EDUCATION IN TRANSITION – THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERAL EDUCATIONAL REFORMS ON TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM IN ESTONIA

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INTRODUCTION

- Educational changes in Eastern Europe around the fall of communism
  - Great expectations on teachers as the main initiators of reforms
- State-run central control mechanisms
- Teachers depprofessionalisation
  - Decreasing autonomy and ever increasing standardisation and external output control
- Refraction of global educational policies in national contexts
Context of the study

- Events and initiatives that influenced developments in teacher control over their work (Eliot Freidson)
  - direct control over the terms (structure and social relationships, discretion);
  - conditions (working conditions, including required training credentials for entry);
  - goals (defined through assessment);
  - content of work (freedom to decide over content and means of work)

- 1986-1996
  - Last Soviet education act – first Estonian national curriculum for schools of general education
METHODS

- Bottom-up and top-down processes in education policy
- Documentary analysis of educational policy documents and articles in professional periodicals
  - Legislative documents, pamphlets & protocols
- Thematic analysis
  - Themes and sub-themes
- The aim of the analysis was to develop coherent and thick description of the study material
RESULTS

1986-1988

- Top-down initiatives
  - Out-dated ideas
  - Headmasters of schools were given some freedom

- Bottom-up initiatives
  - Democratization, decentralization, participation and involvement
  - Teachers Congress
    - Beginning of decentralization and democratisation movement
  - Estonia’s Educational Platform
    - Main purpose of education should be supporting the growth of democracy in society
  - Teacher – victim of the circumstances or the cause of the troubles?
  - Textbooks and school subjects under critical observation
Control over work

- Increasing the autonomy of the school boards, teachers’ councils and headmasters
- The need for a complementary education
- Bottom up initiatives focused on the change of the content of education
- Top-down initiatives focused on the structure
- Lack of teachers professional autonomy
RESULTS

1989-1990

- **Top-down initiatives**
  - Declaration on the Sovereignty of the Estonian SSR
  - National Educational Committee
  - Stabilisation period – initiative was taken over by the state

- **Bottom-up initiatives**
  - Education Forum
  - Critical review of Estonia’s educational conditions
Control over work

- Schools gained rights to partially modify the school syllabus
- Professional freedom of teachers increased:
  - right to decide over assessment forms and criteria;
  - right to decide over methods;
  - right to choose their own teaching materials from the selection approved by the ministry
RESULTS

1991-1996

- Top-down initiatives
  - A principle of shared responsibility
  - Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act
  - Evaluating teachers’ work on the basis of students’ results
  - State Board of Education – teacher evaluation
  - Process of curriculum development
    - Teachers were given more responsibility
  - Schools gained more autonomy

- Bottom-up initiatives
  - Leading role was taken over by experts in advisory groups formed inside the ministry
  - The government’s one-sided focusing merely on administrative duties was heavily criticised
Control over work

- Signs of increase in professionalism at the same time with deprofessionalisation
- Input to the school curriculum
- Formal education requirements were replaced by evaluation
- Efficiency became more important indicator of teachers work than professionalism
- Decentralization led to the increase of schools’ autonomy
  - Increasing collective rather than individual autonomy
CONCLUSIONS

- The main source of influence on professionalism is the state and its policies
- Freidson`s indicators of professionalism were found to have been partially followed at an institutional level
- External growth of professionalism in increased requirements and expectations for teachers
- Tendency towards standardisation
- Teacher profession became more vulnerable
Tänan kuulamast!

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