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The Child In Estonian Culture During the 20th Century

This paper will reflect the methodological problems and results of my doctoral study published in 2005 with the title “Meaning of the Child in Estonian culture: Educational Sciences and Children’s Literature”.

Here I will present the structure and theoretical frame of the research and point out the results of the study – the description of the changes in Estonian childhood during the 20th century. I will also discuss different methods to study the subject “changing childhood/childhood image” and the opportunities to compare the results of the research with the tendencies in other cultures.

Structure and theoretical frame

The aim of the study was to clarify the meaning of the child reflecting in the educational discourse, presented in educational periodicals and in children’s prose. The treatment follows the changes in the interpretation of the child during 20th century. Who was the child in different historical and social conditions and during different political periods like in the time of Russian government, in the independent Estonian Republic, in Soviet Estonian Republic and after Soviet occupation?

My study belongs to the theory and history of both education and children’s literature. The theoretical background of this inter-disciplinary, inter-textual and comparative study is developed from the works of H. Habermas, J. Lotman, U. Bronfenbrenner and M. Nikolajeva. The concept of meaning will be clarified as a result of communication.

Subordinating the theme of the research to a more general background of cultural studies, the connection between children’s literature and educational texts will be interpreted from the position of cultural semiotics. Lotman’s term semiosphere will be used to describe a conditional space of meanings around the child, symbolising all ideas about child: the ideas about childcare, educational beliefs and specific knowledge about the life conditions of the child. Social movements – as an external

message – will break the boundary of the semiotic structure and create a new meaning.

In Estonian 20th century history a system of periods can be constructed based on the political changes: the periods 1900-1918, 1918-1940, 1940-1991 and after 1991 will be treated here. The rereading and decoding of texts revealed the necessity to split these historical entities into even narrower sub-periods. So finally the periods used in the analysis were formed in like this:

1900-1918 – The general voluntary movement leading to the forming of the ideas of national education, the activity of societies to publish educational literature, and to organise the private schools realising the reform ideas.

1918-1934 – Foundation of the independent Estonian government, construction of national cultural openness and educational system.

1934-1940 – The establishment of an authoritarian regime and the official requirements to adapt the literature and education after this political turn.

1940-1956 – Instability caused by the changes of different regimes during World War II, and after the war – subordinating all cultural and educational activities to the Soviet ideology.

1957-1968 – Beginning of the liberating processes, formation of the Soviet/national double culture.

1969-1991 – Strengthening of political and administrative control, the phenomena of forced Russification, the beginning of democratisation and school reforms.

1991-2000 – The re-establishment of civil society, reorganisation of the school system, of the institutions of children's culture and publishing activity in accordance to capitalist rules.

The study contains the comparison of two clusters of texts reflecting the Estonian children's life during the period 1900-2000:

- articles in educational journals, like "Education" (1919-1940), "Estonian School" (1935-1940), "Soviet School" (1940-1989), "Education" (since 1989) and other serial publications describing and analysing the way of life of Estonian children during the 20th century, in all 701 articles.
- Estonian children's prose, 116 books written or published for children.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model of human development (including the micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems) was adapted to treat the child's roles reflected in children's books and educational publications. According to the model the roles of child have been described as a member of family, a pupil (in school or kindergarten), a communicator with the wide world, a citizen (a member of nation, a builder of communism).

The method of text analysis could be described by the general notion of coding. The role of the child presented in educational articles and the role of the fictional child in children's literature was determined from the viewpoint of Bronfenbrenner's model, including the different order of main motifs and side issues. The specification of the role of child was provided by the hero's sayings about her/himself, the opinions of other characters about her/him and the activity or function of the main hero.

20th century changes in childhood

The main ideas about the child expressed in the analysed clusters of texts are the following:

1900-1918 – The rise of ideas of child-centredness in memoir prose and in teachers' education.

1918-1934 – The manifestations of child-centred ideas as the leading ideas of the building of national school system, the beginning of national educational research; the forming of specific features of children's literature. Since the educational publicity was addressing the child mostly as a pupil, children's literature was forming itself to a liberating, subversive factor, reflecting the child mostly as a member of family and a communicator of the wide world. There is a contradiction between the educational and the aesthetic reflection of home life: the educational journals have found hard problems in home nurture, while at the same time children's prose reflected a happy and warm atmosphere in the traditional country families.

1934-1940 – Official treatment of the child as a nationalist, the understanding both of school education and children's books as a realisation of the government policy. The role of the citizen was important both in the educational and in literary reflection as never earlier.

1940-1956 – The Stalinist ideology of education was founded exclusively on the belief in a happy childhood under Soviet government and of the collective influence as the main educating power. The scientific research of the child was nearly stopped. The model requested to follow in the children's book was limiting the aesthetic possibilities of the literature. The reflection of the child is concentrated on the role combination – pupil – citizen, builder of Soviet order.

1957-1968 – During the period called “thaw”, the liberating processes were mentioned both in education and in the children's literature. The academic research of child activities, individual capacity, collective relationship and other problems is beginning again, although the child would be treated mainly as a pupil. Children's literature began to flourish because of the new and fresh generation of children's writers depicting the child in new aesthetic qualities, reflecting the child in the play, in imagination, in the adventure. In the 1960s, children's literature as an agent of communist ideology turned into a critic of it.

1969-1991 – The period called the stagnation was remarkable in the educational openness because of the movement from the theme of teaching efficiency to the more general treatment of the child as whole. The critical position of the fictional child is widening also towards the home upbringing: the parents are too busy because of their work and social life, and the children are too alone, like mentally homeless. As the educational discourse would prepare the democratisation and school reforms in 1980s, so the children's books reflected the general waiting of positive changes by depicting an idyllic new wave.

1991-2000 – Publicity on education is very critically following different social problems concerning children's life in its different roles – as a member of family, a pupil and a communicator with the wide world. The children's books are treating the everyday problems in a more imaginative and philosophical way, discussing the relations between children and adults. The motif of citizen is nearly forgotten – something that might appear surprising in today's context of globalisation. Evidently the meaning of the child in Estonian society has been subject to diametrically opposite influences by the social movements, mostly in connection with strengthening and weakening of authoritarian regime. Certainly the actual understanding of the child

depends on phenomena peculiar to our national development in the ideology of the education, like the harsh changes in the estimation of children's value, the ignoring for many years of childhood as a specific phenomenon, and the periods of forgetting children's primary role as members of family.

Changing childhoods and other cultures

Some features in study design are certainly depending on the concrete conditions of educational and literary life in our relatively small culture. The clusters of texts include practically all texts (in books and educational periodicals) of interest to the research. Book publishing for our small population has been studied many times before and for a long time. During the Soviet period, there was one leading journal and only one publishing house. The situation has been complicated during the last ten years because of a widening publishing practice by many private groups of publishers. Maybe it would be rational to select a certain number of books and articles from each of the periods, but then the conclusions might be much more subjective.

Another way to approach this field might be to analyse other periodicals, like family magazines or daily newspapers as well as fictional texts published in periodicals.

Of course it would be possible to throw light on the dominating ideas of child rearing and education through interviews with representatives of different generations, and also through memoir writings, both literary and ethnographic.

The use of children's prose may seem questionable considering the artistic features of books, and because of the retrospective nature of children's literature: writers usually reflect not contemporary childhood, but more or less their own childhood experiences. In the 1960s for example, the rash urbanization and problems of children in new big buildings with many flats were a reality, but children's books typically depicted the child in a small house in a suburb or in a village.

The important structure along which to organize the results concerns the distribution into periods. The periods in the study are following the most influencing political changes, like the birth of the Estonian Republic in 1918, the turn to the authoritarian regime in 1934, the beginning of soviet occupation in 1940, the beginning of thaw

after Stalin's death 1956, the end of the Soviet order in 1991. The very same tendency will be obvious when analysing the development of the literature of Eastern Germany: topics and the style of writing for children have changed simultaneously with the great political events in the history of the country. (Thomson-Wohlgemuth 2005)

The meaning of the child in Estonian society has evidently been subject to considerable influences by the social movements, mostly those connected with the strengthening and weakening of authoritarian regimes. How to successfully compare changes of the child image in Estonian culture to the geographically and culturally close, but politically different Nordic countries remains to be solved.

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