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Teachers’ perceptions of the curricula of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras: A case study of Estonian pre-school teachers

MAIRE TUUL, AINO UGASTE and RAIN MIKSER

Broadening the role of teachers in curriculum development was among the fundamental objectives of educational reforms in the formerly communist Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The research done so far, however, calls into question the degree to which teachers perceive the relevant changes in curriculum and their new role. This article first describes the context of curricular changes in Eastern Europe and Estonia after the fall of communism. It then analyses Estonian pre-school teachers’ perceptions of national pre-school curricula utilized in two different eras: the late Soviet period and the period from 1999 to date in a sovereign Estonia. Data were gathered via semi-structured interviews. Thirty-one experienced teachers participated in the study. It was concluded that teachers generally apprehend the broadened meaning of the concept of curriculum and their augmented role as reflective curriculum makers and theorists. However, differences emerge between teachers’ perceptions of their new role and their readiness to adopt it. Regarding the reported generality and indefiniteness of the new national curriculum, teachers need more assistance for implementing the autonomy and self-responsibility imposed on them by the curriculum. A balance between self-responsibility and professional advice should be sought by both curriculum makers and teacher educators.

Keywords: teachers’ perceptions; curriculum; early childhood education; Estonia

Introduction

A clearly articulated research question in curriculum studies of recent years is how teachers could be engaged more actively in the process of curriculum development. A number of empirical studies, mostly qualitative, have highlighted a problem of under-representation of...
teachers in the curriculum process and the consequences for teacher
development and curriculum implementation (Craig 2006, Shkedi 2006,
2009, Shawer 2010). Theoretically, it is argued for a more thorough
involvement of teachers in the broader questions of curriculum develop-
ment and, thereby, for a broader definition of the concept of teacher pro-

This article positions itself within the context of the above-mentioned
research direction, arguing for a more attentive approach towards the
problematics of teacher involvement in the curriculum development pro-
cess. The problem is elaborated in a specific socio-historical context,
namely the former communist Eastern European countries. While the
general discourse of curriculum studies in Western countries has long rec-
ognized the centrality of teacher expertise in curriculum development, at
least in theory (e.g. Jackson 1992), in communist Eastern Europe the nar-
rowing and instrumentalizing of teachers’ roles to passive participants was
a conscious part of the state-controlled educational programme. This state
of affairs still affects many aspects of educational research and practice in
these countries—despite the widely recognized differences between the
Eastern European countries themselves and despite some opinions (Scott
2002) that the impact of communism on these countries was less totalitar-
ian than is commonly supposed. Although the communist system’s fall
brought radical administrative and legislative changes in education to
these countries, including the enactment of new national curricula, little
research has been done to evaluate teachers’ attitudes towards these
changes and to explain the ways teachers think about their involvement in
the curriculum development process. As Shkedi (2006) explains, curricu-
lar innovation is not about putting into place the latest curriculum; it
means changing the cultures of teachers, classrooms, and schools, and
making the teachers’ role in the process of curriculum development cen-
tral and crucial. This argument characterizes the situation in the former
communist Eastern European countries. It would be wrong to presume
that the broad changes that have taken place in education and other social
spheres in these countries during the last 20 years automatically caused
relevant transformations in teachers’ attitudes towards curriculum and in
their readiness to actively participate in the curriculum development pro-
cess.

This article focuses on pre-school teachers’ attitudes towards the
national early childhood education curricula in Estonia in two different
periods: the Soviet period and the period after the fall of communism.
First, we give a brief description of the educational changes in Eastern
European countries after the fall of communism, of the implications these
changes had upon curriculum development, and of the mechanisms
which, in our view, underlay the seriousness of the problem of teacher
involvement in curriculum development in these countries. This is fol-
lowed by an analysis of educational reforms in Estonia after it regained
independence. This entails a more thorough investigation of teachers’
reflections on curriculum, its implementation and objectives, and a tea-
cher’s role in implementing the curriculum.
The term ‘early childhood education’ refers to education that involves children up to the age of 7 years, whereafter compulsory school attendance begins at the age of 7 years.

Educational changes in Eastern Europe

The image of a unitary Eastern Europe is inevitably a simplification—or an *artifice* (Scott 2002). Discriminations employed involve dimensions such as geopolitical, economic, and cultural history, size, and demographic of the population (Kotásek 1996), and the character of the reforms undertaken before, during and after the fall of communism (Birzea 1996). Taking, thus, local differences as granted, we concentrate on the aspects that have been described as inherent to all (or at least to most) of the former communist Eastern European countries. The general narrative explains that after the fall of communism these countries rapidly moved into a social, economic, and cultural model that, according to the then-common understanding, characterized the West (Birzea 1996, Scott 2002). The result was a liberal, weakly regulated market economy, which inconsistently retained some features inherited from the Soviet period. In many of these countries, a goal appeared to be the radicality of changes and a contrasting departure from the Soviet-era’s unitary and centralist approach. The exaggerations of liberalism, market-economy competition, and privatization were characteristic phenomena of the early years after the re-independence of the Eastern European countries, which phenomena became more adequately understood only after a number of years and serious dissapointments (Olek 1998, Roberts 2001, Scott 2002).

From previous research, it is evident that teachers’ curricular beliefs and attitudes in Eastern European countries did not follow the same curve of development, which, however, will be discussed in a later chapter. Meanwhile, we want to highlight an issue that may have high relevance from the viewpoint of teacher involvement in the curriculum development process and somewhat places a double burden on the problem in Eastern European countries. Temple (2003), observing the educational research and policy-making practices in post-communist states, argues that much of what was inherent in the Soviet approach to educational research and practices also characterizes the later practice in these countries. Rather than relating to Soviet ideology in itself, these phenomena rest upon certain scientific credos that were adopted by the Soviet regime but have persisted well after its decline. Using examples from several Eastern European countries, Temple suggests that in these socialist states with totalitarian regimes educational research and practice were narrowly instrumentalist and highly compartmentalized, focusing on the production of findings related to ‘actually existing’ problems in defined fields. This state-driven policy, technicist and positivist in essence, discouraged interdisciplinary work and a wider conception of research activity. Institutionally, research activity was splintered into narrowly specialized institutes (Temple 2003). The double burden of the problem, on one hand, consists of a political reinforcement of the deficiency well
known in many countries across the world. On the other hand, the problem is that Eastern European education researchers were also historically less than encouraged to set research questions that were directed toward the problematics of teacher autonomy and emancipation.

Different meanings of curriculum and their implications for the teachers’ role

As is well known, there is an over-abundance of definitions of curriculum (Valverde 2003, Marsh 2009), although, as Jackson (1992) reminds us, things are quite different when one looks for truly distinct definitions. A traditional thought of curriculum regards it as a plan for what will be taught in the classroom, with the focus being cognitive and academic. A broad conception of curriculum takes into account the ideological and political contexts, organizational forms, and all partners affected by educational decisions. As an example of the broad definition, Westbury (2003: 532) defines curriculum as

... the symbolic centre of a loosely coupled system of ideologies, symbols, organizational forms, mandates, and subject and classroom practices that instantiates collective, and often differing, understandings about what is to be valued about the idea and the ongoing practice of education.

Teachers, at best, see curriculum as part of their evolving professional identity and taking place in social interaction with others. As Craig (2009: 606) suggests:

... the teacher-as-curriculum-maker idea does not view curriculum simply as a document or programme of study external to teachers. Rather, curriculum is a complex phenomenon that takes shape in the throes of teachers’ and students’ pedagogical relationships.

The German tradition of Didaktik has been seen as a promising source of inspiration for broadening the concept of curriculum and reconsidering the role of teachers. Comparing the English-language curriculum tradition with the European concept of Didaktik, Westbury (2000) asserts that, in the former tradition, teachers have always been treated as invisible agents of the system, satisfying the pre-determined public needs by way of structured and codified programmes, and seen as ‘animated’ by the system, and not as sources of animation for the system. This starting point, Westbury continues, leads to a view that teachers are among the major brakes on the innovation, change, and reform that the schools always seem to require. This is the point where the two traditions seem to radically diverge:

Didaktik, on the other hand, in all its forms is teacher rather than system centred: Its focus, and ideal, is on the role of the teacher in ‘forming’ rather than ‘instructing’ his or her students and, to do this, celebrates the individuality of each teacher as an active, reflective curriculum maker and theorist rather than seeing the teacher as an agent of a workplace manual or best practices, that is, a curriculum or curriculum package. (Westbury 2000: 27)
Although stemming from different ideological premises, regarding the role of teachers we see essential similarities between the education research and practice traditions inherited from the Soviet period and that of the English-language curriculum tradition as described by Westbury. In our view, the comparison between the English-language curriculum theory and the German *Didaktik* tradition has grasped the essence of why teachers’ views matter: teachers are among the major sources of inspiration for reflecting and reconsidering society’s needs and, at the same time, their activity as curriculum designers is among the major impetuses to promote their professional growth. As Eisner (2000) states, teachers need to feel a part of, if not in control of, the curriculum improvement process. That conviction led us to investigate how teachers perceive the curricula of the two periods in the broadest meaning: the level and the nature of their participation in curriculum development and implementation, relationship with the related parties, and the readiness to take responsibility for curriculum improvement and how all this affects their daily professional practice.

**Curricular changes in Eastern Europe and the new role of teachers**

The basic characteristics of curriculum during the Soviet era are well known. All the curricula were, first of all, characterized by extreme centralization and standardization. Key decisions were imposed by the ministries of education and were made compulsory throughout the countries. The ideal of education was a communist upbringing of children, which was claimed to harmoniously combine moral purity, intellectual wealth, and physical perfection. Pupils were taught final, unquestionable truths, values, and norms in order to develop firm and lasting knowledge based on the communist world-view. Syllabi and teaching materials were unified, the autonomy and creativity of teachers were strictly limited (Kallen 1996, Cerych 1997, Elliott 2009).

It was relatively easy to free the official curricula from the main external attributes of the Soviet era—such as ideological one-sidedness, over-centralization, and excessive prescriptivity (Kallen 1996). It was a much more challenging and complicated task to establish a proper conceptual foundation for substantial curricular changes and to elucidate the ways to implement the agreed upon changes in policy and practice. Among the latter challenges was a new conception of the teachers’ role in the curriculum development process. Although there existed different, and sometimes contradictory, conceptions of the basic needs of curriculum reform (Kallen 1996, Cerych 1997), increasing the autonomy and professional responsibility of teachers was among the most fundamental goals. Almost everywhere teachers were expected to become the main actors of curriculum reforms (Cerych 1997: 85, Kalin and Zuljan 2007: 164).

Reports have not been optimistic about the accomplishment of this task. Many teachers have been in a state of ‘anomy’ (Kallen 1996: 52), as the old ideological certainties had been rejected, but there was a general
lack of skills and habits, often also accompanied by a lack of substantive conditions for taking responsibility for curriculum development. A survey of Polish schoolteachers (Olek 1998) revealed that only 10% of teachers considered themselves as active participants in curriculum development. In other words, the teachers’ view of their role was confined to the efficient delivery of a curriculum defined elsewhere—as under the communist system (Olek 1998). In the Czech Republic, also, teachers’ understanding of curriculum and its components have been reported as fragmented; there has been a general reliance on the central curricular model and an unwillingness to take risks or assume individual responsibility (Polyzoi and Černá 2001). During recent years, few studies have focused specifically on teachers’ attitudes toward curriculum development in Eastern European countries. Still, it could be suggested that the topicality of the problem is evident (Kalin and Zuljan 2007): the greater the integration with the general Western discourse on curriculum studies does not automatically guarantee teacher participation in the curriculum development process.

Estonian education and curriculum policy during and after the Soviet period

Estonia is the northernmost and the smallest of the three Baltic States, which first gained their independence from the Russian Empire in 1918. Estonia developed a national educational system and curriculum during this first period of independence. The first national curriculum for elementary schools was established in 1921, and before World War II it was renewed three times (Krull and Mikser 2010).

After Estonia was occupied in 1940, Estonian education followed the principles of Soviet pedagogy. In spite of the general effort for standardization, Estonia managed, to some extent, to maintain and develop the former specific character of the country’s system of education. Estonia kept its 11-year secondary school (to age 18) system, partly by legally emphasizing local characteristic features and needs, partly under the label of experiments and trials. All children had an opportunity to learn at a school where Estonian was the language of instruction. The tradition of using original textbooks (instead of those translated from Russian) was also maintained. Much attention was paid to establishing specialized schools and classes, so pupils were able to specialize in music, languages, and fine arts. At Estonian schools there were still teachers who had been trained before the war and were familiar with Western pedagogy. So-called shadow or hidden curricula were also in operation in schools, through which national feelings were promoted and Estonian historical traditions were fostered.

Perestroika, which began in 1985, presented an opportunity for educational breakthroughs in the Soviet Union and communist Eastern Europe. In 1987, the Estonian Teachers’ Congress adopted a declaration of the sovereignty of Estonian education, realizing that independence could only be achieved through a curriculum that took into account Estonian educational needs. School reform was made the responsibility of
schools, which legalized the democratization opportunity at the level of schools and kindergartens (Ruus and Sarv 2000). In 1992, the Education Act of the Republic of Estonia (Eesti Vabariigi haridusseadus) was adopted, which aimed to formulate new general principles of curriculum. The curriculum reform stipulated an orientation to the West: extensively increasing foreign language teaching, developing the pluralism and diversity of schools, introducing private schools, and recognizing a child’s individuality and special needs. It was stated that learners should focus on problem-solving and building their own personal knowledge. It was stipulated that in all educational institutions the development of new curricula had to take place in order to guarantee a smooth transition from one stage of education to another, to promote further education and to avoid educational dead-ends (Eesti tegevuskava: Haridus kõigile 2004). More than ever, the need to support teachers’ professional development grew as the development and implementation of the new curriculum confronted teachers with a completely new situation and required teachers to be able to adjust to modern conditions.

Early childhood education in Estonia and the national curricula

Early childhood education formed the initial stage of the Soviet system of education, and great attention was paid to it. Almost all children were provided with a place in a crèche or pre-school, where relatively good spatial and material conditions were created. The need for early childhood institutions was evident, because the level of women’s participation in the active work force was high (Motiejunaite and Kravchenko 2008).

The importance of pre-school teachers for the well-rounded development of children and the teacher’s public role was also emphasized. The success of education was regarded to be dependent on how well teachers knew childrens’ development, the programme of the pre-school establishment, and how well they planned their work (Jadesko and Sohin 1978, Loginova and Samorukova 1983).

Nevertheless, in Estonian pre-school establishments, educational work was based on the all-Union standardized programme, which was, when opportunities presented themselves at different times, adapted to the local culture to a greater or lesser extent. The objectives prescribed by the programme were realized by teachers through various activities for children—academic activities, work, play, and learning. The upbringing of children was viewed as cooperation between the home and the early childhood institution, where the decisive role belonged to the institution.

The 1987 Programme for Pre-school Education (Koolieelsest kasvatusest lasteasutuses. Programm) was the last official curriculum for early childhood institutions adopted in Estonia during the Soviet period. It well exemplifies the main features of the Soviet-type pre-school curricula. It was based on the all-Soviet programme, but was authored by Estonian specialists. The 175-page document included a description of the activities for children at different ages (0–5) and the key features of their
intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and physical development at each age level. The main educational objectives at each age level were also included. A 10-page introductory part delineated the general objectives and principles of different activities carried on in the pre-school education institutions. Exemplary was the statement that the all-Soviet standard programme was scientifically based and proved in practice (Koolielust ... 1987: 3) without any further qualification of the meaning of scientifically or of the implication this had for the role of the teacher. The document, in general, was detailed and prescriptive by nature.

Although Soviet vocabulary was quickly removed from the curricula after Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the first official national pre-school curriculum was passed only in 1999. This is a relatively brief, 10-page document that defines general aims and tasks, basic principles, and the content of early childhood education. Great emphasis is put on the composition of the curriculum in each pre-school education institution, taking into account local circumstances and demands. The active role of the teacher is clearly emphasized (Alushariduse raamöppekava 1999). In a way, the new national curriculum reflected a more general tendency in Estonia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, where the accent was put on the autonomy of the local community and the individual teacher. This tendency somewhat contrasts with what has been observed in many other countries, where a rising trend in the 1980s and 1990s emphasized the importance of conceptual understandings, procedural knowledge, and other academic objectives—in other words, the importance of the official intended curriculum (Valverde 2003).

The study of teachers' experiences of pre-school curricula in different eras is of interest for several reasons. Any unsolved issues in early childhood education will intensify later during basic education. It is possible to avoid, or at least decrease, drop-outs, learning difficulties, and social rejection with earlier involvement. It is also emphasized in the OECD report (2006) that, in terms of lifelong learning, as a whole the best results are produced by investments in early childhood education. During the Soviet period, however, no extensive empirical studies on the implementation of the curriculum were carried out in Estonia because no doubt was cast on the need to explicitly follow the curriculum. Now that the expectations for teachers have radically changed, the situation in the field of research remains much the same.

**Research methodology**

*The aim and method of the study*

The main aim of the study was to analyse teachers' views on the objectives and content of the curriculum of early childhood education during the Soviet period and of the present time. The study investigated what meaning they attached to various aspects of the curriculum, what curriculum-related knowledge and experience teachers have acquired over decades, and how they had adopted the discourse of the new curriculum.
The study used a semi-structured qualitative interview method that ascertained respondents’ thoughts, experiences, and interpretations (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Kvale 2005, Flick 2006).

**Participants**

Thirty-one teachers with at least 25 years of work experience at pre-schools participated in the study. The sample was drawn on the principle that teachers with different levels of professional education would participate in the study, representing urban and rural areas throughout Estonia and pre-schools of differing sizes. All participants had worked with the curricula of the two periods under discussion. Twenty-two teachers had secondary specialized education and nine had pedagogical higher education. Their average work experience was 32 years, and their average age 54 years. The youngest respondent was 42 and the oldest 65. All the respondents were women, as there are no male teachers in Estonian pre-schools with at least 25 years experience in pre-school education. There are 27 male teachers currently working in Estonian pre-schools, which accounts for 0.3% of the total number of pre-school teachers.

**Data collection and analysis**

Two pilot interviews were carried out prior to the study in order to check the interview procedure. Teachers were interviewed in the kindergartens in a separate room and the interviews were recorded. The average duration of an interview was 1.5 hours (ranging from 55 minutes to 2.5 hours). The respondents were asked to describe and explain their personal thoughts and experiences based on the interview questions. For example, they were encouraged to explain what the objectives of the curriculum were in the Soviet period and to describe how those objectives were achieved. The interviewees were also requested to assess the curriculum and to give examples from their work as illustrations. All interviewees were asked the same questions and they were allowed to complement and expand the interview questions.

The method of constant comparison described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used. Content analysis obtains clear, thorough, and comprehensive information from the material (Miles and Huberman 1994, Strauss and Corbin 1998, Patton 2002). All the interviews were first transcribed, and then each transcribed interview was read in detail in order to discover the topics and determine the categories. Important topics related to the research aims were identified from the material. Content analysis showed similarities and differences in the interviewees’ texts, and these were categorized and analysed according to the research questions. Two researchers independently transcribed and read through the material and discussed the resulting interpretations. A third researcher reviewed all the texts for credibility. After a thorough discussion, a consensus was reached among all three researchers regarding the analysis and interpretations of the interviews.
Findings

The curriculum

All the interviewees reported that during the Soviet period teachers were supposed to follow exactly the same programme, educating children exactly the same way. By prescribing all actions in detail, it was attempted to ensure quality education uniformly in the Soviet Union, irrespective of historical-cultural or national differences.

However, several differences became evident in the interviewees’ opinions. Many teachers found that the curriculum was thorough and precise and gave them a feeling of confidence that they were working in the right way. The programme was trusted because it had been worked out by scientists and was applied across the Soviet Union. Some interviewees claimed that, although such a programme was of great assistance to them, they had felt that in the long run the excessive prescriptions started to restrict their work. Nothing could be changed in the curriculum; teachers lacked a freedom of thought and choice. According to the teachers, there were too few opportunities in the programmes of that period to teach various topics in a child-friendly way, and every topic taught to the children was as if self-contained. An interviewee commented:

During the Soviet period a teacher had fewer choices. Everything was prescribed, exact and clear. A teacher did not have to think or decide a lot. Using the programme was like locking up the creativity of a teacher. (09.10.2007)

In spite of the fact that the teachers constantly emphasized the strict inspection protocols, which required the exact fulfilment of the curriculum, a significant inconsistency became evident in their talk. Many of the teachers said that they tried to work so that children’s interests were considered more important than the exact fulfilment of the curriculum. They found that a really professional teacher was independent, and, despite the inflexible curriculum and strict inspections, tried to keep in mind that the dignity and ethical viewpoints of her occupation were paramount. Thus, in the shadow of the national curriculum there was an effort to implement their personal curricula, one in agreement with their own views and positions. The interviewees spoke often as follows: the curriculum was then such and such, but I did what I considered was right. A commonly expressed opinion was that Soviet ideology was strange for the teachers and, therefore, they did not put their hearts into fulfilling it, they just had to fulfil it.

While analysing the current curriculum, the interviewees often came to the conclusion that today’s national curriculum does not contain anything superfluous. It only provides general aims, proceeding from which teachers develop a more detailed curriculum for their kindergarten while taking into account the characteristics of the establishment. The curriculum outlines the goals a teacher has to achieve, but how, with what methods and materials, is left for the teacher to decide. An interviewee specified:
The curriculum is like a skeleton on which each teacher puts the flesh and everything else. (12.11.2007)

According to the teachers, it is possible to adjust the current curriculum to regional characteristics, and the curriculum also allows them to take into account the children and their parents’ interests. Teachers can improve and revise the activity plan of their group of children according to needs. However, not all the interviewees appreciated such freedom equally. Some believed the current curriculum is too general and gives no definite guidelines, and therefore the teachers are not able to organize their work on the basis of that.

Teachers reported that the pre-school curriculum is not unalterable. Continuous curriculum development goes on all the time in which all pre-school teachers participate. Teachers also have an opportunity to participate in the development of the national curriculum. Most interviewees asserted that they highly appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the development and joint discussions about the curriculum.

Objectives of curriculum

When comparing the current and past curricula, the interviewees most frequently emphasized the ideological differences of those documents. All teachers mentioned first of all the Soviet curriculum’s goals of education deriving from the directives of the party. The teachers said that active members of society were brought up to be thoroughly loyal to their homeland. The daily life of a pre-school included learning the customs, dances, songs, and poems of the other Soviet peoples. That left little time and opportunity for the teachers to introduce Estonian culture and history to the children.

According to the teachers, during the Soviet period the aim was a collectivist upbringing, which meant teaching and educating all children in a uniform manner and at a uniform rate. The individual was not valued, hence a child’s individuality and creativity were not taken into account. People were viewed as a grey mass where everybody had to be alike and equal. The requirement of uniformity applied to the children’s behaviour, clothes, knowledge acquisition, as well as artistic self-expression. For example, regarding children’s drawings, conformity to the image or sample presented by the teacher was lauded, whereby teachers were often provided with those samples. A teacher explained:

Children’s works were all analysed together and compared to the sample. Whose work was very different from the sample was considered poor. (20.02.2008)

Among the other goals of Soviet education, the teachers also pointed out the preparation of children for school. Special attention was paid to children’s cognitive ability, whereby school maturity was often defined on the basis of the child’s ability to read and write. As a positive feature of the past system of preparation for school, teachers emphasized that great
attention was paid to the children’s health and physical development. The teachers also emphasized the children’s ‘self-service’, which meant the development of basic coping skills (getting dressed, washing, eating, etc.) and working habits, getting to know different jobs, as well as noticing and helping each other. An interviewee recalled:

Self-servicing usually started with learning to tidy after yourself. Already very small children were taught to put the toys back on the shelves, assist the teachers and help their peers. Children on duty helped to lay the table and place tools and materials for activities on the table. Outdoors, children sometimes helped to rake the fallen leaves and clear away rubbish. (02.04.2008)

During the Soviet period much attention was paid to children’s personal hygiene and to the development of socially-accepted behaviour patterns, which, according to the interviewees, were necessary for the development of the children’s independence and positive self-image.

The teachers shared the opinion that no ideological pressure can be detected in the current national curriculum. Children’s individual traits and needs are put first. When addressing educational objectives in the current curriculum, all teachers without exception spoke about the all-round holistic development of the child, including physical, intellectual, social, and moral development. A teacher specified:

Now we are striving for healthy, creative, kind-hearted children with good personalities. Our society needs creatively thinking and well-educated personalities. (23.11.2007)

The teachers emphasized the importance of preparing children for school. Although in the Soviet period preparation for school was also an important keyword, today it is viewed in a wider context than simply teaching children to read, write, and calculate. A child’s social skills are considered important. A child should be able to communicate with both peers and adults and should be aware of themselves and their communication partners. In terms of school maturity, the children’s physical development was also considered important, although it was often admitted that too little attention was paid to it. In a few interviews the importance of building a child’s learning readiness was emphasized, which indicated that teachers generally do not view early childhood as the period of laying the foundation for lifelong learning. At the same time, interviewees stressed that today, as opposed to the Soviet period, too little attention is paid to other cultures. A teacher said:

Now that we are in a union again, in the European Union, we need to cultivate tolerance in children towards other nations, since our society is a multicultural society. (13.03.2008)

The teachers expressed their opinion that, since there were many ethnic groups living in Estonia, it was equally important to introduce the Estonian language and culture to non-Estonians and to increase Estonians’ knowledge of other cultures.
The role of a teacher

According to the interviewees, in the 1970–1980s the main task of a pre-school teacher was to deliver the contents of the national curriculum and to achieve the objectives set by it. In most cases teachers were not able to participate in curriculum development; however, they were expected to follow it strictly. Teachers had to compile written plans of teaching and education based on the programme, which plans were approved by the institution’s administration and severely controlled for adherence. Generally, it was the documents submitted by teachers that were checked, but often teachers’ activities with children were observed and analysed.

The interviewees held different opinions about the feedback concerning the teachers’ work. Some of the teachers found that the person in control did not usually give any reasons when some activities were disapproved (e.g. using different techniques in children’s drawings), neither did they give any feedback of the teachers’ successes. Other teachers found that, although their work was constantly monitored, the feedback was positive. An interviewee recalled:

They looked at the class notes and how you carried out the activities and then it was all thoroughly discussed. The assessment was given, what went wrong and what went well. I received a very positive assessment. I do not remember receiving anything negative. (17.03.2008)

The work of the institution’s administration was, in turn, checked by the inspectors of the local departments of education or the ministry of education.

Teachers claimed that during the Soviet period there were relatively few in-service training courses organized for kindergarten teachers by the state, and the few that were offered often contained more ideological information than the needed instruction to work with children. Thus, the majority of teachers’ professional skills were acquired by reading professional literature or by observing sample activities carried out by colleagues.

At many pre-schools, carrying out such sample activities was obligatory for the teachers. They said that each activity with children meant to be demonstrated to others required very thorough preparation. In spite of the stress that accompanied the process of introducing their work to other teachers, the majority of the interviewees recollected the visits to other kindergartens and observing the activities of their colleagues as an extremely educational method of self-improvement. An interviewee explained:

We visited one another really a lot in the pre-schools—it was obligatory. And the more you go, the more you expand your scope and get experience. ... After the activities there was an analysis and an exchange of experiences and to my mind it was extremely great. We all, the older kindergarten teachers have spoken that it is what we are missing. (05.04.2008)

One of the most important areas of a teacher’s work was creating cooperative ties with the children’s families. According to the curriculum, the
leading role in the cooperation between families and pre-school establish-
ments belonged to the pre-school establishments, where parents were
viewed more like passive listeners and those to be counselled. As pointed
out by the interviewees, the establishment of such a relationship often began
by teachers visiting children's homes even before a child had joined the kin-
dergarten. The aim of these visits was to get information about the chil-
dren’s family relations and rearing environment at home, and if there was a
need, to counsel parents in matters of childrearing. An interviewee said:

Then you would observe what the home looked like, how much playing
space there was for the child and what were the child’s activities at home.
All that was done to guarantee that there would not be a split between what
the child was doing in the kindergarten and at home. (30.06.2008)

As the greatest difference between the two periods under observation,
the interviewees pointed out a greater freedom of activity and choice for
the teacher of today, which has also caused a change in the professional
development of teachers. Formerly treated as executors of the curriculum,
teachers have now become the compilers and developers of the curricu-
lum. In the beginning, such a change of role was not easy for the teachers
to accept. The new situation caused doubts, fears, and hesitation in teach-
ers, because suddenly they had to start making decisions and choices, thus
taking responsibility for their activities. While a majority of the
interviewees overcame the shock of the sudden change of role and began
to view the new curriculum as a challenge and opportunity for self-
development, there were also those among the respondents who had not
yet managed to adapt to the greater responsibility given to them. It was
difficult for them to give up a curriculum that prescribed things in detail,
and then start choosing, analysing, and deciding. They said that they felt
insecure in the new situation because they thought they did not have
enough knowledge and skills to fulfil the new role given to them.

Besides writing and improving their pre-school curricula, which now
belongs to their daily tasks, teachers are also expected to contribute to the
national curriculum. Contrary to the Soviet time, an increasingly more
creative approach to the curriculum is valued today. A teacher said:

In the Estonian Republic a teacher is more appreciated when she or he is
able to do his or her work creatively and adjust to the situation.
(22.11.2007)

The interviewees think that, in comparison to the Soviet times, chil-
dren have changed and that this also influences the work of teachers. Teachers
cannot be only mediators of knowledge, but have to proceed
from children’s interests and make the learning activity captivating for
children. Teachers plan a large part of their work now and, therefore, they
have to know what level of development each child has achieved at the
moment and what knowledge and skills are in the child’s zone of proximal
development. An interviewee commented:

Guidance does not follow development but is ahead of it, and helps a child
to acquire new knowledge and experience. (22.02.2008)
Communication is no longer one-sided, but reciprocal, which means that while communicating with an adult a child is also an active participant. It is not so important what the teacher is doing exactly, what methods he or she is using, but more important is how eagerly the children participate in activities and to what extent they are interested.

Such freedom of activity and child-centred approach to teaching requires very good knowledge of educational science and child psychology, which is why a pre-school teacher now needs to obtain at least a specialized pedagogical higher education. While in the Soviet period a kindergarten teacher could quite successfully cope without a pedagogical higher education, because the curriculum was precisely described by various regulations, today the aim is to train a creative and discerning teacher. A natural part of a teacher’s work is continuous self-improvement, which now is financially supported by the state. An interviewee said:

Pre-schools generally want trained personnel and to facilitate learning; they send you to all sorts of courses. Teachers also want to develop themselves. Lifelong learning and continuous self-improvement are taking place. (23.11.2007)

An important role in facilitating teachers’ professional development can be credited to various alternative pedagogical approaches. Teacher training courses today introduce pedagogies such as Montessori, Waldorf, and Reggio pedagogy, which were little known during the Soviet period.

The interviewees also emphasized that nowadays teachers are trusted more. They do not have to fill in so many papers or account for their work. The interviewees explained that now they can work more creatively, that they have been given more freedom of choice and decision, which is also accompanied by greater responsibility, whereby the administration need not carry out strict control of the curriculum’s implementation. Control more often involves teachers who are trying to get by with less work, and in those instances inspection is advisory rather than critical in character.

A noticeable change has also taken place in the relationship between teachers and parents. The former formal relationship has been replaced by a partnership, where both sides act towards the same goal and perceive their responsibility. Parents are expected more than before to take part in the activities of the group, while also being involved in the planning and analysis of teaching and educational work. The visits to children’s homes, which parents often perceived as checking on them rather than being an information exchange between equal partners, have been replaced by development discussions, where teachers and parents exchange information about the development of the children.

Teaching and education practice

The teaching of children was primarily adult-centred in the Soviet period and a child was viewed as a small, passive learner. An interviewee illustrated:
In the old days everything that was in the programme, divided into subjects, had to be taught. Teaching and educating were considered most important; pedagogical activity was subject- and teacher-centred. (17.03.2008)

The interviewees pointed out a similarity between the Soviet era pre-school and school, where children were sitting at desks in twos in a classroom. Children were required to be completely silent. In cases where they knew an answer, they had to put up their hands, exactly like at a school, and he or she had to stand up when giving the answer. The activities were more serious and school-like. Following the didactics and the structure of the activities was strictly enforced and the rules were the same for everybody. The study revealed that in the 1970–1980s following the rules of behaviour and obeying adults’ orders were considered very important. An interviewee reported:

Earlier a lot of attention was paid to discipline. It was stressed all the time, and it was also controlled. When somebody came to observe the lesson of the group, the thing that always especially scrutinized was discipline. As a young teacher, I was often reprimanded for my group being too noisy. (22.02.2008)

According to the interviewees, a child was considered disciplined when he or she followed the standards of behaviour approved in society, patiently waited for his or her turn in the activities, and asked questions or spoke up only when asked to do so. Rules were introduced according to the adults’ will.

Since in the Soviet period teaching was mainly focused on the results, it was also important to plan ahead the activities carried out with children. The teaching and educational activities planned by teachers were required to begin exactly at the time stated in the schedule, and children were not allowed to miss them without a compelling reason. The duration of learning activities was also precisely prescribed and depended on the children’s ages.

The interviewees found that while in Soviet Estonia all children were taught in the same way, today’s individual approach to children considers their individuality and creativity as important. It means that, to a large extent, the adult-centred approach to teaching and education has been replaced by a child-centred approach. Teachers try to notice every child and teach children to notice others beside themselves. A teacher explained:

I get children completely different from each other—each of them comes from a different home, has a different upbringing, different habits. My task is to unify this group of children to some extent, to make them perceive that everybody around them in the group is a friend, so that they would care about each other. (26.02.2008)

According to the respondents, the number of activities carried out with the whole group (18–22 children) has considerably decreased, while individual support of children and activities in small groups of two-to-four have become increasingly more common.
The interviewees stressed the change in the process of teaching and education. Today's pedagogues mainly follow the principle of integrated teaching, according to which teaching activities combine music, movement, motor activities, mother tongue, and mathematics into a unitary whole. Teachers have been given the freedom to decide about the start time, duration, and place of the activities. Many activities are carried out sitting in a circle on the floor to make children feel comfortable, and the school-like training of sitting at a desk has been replaced by children's lively activities located in the part of the room designated for the group.

The teachers also saw a great difference in the teaching and educational activities, which have become more child-friendly and playful. A child in his or her activities is viewed as an active doer and builder of his or her knowledge rather than as a passive listener memorizing the existing knowledge transmitted by an adult. A teacher said:

Now all activities are a great play during which a child achieves goals set by the teacher without realizing he or she is learning at all. We aim at the children discovering the things the teacher wants to teach them while playing. (09.04.2008)

A couple of teachers expressed their satisfaction with the fact that nowadays children are viewed as equal partners who are able to participate in the process of planning their activities. One of the interviewees compared the former and the present times as follows:

In Soviet Estonia children were never asked to express their opinions. Presently, children can express their thoughts and wishes and the teacher can make changes in his or her plans accordingly. (21.11.2007)

Increasingly more often children are asked to express their opinion and teachers try to take into account their wishes and suggestions.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The aim of the current study was to explore Estonian pre-school teachers' opinions of the national pre-school curricula in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The investigation was prompted by an insufficiency of evidence regarding how teachers perceived their role in the curriculum development process of the two periods and an interest to discover what changes have occurred in their perceptions. In many countries the role of a teacher as being central to all curriculum decisions has been long recognized and more recently emphasized anew. Because of the particular social and historical developments in the former communist Eastern European countries, the problem was expected to exhibit certain differences, and the results were supposed to add new knowledge to the already available research in the field.

The study clearly indicated that teachers perceived substantial differences between the national curricula of the two periods; however, the differences were not so black and white so as to be easily transferable into political terms. The curriculum of the Soviet period was perceived as
prescriptive, strict, and levelling by nature, leaving little space for the autonomy and creativity of teachers. Teachers saw themselves as ciphers for the official curriculum, to use a term of Westbury (2000: 21). Beneath the overarching communist ideology, however, many teachers saw substantial benefits in the thoroughness and specificity of the Soviet-era curriculum. It was considered of great assistance to their daily work, giving teachers a feeling of security and confidence. The current curriculum’s shortness and generality, in turn, was viewed as giving too little guidance for daily practice.

An important aspect that emerges from the teachers’ interviews was the presence of their personal curriculum, which was regarded as particularly relevant during the ideologically-biased Soviet period. Here, the results appear to be consistent with Shkedi’s (2009) recent study, according to which teachers used some parts of the written curriculum but tended to be loyal to their own metanarratives reflecting their individual ideology, orientation, or platform. In Soviet Estonia, the written curriculum was not discussed and not disputed in a loud voice. However, the support guides for the actual work became mainly the teachers’ own pedagogical principles and ethical values. Altogether, an excessive emphasis on ideology in the written curriculum and a disregard for Estonian cultural traditions inevitably caused the situation where a hidden curriculum started functioning in parallel to the official curriculum—meaning that messages given by teachers were intentional but purposefully concealed from public discussion (Eisner 1992). The hidden curriculum was compiled by teachers and involved content and objectives that were not represented in the official curriculum, but, rather, reflected what teachers considered important in their everyday work. The hidden curriculum was of crucial importance in preserving Estonian educational traditions and national identity (Läänemets 1995).

The great majority of teachers perceived a clear difference when comparing their role in the curriculum development process in Soviet times and today. Opportunities to participate actively in curriculum development and implementation have increased enormously in everyday practice as well as at the national level. Participation was perceived as a part of the teachers’ professional role as well as an opportunity to learn and develop. Thus, the responsibility accompanying the growing range of opportunities was also generally recognized. However, similarly to what has been found in Eastern European countries more than a decade ago (Kallen 1996, Olek 1998, Polyzoi and Černá 2001), many teachers still do not feel comfortable about accepting this responsibility. Although the present curriculum clearly stipulates teachers’ responsibilities and competences, too often they lack confidence in making and justifying independent decisions and choices.

An encouraging note is the rise of public trust in teacher competence as perceived by the interviewees. The former distrust and constant inspection of teachers has been replaced by curriculum-related counselling, the main emphasis placed on helping and supporting the teacher.

Regarding teaching and education practice, the interviewees observed a substantial shift from an adult-centred to a child-centred approach.
Formerly, the curriculum was overburdened with subject matter knowledge (mathematics, language, etc.), which led to over-organizing children’s daily life and which decreased children’s opportunities to choose and engage in activities they liked. Now, each child’s age and individuality is taken more into account, and children’s knowledge, interests, and motives are foremost in the teacher’s work. The current study’s findings are consistent with those of previous studies, according to which a new child-centred curriculum requires sensitivity from a teacher, an ability to focus on the meaning-making capacities of children, and their taking into account the pupils’ diversity and the principle of learning differentiation (Pridmore 2007, Lockhorst et al., 2010).

As many teachers were inclined to contradistinguish the two curricula under study, often using the words such as ‘ideology’, ‘inflexibility’, and ‘inspection’ while speaking of the Soviet-era curriculum, and ‘creativity’, ‘freedom of making decisions’, and ‘responsibility’ while speaking of the present curriculum, a thought resulted from these interviews that there was something to draw from this history. The close attention paid to the children’s health education, physical development, and self-servicing was pointed out as a positive trait of the former Soviet curriculum. There are reasons to believe that the basis for the remarkable study results of Estonian pupils in two international researches, PISA 2006 (Kitsing 2008) and TIMSS 2003 (Mullis et al., 2004), was laid with the support of the previous curriculum. However, as the changes carried out with curriculum reform have begun to influence the teachers’ daily work to a larger extent only in recent years, there are no reliable studies that accurately assess the impact of the present curriculum on Estonian early childhood education.

The former communist Eastern Europe, including Estonia as an example, is a rather specific context. Potentially overshadowed by more general political and economic factors of change and success (most Eastern European countries having become EU member states), some fundamental transformations influencing educational practice may emerge in a rather different manner than could be pre-supposed on the basis of overt media and public documents such as legislation and official curricula. Two principal conclusions can be drawn from the current study. First, the findings are optimistic in the sense of indicating a substantial broadening of teachers’ perceptions of curriculum. Teachers have recognized the nature of curriculum as a constantly developing social and political construct that is fundamentally connected with their professional development, which develops through relationships with all parties affected by, and interested in, curricular decisions. They have recognized the importance of their role as active, reflective curriculum makers and theorists. In this sense, the results clearly represent an advance from what was reported in other Eastern European countries a decade or more ago (Olek 1998, Polyzoi and Černa 2001). Besides this optimistic conclusion, however, it is apparent that important differences exist between the perceptions teachers have acquired and, on the other hand, their readiness to accept and adopt the perceived changes. In important aspects, particularly regarding the completeness of curriculum content, a considerable number...
of teachers expect more from the official curriculum. Teachers also expect more assistance in making important curricular decisions. Often, thus, the current practice has failed to take into account the real challenges facing teachers.

This study exposes how teachers perceive the curricula of the two different periods, but it also raises many issues for further research. It remains to be investigated whether the perceived discontent with some aspects of the current situation is due to the overtly liberal and open national curriculum currently in use, or is it because of the lack of self-confidence inherited from the previous times and accompanied with an insufficient professional preparation for the present needs. It is also important to note that because the Eastern European countries were historically much influenced by the German and Russian cultures, and now experiencing a growing influence from the English-speaking world, they may have the potential to intermediate between these different pedagogical traditions and to reflect the best practices. The recollections of experienced teachers could be a promising source for that.

At a practical level, the results suggest paying more attention at the national and local levels to the real challenges teachers face in implementing the curriculum in practice. The emphasis on freedom and autonomy cannot per se replace advice and assistance necessary for teachers to realize their autonomy and to make informed choices. In a way, Estonia and perhaps some other Eastern European countries may serve as examples of the pendulum effect: still greatly relying on the ideals of individual autonomy and responsibility, but sometimes neglecting their social preconditions. The teachers' perceptions of the curriculum reflect this, and this is something curriculum makers and teacher educators must consider.

It is important to note that the ‘new’ insecurity experienced by teachers is not an issue solely to be explained in terms of the shift from a Soviet to a post-Soviet context. The redefinition of teachers’ professionalism, including curriculum competencies and the accompanying feeling of uncertainty, has become an important issue in many countries around the world. This has been observed as a result of managerialism and new public management, explained in terms such as ‘accountability’, ‘efficiency’, and ‘performance’ (see e.g. Wong 2006, 2008, Hopmann 2008). Our article, while not discussing these questions in detail, is intended to provide material for further research on how these global phenomena may be reinforced and how they may shape teachers’ curricular perceptions in a particular socio-historical context.

We acknowledge the limits of our study. We recognize that the differences between the former communist Eastern European countries, briefly discussed above, may have had a substantial impact on teachers’ perceptions, even when the apparent political conditions were equal. We also recognize that, as previous research has indicated (Kwon 2003), inconsistencies may emerge between the pre-school teachers’ perceptions and their practice—for example, claiming to have a child-centred philosophy does not necessarily follow that teachers always apply it in practical situations. Nevertheless we hoped to address the long-recognized problem
from a specific angle and to add a piece of new knowledge to the international discussion.

References


