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Changes in Craft Education

A Case Study of General Education in Latvia

ABSTRACT

In Latvia, the aim, content, and name of the subject of craft education have changed several times. The most recent transformation to “craft education” has been made following the general education reform, which has been gradually implemented since 2020. This study aims to investigate how the purpose and content of craft learning in Latvian comprehensive schools have changed as a result of this reform in comparison to the previous period. A qualitative study was carried out by analysing normative documents and interviewing design and technology teachers (N = 9) with at least 10 years of experience. The document analysis shows that the goal of teaching craft education has shifted from using craft as an opportunity to improve the quality of the living environment through creative involvement in techniques to producing valuable objects for oneself and society through the design process. The most significant change in the content is that craft is taught through the design process. Moreover, every pupil learns all the techniques; previously, students chose textile or woodworking and metalwork techniques from grade 5. According to the interviews, the skills acquired in each technique are at a lower level compared to the previous period, as the number of hours allocated to each technique does not allow pupils to pay in-depth attention to the tasks. The products made by the students have also become more straightforward. Finally, more time is spent on idea generation, planning, and evaluation.

Keywords:

Craft education content, craft products, craft techniques, design and technology education, general education.

INTRODUCTION

In Latvia, crafts have been taught in comprehensive schools since the end of the 19th century. Following the country's occupation by and incorporation into the USSR, handicrafts were taught together with nutrition and other topics rather than as a separate subject. The name, purpose, and content of the subject have changed several times (Pöllänen & Urdziņa-Deruma, 2017). The latest modifications have been made in line with the reform of the general education curriculum, which has been gradually implemented since the 2020–21 academic year. The 2022–23 academic year is the first in which the new subject of design and technologies is taught in all grades. This study compares the current aim and

content of handicraft learning with those of the previous period by considering both normative documents and the experiences of teachers in grades 1–9. Although the word *craft* is not mentioned in the documents, many of the themes planned in the new subject correspond to this word.

The previous period covers the years 2006–2020 (hereafter “previous period”) when a new standard for basic education came into force (Likumi, 2006). New standards for basic education were also adopted in 2013 and 2014, but they did not change the aim of home economics and technology; the content also remained largely the same (Likumi, 2013, 2014). This is also evidenced by the fact that the National Centre for Education of the Republic of Latvia offered teachers the possibility to implement home economics and technology programmes (with minor alterations); these were developed in 2005 and refined in 2010 and 2014 (Kampuse & Valsts Izglītības saturs centrs [VISC], 2010a, 2010b, 2014).

This study asks the following research question: How have the aim and content of craft learning in Latvian basic-education schools changed compared to the previous period as a result of the general education reform? This question is investigated by comparing normative documents and exploring teachers’ perspectives.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN CRAFT TEACHING

According to the *Dictionary of the Latvian Literary Language* (Latviešu literārās valodas vārdnīca, n.d.), *handicraft* refers to handmade products (e.g., textiles and leather products), a form of applied art, and a subject taught in schools for the development of simple working skills and abilities. “In craft, the focus is on creating a material solution by working with one’s hands” (Lepistö & Lindfors, 2015, p. 4). Craft is unique because making objects is an opportunity to experiment by combining function and expression; craft objects have a multisensorial appeal, e.g., visual appearance, sound (Niedderer & Townsend, 2014).

“Both craft techniques and designing are important parts of craft teaching” (Rönkkö et al., 2016, p. 55). Five types of craft processes can be identified: (1) model-oriented, (2) skill-oriented, (3) design-oriented, (4) art-oriented, (5) and tradition-oriented (Kröger, 2016; Pöllänen, 2009). Learning craft skills takes time and considerable practice (Johansson & Andersson, 2017). The content of craft as a subject is changing, as is the content of learning in general. Previously, “[h]andicraft was one of the subjects of general education, the content of which was mostly influenced by political, economic, technological, social and cultural development” (Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė et al., 2020, p. 2). In general education, there has been a move towards holistic and design-oriented crafts, with the possibility for the learner to choose the product, materials, and techniques based on specific needs (Lepistö & Lindfors, 2015).

Innovation means the availability and usability of new materials and technologies. In Finland, for example, one of the current trends is multi-materiality (Pöllänen, 2019). In Lithuania, “the handicraft subject went through a dramatic shift from crafts to technologies education” (Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė et al., 2020, p. 2). The United Kingdom (UK) was the first country to pioneer the subject of design and technology in schools (Owen-Jackson, 2015), and Latvia has followed the UK’s example. Today, interdisciplinary projects and collaborative work are recommended in craft education (Pöllänen & Urdziņa-Deruma, 2017). Furthermore, craft teaching around the world is gradually reducing gender segregation (Lepistö & Lindfors, 2015; Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Official documents were studied and teacher interviews were conducted to answer the research question posed above. The document and interview analyses were based on Ihatsu’s (2002) dual view of craft as an activity that consists of techniques and process (holism and intentionality). According to Bowen (2009, p. 32):

Document analysis involves skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation. This iterative process combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis ...

although quantitative content analysis can be useful in providing a crude overall picture of the material being reviewed, with indications of the frequency of terms.

To compare the purpose and content (the stages in the development of craft products and the craft techniques) of craft learning, the previous basic-education standards (Likumi, 2014) were compared with the current ones (Likumi, 2018). Additionally, model programmes for home economics and technologies (grades 1–9) (Kampuse & VISC, 2010a, 2010b, 2014) were compared with those for design and technologies (grades 1–9) (Eglīte et al., 2019). The model programme is a recommendation. Teachers can choose to use this programme or develop their own based on the model and the education standards (Kampuse & VISC, 2010a, 2010b, 2014; Eglīte et al., 2019). A semi-structured interview protocol was set up according to Pipere's (2016) recommendations. Nine design and technology teachers with at least 10 years of experience from different regions in Latvia were interviewed (Table 1). The teachers were asked whether they worked with the model programme recommended by the National Centre for Education or with their own programme. The respondents were also asked to describe what has changed in the content and organisation of teaching since the reform. The topics included the learning of handicraft techniques and the design process, the use of cross-curricular links, the proportion of individual and group work, and the division of pupils into groups.

All the interviews were conducted in Latvian via mobile phone and were recorded and transcribed. All the teachers' opinions presented here are paraphrased translations of their answers, not direct quotes. All the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study and gave their permission for their opinions to be used for research. Each respondent was assigned a code to protect their anonymity.

TABLE 1. Information about respondents.

Code	CRAFT TEACHING EXPERIENCE (YEARS)	TYPE OF SCHOOL	INTERVIEW DURATION
S1	30	Secondary	39:26
S2	28	Secondary	28:05
S3	32	Secondary	25:00
S4	23	Basic	37:48
S5	10	Secondary	69:33
S6	20	Basic	40:59
S7	33	Secondary	35:42
S8	31	Secondary	35:34
S9	45	Secondary, gymnasium	84:07

Note: basic school = grades 1–9; secondary school = grades 1–12; gymnasium = grades 7–12

RESULTS OF THE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

During the previous period, the handicraft subject aimed to develop the learner's understanding of the conditions and possibilities for improving the safety and quality of the human environment. The subject allowed students to become involved in creative technological processes. With the new approach, the aim is to make practical products that are useful to their creators and others, thereby gaining an understanding of the design process. Common to both periods is the emphasis on holistic crafts. The main difference is the following one. In the previous period, there were four stages of craft-making: (1)

creating and designing the idea, concept, and design; (2) designing the product; (3) making the product; and (4) evaluating the technological process, the product, and its safety (Likumi, 2014). In contrast, the current standards emphasise a design process with five stages: (1) identification of user needs and opportunities; (2) search for and selection of the solution; (3) solution planning and making; (4) solution testing, evaluation, and development; and (5) solution implementation (Likumi, 2018).

TABLE 2. Number of hours in the model basic-education programme for craft learning (grades 1–9)

Technique	2006–2020	Since 2020
<i>Paper</i>	26	27
<i>Natural materials</i>	25	22
<i>Moulding materials</i>		18
<i>Basic textiles</i>	34	40
<i>Basic woodworking and metalwork</i>	16	0
<i>Combining materials</i>	8	75
<i>Crocheting</i>	28	12
<i>Felting</i>	0	
<i>Knitting</i>	52	20
<i>Macramé</i>	0	
<i>Embroidery</i>	46	0
<i>Sewing</i>	70	28
<i>Weaving</i>	10	25
<i>Batik, printing</i>	6	0
<i>Combining textiles</i>	20	0
<i>Woodwork</i>	100	49
<i>Metalwork</i>	56	0
<i>Combining woodwork and metalwork</i>	36	0
<i>Technical drawing</i>	50	0
<i>Candle-making</i>	0	4
<i>All techniques (for one pupil)</i>	341 (textiles group) 351 (woodwork and metalwork group)	320

The previous standards named the craft techniques that had to be learnt, but the new standards do not name any techniques; instead, the specific techniques to be learnt are addressed in the model programme (Eglīte et al., 2019).

Previously, in grades 1–4, all students learnt the same material-handling techniques, and they worked with paper, natural materials, textiles, wood, and wire (Kampuse & VISC, 2014). Now, however, there are between three and four craft themes in each year from grade 1 onwards; for example, in

grade 1, no work is done with textiles. The basics of craft techniques are taught in grades 1–3 (Eglīte et al., 2019).

In the previous period, from grade 5 onwards, each pupil could choose whether to learn textile techniques or woodworking and metalwork (Kampuse & VISC, 2010a, 2010b; Likumi, 2014). Now, all students learn textiles and woodworking; new topics (e.g., candle-making and composite material creation) are also offered, but metalwork is no longer taught (Eglīte et al., 2019). Previously, 266 hours were devoted to textile craft, whereas now the figure is 125 hours. The number of hours for woodworking has also halved (Table 2).

RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

All the interviewed teachers worked according to the basic-education standard, and eight of them used the model programme. In the interviewees' schools, all pupils learn all the craft techniques. All the teachers noted that their work had changed. Two teachers who previously taught only textile subjects had started to teach woodworking. Seven teachers were teaching the same subject twice to two different groups; they said that they were still looking for ways to teach the new subject. One interviewee mentioned many times that she often consulted other schoolteachers in the district. Another respondent was trying out options for division of pupils into groups. The interviewees were consciously exploring how the proposed topics could be implemented according to the model programme. Three of them involved professionals from the community.

Craft techniques

The biggest change is that all students learn all the techniques. Pupils “are no longer divided into textiles and woodworking. There is more diversity because both [groups] are getting more variety and technology; at the same time, they are much more simplified” (S1). The level of skill acquisition has decreased because the number of lessons has diminished. This can be observed both in the number of technical elements learnt and in the complexity of the final products.

The teacher has to think specifically about the tasks so that the students have time to complete them (S7, S8, and S9). Several teachers cited knitting, which is taught in grades 4, 6, 7, and 8; as part of this technique, students learn different types of stitches as well as how to knit a variety of items: “They used to be able to knit mittens and socks and were able to do so quite smoothly and with good quality. At the moment, they are limited to knitting cup warmers and other small items.” (S2) “We only touch on knitting very minimally. We just cast on stitches and learn a little plain stitch or purl stitch. ... We don't make any items.” (S3)

One lesson a week leads to a situation where part of the lesson is devoted to repeating what was done the previous week because the pupils have forgotten they learnt (S1, S2). Several interviewees pointed out that the new programme for grades 4–9 no longer includes embroidery (S2, S6, and S8) or metalwork and technical drawing (S6, S7, and S9). In woodworking, the sequence of topics has changed. Now woodturning is in grade 8 and woodcutting in grade 7, but pupils in grade 7 are not yet able to do woodcutting (S9).

The students' skill levels were also affected by the fact that most of the interviewed teachers no longer gave them homework. Two respondents mentioned that they gave them small tasks, such as finishing what they had started. One teacher working with grade 1 students attributed their lower skills to the fact that pupils came to grade 1 with less developed fine motor skills (S4). S2, who worked with grade 4 students, said that she needed to work on skills that should be taught in grades 1–3. The decrease in skill levels was also attributed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the social constraints it caused.

The teachers interpreted subjects where more than one technique is offered differently. For example, S2 offered grade 6 students a choice of techniques for the topic “How to knit; knit on a loom or knit a product.” The boys' group chose knitting, while the girls' group chose knitting and macramé (S2). Another respondent also allowed their pupils to learn both knitting and macramé (S3). S6 said that

in grade 4, the students had previously learnt both felting and crochet in one year; this year, however, the teacher had decided to offer only crochet.

Design process

Regarding the stages of the design process, the teachers mentioned most often the generation of ideas and the making and presentation of products. The methods used to generate ideas were those that could successfully achieve results (S2, S3, S7, and S8). Sketching was considered important (S9). However, the interviewees spoke of a lack of time (S7, S8, and S9) and said that the time available was more appropriate in secondary school (S8). They experienced difficulties teaching the design process because the students wanted to work from a model (S4) or did not know how to implement it (S6). One of the teachers paid special attention to pupils' understanding of the design process at the beginning of grade 5 and included a special topic for learning about this process; as part of this, the students worked in groups to design a prototype rucksack commissioned by the teacher (S5). Another view is that the design process was already implemented in the past but was described with different terms (S9).

Cross-curricular and cross-subject links

Only one interviewee mentioned a cross-curricular link between learning textiles and woodwork: a beading frame and a tapestry tool in woodwork (S4). A cross-curricular link with visual arts was implemented in the topic "How to make the model of a house and its layout" (S1, S4). Another teacher described their collaboration with computer science and Latvian language teachers in grades 7–9 concerning the evaluation of presentations (S3). One respondent (S5) mentioned their collaboration with English teachers. This involved the presentations for design and technology being shown in English; the students translated them and then repeated the words in the English lessons. Another respondent (S6) taught several subjects and had made active use of cross-curricular links also in the past.

Dividing pupils into groups

Large classes of more than 20 pupils were divided into groups, though the principles of this grouping varied. In some cases, the groups were divided according to gender, as in the previous period. One school that had adopted this method was now trying mixed groups. In some schools, certain classes were divided by gender and others were mixed. Other schools only used mixed groups. One interviewee mentioned complaints from parents about why boys had to learn to crochet or knit; the school in question was helping to resolve this issue by explaining the situation (S4). According to S3, there has been progress in achieving greater gender neutrality thanks to the gradual combination of boys and girls in the same classes since 2020–21 (S3). Some teachers observed that boys often worked much faster than girls in woodwork and managed to complete three or four projects while girls only did one (S7 and S9).

Individual and group work

Most of the time, the students work individually on handicrafts. One of the respondents already used paired and group work for some woodwork topics in the previous period. Two of the teachers have started using group work as a result of the reform, with one (S5) doing so for several topics. In group work, the pupils form pairs or trios to research and develop ideas and often implement them. No more than three students work in a group to ensure that everyone is actively involved. Another respondent (S6) used group work to make environmentally friendly seating surfaces from recycled materials with grade 6 pupils and to sew heat-resistant utensil grippers with grade 8 students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is limited by the small number of teachers in the sample, so generalisations from it cannot be made. However, certain conclusions can be drawn. As a result of the new basic-education standards, changes are taking place in the teaching of crafts. In line with global trends, there are no longer "boys'

and girls' crafts" in Latvia; all pupils learn all the craft topics on offer. Consequently, fewer hours are devoted to each of the materials and techniques, given that the number of hours devoted to the subject as a whole has decreased. Because most of the teachers interviewed work with the model programme, embroidery, metalwork, and technical graphics are not included in the new content, which is a disadvantage. As the interviewees' observations show, pupils are gradually getting used to the idea that everyone has to learn to handle all the materials on offer. Some teachers emphasise teaching the basics of craft techniques so that students can make small products. With this approach to learning technical skills, the problem is the lack of time. The focus on promoting design thinking does not always lead to the production of items. The use of cross-curricular links has increased. The analysis of the normative documents shows that these emphasise a design-oriented approach, but teachers' real-life experiences vary between skill-oriented approaches and design-oriented ones. Therefore, teachers are still looking for the best way to implement the new content.

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