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Changes in Estonian general education from the collapse of the Soviet Union to EU entry

Authors:

Edgar Krull (Professor, Department of General Pedagogy, University of Tartu, Estonia)

Karmen Trasberg (Lecturer, Department of General Pedagogy, University of Tartu, Estonia)

Address: Department of Education, Ülikooli 18, Tartu 50090, Estonia

Tel.: + 3727 375 155

Fax : +3727 375 156

E-mail: edgar.krull@ut.ee

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Abstract

This article introduces and discusses the nature and development of Estonian system of general education in the period of last thirty years. The main focus is paid on the changes resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the period of integration leading up to EU entry. Also changes in other spheres of education and social life are briefly discussed. Special attention is paid to outlining and analysis of Estonian educational strategy, policies, and school and curriculum renewal since regaining the national independence in 1991. The study shows that learning the history of general education of a country, especially if it is a transfer society, is an inevitable condition for making informed educational decisions in present, and sound decisions today create, in their turn, a strong foundation for sustainable development of this country' s education in the future.

Keywords: historical research, social change, educational development, general education, school democratization

1. Introduction

Regardless of time and regime, good education has always been considered the reason for nation's vitality and survival. The development of the Estonian nation and the civil society never occurred in isolation, but in the context of the European culture. Estonia, with a current population of 1.4 million inhabitants, has in the past lived under several foreign rulers, however, the strongest influence on Estonians' mental and cultural psyche were German nobleman landowners who first settled in Estonia in the 13th century. Despite the incorporation of Estonia into the Russian empire the beginning of the 18th century, the strong dominance of the German nobility in public life lasted until the beginning of World War I and only started to weaken after the declaration of Estonian independence in 1918. During Estonia's short existence as an independent state (1918 – 1940) a well functioning and up-to-date national system of general education was established. In 1940, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union, its system of education was forcibly reorganized to make it compatible with the Soviet totalitarian and centralized principles of education. The restoration of an Estonian model of general education became a reality only with the nascent liberalization of Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the mid-nineteen eighties.

The main purpose of the following paper is to study and analyze the changes in the nature and condition of Estonian general education resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the period of integration leading up to EU entry. The underlying methodology of this study is historical research based on the analysis of publications and documents characterizing Estonian general education and its related issues from the Post-World War II period to EU entry in 2004. However, many commonly known facts and recent events are often introduced without references, as they are not yet documented or thoroughly analyzed by historians of education.

2. Estonian general education the waning days of totalitarianism

By the mid-nineteen eighties the Soviet principles of education were formally well ingrained. Estonian educators and teachers, understanding that the authorities did not tolerate any refusal teaching communist ideology, became used to including in their instructional subjects and educational addresses ideological slogans of which the overwhelming majority of them really did not believe. Nevertheless, the result was that the Estonian system of education was seriously harmed and distorted by the totalitarian regime and its institutions.

2.1. Ideological totalitarianism. The official Soviet curriculum, nicely summarized by Holms and Mclean, was “... designed to create a ‘New Soviet Man’ and to promote communism through the correct interpretation of worthwhile knowledge. The all-round upbringing of Soviet boys and girls should be informed by a communist ideology, high moral standards, spiritual enrichment and harmonious physical and mental development... History of the Communist Party and studies of works by Marx, Engels and Lenin and basic documents of the Party and the Soviet state were considered as the most valuable educational instruments (1989, p.108). Though Estonia, the other Baltic States, was entitled to a limited autonomy that allowed instruction in Estonian and that allowed some elements of Estonian culture to be included into the centralized subject syllabi, the Soviet authorities tolerated no concessions to the teaching of these ideological dogmas. So, Estonian general education, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, was supposed to be based on the following principles: (1) Soviet patriotism, (2) The communist attitude towards work (work as a matter of honor, fame and heroism); (3) Collectivism, (4) Socialist humanism, (5) Consciousness (the more that people understand the foundations of Marxism-Leninism, the more conscious they are), (6) Materialist world view; (7) Military training (Kera 1996, pp. 31-32).

2.2. Two parallel systems of general education. After being incorporated into the Soviet Union, a massive immigration flow into Estonia took place, with immigrants coming mainly from Russia. During the years 1945 – 1989 the number of non-ethnic Estonians increased by 4.5 times, and their share in the total population rose from 8.5 % up to 38.5 %. As there were significant differences in the native and immigrant populations’ mentalities and cultural backgrounds, two separate school systems appeared in Estonia. The curriculum of Estonian schools, though following the central ideology and directives of Soviet education, was adapted to some extent to the local conditions by the Estonian Ministry of Education, which was subordinated to the central Ministry of Education in Moscow. Many textbooks and other study aids were still written by Estonian authors, but every publication had to be “ideologically” correct and reviewed and approved by the central authorities. The schools teaching in Russian practically ignored the native culture and language of the country, and they operated on the basis of curricula designed for the Russian Federation and for Russian schools throughout the Soviet Union.

General education based on national languages was considered an exception in the Soviet Union. Therefore, schools teaching national languages and using them as working

languages were first supposed to meet the requirements of the centralized Russian language curriculum, and only then to apply additional requirements. Consequently, the duration of secondary education for schools teaching in national languages was longer by one year than for Russian schools. So, secondary education in a Russian school was 10 years and in Estonian schools 11 years. In the mid-nineteen-eighties, when change for starting schooling earlier was introduced, from the age of six, it now took 12 years to complete a secondary education in Estonian schools (with one year of pre-school introduced) and 11 years in Russian schools.

2.3. Educational policy. One of the most characteristic features of the Soviet system of education, including in higher education, was that it was state financed and free of tuition fees. Just before the beginning of *perestroika*, the Soviet authorities took many measures to increase the efficiency of the education system from the point of view of serving the vital needs of the Soviet state. Many of these measures shaped the character of the Estonian school system and influenced its later development. In 1981, the 26th Congress of the Communist Party declared the transfer to full general secondary education as completed (CPSU, 1981). This objective was almost achieved in Estonia, if students going to vocational schools providing general secondary education were included and making some concessions to the academic quality that this policy caused. Having a general secondary education was considered as the ultimate right and the most self-evident way of being educated.

Another regulation of the communist authorities that had a major impact on the Estonian system of general education was a directive issued by the plenary session of the Communist Party in April 1984. This regulation launched a campaign for strengthening the professional orientation schools of general education (CPSU, 1984). The main goal of this initiative was to increase, by emphasizing the role of labor education, the prestige of jobs calling for vocational education and to overcome a permanent shortage of skilled workers, and it was meant to decrease simultaneously the number of secondary school graduates entering the institutions of higher education.

2.4. Educational research. Soviet authorities considered educational research as an ideologically strategic field. The persons admitted to post-graduate studies were carefully checked for their loyalty to the regime. In 1959 an Institute of Educational Research was founded in Tallinn, and a public institute of educational research run by teachers appeared in the beginning of the 1960s.

During Khrushchev's period of liberalization, Estonian educators started to relearn the works produced by their colleagues in the first period of independence that had been prohibited during Stalin's rule. Also, some limited access to Western educational ideas and research became possible when the Central Pedagogical Library in Moscow started to collect foreign educational literature and periodicals. However, until the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991, researchers were only allowed to refer to these western educational ideas and research from the point of view of 'critical analysis'. The authorities rigorously checked all publications (official and unofficial) in order to prevent the dissemination of any ideas incompatible with or criticizing communist ideology. Despite these restrictions, the infiltration of Western educational ideas, especially from Finland, took place and had an enormous impact on the reorganization of the Estonian system of general education after the restoration of independence.

3. Development of Estonian general education and educational ideas since the collapse of Soviet totalitarianism

The last years of the 1980s marked a turning point in Estonian life. It was the time of national reawakening, when the so-called "singing revolution" culminated with the proclamation of the Republic of Estonia on August 20, 1991. The 'singing revolution' itself can be considered as a product of Estonian education due to the fact that music education (at home and at school) kept alive the Estonian tradition of singing and in turn helped strengthen the feelings of national identity.

Drawing on Brzezinski's (1994) three stages model (introduction of the basis of democracy, transfer from transformation to stabilization and consolidation of the democratic system) of the process of legal changes in Central and East European countries during their post-communist transformation and its adaptation to Estonian condition by Lauristin and Vihalemm (1997, pp. 82–83), three partly overlapping periods in the development of the Estonian system of general education can be identified. Stage 1 of the educational changes started in 1987 and ended with the passing of the Estonian Law on Education (Estonian Parliament, 1992). Stage 2 began with the launching of activities for designing a principally new school curriculum for general education in 1994, and it ended with the introduction of an updated version of this curriculum in 2002. Finally, stage 3 started in the same year, and was marked by a general dissatisfaction with this curriculum and many other educational decisions.

3.1. Period of radical changes and unhooking from the Soviet system of education

The everyday work and mentality of the majority of Estonian educators and teachers at the end of the Soviet period can be characterized as a silent and hidden reluctance towards compulsory ideological education and towards the centralization of curricula giving priority to teaching the Russian language and culture at the cost of diminishing the number of lessons for Estonian language, culture and history. This hidden dissatisfaction of Estonian educators was for the first time clearly exposed at the Estonian Teachers Conference held in April 1987. The conference called for the authorities in Moscow to decentralize compulsory curricula of general education by dividing their contents into central (60 – 70 %), national and local (30 – 40 %) components. The renewed curriculum was supposed to pave the way for replacing the subject-centered instruction, dominant during the whole Soviet period, by a more learner-centered instruction (Gretshkina, 1987). This initiative of Estonian educators and teachers was decisively rejected a year later at the Soviet Congress of Teachers in Moscow and criticized as incompatible with the Soviet ideology of unified education. The failure to create a common ground for the centralized curriculum in the Soviet Union and the strengthening movement for independence, leading to a declaration of the superiority of Estonian legislation over federal legislation on 16th October 1988, was a clear message for Estonian educators that the time had come to take measures for building up a national system of education. A period of heated debates and brainstorming followed concerning educational principles and foundations. These forums often ended without any tangible outputs or agreements. In 1989 the main principles for the reorganization of public education in Estonia were published. This document stated that the focus in learning was to be shifted away from cramming “ready-made” facts and regularities for acquiring intellectual skills for mental work towards the ability to put one’s theoretical knowledge into practice. The share of various intensive teaching methods, such as solving problematic situations, role-playing with video feedback, micro-teaching, etc, should be drastically increased (Kareda, et al., 1989, p.13). These progressive ideas were very much the basis for the transition period of the educational system of Estonia.

Along with studies for new educational solutions at the governmental level, many changes took place at the school level as well. However, these innovative changes were not always systematic or well founded. This was a period when the school leaders and teachers realized that the central control over the school system had collapsed and they, inspired by the general atmosphere of liberalization, enjoyed a freedom to make educational decisions themselves. Unfortunately, many schools were not prepared for making important educational or curricular decisions themselves, and thus could not formulate a clear vision of their mission.

The official curriculum of general education, still of Soviet origin, was ignored or rejected without replacing it with a new one. Many alternative educational ideas like emphasizing constructivism or Steiner's anthroposophy became popular, and some Waldorf schools were established. However, ignorance of the legal curriculum and a lack of competence to create new curricula at the school level caused anarchy and a fast decline of learning achievements, especially in mathematics and sciences (Krull, 2000). Simultaneously with these events in Estonian schools, the schools teaching in Russian tried to preserve the Soviet central curricula, and, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to introduce Russian curricula.

The reluctance of teachers and students of Russian schools to accept the political and social changes in Estonia reflected the general attitudes and actions of the Russian minority in Estonia that were aimed at preserving their privileges and special rights that the Soviet authorities had granted to the immigrants. The recent immigrants claimed to have unconditional rights to Estonian citizenship for all its members and without any obligations towards the Estonian State, and demanded Russian to be made a state language. This political confrontation between the native Estonian population and Russian-speaking minority lasted almost ten years and was attenuated only by the end of the 1990s when cooperation was fostered between the Estonian and Russian communities, at least at the level of political parties (see e.g. Laius, 2000; Krull, 2001).

Two major events mark the end of the radical transfer period in Estonia's system of general education. Trying to stop confusion caused by the lack of coordinating guidelines for selecting the content of instruction in general education, the Estonian Center for Educational Development, established in 1989, took the initiative and compiled a renewed curriculum for the nine-year basic school (Unt and Läänemets, 1992). A year later the curriculum for Estonian secondary schools (Unt and Läänemets, 1993) was published and applied. The curriculum for secondary schools consisted of a compulsory core curriculum and subject syllabi for the academic profile. Though there were many demands to adjust secondary education to pupils' needs by introducing branches of academic, technical and professional studies, these ideas were not applied, and the academic orientation of secondary schools, like in the Soviet period, remained dominant. The structure and content of school subjects of these new curricula represented the curricula used at the end of 1980s from which Soviet ideology and ideological slogans had been removed.

The other important events having major impact on the development of the Estonian system of general education were the enforcement of the Estonian Law on Education (Estonian Parliament, 1992) and the Law on Basic Schools and Gymnasiums (Estonian

Parliament, 1993). The first document established the general principles of organization, governance and financing, and the legal basis of the Estonian system of education. A major change in comparison with the end of the Soviet period was the shortening of compulsory schooling to nine years, or until the age 17. The second document established the principles of funding and running of schools for general education.

A third aspect characterizing the system of general education in this period was an increase in the number of schools. In 1981 there were 541 comprehensive schools providing general education, while ten years later this number had reached 666 (Statistical ..., 2004, p. 28). This increase was often due to the reopening of small rural schools closed by the Soviet educational authorities for economic reasons. Seen as a malevolent act of the Soviet authorities during the period of the political fight for independence, these local initiatives were supported by the Ministry of Education and the finances were found for reopening and running these rural schools. However, by the 2004-05 school year the number of schools had dropped to 606 mostly for the economic reasons.

Simultaneously with the reorganization of general education, many other changes, especially in the field of higher education, took place. The unified Soviet system of five-years diploma studies was replaced with four-year bachelor studies and two-year master studies. In the organization of studies a transfer took place from the Soviet centralized and rigid annual course system, with fixed lists of compulsory courses in programs, to subject course-centered learning and flexible preparation programs. Along with the liberalization of social life, many Estonian educators started to work on replacing the compulsory Soviet textbooks of pedagogy with western textbooks reflecting pedagogical knowledge and good practice in the democratic world (see e.g. Krull 1992). As a result of this work many textbooks on pedagogy and educational psychology were translated from different languages into Estonian.

In 1991 the Institute of Educational Research subordinated to the Soviet Academy of Educational Sciences was reorganized and merged with the academic structures of Tallinn Pedagogical University, and two years later the Estonian Center for Educational Development was closed in 1993 because the Estonian Ministry of Education found the quality of the compiled curricula of general education unsatisfactory (Läänemets 1995, p.89).

3.2. Curriculum renewal and educational policy in 1994 – 2004

Characteristic to this period of development in the Estonian system of general education are dynamic changes in many important spheres: outlining educational strategies,

democratization of the school, introduction of a radically new curriculum and its updating, efforts to integrate Russian schools into Estonian society, computerization of schools, and the reorganization of vocational and higher education. Two major factors of this period in shaping the ideology, aspirations, and even mentality of Estonian society, including the renewal of the educational system, were the prospects of joining NATO and becoming a member state of the European Union: the overwhelming majority of Estonians saw these perspectives as issues of strategic importance that would lead Estonia to integration with the Western cultural sphere and identification with its values in 2004.

Outlining Estonian educational strategy and policy. Until the mid-1990s the need for the identification of general educational goals was not very topical, as ideological and strategic issues in education were often seen in terms of black and white: as a transfer from the evil and totalitarian Soviet educational ideology and concepts to the omnipotent and universal Western educational ideology and values. The experience gained from the reorganization of the school system and from the development of curricula for general education led to the understanding that there was no single or generally accepted Western educational ideology or methodology, thus making evident the need for setting out the strategic goals of the Estonian system of education. The initiative for promoting an Estonian concept and strategy of education was undertaken by many groups of educators, academicians and politicians. However, only two of these groups acquired sufficient social and political weight that allowed them to submit their concepts to parliament. One of these groups was the Academic Council of the President of the Republic, which included leading scientists and cultural figures who were asked to formulate the strategic tasks facing the Republic of Estonia and to offer solutions divorced from party politics. The members of this council developed a report outlining the strategy and prospects of Estonian education called “Learning Estonia”, which was submitted to Parliament to be used as the basis for decision-making in the field of educational policy. The document analyses the current situation and highlights the idea that Estonia has a real chance and identified necessity to promote education as its main national resource, taking into consideration its modest natural resources, limited material infrastructure and educational trends in the world (Academic ..., 1998, p. 4). The other important movement was the Estonian Educational Forum founded in 1995 for involving different interest groups into the preparation of educational policymaking. From 1997 until 2001, the Educational Forum elaborated jointly with the Ministry of Education a concept of development and strategy for Estonian education (Estonian ..., 2001), which was submitted to parliament but was

withdrawn in 2002 as not sufficiently developed. The document outlined the main directions of development for the educational system at all levels, and pointed to changes needed in the instructional content and in environment management, and suggested renewed principles for educational management, leadership and financing. Despite the fact that these documents were not approved by Parliament, many of the educational visions and ideas reflected in these documents have played a relevant role in promoting Estonian educational decision-making and development.

Administration, financing and democratization of schools. In the Soviet period the administration and financing of schools was centralized. All the schools in Soviet Estonia were public schools maintained and directed by the state. Despite a weakening of the Soviet regime's grip by the end of the 1980s, the role of local communities and parents in educational decision-making regarding local school activities was rather marginal, and traditions of this kind of involvement were non-existent. The changes started mostly at the grass roots level: initiatives for establishing private schools of general education, attempts by local authorities to alleviate schools' financial conditions and the involvement of parents in their children's school activities. Many school principals and teachers visited their colleagues abroad and learned from their experiences. Also, literature on school administration and management was translated into Estonian. However, the number of private schools of general education remains modest and constitutes two per cent of the total number of schools of general education in Estonia (Statistical ..., 2004, p.75).

The present financing system of schools is based on payments from state, parish or town budgets, from foundations, donations and school income from extracurricular activities. The owner covers the expenditures of municipal schools. State support to parish and town budgets is fixed yearly and is based on the number of pupils living within a jurisdiction. It is aimed at covering expenditures on wages, social taxes and the in-service training of educators, and for buying textbooks (Estonian Parliament, 2004). There have been governmental initiatives for liberalizing the present financing system and for enhancing the quality of instruction by issuing pupils with personal education vouchers that they could apply to the schools they prefer to attend. The proposal was heavily criticized and rejected by the educational community as poorly prepared and immature (see e.g. Krull, 2004).

The introduction of school boards and the definition of their roles as permanently functioning bodies of representatives (consisting of school staff, local authorities, parents,

alumni and sponsor organizations) for observing school educational activities and creating better conditions to implement their missions was also an object of debate for years before a consensus was reached for legalizing them in the Law on Education (Estonian Parliament, 2004).

The transfer from the Soviet Union's rigorous school attendance regulations and totalitarian socialization principles of pupils to democratic principles of education along with the rapid social stratification of the people caused a high pupil dropout rate from schools and a boom in incidents of school violence. Both negative phenomena represent a real challenge for the Estonian system of general education.

Curriculum renewal. The renewed curricula for primary and secondary education were found by many leading Estonian educators as not radical enough in comparison with those used at the end of the Soviet period and not in line with the general trends in educational ideology and policy of the industrialized democratic countries. For the purpose of compiling a totally new curriculum for general education, a Laboratory of Curriculum Studies was established in 1993 at Tallinn Pedagogical University. The staff of this laboratory established cooperation with the Finnish School Agency in order to learn of Finland's experiences in the field of developing national curricula and managed to involve the majority of progressive Estonian educators into this work. As result of this work, a principally new concept of the Estonian National Curriculum for primary and secondary education was elaborated and affirmed by the Estonian government (Ministry of ..., 1996). This framework curriculum introduced many innovations for instructional design, like a methodology of integrating different school subjects, a conception of general competencies in terms of expected learning outcomes, social and communication skills and values, and guidelines for the design of school curricula. Along with the conception of the new curriculum, competitions for writing and compiling compatible textbooks were also launched. The new curriculum was introduced according to school levels (starting with grades one, four, seven, and nine) in 1997.

Shortly after its introduction, many weak points of the new curriculum emerged. For example, schools were often not appropriately prepared for implementing its requirements. The document was repeatedly criticized for a deep gap between its updated and innovative general part and its subject syllabi, which many experts found to be obsolete and not being in line with the ideas reflected in the general part (Finnish ..., 1999). The first Estonian framework curriculum for preschool education appeared only in 1999 (Ministry of ..., 1999).

Trying to guarantee continuity in curriculum design, the Ministry of Education declared an open competition for establishing a new curriculum development centre, which subsequently was founded at the University of Tartu in 2000. Unfortunately, the following years did not bring about the expected breakthrough in curriculum design. The newly founded Centre of Curriculum Development resumed work on the revised version of the 1996 curriculum elaborated by the Curriculum Studies Laboratory. The renewed curriculum (Ministry of ..., 2002) was introduced in 2002, but due to many shortcomings in its general part, it was heavily criticized. In the following years many attempts were made by the Curriculum Development Center to promote and intensify the work of producing a principally renewed framework curriculum for primary and secondary education, but little progress was made in creating a common and acceptable basis for its design. Almost simultaneously, a rival group of educators compiled and published an alternate version of the general part of the prospective curriculum (AVITA, 2004). Because efforts to merge these two rival groups were unsuccessful, the Ministry of Education and Research delegated in 2005 the responsibility for the renewal of the National Curriculum to the School Agency established at the Ministry of Education and Research.

Integration of schools teaching in Russian into Estonian society. The integration of Russian-language schools into Estonian society was and is one of the major tasks of the Estonian integration policy aimed at removing the negative consequences of the demographic and cultural policies of the Soviet era. Consequently, significant changes took place in Russian-language schools since the passing of the Law on Education in 1992. Estonian programs/syllabi were being applied, more than half of the textbooks in use were published in Estonia, the gymnasium level has been extended from two years to three, and the teaching of Estonian had been implemented in all schools by the year 2000 (Government of..., 2000). The transition to the National curriculum of grades 1, 4, 7 and 10 in Russian-language schools was begun from the autumn of 1998. The increased effectiveness in the teaching of Estonian permits a transition in the gymnasium grades to the teaching of most subjects in the Estonian language. The transfer to teaching of at least 60 % of the subjects in Estonian is planned for 2007. In order to improve the quality of teaching Estonian in Russian schools, the status of teacher of the state language was introduced. To this end, qualified educators who are prepared to expand their activities in Russian-language schools shall be employed as counselors and guides for other teachers and school directors, and they will organize supplementary training within their competencies.

Comprehensive computerization of general education. In 1996 the Estonian government, giving high priority to the development of general computer literacy, initiated the “Tiger Leap Project” with the goal of integrating ICT into the educational system. This program aimed at achieving nine strategic objectives. These objectives included providing the growing generation with ICT literacy, educating them as citizens of the global information village by connecting the Estonian education system with international databases, creating a modern schooling environment with corresponding study aids, building up an infrastructure for distance and continuing education and using this structure as an agent of regional policy for providing equal educational opportunities, optimizing educational expenditures by using ICT in the education administration, and preserving and protecting education in the maternal tongue of the information society (Tiigrihüppe ..., 1996). The Open Estonia Foundation extensively supported the program financially. In 2001 the “Tiger Leap +1 Project” (Tiigrihüppe ..., 2001) was launched with the goal of promoting the application of ICT for creating conditions supporting the formation of a learning society at Estonian schools. By the 2003/2004 academic year, all schools of general education had Internet access (98 % had permanent connections and 2 % had dial-up connections) and the ICT literacy of pupils and teachers became universal at Estonian schools of general education. In 2004 the Estonian schools had on average 1 PC per 20 pupils and 1 PC per 6-8 teachers (Toots, Plakk and Idnurm, 2004).

The boom of higher education institutions. Reorganization of higher education. Teacher education. By the end of the Soviet period there were six universities in Estonia. In 2003 there were already 14 universities, of which eight were private institutions (Eurydice ..., 2003). Many institutions providing vocational secondary education at the end of the 1980s eventually became institutions of applied higher education in the following years, and their number increased. There were seven state and 14 private institutions of applied higher education by 2003. Several education leaders have already expressed their concerns about the unreasonably large number of universities and other institutions of higher education for this small country.

In 2002 Estonia joined the Bologna Declaration (The European ..., 1999) aimed at creating a convergent European higher education space offering new opportunities for student mobility. This means that the Estonian system of higher education adopted in the early 1990s has been replaced with a new system of three-year bachelor studies and two-year master studies (Government of ..., 2002).

The reorganization of the rigorous and prescriptive Soviet system of schoolteacher training has been rather painful in terms of finding consensus on the content of theoretical and practical studies and on the organization of these studies. The first framework guidelines of teacher education for Estonian institutions of higher education were introduced only in 1995 (Ministry of ..., 1995), and its updated version was introduced five years later (Ministry of ..., 2000). The new framework guidelines for teacher education foresaw the introduction of an induction year for novice teachers who are licensed only on the condition of the successful completion of this year.

4. Conclusion

As noted by Fraenkel and Wallen, a main purpose of historical studies is making "...people aware of what happened in the past so they may learn from past failures and successes" (2003, p 548). Probably the biggest mistake to be committed in the transition from a long governing totalitarianism to democracy is a blind denial of the past. Whether we want to recognize it or not, the Estonian educators' understanding of principles, content and organization of general education was, and still is, influenced by a Soviet legacy. Therefore, it is critical to identify this inheritance the best way we can. Our historical study shows that almost fifty years of Soviet rule and its accompanying ideological totalitarianism caused serious biases in Estonian educational policy and research, forced existence of two parallel systems of general education, and brainwashed teachers and other educators.

With the restoration of state independence, the Estonian educators faced a serious task consisting of getting rid of the totalitarian way of educational thinking and the established institutions on the one hand, and in building up a new democratic system of education on the other hand. There was an inevitable transfer period when many educational institutions originating from the Soviet system (like curriculum of general education, school legislation etc.) were formally still in force and, at the same time, the western educational ideas poured in. Not being used to the pluralism of ideas, many educators often accepted them uncritically. This caused a temporary confusion and anarchy at schools in terms of educational legislation, curricular regulations and work discipline, and a decline in learning achievements of students (mostly in sciences) followed. Also, a boom of founding private institutes of higher education marked this period.

Outlining of Estonian educational strategy and policy, developing of national educational legislation, carrying out multiple curriculum renewals, integration of school teaching in Russian into Estonian society, reorganizing and up-dating of teacher education,

giving high priority to the development of general computer literacy since the middle of 1990s, and repetitive attempts of outlining national strategy of educational research characterize the still lasting consolidation period in the Estonian system of general education. These tasks are doubly difficult, as the goal is to build up a new system of education, along with ingraining principles of democracy in the Estonian society, and simultaneously keep pace with changes in educational thinking and practice of the advanced democratic countries that have enjoyed stability in their development for decades.

One of the major problems in the current Estonian educational decision-making environment is to find a balance between participation and representative democracy. It is not infrequent when educational decision-making is based on the expression of personal opinions of administrators and otherwise socially active persons belonging to the councils rather than on the research-based knowledge of experts. These uncritical or sometimes ignorant initiatives frequently cause never-ending debates and end too often with the failure of the approved innovations due to their unsuitability for the Estonian conditions. Finding a balance between everyone's political right for participation in decision-making and the competence needed for this decision-making is one of the most difficult and time consuming aspects in the democratization and further development of the Estonian system of education. However, as we all know, democratic governance of social processes has always been a very difficult task, and the decision-making in education is not an exception in this sense. Yet, a better awareness and analysis of confronted difficulties in the past is often helpful for projecting the future.

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