
Cornerstones of socio-economic education: on the importance of contextualising economic issues

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Abstract: Like mainstream neo-classical economics, mono-paradigmatic economic education currents neglect the cultural, historical, political, ethical, social and psychological factors. This occurs even though the relevance of these aspects is obvious from the (subject) didactic perspective, topically revealing, and convincing in terms of educational psychology. Many economic ‘semi-fictions’ such as ‘economic man’ persist, especially in the teaching context, despite wide-ranging discussion of importance of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. The issue is especially pressing in school economics teaching, which should be orientated on students’ situations and lifeworlds rather than adhering to the structures and models of the academic discipline. The present contribution identifies the epistemological, education policy and didactic deficits of neo-liberal-leaning economic education and outlines the epistemological foundations, didactic principles and policy implications of socio-economic education.

Keywords: socio-economics; socio-economic education; multidisciplinarity; interdisciplinarity; transdisciplinarity; didactic principles; integration of social sciences.

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1 Introduction

Mainstream economics holds fast to its established models, paradigms and methodologies. Despite passionate debates about the need for multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in economics, many myths persist: from the *semi-fiction* of ‘economic man’ and *self-regulating markets* to the haphazard growth forecasts of leading

economic institutes.¹ The persistence of these ideas – which remain especially strong in German-speaking countries – is astonishing when one considers that the deepest economic crisis since 1929/1932 has generated an epochal euro and state debt crisis. On the other hand, an increasing number of economics students are following a group of university teachers in backing to the widely publicised reform proposals of the *Netzwerk Plurale Ökonomik*.

Mainstream economists parries the potential contribution of other disciplines, ignoring the relevance of cultural, historical, political, ethical, sociological and psychological factors. “This ‘economic imperialism’, where political acts and motives are equated with the rational cost/benefit calculations of market participants, may have supplied new perspectives and insights in certain cases. In some cases, but it has failed to account for the effects of changing political, social and historical constellations, which are completely neglected in the isolated economic perspective” [translated from Rothschild, (2004), p.19]. This insistence on mono-disciplinarity has generated student scepticism towards economic teachings.

Given the priority accorded to ‘economic science’, upon which conventional economics education bases its claim to scientific status, the question of whether and to what extent integration between social science disciplines – with their sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory logics – of enormous significance for the didactic, curricular and education policy debate. If economic education is seeking content that makes the connections between politics, society, history, geography and economics, there is no place for didactic concepts that prioritise separation and isolation over integration and conclusion (Deutsches Aktieninstitut, 1999; Kaminski and Eggert, 2008; Seeber et al., 2012). Taking this critique of traditional approaches as its starting point, this paper seeks answers to the problem of pedagogically contextualising economic questions. In other words: What cornerstones of socio-economic education open doors to contextualisation?

2 Socio-economic education – ground rules for life-oriented economic education

School curricula that isolate the field of economy from its social, historical and cultural contexts risk promoting oversimplified and mono-perspectival perceptions and consequently unrealistic judgements (see esp. Weber, 2015). An exploratory study conducted in early summer 2017 at five of Germany’s largest economics faculties (measured by number of professorships), for example, found that students in higher years reported lower significance of idealistic motivations to study and weaker perceptions of their own idealism, solidarity, helpfulness and empathy (Engartner and Schweitzer-Krah, 2019). One tentative explanation might be perceived in the widely mentioned lack of transdisciplinarity: 43% of the surveyed economics students said they were dissatisfied with the paucity of references to sociology, politics, psychology and law.

One initial conclusion is that economic issues need to be analysed, discussed and reflected in their social, political and cultural contexts simply because this is what students wish for. The same should also apply to school students’ exploration of economic questions, given that the questions of taxation, society and environment addressed in social science teaching call for a transdisciplinary approach: What role can political motivations, legal codes and economic mechanisms play in encouraging

ecological behaviour? Can food speculation be ethically justified? Are there (socio-)political arguments for rent controls? Aside from economic factors (such as market asymmetries generated by overproduction), what is the case for considering colonial history, the market power of food multinationals and the European Union's agricultural subsidies when explaining the occurrence of famine? And if one wants to understand the repercussions of the economic, financial and euro crisis, the reasoning behind a linear progressive tax system, or why an increase in VAT disproportionately affects large families and the poor, there is no alternative to examining the economic, political and social context.

2.1 Multi-paradigmatic social science rather than mono-disciplinary 'social physics'

Socio-economic education addresses that demand, seeking expressly to promote the unity of politics, sociology and economics that exists in the integrated social science subjects [Fischer and Zurstrassen, (2014), p.7]. Socio-economic education is not 'science', but multi-paradigmatic social science. It represents a response to growing criticisms of the formal mathematical models and methods that for so long lent an aura of universal natural science to standard neo-classical economics. Hewing to the principles of inter-disciplinarity, plurality and controversy, as well as permanent ethical reflection, socio-economic education seeks to contribute to expanding the paradigmatic diversity of economics. That is an absolute precondition for networked – and thus meaningful – learning. If the interconnections between politics, economics and society (and their sometimes different logics) are to be analysed, teaching content must be addressed in such a way as to reveal the connections. Only then can the paradigmatic and thematic plurality of economic perspectives generate autonomy and maturity in self-activity and problem-solving as the uppermost goal of social science education. Ultimately, teaching/learning processes can only be successful if opinions and judgements are (have to be) reconsidered, honed, reflected, verified and potentially also falsified [e.g., Massing, (2005), p.20].

Fulfilling the emancipatory aspiration of education therefore requires a multi-disciplinary approach, because stand-alone social science disciplines – especially economics – are liable to lose themselves in their own self-referential system. Brief examination of the market offers clear reasons to avoid disciplinary monism and make room for an inter-disciplinary and thus multi-perspectival culture of explication in social science teaching.

2.2 Characterising the socio-economic perspective: example 'market'

Today, a where increasing aspects of society are subjugated to the market (Engartner, 2016), deeper examination of its (dys)functionalities is essential. In the context of socio-economic education, it must also be acknowledged that the existing models – mostly hewing to the neo-classical tradition – exclude the application of categories such as fairness, solidarity and social balance. Even Friedrich Hayek fretted that these 'equilibrium models' (1976) were unrealistic. The fundamental assumption of equilibrium in neo-classical economics ensues not least from its functional mathematical modelling – based on the paradigm of the laws of physics – which suggests neutrality and itself creates the system it analyses. In other words, the equilibrium assumption is made

not only for reasons of abstraction but above all out of ‘logical and theoretical necessity’ [Vogl, (2017), p.105]. The chosen ‘language’ is that of higher mathematics – from which the layperson is by definition excluded [Krätke, (1999), p.102]. This also ignores the realities of political economy – such as conflicts of interest, power asymmetries, and the historicity and uncertainty of economic events – that are so decisive for economic and societal developments [Vogl, (2017), p.103, p.107].

The fundamental assumptions underlying neo-classical market models are themselves problematic: supply and demand constituted by rational, homogeneous, profit- or utility-maximising actors interacting in frictionless ‘pure exchange’ [Hedtke, (2001), p.69; Krätke, (1999), p.118]. That the efficiency thus achieved is Pareto-optimal underscores how neo-classical economics must exclude questions of social distribution for modelling reasons [Krätke, (1999), p.125]. Altogether neo-classical economics thus concerns itself “principally with studying its models, rather than economic realities” (translated from *ibid.*, p. 102). In a context of general education, any adequate discussion of the institution of the market – which exerts such deep influence in an increasingly ‘marketised’ society – must involve analysis of the ‘self-regulatory forces’, reflection of the construct of the ‘invisible hand’, examination of the heuristics of market models, and decoding of the myth of the all-powerful market [Engartner, (2016), p.229].

On the basis that the labour market needs to be classified as a ‘specific’ market and understood as ‘inherited territory’, the role of the employee must be comprehensively examined, especially in connection with the possibilities of co-determination [see Häring, (2010), p.157]. Here it must be stressed that an undemocratic economic system is incompatible with a democratic social system. At the same time work represents the organised and organising centre around which most people’s lives revolve, and that employment still occupies a special place in the processes of social integration. An examination of the labour market exclusively from the perspective of ‘prices’ (in other words, wages), under the assumption that wages are best governed by the marginal productivity of labour, would thus be fatal. This would ignore for example the phenomenon (especially in the low-wage sector) of workers wanting (or needing) to work more rather than less when wages fall (quite aside from the difficulty securing an existence on the minimum wage) [Keen, (2011), p.129; Ortlieb, (2006), p.56].

The inadequacies of neo-classical models are also exposed in their portrayals of – enthusiastically liberalised – financial markets, where crises have become normal since the 1980s but still cannot be anywhere near reliably predicted [Vogl, (2017), p.97]. Yet when confronted with the shortcomings of their models, the proponents of neo-classical economics assert that the problem must lie in the practice rather than the theory [Vogl, (2017), p.98]. A further excuse for forecasts that later turn out to be incorrect is that they were shared by most economic researchers – who are plainly united “in a robust immunity to falsifiability” [translated from Vogl, (2017), p.99]. Most defences of neo-classical theories thus largely ignore methodological and logical concerns [Vogl, (2017), p.100]. Albert (1963) characterised the immunity to criticism of neo-classical economics as ‘Platonism in models’ (see also Kapeller, 2012). The Berlin-based philosopher Joseph Vogl speaks in this connection about ‘oikodicy’, meaning an economic “doctrine under which no scourge or catastrophe appears incompatible with the idea that the system itself is correct” (translated from 2017, p.106). The underlying dogmas and doctrines are not explicitly postulated, but instead form part of the model’s assumptions and are thus difficult or impossible for an untrained observer – which obviously includes students – to identify [Krätke, (1999), p.117].

2.3 Theoretical assumptions, didactic principles and implications for education policy

As this example of a socio-economic perspective on the market demonstrates, the neo-classical theories that still dominate in school and university teaching – under which the markets for goods, labour, and marriage all function according to largely the same mechanisms – need to be challenged with political, societal, legal and historical alternatives, even in school teaching. The idea that a science that ceases to reflect its normative and paradigmatic principles ceases to be science in the strict sense of the word is no less valid in (social science) subject didactics. A broadening of perspective would appear especially necessary in light of the observation that economic rationalities have come to permeate ever more spheres that had hitherto been regarded as by nature private and/or political. Even an established economist like Thomas Straubhaar, Director of the *Hamburgisches WeltWirtschaftsinstitut*, argues for an ‘end to economic imperialism’, criticises economists’ ‘thinking in schools as a kind of caste system’, urges academic cooperation “with historians, psychologists and sociologists” in the interests of reflection, and calls for a fundamental “renewal of teaching” (translated from 2012).

Socio-economic education is thus explicitly characterised by the five following, partly overlapping theoretical assumptions, didactic principles, and educational implications (Table 1).

Table 1 Cornerstones of socio-economic education

<i>Assumptions, principles and implications</i>		<i>Dimensions</i>
1	Contextualisation of economic questions and problems	Multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity
2	Orientation on students’ interests and life situations	Addressee orientation
3	Foster the ability to reflect, critique and judge	Educational aim
4	Convey orientation on action, interaction, problem and cooperation	Method and didactics
5	Curricular anchoring in social science combination subject	Curriculum

2.3.1 Contextualisation of economic questions and problems

In contrast to economic education, socio-economic education places economic topics in relation to historical development strands, political possibilities, societal circumstances, ethical principles and legal requirements [Graupe, 2013; Tafner, (2014), p.290]. It is accepted that economic phenomena, principles and projects are path-dependent (history), regulatable (politics) and developable (society), as well as morally and legally classifiable (ethics and law). Socio-economic education concepts thus challenge the *narrowness* of economic education, which remains largely trapped in the corset of neo-classical standard economics. Therefore, the *economic* is understood not as an autonomous system but integrated in historical, political, social, ethical and legal contexts. Economic questions and problems only become ubiquitous where there is adequate connection to neighbouring disciplines, domains and ways of thinking (Hedtke, 2017). In other words, socio-economic education must dedicate itself to all the “economic, economically influenced and economically relevant phenomena and problems” that “a society *regards* and treats as economic” [translated from Hedtke, (2014), p.92, emphasis in original].

If real life is to be perceived *in toto* rather than fragmented along disciplinary lines then (socio-)economic education must steer away from examining real life through too sharply focussed disciplinary lenses and instead adopt a lifeworld perspective. In other words socio-economic education must not concentrate on *one single* discipline – in this case economics – but instead supply multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary answers to societal problems like poverty, unemployment and atypical employment. Socio-economic education concepts inherently connect individual social science disciplines in order to grasp life situations *as they are in reality* rather than *how they are modelled*. In particular the level of action “would suggest systematically bringing together knowledge from multiple social sciences in a planned fashion. This applies in particular when learners are to be enabled to act competently in the central fields” [Hedtke, (2008), p.298]. The integration of politics, sociology and economics is “entrusted and designated to assist the disciplines to unlock social experiences, verify verdicts and prepare decisions” [translated from Reinhardt, (1997), p.14]. The sometimes observed *narrowness* of economic education along purely economic – mostly neo-classical – lines is thus to be rejected, along with associated proposals for a separate subject of *economics* in the sense of “economic science education” [Kahsnitz, (2005), p.156]. Arguing against economistic education, Georg Tafner pertinently calls for “more reflexion rather than addition” (2014, p.301). If key events of economic history such as industrialisation, the Great Depression of the 1930s or the emergence of the social market economy are to be reflected in the interests of general education, direct connections need to be made to related social science disciplines (for further detail Engartner, 2010; Hedtke, 2017; Kruber, 2000). Homann and Suchanek also stress “that the ultimate *meaning* of economic research lies [...] in the elaboration of findings [...] that are able to contribute to solving the problems of social order” (2005, p.349, emphasis in original).

Like the rich tradition of social economics with all its disciplinary branches and variants, socio-economic education seeks “economic multi-culturalism” [Bracht, (1994), p.30]. This manifests itself in different modes of organisation of production (from private households and cooperatives to small and medium-sized businesses), in different attitudes and expectations concerning work and employment, but also in different self-images (spanning *self-optimisation* to self-realisation under the *sufficiency postulate*). Ultimately teaching should reflect the diversity of (economic) motives, values, ways of life and living situations, and as such oppose the “ubiquitous economising pressure to conform” [translated from Hedtke, (2014), p.108]. It should also be noted that pluralism – understood as a stance recognising the legitimacy of alternative ideas, frameworks and disciplinary references – can only develop under conditions of complete openness, equality of opportunities and heterogeneity, as well as the interplay of the different social science disciplines. Altogether “the principle of science orientation imperatively demands a pluralistic principle in academic teacher training, in curriculum design and in school teaching” [translated from Hedtke, (2014), p.106]. On the one hand, socio-economic education is normative to the extent that democracy and social participation, for example, are generally regarded as desirable [Tafner, (2014), p.293, 2018). On the other, it is academically and politically critical [Hedtke, (2014), p.100], with disciplinary knowledge only coming to the fore where it can contribute to concrete discussion of a specific problem [Famulla, (2014), p.405].

The topic of ‘consumption’ exemplifies the risk of mono-perspectivity associated with purely economic education. Thus mainstream economics – which sees consumption as the ultimate purpose of all economic activity and thus the universal goal of the

economy – treats employment almost exclusively as an instrument of income generation. Education (and socio-economic education) needs to encompass much more than that, especially where the significance of consumption is growing and consumers today find themselves confronted with a sheer endless choice of products and services (keyword: *consumer society*). Consumer education needs to enable people to make their own decisions, resisting the influences of advertising and marketing and reflecting on the social and ecological consequences of their choices. Leaving aside the purchase of vital necessities, “young adults consume disproportionately beyond purposes of existential reproduction and recreation, and exhibit conspicuous consumption” [Veblen, (2009), p.79]. In other words, among young adults consumption primarily serves prestige and the emerging self-concept and self-realisation. This is territory where socio-economic education needs to operate, moving beyond the structures of business studies and macro-economics.

This applies to the ‘throw-away society’ [Toffler, (1971), p.45] where products tend to be discarded before their life has expired. In fact, the act of consumption does not necessarily follow the act of purchase, because acquisition no longer automatically leads to use; instead the possibility of potential future use appears to offer sufficient grounds for purchase. A resolution for consumer confusion is offered by politicisation of consumption, where the act of purchase can be discussed as an (individual) opportunity for consumers to ‘vote’ on the conditions and structures of production. Whether – and if so to what extent – the “political consumer” (Beck, 2002) can bring about a ‘moralisation of the markets’ cannot be discussed in the framework of a purely (business or macro-) economic discussion, but must be a matter of socio-economic education [one of many: Stehr, (2007), p.236].

2.3.2 *Orientation on student’s interests and living situation*

Under the principle of general school education, socio-economic education pursues orientation on lifeworld and subject rather than division by discipline; in other words it “begins and ends [...] with learners and their real lives, not the structure, methods or approach of a discipline” [translated from Famulla, (2014), p.405]. Approaches to the topic should accordingly be organised in such a way as to permit connections to students’ lifeworlds, enabling them to contribute their experiences, findings and expectations. Taking the challenges of personal living situations seriously, socio-economic education focuses on “responsible decisions orientated on subject and lifeworld” [Weber, (2013), p.12]. More must be done than simply communicating facts; their significance for self-realisation must be kept in mind. In principle the students decide “what they see – and wish to have treated – as *their* problem” [translated from Hedtke, (2014), p.100, emphasis in original]. Socio-economic education takes the side of children and young people in particular where their “growth and development appears constrained or endangered by economic structures, processes and requirements” [translated from Hedtke, (2014), p.91].

In order to relate to the everyday experiences, ideas and attitudes of school students, to illuminate their needs and desires, and to generate productive provocations that stimulate critical reflection, almost all economic and political roles should be addressed in socio-economic teaching. Starting from the premise that the interests of the majority are (or should be) paramount in a democratic education system, socio-economic education seeks: *work-centred career orientation, sensitising consumer education*

orientated on ecological and ethical principles, and *civic education* orientated on economic, social and fiscal topics (for further details see Engartner, 2014, 2015; Engartner and Heiduk, 2016).

- a Work-centred career orientation needs to be designed to thoroughly illuminate the acceleration of labour processes, growing performance pressure, and the (geographical and vocational) mobility now demanded in many sectors: in short the globalisation-driven transformation of the world of work. In an age of short-time working, temporary contracts, agency work and involuntary self-employment – together with growing demands for spatial and temporal flexibility – a sense of insecurity has crept far into the heart of society. If we classify the labour market as a *specific* market and *inherited territory* with power asymmetries benefiting the employers' side, then the possibilities of workplace democracy in particular need to be explored in full. Here it needs to be made clear that there is no place for an undemocratic economic system within a democratic societal system.
- b The motto 'change through trade' also needs to be addressed in teaching, on the basis that consumers (could) make a substantial contribution to moralising the markets by rejecting an instrumentality orientated purely on increasing utility and value and instead demonstrate (market) behaviour guided by moral criteria. Sensitising consumer education permits discussion of questions such as the extent to which savings should be entrusted to banks that speculate with foodstuffs, finance arms deals or grant loans for the construction of nuclear power plants. If ethical consumer consciousness expands, the phenomenon of goods with environmental and social quality marks grows beyond an interesting business question to generate significant market power on the part of buyers.
- c Under the socio-economic perspective on civic consciousness, it should be emphasised that the idea of solidarity as the foundation of the welfare state is concretised not only in the funding of the social security systems but also in their use. It should also be communicated that fiscal fairness, tax morale and tax revenue are inseparably bound up together, while foundations, charitable donations and voluntary work can in no way substitute for a functioning welfare state, but at most supplement it here and there. Finally, the responsibility of ownership can be emphasised, because property creates, prevents and hierarchises social relations.

2.3.3 *Fostering the ability to reflect, critique and judge*

Pursuing emancipatory objectives, socio-economic education concentrates especially on developing the ability to reflect, critique and judge [e.g., Haarmann, (2014), p.208]. As such, it seeks to awaken a consciousness of change rather than to impart epigonic knowledge. It should thus be assumed that "subjects' economic thoughts and actions [...] are fundamentally multi-motivational, and cannot be reduced solely or primarily to the maximisation or optimisation of utility or profit" [translated from Hedtke, (2014), p.85].

Bauman and May describe very vividly the application of sociological theory to sharpen awareness of contingency and change and engender multi-perspectival judgement (2001, pp.10–11):

“Sociological thinking, as an antifixating power, is therefore a power in its own right. It renders flexible what may have been the oppressive fixity of social relations and in so doing opens up a world of possibilities. [...] Thus to think sociologically means to understand a little more fully the people around us in terms of their hopes and desires and their worries and concerns. [...] Going back to what we were saying about the fluidity of that which appears inflexible, sociological insight into the inner logic of forms of life other than our own may well prompt us to think again about the boundaries that have been drawn between ourselves and others. A new understanding generated in this way may well allow our communications with ‘others’ to be easier and more likely to lead to mutual agreement. Fear and antagonism can be replaced by tolerance.”

Socio-economic education raises the question of origin- and gender-related differences in life and career opportunities. Moreover, the phenomenon of *power* is understood as a central teaching category, pointing as it does to the possibility of change in social conditions. In line with the pluralist principle ‘*audiatur et altera pars*’, school students should not only learn to outline, respect and generate alternative positions but also develop a sense of the historicity of our economic, fiscal and social systems: what should, can, must be changed, and how? In this scheme socio-economic education should promote students’ ability to think in alternatives and generate utopias. A multi-paradigmatic approach is imperative [Hedtke, (2014), p.106]. Ultimately socio-economic education seeks to “practice an ethical overview that is not narrowly deontological or utilitarian, but includes the structural wholeness of the act, always considers intention and consequence, and takes into account the specific situation and persons” [translated from Tafner, (2014), p.301]. Ideally this generates “self-will and critical [...] *agency*” [Famulla, (2014), p.406, emphasis added].

Treating the abilities to reflect, critique and judge as central characteristics of socio-economic education necessarily directs attention to society, in order to promote alternative perspectives and avoid perspectival monism. This means reflecting alternatives to predominant ways of thinking, established paradigms, existing models, constitutive methods, dominant norms and traditional theories, thereby emphasising the transformative potential of the social and political framework for any and every form of *economy*.² On the one hand school students should learn that the historic and regional relativity of the social sciences means that (unlike in the natural sciences) there are no universal *laws* – and that the political culture, frequently characterised by the media as the ‘intellectual climate’, is also subject to change over time. Like upbringing and education as a whole, socio-economic teaching should work towards a situation where the social system can be understood, interpreted and analysed in terms of its development potential and possibilities.

Rationalities that evade standard economic interpretation are also considered in order to initiate reflection outside the predominant patterns of thinking and interpretation. The idea that a science that does not (or can no longer) reflect its societal context is not a science in the strict sense of the word applies doubly to socio-economic education. So heterodox perspectives need to be actively encouraged. Socio-economic education must therefore also communicate positions that resist subscribing to the “intercession of the market” (Friedrich Breyer) and instead interpret a society’s grammar and analyse, explain and comment on its political constitution. The expansion of perspective appears especially necessary when one observes with concern – as outlined at the beginning – economic rationalities penetrating into ever more areas of life (for further detail see Butterwegge et al., 2016) hitherto regarded as intrinsically private or political. That

means actively promoting alternate perspectives, within economics naturally but also and especially in the context of economic education.

2.3.4 *Communicating an orientation on action, interaction, problems and cooperation*

Not least against the background of the modern half-life of knowledge, socio-economic education should seek to teaching characterised by a strong orientation on action, interaction, and cooperation. In order to awaken motivational curiosity, promote discovery-led learning and intensify communication (both between teachers and school students and among school students), a broad repertoire of methods needs to find its way into teaching. Judgement and decision-making skills should be fostered by giving students the opportunity to scrutinise statements rather than simply copying them down to learn by heart. In group project work and subsequent reflection school students learn how demanding, difficult, sometimes protracted and at the same time necessary democratic negotiating processes are [Engartner, (2010), p.105].

With respect to the methodological form, explorative teaching is preferred to instructional teaching. Explorative teaching provides a systematic overview, for example of a government or economic system, through the stringent presentation of information. Explorative Teaching *involves* students by placing them in a situation that the teacher has created or they have requested. This connects precisely with the objective of the Hamburg State Education Act of 2016: “Conveying knowledge and awareness, skills and abilities [...] that promote personal development, independence and decision-making in such a way as to enable students to participate actively in social, societal, economic, vocational [...] and political life” (translated from HamburgischesSchulgesetz [HmbSG], para. 2 [4]; and similar formulations in most other German state school laws).

Successful learning processes in the context of socio-economic education have to offer students occasions to review, sharpen, verify and possibly also falsify (their own) opinions. This didactic concept aims to enable students to think in political categories and to encourage them to acquire a culture of political debate. So unlike didactics, which strives merely to miniaturise its reference discipline, the approach is based not on a pre-existing objective system, but primarily on questions that can be used to explore societal structures and processes. Differentiated consideration and judgement of problems and conflicts presupposes a purely affirmative basic stance towards the existing economic and social order. Only then can economisation processes and mechanisms, and their repercussions, be recognised, criticised and changed by those affected. In relation to the teaching hours afforded to it, socio-economic education is “radically realistic” [Hedtke, (2014), p.84].

2.3.5 *Curricular anchoring in integrated social science*

Notwithstanding demands for a separate subject of ‘economics’ raised by businesspeople, business-linked foundations, employers’ organisations and chambers of industry and commerce, socio-economic education is here to stay and will continue to have to find its place in an integrated social science curriculum. The “subject-didactic spiral of impoverishment” asserted by mainstream economic educators – under which only a stand-alone school subject will find proper recognition, in the form of teaching staff and courses, in academia – is justifiable, but not the persistent moaning that school students

lack economic education. The economic knowledge deficit is by no means empirically proven, at least not – and this is decisive in the context of a timetable that cannot simply be expanded at will – in comparison to other disciplines, domains and subjects.

With due respect for competing curricular interests, the proponents of socio-economic education therefore seek not to create a new teaching subject, but to continuously improve tried-and-tested integrated social science subjects, “focusing on targeted initial and in-service teacher training, on didactic development of the respective subject, on methodological innovation, and on support for ambitious teacher-led initiatives in schools” (translated from Fridrich, forthcoming). Teaching subjects that integrate the individual social science disciplines represent the norm in both the German and international contexts, with the connections between politics, history, economics, law, sociology and cultural studies generally regarded as productive for learning with reference to the didactic principles of orientation on lifeworld, situation and problem.

The school subject of economics, as demanded by most economics didacticians and almost all economics pedagogues, ignores the inseparable interconnections between associated disciplines, provokes an irresolvable *exclusionary competition* between the individual social science disciplines, and in light of timetabling constraints represents a fiction (even leaving aside the reduction of regular secondary education to eight years at many grammar schools). An economic turn in economic education (initiated by a report by the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts in 2010) has led to an increase in broader public calls for the dissolution of integrated social science in favour of an independent teaching subject of economics. But to this day these policy ambitions lack any adequate empirical backing. There is, on the other hand, empirical evidence that most citizens in Germany possess an adequate level of financial competence. In 2015 US ratings agency *Standard & Poor's* commissioned a survey of more than 150,000 adults in more than 140 countries about their knowledge in the areas of interest and compound interest, inflation and risk diversification. Germany ranked among the ten countries with the best financial education, with up to three-quarters of the German population possessing basic *financial literacy* (Klapper et al., 2015). The demand “that the development of the ability to act and judge in matters economic must keep pace with the ‘economisation’ of the lifeworld” [translated from Retzmann, (2008), p.215], must thus – at least in relation to financial education – be regarded as fulfilled.

4 Conclusions

There are at this juncture no *empirically* substantive arguments for the position that economic education needs to be expanded at the expense of political, social, historical, cultural or geographical teaching. Nevertheless it is still regularly that separate economics teaching can offer adequate scope and quality of interdisciplinary references, topical connections and reflexive learning opportunities – without a shred of reliable empirical evidence (one example of many: Seeber, 2014). To that extend it is gratifying that vocal public support for interdisciplinary thinking and research is growing, in the process directing attention to the rich socio-economic tradition – and with it socio-economic education [Hedtke, (2014), p.82]. The Hightech-Forum appointed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research to develop research and innovation policy, for example, recently noted (2017, p.12): “Economic knowledge conveyed in schools serves the economic, vocational and social education of school students. The field of ‘economy’

should therefore be promoted in schools in order to facilitate comprehensive socio-economic education. The political, social, ecological, legal and ethical dimensions must be observed". Business games, for example, should include decidedly social and ecological perspectives as well as economic, and teachers should be accordingly trained (ibid.).

If economics is taught in a separate subject schools will be teaching transient specialist knowledge. Economic education in a cocoon is the inevitable consequence. If economic knowledge is to be conveyed in a context of general education and lifeworld contexts, persisting with the various established versions of integrated social science remains the only plausible way forward. Only this teaching subject, actively integrating adjacent disciplines, enables perspectives and findings of central associated disciplines of socio-economic education and knowledge to be more centrally elaborated, analysed and (critically) reflected. Classical macro-economic questions need to be placed in relation to findings from sociology, ethics and also politics, history and cultural studies, and discussed with respect to didactic aspects in order to enable learning that is networked and meaningful and thus satisfies the educational ambition of the general school system.

If school students are not to analyse economic matters exclusively in *model*, *mathematically typologised* or *idealised* form, but illuminate them in the context of social science-led education, this also has repercussions for questions of business and macro-economics. Economies are subject to economic, fiscal and social policy decisions and as such generally affected by *zeitgeist* and historical trends; business decisions are often influenced by psychological, cultural and social factors. Fundamentally, social coexistence is not best organised by everyone seeking *exclusively* to maximise personal gain at any price. 'Economic man' (and woman), who views all and sundry – from what to study to which career to pursue to when to found a family – through the economic lens of utility, must not be held up as the paradigm for educational processes. At best it can serve as a model of individual behaviour. Otherwise we risk one day reifying the semi-fiction of 'economic man' in the sense of permitting 'him' to step out of the world of models and gain a foothold in the real world – and allowing an *individualism* of self-interest and goal-instrumentality to usurp *sociality* based on the shared and collective.

In contrast to affirmation-seeking economic education, socio-economic education aspires to critically examine social developments. With ever more areas of society subjugated to economi(sti)c principles (education, health and pension systems, privatisation of public services), the current 'managerialisation' trend offers a wealth of learning opportunities. An almost boundless supply of possible examples underlines the societal constancy of economic phenomena, and it becomes obvious how an exclusively economic perspective fails to do justice to significant political, historical and social developments. The observation that economic rationalities have crept into many areas of life that were previously regarded as inherently private or political points to an urgent need to expand the perspective. If one shares the criticisms, alternate perspectives must be actively encouraged within teaching, within the economic sciences but also and especially in the context of economic education. For that to happen, *shared* ways of thinking, categories and methods underlying the social sciences need to be placed in a systematic context, conceptionally ordered and located in the curriculum. Only socio-economic education is capable of that.

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Notes

- 1 Tellingly, the 'semi-fiction' of 'economic man' – as a partial model of human behaviour – continues to enjoy outstanding prominence in (introductory) university economics teaching, despite clear evidence of its epistemological inconsistency, lack of empirical validity and associated restricted forecasting ability. Even though numerous (economic) experiments have demonstrated the decisive influence of social, cultural and political preferences (even in economic questions), orthodox economic didactics continues to adhere to this trivial anthropology.
- 2 Here pluralism is understood as an "empirical fact" [Hedtke, (2014), p.104] and a "central structural feature" (ibid.) of modern societies, including their economic spheres. Discussion of at least one alternative position represents the pluralist minimum. The subject didactic challenge is to transpose the academic pluralism of economic theories, models and methods to the school context, and give these controversies an airing outside the ivory tower.