



Investigating the Neoliberal Educational Agenda: The Effect of Reform Contexts on Teacher Agency

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Annotation. During the transition to democratic society a neoliberal educational agenda was introduced to guide the reform process in Estonia. Documentary analysis was conducted for this research and six periods emerged, which showed that expectations were placed on teachers that assumed the existence of teacher agency, while the reform context didn't support its emergence. Evidence of change can be seen in the last periods, when also a significant dichotomy arises.

Keywords: *neoliberal educational reforms, teacher agency, systemic narrative, general education, Estonia.*

Introduction

Neoliberalism has become the hegemonic discourse in Western countries over the last 30 years. After the collapse of the Soviet sphere, the paradigm had a severe influence on the former Soviet countries and this article focuses on one of them – Estonia. Mirowski (2013) has elegantly labelled neoliberalism a “theory of everything” and Harvey (2007) has equally well outlined it as having the nature of aiming to elevate capitalism into an ethic that serves as a guide to all human action. The main reason behind the success of this idea is what Harvey calls the “construction of consent”, referring to the ways that this idea has been made acceptable in society. The main concepts connected with neoliberalism that weaken the position of education professionals are competition and efficiency, which are both accomplished through standardisation (Freidson, 2001), decentralisation, applying

market principles to reform aspects and the development of an emphatic discourse of marketisation (Ball, 2007; Rudd & Goodson, 2017).

The aim of this study is to explore how and when neoliberalism was introduced into educational thinking in Estonia. The questions that are addressed in this paper are how neoliberalism influenced the building up of a post-Soviet systemic narrative in the field of education and in what ways did the reform context affect teacher's agency. The building of a systemic narrative is scrutinized through documentary analysis that covers the period starting from 1987, immediately preceding regaining Estonian independence, until 2020.

The concept of a "systemic narrative" developed by Ivor Goodson, refers to the storyline of educational changes in the local context and is constructed on the basis of the analysis of policy documents, laws, regulations, and other educational initiatives (Goodson, 2010). The systemic narrative creates a backbone for understanding the historical context within which teachers have created their work-life narratives (Mikser & Goodson, 2018). Hence the systemic narrative is the soil in which the teachers' identity sprouts and the possibility for teacher's agency is rooted.

Structure and agency

The main influences that shape a teacher's development are early influences (Lasky, 2005), their individual characteristics and individual strategies, and last but not least – the current reform context, including specific factors of state and society (Lasky, 2005; Loogma et al., 2009). This research was motivated by the current situation, by the fact that neoliberalism has been the driving force behind Western educational policy (Ball, 2007; Freidson, 2001; Harvey, 2007; Lindblad & Goodson, 2011; Mirowski, 2013). Nevertheless, educational policies prone to neoliberal ideas, such as competitiveness, testing, accountability, and efficiency, have been linked to restricting teacher's agency (Mirra and Morrell, 2011; Priestley et al., 2015; Leijen et al, 2020). Reform creates the conditions from which teachers create their teaching practices and have the possibility to become agents of change (Fullan, 2003). Margaret Archer (2000) has theorised on how the agency is regulated by contextual factors, which have been described as a structure in more recent studies (Priestley et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2014) focusing on the relationship between agency and structure. In this paper, structure is presented in the form of a systemic narrative. And when an agency is a decision-making process in which different options are considered and the most appropriate selected and put into practice (Leijen et al., 2020), then an agency is something teachers do or achieve. Therefore, investigating the structure helps us to understand how individuals are enabled and constrained by their social and material environments, such as through elements of the reform context (Biesta et al., 2018).

However, in terms of education, neoliberalism does not necessarily embody itself in the same unitary manner, it is at least partially context driven (Goodson & Rudd, 2016, 2017; Mikser & Goodson, 2017). Indeed, due to neoliberalism's nature of containing multiple variables forming an integral paradigm, the way these variables are emphasized

and implemented differs from one society to the next (For a brief overview focusing on European countries and regions, see Mikser & Goodson, 2018). Therefore, it is inevitable that we must study the systemic narrative to understand the effect the paradigm of neoliberalism has had on the structure (Goodson, 2010). The documentary analysis has been conducted in order to identify different phases in the systemic narrative and analyse how these periods affected teacher's agency.

Historical context of the study

During World War II, Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union and remained a part of the Soviet system until regaining independence in 1991. Each aspect of social life under the Soviet system, including education, was under harsh centralised control (Cerych, 1999; Erss et al., 2014). The Soviet-era centralised education system therefore ideologically reduced teachers to being executors of orders that were received strictly in a top-down manner (Olek, 1998). It is well acknowledged that the fall of the Soviet Union was accompanied by a decentralisation in the field of education that resulted in a significant shift in the decision-making power from the centre to the schools and local authorities (Olek, 1998). However, in the case of Estonia, this shift had already occurred in the second half of the 1980s, anticipating the restoration of independence. Furthermore, the first ideas of neoliberalism, mainly decentralisation, had emerged in Estonia in the late 1980s and were also noticeable in professional media discussions (Tinn et al., 2015).

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev started his reform plans known as Perestroika and Glasnost, and these led Soviet states along a path of change. In the totalitarian Soviet society, the majority of educational issues was decided in Moscow and local conditions were not generally taken into account. Therefore, the range of people involved in education were looking for ways to change this, initially, from inside the Soviet system, while, as time went on, they more and more withdrew from the system when they realised that regaining independence was an actual possibility.

When statehood was restored then, in order to secure it, necessary processes were conducted such as drafting and adopting a new constitution, implementing the first free elections, electing the president, and conducting monetary reform. However, drastic changes in the political system also meant that a new policy of education had to be developed in a short period of time. New educational legislation was created and, as a framework law, the Education Act (1992) was implemented shortly followed by the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (1993). National specificities and democratic ideas were heavily emphasized in these early documents.

In the mid-90s, the state moved on to design a unitary package of educational policies and the first national curriculum was implemented in 1996, while new standards were also framed and student evaluations were developed (national exams and school level

exams). The education reforms in Estonia were supported by the Open Estonia Foundation (Soros) and foreign sponsors from Denmark, Germany, Great Britain, Finland, Norway, the USA, and elsewhere (Open Estonia Foundation, 1994). At the same time projects were initiated that were designed to provide the knowledge and know-how that would prepare school leaders and teachers for adapting to the changes. Some active schools grasped the opportunity and took the initiative themselves; an example of this is the movement called “Unique School”, under which school leaders and teachers organised seminars so that they could learn from each other (Open Estonia Foundation, 1994).

At the turn of the millennium, the government moved on to design and adjust laws associated with education. With the adoption of the Private School Act (1998), all new documents connected with general education were finalised. The economy started to grow between 1996 and 1998, indeed, this was a time of financial stability and due to that, educational thinking was integrated into wider systemic thinking. Nonetheless, there was still no consensus on the overall long-term educational strategy. In fact, while many different documents were blueprinted, none of them made it to the status of a framework document for Estonian education, and policy making remained rather short-sighted. All efforts in regard to planning a long-term strategy died away amid political quarrels, which became a characteristic feature of educational reforms in the late 90s and early 00s.

During the first decade of the new millennium, Estonia joined prominent international organisations like NATO (2004), the European Union (2004), and the OECD (2010). Therefore, the focus shifted to implementing global (especially EU) structural education goals in the Estonian context.

Method

The data presented here was gathered and analysed as part of a large-scale mixed-methods study of the professionalism of Estonian teachers. The study consisted of four sequential stages: documentary analysis (current study is based on this particular section), survey study, narrative study, and scenario building (see more about the study design in Niglas et al., 2018).

The essence of the concept of a systemic narrative carries within itself the construction of the storyline, where the storytelling power lies within policy documents, legislative documents, protocols and pamphlets, among others (see more about the concept of systemic narrative in Goodson, 2010; Mikser & Goodson, 2018). Therefore, in order to understand the construction of the systemic narrative, a documentary analysis was conducted for this study. The analysed documents included different education-related papers from the Estonian Pedagogical Archives and Museum (protocols, and programmatic documents, and pamphlets from the late 80s) and educational legislative documents (Ministry of Education directives and guidelines for schools, The Temporary Statutes

of General Education (1990), the Education Act (1992), the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (1993), the National Curriculum for Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools (1996; 2002; 2011), and numerous development plans and strategies developed at the regulatory level). The documents analysed were chosen for the sample on the basis of two requirements: first, all the legislative documents for general education from the period of the study, and second, all other relevant documents connected to the legislative documents, which specify or explain the decisions and objectives.

A thematic approach was used when conducting the analysis – a process containing six phases that resulted in developing meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis started with becoming familiar with the data, creating initial codes, and searching for themes among these codes, while this was followed by reviewing the themes, defining, and naming them and creating a coherent description as the main result. As a consequence of the analysis, six distinct periods of change emerged, each adding a new key neoliberal concept to the current systemic narrative. The main concepts connected with neoliberalism that distinctly emerged from the analysis process were decentralisation, applying market principles to reform aspects and the development of an emphatic discourse of marketisation (also emphasised in Ball, 2007; Rudd & Goodson, 2017), competition and efficiency, and in the later period, prioritising in the school context certain subjects that carry easily traceable value for the economic field (e.g. science and technology).

Results

Transition period: 1987–1989

The key characteristic of the first period, the transition period, was decentralisation. The field of education was welcoming a period of change and the 1987 Teachers Congress became the starting point for the educational reform movement in Estonia, and a strong grassroots movement started to take shape (Tinn et al., 2015). During this period, there was severe criticism about what the teacher's role had become under Soviet rule and new, ideal characteristics were collectively constructed by interested parties – educationalists, the teachers themselves, and the other active parties (Kareda et al., 1988). The main characteristic of this new idea was that teachers' roles became strongly connected with the national context and they were expected to set their own goals and were seen to be professionals with a sense of a mission. While at that time there was already room for independent actions to modify the school curricula and the school system in general (The Temporary Statutes of General Education, 1990), then, more importantly, there was the real possibility of holding public debates over school reforms. While the requirements for teachers did not undergo severe changes at this point, they were actively discussed in education forums. The aim was to change the attestation system (Kaldma, 1991) so that

teacher salaries would be connected to the level of the teachers' professionalism (Kareda et al., 1988). It was argued that making the teaching profession one of following strict governmental guidelines had alienated teachers from the schools and from the essence of their work (Nurmik, 1988). Furthermore, instead of autocracy in the classrooms, there should be a democracy (Lepik, Remmel, & Vernik, cited in Oja, 2016, p. 32) since this was seen as the main reason why schools had become systems that filtered out the most talented and creative teachers (State of education... 1988), highlighting that the only way to stop this happening was to extend autonomy at all levels of education (Kareda et al., 1988). Some actual progress was made in this area as part of the decentralisation that had become the main local-level agenda to push for sovereignty – in 1988, the autonomy of schools increased remarkably (Information bulletin 1, 1989) and teachers were given more relevant roles in the decision-making process inside their schools (ESSR Ministry of Education directives and guidelines for schools, 1987).

The teaching community was directly involved in the education reform movement; therefore, it can be argued that the current context supported teacher's agency. In particular, they were involved in drawing up new syllabi and sketching new subject programmes (Lepik et al., cited in Oja, 2016, p. 32) and also had a chance to participate in drafting experimental curricula (Kaldma, 1991). Due to this somewhat unexpected window of opportunity, a lot of ideas were in the air and numerous initiatives were attempted and carried out simultaneously. But it was also clear that schools and teachers were engaged to widely varying degrees. As a result, the period ended with fragmentation, costing the movement its unity as we can see from the next period.

Restructuring period: 1989–1993

The key characteristic of this period remained the decentralisation but in addition the first signs of standardisation also appeared. Economic difficulties and the slow development of new socio-economic relationships resulted in complications in the education system, while the development of new curricula began nonetheless and new teaching materials were also issued (MCE Board Meeting Protocol, 1993a). In this period, the main goal remained decentralisation as part of the de-Sovietisation, which included closing down Soviet-era institutions. In 1990, schools were permitted to establish international connections (The Temporary Statutes of General Education, 1990). The focus shifted to keeping the education system functioning during the time of regime change while reforming it at the same time and an effort was made by educational professionals at all levels to establish connections with Western partners (MCE newsletter, 1993). The period stands out for enforcing numerous initiatives, such as the introduction of tests as a measurement tool (that ultimately were not widely used), providing additional training for school leaders and teachers, and conferences on educational innovation and curriculum reform, many of which were carried out with Western assistance (Soros Foundation, British Council, Phare). However, in addition to diversifying the reform movement, this

also helped to deepen the fragmentation. Furthermore, little attention was given to the fact that carrying out this so-called “de-Sovietisation” was resulting in cutting through the connections with active members of the teaching profession, causing the reform initiatives to pass over from the grassroots level to the regulatory level. Meanwhile, a great amount of trust was placed in Western expertise. For example, the British were willing to help in introducing the testing system (MCE Board Meeting Protocol, 1993a) and Scottish curricula were made available (MCE newsletter, 1993) as an example for drafting new national curricula.

The fact that the teachers’ involvement in the education reform process weakened and that bottom-up initiatives were replaced with top-down initiatives becomes exceptionally clear when reading the protocols of the Ministry of Education where, at one point, it is stated that the new curriculum is under development while there is no knowledge about what teachers think about this core document (MCE Board Meeting Protocol, 1993a).

With regard to decentralisation, school autonomy was further extended – the teachers’ councils at schools were left to make decisions on managing learning activities, assessment issues, and analysing learning processes in general, while the learning objectives were laid down at the regulatory level (Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, 1993). In contrast with the previous period, the focus of the discussion of who teachers are, shifted to what teachers (should) do and which requirements and expectations teachers should meet. Related to this, the methods for renewing additional training programmes for teachers were intensely discussed at the regulatory level (MCE Board Meeting Protocol, 1993b).

Rebuilding the control: 1993–1997

The key characteristics of this period were *standardisation* and *teacher accountability*. The work of teachers became clearly defined through implementing the first national curriculum in 1996. This list of “to-dos” contained designing and creating learning activities, shaping the learning process and guiding students (National Curricula, 1996). The bar of expectations and requirements was raised – teachers were expected to develop school curricula (Liiv, 1998a), subject syllabi and school development plans and, most importantly, to implement the national curriculum. Teachers were also expected to increase their knowledge base, for instance, in terms of understanding economic developments and mastering some managerial skills (National Curricula, 1996)

This period ended with implementing a national exam system in 1997 as a core quality-measurement tool. This system was created in the spirit of teacher accountability and standardisation, and it was clearly stated that the aim of these national exams was, first, to get feedback on the performance of teachers and, second, to direct the learning process through the content and form of the exams (Procedures for Completing final exams and graduating school for basic schools and upper secondary schools, 1997). Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education created a framework for increasing control and supervision on

the part of the state that included carrying out standardised tests to measure the level of education. This was planned in two ways: measuring student performance and measuring teacher performance (Liiv, 1998b).

In this period, a certain dichotomy appears between the strong autonomous professional described in the curricula and creating a teacher accountability system at the regulatory level. Hence, in rebuilding control, the focus shifted to establishing new means of education management and working out a system of teacher accountability, the latter being a contextual factor limiting the possibility for teacher's agency. Therefore, the first real indications of a paradigm change also became visible when education began to be linked to economic and international competitiveness at the regulatory level (Reform Party, 1995).

Education becomes the “handmaid of the economy”: 1997–2002

The key characteristic introduced in this period is *marketisation*. Accordingly, one of the chapters in the 1999 government coalition agreement was titled “Education as an investment in the future” and the key concept behind it was that the importance of education lies in creating a foundation for a strong economy (Reform Party, 1999). Therefore, in a way, education was put to work in the service of the economy. The principles and concepts inherent in the economy were interlaced with the principles and concepts of education as a field such that concepts like “educational services”, “competitive education”, “education services” and “efficiency” (Aava, 2010, p. 123) legitimatised the neoliberal agenda in the field.

Efficiency, cooperation, and the preparation of labour force became the key concepts in terms of the expectations and requirements of teachers. It was stated that both the education system in general and the teachers, as central agents in this system, had to become more effective in order to ensure the competitiveness in the global market system (Learning Estonia, 1998)

Teachers were expected to be able to use up-to-date ICT tools and the teacher training system, therefore, needed upgrading and, as a result, additional training programmes were decentralised – there were many providers as the free market economy was exploited for the field of education (Learning Estonia, 1998). Standardisation acquired some additional features during this period while the teachers remained guided by the examination system and the student evaluation system (National Curricula, 2002), as this remained the main source of feedback on the performance of teachers. The system included standardised tests at the end of every level, graduation exams at the end of basic school and national exams at the end of secondary school, and the form and content of these tests and exams were approved by the Ministry of Education (Procedures for Completing final exams and graduating school for basic schools and upper secondary schools, 1997). This period ended with the implementation of the new national curricula (2002), although work on revising it continued.

Descending into the detail – a decade of development plans and strategies: 2002–2011

The interconnected key characteristics of this period were *efficiency* and *de-professionalisation*, but also *a competition* to a lesser extent. Furthermore, a global dimension of standardisation was introduced during this period as Estonia began participating in various international comparative studies (e.g. PISA, TALIS, TIMSS, and IEA). The demand for effectiveness in education was heavily emphasised and education's place within the neoliberal economic paradigm was not really contested, making it automatically acceptable not only at the political level, but also in society (Kitsing & Kiho, 2005).

The ever-increasing problem of the shortage of qualified teachers was addressed at the systemic level by lowering the qualification requirements of the profession and launching the “Teach First” programme called “Youth to School” in Estonia in 2006. In this programme, participants were not required to have higher education in their chosen subject and prior pedagogical education was regarded as an exclusive factor (Youth to School, n.d). In fact, lowering the bar to such a level that secondary school students could enter this kind of programme was even discussed at the political level (Reform Party, 2011).

The expectations regarding teachers peaked during this period, which is visible as an accumulation of bureaucracy and numerous additional duties. For example, an e-school environment was introduced during this period that expanded teacher accountability in multiple ways. The development of e-school continued throughout the period and new functions were added regularly, such as giving students and parents the means to communicate with the teachers but also to exercise control over the teachers' everyday work.

It was stated that both the education system and teachers, as the central actors in the system, carry the responsibility for a societal transformation that involves an innovation-based economic model (Reform Party, 2003). Therefore, they were expected to develop e-competences (General Education System Development Plan, 2010) and address the need for a more individual approach to students, which brought additional duties such as creating individual work plans. The key agenda behind the educational thinking at the regulatory level thus remained one of retaining competitiveness on global markets, which had become deeply rooted in the thinking at the political level.

With regard to accountability, there was a transition from external evaluation towards internal evaluation, making the school boards responsible to a greater extent for inspections and outcomes and thus bringing the control level inside the schools (General Education System Development Plan, 2010; Coalition agreement, 2007). Teachers' professional standards were created in this period in the form of a list of skills teachers should master (what teachers should do) that contained neoliberal principles connected with competitiveness, efficiency, accountability, and standardisation, while there was another side connected with the essence of the profession (who teachers are) emphasising individual autonomy and the importance of education in the field of values (Estonian Teachers'

Union, 2020). These standards also became the new foundations of teacher training programmes and additional training courses (Education and research in Estonia, 2006).

At the end of this period, there was a slightly visible change at the systemic level in terms of the way that the teaching profession was seen. This change was mainly connected to how values education was becoming more frequently emphasised in different system-level documents and also the understanding was emerging of the necessity of teachers to be self-guiding professionals in order to manage these standards, wherein it was stressed that the teacher's role was changing (General Education System Development Plan, 2010). Therefore, there might also be a certain dichotomy evident in this period, this could be a result of piling somewhat controversial duties onto the teachers but also a slight shift away from the roots of a neoliberal agenda, offering the chance to start rebuilding the support system for autonomous professionals.

Efficiency driven education policy: 2011–2020

The key characteristics of this period were *efficiency* and *competition* fenced by the idea of *marketisation*. The economic crisis that started in 2008 and the austerity measures used by the government had a direct influence on the educational field. The prevailing paradigm of efficiency already introduced in the previous period was now situated in the policy measures, meaning that everything had to be done with fewer resources. This was already present due to the market economy principles associated with neoliberalism, but now efficiency became the main driving factor which was suitable ideologically but also became a necessity in the first years, which were also the years when the most radical reforms took place. For teachers, that meant that the idea of basic working hours (35 hours per week) was introduced and the previous system, where the teachers' salaries depended on the number of classes they had in a week, was abolished and this arguably created inequality (one teacher could teach 18 classes per week while others taught 26 classes per week). This change was brought in so that teachers could negotiate their professional value with the heads of schools – a neoliberal idea, which was totally foreign to the teachers and school heads and also resulted in a situation where salary politics were not clear or transparent, making even more room for inequality. Ideas like formative assessment, supervising student research papers, shifting towards an integrated curriculum, using more project learning, and taking part in international projects with students (National curriculum for basic schools, 2011; National curriculum for upper secondary schools, 2011) were added by the regulatory level.

When the new curriculum was adopted, accompanied with changes in national examination system (optional examinations were abolished) then STEM subjects were prioritised, supporting the neoliberal idea of marketisation, meaning that the education sector had to prove its value in the economy.

Teacher professional standards were first developed in 2005 but were only fully implemented in 2014, when the previous teacher attestation system connected to salaries

was abolished; however, the new professional standard system, which resulted in efforts made by the teachers to contribute to their professional development, was ripped from a significant motivational tool. As indicated above – the agency is a decision-making process, which is coherently shaped by the professional goals teachers' set for themselves; therefore the initiatives that disable professional long-term goal setting will also disable the agency.

The most significant core policy document from this era is the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020. Five strategic goals were established, the first being a change in the approach to learning, and the second, having competent and motivated teachers. Near the end of this period, a midterm evaluation was conducted and the data clearly indicated that the main goal had not been achieved – the change in the approach to learning had not been implemented (Haaristo et al., 2019). The reason behind this was that its content and the need for its implementation were understood differently by policy makers, teachers, and educationalists. This is a clear sign of a lack of a common discourse, resulting in ambiguity and as such, the initiative can easily come into conflict with teachers' professional aims and goals, and for less experienced teachers, conflicting concepts can make it difficult to lay down professional goals in the first place. The other findings were that in-service training for teachers did not meet their needs, nor did it support teacher professional development (Haaristo et al., 2019). The potential of professional teachers was clearly underused or was implemented in ways that were demoralising for the teachers and created job dissatisfaction or even resentment. For example, there was no supporting basis laid down for teacher-to-teacher training and no use of existing potential to strengthen the community and support professional development – both crucial aspects of agency building. Therefore, it could be argued that the structure did not provide the possibility for a situation where teacher's agency could be achieved.

Discussion and conclusion

In the transition period – when the grip of Soviet power started to decay – there was an opportunity for independent actions to make changes in the education system, and most importantly, there was the real possibility of holding public debates over school reforms. A community of teachers started to take shape in its new and more professional form, making room for the emergence of teacher's agency.

After regaining independence, the state on the one hand showed some distrust towards teachers by initiating teacher accountability measures, while at the same time, assumed and hence partially relied on teacher professional capacity; for example, the ability of teachers to develop national curricula. For such professional trust to work, there must be prior evidence of support and room for teacher agency to grow, as there was no evidence of this, ultimately, the teachers were left outside this process, giving us good reason to

argue that at the time there was insufficient teacher agency or that it was not supported in practice by the reform context.

In the 1990s, accountability, standardisation and marketisation were the three most notable neoliberal indicators, the latter becoming increasingly interwoven with efficiency in the last periods and having a direct impact on the professional body in terms of creating a previously unknown hierarchy among teachers. Changing the state exam system resulted in creating new hierarchical divisions among teachers – the teachers of subjects in the state exams and the others – and an extensive weighting in the national and school curricula resulting in higher status for certain subjects and therefore teachers inside schools. A vertical model of school culture, as opposed to a hierarchical model, combined with collegial relationships based on equality reinforce teacher agency (Leijen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in this case, we rather witness a hierarchical model taking form inside schools as a result of changes initiated at the regulatory level, allowing us to suggest that these reforms did not support the growth of teacher agency but rather worked against it.

Several international tests (PISA 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018) have shown that education in Estonia is of good quality – in PISA 2018 Estonian students ranked first among European countries in all three domains of assessment. These results clearly indicate that teachers are doing excellent work within this given framework, but at the same time only 14% of them believed that teaching is a valued profession in society (TALIS, 2013). Near the end of the final period, this figure rose significantly, and teachers then perceived that society valued their profession almost twice as much as five years earlier, but job satisfaction was still very low (TALIS, 2018). Teachers felt that they could not cope with all the requirements of their position and there was a severe lack of time for focusing on their work. Perhaps this is the most important finding through which the effect of an efficiency driven education policy on the work of teachers has become visible. At the same time, the need to support teacher agency becomes somewhat recognised in the penultimate period, when comprehensive dissatisfaction among teachers in terms of their work became evident (i.e. as evidenced by the lack of enjoyment, not understanding targets, low self-efficacy (Henno, 2005)) and the need to address the problem was stressed at the regulatory level.

However, at the same time the shortage of teachers was controversially handled in the spirit of neoliberalism, introducing the “Youth to School” initiative as a solution to this prolonged problem without actually addressing its essence. A solution was created that resonated with the market logic and completely ignored the specificity of the field, thereby arguably downgrading professionals to mere technicians. Therefore, a de-professionalisation becomes apparent in how the profession is appreciated at the regulatory level, in this case, illustrated through how university training was equated with training at the workplace, which is common to other occupational categories associated with specialist knowledge, such as crafts and technicians.

A significant part of a teacher's professional identity is a matter of ongoing negotiation and the political choice of reinforcements and boundaries set for a community. Accordingly, an individual's professional growth is inevitably conditioned and bent by the forces at the regulatory level (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Or, to be more exact, the actions of teachers are constrained by the fact that their choices are embedded in institutional forms and practices (Coldron & Smith, 1999). Although it is clear that policies, norms, and institutional conditions constructed at the regulatory level do not directly "beam down" to the classroom level, it is still clear that these policies, norms, and institutional conditions highlight some ideas and insist on some ideals that can become the new educational paradigm that is embraced by society as, argued here, was the case with neoliberalism. Indeed, there can be no doubt that the paradigm will have an effect on a teacher's agency, forcing them to react to these policies, norms, or conditions. Obviously, their reactions can differ to a great extent – in the form of adoption, rejection, or adaptation – but rarely is the case of total disregard possible. In short, the decision regarding the reaction itself is an act of confirming or reshaping one's professionalism.

Therefore, it could be argued that the teaching profession became more vulnerable during the time under consideration because of the rapidly-increasing and rarely-contested neoliberal paradigm that was created step-by-step at the regulatory level and was guided by a trust that was placed in Western educational norms.

Tracking down a neoliberal agenda resulted in giving us a dense narrative where the presence of this agenda in educational policy making was clearly and gradually increasing, while focusing on the different conceptual characteristics of the different periods. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the systemic narrative only gives us half of the story and for a more holistic approach, a work-life narrative is needed, and hence was also an integral part of the broader study.

The concept used in this study – systemic narrative – is selective by nature due to the fact that it is based only on sources at the regulatory level, leaving out everything else that shapes content and form in the field of education. Hence, it can only become fully meaningful when juxtaposed with the teachers' professional work-life narratives; therefore, providing a more comprehensive overview. The fact remains that the systemic narrative never gives strict and unitary guidelines for teachers, but rather represents the context of what is taught and the overall aims and goals set at the regulatory level. Nevertheless, it is a starting point on which to build a larger scale study. Hence, the next phase of the study focused on creating teacher life story narratives (for more about the next phase of the study, see Tinn, 2020).

Creating the structural context at the regulatory level means strengthening the conditions for achieving teacher agency. The data presented here indicate which reforms prone to neoliberalism have built up a supportive structure where teacher agency could grow, and which have had rather the opposite influence. It is a long-term process and the effects are not immediately apparent, and we need to increase the capacity to make

well-informed decisions. For this reason alone, we need to continue conducting research like this, so we have a better understanding of how reform mechanisms work and to be more aware of the impact certain types of reforms have on teacher agency.

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Neoliberalios švietimo politikos ketinimų tyrimas: reformų poveikis mokytojų veikmei

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Santrauka

Neoliberalizmo paradigma turėjo didelę įtaką buvusioms Sovietų Sąjungos šalims, tokioms kaip Estija, o švietimo neoliberalizmo politika buvo siejama su mokytojų laisvės ribojimu. Kadangi neoliberalių reformų rezultatai yra giliai išsiskirę reformose, buvo sukurtas sisteminis pasakojimas, skirtas ištirti neoliberalizmo poveikį reformos struktūrai.

Devintojo dešimtmečio pabaigoje, kai sovietų valdžios struktūrų kontrolė pradėjo silpnėti, atsirado galimybė mokytojų veikmei atsirasti, ir mokytojų bendruomenė tuo pasinaudojo, kad pradėtų reformų švietimo srityje procesą. Spartūs pokyčiai, kurie tęsėsi ir atgavus nepriklausomybę, dominavo ir neoliberalioje politikoje, todėl iš prigimties gana riboję mokytojų laisvę. Nepasitikėjimas buvusiais sovietmečiu mokytojais tik sustiprino atskaitomybės priemonių formavimąsi ir taip leido susiformuoti hierarchiniam švietimo modeliui, taigi ir pažeistų mokytojų veikmei.

Naujojo amžiaus pradžioje ėmė ryškėti dvejetainis požiūris – atsižvelgiant į kelis tarptautinius testus, Estijos švietimo kokybė buvo puiki, vis dėlto tuo pat metu mokytojų pasitenkinimas darbu buvo labai žemas. Sisteminis pasakojimas rodo, kaip pastaraisiais metais problema tam tikru mastu buvo pripažinta reguliavimo lygmeniu ir buvo imtasi tam tikrų veiksmų siekiant mokytojų veikmės.

Esminiai žodžiai: neoliberalios švietimo reformos, mokytojų veikmė, sisteminis pasakojimas, bendrasis lavinimas, Estija.

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