a critique of ideology?

Let me start with a quote:

"The end of action is the first principle of action, insisted the ancient Greek thinkers. The content of this statement has become very topical in Western societies, which are struggling year after year under increasing techno-economic competition. The instrumental spirit of material competition has also become apparent in higher education: an overvaluation of means and instruments and a dire need to develop them further.

However, social problems cannot be solved solely on the basis of technical and economic criteria. Society and its members are likely to become an intermediary between one means and another if the aims and purposes of social life are not clarified with vigour and determination.

This is the task of higher education. It is the duty of every higher education institution to maintain and cultivate a social, ethical and aesthetic spirit of enquiry and to point the way both for the individual and for society as a whole." (Koli 1968, 32-33)

With these words, which are also visible in this table, Paavo Koli, Rector of the School of Social Sciences, which today is Tampere University, concluded his speech at the opening of the academic year 1964. Now, 60 years later, we are gathered here in the Paavo Koli Hall, which - and the entire PinniA building - is in the process of being abandoned by the university in the interests of economy.

This could be a statement from a contemporary critic, so completely have the instrumental values of global competition, efficiency, commercialisation, economic growth and money taken over the discourse on universities, science and education.

How have we arrived at a situation in which the production of competitiveness has become the primary objective of education and science?

In my dissertation, I argue that the conditions of the present should be approached through a critical study of the ideology of the past that traces its historical development.

Understanding the history of education policy is crucial, as the social context with its history, traditions and cultures forms the continuities that delimit socio-political decision-making and the arena of political struggles.

In my dissertation, I trace the formation of Finnish contemporary education policy and the Finnish education system from the post-World War II period, from the construction of the welfare state onwards. However, for the purposes of this opening speech it is worth starting a

little closer, from a turning point in recent history a couple of decades ago.

At the beginning of the 2000s, it seemed that we were living *post-ideological* times in Europe: things were going well, economies were thriving, the ideological battle of the Cold War appeared to have been settled for good: liberal democracy and capitalist markets were applied in new territories in Europe and Russia. Education systems were promoting *Education for all* and aiming at global citizens with competencies for knowledge-based economies. However, the hubris did not last.

After the financial crisis 2008 and the ensuing economic recessions, increasing material and cultural polarisation of the population, growing awareness of impending ecological crises and related civic movements, the rise of radical conservative right-wing parties, Brexit, Russia's annexation of Crimea (and the following war of aggression against Ukraine) it has become palpable that such views were dream-like reveries. The *ideological* returned to the forefront with a vengeance.

Yet post-ideological convictions seem to persist in many discourses. The regime of a global knowledge economy boosting economic and material growth via national competition has been surprisingly impervious to socioeconomic and ecological crises. Instead, its steady course has been articulated to hasten and require 'more steam', especially in national education and training systems, to increase efficiency among the population. The bold tone of the necessity for reforms – 'There is no alternative' – is taken for granted as a justification. In response, national governments have proposed reforms in the education sector at an accelerating pace.

What emerges in these social and political phenomena is the manifestation of contingency, dissonance, hierarchies and a heterogeneity of antagonisms but also continuity, persistence of discourses and social inertia present in contemporary societies. They also show how human beings are enthralled by divergent ideologies and end up transforming *and* reproducing the foundations and institutions of societies in contingent, even unforeseen ways. These social and political phenomena have also been prominent and influential in Finland.

For a long time Finland has in many respects been seen as a global benchmark country due to the rise of the IT sector as a global force followed by the shortlived but spectacular success of Nokia. Since the turn of the millennium, the PISA results have raised the Finnish education system to an object of global admiration. Tides turned, however. The IT sector has declined since the late 2000s followed by a dip in Finland's PISA rankings. Finland fell into an era of slow growth and austerity, causing cuts in public spending, including the education sector.

Yet the belief in the power of the education system as a driver of major societal changes in terms of knowledge economy has not waned but persists.

The list of reforms in the recent history of the education system is long: two-year pre-school, the reform of the vocational education, the extension of compulsory education, the reform of university entrance examinations, the 3-year doctoral pilot, and so on.

Restoring the old ‘competitive edge’, aligned with introducing new reform incentives and concerns, such as populism, growing cultural heterogeneity, ecological threats and digitalization to name a few. Finnish education policy, therefore, is in a state of intensive fermentation where old problematisations brew together with new challenges.

My dissertation analyses the concretisation of these challenges in Finnish education policy and develops new analytical methods for the study of education and education policy. In this thesis, I apply the framework of Essex School discourse theory and at the same time explore the potential and limitations of this framework in education policy research.

### **And how did I come to study the ideological features of education policy?**

The social developments described above also illustrate my own personal history, as I spent my childhood in the 1990s and early 2000s. I entered primary school aged 7 in 1996, started vocational school and night school in 2005, and began my university studies in 2010 in primary school teacher training at the University of Jyväskylä. In my studies in education, I experienced a strong emphasis on educational psychology and the didactics of teaching. I had been interested in the historical construction of education, but I felt that my studies offered only a few perspectives on the history of education, and the broader social context. The central focus of the teacher studies was effective learning, i.e. how to learn and teach - rather than questions about the aims of education, what should be learned, or why such content is studied in schools in the first place.

I sought for broader perspectives first through my minor subjects - I read social sciences, sociology and the basics of social policy, which also offered broader perspectives on how the education system works.

During my studies, I also part-timely worked with young people placed outside their homes in Child Welfare and in an organisation for children with cognitive disabilities. In these, the diversity of society and, on the other hand, marginalised groups and inequalities became real to me. My interest in the mechanisms of social inequalities and forms of power was strengthened. I applied for the joint Master's programme in Sociology and Policy of Education offered together by the Universities of Helsinki, Turku and Jyväskylä, which fuelled and expanded the perspectives I wished to gain on the functioning of the education system.

In my Master's thesis, I studied the ideologies behind the basic education curriculum in Finland - what kinds of goals and values are set for education and teaching. While doing that research, I discovered how little ideologies are discussed in the field of educational science.

As you might expect, this work laid the foundations for the present dissertation.

Critical research on ideologies is therefore important because ideologies influence our choices, even if we are scarcely aware of them. A key contribution of my dissertation is therefore to demonstrate the relevance of ideological theory in understanding educational phenomena.

**Dear listeners,**

what is at stake when we talk about research on ideologies in educational policy?

A brief overview of ideology theory is called for.

Political ideologies are a set of values, beliefs, opinions, habits and related practices that form relatively stable belief systems, such as conservatism, socialism and liberalism. Social actors such as political parties, international interest groups and civil society movements draw on these traditions of thought to justify, define and change the conditions under which society is organised - such as social and economic policies, legislation and the functioning of social institutions such as education.

The study of ideologies is therefore a study of political thought and of the self-understanding of political communities. Ideologies are frameworks for decision-making and the conceptualisation of social life and contain central ideas, normative commitments and unstated preconceptions, self-evident truths and truths, often partly unnoticed by the actors themselves.

For Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, founders of the Essex school of discourse theory, the study and critique of ideologies focused on the concept of ideologism, that is, (the question of) the ways in which a particular viewpoint is established and normalised as the dominant view preferred over other options. This signification is called ideological closure.

Laclau and Mouffe also drew attention to the role of affect and emotion in the appeal of ideologies: certain political claims appeal (and appeal) to people because they evoke emotions and respond to the needs experienced by individuals. These desires and needs are partly unconscious. Ideological closure and emotive rhetoric are applied in politics, for example by articulating black and white narratives of threats or by appealing to necessity of no other alternatives.

Finnish education policy can be structured around two main, partly competing frames; welfare state ideology and competition state ideology. These policy-making frameworks have taken shape through historical struggles that might well have ended in significantly different outcomes. The primary school system, for example, has been a subject of criticism since its inception, and in the late 1990s its legitimacy was again challenged when business demanded

more competition between schools by opening up the school market and allowing private education providers, as was the case in Sweden at the time. These demands culminated in Finland's surprising PISA success in December 2001.

While welfare state ideology emphasises equality of educational opportunity and the extension of social justice, the education policy of the Competition State emphasises the individual's responsibility for his or her own employability, and the skills and competences that enable him or her to compete against other job seekers for jobs in the labour market .

The success of the Nokia company strengthened Finland's competitiveness strategy based on technological development, with an emphasis on mathematical and scientific know-how and the production of technological innovations to meet the needs of business and industry. This success story has been nurtured in education policy since the 1990s and indeed remains the basis for projections for the future of education, even though the world around us and its challenges have changed significantly.

Financial crises, a growing polarisation of society and a growing awareness of ecological crises have intensified criticism of the prevailing ideology of the competitive state. Finland's competitive state strategy has failed to deliver on its promises of stronger economic growth and prosperity for all, or to address the over-consumption of ecological resources. Instead, social inequalities have increased, especially in the 1990s, and the economic growth since then has mainly increased the wealth of the rich.

It is legitimate to question the focus of education policy on competitiveness, for example on ethical, educational or even ecological grounds. But even if we accept the goal of increasing competitiveness as the guiding star of education policy, there are ideological distortions in its implementation; I will now present two paradoxes in current education policy.

The central objective of Finnish education policy is to raise the educational level of the population so that at least 50% of the generation has completed higher education. To achieve this goal, it no longer suffices for even the entire age cohort entering upper secondary school to continue to higher education after completing their studies in secondary school; in the future more and more vocational school students should also continue their studies to higher education. At the same time, vocational education and training is being 'developed' through funding cuts, which have led to staff redundancies and a reduction in contact teaching resources. Cuts are also undermining opportunities for adult learning and retraining, and top-up education. The question is: to what extent does compromising on the quality of vocational education and training contribute to reaching the 50% higher education target or to strengthening national competitiveness?

Another aspect of the tight economic policy and cuts is that education and training policy must be seen in conjunction with other sectors of social policy. The significant cuts to social security made by the Orpheus government (2023-) will drive families into poverty. Last autumn, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health estimated that poverty among

families with children will increase by around 16,000 children. Such short-sighted austerity measures will have long-term negative effects on the well-being of families and children. Poverty also affects children's learning, as we can see from the PISA results how children's learning levels are closely linked to their socio-economic backgrounds.

These two examples are highly controversial reforms: at the same time as governments are pursuing national competitiveness and are concerned about the decline in PISA scores, this does not prevent them from pursuing policies that undermine the very objectives they claim to promote. We are at the heart of ideological closures and contradictions. In practice, competition state education policy is destroying the preconditions for its success.

We live in a time in which ideologically complex struggles are more visible than ever before. Inequality, the response to the ecological crisis, immigration, nationalism, the state of democracy and the funding of public institutions are divide opinions. Unfortunately, questioning the role of science in society and admiring authoritarian leaders have also become more common.

Education and training are fundamentally practices committed to the good life and to safeguarding the conditions of life - in this age, truth, goodness, equality and democracy need defenders.

My findings also argue for 'generalists' - generalists who can link phenomena at different levels and examine the implications of the socio-political situation. In an era that has fuelled the increasing specialisation of researchers in narrower and more specialised fields of study, we still need comprehensive frameworks and analyses to understand broader social developments and to address the social and political dimensions of education.

It can be said that the determination to address the social problems and social purposes that Paavo Koli called for 60 years ago remains a pressing issue in our time. In my dissertation, I argue that criticism of ideology based on discourse theory offers a versatile framework for this purpose.

Finally, looking to the future:

Policy makers are currently drawing up guidelines for the reform of the education system: the Future of Basic Education 2024-25 sets out long-term development priorities for basic education and curriculum work. At the end of November this year, the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture set about updating the vision for higher education and research from 2030 to the next decade.

It is up to us as educationalists and all those working in education and training to take action and ask where we are going and why. The future of education is being defined in the present and the time to influence in it is now.