

Investigating refractions – the impact of neoliberal education reforms to the teachers working life in Estonia

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Summary

Over the last 30-years educational innovation in Western countries has been led by the dominant paradigm of neoliberalism (Freidson, 2001; Ball, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Lindblad & Goodson, 2011; Mirowski, 2013; Rudd & Goodson, 2014). In Estonia, the first signs of the neoliberal agenda were detected in the late 1980s (Tinn et al., 2015). As a reaction to this, there have been an increasing amount of studies in the field of education that focus on investigating the means and consequences of change. In this article the concept of refraction is used to investigate neoliberal reform trajectories in an Estonian context. Two main research questions have been addressed:

- 1) Which educational reforms prone to neoliberalism were implemented in Estonia between 1987–2017?
- 2) In which ways have the trajectories of these educational reforms refracted, and what have been the unintended consequences to the teachers working life?

The concept of refraction focuses on demonstrating how contextual characteristics provoke the initiatives to refract on their path towards implementation or in other words – the concept of refraction can be used to explain why global initiatives are not implemented, in different contexts, in a unitary manner (Goodson, 2012; Goodson & Rudd, 2016, 2017; Mikser & Goodson, 2017). These contextual characteristics can be historical, cultural, socio-economical or individual.

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. Therefore, the aim to change the rhetoric’s is one of the key concepts – changing the way we *talk* about education, changes the way

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we *think* about education. The main concepts connected with neoliberalism that weaken the position of the 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). In the school context, prioritising certain subjects that contain an easily traceable value in the economical field (such as science and technology) and reducing teachers work into a mainly technical one are also integral parts of the neoliberal agenda (Goodson, 2014a) and are under consideration in this article.

To investigate the educational reform trajectories two separate narratives were created. Firstly, documentary analysis was conducted to create the *systemic narrative* to investigate the institutional level. The analysed documents included different education-related papers from the Estonian Pedagogical Archives and Museum (protocols, programmatic documents and pamphlets) and implemented 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). Secondly, the *work life narrative* was created to investigate the individual level. Life history interviews (Goodson, 2008, 2011, 2013) with thirteen Estonian teachers (in the field of general education) were conducted, transcribed and analysed. To validate the results an additional survey was conducted (888 participants). In order to investigate and understand the refractions, it is most important to juxtapose these narratives and then note the interplay between these two narratives.

The results of both analyses showed five distinctive periods of change emerging, each having distinctive features. Although the number of periods is the same, the starting and finishing points differ, suggesting that there is a noticeable difference between these two narratives. Both narratives together with distinctive features are presented as a themed table matrix in the article.

Periodisation of the systemic narrative:

1. Transition period: 1987–1989
2. Restructuring period: 1989–1993
3. Rebuilding the control: 1993–1997
4. Education becomes the “handmaid of the economy”: 1997–2002
5. Descending into details – a decade of development plans and strategies: 2002–2015.

Periodisation of the work life narrative:

1. 1987–1995: The Golden Age of the teaching profession
2. 1996–2001: Getting acquainted with new borders and guidelines
3. 2002–2007: Adjustment period
4. 2008–2012: Carrying the weight of an efficiency driven education policy
5. 2013–2015 (2017): Facing the changing inner dynamics of the profession

The first noticeable difference between these two narratives was that when in systemic narrative only one transitional period was detected (from totalitarian state to democratic society), whilst in work life narratives two separate transition periods were detected – the first one being the same as in the systemic narrative, but the second one was a reduction of professional autonomy in the late 90s, which was defined as a much harder transition from the teachers' point of view.

The following refractions emerged (in connection with all the main neoliberalist characteristics):

1. Decentralisation – quickly took the form of desovietisation;
2. Standardisation – due to contextual peculiarities in the 90s, began to strengthen the professional body of teachers, therefore taking unexpected root during this time called “The Golden Age of the teaching profession”;
3. Accountability – a good example of how refraction of certain initiatives can occur at the institutional level but not at the professional (individual) level. Also how other initiatives, carrying the same ideological purpose, can have more leverage in the name of digitalising in the field of education, resulting in conflicts with third parties such as parents and school authorities;
4. Marketisation – changing the rhetoric is a good example of how refraction occurs at the professional level but not at the societal level, therefore, creating a gap in how society and professional bodies defines the work of teachers;
5. Efficiency – an example of how an initiative aimed at optimising teacher potential can achieve far better results rather than increasing the teachers work load, which causes problems at work and difficulties in maintaining professional standards, especially now that there alternative paths to the profession (“Teach first” type of initiatives).

The importance of investigating educational reform trajectories is that they could lead us to finding alternative ways of restructuring the educational field, instead of imposing initiatives that firstly do not meet the intended goals and secondly cause significant collateral damage for the professional body – teachers.

Keywords: refraction, neoliberal educational changes, life history interviews, teacher