

Teachers' learning experiences in the context of neoliberal educational change

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Summary

Our aim is to describe how neoliberal changes in society are reflected in the teacher's learning experiences and to analyse which learning experiences are more meaningful to teachers. The curriculum is changing constantly, and coping with this change requires learning, however, it creates certain tensions (frustration and stress) among teachers.

According to Britzman (2007) the problem is inevitable, and she calls it uncertainty of teaching, which is driven by both the variability of situations and educational policy changes. An outstanding example of such changes is the democratic social order achieved by Estonia's regaining of independence in 1991 (cf. e.g., Kitsing et al., 2016).

Education was influenced by market economy principles and the liberal worldview. Similar changes in education continue, but are no longer so revolutionary and take place on a step-by-step basis as Estonia follows the global trend over the last decade (Ruus & Timoštšuk, 2014).

The effect of such ideological and economic trends appears throughout the desire for comparability of educational outcomes (Olssen, 2004). It is expected that teachers will be able to bring pupils to better educational outcomes. Estonian teachers have achieved very remarkable results, and have improved over the years (OECD, 2016). Meanwhile, market economies societies appear to be cutting costs in education (Bates & Townsend, 2007; Cochran-Smith, 2006; Kostogriz, 2007).

In Estonia, it is more about cost efficiency – money is not significantly reduced, but it is redistributed. For example, the teacher's workload is being redesigned and the school network reorganized. At the same time, it is known that the desire to achieve better results with fewer resources makes teachers resentful, and conflicts between external expectations and self-perceptions create tensions (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Hargreaves, 2006).

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The dissatisfaction of Estonian teachers in their daily work is heavily related to out-of-school conditions less dependent on themselves and colleagues, such as low salaries and low public recognition of teachers in society and the media (OECD, 2013). Only 13.7% of teachers perceive that society values their work (ibid.). According to the same results, the prevalent majority (90%) of teachers is satisfied with their work – this is a significant contradiction. Unfortunately, if the teacher's work-related tensions increase and cannot be overcome, this will result in opting out of the teaching profession or having a very short career in education (Day, 2004; Day et al., 2005; Flores & Day, 2006; Stokking et al., 2003). This possibility should be avoided in the light of ageing teachers (OECD, 2008, 2013).

In order to obtain a diverse and rich research material concerning teachers' learning experiences, 33 Estonian teachers were interviewed. The study used the principle of targeted sampling (see Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). All teachers started work between 1990 and 1995, when big changes in Estonia's social life and in the education system took place: changes in the state system, the development of a new educational policy, the development of curricula.

Interviewees were asked to talk about the changes that have taken place in Estonia during the following decades and how these changes have influenced them as learners and teachers. They were asked to explain how they understood learning. The interviewees discussed their mission and role and explained with whom they learn. Finally, we wanted to find out how the teacher evaluated and appreciated his/her long-term work and what he/she would still like to learn.

The data analysis is based on thematic analysis, which provides an opportunity to present the research results accurately, precisely and abundantly (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were initially transcribed literally, and then the material was repeatedly read. As a result of in-depth reading of the interviews, codes were created, for example, the meaningful units closely related to the goals of the study, including dimensions of social learning (Wenger, 1998, 2009).

Describing the changes, teachers pointed out the positive aspects of improving their economic situation: the need and opportunity for the use of educational technology and the plurality and availability of educational materials. Teachers will gladly accept such changes. At the same time, in the descriptions of teachers' learning, the contradiction between liberal values (such as appreciation of the learner's individuality and humanity) and the orientation of educational performance and measurement are constantly highlighted. The same contradiction is felt in many democratic countries (McGregor, 2009; Olssen, 2004). The socio-economic problems of families, which are reflected in the lives of children and young people, influence the learning process and cooperation

with parents. Therefore, teachers need to find a balance between being aware of the needs and opportunities of the learners and ensuring academic success. Teachers explain this as very important since they must support students first and foremost in a complex and controversial neoliberal situation. This support is attempted by adapting teaching methods to the contemporary situation and greater awareness of the needs of learners, while recognizing the inevitability of change and the need to change their perceptions constantly (cf. Britzman, 2007).

Teachers see themselves as being under constant external pressure because they believe that parents and the general public do not understand the profound content and specificity of their activities, that is, teaching is not regarded as a professional activity - all views of teaching are presented and treated equally in public opinion. At the same time, the requirements for professional standards for teachers are very high (Kutsestandard ... 2005, 2013). In addition, in liberal societies, educational policy is in constant flux. It is therefore expected that the teacher will be able to respond to all conditions and adapt to different changes. These requirements also shape the teacher's self-image - they will perceive in what areas they'll need further additional training. With this background of such high demands, they have, *inter alia*, to set high standards and requirements for in-service education, which often does not meet expectations and is disappointing. So, teachers understand the importance of professional development and learning, but often do not receive professional support applicable to their needs. Supporting colleagues, continuously (re)interpreting the content of their work and improving teaching activities, and positive feedback from learners will help teachers overcome frustration and tension. At the same time, coping with strain of change should not be the responsibility of the teachers themselves and their closest colleagues. Teachers need more relevant continuing education and counselling, and this poses challenges for educational institutions and universities preparing and supporting teachers (cf. Beck, 2005).

Much of the stress in teacher's work is not directly caused by the teacher's own actions or inaction, but only reflects the condition and development of society. Teachers probably need more support to enable them to understand and to give meaning to the changes in social backgrounds. A better supportive system that puts into focus a learners as well as a teacher, but acknowledging that teachers work inevitably in an ever changing environment and with different learners, would help to reduce tensions. In order to cope with changes and differences at the senior professional level, they need both constant, systematic, competent support and the activities of a professional teacher and

decision making in teaching should be trusted, and assume that the teacher sees the whole context of learning and works best in the given context.

Analysing the results of this study revealed, among other things, that the learning experience reflecting the social changes of teachers did not differ significantly by their age and subject areas. The results described can be regarded as generally characteristic of the teaching community in Estonia. At the same time, there are limitations to this generalization – we did not study the experiences of Russian speaking teachers, and this is a research methodology that does not show clear statistical relationships but describes the situation and highlights the experiences of teachers and their perceived meanings. Thus, in designing initial teacher training, in-service education as a support system, teachers' needs in terms of support for professional development and the overcoming of tension should be examined more.

Keywords: educational change, neoliberalism, social learning, teacher