Comparing teacher autonomy in three European countries: Estonia, Finland, and Germany

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Abstract
In the era of global educational competition manifested in the international comparative studies of student achievement many countries have chosen a stronger standardization of curricula and increased pressure on teacher accountability which has raised concerns regarding teacher professionalism and autonomy. This study focuses on cross-cultural research of teacher autonomy casting light on the varying responses of nation-states to the tension of standardization and decentralization of education as well as structure and agency problematic. The three main research questions are:
1) What theoretical frameworks are there about teacher autonomy and control?
2) How does the education policy shape teacher autonomy and control?
3) How do teachers perceive their professional autonomy and control over themselves?
In addition to creating two theoretical models three empirical studies were conducted. First, upper secondary school curricula and teachers’ newspapers from Estonia, Germany (Bavaria) and Finland (1990-2011) were analyzed using critical discourse analysis. Then an interview study was conducted with 10 Estonian, 10 Finnish and 13 German teachers. The result: Curriculum discourse is in contradiction with teachers’ experiences as expressed in newspapers and interviews.

Keywords: teacher autonomy, comparative education, curriculum discourse, teacher attitudes, neoliberalism.

Introduction
My interest in the topic derives from my own experience as an Estonian high school teacher who experienced, during the 2000s, the contradictory roles of teachers in the era of decentralization and standardization of education. Since the mid-1990s, Estonian education policy emphasized local, school-based decision-making regarding the curriculum and school management, while centralized graduation exams were introduced which emphasized competence-based learning and standardized outcomes of education. Based on these exams, ranking lists of schools were created which strongly influenced students’ school choice and public opinion of school quality, at the same time putting pressure on teachers to be accountable for the performance of their students. With the independent lesson allocation of schools and school profiling, teachers felt the pressure to deliver the same standardized outcome with fewer lessons than schools which emphasized the subject with additional lessons. This naturally created negative feelings in teachers. In fact, according to an OECD study on teachers (2009, p. 111), Estonian teachers reported, on average, a lower level of job-satisfaction and self-efficacy than teachers in other OECD countries. Self-efficacy was, in this report, defined as “the judgment of one’s capability to
accomplish given level of performance” (Bandura, 1984, p. 391, as cited in OECD, 2009, p. 111). This finding, combined with the general knowledge of teachers' low social status in Estonia and the following difficulties in recruiting new teachers, raises concern regarding the sustainability of the teaching profession in Estonia.

Although the demands on the teaching profession are growing everywhere since education became, with the comparative student achievement tests, such as PISA, a matter of international importance, evidence suggests that on-the-job stress is managed better by teachers who perceive themselves to be autonomous regarding the curriculum. Moreover, general teacher autonomy, which involves the need of teachers to have control over their work environment, is also positively correlated with empowerment and professionalism, which are indicators of commitment to the profession (Pearson and Moomaw, 2005, p. 49). Since autonomy is one of the basic psychological needs fostering motivation and job satisfaction (Vansteenkiste and Deci, 2013) it is important to study how much and what kind of autonomy teachers in Estonia do have. In order to do this, an international comparative study seemed appropriate because it enables to see the findings on Estonian teachers in a larger context.

The comparison involves Estonia and two other countries which were selected due to their historical and present influences on Estonian education: Germany (with the focus on Bavaria) and Finland. While the influence of German culture on Estonian education is mainly explained by the long presence of (until 1918 ruling) Baltic Germans in Estonia from the early 13th century until 1940, the Finnish influences are more recent. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 when the Estonian Republic was re-established, Estonia resumed developing its own curricula. Expert knowledge was sought from Finland as Estonia's closest neighbor with well-functioning education system and longer existing traditions of democracy. The first national curriculum of Estonia after the Soviet period was released in 1996 after being reviewed by the curriculum experts of Finnish National Board of Education (Krull & Trasberg, 2006).

This paper summarizes the main findings of my doctoral dissertation (Erss, 2015) which contains the theoretical overview and the development of two theoretical models and three empirical studies. First, the theoretical concepts of teacher autonomy and the two models are presented that form the operational context of the empirical studies from which the research questions are derived. Next, the main results of the empirical studies of curricula, teacher newspapers and teacher interviews are given. Finally, the results are discussed in the light of global pressures of neoliberal policy and ideology.

Theoretical overview

The question of human freedom and autonomy has fascinated philosophers since ancient Greece. Plato described freedom as self-government and control of one’s desires by saying that people who succumb to their desires become slaves to them and are no longer free. He emphasized the dichotomy of freedom and responsibility which comes close to the notion of positive freedom by some modern philosophers (Hansen, 2010, p. 8). The distinction between positive and negative notion of liberty goes back to Kant (Carter, 2012) and was defended in detail by Isaiah Berlin in the 1950s and 1960s (1969). While positive liberty refers
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To the capacity of an individual to take control of one’s life and realize one’s fundamental goals, negative liberty indicates absence from constraints and control by others (Carter, 2012). Another difference is the attribution of negative liberty to individuals and positive liberty to collectivities of humans which makes the notion of autonomy closer to the positive liberty. However, both are necessary in understanding autonomy which is why this paper concentrates on analyzing both autonomy and control.

Autonomy can additionally be viewed from the psychological and sociological point of view. In following, I will present four theories that led to the creation of two theoretical models for the empirical research. Psychological research has long been divided between those who do not believe in the existence of the free will of humans such as behaviorists (Skinner, 1971) and those who consider it illusory (Wegner 2002), burdensome (Schwartz, 2000) or bound by culture and gender (Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Jordan, 1991). The self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2006) views autonomy as a key in understanding the quality of behavioral regulation. Within self-determination theory (SDT) autonomy is understood as self-governance or rule by the self that is accomplished with self-determined acts. The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy which refers to regulations from outside of the phenomenal self by forces experienced as alien or pressuring which can point to inner impulses or demands or external contingencies such as reward or punishment. Unlike other psychological theories on autonomy, the self-determination theory acknowledges, while referring to Pfander (1967), that self-determined acts must not be solely based on inner urges. Withal, they can follow external suggestions, on the condition that they are fully endorsed by the self.

In case of curriculum enactment, autonomy becomes a matter of degree to which teachers endorse the curriculum instructions. Regarding the self-determination of human acts the SDT distinguishes between five degrees of motivation between autonomy and heteronomy: external, introjected, identified, integrated or intrinsic motivation. While the first refers to total lack of autonomy and the last to absolute autonomy the rest express different degrees of endorsement of externally suggested ideas (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1563).

The sociological view of autonomy regards autonomy as a too individualistic concept and prefers using the term “agency” which takes into account the social constraints to autonomy (Archer, 2000; Priestly, Edwards & Priestly, 2012). In simple terms, agency can be understood as “capacity for autonomous social action… to operate independently of the determining constraints of social structure” (Calhoun, 2002, p. 7) or as “ability to exert control over and give direction to one’s life” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The ecological agency theory of Biesta and Tedder emphasizes agency as achievement, not “power” while concentrating on the preconditions under which agency can be realized. Achieving agency involves interaction between “individual efforts, available resources and the contextual and structural “factors” which are bound to a certain time and location during a person’s life-course and related to his/her previous experiences and future aspiration. The good news is that limitations to agency can be overcome, to a certain point, by learning (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Another sociological approach, neoinstitutionalism, refers to the social structure
defining or constraining the autonomy of teachers by organizational practices and structures which are deeply embedded in social and political environments. These reflect the rules, beliefs and conventions of a wider environment (Scott, 2001). New institutionalists do not see individuals as autonomous authors of their preferences; they believe preference formation takes place within the constraints imposed by institutional settings (Weber, 1947; Immergut, 1998), history, tradition, and culture (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, p. 14).

The philosophical, psychological and sociological aspects of teacher autonomy are combined in the model of Smith and Erdoğan (2008, p. 84) who emphasize three components of autonomy: 1) self-directedness 2) capacity 3) freedom from control. These aspects refer both to teachers’ professional action and development while distinguishing between capacity or willingness to self-direct one’s teaching and learning, and actual self-directed teaching or learning behavior. According to this model the term teacher autonomy refers mainly to the capacity.

These four theories were the basis for creating two theoretical models as a theoretical framework of the study of teacher autonomy. The first model (see Figure 1) is inspired by neoinstitutionalism depicting the institutional governance of teacher autonomy with the main emphasis on discourse since institutional order manifests itself through discourse and documents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional levels/Forms of control</th>
<th>Regulative</th>
<th>Normative</th>
<th>Cultural/cognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Global/European</td>
<td>Recommendations of OECD, World Bank, UNESCO, regulation through international comparative testing (PISA, TIMSS)</td>
<td>e.g. Lisbon treaty: life-long learning strategy for EU</td>
<td>Curriculum/Didaktik theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II National</td>
<td>Education laws</td>
<td>National or state curriculum</td>
<td>Curriculum, ideologies, beliefs and traditions, public discourse in media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III School/Classroom</td>
<td>School regulations, e.g. code of conduct</td>
<td>School curriculum</td>
<td>Organizational culture, habitus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher-made rules about assessment, discipline etc.</td>
<td>Individual teaching plan</td>
<td>Teachers’ beliefs, perceptions, experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Institutional order of educational governance

The model depicts the position of teacher within the framework of institutional, national and supranational education policy who is influenced by regulative and normative documents which define his/her duties and rights. By this model teachers are a product of the socialization in particular national, cultural and social settings reflecting ideologies, beliefs and traditions while being impacted by public opinion and discourse in media. In order to create a
multilayered picture of teacher autonomy two sources of data were used: curricula for upper secondary schools in Estonia, Bavaria, and Finland since 1990, and teacher newspapers from 1991-2010. Since German education system is decentralized between 16 Länder where each Land makes their own education policy and curricula, only one could be selected for this study: based on personal access to the sources, Bavaria is in the focus of this study among the German provinces.

Following this model the first research question with its sub-questions is:

1) How does the education policy shape teacher autonomy and control?

As the aforementioned theories demonstrated, teacher autonomy is a complex phenomenon that involves the social structure and contingencies on institutional and macro-political level as well as personal factors of motivation, capacity and willingness for autonomous action. Consequently, the second theoretical model concerns the personal factors of teacher autonomy as reflected in the following model:

While synthesizing the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2006), the ecological agency theory of Biesta and Tedder (2007) and the teacher autonomy model of Smith and Erdoğan (2008), this model explains teacher autonomy by three factors in the teachers’ organizational, personal and public context: degree of freedom from control, capacity and degree of self-directedness. Whereas freedom from control is defined by the influence of public sphere (education policy, public opinion) and organizational dynamic (school policy and relations), capacity is illustrated by internal factors such as capacity for autonomous pedagogy and the external factors such as resources. Likewise, teachers’ actions regarding the content of teaching (curriculum) and students reflect a higher or lower degree of self-directedness.
Following this model, the second research question is:

2) How do teachers perceive their professional autonomy and control over themselves?

As method of data collection for the second question, interviews with teachers were selected with the purpose of getting insights into teachers' attitudes, experiences and beliefs regarding teacher autonomy and control.

Methodology

The three data sets and the methods used for data analysis are illustrated by the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data sources from:</th>
<th>Estonia</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Finland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study III: Qualitative content analysis of teacher interviews</td>
<td>1) 10 upper secondary school teachers from Estonia</td>
<td>2) 13 gymnasiu teachers from Germany (9 were currently teaching in Estonia)</td>
<td>3) 10 upper secondary school teachers from Finland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Data

Only upper secondary curricula (with the exception of German gymnasium which covers the grades 5-12) were selected for analysis since the differences of the education systems on lower levels make the comparison more difficult. Furthermore, the existence of a standardized graduation or matriculation exam in all three education systems presumes a particular pressure on upper secondary school teachers. I was interested in how these exams would affect teacher autonomy. The time period of curriculum analysis and media discourse of teacher newspapers was synchronized in order to compare reactions to the curricula in the newspapers and the reception of education policy.

The method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) seemed appropriate since the study of teacher autonomy in curricula and teacher newspapers was carried out using the social constructionist paradigm which considers language as the most essential system through which humans construct reality (Burr, 1995, p. 5; Gergen, 1999, pp. 6-12). CDA is considered a helpful tool in examining the underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualizations and ideologies in texts and discourses, shedding light on the overt and covert agendas of educational policy manifested in normative political documents such as curricula, and public discourse in media. CDA is an interdisciplinary field connecting critical linguistics
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and social sciences. It conceptualizes languages (discourse) as a form of social practice or behavior while making people aware of the mutual influences of language and social structure (Titscher et al., 2000, p. 147). Following the discourse-historical approach of Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p. 93) the analytical steps are operationalized as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational question</th>
<th>Discursive strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to linguistically?</td>
<td>Nomination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?</td>
<td>Predication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?</td>
<td>Argumentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?</td>
<td>Perspectivization/framing or discourse representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Are the respective utterances articulated overtly; are they intensified or mitigated?</td>
<td>Intensification/mitigation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Discursive strategies

For the purpose of triangulation another method was selected for the analysis of semi-structured teacher interviews: qualitative content analysis. My preferred approach to qualitative content analysis is that of Mayring (2000) which unites the strengths of quantitative content analysis with the qualitative procedure. Focusing on a step-by-step description of inductive and deductive category development, the categories are rigorously defined (see appendix 1) including text examples. To ensure reliability, I have used theoretically founded, deductive categories that enable a comparison with other studies.

Results of the critical discourse analysis of curricula

The following table summarizes the main findings of the comparative analysis of curricula:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher autonomy</td>
<td>Changing role of teachers from curriculum implementers to curriculum developers since 1996. Curricular decision making involves decisions about methods, materials and assessment. The freedoms</td>
<td>The 1990 curriculum is very prescriptive, only allowing space for meeting students' interests, cross-curricular projects, pedagogical conversations, currently important topics and limited extracurricular activities. The 2008</td>
<td>Changing role of teachers from curriculum implementers to curriculum developers since 1994. Compared to Estonian curriculum of 1996, Finnish curriculum of 1994 has more details about teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
regarding assessment and new course design increase since 2011. The curriculum adds two career-related seminars for teachers to design.

autonomy, including selecting the content.

Social constructivist learning paradigm

Strongly represented since 1996 by describing teachers as “guides”, “designers” or “creators of learning situations.” Since 2011 intensification of the discourse of “learning environment” which starts to replace teachers and mitigate their agency.

The 1990 curriculum is traditionally teacher centered while the 2008 curriculum introduces social constructivist keywords but they are used simultaneously with the paradigm of “knowledge transmission”.

Strongly represented since 1994 by describing teachers as “guides”, “designers” or “creators of learning situations”. Since 2011 curriculum teachers are less frequently mentioned than in 1994 resulting in mitigation of teachers' agency.

Change of rhetoric in the 2000s

The 2002 curriculum uses more normative rhetoric. All choices refer to collective decision-making of teachers, not individual decisions, especially in the 2011 curriculum where “school” is replacing teachers as the decision-making body.

Increase of school autonomy rhetoric but at the same time tighter standardization and decrease of choices for students in the 2008 curriculum as well as less time for covering all the topics than before the G 8 reform.

The 2003 curriculum is more normative and somewhat reduces teacher autonomy: when the 1994 curriculum was more or less a suggestion then the 2003 curriculum makes its compulsory character very clear.

Forms of control/standardization

Stress on self-assessment of schools, although external evaluation of schools also exists. Comparative centralized tests and interregional tests are emphasized in the 2008 curriculum. Symbolic control of civil servants through oath-taking. Standardization of education is the strongest in Bavaria.

Stress on self-assessment of schools.

Table 3: Comparative results of the curriculum analysis

The most significant differences between the autonomy expressed in upper secondary school curricula of Estonia, Finland and Germany lie in school autonomy although this does not automatically translate into teacher autonomy. Whereas Finnish and Estonian curricula authorize since 1994 and 1996, respectively, the development of school curricula based on the national curriculum, the Bavarian curriculum for gymnasia was still centrally prescribed in 2008. Although some concessions were made for independent design of career-related seminars in grades 11 and 12, no school-based curriculum development on a comparable scale was authorized, yet promises were made in the 2008 Bavarian curriculum to increase school autonomy in the future.

Teachers’ roles are described in the 1994 Finnish curriculum and 1996 Estonian curriculum as changing from “curriculum implementers” to “curriculum developers”, and in the Estonian case, very optimistically even to “makers of education policy”. The Estonian and Finnish curricula of the 1990s mention as autonomy of teachers specifically decisions regarding methods, materials and assessment, and the Finnish curriculum additionally refers to content. Simultaneously, the Bavarian curriculum of 1990 is very prescriptive, even
extracurricular activities are cautioned to be selected as “not to contradict the purpose of education”.

Another difference in the curricula is the dominant teaching paradigm which is in the Estonian and Finnish curriculum since 1996 and 1994 strongly social-constructivist, referring to teachers as “guides”, “designers” or “creators of learning situations”, while Bavarian curriculum is more teacher centered, representing the paradigm of “knowledge transmission”.

A change in rhetoric of the Estonian and Finnish curricula is noticeable in the 2000s when the curriculum text becomes more normative, emphasizing more the duties than freedoms of teachers and tending to avoid the word “teacher” by replacing it by “school”. The responsibility of individual teachers is clouded as most decisions are made collectively and also autonomy becomes a collective concept. The Bavarian curriculum of 2008, on the other hand, increases the autonomy rhetoric while concurrently referring to increased standardization and control by comparative testing. Control discourse altogether is in Estonian and Finnish curriculum disguised as self-control and self-assessment making it rather latent. In comparison, the standardization discourse is the strongest in Bavarian curriculum.

Results of the critical discourse analysis of teacher newspapers

The results of the comparative analysis of teacher newspapers such as Estonian “Õpetajate leht” (1996-2010), Finnish “Opettaja” (1994-2010) and Bavarian “Das Gymnasium in Bayern” (1991-2010) are summarized in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourses</th>
<th>Estonian context</th>
<th>German context</th>
<th>Finnish context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II. The influence of PISA tests on educational discourse</td>
<td>Strong: a pleasant surprise: “Teachers deserve more respect” discourse; increased output standardization</td>
<td>Very strong: PISA shock: “bad schools and bad results” discourse, rapid reforms: more control and standardization.</td>
<td>Strong: return of the equality discourse and intensified evaluation discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Neoliberal discourse</td>
<td>Very strongly represented, resisted by scholars and somewhat by teachers.</td>
<td>Very strongly represented as well as very strongly resisted by teachers.</td>
<td>Very strongly represented as well as very strongly resisted by teachers and scholars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) competition between schools</td>
<td>1) Very strong, teachers fear losing their job due to school closures.</td>
<td>1) Low, as schools have more standardized curricula and teachers as civil servants are centrally paid.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) “parentocracy”</td>
<td>2) Strong, teachers feel powerless and not supported by their principals.</td>
<td>2) Increasing, teachers fear loss of autonomy and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) “teachers as service providers”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1) Strong on upper secondary school level, felt particularly in bigger cities and south of Finland.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Strong, teachers feel bullied and threatened by parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) Characterizes the attitudes of politicians, students and parents.  
3) Not so prevalent.

### IV. Discourse of autonomy

- Strongly discussed but diverse concepts. “Teacher as an artist” metaphor = interpreter of the curriculum. School curriculum development as imposed autonomy. Fear of responsibility and additional workload.
- Strongly discussed in the context of “school autonomy” which has a negative connotation, instead “pedagogical freedom”. Teachers prefer a centrally determined curriculum.
- Not very prevalent but increasing since OECDs remark: “The system of trust”. “Teacher as an artist metaphor”, teachers generally favorable towards school curriculum development and autonomy but critical of growing workload.

### V. Discourse of democracy

- Teachers criticize strongly the “authoritarian” and “undemocratic” educational governance. Strong confrontational attitude between teachers and other stakeholders.
- Generally missing, except for the “G8-reform” which was decided “behind closed doors”.

### VI. Discourse of evaluation and control

- Strong but contradictory: school inspectors want more power to sanction schools, punitive discourse; scholars want to “liberate” teachers from bureaucratic control.
- Very strong since 2002, the PISA shock: “More testing = more quality” to which teachers respond: “we want less control and more freedom and time”
- Strong with emphasis on self-evaluation and school development but with national criteria.

### VII. Discourse of equality

- Moderately present in the context of comprehensive school discourse as opposed to democratic and diversified school.
- Strong: basic counterargument against school autonomy.
- Traditionally very strong, intensified by PISA test findings.

**Table 4: The comparative discourse analysis of teachers’ newspapers**

The discourse analysis of teacher newspapers regarding teacher autonomy and control is summarized by seven dominant discourses which play a more or less significant role in different national contexts. For example, the democracy discourse is only prevalent in Estonian context and missing almost completely in German and Finnish context. This can be explained by the historical events and the status of Estonia as a country in transition from Soviet totalitarianism to democracy in the 1990s. Estonian teachers perceived the education policy-making as an authoritarian top-down activity where teachers were not sufficiently involved nor their comments taken seriously. Related to democracy discourse, the teacher autonomy discourse was very strongly represented in Estonian teachers' newspaper but rather modestly covered in Finnish teachers' union paper. It seems that in Finland teacher autonomy was taken for granted while Estonian teachers had to fight for it. In Bavaria, the discourse of school autonomy took a surprising turn where it was associated with negative things such as an irresponsibly unfunded increase of work load and independent management of reduced resources. As such, school autonomy was completely resented by
Bavarian gymnasium teachers who preferred a continuing central guidance of the curriculum and centrally provided funds so that teachers could be autonomous in their classroom.

The penetration of neoliberal vocabulary into education with education as a market place where schools are in competition with each other for students as “clients” and where parents gradually gain more influence was very strong in all three countries, although the reactions of teachers varied. While Estonian teachers regarded the neoliberal discourse neutrally, Finnish and German teachers actively opposed it. The results of the PISA tests became a catalyst for increased evaluation and control discourse affecting Germany the most due to its disappointing results which were published in 2002. Increased standardization similarly followed in Estonia and Finland where results were good. In fact, internal school evaluation discourse in connection with school quality discourse became one of the dominant topics in the Finnish teachers’ newspaper in the 2000s. On the positive side, the PISA results, which exceeded expectations in Estonia, started a discourse for improving teachers’ low status and giving them more credence.

**Results of teacher interviews**

The sample of teachers who participated in teacher interviews is characterized by the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
<th>Estonian teachers</th>
<th>German teachers</th>
<th>Finnish teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical location</th>
<th>Tallinn 8</th>
<th>Paide 1</th>
<th>Viimsi 1</th>
<th>Teachers with experience working in Estonia and Germany: 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(S) Saxonia: 2, (BW) Baden-Wuerttemberg: 1, (RP) Rhineland-Palatinate 1 (NRW) North Rhine-Westphalia: 2 (Br) Bremen: 1 (B) Bavaria: 2</td>
<td>Teachers currently teaching in Bavaria: 4</td>
<td>Helsinki 5 Tampere 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>2 men 8 women</th>
<th>5 men 8 women</th>
<th>3 men 7 women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>5-40 years</td>
<td>1-34 years</td>
<td>5-31 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Sample

It is a purposeful sample, intended to include as many different subject teachers as possible. Teachers were contacted via existing contacts or by e-mail provided on schools’ homepages. All interviews were conducted personally and lasted 1.5-3 hours. All teachers taught various subjects on upper secondary
school level, additionally, the Estonian and German teachers had classes on lower secondary level. The interviews took place from 2012-2013. The content of the interviews was categorized by the theoretical model (see Figure 2) in three categories: self-directedness, capacity, freedom from control. Additionally, one inductively derived category was added: teachers’ responsibility and accountability for student achievement.

The study revealed German teachers perceive to be externally directed regarding the educational goals while there were none among Finnish teachers who admitted it. Some Estonian teachers perceived the national curriculum development as externally directed despite the ostensibly democratic involvement of teachers which unfortunately did not yield in any of their suggestions being accepted. The difference in endorsement of the curriculum is striking: Estonian teachers are most critical regarding the curriculum while curriculum usually "makes sense" to German and Finnish teachers who are more loyal to it. Estonian teachers often felt that the lack of resources and study aids does not allow them to fully implement the curriculum. The most valuable resource that is in short supply everywhere is time. Teachers in all three countries voiced concern about not having enough time for all topics prescribed in the national curriculum.

In terms of freedom from control all teachers perceived to have pedagogical autonomy. However, many Finnish teachers prefer greater autonomy, teaching without textbooks while using their own choice of materials. Furthermore, they take autonomy for granted: “I don’t think there is so much control and that we thrive because of this pedagogical freedom that we have guaranteed in the law in Finland and being so trusted as a professional group.” (EnSF25)

Estonian teachers did not perceive teaching without textbooks as true freedom, rather as imposed since textbooks in several subjects were totally outdated. In addition, Estonian teachers demonstrated less frequently their own pedagogical agenda than German or Finnish teachers which is an indicator of capacity to enact autonomy.

The most compelling differences in teacher autonomy concern teacher accountability for students’ test results. In Estonia, school administrators, students and parents frequently put an equal sign between student achievement and the quality of teachers’ work. Estonian teachers feel pressure to be accountable for the results of graduation exams and ranking lists of schools while German and Finnish teachers emphasize more the responsibility of students and see their own role in student achievement merely as facilitators of learning.

Conclusion

The analysis of the curricula, teachers’ newspapers and teacher interviews clearly shows that curriculum discourse can be misleading as the promised autonomy often will not be realized due to social, organizational or personal constraints. In Estonia, teachers never became “makers of education policy” as suggested by the national curriculum of 1996. The Bavarian teachers saw a contradiction between the increasing rhetoric of autonomy in the 2008 curriculum and the reform in 2004 (the “G 8” reform) which compressed the gymnasium time and content designed for 9 years into 8 years. Finnish teachers concurrently
experienced difficulties in realizing independently designed school curricula during the economic downturn of the 1990s.

Evidently, the discourse of neoliberalism was very strongly represented in the teachers’ newspaper discourse and somewhat in the curricula in all three countries but due to the strong resistance of teachers in Germany and Finland it never came to dominate their education policy as it did in Estonia where teachers do not seem to have a firm opinion about these practices. This can most likely be explained by their national trajectories and path-dependencies. Traditionally, Finland has laid a heavy emphasis on social-democratic values while Germany claims to be a “social capitalist state”. Estonian development has been, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, characterized by total resentment of anything resembling the socialist governance, thus free reign has been given to “parentocracy” and competition between schools (read “school choice”).

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. The text examples of the categories are in this article not provided due to limitations of space.
2. The code combination refers to the taught subjects, gender and work experience of the interviewee in years (En - English, S - Swedish, F - female).

References


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Appendix 1: List of categories

1. Self-directedness
   - *Externally directed motivation* (lack of self-directedness, which indicates that teachers’ opinions of the curriculum and its goals do not matter, because they have to follow them anyway)
   - *Introjected motivation* (partial assimilation of external controls. Teachers are critical of the curriculum or there is centralised testing, but teachers still feel that there is some freedom)
   - *Identified motivation* (personal valuing of actions. Teachers accept curricular prescriptions or the requirements of centralized tests and see opportunities for autonomous action)
   - *Integrated motivation* (personally valued and well synthesised with the totality of values and beliefs. Teachers explain in detail why they approve of the curriculum, standardised tests or other kinds of control or the lack of control, and approval motivates them to take autonomous action.)
   - *Intrinsic motivation* (highly autonomous, non-conflicted, based on interest in behaviour. Key words: interest, fun and enjoyment)

2. Capacity
   - *Resources* (time, money, study aids and competence)
   - *Pedagogy* (system of pedagogical beliefs, and teachers’ own pedagogical agenda)
   - *Understanding of educational political environment* (how hierarchical teachers perceive the education system to be and their understanding of their place in it)

3. Freedom from control
   - *Control by the public sphere* (administrative and political control)
   - *Control by the private sphere* (parents and students)
   - *Organizational dynamic* (leadership style and work environment, including organizational control)
   - *Trust in creative practices* (school leadership encourages creativity and innovation)
   - *Teachers’ attitudes towards creativity*

4. Responsibility of teachers
   - *Accountability and responsibility of teachers for student achievement* (the different levels of responsibility of teachers in stratified schools vs comprehensive schools)
   - *Level of school autonomy and the consequences for teachers* (the additional duties for teachers concerning school curriculum development and their relations with school headmasters)