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Understanding Finnish education: science popularization and scholarly work as intertwined activities

Tamás Péter Szabó

Moving to Finland two years ago had given new push to my work in many ways. I have been studying Hungarian education for about thirteen years and I have been addressing the general public with popularizing materials for nearly five years now. However, in Finland these activities become more complex than in my native country. Here, I wish to discuss how my research found larger and larger contexts in two steps: first, by starting to make my research available to wider audiences in Hungary, and second, by turning my focus to an international environment. I claim that these two types of re-contextualization are not only beneficial for me as a researcher personally but also serve the researched communities as well as teachers and other practitioners in a rich way.

Having my Master's thesis written on the presence of prescriptive linguistic traditions in Hungarian educational practices and discourses, I continued into doctoral studies. In my dissertation, I investigated classroom discourses as well as students' and teachers' descriptions of their experiences with correcting and evaluating others' speech and being corrected and evaluated by others.

While working on my thesis, I felt a strong need for more intensive dialogue with the world outside my actual academic environment. At that point, I had spent about twenty-two years in the Hungarian school system, including my elementary, secondary, tertiary and post-gradual level studies. I shared my work with my teachers and colleagues within the Hungarian academe and regularly received useful feedback, but

I became more and more curious about how my work would be received in another context than universities and research institutions. I wanted to learn more about the relevance of my work.

As a regular reader of the popular portal *Nyelv és Tudomány* 'Language and Science' (www.nyest.hu), I contacted the editors who were interested in my PhD topic so I started to write popularizing materials. This required new skills. I had to learn how to avoid academic jargon and I had to write in a more compact way than I got used to. In an academic paper, you usually have 7–9,000 words to tell the story, but a popular text should be around 1,100–1,500 words. So cut it short! No detailed background, no dozens of citations – just the essence.

At the beginning, I had several difficulties with breaking the traditional frames of academic writing, using a less fancy vocabulary and cutting the story short, but the editors helped me a lot so step by step I got familiar with how non-linguists should be addressed. And the responses were really encouraging! Publishing a popularizing paper is a good test: it helps to measure whether your ideas work or not.

During the years, some of my materials failed at the very initial step: the editors shared their concerns with me that the stuff I submitted was just simply not interesting enough. They suggested me to think it over from a less academic point of view: why does this matter to those who are not in the exclusive club of professional linguists? I am very grateful for this kind of feedback for many reasons. To begin with a selfish point, I myself got a more comprehensive understanding of the question and got ideas about how to explain the impact of my work to others. Working as an applied linguist, my focus, not surprisingly, is on the ways of how my results can be turned into practice. Popularization is a good laboratory for understanding this. So popularizing does not only mean that I make an idea easier to understand for those who do not deal with that as part of their job, but it is also part of my professional development.

One of the great advantages of online materials is the immediate feedback from dozens, hundreds or even thousands of reader-contributors. I use this word because the readers can also share their comments with me and other readers on the portal. Of course, likes and comments do not always tell you everything about the reception of my contribution, but the feedback is quite telling many times. A couple of hundreds or even a couple of thousands of likes tell that, for some reason, people think my work should be read by others because there is something relevant in that. In a similar manner, hundreds of challenging comments also tell that I touched a hot pot with my

ideas or arguments. This, of course, does not mean that I should abandon that topic immediately. Rather, it reminds me that my work may touch tender spots since there are competing visions and traditions of education.

I think it is not by accident that my materials on Finnish education are sometimes extremely popular, based on the number of likes and shares in the social media. One could say that the topic of Finnish education in itself is a top hit because examples of the 'Finnish wonder' serve as really good examples, especially if one wants to make a contrast between an actual, not-really-working education system and an 'ideal' one. It is easy to understand that people get inspiration from the description of something that seems to work, and they immediately want to share that with others. However, in my materials I want to avoid painting a too purple image of Finnish education. I aim at sharing also current challenges with the readers, so they not only see good examples but also ways of reflecting on things that do not really work.

I visited schools and talked with teachers after the visited lessons, and I also had inspiring meetings with my colleagues at the university on studying Finnish education. I feel honored that they shared also their doubts or uncertainties with me. For example, I had discussions with teachers who really enjoyed their professional independence given by the institutional environment and regulations. But they also faced challenges, such as getting rid of their own practices that they do not find efficient or good enough. Among others, they told me that, according to their self-assessment, the textbook played a too dominant role in their lessons, or they could not yet find ways how to develop their interaction routines to meet the needs of children with an immigrant background.

I remember my first school visits in Finland when I expected wonders in the classroom. I need to say I was quite naive, especially because I thought first that the methods and the techniques would be significantly different from Hungarian ones and everything would run smoothly. And no, I cannot say that everything was ideal.

Looking back, it seems that the way in which interpersonal relationships are built and maintained is really relevant. So, for me, it seems that it is not necessarily the methodology that counts but rather how – in what kind of interactional and emotional context – the methods are applied. When I was in Hungary this year, carrying out fieldwork in four schools, many teachers asked me to tell what could be behind the world famous Finnish system. I could tell them that the quality of interaction with students, colleagues and parents would be the most important. I can say, all my

Hungarian teacher colleagues agreed.

I am happy that my Hungarian and Finnish experiences are intertwined. In Hungary I also met excellent teachers who gave space to the children's contributions and brought tolerant and involving approaches to community building, just like their Finnish colleagues. Many similarities between my Finnish and Hungarian experiences strengthened my view that it is probably not the 'ideal' Finnish or the strongly criticized Hungarian school system in itself, at the level of the system, that counts, but rather the local practices that react on current challenges. This raised my interest towards local negotiations and decision-making on policies. Sadly, when I write about the importance of local practices and flexibly made local decisions, I have to mention that current developments in Hungarian official education policies strongly challenge the notions of democracy, diversity, personality, individuality and local self-government (for a more detailed account of this, see Szabó 2015). In an extremely centralized administrative and regulatory environment, Hungarian teachers often need to fight for their autonomous decisions while Finnish teachers in general are encouraged to be independent-minded also at the level of the administration system and professional regulations.

Since I am surrounded by materials from and about both Finnish and Hungarian education, I feel that being in-between gives me the role of a reporter who tells experiences to the home country as well as to an international audience. This is a really interesting role in many ways. First, I think my position as an expatriate researcher makes me more self-reflective, so I can react to or notice the peculiarities of the Hungarian system after discussions with international scholars. Since I was socialized in the Hungarian school system, I was not always aware of practices that can be even exotic for those who were educated elsewhere. For example, the practice of oral recitation (which practically means the re-vocation of textbook passages or poems learnt by heart in front of all classmates) is something that I got used to as a child but can be quite strange for my colleagues. Of course, many Hungarian teachers also discovered that the assessment of a memorized text in front of all the peers is not the best method ever, so recitation is maybe not as dominant as it was decades ago, but still it exists and is part of the social perception of Hungarian schooling.

When I published a popularizing article about Finnish university entrance exams in teacher training, the response of the audience was almost shocking. I simply included a statistic figure according to which last year the University of Jyväskylä accepted only the 4% of those who applied for classroom teacher training. Thousands of likes and

shares and [an immediate response post in a professional blog](#) showed me that people found it impressive that Finland is a place where the teaching profession is competitive and well appreciated. This sole statistic figure was in a huge contrast with the low number of Hungarian applicants at teacher training universities which can be partly due to teachers' low wages and their limited professional autonomy. Although there are many challenges in my native country, I hope that my work can somehow contribute to making good decisions in a legal and organizational environment which does not at the moment encourage local, independent decision-making.

The author is a linguist who has conducted research in Hungary and Finland. He is currently a senior researcher (Marie Curie research fellow) at the Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Jyväskylä. His work is supported by the European Union's Research Executive Agency under Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship for Career Development within the EU's Seventh Framework Programme for Research (ref. 626376).

Further reading

Facts and figures: OECD country report on Hungary. URL: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Hungary-EAG2014-Country-Note.pdf>

Szabó, Tamás Peter (2015). The Management of Diversity in Schoolscapes: An analysis of Hungarian practices. Apples: Journal of Applied Language Studies 9 (1), 23–51. <http://apples.jyu.fi/issue/view/18>

Tamás' site: <http://sztp.hu/>

Tamás' blog: <http://findingownwords.blogspot.fi/>