



‘Teachers have to take the responsibility for everything’: Challenges and opportunities for Lithuanian teachers in the 21st century.

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This article focuses on the challenges and difficulties faced by the Lithuanian teaching profession in primary schools. It asks how the post-Soviet educational reforms in Lithuania have affected teachers and what the gendered implications for the teaching profession are in Lithuania. Two theoretical approaches were used: the first is a critique of neoliberalism, and the second is a feminist perspective concerned with the feminisation of primary school teachers. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with female Lithuanian primary school teachers with 25–45 years of professional teaching experience. The data reveals an intensification of teachers’ jobs, increased accountability and performativity, marketisation of student school placements, and job precariousness. Also, the study findings imply that low teachers’ salaries reduce the attractiveness of the teaching profession, yet the interviewees also found their jobs meaningful. The findings also reveal the perception of primary school teaching in Lithuania as a women’s occupation due to deeply engrained gender norms. The study, therefore, suggests that the neoliberal turn in education has harmed the Lithuanian teaching profession, undermining the role of teachers as professionals. The results underline a need to reconsider widely spread neoliberal educational developments for teachers to gain a greater sense of professional independence.

Keywords: Lithuania, neoliberalism, gender, teachers’ work

Introduction

Teachers play an important role around the world. Yet their conditions vary from country to country. However, the job tends to require an ever-greater variety of skills, qualifications, knowledge, abilities, and passion for nurturing children and young people in the 21st century. In light of this requirement, the teaching profession around the world is encountering various challenges (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2013; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Jóhannesson, 2006). Lithuania is no exception. Many devoted teachers have begun to think about leaving the profession due to low salaries, high demands, and stress levels (Bilbokaitė & Bilbokaitė-Skiauterienė, 2017; Bulotaitė & Lepeškienė, 2006; Gruodytė & Pašvenskienė, 2013; Lietuvos Švietimo Darbuotojų Profesinė Sajunga, 2021).

After Lithuania gained independence in 1990, during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, educational transformations and reforms took place to create an educational system that would allow Lithuania to catch up with the more developed Western countries. However, despite significant efforts to reform Lithuanian education, today, at the beginning of the third decade of a new century, the Lithuanian teaching profession is confronted with many difficulties and is subject to severe criticism (Bilbokaitė & Bilbokaitė-Skiauterienė, 2017; Gruodytė & Pašvenskienė, 2013). Teaching, a strongly feminised occupation in Lithuania, is not seen as an attractive and worthy career path. Many graduates of teaching and education programs do not pursue an actual teaching career (Želvys, 2004). As a result

of the lack of new recruits, the Lithuanian education community is ageing, which is likely to lead to teacher shortages in the near future (Bilbokaitė & Bilbokaitė-Skiauterienė, 2017; Gruodytė & Pašvenskienė, 2013; Lietuvos Švietimo Darbuotojų Profesinė Sąjunga, 2021).

This situation led the first author to want to delve deeper into the topic of the challenges and difficulties faced by the Lithuanian teaching profession in primary schools. Therefore, the focus of this study was to look at the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania and identify the problems that the Lithuanian primary teachers have been facing. The following research questions guided the study: *How have the post-Soviet educational reforms in Lithuania affected teachers? What are the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania?*

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with Lithuanian primary school teachers with 25–45 years of professional teaching experience. The study is important because of the lack of research that examines the challenges that Lithuanian teachers have faced with post-Soviet educational reforms, both in terms of the feminisation and the social standing of the Lithuanian teaching profession. [1]

Lithuanian context

Lithuania has a population of 2.7 million people. Its education system is divided into different levels: pre-school, pre-primary (between ages 5 and 7, lasting one year); primary (between ages 7 and 11, four years); basic, or so-called lower secondary (between ages 11 and 16, six years); and upper secondary education (between age 16 and 19, two years), which ends with matura examinations that lead to higher education. Pre-primary, primary, and lower secondary schooling is compulsory in Lithuania.

After the country became independent in 1990, several educational reforms took place. They can be roughly divided into three phases (Želvys, 2009). The first stage of educational reforms lasted from 1990–1997, followed by the second stage, 1998–2002, and finally the third stage, beginning in 2003. For this study, the third stage can last until the 2020s, including the most recent developments.

Lithuania has examined how other countries’ education systems and ideas have developed throughout history. For instance, in 1994, Lithuania was among the 92 countries that signed the UNESCO *Salamanca statement* representing the international consensus about the need for inclusive education and stating its main principles and needed policy changes (Adomaitienė, n.d.; UNESCO, 1994). In 2010, Lithuania ratified the United Nations’ (2006) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*.

In 1995–1996, OECD experts conducted the first systemic evaluation of Lithuanian education (Bruzgelevičienė, 2002; Želvys, 2009). The results of the evaluation had an impact on later educational developments (Bruzgelevičienė, 2002). Various education evaluation centres were opened, such as the National Examination Centre, responsible for evaluating students’ learning outcomes, the Study Quality Evaluation Centre, and expert committees. In 2000, a broad educational institution evaluation system was developed, which led to the beginning of external and internal auditing (Bruzgelevičienė, 2002), and the ‘rules of the global game’ were accepted (Želvys, 2009, p. 25).

In 2001, the Lithuanian education system underwent finance reform when the student basket scheme was introduced. The main factor determining funding is the number of students in the school. ‘The funding follows the student, which was among the explicit policy goals of the reform to foster competition among schools, thus aiming to improve education quality’ (OECD, 2016, p. 96).

During the independence years, Lithuania developed its education sector similar to how it had done through the early reforms. In Lithuania, the first national attempts to assess students’ achievements were made in 2002. Since 2014, every spring, primary school students from Grade 2 and Grade 4 have taken national standardised tests (Eurydice, 2022; Nacionalinis Egzaminu Centras, n.d.).

Regarding the Lithuanian teaching body, two main labour unions represent teachers and education workers. However, these unions do not represent the majority of teachers since many teachers do not

belong to any union (Švietimo, Mokslo ir Sporto Ministerija, 2019). Further, according to OECD (2021) data, Lithuanian primary school teachers receive lower than average salaries compared to the average primary school teacher's salary in OECD countries.

Theoretical background

Two theoretical approaches were used. The first is a critique of neoliberalism, borrowing from the wealth of literature on the subject (Chomsky, 1999; Connell, 2013, 2015; Connell et al., 2009; Graeber, 2018; Harvey, 2007; Klein, 2007; Nussbaum, 2010). The second approach is a feminist perspective (Connell, 1995, 2000; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Drudy, 2008; Howe, 1977; Wallerstein, 1995), which is also concerned with the feminisation of primary school teaching (e.g., Moreau, 2019).

Neoliberalism and teachers' professionalism

Neoliberalism is commonly understood as a political and economic model that emphasises free market capitalism and the weakening of the state's actions. Critics describe it as free 'market fundamentalism' (Stiglitz, 2002, pp. 35–36). Harvey (2007) points out that neoliberalism can be defined by certain features, such as the lessening or minimising state power, austerity policies, privatisation, deregulation, anti-unionism, strong individualism, competition, and continuously increasing productivity. Harvey (2007), as well as Ball (2016) and Connell (2013), agree that neoliberalism has become deeply rooted in almost every sphere of people's personal and professional lives, so much so that many people are not even aware of it.

Standardisation and assessments are among the features of neoliberalism in education. In many countries, significant focus has been on various forms of assessment and measurements as a means to improve productivity and educational achievements. Ball (2016) argues that a strong emphasis on performativity and accountability in neoliberal education reduces teachers' professionalism since the increased importance of tests, benchmarks, audits, reports, and assessments increases the workload, creates unnecessary stress, and diverts teachers' attention away from the real goals of teaching. Ball (2016) also argues that 'in the regimes of performativity, experience is nothing, performativity is everything' (p. 1054). In addition, teachers tend to have less freedom and fewer chances to use and develop creative teaching methods and work as autonomous experts of the teaching profession whom society trusts (Connell, 2015).

According to Evetts, occupational regulation and control are often seen and advocated for to achieve professionalism at work. She distinguishes between two types of professionalism, that is, organisational professionalism and occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2009). Organisational professionalism can be defined by 'increased standardisation of work procedures and practices and managerial controls' and 'externalised forms of regulation and accountability measures such as target-setting and performance review' (Evetts, 2009, p. 23). In contrast, occupational professionalism relies on collegial authority and autonomy, requiring trust from employers and customers, with practitioners monitoring regulations themselves (Evetts, 2009, p. 23). Therefore, a clear connection can be observed between organisational professionalism and the new public management methods of neoliberalism, highlighting the shift from occupational professionalism towards organisational professionalism (Hall & McGinity, 2015). Evetts (2011) also claims that professional work is becoming increasingly commodified nowadays, and the relationship between professionals and users of their service is being turned into customer relations (p. 416).

Hall and McGinity (2015) also argue that professionalism has become closely linked with compliance in teaching and 'controls from above' when teachers are 'dominated by forces external to the profession through the commercial logics of the market and the managerialist logics of the organisation' (p. 4). As a result, teachers are increasingly perceived as technicians or 'compliant operatives', which decreases their collective and individual autonomy and professionalism (Hall & McGinity, 2015,

p. 5; see also Ball, 2003). One of their primary tasks is the implementation of policy agendas. This implementation, according to scholars Ball (2003) and Hall and McGinity (2015), leads to the debate about the de-professionalization or post-professionalisation of teachers since ‘neo-liberalism is itself in antagonism with professionalism’ (p. 5). Therefore, it becomes clear that under neoliberalism, teachers’ professionalism transforms while teachers become more vulnerable.

Feminisation of teaching

More or less worldwide, women are the vast majority of teachers in the primary grades in compulsory education (e.g., Moreau, 2019; Warin & Gannerud, 2014). This situation is also the case in Lithuania, where women occupy a significant majority of the teaching positions, especially in primary schools (Cerych, 1997; Purvaneckienė, 2012). This phenomenon has been called feminisation. According to Eurostat (2023) data in Lithuania, in 2021 the number of female teachers significantly surpassed that of male teachers, with male teachers making up only 3.7% of the teaching staff at the primary school level, the lowest proportion among EU countries.

According to Connell (1995, 2000), there is a clear distinction between masculinities and femininities as socially constructed concepts that define certain actions, social practices and behaviours attributed to different genders. Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity (1995; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840) refers to practices that lead to ‘men’s collective dominance over women’, but it also indicates the dominance of some masculinities over other masculinities that are considered as subordinate. According to Donaldson (1993), hegemonic masculinity can be defined as a set of idealised characteristics of manhood, such as physical strength, toughness, financial stability and superiority, individualism, confidence, and competitiveness. Deeply rooted characteristics of the different genders might be noticed in selecting professional occupations and division of labour (Connell, 2000; Donaldson, 1993).

A certain division of labour based on gender appeared when men were seen as breadwinners who earned wages, while unpaid homemaking and child-raising responsibilities were left for women (Connell, 2000; Wallerstein, 1995). According to Drudy (2008), this circumstance tends to be clearly the case in teaching young children when the female teacher is seen as an ‘ideal primary teacher’ ‘based on the essentialist belief that a woman’s nature tends to make her better with children’ (p. 312). Drudy (2008) argues that domestic ideology, i.e., that women’s careers should be consistent with domestic chores and responsibilities, is still perceptible in many countries. She also claims that the ‘feminisation of teaching is a cumulative historical and social process’ (Drudy, 2008, p. 312).

When discussing the feminisation of the teaching profession, it is also important to address the term profession. Drudy (2008) claims that different opinions exist on whether teaching is a real profession. She states that ‘an occupation [as it is argued by scholars, e.g., Johnson, 1972] is called a profession when it exercises collegiate control, i.e. when it is the primary authority defining the relationship between the giver and receiver of its services’ (Drudy, 2008, p. 315). Moreau (2019) says that teaching as a vocation has been replaced with teaching as professionalism (p. 86). Dillabough (1999) argues that sociologists of education have pointed out that uncritical acceptance of instrumental goals can lead to inequality and that a feminist analysis of the social and political dimensions of identity formation in teaching is needed. The views of the authors cited here are consistent with the view of Evetts (2009) about occupational professionalism that relies on collegial authority and autonomy, presented above.

Feminisation and neoliberalism are connected because neoliberalism curbs the public sector by narrowing it, shrinking public employment, and transferring power from the state to the private sector and markets (Connell, 2005, 2009; Harvey, 2007). This factor strengthens gender inequalities and weakens women because women mostly rely on the public sector for income, e.g., teachers, nurses, social workers, and caregivers. At the same time, men dominate the private sector and the markets (Connell, 2009). This situation results in lesser social security and higher insecurity and precariousness, which affect women especially (Connell, 2005, 2009). According to Connell (2005),

the rise of neoliberalism and the shock doctrine in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet countries, such as Lithuania, ‘has been followed by a sharp deterioration in the position of women’ because of sustained domination of masculinities induced by the neoliberal system that gives the advantage to men (p. 1815).

Method

Participants

A qualitative interviewing approach was selected to conduct this study. In January 2022, eight qualified primary school class teachers (grades 1–4) were interviewed face-to-face. Since this study focused on understanding how teachers have perceived post-Soviet educational changes, participants with long teaching careers and 25–45 years of professional teaching experience were selected. Convenience sampling was used to find interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2013), referring to the sample accessible to the researcher. Thus, the participants were chosen from four different schools in the same county in the southern part of Lithuania, representing the typical homogeneous Lithuanian society with a similar ratio of female to male teachers in the study as in the country.

Snowball sampling was also used to find interviewees when participants were willing to use their networks to help find more participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). All the teachers interviewed were women since no male class teachers worked in any of the four research sites. The participants were 50–65 years old. They all have a teacher’s degree in primary school teaching and lengthy teaching experiences.

The interviews and analysis

Open-ended interview questions were used to guide the interviews. The interview questions helped to understand the teachers’ perceptions of educational reforms and changes, the current status of the teaching profession in Lithuania, and the challenges and opportunities they faced at work. Reflexive thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2013; see also Clarke & Braun, 2017), was used to analyse the data because it gives flexibility for interpretation, and it ‘can be used to identify patterns within and across data about participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives’ (Braun & Clarke, 2017, p. 297). A six-phase approach to thematic analysis, defined by Braun and Clarke (2012), was followed while analysing the data. The first author led the analysis and the initial writing, and both authors discussed the findings at all steps. The first author made all the translations.

Ethics, strengths, and limitations

The participants are referred to in the study with pseudonyms. All of them are professionals who willingly agreed to participate. The number of participants was limited due to conventions in this type of research. Even though the small sample does not allow generalisations, rich and in-depth data was collected. The patterns and similarities identified in the data allow for the creation of a certain understanding of the teaching profession in Lithuania from the perspectives of the teachers interviewed.

Findings and discussion

The teachers interviewed claimed their jobs had changed and become more challenging. They addressed rapid changes, increased workload, and issues relating to their gender. Five themes were developed from the collected data: intensification of the teachers’ job; accountability and performativity; marketisation of school placements for students and job precariousness; low salary–lowered attractiveness–still a meaningful job; and the gendered implications and feminisation.

The Intensification of teachers’ jobs

All interviewees talked about a significant increase in workload, which they linked to higher stress and exhaustion since it was difficult to manage all the tasks. The participants also noted that at the beginning of their teaching careers, teachers mostly had to devote their time to tasks directly related to teaching in the classroom. Later, other types of tasks were introduced, such as participation in various projects and seminars and developing digital teaching material. For instance, Laura saw the increased workload as one of the most significant negative changes, making the teachers’ job ‘never-ending’. She stated:

Teachers have been loaded with more work. What teachers did not have to do back in the day, now we must do, and lately, that amount of work has even doubled or tripled.

The interviewees contended that there had been a significant increase in paperwork as time had passed, which they perceived as pointless, time-consuming, and even excessive. The participants said they would rather devote the time to improving their teaching methods and creating engaging exercises for students than having to fill out various documentation.

Greater intensity in the job can be identified as one of the consequences of educational changes and reforms. Work intensification can be associated with increased paperwork and various tasks that the teachers felt were additional. Moreover, the teachers often mentioned teaching children with special educational needs as an addition rather than an integral part of the job.

The majority of the interviewees also claimed that throughout their teaching careers, and especially lately, they have experienced many changes and reforms in the education sector. Many perceived the reforms as unsystematic, chaotic, and too rapid. Thus, teachers did not adapt and learn new things needed to provide high-quality teaching. For instance, Maria stated:

New educational curricula are being adopted when we have not yet even fully understood how to work properly according to the older ones ... and then we have to do everything all over again ... that is somehow difficult ...

Therefore, the teachers indicated the lack of well-thought-out, well-planned, and systematic changes that would help to achieve the desired outcomes. The interviewees perceived these reforms as including a greater diversity of additional tasks, such as participation in various projects, paperwork, community activities, communication with parents, and attending seminars and meetings, which became a significant part of teachers’ work lives. That aligns with the claims and findings by, for instance, Fitzgerald et al. (2019) and Jóhannesson (2006), who also discussed the overload in the teachers’ jobs.

One of the changes that the teachers felt intensified their job was implementing inclusive education. The teachers interviewed had strong opinions, and some even claimed that the efforts to achieve a higher level of inclusion were a negative decision made by policymakers. In 1994, Lithuania was one of the many countries that signed the United Nations’ *Salamanca statement* (Adomaitienė, n.d.; UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations’ (2006) *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2010. After the ratification of the latter convention, inclusion of children with special educational needs into regular schools has been one of the main educational goals stated in the latest Lithuanian educational strategies (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013). Therefore, the number of children with special educational needs in regular schools has grown.

However, as stated above, the teachers interviewed did not perceive inclusion as positive or necessary. In contrast, it seemed that teachers believed that inclusion added to the teachers’ already high workload and numerous responsibilities. Since teachers who worked in regular schools were used to teaching students without impairments, inclusion was seen as an extra burden. Also, most teachers lack the necessary skills and professional expertise to respond to the different educational needs of students with difficulties or impairments, making inclusion even more challenging. As such, inclusion can be perceived as an additional task that has been appointed to teachers because of new educational

policies and changes, consistent with the findings of Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014).

Furthermore, teachers were not always provided with teachers' aides who should help, especially while teaching students with special educational needs. Thus, it could be argued that greater inclusion of children with special needs into regular classrooms, without providing all the needed support and help for the teachers, is also related to austerity policies about cutting expenditure (Harvey, 2007). The teachers interviewed acknowledged that the help and support needed to provide high-quality education to all the students was lacking due to limited financing. Therefore, implementing inclusion policies without providing the required help and support can be seen as a way to save costs due to limited resources. Inclusion has become a challenging issue for teachers despite being a crucial human right that should be pursued and fostered in all regular classrooms.

Increased accountability and performativity

The interviewees emphasised that they felt too little freedom and a lack of trust in teachers. They also expressed the need to work more independently. Julia explained how this situation worked:

Every year, our lessons are inspected and discussed openly in our meetings. I think that the management should trust their teachers since we have been working together for so long. I think they should let teachers work freely and trust them because all the teachers try to give their students what is best . . . the constant lack of trust and constant control really kill your motivation.

While discussing increasing accountability, the teachers tended to have contrasting opinions about standardised testing. Standardised testing and rankings clearly indicate the increasing accountability and performativity in education (Ball, 2003, 2016; Connell, 2009). Since 2014, every spring, primary school students from Grade 2 and Grade 4 have taken the national standardised test (Eurydice, 2022; Nacionalinis Egzaminų Centras, n.d.).

Half the teachers strongly criticised standardised testing, claiming it was unnecessary. They argued that standardised testing does not show students' achievements and real knowledge. Some teachers pointed out that teachers should instead have more freedom and be trusted to evaluate their students' achievements since only the teachers can objectively see their students' progress. In addition, the teachers claimed that standardised assessments cause more stress among teachers. If students do not perform well, the teachers are blamed and face criticism from the school management for not reaching high scores.

The other half of teachers believed that testing can be useful for improving students' achievements. However, all the teachers interviewed agreed that standardised testing should not be applied to rank and compare educational institutions or teachers. Ranking and comparison were perceived as a negative thing that adversely affected the teaching community. Anna pointed out:

There cannot be any comparison. Those comparisons have a strong negative effect on children and especially on teachers. I do not know how it is in other schools, but we were suffering . . . It only leads to suspicions and pressures for the teachers because of those tests and nothing more than that ...

The teachers also strongly believed that school rankings cannot be seen as depicting a fair story since schools and students are too different to be compared. For instance, standardised tests are not adapted for students with special educational needs, who usually receive easier tasks and additional help throughout their everyday education. In addition, school ranking has also affected the teaching body by creating unnecessary stress, tension, and competition between teachers. Rankings of schools that are usually openly revealed to the public contribute to the image of the teaching profession.

According to Ball (2003), performativity is 'a technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—

based on rewards and sanctions’ (p. 216). The teachers interviewed perceived comparison and ranking as unfair since students and schools are too different to be compared. Besides that, some of the teachers interviewed said they were worried about their students’ performances in standardised assessments because teachers face criticism and are made accountable for their students’ poor performance. Ball (2003) calls it ‘the terrors of performativity’ (p. 216). Increasing accountability and performativity can signify organisational professionalism in education with target setting, performance reviews and ‘controls from above’ (Evetts, 2009; Hall & McGinity, 2015, p. 4). As such, teachers have less autonomy and control over their work.

Therefore, pressures to perform well and produce good results strongly affect teachers and their teaching. According to Nussbaum (2010), when emphasis is placed on measurable results, teachers tend to concentrate on the knowledge needed for testing. Besides that, Ball (2003) argues that teachers become deprofessionalised. It also complies with the teachers’ claims about increased paperwork due ‘to demands of performativity’ that consume a lot of teachers’ time (Ball, 2003). As Ball (2003) stated, teachers tend to spend more time ‘reporting what [they] do, rather than doing it’ (Ball, 2016, p. 1054). As a result, teachers tend to be less trusted and respected, while their role as autonomous experts tends to diminish.

The teachers interviewed made similar claims that teachers should be allowed more freedom and should be more trusted. Some of them even believed that teachers are the most competent to assess their students’ progress and achievements because they are professionals who are well acquainted with their students while teaching them every day. The interviewees also acknowledged the lack of space to manoeuvre while teaching and the need for more flexibility to make their own judgements while deciding which direction to take to respond to the needs of their students. But, according to Connell (2009), ‘neoliberalism distrusts teachers’ and their judgements (p. 217). Thus, under marker-oriented neoliberalism, schools and teachers must ‘make themselves auditable’ (Connell, 2009, p. 218). This factor leads to the perception of teachers as technicians who teach according to strongly defined methods and curricula that are considered ‘best practice’, resulting in desired achievements that are easily measured (Connell, 2009, p. 224; Hall & McGinity, 2015).

The marketisation of school placements for students and job precariousness

Some interviewees revealed how they were subjected to precarious working conditions that worried them about losing their jobs. As a result of the decreasing number of students and increasing competition between schools, teachers had to find and form their own groups of students to maintain their jobs. To do that formation, teachers had to attract students by advertising themselves when visiting kindergartens or private households. The teachers described this experience as downgrading since educators were turned into salespeople who must sell their service, while parents had the right to select the teacher they liked the most. Anna shared her experience:

The principal told us: ‘You collect your group of students, you keep your job. If not, you will not work . . . someone needs to be fired.’... We had to go to people’s homes. Some people opened the door; some people shouted at you that they did not want to send their children to your school. Others set their dogs to bark at you ...

Furthermore, as Anna explained:

I experienced so many theatrics. We were going to kindergarten to find new pupils. We do not go now because of the pandemic. I think that was so degrading. When I started working as a teacher back in the day, it was not like that. Pupils came to school, and one teacher got one group of pupils, the other one got the other group, and you just worked with those pupils you had. But then, different times came, the number of children entering schools started to decrease. So, we had to go to kindergartens, where there were parents, children, and us, teachers. One teacher is young and beautiful, and the other one is older ... It was very hard emotionally. I never wanted to go there... We were like some exhibits.

Teachers liked exhibits that children could choose based on their looks, impressions, and work.

Julia also told a similar story:

For instance, there are three teachers and a hall full of parents. As a teacher, you must introduce yourself to them because they choose one of you. That is very significant to you. Of course, when you are being chosen, that makes you feel good, but for the one who is not being chosen, or is chosen by fewer parents ... that just breaks those teachers down . . .

Such practices and experiences not only affected the teaching body's general image but also impacted the teachers' perception of themselves. It also led to individualism and competition among teachers, which can be seen as a sign of neoliberalism and the marketisation of education. (Connell, 2009; Harvey, 2007). When education becomes more commodified and marketised, the roles of students and parents change. Parents are seen as customers who make individual choices while selecting an educational institution for their children (Connell, 2011, 2013, 2015; Rubin et al., 2020). Therefore, schools and teachers compete to attract more students.

In addition, many interviewees also noted that they felt a lack of support from the school management and education system. The teachers claimed to encounter pressure from the school management often. For instance, Sophia stated that in case of disputes, the management often stood on the parents' side without offering any support for teachers. She said:

I think the management should defend teachers because when something happens, the management sweet-talks and tries to soothe the situation while making the teachers give way to parents.

Since market values drive the system, 'the customer is always right', teachers become silenced and must yield to parents. It could be argued that management tries to maintain a good image of their school and satisfy parents, who are perceived as customers. As a result, the teaching body becomes less respected and more powerless while their professional roles are being undermined.

Lack of financing for education is the next point that has affected teaching and the status of teachers' jobs and their precarity. The participants mentioned multiple cases where the lack of financing impacted not only the quality of teaching but also the teachers' personal income. Laura said:

You have to make everything with your own hands. It is not that you come and take what you need. You have to buy everything yourself—sheets of paper, or some supplies for some experiment—let's say some oil or something like that.

One teacher pointed out that they also had to persuade the students' parents to provide certain class tools. Consequently, the scarcity of certain supplies not only made it difficult for teachers to develop innovative exercises and make the lessons more engaging but also indicated the precarious working conditions that teachers faced.

Yet another finding of this study is the teachers' distrustfulness towards the labour unions and reluctance to join a union. None of the interviewees was a union member when they were interviewed. Some said they had been union members before but withdrew their membership. For instance, Julia explained her decision to leave the union by saying:

My colleague had faced some injustice. However, the union representatives could not help her even though she was legally in the right. So then I made my decision . . . because any way you cannot receive any help when it is needed, so why be a member ... I think that nobody actually pays any attention to what the union is saying.

According to the teachers interviewed, the powerlessness of the union to make any changes was the main reason they left it. However, most participants agreed that teachers' labour unions might be

needed for teachers if they were active and capable of defending teachers’ rights. A few participants expressed their view that the lack of a mechanism to defend teachers’ rights has led to the pacification and silencing of teachers.

Consequently, the defenceless teaching body has sometimes encountered precariousness and a scarcity of jobs. In a market system, the workforce is often insecure (Connell, 2013). As Connell (2013) stated, job insecurity has also been increasing among the teaching communities, which is related to anti-unionism or weakening of labour unions, one of the features of neoliberalism (Connell, 2015; Harvey, 2007). In the neoliberal era, when individualism is strongly emphasised, the workers tend to be less united while the rights of the workforce tend to decline.

As noted before, the majority of Lithuanian teachers do not belong to a teacher union (Švietimo, Mokslo ir Sporto Ministerija, 2019). Accordingly, it is not surprising that none of the teachers interviewed were members of teachers’ unions when they were interviewed. The absence of strong teachers’ labour unions might also impact teachers’ low salaries.

Low salary–lower attractiveness–still a meaningful job

The interviewees pointed out certain aspects of their work that could be seen as leading to lower respect and attractiveness of teaching. All the teachers interviewed believed that low salaries are the main reason teaching is not highly respected. They claimed Lithuanian teachers are severely underpaid since there is a clear discrepancy between workload, responsibilities, demands and salary. For instance, Maria claimed that ‘teachers’ salary allows you to fulfil only your very minimal needs’, while Rita believed that ‘teachers’ salaries are below the poverty line’. As a result, according to the interviewees, young people do not see teaching as an attractive career option but seek other jobs that are higher paid. As Diana said:

Nowadays, the prestige of the teaching profession is defined by teachers’ pay. Why do young people not want to become teachers? Because they can earn more somewhere else while having an easier job. Teachers have so much to do, but seeing the amount on your paycheck just makes you sad.

The teachers interviewed pointed out that low teachers’ salaries were the main factor diverting young people from becoming teachers. As noted before, Lithuanian primary school teachers receive lower average salaries than the average primary school teachers’ salaries in OECD countries (OECD, 2021). Low teachers’ salaries affect the social standing of the teaching profession and limit its competitiveness in the labour market (Lietuvos Švietimo Darbuotojų Profesinė Sąjunga, 2021).

Graeber (2018) pointed out that there are two main things that people usually expect to get from a job: a salary and ‘the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the world’ (p. 207). However, Graeber (2018) argued that there is an ‘inverse relationship between the social value of work and the amount of money one is likely to be paid for it’ (p. 207). This point tends to apply to teaching and all other caring jobs. Since caring jobs are ‘directed at other people’ and require a lot of understanding and empathy, some could argue that caring jobs are not real work (Graeber, 2018, p. 236). This perception implies that caring jobs are easy and do not require professional knowledge or qualifications, which means everyone can perform them. Also, even though caring jobs are often underpaid, they give fulfilment to people who perform them. That is why it is argued that only those who perform unfulfilling jobs deserve decent pay as compensation for their hard work (Graeber, 2018). That relates to the perception that teaching is a meaningful and satisfying occupation despite being low-paid.

Despite various negative factors teachers encountered at work, all teachers interviewed claimed that teaching is meaningful work and a crucially important occupation. A few participants admitted that a deep connection with some of their students gives the teachers fulfilment and motivation to continue. As Rita said:

You see your students' eyes, and when you come home after work, you think I will prepare for the next day's classes and go to work because of those students.

All teachers interviewed claimed they enjoyed caring for and working with young children. The teachers interviewed also talked about feeling connected to their students. They also experience emotional reciprocity in their work because teachers often receive love and appreciation from their students, which enriches their job. Thus, while the salaries are one factor that concerns how attractive or meaningful the work is, interviewees still perceived their job as significant and fulfilling.

The gendered implications and feminisation

Since no male class teachers were working in the schools of the interviewees, it is important to explore the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania. Therefore, the participants brought up various points on this matter that are related to low teachers' salaries, low prestige, and the belief that women are better suited for working with children.

According to most teachers, the low teachers' salaries are the main reason men do not choose to work in primary schools since the low salaries make teaching unattractive for men. This perception relates to the belief that men should be so-called breadwinners who must provide for their families and ensure financial stability at home since a man is 'the head of the family' (Anna). For this reason, as the teachers interviewed implied, men cannot afford to work in primary schools. Maria contended:

Being a teacher, you cannot create a well-being for your family. Also, the school can only pay you as much as it can. While you can do the impossible or achieve the best results, you will be told that no money will pay you more.

In addition to that, some of the participants also mentioned the lack of career development options. They claimed that teaching as an occupation tends to have very limited opportunities for advancing one's career compared to other professions where various promotions are more common. According to the interviewees, men are assumed to be more natural career seekers, so for them, having the chance to climb the career ladder is very important, explaining why men tend to choose other occupations rather than teaching.

The other reason why very few men teach in primary schools in Lithuania is related to the previously mentioned issue of low prestige and the status of the teaching profession. A few participants claimed that men tended to seek well-paid jobs and those highly regarded jobs in society. For instance, Silvia stated, 'For a man to work at school is not prestigious'.

In addition, most of the interviewed women teachers tended to perceive the absence of men in primary school teaching as normal and a matter of course. 'Teacher is a mother', as Maria said, who supposed that teaching is inherently a women's occupation. Most participants tended to hold the same view. They claimed that teaching small children, such as primary schoolers (grades 1–4 in Lithuania), is a women's job since women are naturally more capable and better with small children. In contrast, men find it uncomfortable to show the love, empathy, and care that is a part of educating children. Also, according to some interviewees, men struggled to lower themselves to the children's level, and they saw it as childish and unmanly.

Interestingly, women's over-representation in the teaching profession and the absence of men in primary school teaching was not perceived as problematic but rather as a natural thing. The belief that women are better with children is related to gender stereotypes that lead to job segregation by gender. The deeply rooted and socially constructed stereotypes about different genders seemed to be widespread in Lithuania. As such, the women's sphere is usually defined by domestic labour, nurturing of children and other caring-related jobs (Connell, 2000). Men, however, often try to comply with the characteristics attributed to 'a real man' or a superordinate form of masculinity called hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). According to Donaldson (1993),

the idea of hegemonic masculinity entails that men are not able to take care of small children, while women’s relationships and bonds with children are considered crucial.

On the other hand, since a ‘teacher is a mother’, as one of the interviewees said, it is a matter of course that women dominate teaching. This point complies with Drudy’s (2008) claim that the female teacher is perceived as ideal for small children because women’s nature makes them better with children (Moreau, 2019; Warin & Gannerud, 2014).

Also, the low salary of teachers was often addressed as one of the main reasons men do not teach in primary schools. As the interviewees claimed, men cannot afford to work at schools since teachers’ salaries are too low to provide for a family and ensure the well-being of one’s own children. This situation reveals that the image of a man as a breadwinner is strong in Lithuania. Anna said:

As we say among the teachers, being a teacher is a luxury. If a husband earns well, then a wife can work as a teacher and try to achieve self-fulfilment. Since a man is a breadwinner, a teacher’s salary is not enough. The salary is low, so teaching is not an attractive job for men.

This finding implies that men must ensure the financial stability and security of the family. That is why men tend to choose those jobs that are higher paid rather than adopt a teaching career. As Wallerstein (1995) stated, men historically were supposed to perform productive work, which was ‘money-earning work’ (p. 24).

Therefore, it can be argued that men still feel pressure to conform to the norm to have ‘productive’ and ‘real’ work, which would be highly paid. As a result, women are mostly left to occupy lower-paid caretaking jobs, sometimes called pink-collar jobs (Howe, 1977).

According to the teachers interviewed, men do not find the teaching profession attractive due to its low prestige in Lithuanian society. As Drudy (2008) pointed out, an occupation’s professional standing impacts men’s career choices. She claimed there are doubts about whether teaching can be a profession since teachers do not ‘exercise collegiate control’ over their work (p. 315). On the other hand, most of those men-dominated occupations tended to be referred to as real professions (Drudy, 2008). Therefore, it could be argued that, since teaching is a women-dominated occupation, it tends to lack professional standing, prestige, and solid pay not because the work is un-meaningful but because it does not comply with the organisational notion of professionalism (Evetts, 2009). All of this context reinforces the feminisation of teaching as a job because low pay and prestige make it unattractive for men.

Conclusion

We set out to study how the post-Soviet educational reforms in Lithuania have affected teachers and the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania. Our findings suggest that the teaching profession in Lithuania has been affected by neoliberal educational reforms, which have led to various difficulties that teachers encounter today. Consequently, this situation has resulted in the lower attractiveness of the teaching profession enforced by the high feminisation of this occupation. The perception of our eight female interviewees is that these conditions make it less attractive for men to choose teaching in primary education as a career.

While we can not draw particular conclusions about other countries from the stories of the eight experienced Lithuanian teachers, their experience is consistent with many current trends of neoliberalism (Ball, 2016; Hall & McGinity, 2015) but also with teachers’ experience of inclusive education as an additional task (Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). In other ways, the Lithuanian situation is different from, for instance, Iceland, where all compulsory school teachers are members of a teacher union and teachers and schools are not competing for students in a manner described by some of our interviewees.

The study's results underline the need to reconsider widely spread neoliberal educational developments for teachers to gain a greater sense of professional independence. For instance, teachers should not have to rely on 'marketing' themselves by having to attract students by visiting kindergartens to enrol students from there. In some sense, this process has turned the relationship between teachers and parents into a customer relationship.

It would also be important for teachers to receive support in gaining more professional authority rather than being seen as mere 'technicians', as described by Ball (2003) and Connell (2009). For instance, there would be support mechanisms for teachers to work out their own professional ideals and implement the policies if relevant. Greater professional authority and autonomy of the teaching community would allow teachers to resist the rise of the new type of professionalism, which emphasises standardisation, managerialism, commercial logic, and performativity in education. Instead, collegial control, trust and cooperation should be nurtured.

Regarding this point, the effects of weak teachers' labour unions are noticeable. Without unions, the teaching body is defenceless and exposed to precarious working conditions and low pay. This situation directly impacts the status of teaching as a job and its attractiveness for male and female recruits, which are needed due to the ageing teaching community. Therefore, active and strong teachers' labour unions are important to unite and represent teachers' rights and interests. They could also help strengthen the status of the teaching profession and more effectively address the existing challenges.

Endnote

This article is based on the first author's master's thesis at the University of Iceland (Kuncevičiūtė, 2022).

„Kennarar eru gerðir ábyrgir fyrir hverju sem er“: Áskoranir og tækifæri fyrir litháíska kennara á 21. öld

Í greininni er sjónum beint að áskorunum og erfiðleikum sem litháískir kennarar í neðri bekkjum grunnskóla standa frammi fyrir. Einnig er skoðað hvernig menntaumbætur sem innleiddar hafa verið síðan Litháen varð sjálfstætt frá Sovétríkjunum hafa haft áhrif á kennara og hvaða kynjuðu afleiðingar þær hafa haft fyrir kennarastéttina. Stuðst var við tvönn konar kenningaramma; sjónarmið gagnrýnin á nýfrjálshyggju og femínískt sjónarhorn þar sem horft er á kvenvæðingu grunnskólakennslu í Litháen. Tekin voru viðtöl, augliti til auglitis, við litháíska kennara sem höfðu 25 til 45 ára starfsreynslu. Niðurstöður gefa til kynna að starf kennara hafi orðið strembnara og áhersla hafi verið lögð á ábyrgðarskyldu og frammistöðu. Þá kom fram að kennarar þyrftu að leggjast í markaðssókn í eigin persónu til að fá nemendur og að kennarastarfið væri ótryggara en áður var. Þessu tengt er að niðurstöðurnar gefa til kynna að launin laði ekki að starfinu en engu að síður þótti viðmælendum starfið vera ánægjulegt og merkingarbært. Glöggt kom fram að grunnskólakennsla í neðri bekkjum þykir vera kvennastarf og að um það gildi djúpstæð kynjuð viðhorf. Ofangreint bendir til þess að nýfrjálshyggjan hafi haft neikvæð áhrif á litháíska kennara og að starf þeirra sem fagfólks sé dregið í efa. Niðurstöðurnar undirstrika þörfina á að gagnrýna hversu útbreidd nýfrjálshyggjusjónarmið eru í menntun til að kennarar geti eflt faglegt sjálfstæði.

Lykilord: Litháen, nýfrjálshyggja, kyngervi, kennarastarfið

Um höfunda

Karolina Kuncevičiūtė (karolina9933@gmail.com) lauk BA-gráðu í textafræði í Vilnius-háskóla árið 2016 og MA-gráðu í alþjóðlegu námi í menntunarfræðum við Háskóla Íslands árið 2022. Rannsóknaráhugi hennar lýtur að menntabreytingum, kennarastéttinni og nýfrjálshyggju.

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