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The Meaning of Sustainability Matters – Analysing Practices of Education for Sustainable Development in Korea’s Teacher Education

Johannes Tschapka and Young-Joo Lee

Abstract The policy on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in teacher education tends to integrate ESD as a cross-curricular theme into school subjects. Korea, by contrast, as one among few countries only offers a separate school subject: Environmental Education (EE). In this article we analyse through theories of social practice how school curricula, lesson plans and teacher students’ theses in our Korean case reflect the implementation of sustainability in practices of teacher students. We argue that this integration fell short, which is less a question of whether ESD serves better as a school subject or as a cross-curricular theme, but rather results from an underestimation of meaning as a core element of teacher education practice.

Keywords education for sustainable development – cross-curricular theme – teacher education – theory of social practices

Die Bedeutung von Nachhaltigkeit ist entscheidend – Eine praxistheoretische Analyse von Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung in der koreanischen Lehrpersonenbildung

Zusammenfassung Die bildungspolitische Linie der Lehrpersonenbildung tendiert dazu, Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung (BNE) als fächerübergreifendes Thema in die schulischen Fachbereiche zu integrieren. Im Gegensatz dazu bietet Korea als eines von wenigen Ländern einen Fachbereich an: Umweltbildung. In diesem Beitrag analysieren wir mittels Theorien zu sozialen Praktiken, wie sich die Bedeutung von Nachhaltigkeit in den Schullehrplänen, Unterrichtsplänen und Masterarbeiten sowie Dissertationen von Studierenden als Praktiken der koreanischen Lehrpersonenbildung widerspiegelt. Wir versuchen den Nachweis zu erbringen, dass mangelndes Verständnis von Nachhaltigkeit bei Lehrpersonen weniger von der Frage abhängt, ob BNE als Fachbereich oder als fächerübergreifendes Thema angeboten werden soll, sondern vielmehr davon, dass Bedeutung als Kernelement von Praktiken in der Lehrpersonenbildung unterschätzt wird.

Schlagwörter Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung – fächerübergreifendes Thema – Lehrpersonenbildung – Theorie sozialer Praktiken

1 Introduction

Despite a couple of attempts to cross disciplinary boundaries in order to confront citizens as *subjects*¹ with their historical and social situations (Fensham, 2004), the doctrine of disciplinarity in school subjects still matters (Deng, 2007). This is nowhere more evident than in the existence of cross-curricular themes among which Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the youngest one. Only few authors ask for a subject covering ESD (see Oelkers, 2004), although there is evidence that embedding ESD into school subjects poses the risk that teachers do not integrate sustainability in their respective field, because they struggle with the *meaning* of sustainability (Kim & Tschapka, 2014). In our analysis here we argue that the importance of *meaning* seems to be more important than the question of offering ESD as a single subject or as a cross-curricular theme.

In contrast to e.g. the new Swiss school curriculum «Lehrplan 21», which includes ESD as a cross-curricular theme (Tschapka, 2012), Korean schools offer an elective subject called «Environmental Education» (EE), which has been dealing with sustainable development since the 2007 curriculum (Lee et al., 2014). We found ourselves wondering to which extent Korean teacher students follow the discourse on ESD and constitute *meaning* of sustainability as a vehicle for both of their practices (teachers and graduate students). Which traces of *meaning* can we identify in Korean teacher guidelines written by teachers and graduate students' theses with respect to the concepts of education and sustainability?

2 Practice theories and Education for Sustainable Development

Practice theories are a certain cultural and philosophical approach to framing public social problems and dynamics through analysing the concrete doings in the respective practice (Halkier, Katz-Gerro & Martens, 2011). Practice theories are a family of theories which originate from a couple of social theorists and do not share a single account (Reckwitz 2002b). Still, they have in common that in contrast to other social theories they neither search for objectivistic and pure structuralist explanations of social phenomena (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2016) nor rely on subjectivist theories, which see society driven by the actions of individuals as autonomous single agents (Schmidt, 2012). In mainstream educational approaches to learning, social challenges like sustainability have been limited to focussing on behavioural change or appealing to citizens' rationality (Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014). Instead, social practices are seen as certain sites of the social (Schatzki, 1996) wherein *subjects* are situated in emergent levels of social life. We use practice theories here as a heuristic approach, because surveying practice

¹ In this article we operate with two different notions of the word «subject»: *subject* (in italic font style) refers to a human individual in her or his historical and socio-cultural context, while subject (in regular font style) labels school subjects in formal educational systems.

leads to findings about how teachers and teacher students in our Korean case act as practitioners in their historical and socio-cultural context, following orders and its contemporary governmentality. According to Lemke (2002, p. 51) governmentality derives from Foucault's (2006) work to analyse power and its technologies of practitioners to situate themselves as *subjects* of society (Bröckling, 2002).

2.1 Role of practitioners

We take this radical departure from the conventional idea of individuals who should change their non-sustainable behaviour owing to their agency, and recognize teachers and teacher students as bearers of social practices, which meet the demands of sustainability or perhaps do not. As Reckwitz (2002b) recommends, we treat actions of these practitioners not as qualities of individuals, but as qualities of practices in which *subjects* participate. Practice theory has already been used for examining pro-environmental actions (Shove, Pantzar & Watson, 2012) in relation to *subjects* who are creating and taking care of social routines in accordance with what is perceived to be a just and a good life (Pakarinen, 2015).

2.2 Elements of practice

Schatzki (1996, p. 89) defined practice as a temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings, which have a historical root and a future-oriented purpose. Practice seems to be composed of aspects of things, knowledge, skills, beliefs and motivation (Reckwitz, 2002a). In a simpler version, Shove et al. (2012, p. 23) feature practice through the three elements «competence», «material» and «meaning». Concerning the general practice of teaching, we can identify a teacher as somebody who has the competence to facilitate learning in a certain domain, uses diverse learning materials and gives *meaning* to her or his profession as a mediator, so that learners can get acquainted with phenomena of this world.

2.3 Meaning links two practices of teacher education

Practitioners participate in many practices at once, which in some elements overlap. In our Korean case of ESD in schooling, we focus on the overlap of graduate teacher students' practices of teaching in their respective school classes and learning in the graduate school of Environmental Education (see Figure 1). While the elements of competencies for teaching and competencies for learning vary clearly and materials in schools differ from materials in teacher education colleges, the element of *meaning* seems to be the same in both practices.

Korean master's and PhD students give *meaning* to the notion of sustainability for both their teaching and their studying, because *meaning* is a constitutive element of practice (Reckwitz, 2002b). In the following sections we shall search for evidence regarding this specific element of practice to argue how certain processes of *subjectification* of

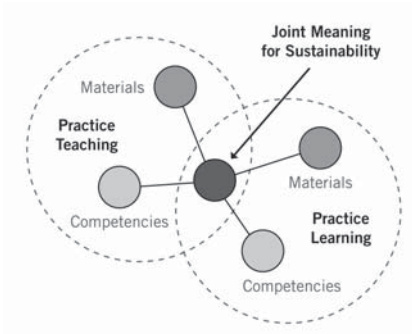


Figure 1: The element «Meaning» of sustainability is constitutive of two different practices of teaching and learning (practice model derives from Shove et al., 2012, p. 37).

teacher students during their preparation programme lead to a fuzzy or even an ill-defined understanding of sustainability, which jeopardises its application in school education regardless of its status as a school subject or a cross-curricular theme.

3 Korean materials on sustainable development

The exploration of the element *meaning* of sustainability in teaching and learning practices should encompass public documents. They come either from practitioners of governments like curricula, from teachers as in teacher guidelines or from teacher students as study results. To detect these practices which influence the *subjectification* as «a form of power itself» (Wrana, 2006 p. 54, translation by the author), we conducted a cross-case analysis on traces of *meaning* specifically inherent in those documents written by different stakeholders of the Korean educational system.

3.1 Korea's national curricula

To begin with the practice analysis, we first browsed curricula texts to detect the official foundations of Korean ESD practice in schooling and teacher education, which are tightly related to a school subject: Environmental Education (EE). The origin of the EE-curriculum has its roots in 1981 as a cross-curricular theme in the 4th Korean national curriculum (Lee & Choe, 2010), containing two pillars of Sustainable Development (Ekardt, 2005): that citizens should care for *environment* through conservation of nature and see the world as a *social* place for all. After the big change towards the democratisation of Korea in 1988, the 6th Korean national curriculum established Environmental Studies as an independent school subject (Nam, 1995). Sustainable Development (SD) appeared for the first time in Korea's curricula of 2007, incorporating «sustainable development, the society and lifestyles» for middle schools and «realisation of a sustainable society» for high schools (Baek, 2007). Owing to a political change

of the presidency in Korea in 2009, the concept of *Green Growth* fostered the *economic* component as the third pillar of SD in Korea's schooling, which remained in the curriculum revision due to the new president Park in 2012 (Seo & Tschapka, 2013).

3.2 Lesson plans

To understand how teachers see the practice element *meaning* of sustainability in their teaching, we analysed three recent sourcebooks: ESD class model contest (Korean Environmental Education Association, 2013), the 2013 ESD program (Korean Ministry of Education, Dept. of Science and Creativity, 2013b) and the guidelines for elementary school teachers concerning ESD class model (Korean Ministry of Education, Dept. of Science and Creativity, 2013a). All guidelines were written by teachers and contained descriptive as well as practical and emancipatory perspectives on ESD – not because of a consistent theory behind the endeavour of the guidelines, but due to a fuzzy understanding of *meaning* of sustainability of the different authors of the chapters (Kwon, Cho & Tschapka, 2014). Some authors of the three guidelines questioned the impact of certain trading practices in Far East Asia on producers and consumers following the viewpoint of critical theory, while other authors just provide information on the ecological footprint of certain non-sustainable production processes in Chinese and Korean agriculture. In the guidelines, food production and consumption play a major role. Nevertheless, some of the authors encourage students to compare the role of rice and cabbage in the kitchen of China with Korea to question the socio-cultural background of consumption and to reflect on the personal estimation and judgement of students. In the same guidelines, other authors remain in memory testing processes, where students should learn by heart how certain rice and cabbage plantations have an impact on ecosystems. This segregation of perspectives is likely to disconcert students' understanding instead of enabling a productive examination of the *meaning* of sustainability (Kwon, Cho & Tschapka, 2014).

3.3 Teacher education theses

To understand how teachers see the practice element *meaning* of sustainability in their teaching, we analysed the writings of bachelor's, master's and PhD theses in a graduate school for environmental education in Korea, examining how teacher students reflect the conceptual orientation of teacher education towards sustainability (Tschapka & Lee, 2016). During the UN decade of ESD between 2005 and 2014, only 7 out of 62 academic graduates explicitly used the notion «sustainability» in their theses. They stated that sustainability appears as a confusing and contested notion, which has been defined in too different ways. This is somehow surprising, because they hardly referred to the contemporary debate in the ESD science community which holds that, like the concepts of freedom and equality, sustainability is basically theory-driven (McKeown & Hopkins, 2003; Sauvé, 1999). Seemingly they kept a kind of resistance to applying sustainability instead of entering the current debate in their theses and instead of positioning themselves inside the scientific discussion.

3.4 Seminar survey

In college-level seminar papers on future scenarios of Seoul 2043 (Kim & Tschapka, 2014) we found evidence of how undergraduate teacher students describe the *meaning* of sustainability, in particular the notion of *development* in regard to ESD. The students were asked to provide narrative responses to the question of what exactly should be developed and to which extent those developments will change the daily routine of everyday people. The analysis of the students' texts was itemised into five categories of *development*: technocratic, world-order, community-based, autonomous and trans-generational development (Sauvé, 1999). The technocratic understanding of *development* argues that technological innovation will solve environmental problems as well as economic growth, while the world-order approach indicates that transnational regulations will control the exploitation and replenishment of natural resources. The community-based approach mainly refers to district-located and particulated projects. An autonomous approach, by contrast, expects individuals to have a saying on their sustainable lifestyle, while the intergenerational approach focuses on considerate actions of the current generations to care for the quality of life of future generations to come.

4 Meaning in the ESD practice

One of the major contributions of practice theories to detecting the element *meaning* in the text genres of section 3 has been the assertion that practice can be detected as the smallest unit of the social and the political that allowed us to investigate the concepts of education, sustainability and development in the Korean case of ESD in teacher education.

4.1 Meaning of education

In Figure 1 we assumed that teaching and learning can both be understood as practices, which occur in the context of social discourses of the society and its power relations (Wrana, 2012). Therefore the constitution of *meanings* appeared as process of *subjectification* of teacher students situating themselves in the social life of schooling as teachers and in graduate schools. In both practices teacher students are requested to deal with information generation for test issues in temporally short terms (Lee et al., 2014), while the opportunities to strengthen students' capabilities to *estimate* sustainable developments in the region or to create socially cohesive solutions to spatial interest conflicts in constructive ways are marginalised (Kwon et al., 2014). This marginalisation conflicts with the official directive of the *Environment Project Teaching* of the Korean curricula reform in 2009, which aims to strengthen the capability of analysing socio-cultural factors of sustainability (Seo & Tschapka, 2013). In our perspective, these competence aspects of estimation and facing conflicts seem crucial to understanding the *meaning* of sustainability, because both aspects seem to be necessary conditions for analysing the political that is inherent in contingent social processes (Mouffee, 2005).

4.2 Meaning of sustainability

Screening the lesson guidelines of teachers and the theses of teacher graduates we recognized that in both practices of teaching and learning ESD the practitioners underestimated crucial ideas like the fair global distribution of common goods. They strongly emphasised that the goal of environmental education is to achieve sustainability through solving environmental problems with technological solutions (Tschapka & Lee, 2016). At the same time the attention for global perspectives and the understanding for networking with other nations are poorly developed. The story of three male Korean teacher students, who rejected the suggestion of their three female teammates to bridge the sea between Busan city of Korea with Fukuoka in Japan, is a peculiar but indicating incident (Tschapka & Lee, 2014). In this case example students rejected the idea of a closer collaboration of two nations to project a more sustainable mobilisation due to a historically and culturally defensive attitude. Cognitive processes like facing conflicts and judging the benefit of constructive solutions – both necessary aspects of the competence for sustainability – are hardly supported in Korean lessons although it is a core of the 2013 lesson plans (Kwon et al., 2015). The case showed that bridging Korea and Japan seems rather an antagonistic debate (Mouffe, 2005) among learners to avoid the danger of hegemonic discourse than a relatively simple technological solution to build a tunnel. Some of the graduate teacher students refused not a tunnel between a peninsula and an island only, but rejected an important *meaning* of sustainability. Although this can be seen as a free choice of understanding (McKeown & Hopkins, 2003) students might confuse their trivial idea of free choice with the epistemological need of understanding practices of teaching and of writing graduation theses in a post-foundationalism way of analysing the socio-historical roots of their actions.

4.3 Meaning of Development

Korean curricula, lesson plans and the majority of graduate theses in EE still merge the notion of progress and *development*. This seems to derive from the political endeavour on Green Growth of the presidency of Lee Myung-bak between 2008 and 2012, which had an impact on the curriculum of the EE subject and on the curriculum of teacher students in EE graduate schools (Cho, Jang & Nam, 2014). By contrast Cowen and Shenton (1996) argue, that twenty-first century thinking refers to development as a process to compensate the shortcomings and maladies of progress and therefore the notions differ significantly. The survey here shows evidence that teachers in their guidelines as well as teacher students in their theses reflect the ongoing discourse of economic growth and technological development (Kim & Tschapka, 2014), while at the same time marginalising the compensation of historical injustice. Among five aspects of the notion *development*, the narrative descriptions and examples of teacher students indicate their strong affinity to understand *development* as an improvement of environmental and renewable energy technologies. On the contrary the students hardly used descriptions about global and intergenerational transformations, which might significantly differ from the current state of society. The expression «development» implies the idea of a trajectory (Sauvé, 1999). But only few teachers and teacher students asso-

ciate the noun «development» with a transformation of the society. On the contrary, the adjective «sustainable» is by a majority associated with conservation of the existing, which contributes to the very vagueness of ESD.

5 Recommendations

Referring to the practice analysis above we recommend educational authorities to foster *meaning* as a constitutive element of practice of teachers in schools and of teacher students. Due to their importance in schooling, curricula, lesson plans and graduate theses could enable a discussion on the *meaning* of sustainability for a democratic approach towards ESD (Kim, Kang & Choi, 2011). Furthermore, schooling happens in subjects still and globally, hence the practice of ESD needs to recruit teachers and teacher students as practitioners of various disciplines to debate the controversial *meanings* from their respective subject's position, bearing their political perspectives in mind too.

Finally we state that practice theory can help ESD to overcome the objectivistic (and basically structuralistic) behaviour orientation prominent not only in the Korean schooling we have analysed. As Bamberg (2003) argues the major reason why the behaviour-change model has received so much attention is because policy papers treat attitudes as if the necessary cognitive processes could be easily modified. This is true for any European educational systems too. But Shove et al. (2012) argue that any form of behaviour is hard to be controlled, because in fact practices are rooted deeply in the hegemonic discourses. Hence we suggest making use of the practice theories approach for an effective ESD policy through reflectively monitoring the *meaning* of teaching and learning practices, tapping into social practices, which are already underway.

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