Pedagogical Beliefs, Instructional Practices and Opportunities for Professional Development of Teachers in Estonia

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• This presentation is based on a chapter co-written with my good colleague Margus Pedaste.

Introduction

• **Average age** of teachers – 47.9 (42.9 OECD average)
• **Work experience** – 21.6 (16.2 OECD average)

• Historically, **subject-orientation** in initial teacher education, students identities were related to their subject fields

• PISA results very good but many students do not enjoy going to school. Thus, the **performance of Estonian students is quite good**, but their **psychological well-being is of concern**. The latter could be linked to teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and instructional practices.
Pedagogical beliefs

• Change in teachers’ pedagogical beliefs from **subject** focus to **didactics** and **pedagogical** focus (see Poom-Valickis, 2003; Poom-Valickis & Oder, 2013).

• Confirmed by others e.g. Lepik et al, 2013. The average scores of different groups of teachers were higher on the **constructivism scale** (close to maximum scores) than on the traditionalism scale (close to the average score).

• The acceptance of **social-constructivism beliefs** by Estonian teachers was also visible in the TALIS study (TALIS survey, 2013)
Instructional practices

- Teachers’ pedagogical beliefs are **not necessarily related** to their instructional practices.
- In TALIS study (2013), Estonian teachers reported that their most common practices were **presenting a summary of recently learned content** (80% did it frequently or in all or nearly all lessons), followed by **checking students’ exercise books** (71%) and letting students **practise similar tasks**, (68%).
- Uibu et al (2013) – instructional practices aiming at **comprehension, application,** and **individualization** (related mainly to cognitive constructivism) more than supporting students’ independence (social constructivism scale) and traditional rote learning practices.
- Uibu et al (2016) – language modelling, teachers used dialogue in their classes, its main purpose was **to check their students’ knowledge** or to simply **transfer knowledge** to students. It was rarely that dialogue was used to support classroom discussion and shared meaning making.
Pedagogical beliefs and instructional practices

• Teachers’ beliefs have changed towards student-centred views over the years in Estonia. The actual teaching practices seem to be more traditional and are changing more slowly.

• Following I present some possible explanations as to why these developments have taken so much time.

• Describe some recent state-level interventions that aim at fostering the student-centered turn in Estonian schools (see also Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 – Eesti elukestva õppe..., 2014).
Estonia’s educational system has been radically reformed since 1991, after the re-establishment of the independent republic. In 1996, the new national curriculum was launched. It had been developed on the basis of many western curricula but was still mainly subject-oriented.

In 1997, new national state exams were introduced at the end of upper secondary school to test the achievement of the objectives set out in the national curriculum.

Introduction of such high-stakes standardized tests decreased teachers’ autonomy in deciding what and how to teach their students.
Teachers’ autonomy

• During the last decade, both the national curriculum and state exams have been changed. Teachers were involved in this process – some of them in the workgroups designing changes and several others in giving feedback.

• Viirpalu, Krull and Mikser (2014) - teachers are now expected to act as curriculum leaders and 43% of them have been involved in curriculum development.

• Today, the curriculum is still rather subject-oriented in defining subject-specific expected outcomes, but the general competencies have gained much more importance and teachers have more freedom to decide what and how to teach. Starting from 2014, students have to take three (instead of five) national state exams – mathematics, mother tongue, and foreign language.

• Schools, teachers and students have more freedom.
Teachers’ professional development

• Another change introduced in the mid-1990s was the teachers’ attestation system, which was important for the goals of that time but had to be adjusted to new societal needs.

• Pedaste (2012) has concluded that the old system did not support teachers’ autonomy and professional development toward using innovative teaching and learning approaches, e.g. no position-specific or more complex work was expected from teachers moved to a higher level through attestation.

• In 2013 the new professional standards of teachers were introduced and these distinguish between teachers, senior teachers and master teachers. Research-oriented competencies. More attention to reflection. Portfolio/based assessment. University teacher ed programs designed accordingly.

• As of September 2013, the minimum or maximum number of lessons a teacher has to teach weekly is not specified.

• Thus, more autonomy has been granted to schools and teachers in designing the school’s curriculum and deciding what type of work should be done by which teachers.
Challenges related to implementation of changes

- **Resources**, schools should have enough money to differentiate teachers’ work and salaries as well as support their professional development and research.

- It is not always easy for school leaders to implement these ideas given the limited resources (salaries on the lower side).
Challenges related to implementation of changes

• The resources are not enough if school leaders and teachers’ willingness to adopt changes and self-efficacy or courage to take responsibility are not in accordance with the increased autonomy they have.

• Teachers should feel competent according to the expectations specified in the professional standards and other relevant documents.

• The need for relatedness should also be satisfied – in this context, teachers should share the new pedagogical aims with many other teachers.

• When the three basic psychological needs have been achieved, teachers are able to self-regulate their professional development.
Challenges related to implementation of changes

• Unfortunately, there are some worrying research results related to Estonian teachers’ self-efficacy and willingness to adopt educational reforms.

• In the analysis of the TALIS data, four clusters of Estonian teachers have been specified (based on the sample teaching in lower secondary school, see Loogma & Nemeržitski, 2013). Two clusters contained teachers with rather low self-efficacy (71%). However, among the teachers with high self-efficacy, only one cluster (17% of teachers) of teachers was satisfied with their work and societal position. The other cluster with high self-efficacy contained teachers who did not feel that they as teachers were loved and appreciated by the society.

• Thus, only a small group of teachers has been shown to be prepared for adopting new educational approaches.
Challenges related to implementation of changes

• Lepik, Loogma and Talts (2014) - conducted interviews with 25 teachers and identified seven reactions that characterized the teachers’ acceptance of changes in the curriculum reform that was needed to change their teaching practice.

• Enthusiastic acceptance of changes appeared when teachers felt that their autonomy increased and new opportunities were opened.

• All other behavioural strategies resulted in unacceptance or merely formal acceptance. Some of the teachers (i) changed their practice because of the formal requirements, (ii) adapted the new expectations to their own needs, (iii) did not see the changes or felt that the changes should be implemented by other teachers, (iv) ignored the changes and followed their own pedagogical approach or (v) ignored the changes because they felt that applying them was difficult or unnecessary, and (vi) for some of the teachers, the changes were not in accordance with their own personal values and moral understanding.
• implementing changes in the educational system is quite difficult if there is a scarcity of resources, if high self-efficacy and relatedness are characteristic of less than one fifth of the teachers and if many strategies teachers use are related to not accepting the changes introduced through educational reforms.

• One of the actions taken to achieve the necessary changes is changing the teacher education programmes.
Teacher education

• Several studies have been carried out in recent years aiming at understanding
• (1) what are the motives of candidates to start teacher education,
• (2) how to provide teacher education that prepares students sufficiently for real work,
• (3) how to introduce them adequate tools for further professional development (e.g., Krull et al., 2013).
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• Several European research and development projects have resulted in new methods and products that are integrated into teacher education.
  • In the ACTTEA project (http://acttea.ut.ee/), a video-supported guided reflection method was developed for supporting action-oriented knowledge construction;
  • in the WatchMe project (http://www.project-watchme.eu/), a framework for supporting the development and assessment of core practices of teaching during student teachers’ school practicum period was developed;
  • in the Go-Lab (http://www.go-lab-project.eu) and Ark of Inquiry (http://www.arkofinquiry.eu) projects, a framework for applying and supporting collaborative inquiry-based learning has been designed where teachers have a new role with increased autonomy and students more responsibility for setting their learning goals and choosing their learning methods.
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• Large reforms in 2013, to better connect theoretical studies with the practical work of teachers

• Firstly, the traditional divide between foundations and methods courses was challenged by developing larger courses taught by teams of different teacher educators. These teams include teaching staff from different faculties and institutes.

• Secondly, the common gap between theoretical courses and school practicum was bridged by changing the whole concept of school practicum.
COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK IN SCHOOL

TEACHERS’ CORE PEDAGOGICAL COURSES (24 CP)

- Communication and Feedback in School
- Designing Learning and Instruction
- Teaching and Reflection
- Teacher’s Identity and Leadership

PRACTICE (24 CP)

- Pedagogical practice in university’s labs
- Continuous pedagogical traineeship in innovation schools (related to main module/didactics’ module)
- Main pedagogical traineeship in a practice school

TOPICS

- Professional ethics, identity, evidence-basedness, motivation of learning
- Communication
- Curriculum interpretations
- Instructional theories
- Learner’s special needs
- Evaluation and feedback
- Modern learning environment and curriculum
- Learner’s development
- Research methods
- Teacher’s identity and dilemmas

COURSES IN SUBJECT AND SUBJECT AREA DIDACTICS (12 CP)

- Didactics of subject area
- Subject didactics
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• ...intended changes have been realized to a large extent (e.g. shared vision, opportunities to practice). We can also see that collaboration between the teaching staff needs to be further supported and the artefacts of everyday instructional practices more readily incorporated into the core pedagogical courses. Furthermore, we need to help our student teachers see the practical value of theoretical frameworks and better guide them in making the best use of these for their own learning.
Thank you!

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