

# The central concepts of civic competence for social studies

Kaarel Haav<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

The author aims to demonstrate that the best way to promote students' civic competence is by using a set of 20 appropriate science concepts he has developed. This has been the result of his theoretical and empirical research on employment relations, organisation theory, education and curriculum theories and policies in Estonia for many decades (Haav, 2005; 2008; 2009; 2010; 2015; 2018). Estonian universities have used these concepts for many years to develop students' social and civic competence.

In this paper, the author compares his **social science conceptual** system for social studies and civic competence with those in the Estonian national curricula and elsewhere. This paper focuses on employment and power relations in hierarchical organisations. It compares how some national civic education systems, the European Parliament (EP), the Council of Europe (COE), and critical social scholars have addressed these phenomena.

The European Parliament puts participatory democracy at the centre of civic competence. The COE promoted the Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) programme in 1999 (Audigier, 1999) and a framework of competencies for democratic culture in 2018 (COE, 2021). The EDC defines its main dimensions but fails to define a system of specific concepts. The framework distinguishes between knowledge (concepts), attitudes, values, and competencies. It lists several concepts and competencies that active citizens should be able to describe, but it doesn't define them. The EP has put participative democracy into the centre of civic competence, but this concept is not in the COE's framework (2021). Both documents pay little attention to employment and power relations, social inequality, and the possibility of social injustice.

Many **critical social scholars**, such as Tony Olgers (2001), Concepcion Naval, Murray Print and Ruud Veldhuis (2002), Heinz Sünker et al. (2003), Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey (2006) have pointed out the shortcomings of the EDC programme. Julie Nelson and David Kerr (2006) studied the education systems for active citizenship in 14 countries (Italy, Japan, Canada, Hungary, UK, USA etc.). The International Journal of Progressive Education

---

<sup>1</sup> Kaarel Haav, Haav46@gmail.com.

published in 2012 a special issue on education for active citizenship (Ross, 2012). Palgrave Publishers also compiled an international handbook on civic education (Peterson et al., 2016).

**The new conceptual system** addresses these phenomena by using dichotomous concepts of social actors and structures (Haav, 2010, 2018). This dichotomy complements the most general dichotomies of man and society, and man and culture. In private firms, the main types of actors are entrepreneurs (as employers), managers, and employees. The main types have different opportunities for using other people for their own sake. The owners have the largest options, and the employees do not have any opportunities at all. It means that these employment relations introduce inequality into hierarchical organisations. In turn, this enables social inequality and injustice.

### Case studies: Conflicts in employment relations and civic education

In Estonia, existing social inequality and possibilities for injustice are ignored. The Estonian Central Union of Employers denies any evidence of social inequality and cases of social injustice in Estonian companies. The Chairperson of its Board, Kai Realo, made it public in the Estonian central newspaper *Postimees* on November 6, 2020. Nobody reacted to her categorical and aggressive statements. It means that this attitude is commonplace in Estonia. Estonian civic syllabuses and textbooks also keep silent about (ignore) social inequality and possibilities for injustice. In practice, social injustice is not commonplace, but it might happen. Most people are aware of it, but Estonian ideologists, politicians, and newspapers tend to interpret these cases by using psychological terms. If some superiors misbehave against their subordinates, then this would be interpreted as a mistake in communication. They refuse to address these cases of injustice by using adequate legal, sociological, and political concepts like social inequality. Civic textbooks also ignore industrial conflicts. They don't prepare students for such cases of injustice.

### The case of participatory democracy: theory, practice, and education

The new framework follows the recommendations of The European Parliament and considers participatory democracy as the central idea of civic competence. The participation complements the model of representative democracy. Citizens elect their representatives once every four years and delegate them their political rights to make decisions. In practice, all citizens can follow and

discuss political processes all the time. If there is a model of public participation, then all active citizens can send their proposals to decision-makers to improve laws or policies. If such good ideas are accepted and later implemented, then these constitute examples of public-state collaboration and a real civic society. If politicians ignore public ideas, then they should justify their rejection. Otherwise, this rejection would indicate a lack of national loyalty. They will remove the good ideas if they are not beneficial to them and some interest groups. This way, participative democracy is an experimental way to assess the loyalty of politicians and civil servants. The active citizens would consider it at the next national elections.

### Discussion and conclusions

Students have many opportunities to practice different forms of democracy at schools. They elect the student council as a form of direct democracy. Students' representatives take part in the school council or board as equal members. They can combine their civic knowledge with democratic practices at school and in the local community. The new conceptual system faces difficult problems in employment relations and teaches students how to protect themselves from trouble. If students practice these concepts, then they will be prepared for life and work in hierarchical organisations. They will realise the need for collective protection and trade unions. Estonian entrepreneurs and civic textbooks disseminate paternalist ideas of industrial harmony and deny the need for trade unions.

The article demonstrates that the implementation of science concepts enables the education of active and critical citizens. Mainstream civic concepts and textbooks don't pay enough attention to power relations in hierarchical organisations and institutions. They don't use adequate concepts like organisational democracy, social actors, and structures. If politicians are interested in the formation of active citizens and the development of democracy, then they should support the implementation of an adequate conceptual system in social studies and civic education.

*Keywords:* civic competence, social subjects and social structures, participative democracy, authoritarian and deliberative civic education