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'Walking a fine line': teachers' perception of curricular autonomy in Estonia, Finland and Germany

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to comparatively investigate the professional autonomy of upper secondary school teachers in three European countries in interpreting and implementing curricula. The paper focuses on teachers' experiences, and their perceptions of their autonomy and the control exercised over them in the global era of neoliberal education reforms. Semi-structured teacher interviews from Estonia, Finland and Germany ($n = 33$) were used to ascertain teachers' professional roles in different political contexts. Despite the common economically motivated pressures on school systems and teachers, the responses of nation-states and teachers vary. While German education reforms have been aimed mainly at increased standardization of education, Estonian and Finnish reforms have also emphasized school autonomy and the empowerment of teachers through school curriculum development. Even the Bavarian curriculum for gymnasias, one of the most prescriptive curricula in Germany, since 2008, has promised increased autonomy to teachers. Nevertheless, as the cases of Bavarian and Estonian curricula show, the autonomy-stressing rhetoric of a curriculum can be accompanied by teachers' perceived lack of autonomy. Moreover, teachers' willingness to endorse and enact curricula depends on their perceived social status and involvement in educational decision-making.

KEYWORDS

Teacher autonomy;
curriculum rhetoric;
neoliberalism; comparative
education; teacher attitudes

Introduction

The world of education has not been left unaffected by a major world political event: the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in the 1990s led to the birth of a new world order. The Western corporate model, in Europe also known as neoliberalism, rendered the blueprint for all social organization. Neoliberalism, which started spreading over a decade earlier in the late 1970s in Europe, particularly advocated by the United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, created the ideological basis of the new global order. Since then, economic thought has been coterminous with rationality (Coudry, 2013), and 'neoliberalism has become "the theory of everything" providing a pervasive account of self and identity, knowledge and information, economy and government' (Mirowski, quoted in Goodson,

2014, p. 14). Education reforms worldwide, with very few exceptions, have faithfully followed the ubiquitous 'theory' of neoliberalism, with the economic rhetoric of *accountability, standardization and privatization* acting as a chain of guiding beacons (Autio, 2011, pp. 110–112).

A review of how the curriculum works in the period of corporate rule reveals atrophy in the concept of education: 'Education has little stated value for itself, only for "getting a job" or helping the economy' (Goodson, 2014, p. 16), as exemplified by the neoliberal education reforms of President George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind* and President Obama's *Race to the Top*. The instrumentalization of value systems and the promotion of market objectives within the educational domain have rendered education and curricula similar to any other commodity. Under this corporate rule, 'teachers are viewed as technicians who implement this system and are paid by results' (*ibid.*).

In line with the neoliberal ideology, for several decades, the curriculum discourse in most Western societies has been dominated by teacher and school accountability and ever-increasing responsibility and workloads for teachers (Apple, 2001; Au, 2011; Ball, 1992, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Hopmann & Künzli, 1997; Pantić & Wubbels, 2012). This situation has led to problems with attracting and retaining effective teachers (OECD, 2005). In spite of the elevated stress level related to growing demands on the profession, evidence suggests that on-the-job stress is managed better by teachers who perceive themselves to be autonomous regarding the curriculum (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 46). Moreover, general teacher autonomy, which involves the need of teachers to have control over their work environment, is also positively correlated with empowerment and professionalism, which are indicators of commitment to the profession (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005, p. 49). Consequently, autonomy is one of the basic psychological needs fostering motivation and job satisfaction (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Since Estonia regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the increased stress level of teachers has left its mark on Estonian teachers, whose professional role has been in transition through many educational reforms. According to the international teacher study TALIS 2008, Estonian teachers reported on average self-efficacy and job-satisfaction rates lower than teachers in other OECD countries (OECD, 2009). As job satisfaction is positively related to autonomy, it is important to investigate how much and what type of autonomy Estonian teachers have, compared to their European colleagues.

This paper summarizes one part of a larger comparative study (Erss, 2015) that focuses on teacher autonomy, control and creativity. The dualism of autonomy and control is understood here in terms of the notions of positive and negative liberty as the freedom to do something versus freedom from constraints (Carter, 2012). Both are necessary concepts in studying teacher autonomy. For instance, teachers may be able to select learning activities autonomously but their creativity may be limited by centralized control and time pressure caused by the content of the curriculum, which is overwhelming. In adopting a teacher-centred and social constructivist perspective, this paper attempts to answer the following question: What are the experiences, perceptions and normative beliefs of teachers in Estonia, Finland and Germany regarding teacher autonomy and control?

These three countries were selected for comparative analysis for historical reasons. Until 1940 Estonia designed its school system based on the German model due to the centuries-long rule (until the birth of the Republic of Estonia in 1918) and the continuing cultural influence of Baltic Germans on the region. This included the adoption of a stratified

secondary school system and the commitment to the German *Didaktik* tradition, which emphasizes the pedagogical autonomy of teachers at the classroom level. Even under the totalitarian rule of the Soviet Union, from 1940 to 1991, the *Didaktik* approach never completely lost its significance. In the changed political environment of the 1990s, Estonian politicians searched for new models. The close cultural and economic ties to Finland contributed to the idea of using the Finnish curriculum as a model for the curriculum reforms in Estonia. As an illustration of the eagerness for policy borrowing in the 1990s and 2000s, the Estonian Minister of Education, Toivo Maimets, suggested that instead of independent curriculum development, Estonia adopt the Finnish national curriculum (Veelmaa, 2005, January 28). The plan never came to fruition, but the first national curriculum in post-Soviet Estonia (1996) was developed in cooperation with the Finnish National Board of Education and was therefore influenced by the Finnish experience (Krull & Trasberg, 2006).

Against that background, the country choices in this paper (Estonia, Finland and Germany) and the topical focus on the politics of teachers' professional autonomy amidst the pressures in upper secondary schools revealed interesting subjective and institutional mechanisms produced to cope with the cross-currents between current neoliberal reforms and more genuinely educational continental traditions.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we will introduce the theoretical background, including the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2006), the ecological agency theory (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) and the teacher autonomy model of Smith and Erdoğan (2008). Next, differences between curriculum policies in Estonia, Finland and Germany will be outlined. Then, we will describe the research design: the method of semi-structured interviews, sampling, forming the coding instruction and principles of qualitative content analysis. Finally, we will present the findings comparatively, and discuss the results in the light of global influences, such as neoliberal policy and the national trajectories of Estonia, Finland and Germany.

Theoretical background

Teacher autonomy is a complex phenomenon that contains philosophical, psychological, sociological and historical-political aspects. Since this article takes a holistic approach to the problem, it is appropriate to synthesize a theoretical framework from these three theories that consider the aforementioned aspects. The main features of self-determination theory, the ecological agency theory and the teacher autonomy model of Smith and Erdoğan will be outlined.

The central concept of the self-determination theory is the autonomous or self-determined act. From the phenomenological viewpoint (Pfander, 1967), self-determined acts are caused or fully endorsed by the ego-centre. According to this definition, self-determined acts are not necessarily always internally motivated; they can also be externally motivated if the 'self' endorses the external suggestions or prescriptions. Autonomy is only a matter of degree because we are rarely completely free of external influences and pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In the school context, these external influences and pressures can be derived from the centrally prescribed curriculum, which teachers may decide to endorse or ignore to differing degrees. Since the effectiveness of curriculum implementation depends on teachers' perceived ownership of the curriculum, a common concern of curriculum writers is how to achieve the endorsement of the curriculum by teachers (Kennedy, 2010).

The ecological agency theory (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) adds to the psychological and philosophical aspects of the self-determination theory and the sociological aspect of the agency-structure problem. Even though agency is often understood as being synonymous with autonomy, some definitions see autonomy as too individualistic, as underestimating social constraints (Archer, 2000; Priestley, Edwards, & Priestley, 2012). In this respect, Giddens' theory of structuration is comprehensive, emphasizing the duality of structure: *rules and resources*. These are 'always both enabling and constraining, in virtue of the inherent relation between structure and agency' (Giddens, 1984, p. 169). The concept of agency, in turn, has been associated with a long list of terms: freedom, creativity, self-hood, choice, motivation, will, initiative, etc. (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). According to Giddens' theory of structuration, agency implies power, as it 'refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place' (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). Taking a step further, the ecological agency theory envisions agency as the capacity for autonomous actions but distinguishes between the theoretical capacity for agency and the preconditions under which it can be achieved (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Depending on the social and physical environment and the capacity for autonomous action, an individual may exercise more or less agency (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 196).

The teacher autonomy model proposed by Smith and Erdoğan (2008) summarizes the first two theories through the notions of *self-directedness* and *capacity*; furthermore, the model adds another concept: *freedom from control*, which represents the negative notion of liberty or, for example, the freedom to self-direct one's teaching. All three concepts concern both teachers' professional actions and development, meaning that teachers ought to have the freedom to self-direct not just their own teaching, but learning as well. The concept of teacher autonomy should be seen in a wider framework of pedagogy for learner autonomy, while promoting the role of teachers as 'reflective practitioners' and as 'researchers' (Smith & Erdoğan, 2008, pp. 85–87).

Differences in the curriculum policies of Estonia, Germany (Bavaria) and Finland

Even though the curriculum policies of all three countries are ostensibly decentralized, the decentralization occurs at different levels. In Germany, the biggest country of the three, the curriculum policy is decentralized at the level of 16 *Länder*, which differ significantly in terms of the curricular autonomy given to schools. While some *Länder*, such as North Rhine-Westphalia, Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Wuerttemberg, are particularly decentralized in the German context, allowing schools more autonomy (Berger et al., 2012, p. 681), the majority of *Länder* have a rather centralized system. Most German teachers do not develop their own school curricula but must follow a detailed centrally prescribed curriculum (Herdegen, 2009). The attempts at school autonomy and school development at the local level, which German politicians have promoted since the 1980s, were substantially weakened by the standardization, new public management and external control systems put in place after the poor results of German teenagers in the international student achievement test PISA in 2000 (Hameyer, 2010, p. 220). Among German *Länder*, Bavaria emerges as having an education system which has traditionally had strong centralized input and output controls, while being Germany's leader in PISA results. The developments in Bavarian education can be viewed not as a break in policy, as in other *Länder*, but as a continuation of the same line,

encouraged by Bavaria's success in international comparative tests. This makes Bavaria a special case in Germany, and it receives particular attention in this article not least due to the need to make the scope of the research feasible.

Compared to other school types, such as primary schools, the German gymnasias are the most traditional and slow-to-change educational institutions, and started developing new patterns of teaching and the core curriculum much later (Hameyer, 2010, p. 224). Compared to the strictly prescriptive curriculum of 1990, the Bavarian curriculum for gymnasias of 2008 uses a much more autonomy-stressing rhetoric and demonstrates a paradigm shift towards an output-oriented curriculum (ISB – Staatsinstitut für Schulqualität und Bildungsforschung München, 2009; KWMBI, 1990). However, the actual freedom of teachers to interpret the curriculum according to their own views and the needs of students has not increased. According to a Bavarian curriculum expert, it has even decreased due to the curriculum reform of 2004, which shortened the gymnasium time by one year without reducing curriculum content (expert interview 2013).

Estonia and Finland have national curriculum frameworks for upper secondary schools but schools and teachers must adapt them for specific school contexts, specifying learning objectives and processes while adding locally significant and profile-related content. Additionally, Finland has a third layer of curriculum authority: municipalities may in cooperation with teachers from local schools decide on the regional points of emphasis in the curriculum. Compared to the upper secondary school curricula of 1994 in Finland (Finnish National Board of Education, 1994) and of 1996 in Estonia (Estonian Government, 1996), which promised a greater amount of autonomy for teachers, there has been a re-centralization in the rhetoric of curricula in later versions, the Estonian curriculum for basic schools and gymnasias of 2002 (Estonian Government, 2002), and the Finnish national core curriculum for upper secondary schools of 2003. The latter (Finnish National Board of Education, 2003), in particular, uses a more normative language compared to its predecessor, due to the changed political climate and the fact that increasing international competition creates more centralizing tendencies (Ropo & Välijärvi, 2010, p. 209).

The rhetoric of teacher autonomy in the Estonian curriculum of 1996, depicting teachers not only as curriculum makers but also as 'educational policy makers', disappointingly was never implemented. An expert group of the OECD pointed out the major discrepancy between the modern philosophy of the general part of the curriculum and the traditional nature of the subject syllabi. The latter were still very subject-centred in the curriculum of 1996, listing requirements for detailed encyclopaedic knowledge and leaving very little room for individualized approaches or teacher autonomy. In addition, the implementation of the curriculum maintained the Soviet model of top-down hierarchy, with very little involvement of teachers in school curriculum development (OECD, 2001, pp. 81, 83). Even though attempts at improvement have been made with each successive curriculum development, the tensions between teachers and curriculum makers still persist as the involvement of teachers in national curriculum development has remained mainly formal (Erss et al., 2014).

Research design

To answer the research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with secondary school teachers in Estonia, Germany and Finland. This study focused on interview questions concerning the topics 'background information', 'experiences and opinions of accountability and control', 'views of educational policy', 'perceptions of curricular autonomy', 'trust and

support by society' and 'views of creativity'. The interviews were conducted in three languages: Estonian, German and, with Finnish teachers, English.

The interviews were conducted in 2012–2013 with 10 Estonian, 13 German and 10 Finnish teachers. Additionally, two expert interviews with curriculum developers and teacher educators were conducted in Bavaria and Finland.¹ Estonian teachers were chosen based on the personal contacts of one of the authors and recommendations by some interviewees. The Estonian teachers (eight women and two men) were upper secondary school teachers of various subjects (see Appendix 1) from seven gymnasias (five in Tallinn, the capital city, one in Paide, a small town in central Estonia and one in Viimsi, a suburb of Tallinn). Their work experience (including teaching in lower grades) varied from 5 to 40 years.

The German teachers were divided into two groups. The first group had teaching experience in Germany and Estonia. They were working at the time in two Estonian cities, Tallinn and Tartu, through a German government programme which promotes the teaching of German abroad. Some teachers were working in an Estonian gymnasium which issues German gymnasium diplomas and where most subjects are taught in German. The teachers came from different *Länder*: two from North Rhine-Westphalia (NW), one from Rhineland-Palatinate (RP), one from Baden-Wuerttemberg (BW), one from Bremen (Br), two from Saxony (S) and two from Bavaria (B). In the other group, four teachers were interviewed in Bavaria. The teachers from this *Land* received special attention, as one of the authors had the chance to visit Bavaria to study the education system and the curriculum. The German teachers (eight women and five men, with 1–34 years of teaching experience) were found through contacts in Estonia and by suggestions of the university staff at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich.

Due to a lack of personal contacts, Finnish teachers were selected based on diversity of subjects, geographical location (Helsinki and Tampere) and ethnic background, as well as the ranking of schools by matriculation exams. They were contacted by e-mail from the teachers' lists on schools' homepages. The Finnish teachers (seven women and three men, with 5 to 31 years of experience) were all working in very highly rated upper secondary schools (eight in total), including one privately operated Waldorf school and one Swedish-speaking school.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The qualitative data analysis program NVivo9 was used to organize and code the data according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). First, a theory-based coding instruction with text examples was developed. The self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2006) provided the taxonomy of motivation that was operationalized as one of the main analytical categories: *self-directedness*. This category contains five sub-categories: *externally regulated*, *introjected*, *identified*, *integrated* and *intrinsic motivation*. While the first and the last are opposites and indicate a total lack of autonomy and full autonomy based on interest in behaviour, respectively, the three types in the middle represent the different degrees of endorsement of externally motivated ideas. While introjected motivation refers to partial assimilation of external suggestions, the other two represent identification of these ideas with beliefs and values.

The ecological agency theory served as the basis for the second main category, *capacity*, which is divided into three sub-categories: *resources*, *pedagogy* and *understanding of the educational political environment*, representing external (material, human, social and political) and internal (personal system of educational beliefs) capacities or constraints on autonomy.

The third main category, derived from the teacher autonomy model by Smith and Erdoğan (2008), is *freedom from control*. Our interpretation of this category contains five sub-categories: *control by the public sphere* (administrative and political control), *control by the private sphere* (parents and students), *organizational dynamic* (leadership style and work environment), *trust in creative practices* (by the school leadership) and *teachers' attitudes towards creativity*.

In addition to the three deductively formed main categories, an inductively derived category, *responsibility of teachers*, was created and divided into two sub-categories: *accountability and responsibility of teachers for student achievement* and *level of school autonomy and the consequences for teachers*. For the full list of categories and sub-categories, see Appendix 2. In the analysis, cross-case and cross-group techniques were used to determine similarities and differences within and between groups. For each respondent, we used codes (eg BWEnLM14) in which the letter combinations indicate the country (E for Estonia and F for Finland) or *Land* (in the German case), subjects taught (see Appendix 1), sex and teaching experience in years.

Results of teacher interviews

Self-directedness

Teachers expressed considerable differences in regard to self-directedness. German teachers frequently (six teachers) felt *externally directed* by curriculum goals and standardized tests:

And the number of tests, the comparative tests, is constantly increasing. Thus, it is not autonomy but the opposite. This means more control because the marking principles are also prescribed. [...] And this naturally has the consequence that the teacher loses his/her autonomy, not just for this one test, but even before he/she prepares his/her students for the test (BGF12).

The increasing number of comparative tests was perceived as a loss of curricular autonomy and the imposition of government control. German teachers usually accept this imposition of state control as their role of civil servants requires taking an oath to serve the country:

And I think this also includes that one accepts the goals of the curriculum and of education. [...] If the curriculum states that I have to cover this and that, I can't say 'this does not suit me at all, so I will not do it' (BWEnLM14).

Therefore, German teachers have to leave their personal preferences aside when it comes to following the curriculum.

There were considerably fewer Estonian teachers (only two) who felt externally directed and none among the Finnish teachers. However, the few Estonians who perceived external directedness did not mention so much the curriculum as the source of control as the national curriculum development, which is only ostensibly democratic:

Well, yes, you can always express your opinion but how much it is taken into account ... because E.K. who is the leader of the subject association in Estonia [...] has been in the Ministry of Education and even in the parliament to discuss mathematics problems and the result was

zero. It did not count at all what teachers thought about what the curriculum should be, where things should be, what should be in it and what should not (EMF13).

Therefore, some Estonian teachers felt frustration and alienation from the curriculum which they did not regard as their own since their expertise and willingness to contribute to its development had been ignored. This experience contradicts the promise made by the 1996 Estonian curriculum for general education schools that described teachers as makers of educational policy

Furthermore, many Estonian teachers expressed *introjected motivation* towards the curriculum, being, unlike their German and Finnish colleagues, much more critical of it and only partially accepting it. One major point of criticism was the lack of resources for curriculum implementation:

The old curriculum was replaced by the new one and all the study aids have still not come for the old one ... [...] The curriculum prescribes that I should work with half the class only, but the headmaster does not have any money for this [...] and this influences me. I don't fulfil the curriculum as I could if I had all the resources. (EPHF40)

The curriculum aids and supporting materials were always too late and there was a chasm between the required learning environment and the real situation in schools.

The German and Finnish teachers, compared to the Estonians, showed much more loyalty towards the curriculum, which they expressed through *identified* or *integrated motivation*. Despite the curriculum framework, the Finnish teachers felt quite free in their classrooms:

Of course there are those national curricula for each subject but as a teacher I may work as I like ... nobody comes to tell me what to do here in the classroom, as long as the results, I mean the numbers and grades of those national examinations, are good enough ... (FPLM9).

As long as the exam results are good, teachers may choose whatever pedagogical approach they wish. The topics prescribed by the Finnish curriculum are very broad for some subjects, so teachers can influence the content as well as the methods:

Well, let's say, if you look at English course 4, that I start on Monday; it's called 'The society and world around us'. That basically covers everything there is. So I'm very good at finding texts that I can argue have to do with this topic. [...] They (the topics) are very broad (FENG15).

In Germany, teachers generally follow the curriculum because it makes sense to them:

You can decide on your content focus. You can ... primarily your freedom is expressed by the fact that not much happens if you don't follow it (the curriculum). [...] *You can ... well, you have certain assignment types that you have to fulfil. It is always ... at least I always try to do it because I understand that it makes sense.* However, there are always colleagues who don't follow it and nothing much happens (NWGF12).

In some *Länder*, such as North Rhine-Westphalia, nothing much happens if teachers do not follow the curriculum, so teachers approach the curriculum in a relaxed way. Even in Bavaria, where the curriculum is theoretically tightly controlled by department heads, who double-check all high-stakes tests, ensuring the curriculum standards are followed, this kind of control often turns out to be just a formality:

There is a proverb: '*Eine Krähe hackt der anderen kein Auge aus*' ('There is honour among thieves'). *Now I am a professional, and my supervisor is also a professional and he looks through my tests. Should he say this is bad? Maybe a senior member of staff can say this to a younger colleague: 'Do it differently next time', but at a certain age ... First, one simply does not do it any more and if it goes further to the next authority, he will also say, unless it is really very bad, there will be no consequences* (BLPEM23).

At least senior members of staff can feel quite safe, as they know that nobody within the school usually wants to rock the boat and expose weaknesses. On the other hand, some younger Bavarian teachers justified the tight curricular prescriptions and the double-checking on tests and perceived the greater autonomy that they had experienced in Estonia as something rather negative:

Something like this double-checking of tests is in my opinion very useful because if every teacher only does what he/she deems to be important then it can't be guaranteed that students of the same year who are maybe divided into three classes are, at the end of the year, approximately at the same level (BGM2).

According to this teacher, the concern for equal levels of student knowledge clearly outweighed the need for teacher autonomy. This demonstrates a high level of conformity with the curriculum and the authorities, which is particularly characteristic of young German teachers.

In regard to the occurrence of *intrinsic motivation*, there were no differences between the groups. It seems that the experience of joy in one's work, interest in one's subject, enjoyment of creativity, self-development and learning, and the avoidance of boredom are universal expressions of intrinsic motivation, and are as likely to motivate Estonian, German and Finnish teachers to take autonomous actions.

Capacity

The capacity for autonomous action in all three countries is restricted by a lack of *resources*. The most important scarce resource is time. The trend seems to be towards constantly increasing curricular content that has to be managed in the same amount or even less time. This is true, for instance, of Finnish teachers of natural sciences:

In 2005, when I wrote the Biology and Geography curriculum, those subjects, which were there before, were there in 2005 ... There were a lot of new things, so it becomes impossible to teach them, because you don't have more time than before... we need to have a four-year *lukio* to do everything which is in our curriculum (FBGF31).

The municipal Biology and Geography curriculum which was developed in 2005 based on the Finnish national framework curriculum of 2003 meant increasing time and content pressure for teachers, who needed one entire year more to cover everything. Teachers in Estonia and Germany expressed similar feelings. Bavarian teachers especially felt the time pressure with the shortening of the gymnasium duration from nine to eight years (the 'G8 reform'):

They took the old curriculum and reduced the font size from, let's say 12 points to 10 points and then they said: Now there are 20 pages less (laughs).... It is not a joke! *And of course there is still an enormous amount of content, particularly in the core curriculum subjects that are tested with the centrally written graduation exams. And the problem is, ultimately, that a meaningful penetration into the content is not possible [...]* For this, one simply needs more time (BLPEM23).

The Bavarian curriculum reform of 2004–2008 claimed to reduce the content of subject matter but it involved rather cosmetic changes which did not significantly ease the content pressure, especially in the core curriculum subjects, which are tested centrally.

Other resources that impede teacher autonomy are money for smaller classes and schools, for additional lessons for weaker students in Germany, for elective courses in Finland and for in-service teacher education in Estonia and Finland. Estonian teachers also mentioned the lack of study aids and money for field trips as obstacles in fulfilling the curriculum.

However, Estonian and Finnish schools are well equipped with information technology, which in Estonia partly compensates for the lack of textbooks and other study aids.

Another important finding is that teachers were generally modest in expressing their own views on *pedagogy*, which is an expression of educational capacity for autonomous action. Either they lacked the theoretical vocabulary to express their views or they had not formed their own pedagogical philosophies. Still, German and Finnish teachers mentioned their own pedagogical agenda more often than Estonian teachers. Only three Estonian teachers expressed their own pedagogical goals, such as developing critical thinking in students or advocating experimental methods in science instruction. While German teachers supported the humanistic, well-rounded *Bildung* ideal, Finnish teachers preferred the social-constructivist student-centred approach and the emphasis on teacher ethics.

Freedom from control

Regarding *control by the public sphere*, teachers in all three countries claimed to have a lot of pedagogical autonomy within the frameworks of the curricula. They all agreed that teachers have the right to choose the methods, materials and pedagogy, but opinions differed as to what extent teachers can influence or choose content. One German teacher working in Estonia expressed the opinion that Estonian teachers slavishly followed the curriculum:

Because I often see that the teachers panic here (in Estonia) if one day is cancelled: 'How can I manage? I still have so much to do! [...] 'I am not through with this textbook yet'. *At the same time, teachers in Germany see it in a more relaxed way. Yes, the curriculum is of course there and I have to follow it but it is approached in a more relaxed way. [...] Thus, a German teacher does not let him/herself be enslaved by the curriculum to the extent that Estonian teachers do.* (BWE nLM14)

This opinion was not necessarily confirmed by Estonian teachers, who were increasingly looking for alternative materials to accommodate the different learning needs of students:

The curriculum naturally influences me. Of course it does, since I have to follow it and, like I said before, after all I have to prepare the students for the exam, not for life ... [...] Although in that sense I don't teach much according to the textbook so that if I don't manage to cover the textbook in the sixth grade it is no big catastrophe. If something is left out of the instruction I don't think anything very bad happens, and the same goes for the curriculum ... (EEF6).

As this quote suggests, final exams influence Estonian teachers more than textbooks or even the curriculum. Although the curriculum is supposed to prepare students for final exams, teachers often find shortcuts and focus on tested knowledge. In Finland, two different tendencies regarding this can be observed. On one hand, there are many teachers who prefer to teach without the textbook and make their own materials:

[...] if you don't want to have a textbook here in the Waldorf school ... I also have the freedom to have my own material totally ... and ... *I teach courses without textbooks also ... and the same is true in the 9th grade ... I can have a textbook if I want to and not if I don't ...* (FMChF10).

And this is not just a freedom in Waldorf schools but also in public schools. On the other hand, final exams start influencing the classroom curriculum more strongly the closer they get. Some Finnish schools start the preparation from day one in upper secondary school although not all teachers go along with this:

Yeah, and in this school we don't have a prep course; most schools have a prep course before the test, where they really get into it and do all the ... We don't do that, thank God. (FEnGF15).

When asked about the standardization of German education in the last decade, two German teachers pointed out the difficulty in finding the right balance between freedom and regulation for teachers, using the metaphor of '*Gratwanderung*': 'walking a fine line':

Yes, it is difficult because common standards have to be achieved, of course, regarding centralized graduation exams, PISA or ... [...] In order to reach these standards, standardized things have to be prescribed. On one hand, *I find this sensible and useful but, on the other hand, it reduces the space for creativity and this creative space is important ... to do things with students that enable them to learn in the first place. It means walking a fine line* (NWGF16).

Standardization of education was thus regarded as necessary to a certain degree in the light of international competition, but at the same time as constraining the autonomy and creativity of teachers. An Estonian teacher described a good balance between structure and freedom in the curriculum as follows:

Well, the ideal option for me would be that the boundaries are known. I know what are the minimums and the maximums of what are expected of me [...] and I know that I should not exceed these limits, at least not drop below the minimal limit. But within the limits I could have complete freedom to choose how I teach, with what methods, because every class is completely different, and I have to do different things anyway (EEF6).

It was understood that setting standards in the curriculum is necessary and teachers have to know what is expected but they wished to have complete pedagogical freedom so as to better meet the different needs of students. The Finnish teachers also stressed the need for teachers to have curricular autonomy as a precondition for effective instruction:

And of course we need to have a kind of curriculum ... but I would like to have not such a specific curriculum. It's so much easier for teachers to do their work properly if the curriculum gives them some freedom to do that ... (FBGeF31).

Currently, Finnish teachers enjoy a lot of curricular freedom. One young music teacher thinks that there is even too much autonomy and it would be good to have a little more guidance:

I would say that sometimes there is even too much autonomy because, as I said, I feel a bit lonely. [...] Guidelines or at least guidance ... the headmaster is not ... or the authorities are not pedagogical leaders; they don't give you pedagogical advice or support, even if you ask them a pedagogical question ... They can't ... actually really answer ... so the teacher is alone and of course that's nice and fun but it's also very stressful ... (FMuM7).

Younger teachers felt left alone with their problems, a concern which is also a by-product of the Finnish school culture, which relies more on teachers' independence than cooperation. Even in Germany, where teachers tend to coordinate the requirements for students more frequently, the teachers' role was characterized as being 'a lone warrior' (NWGF12) who 'battles' in order to prepare his/her students for standardized tests (BGF12). More feedback and guidance seemed to be a common need of younger teachers since also young Estonian teachers mentioned it:

As I said, since I am a young teacher I think it would be easier for me if I had the control because I am actually still learning my job, what to teach after all, but ... honestly I have not felt control as such and I still do not feel it [...] maybe I like it that everything is prescribed: do this and you have so many lessons ... (EBF9).

A more prescriptive curriculum might help younger teachers to overcome their insecurities; however, more experienced teachers preferred guidance in the form of options, not prescriptions:

But examples are actually necessary, I would like it in Estonia if examples and study aids existed that teachers could use [...] But this should be voluntary, not compulsory ... (EHM15).

It is important to present teachers with choices and examples of how to use them.

The sub-category *control by organizational dynamic* reveals how teachers operate in different work cultures within the same country, yet some country-specific differences definitely occurred.

Not surprisingly, the Estonian teachers regarded the school leadership style as an important control factor, since school headmasters in Estonia have more authority and power over teachers than they do in Germany and Finland, where the role of headmasters can be described more as being 'primus inter pares' (the first among equals), as one German teacher said. Particularly, in Germany, the power of headmasters is limited mostly to carrying out policies decided in the ministry. In Finland, all headmasters are teachers themselves and often side with teachers in cases of attempts at bureaucratic control from above. Still, the role of headmasters has also changed in Finland, where they sometimes act as agents for the educational administration, not as educational leaders who share the same values as teachers:

[...] and previously I think the headmasters used to be sort of ... like the head teachers ... like the captains of the ship. Now it seems that they are not the captains of the teachers; they are sort of ... like *messengers of the Educational Board* or some office ... they sort of come and deliver messages ... that now there is this change and now there is that change ... that you should apply these in school ... (FMuM7).

Several Finnish teachers felt that they could not trust their headmasters because they had become mere bureaucratic administrators who disturbed the work of teachers. In Estonia, the administrative leadership style also dominates but unlike the headmasters in Finland and Germany, Estonian headmasters have often been away from teaching for years and sometimes do not realize what is going on in the lessons any more. If asked whether it is necessary to control teachers, most Estonian teachers agreed:

Yes, it is necessary. I am not in favour of the absence of control. I see that the school leadership should be more aware of the quality of their teachers, what methods they use ... the didactic part and at the same time organise, for instance, workshops in school to improve and develop ... (EAF28).

At the moment, most of the control in Estonia is exercised by means of paperwork: teaching plans, electronic class book entries (in 'e-kool'), self-evaluation of teachers, etc. However, it is rare that school leaders actually observe lessons, which would give them a better understanding of development needs. The Finnish teachers also almost never experienced lesson observations by headmasters and believed that they were generally trusted. In Germany, teacher evaluation by headmasters through lesson observations happens regularly in Bavaria, but in other *Länder* usually only in the case of evaluations for promotion.

In contrast to the Estonian teachers, the Finnish and German teachers cringed from the word 'control' and preferred 'supervision' by peers or by the headmaster. Half of the Finnish teachers regarded control as unnecessary, arguing that teachers are professionals who know what they are doing. Estonian teachers, on the other hand, advocated control on condition that the goal of control was positive supervision that helped to detect and solve problems. Above all, most teachers regarded self-control and self-analysis as the most important forms of control, as teachers are usually self-critical and self-reflective anyway.

With respect to *teachers' attitudes towards creativity and neoliberal influences on schools* the data exposes important cultural differences. The word 'innovation' evoked negative feelings among the Finnish and particularly among the German teachers, as a word that belongs to the neoliberal vocabulary: 'Innovation is public perception, where the main thing is getting something in the newspaper' (NWGF12). The Finnish teachers associated 'innovation' with external pressure for school efficiency and perception management:

Personally I don't like every time being *more efficient, more effective ... This ... the whole religion of progression irritates me. If things are going well, what is the idea of always making progress and progress and progression ... it becomes a religion* (FPLM9).

Thus, the pressure for constant innovation and improvement was regarded as a business-like concept that is not critically questioned in the school context. It seems that many Finnish and German teachers took a more conservative stance to teaching, under the motto 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'. The opposition to neoliberal ideas in schools among Finnish and German teachers also became apparent when they were asked how open they were to ideas from the business world. While anything linked to business in schools was, according to the Finnish teachers, 'like a red flag', the Estonian teachers reacted to ideas borrowed from business neutrally. Moreover, the Estonian teachers viewed innovation positively, as a creative use of technology, and used a lot of computer-based learning activities:

I seek out new methods, technologies, processes and teaching ideas in my work. [...] Yes, I do that and I have done animated films with the graphic programming tool developed at Harvard University (EHM15).

Correspondingly, the Estonian teachers perceived the need to develop their technology skills while at the same time valuing creativity, defining it either as the creative use of the ideas of others in a concrete class setting or as creating a fully independent elective course. The latter is not always possible, which is why many Estonian teachers characterize themselves modestly as 'not the creative type'. Creativity and control are understood by most teachers as mutually exclusive concepts, since the prerequisite of creativity is, according to a German teacher, 'freedom from fear' (BPSEtDM16).

Responsibility of teachers

There were considerable differences in the perception of *teacher accountability for student achievement* among the German, Estonian and Finnish teachers. While the German and Finnish teachers did not consider themselves to be accountable for student achievement and also experienced less pressure in this regard, the Estonian teachers felt more pressure to be accountable. The impression of the German teachers working in Estonia was that Estonian schools seem to have a motto: student achievement defines the quality of teachers' work:

I think it is not so extreme in Germany as in the Estonian schools. *Here the responsibility of teachers is very high. As I have experienced it, student achievement equals teacher achievement. It is not like that in Germany, meaning the student has his/her own responsibility for his/her learning and the learning process* (RPGF19).

This attitude is often applied by Estonian headmasters and even some Estonian teachers are willing to accept this concept, although with reservations:

In this sense, I feel the responsibility that marks show how well I have done my work. Of course I can't expect ... or think that if somebody gets a bad mark, a few students, that I have done

bad work; it does not mean that, but if there are massive failures then I look at the teacher to see what went wrong (EEF6).

Others were convinced that this concept involved going too far, and that there are other factors that influence student achievement:

I don't agree that it is only the responsibility of the teacher; there are marks and exam results and so on; it cannot be reduced only to the teacher (EGF8).

Overall, the Finnish and Estonian upper secondary school teachers believed they had more responsibility for student achievement than did the German gymnasium teachers due to the comprehensive school system:

You know, I think that this is the difference between a big and a small state ... First, we could never have this stratification (of students in different education paths) because our nation is so small. We need more ... 'educated' people and this means that we have to find them even among the 'dodgy material' ... which puts a bigger responsibility and weight on us (EHM10).

The results of this study indicate that in the small nations of Estonia and Finland, teachers felt it was their duty to maximize the potential of each student and to make sure that everybody who entered upper secondary school also graduated, even if the students were not particularly motivated. However, another reason teachers are held more accountable for student achievement in Estonia is the lack of trust by society and the low social status of teachers:

Here, prestige means maybe that you are an authority among students; you feel it, but outside the school, in society, you feel the opposite. [...] You have to prove all the time that you can also think and sometimes you have to be loud to get it across that in this case we are the best experts. This is abnormal [...] that we are not valued as the experts that we really are (EHM10).

A German teacher working in Estonia confirmed that teachers in Germany are generally more respected than in Estonia;

But, generally, teachers are seen as people who are professional, who know their work and are competent. And this gives the profession a higher status, but here in Estonia teachers are held responsible for everything negative and they are put on the same level as customer service [...] (BWEnLM14).

On the contrary, the Finnish teachers generally felt that there was trust from society:

I don't think there is so much control, we thrive because of this pedagogical freedom that we have guaranteed in the law in Finland, and we are trusted as a professional group (FEnSF25).

These examples indicate that the neoliberal ideology is, compared to Finland and Germany, more deeply rooted in Estonia: the Estonian society sees schools as being no different from the marketplace, where customers (students) are entitled to the best service for the taxpayers' money and any shortcomings must be the service provider's (teacher's) fault.

Discussion

The main task of this paper was to investigate the experiences, perceptions and normative beliefs of upper secondary school teachers in Estonia, Finland and Germany regarding teacher autonomy and control. The comparative analysis provided several findings that make it possible to draw wider generalizations within the conceptual framework of curricular autonomy and neoliberal accountability culture.

Although contemporary curriculum discourse in Estonia, Finland and Germany emphasizes, to differing degrees, school and teacher autonomy, the rhetoric of the Estonian and Bavarian curricula differs from that of the Finnish curriculum in terms of teachers' experiences of autonomy. The optimistic promise of the Estonian curriculum of 1996 to grant teachers the role of 'makers of education policy' was never realized as Estonian teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with top-down curriculum reforms where their professional expertise was ignored. In a similar fashion, the promise of more teacher autonomy in the 2008 Bavarian curriculum clashed with increased time and content pressure experienced by German teachers after the gymnasium reform of 2004, which shortened the duration of the school form by one year. These findings suggest that curriculum texts may be naively or intentionally misleading and, thus, it is insufficient to judge actual education policy based solely on official documents.

All teachers who participated in the study felt they had pedagogical autonomy in deciding the methods, materials and sequencing of instruction. Finnish teachers felt they had more influence over the choice of content than did Estonian or German teachers because the national curriculum in Finland in certain subjects, such as foreign languages, is less specific and allows more room for interpretation. Nevertheless, teachers' content-related autonomy is generally limited, particularly in the core curriculum subjects that are tested centrally and that are under more time pressure. For Estonian teachers, narrowly focussed preparation for national exams clearly outweighs the importance of the curriculum. The enactment of autonomy also depends on specific institutional settings and school leadership style. The predominantly administrative leadership style is perceived, particularly by Finnish teachers, as 'obstruction' of teachers' work.

These results reflect the dual nature of the curriculum as simultaneously 'enabling and constraining', showing a parallel with Giddens (1984, p. 169) notion of the relationship between agency and structure. In the light of ecological agency theory (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), teachers' curricular autonomy is not a state of being but rather a state of becoming, meaning that attention should be paid to the personal, social and physical preconditions under which agency can be achieved, such as teachers' competence, personal pedagogical agenda, physical and social resources (study aids, time and space and encouragement by school leadership) and freedom from control.

Regarding the capacity for autonomous actions, it is a matter of concern that the teachers, and particularly the Estonian teachers, rarely offered their own pedagogical views or personal agenda. Previous studies have found that teachers often do not have clearly formed philosophical beliefs and find the discovery and articulation process to be frustrating (Livingston, McClain, & DeSpain, 1995). Since the existence of such an agenda is an important factor in the willingness to exercise autonomy and the resistance to external control, it is pertinent for further research to study the connection of teacher education and practice with the formation of personal pedagogical goals.

According to the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2006), curricular autonomy is a matter of degree. Teachers who endorse curriculum goals tend to perceive having greater curricular autonomy. In this respect, there are significant differences between Estonian, Finnish and German teachers. While most Finnish and German teachers expressed identified or integrated motivation regarding the curriculum, Estonian teachers perceived the curriculum more critically, indicating introjected motivation. Our interpretation suggests that teachers' loyalty to a curriculum and endorsement of its goals tend to be connected with

teachers' status in the society and their involvement in curriculum policy. The status of teachers as civil servants in Germany, with the benefits that this includes, and the status of Finnish teachers as highly valued professionals have created more positive attitudes towards the curriculum than in Estonia, where teachers perceive themselves as undervalued and not sufficiently included in the national curriculum development.

While inclusion in curriculum development as a precondition for teachers' 'ownership' of the curriculum has been pointed out by many curriculum scholars before (Goodson, 2014; Kennedy, 2010), the social status of teachers and its connection to identified and integrated motivation in curriculum enactment is a finding that deserves further research. So far, research in the United Kingdom has indicated that teachers' perceived social status and job satisfaction are positively related (Fuller, Goodwyn, & Francis-Brophy, 2013), which logically also has implications for teachers' commitment to the curriculum.

Our study also highlights cultural differences in teachers' normative beliefs and expectations regarding autonomy that reflect a different causal orientation (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1563): while Estonian and German teachers tend to be more control-oriented, Finnish teachers are more autonomy-oriented, focusing on reflection and choices in the curriculum. Also, Estonian and German teachers incline towards justification of external control, while Finnish teachers focus on the high morality and professionalism of teachers. The differences in the attitudes may be explained by the different path dependencies of these countries. German and Estonian teachers have, until relatively recently (Germany until the PISA-shock in 2002, and Estonia until 1996, or in some ways even longer), followed a quite tightly prescribed *Didaktik* type of curriculum and, accordingly, have certain expectations regarding a clear definition of curricular input. Due to the ongoing discussions of school reform in the 1980s, Finnish teachers were more receptive to the curricular change of 1994, which tremendously increased teacher and school autonomy (Sahlberg, 2011, pp. 35–36).

The last finding of wider significance refers to the differences in the prevalence of the neoliberal accountability culture in the studied countries. Estonian teachers have, compared with teachers in other countries, quite a lot of curricular autonomy and they show as much willingness to work creatively as Finnish or German teachers; however, they seem to be defenceless in the face of the neoliberal accountability pressure and the lack of trust from, and prestige in, society. Generally, the positioning of teachers within an education system is indicative of the guiding educational ideology. The key lacuna in externally mandated, neoliberal change is the link to teachers' professional beliefs and to teachers' own personal missions: 'The personal and professional commitment that must exist at the heart of any new changes and reforms is absent ... so many changes seem ill-conceived, professionally naïve and against the heart and spirit of professional belief' (Goodson, 2014, p. 16). Goodson's criticism, although coming from an Anglophone intellectual position, is similar to the feelings of Estonian teachers regarding curriculum reforms.

Although the basic tenets of professional autonomy of German, Baltic and Scandinavian *Bildung* and *Didaktik* traditions as the 'negative' of neoliberal education reforms are traditionally shared, Estonia has drifted in the last few decades more in the neoliberal direction. The 'negative' of neoliberal totalitarianism is positively expressed in the myriad of continental schools of educational thought, the quintessence of which is embodied in Wolfgang Klafki's (1991) view that the ultimate educational goals are freedom (*Freiheit*) and self-determination (*Selbstbestimmung*). These goals are reflected and implied in northern European ideals of

the professional autonomy of teachers and the freedom to interpret and translate a curriculum on the basis of intellectually qualified teacher education (Autio, 2014).

Even though the neoliberal ideology, with its emphasis on competition, accountability and business-like management concepts, has influenced all three education systems, German and Finnish teachers have actively opposed it and have thus impeded its infiltration at deeper levels. This is apparent, for example, in the relatively low impact of ranking lists of schools in Germany and Finland compared to Estonia, and in the lower sense of responsibility of teachers for student achievement. However, Estonian teachers are not organized well enough to form a consensus in these matters, or perhaps they have just not given it much thought due to the overwhelming workload or apolitical attitude towards education. Based on this research, one might assume that the low level of self-efficacy perceived by Estonian teachers in the TALIS 2008 study is not due to a lack of curricular autonomy but to other factors, such as ecological, social and internal constraints on autonomy.

Despite the different reactions of nation-states to global policies, some trends remain common: teacher autonomy is limited everywhere by high-stakes standardized tests, which increasingly narrow the curriculum as final exams approach. The task of teachers thus becomes 'preparing students for the exam, not for life' as one Estonian teacher put it. Simultaneously, the study implies that teacher autonomy is appreciated to varying degrees in different cultural and historical contexts and more autonomy without providing the pre-conditions to enact it is not necessarily understood as something positive. Therefore, it is difficult to give any concrete suggestions as to a preferable amount of curricular autonomy since the balance between structure and agency is described by teachers in different cultural contexts as 'walking a fine line'.

Critical methodological remarks of the study

International comparative research in education can be problematic from the standpoint of cultural relativists (Jarvie, 1983, p. 45) or phenomenologists (Barber, 1972, p. 433), who believe that any cross-cultural comparison is comparing apples with oranges. Nevertheless, we take the view that comparative research is necessary, particularly in the era of globalization (Schriewer, 2003, p. 52), as nation-states often face similar challenges.

A slight reservation regarding the validity of the teacher interviews is due to the fact that Finnish teachers were interviewed in English, instead of their mother tongue. Therefore, their foreign language skills played a role in sampling. Even though the Finnish teachers' language skills were generally very good, something still might have been lost in translation.

Another limitation derives from the small and, especially in the German case, somewhat asymmetrical sample of teachers involved in the study, which does not allow us to generalize the findings for the three countries involved. Instead, this paper should be seen as input for future studies.

Note

1. In Estonia, experts were not interviewed as one of the authors has had informal conversations with Estonian curriculum developers and having worked as a teacher in Estonian public schools for 10 years has sufficient knowledge of the curriculum policy.

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Appendix 1. Sample description by subject

Subject	Estonian teachers	German teachers	Finnish teachers
E—Estonian language and literature	1		
G—German	2	4	1
En—English	2	3	3
EnIB—English as International Baccalaureate			1
F—French		1	
S—Spanish		2	
Sw—Swedish			1
L—Latin	1	2	2
M—Mathematics	1	2	1
B—Biology	1	1	1
N—Natural science	2		
G—Geography	1		1
Ch—Chemistry	1		1
Ph—Physics	1		1
H—History	2	2	
C—Civics	2		
P—Psychology		1	1
Et—Ethics		1	
R—Religion		2	1
P—Philosophy	2	1	2
Mu—Music (+ light and sound technology)			1
A—Art and technical drawing	1		
Hu—Human science	1		
PE—Physical education		1	
D—Drama		1	

Note: Most teachers taught two or more subjects.

Appendix 2. List of categories

- (1) Self-directedness
 - *Externally directed motivation* (lack of self-directedness, which indicates that teachers' opinions of the curriculum and its goals do not matter, because they have to follow them anyway)
 - *Introjected motivation* (partial assimilation of external controls. Teachers are critical of the curriculum or there is centralized testing, but teachers still feel that there is some freedom)
 - *Identified motivation* (personal valuing of actions. Teachers accept curricular prescriptions or the requirements of centralized tests and see opportunities for autonomous action)
 - *Integrated motivation* (personally valued and well synthesized with the totality of values and beliefs. Teachers explain in detail why they approve of the curriculum, standardized tests or other kinds of control or the lack of control, and approval motivates them to take autonomous action.)
 - *Intrinsic motivation* (highly autonomous, non-conflicted, based on interest in behaviour. Key words: interest, fun and enjoyment)
- (2) Capacity
 - *Resources* (time, money, study aids and competence)
 - *Pedagogy* (system of pedagogical beliefs, and teachers' own pedagogical agenda)
 - *Understanding of educational political environment* (how hierarchical teachers perceive the education system to be and their understanding of their place in it)
- (3) Freedom from control
 - *Control by the public sphere* (administrative and political control)
 - *Control by the private sphere* (parents and students)
 - *Organizational dynamic* (leadership style and work environment, including organizational control)
 - *Trust in creative practices* (school leadership encourages creativity and innovation)
 - *Teachers' attitudes towards creativity*
- (4) Responsibility of teachers
 - *Accountability and responsibility of teachers for student achievement* (the different levels of responsibility of teachers in stratified schools vs. comprehensive schools)
 - *Level of school autonomy and the consequences for teachers* (the additional duties for teachers concerning school curriculum development and their relations with school headmasters)