



**HÁSKÓLI  
ÍSLANDS**

**Challenges and opportunities for Lithuanian  
teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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# **Challenges and opportunities for Lithuanian teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

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## Preface

This 30 ECTS thesis is the final project towards a master's degree in the International Studies in Education program at the University of Iceland. I greatly enjoyed working on this research since it reflects some of my main academic interests—the teaching profession and educational changes.

I would like to express my gratitude to Anna Kristín Sigurðardóttir, my advisor, for her feedback and to Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, my supervisor, for his guidance, help and expertise. His professionalism and devotion to his work made the process of this research easier. I also want to thank all the interviewed teachers who kindly agreed to participate in this research and shared their experiences and opinions. It was a great and interesting experience to hear their thoughts and perspectives.

I would like to thank my family for their support and help when contacting the interviewees, and especially to Tjörvi for his encouragement, advice, endless support, and patience.

This thesis was written solely by me, the undersigned. I have read and understand the University of Iceland Code of Ethics ([https://english.hi.is/university/code\\_of\\_ethics](https://english.hi.is/university/code_of_ethics)) and have followed them to the best of my knowledge. I have correctly cited to all other works or previous work of my own, including, but not limited to, written works, figures, data or tables. I thank all who have worked with me and take full responsibility for any mistakes contained in this work. Signed:

Reykjavík, May 23, 2022

*Karolína Kuncevičiute*

## Abstract

After Lithuania gained independence in 1990, significant reforms and educational transformations have taken place. The aim of the reforms has been to create an advanced educational system that would allow Lithuania to catch up with the more developed Western countries. However, despite significant efforts to reform Lithuanian education, the Lithuanian teaching profession is confronted with challenges and difficulties and is subject to severe criticism (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013). The teaching community, which is strongly feminized in Lithuania, is aging, and that has already resulted in teacher shortages in some schools (Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013; Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021). Therefore, this interview study aims to analyze how the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania have affected the teaching profession and teachers' professionalism, and what are the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight qualified primary school women teachers who had 25–45 years of professional teaching experience in Lithuania. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2013) was used to analyze the collected data. To answer the research questions of this study, a critique of the neoliberal paradigm by Harvey (2007) was used, as well as the feminist approach by Connell (1995). The findings reveal intensification of the teachers' job and other complexities that relate to respect and attractiveness of the teaching profession. In addition, the findings suggest that primary school teaching tended to be perceived as women's job, due to existing social norms and gendered stereotypes, that sustain a gender-based occupational segregation.

# Ágrip

Áskoranir og tækifæri kennarastéttarinnar í Litháen á 21. öld

Eftir að Litháen öðlaðist sjálfstæði frá Sovétríkjunum árið 1990 hefur umtalsverðum umbótum á menntakerfi landsins verið hrint í framkvæmd. Umbótunum er ætlað að skapa nútímalegt og háþróað menntakerfi að hætti Vesturlanda. En þrátt fyrir þessar umbætur stendur litháíska kennarastéttin nú á dögum frammi fyrir miklum áskorunum og hefur einnig sætt harðri gagnrýni (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013). Kennarasamfélagið í Litháen sem samanstendur nánast alfarið af konum er að eldast og það hefur þegar leitt til manneklu í sumum skólum. Þess vegna miðar þessi rannsókn að því að skoða hvernig umbæturnar á menntakerfinu í Litháen eftir fall Sovétríkjanna hafa haft áhrif á kennarastéttina og starf kennara. Ætlunin er að skoða kynbundin áhrif og hvernig fagmennska kennara hefur átt undir höggi að sækja. Gögnunum sem liggja til grundvallar þessarar rannsóknar var aflað með hálfstöðluðum viðtölum við átta kvenkyns litháíska kennara sem hafa 25–45 ára starfsreynslu. Þemagreining í stíl við hvernig Braun og Clarke (2013) lýsa henni var síðan notuð til þess að greina gögnin. Til að svara rannsóknarspurningu ritgerðarinnar er stuðst við gagnrýna nálgun á nýfrjálshyggju samkvæmt Harvey (2007), ásamt femínískri nálgun í anda Connell (1995). Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til aukins vinnuálags kennara ásamt öðrum margvíslegum vandamálum, sem tengjast orðstír kennarastéttarinnar og minnkandi aðsókn í kennaranám. Einnig að sú tilhneiging virðist vera sterk að líta á grunnskólakennslu sem kvennastarf, vegna ríkjandi kynbundinna staðalímynda sem viðhalda kynjahalla á vinnustaðnum.

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# 1 Introduction

Everyone has had a teacher. Some people have good memories of their educators who were good role models: inspiring, motivating, kind and strongly devoted to their profession and to their students. However, others might have different and not so positive opinions. Even though feelings about teachers and their profession might be diverse and conflicting, everyone could probably agree that teachers have always played an important role in society. Some might believe that teachers' work is an art or a calling; others might think that it is a professional occupation. Teaching is a demanding, multidimensional and dynamic work that requires a variety of skills, qualifications, knowledge, abilities, and passion for nurturing our children who will build the future in the ever-changing 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, nowadays the teaching profession around the world is encountering various challenges, as well as new opportunities (Ball, 2003; Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Connell, 2013; Esteve, 2000; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Jóhannesson, 2006).

My home country of Lithuania is no exception. During my schooling I met many good and passionate teachers whom I am always happy to meet still to this day. From my personal experience, while communicating with the teachers, I have noticed that a majority of the teachers I know are highly qualified and strongly devoted professionals. However, some of them have begun to question their jobs and to think about leaving the teaching profession, due to low salaries, high demands and stress levels, as well as an increasing workload (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Bulotaite & Lepeskiene, 2006; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013; Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021). In addition, in Lithuania there is an ongoing public debate about the teaching profession facing various challenges and teachers being unfairly treated (Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021; Zelvys, 2009).

After Lithuania gained independence in 1990, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, educational transformations and reforms took place in order to create an advanced educational system that would allow Lithuania to catch up with the more developed Western countries. However, despite significant efforts to reform Lithuanian education, today the Lithuanian teaching profession is confronted with many difficulties and is subject to severe criticism (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013). Teaching, which is a strongly feminized occupation, is no longer seen as an attractive and a worthy career path, while many graduates of teaching and education programs do not even pursue an actual teaching career (Zelvys, 2004). As a result of the lack of new recruits, the Lithuanian education community is ageing, and this is likely to lead to sudden teacher

shortages in the near future (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013; Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021).

## **1.1 Purpose and significance of study**

I was interested to delve deeper into the topic of the challenges and difficulties that are being faced by the Lithuanian teaching profession since the country gained independence, by looking at it from the perspective of primary school teachers. The focus of this study was therefore to look at the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania. Then, the problems that the Lithuanian primary teachers have been facing were identified. Finally, the problems were analyzed, as well as their connection to the reforms, by looking at how the recent educational transformations have impacted the Lithuanian teaching profession. Therefore, the research questions of this study were the following:

*How have the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania affected the teaching profession and teachers' professionalism? What are the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania?*

To answer these research questions, two theoretical approaches were used. The first is a critique of neoliberalism, borrowing from the wealth of literature on the subject, as well as the literature on neoliberalism in education (Chomsky, 1999; Connell, 2009; 2013; 2015; Connell et al., 2009; Graeber, 2018; Klein, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Nussbaum, 2010). A part of this approach is that which analyzes the so-called deprofessionalization of education (Ball, 2003; 2016; Connell, 2013; 2015; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The second approach is the feminist perspective (or feminist critique), borrowing from the wealth of literature in feminist and gender studies (Connell, 1995; 2000; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Drudy, 2008; Howe, 1977; Wallerstein, 1995).

Face-to face interviews with Lithuanian primary school teachers, who had 25–45 years of professional teaching experience, were conducted to collect the data. Various secondary sources, such as scholarly papers and educational documents, were also used to look at the educational reforms. I believe that this research is significant because there has been a lack of studies that look at the challenges that Lithuanian teachers have faced in relation to post-Soviet educational reforms. Also, certain aspects of the Lithuanian teaching profession, such as feminization or social standing of the teaching profession, tended to be under-researched.

## **1.2 Overview of thesis**

This paper consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research topic and research questions. The second chapter provides the comprehensive background knowledge to the

research topic by describing the Lithuanian education system, Lithuanian educational reforms and challenges, the Lithuanian teaching profession, the concept of neoliberalism, as well as the implications for the feminization of the teaching profession in Lithuania. The third chapter explains the methodology of this study, the methods applied for data selection and analysis, ethical issues, as well as limitations and strength. The fourth chapter is devoted to reporting the findings of this research. In the fifth chapter, called *Discussion*, the findings are analyzed in relation to the theoretical background. In the sixth and final chapter, an overview of the study as well as some recommendations are provided.

## 2 Background

This chapter is divided into the following subsections. The first section, chapter 2.1, provides a general introduction to the educational system of Lithuania. The second section, chapter 2.2, covers the reforms and transformations that have taken place in the Lithuanian education system since 1988. The third section, chapter 2.3, provides some information about the teaching profession in Lithuania. The fourth section, chapter 2.4, covers today's challenges that are being faced by the Lithuanian teaching profession, as depicted in the academic literature and other sources. The fifth section, chapter 2.5, presents an analysis of neoliberalism, where the concept is defined (based on the definition by Harvey, 2007) and it is argued that the reforms and transformations of the Lithuanian educational system, that have taken place in the last few decades, have been characterized by neoliberalism. The last section, chapter 2.6, discusses the gender side of the issue, where the topic is approached from the feminist perspective by employing Connell's (1995, see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) theory of hegemonic masculinities.

### 2.1 The educational system of Lithuania

The Republic of Lithuania is one of the three Baltic states that lie on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. It has a population of 2.7 million inhabitants (Eurostat, 2021). The country covers an area of 65,300 km<sup>2</sup> and shares borders with Latvia, Belarus, Poland and Russia (the Kaliningrad Region). The official language is Lithuanian. The country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. In 2004, Lithuania became a member of the EU and NATO.

The educational system in Lithuania is divided into different levels, with pre-tertiary education organized into the following five stages: pre-school, pre-primary (between age 5 and 7, lasting 1 year); primary (between age 7 and 11, lasting 4 years); basic, or so-called lower secondary (between age 11 and 16, lasting 6 years,); and upper secondary education (between age 16 and 19, lasting 2 years), which ends with *matura* examinations that lead to higher education (either university or non-university, i.e., college). Pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schooling (from approximately 5 or 6 years old, up until 16 years old) is compulsory in Lithuania.

The country has a broad educational system, with many institutions and educators, that provide education to many students all over the country. There are a total of 1,076 schools in Lithuania (Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019), and 42,616 teachers were working in the Lithuanian educational institutions in the academic year of 2018–19 (Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019).

## 2.2 Educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania since 1988

After the country gained independence in 1990, significant reforms and educational transformations have taken place. According to Zelvys (2009), these educational reforms can be divided into different stages (or periods). They were the so-called preparatory stage during Soviet times (1988–1990), then the first stage of educational reforms (1990–1997), followed by the second stage (1998–2002) and finally the third stage (2003–2012). For the purpose of this study, the third stage can be said to last until today, including the most recent educational developments.

The very first preparatory steps to reform education in the country of Lithuania were taken in 1988, while it was still part of the Soviet Union, in the atmosphere of the *Perestroika* reforms of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. During this time, some independent actions became possible, and the Reform Movement of Lithuania (known as *Sajūdis*) was formed. As stated before, the preparatory stage of educational reform started in 1988, with Lithuanian education theorists presenting *The Concept of the National School* at the Teachers' Congress of the Soviet Union in Moscow, since it was perceived that opportunities for achieving some independence had emerged (Juozaitis, 1996; Zelvys, 2009). This ambitious action and attempt at decentralization, built the foundation for further educational changes following the independence of Lithuania. In 1989, all the teaching programs had already been altered and revised (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992).

Then, the largest and most significant changes and transformations began to take place after March 11, 1990, when the country declared its independence. The period from 1990 to 1997 is the first stage of educational reform (Zelvys, 2009). This stage is distinctive due to the general atmosphere of positivity, enthusiasm, and belief in bright educational future, because of the liberation from the Soviet regime. This was despite the difficult economic times, when a serious lack of resources was felt, and the country was encountering many challenges while trying to achieve financial stability (McGuinness, 2001; Zelvys, 2009). During these years, most of the effort was put into the revision of educational content and the eradication of Soviet ideology (Zelvys, 2009). The four main principles of Lithuanian education were stated in *The General Concept of Education in Lithuania* (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992). These were humanism, democracy, commitment to Lithuanian culture and renewal in the sense of being open to changes. Due to the historical past and recently acquired independence, it is not surprising that a strong emphasis was placed on national values, unity, and the fostering of Lithuanian culture and language. However, new connections with Western educators and partners were also established. It is important to note that *The General Concept of Education in Lithuania* (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992) established the new goals and attitude towards education. Human and

culture were seen as the foundation of new education system. Particular importance was placed on personality development and socio-cultural orientation of education (Zelvys et al., 2018).

At this time, various regulations and documents which formed the juridical foundation and legal framework for later educational reforms were prepared (McGuinness, 2001). The Ministry of Education of the former Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic was reorganized into the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture and Education. In 1991, the Lithuanian law on education was approved. Some new universal teaching programs, such as religious, civic, ethnic culture education, and health education were created (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992). New textbooks were released, and the old ones edited. The first private schools were also opened in 1991. New centers and organizations were created, such as the Psychological Service Center for Schools and the Children with Special Needs Diagnostic Centers (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992).

The year 1991 also marked the beginning of the reorganization of higher education. In addition, significant changes happened in the education and teaching programs that prepare teachers. The regulations for teachers' attestation were prepared and the Commission of Teachers' Attestation was formed (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992). Teachers' attestation is a process when teachers can voluntarily obtain a higher teacher qualification category. Starting from the initial and the lowest *teacher* qualification category, teachers can gradually achieve higher categories: senior teacher, teacher-methodologist, teacher-expert (Eurydice, 2021). During the attestation process, teachers' achievements and level of professionalism are being evaluated by the commission of attestation.

During these years, Lithuanian educators and reformers started to look more to international educational tendencies and practices. For instance, in 1994, Lithuania was among the 92 countries that signed the UNESCO *Salamanca statement* that represented the international consensus about the need for inclusive education, as well as stating its main principles and needed policy changes (Adomaitiene, n.d.; UNESCO, 1994). Lithuanian teachers also began to gain more professional knowledge from foreign educators who were sharing their professional experience. One of the first organizations that provided financial and professional support for teachers was the American Professional Partnership for Lithuanian Education, known as APPLE (Zelvys, 2009). Many teachers attended APPLE summer courses and seminars and received funding for their educational projects. As a result, Lithuania implemented the well-known American pre-school education program *Head Start*.

In 1995–1996, OECD experts carried out the very first systemic evaluation of Lithuanian education (Bruzgeleviciene, 2002; Zelvys, 2009). The results of the evaluation had an impact for later educational developments (Bruzgeleviciene, 2002). Various education evaluation

centers were opened, such as the National Examination Center, that was responsible for evaluating students' learning outcomes, and the Study Quality Evaluation Center, as well as expert committees. In 2000, a broad educational institution evaluation system was developed and led to the beginning of external and internal auditing (Bruzgeleviciene, 2002).

After the enthusiastic first stage of educational reform, came the second stage, which lasted from 1998 to 2002. During this period, the focus shifted to the financing of education and solving the problems that appeared after the busy and transformational years of previous educational changes that had followed independence (Zelvys, 2009). It was understood that some of the steps that had been taken right after gaining the independence, were not well-thought-out, and were not leading to the expected outcomes. It is important to note that in 2002, the working group of intellectuals and educators formed by President Valdas Adamkus of the Republic of Lithuania, expressed certain critique towards the educational reform in *Švietimo Gairės* (Adamkus et al., 2002) while drafting the new education development strategy. They claimed that the reform was a bit chaotic, not coordinated well enough and poorly correlated with the changing needs of society (Adamkus et al., 2002). Also, the reform came from the top (top-down model) and that is the reason for why sometimes it was not well accepted and supported by the teaching community and wider society (Adamkus et al., 2002). The different education sectors were unevenly affected by the reform. The reform also struggled to adjust to the growing needs of a market economy (Adamkus et al., 2002).

However, at this stage, a few important additional steps were introduced, such as the system of *matura* examinations; the so-called pupils' basket principle; and the optimization of school networks (Zelvys, 2009). The influence of globalization became more widespread and preparation for joining the EU and NATO began. That is why Zelvys (2009) calls this stage the period when "the rules of the global game" were accepted (p. 25). In 1999, Lithuania signed the Bologna Declaration that aimed to create a European Higher Education Area. The main goal of this declaration was to help to improve the mobility of students as well as teachers, increase the flexibility of higher education and prepare highly qualified specialists for the European labor market (Svietimo, mokslo ir sporto ministerija, 2018). Consequently, Lithuania started to merge its educational system into the wider supra-national European educational system. Since then, the country has had to adopt regulations from the EU and conform its regulatory environment on education with EU regulations.

More questions were raised about how to finance education, as part of the educational reforms. Financial concerns became especially prominent after 1998 during the so-called Russian crisis that led to significant economic decline, which slowed down the transformations in education (McGuinness, 2001; Zelvys, 2009). In 2002, the World Bank stepped in. It is important to mention the role of the World Bank in developing the Lithuanian educational



system. In 2002, Lithuania received a loan of 100 million litas (LTL) from the World Bank and launched the School Improvement Project (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania, 2004; Zelvys, 2009). The project aimed to improve the quality of education with the emphasis on school network reorganization and renovation of schools “by reducing spending but increasing efficiency” (The World Bank Europe and Central Asia Region Human Development Sector, 2000). According to Zelvys (2009), leaders of the educational reform movement in Lithuania had to follow the recommendations from the World Bank experts, who strongly encouraged austerity strategies, i.e., the reduction of spending and increasing of “efficiency” (The World Bank Europe and Central Asia Region Human Development Sector, 2000). The World Bank recommended to lower the number of teachers, increase the teaching load and the number of pupils in the class, as well as to begin the “optimization” of the school network.

Even though at first Lithuanian educators were skeptical about the proposed changes, later those recommendations were accepted and put into practice (Sliavaite, 2018; Zelvys, 2009). In 2004, the Lithuanian Ministry of Science and Education released the *Methodological Recommendations for Reorganization of School Network* (Svietimo ir mokslo ministerija, 2004) with the goal to use the resources more effectively and to improve the quality and accessibility of education. As Sliavaite (2018) claims, higher effectiveness and higher amount of capital (funding) was seen as directly related to the higher quality of education, while “economic factors were considered as the most important in improving the quality of education” (p. 46). The recommendations of the World Bank to optimize the Lithuanian school network, that resulted in many closures of rural, minority and smaller schools in the countryside, received severe criticisms from wider members of society (Sliavaite, 2018; Zelvys, 2009). Local communities were concerned that with the school closures people would lose the only centers of culture in areas that need them. These cultural centers also helped to nurture community bonds (Zelvys, 2009). In addition, some school staff lost their jobs, and minorities such as Poles and Russians faced a significant reduction of Polish and Russian educational institutions (Sliavaite, 2018). It is important to note that according to Sliavaite (2018), this program of reorganizing the Lithuanian school network, complies with neoliberal education models that are common in many countries. That is because of the emphasis on higher efficiency and more effective use of resources that are thought to lead to higher quality education for everyone. However, equal opportunities and accessibility, as well as integration and community values, have become secondary concerns, which indicates the lack of social justice in the neoliberal reforms, and moving away from the real goals of education that are based on core values (Sliavaite, 2018).

The third stage of Lithuanian educational reform began in 2003 and includes the latest transformations. During this period, Lithuania entered the EU accession process. As part of its accession to the EU, Lithuania had to adopt the EU regulations on education. The National Education Strategy 2003–2012 was developed in compliance with the EU regulations on education, as well as the Lisbon Strategy (Zelvys, 2009). The main goal of Lisbon Strategy, also known as the Lisbon Agenda, was “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (The European Council, 2000, n.p.). The National Education Strategy 2003–2012 provided a framework for further development of Lithuanian education (Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003). Its main goals were the following: to develop an accessible “efficient and consistent education system” that would “guarantee life-long learning and social justice” and would ensure high quality education “which is in line with the needs of an individual living in an open civil society under market economy conditions” (Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003, p. 5). Strong emphasis was placed on a new education management system and decentralization, as well as a reform of funding. In addition, the strategy claimed that participation of the local community in education should be strengthened, teachers’ salaries should be increased, and there should be a “strengthening [of] the link between education and actual life” (Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003, p. 9). It was also stressed that educational institutions should offer qualifications that match the demands of labor market.

During this period, Lithuania also took part in international large scale students’ assessment programs such as PISA, TIMSS, IEA PIRLS and ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study). In 2006, for the very first time, Lithuania took part in the international PISA survey (the Program for International Student Assessment) that measures the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in science, mathematics, and reading/literacy (Nacionalinis egzaminu centras, n.d.). Since then, the country’s educational achievement has been measured every three years (2009, 2012, 2015, 2018) in PISA surveys. In all the three fields Lithuania showed lower than OECD average performance (Zelvys et al., 2020; Zelvys, 2014). For instance, according to the PISA 2012 results, only a small number of Lithuanian students managed to achieve the highest international performance levels (Zelvys, et al., 2020). Unsatisfactory Lithuanian performance scores in PISA led to serious debate about the quality of Lithuanian education. It also had an impact for the further development of educational goals and strategies. New educational aims and benchmarks were set in order to show better results in international assessments, with the tendency, as Zelvys et al. (2020) claim, to concentrate mostly on benchmarks rather than achievement of actual goals and improvements. The same tendency can be seen in the National Education Strategy 2013–2022

(Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013) where the goals of education are also indicated in exact educational targets that should be achieved in international assessments. Unfortunately, significantly higher achievement levels in PISA results, since the country's debut in 2006, have not been indicated, and the performance tended to stay below the average of OECD countries (OECD, 2019).

The National Education Strategy 2013–2022 (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013), set four directions of educational priorities: teachers' professionalism, quality culture of education, inclusion, and life-long learning (Zelvys, et al., 2020). Significant attention was paid to the challenges of the teaching profession. A highly qualified professional teaching community, which is creative, motivated and competent, was seen as a key to successful education. The need to encourage young and talented people to enter the teaching profession, to develop high quality education and teaching programs, to motivate teachers to achieve higher teaching qualifications, as well as to increase society's trust in the education system and educators, were indicated (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013). The lack of male teachers was also addressed, and the need for male role models in the education system was emphasized, as 87.5% of teachers were women (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013). According to Zelvys et al., (2020), the National Education Strategy complies with all the international tendencies in education. But scholars have some critique for the National Education Strategy 2013–2022, as well as for other educational documents and strategies, such as Lithuania 2030 (*Lietuva 2030*), as lacking clearer vision (Zelvys et al., 2020). As a result, putting the educational strategies into practice and achieving the set objectives, tended to be problematic, partly due to the short government terms (4 years), that led to prioritization of short-term and easily achievable goals, rather than those that require longer time to implement. That is why the quite poor achievement of the previously set objectives was noticed (Zelvys, et al., 2020).

The newest National Education Strategy is a part of the National Plan for Progress (NPP) 2021–2030 (Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020), a document that consists of ten strategic goals (Eurydice, 2021). The third NPP goal (NPP 3), which is to “increase the inclusion and effectiveness of education to meet the needs of the individual and society”, is dedicated to the education sector (OECD, 2021; Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020). In addition, the document identifies the following as problems that the Lithuanian education system is currently facing: the need for faster digitalization and better knowledge in IT (which has been revealed due to the Covid-19 pandemic); unsatisfactory performance and lack of progress in the PISA and TIMSS surveys; mismatch between acquired skills and the needs of the labor market, which leads to the lack of a qualified workforce in some sectors; this is also enforced by the so-called brain-drain which is due to the high rates of emigration (Eurydice, 2021; Office of the Government of the Republic

of Lithuania, 2020). The main goals of this ten-year progress plan are to improve the quality of education, optimize the school network, achieve higher inclusiveness of education, reduce the gaps between different groups of students, ensure life-long learning opportunities and to “improve the match between the competences acquired in education institutions and in the labor market” (Eurydice, 2021, n.p.). The document also addresses “strengthening the attractiveness of the teaching profession”, by drawing particular attention to the problem of the ageing teaching community (Eurydice, 2021, n.p.). The strong need to attract young and motivated people to the teaching profession is thus identified. In addition, the aim to create a new and effective system of teacher training and competence development is raised (Eurydice, 2021; Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020).

All in all, the Lithuanian education reforms and transformations that have taken place since the country gained independence can be divided in three main stages (Zelvys, 2009). The beginning of transformations was marked by positivity and enthusiasm to create a new and democratic education model based on Western practices and values that were quite contrary to those imposed by Soviet ideology. The core principles of educational reforms were stated in *The General Concept of Education in Lithuania* (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir švietimo ministerija, 1992). The socio-cultural orientation of education was emphasized. Later, during the other stages of educational transformations, the Lithuanian education system started to turn more and more towards the economic paradigm (Zelvys, 2020). It can be explained by the growing globalization, influence of foreign funds and education policies, after joining the EU. The top-down educational reforms tended to shift more towards the importance of economic factors, effectiveness, accountability, various benchmarks and performances in international assessments. During the independence years, Lithuania has strongly developed its education sector. Today, the country has established a modern democratic education system with a wide school net that provides high quality education. Education became more accessible to the learners as well as more flexible to the current needs of ever-changing life in the 21st century. Even though the Lithuanian education system still encounters many challenges, they tend to go hand-in-hand with opportunities.

### **2.3 The Lithuanian teaching profession**

Before Lithuania gained independence, teacher’s education was obtained in teachers’ seminaries that later were called pedagogical schools and pedagogical institutes. Pedagogical schools mostly prepared pre-primary and primary (1–4 grade) schoolteachers as well as music teachers (Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija, n.d.). To enroll in pedagogical schools, students had to have completed the so-called eight-year schools (8 grades) or secondary schools (11 grades) (Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija, n.d.). Students had to pass entrance exams. Education in

these pedagogical schools lasted 2–3 years for those who enrolled after completing secondary education, and 3–4 years for those who enrolled after graduating from eight-year schools (Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija, n.d.). For example, in 1985, there were four pedagogical schools in Soviet Lithuania, while before 1985 the number of such schools was higher (Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija, n.d.). In 1991, these pedagogical schools were reorganized into colleges. Pedagogical institutes, that were in Vilnius and Šiauliai, provided higher education for teachers. Studies in these institutes lasted 4–5 years (Šiaulių akademija, n.d.). After the country gained independence in 1990, pedagogical institutes were reorganized into universities: Šiauliai University and the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences.

After Lithuania gained independence, teacher's qualification can be obtained in universities and colleges. Universities provide a higher education bachelor's degree with teacher's professional qualification as well as master's and doctoral degrees. Colleges provide non-university professional bachelor's degrees with teacher's professional qualification (Eurydice, 2019). There are 16 higher educational institutions which provide more than 100 education programs and teacher education study programs (Lietuvos Respublikos Sveikimo ir Mokslo Ministras, 2017). However, in 2018, according to the new regulations, three Teacher Training Centers (Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University and Šiauliai University) were created and entitled to be responsible for teacher education. Teacher education programs are being provided by these centers, as well as by other higher educational institutions, that have treaties with any of these centers (Eurydice, 2019). The teacher's qualification and permission to teach can be granted not only to the graduates of education and teacher education programs, but also to the holders of a bachelor's degree who have additionally completed 60 ECTS credits in pedagogy.

In order to enter the teacher education programs, students' learning achievements (evaluated by a competition score based on the results of *matura* exams) and motivation are assessed (Eurydice, 2019). Students have to pass a motivational test which consists of two parts: a written questionnaire and a semi-structured interview conducted by a special evaluation commission (Eurydice, 2019). The general and special competencies needed for teachers are indicated in the Regulations on Teacher Training (Lietuvos Respublikos Sveikimo, Mokslo ir Sporto Ministras, 2010). These are the following: general competencies—leadership, problem solving, critical thinking, digital literacy, reflection, and self-assessment, etc.; and special competencies—evaluation of students' achievements, professional partnership, cooperation, implementation of educational content, etc. (Eurydice, 2019, Lietuvos Respublikos Sveikimo, Mokslo ir Sporto Ministras, 2010). They are supposed to be gained during the studies and developed throughout the further teaching career. During the first year of teaching, teachers are regarded as pedagogical interns (Eurydice, 2021). The

internship is supposed to help the inexperienced teachers to integrate into the teaching community and get professional assistance and support. If the internship is successfully completed, teachers can begin their teacher's work independently (Eurydice, 2021).

Teachers in Lithuania do not have civil servant status but are considered as employees of the public sector (Eurydice, 2021). However, they do not receive any special guarantees. In most cases teachers are being employed for an indefinite period. Principals are responsible for the recruitment of teachers. Impeccable reputation is a must in order to work as a teacher, according to the *Code of Ethics for Teachers (Pedagogu etikos kodeksas)* (Svietimo ir mokslo ministerija, 2018). Teachers have to meet the high standards of ethics and behavior, as established by each school in accordance with the requirements of the *Code of Ethics for Teachers* (Eurydice, 2021).

The salaries of public-school teachers “depend on teachers’ pedagogical experience, qualification category and the complexity of the activity” (Eurydice, 2021, n.p.). The complexity of activity refers to e.g. teaching some students with special educational needs, teaching a student at home due to illness or teaching a student who does not speak Lithuanian (Eurydice, 2021). A full-time primary teacher’s position consists of 36 working hours per week or around 1512 hours per year (Eurydice, 2021). The working hours include not only the time spent for actual teaching, but also for professional teachers’ development, preparation for classes, evaluation of students’ work and leading a class (Eurydice, 2021). Due to the stressful and multi-dimensional nature of teacher’s work, teachers get a longer vacation compared to other professions, that is usually the length of 40 working days (Eurydice, 2021).

In order to climb the career ladder, teachers can obtain a higher teacher’s qualification category through the attestation process. During the attestation process, teacher’s professionalism and competencies are being assessed by the attestation commission leading to a higher teacher’s qualification category. In Lithuania, there are four teacher’s qualification categories: teacher, senior teacher, teacher-methodologist, and teacher-expert (Lietuvos Respublikos kultūros ir svietimo ministerija, 1992).

## **2.4 Challenges of Lithuanian education and the teaching profession**

The Lithuanian education system and the Lithuanian teaching community are currently facing many serious challenges (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013; Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021). In Lithuania, there is an ongoing debate about the teaching profession lacking prestige because of numerous reasons (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Bulotaite & Lepeskiene, 2006; Zelvys, 2004). Some studies show that the Lithuanian teachers are confronted with many issues, such as stress and anxiety due to excessive paperwork and immense workload, low

salaries, many responsibilities, as well as lack of respect for their profession (Bulotaite & Lepeskiene, 2006; Zelvys, 2004). Also, in the last few years a serious threat to the Lithuanian education system is the ever-increasing lack of teachers caused by various reasons (Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021).

First of all, it is important to note that in Lithuania, there is a tendency to believe that the teaching programs are mostly chosen by unmotivated students who cannot be proud of good academic achievements (Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013). This tendency can be illustrated by the fact that the required entrance score to the teacher education study programs is lower as compared to other more popular study programs (Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013). According to Gruodyte and Pasvenskiene (2013), around 37,000 students gained teaching degree in the Lithuanian higher education institutions between the years 2000 and 2010. However, only 15% of them worked in schools at the time of the study (Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013), while 30% to 60% (according to Zelvys, 2004) of all graduates of teaching and education study programs found other jobs outside the education sector. Also, another reason for why the teacher education programs are not attractive to highly motivated students, who after graduation would start teaching, is that the teaching profession in Lithuania is not considered as a good career choice that could provide economic security and a decent income (Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013; Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021; OECD, 2016). This is closely related to occupational prestige of teaching, which tends to be quite low in Lithuania (Bakonis, 2021). The term prestige is often considered as vague because there is no clear and widely accepted definition of it (Bakonis, 2021). Thus, it is difficult to measure occupational prestige (Bakonis, 2021). However, the prestige of a profession is often being evaluated based on the social value of a profession on one hand, and social privileges as well as salaries which that occupation provides for those who perform it, on the other hand (Bakonis, 2021).

The low teachers' salaries are one of the deeply rooted problems in the Lithuanian education system. It has an impact on the social standing of the teaching profession (OECD, 2016). The salaries of Lithuanian teachers are among the lowest compared to all the other members of European Union (OECD, 2016). According to the official statistical data, in 2020 the average monthly salary in the education sector was 1333 EUR before taxes, which is even lower than the Lithuanian monthly average (Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021; Official Statistics Portal, 2021). As the leader of the Lithuanian Education Employees Labor Union, Andrius Savickas claims, the teaching profession is not competitive in the labor market (Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021). That is why it is difficult not only to attract the new recruits to the teaching profession but also to keep those teachers who are already teaching (OECD, 2016). Other studies also show that some qualified teachers

(especially language and IT teachers) have left the teaching profession for other better paid jobs (Cerych, 1997; Zelvy, 2004). It is important to mention that “teachers in Lithuania do not have civil servant status and there are concerns regarding job security and working conditions” (OECD, 2016, p. 134). Educators have an opportunity to become members of teachers’ labor unions that represent and defend teachers’ rights. However, it seems that only a minority of teachers have joined labor unions, since the unions claim to unite only around 15,000 members, while this number includes not only teachers but also other pedagogical staff (Jakubauskas, 2019).

Due to the previously mentioned reasons, the Lithuanian teaching community is ageing, which is likely to lead to even bigger teacher shortage in the near future (Bilbokaite & Bilbokaite-Skiauteriene, 2017; Gruodyte & Pasvenskiene, 2013). According to Eurydice, 40% of teachers are between the age of 50 and 59, and only 3–5% of teachers are younger than 30 (Eurydice, 2020). The Lithuanian Education Employees Labor Union (Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021) claims that the current situation is really worrying for the teaching community, since in two years the number of vacancies in the teaching profession can reach 2700 positions. While in the last year, the number of empty teaching positions in schools increased by one fourth, or 25.3 % (Murauskaite, 2021).

However, other sources indicate a certain controversy in the Lithuanian teaching profession (Korsakovaite, 2020; OECD, 2016). Despite the fact that schools already struggle due to the lack of educators, the Lithuanian unemployment agency reports a significant number of unemployed teachers (Korsakovaite, 2020). This situation can be explained by the fact that teachers do not want to work, or cannot afford to work, in distant rural schools that are not offering full-time employment. Because of the low number of contact hours, some of the teachers have to work in more than one educational institution (OECD, 2016).

According to the OECD (2016), low attractiveness of the teaching profession can also be caused by the unclear organization of working hours, and by so-called tariff salaries. The OECD also reports uneven and unclear distribution of contact hours among teachers, leading to low salaries for some members of the teaching body (OECD, 2016). On the other hand, the lack of teachers is also felt in the big educational institutions in big towns, such as in the capital Vilnius. Some incentives are already being used in order to solve this increasing problem of the lack of teachers. For example, the municipality of Vilnius has just started to provide free use of public transport for all the teachers that work in the city (Jackunaite 2021; Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021). The district municipality of Kaunas (the second largest city) offers a single 5000 EUR financial incentive for teachers who would come to work in the district’s schools, as well as fully covering teachers’ requalification costs (Klaipeda, 2021). Other municipalities try to take at least some temporary measures to solve the lack of



teachers by recruiting retired educators (Klaipeda, 2021). In order to increase the enrollment of motivated students in teaching programs, monthly 300 EUR grants are offered to those students with high academic results who get enrolled in state-funded study places.

This concludes the four sections that have provided an overview of the Lithuanian educational system—the reforms that have taken place in recent decades, the Lithuanian teaching profession, and the current problems faced by the teaching community. The next section will delve into theoretical approaches, first the concept of neoliberalism, while the gender implications of this research problem will be covered in the final section of this chapter.

## 2.5 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is understood as the current prevailing political and economic ideology, a paradigm that replaced the preceding post-war consensus (1945 – ca. 1973) in the Western world, which was characterized by adherence to Keynesian economics, a mixed-market economy, high taxes and a strong welfare state. The term neoliberalism is sometimes used synonymously with the “Washington consensus”, since it is associated with the policies of Washington D.C. based institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Chomsky, 1999). Neoliberalism is commonly understood as a political and economic model that emphasizes free market capitalism and weakening of the state’s actions. Critics describe it as free “market fundamentalism” (Stiglitz, 2002, pp. 35–36). It became especially prominent in many countries around the world since the 1970s, and it is often associated with Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and their policies, such as tax cuts, privatization and deregulation (Chomsky, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that the term neoliberalism is sometimes used loosely in everyday language but can be complex and multifaceted. For this reason, in this study the analysis will be based on a comprehensive definition of neoliberalism provided by Harvey (2007), who defines neoliberalism as

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (p. 2)

According to Harvey (2007), neoliberalism can also be defined by certain features, such as the lessening or minimizing of state power and interventions, austerity policies, privatization, deregulation, anti-unionism, strong individualism, competition, and continuously increasing

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of neoliberalism and the history of the concept, see Jones (2012).

productivity. Harvey also defines neoliberalism as a hegemonic political and economic ideology that tries to dominate society in every domain, for instance, in politics, the media, and even in education. Harvey (2007), as well as Ball (2016) and Connell (2013), agree that neoliberalism has become deeply rooted in almost every sphere of people's lives, so much so that many people are even not aware of it. They argue that it affects our social life, personal relationships, our values and how people perceive themselves and the world they live in.

The main role of the state under neoliberalism is to create favorable conditions for markets and free trade, as well as to secure private property rights. Neoliberal governments have to work on "freeing businesses" in various ways, e.g. by weakening the control over the banking sector and capital movement, that resulted in a fast growth of markets of bonds, shares, and other financial transactions (Connell, 2013). As Harvey (2007) claims, if in some sectors, for example education or healthcare, "markets do not exist, then they must be created" (p. 2). Connell (2013) adds to this argument, by saying:

Needs formerly met by public agencies on a principle of citizen rights, or through personal relationships in communities and families, are [under neoliberalism] to be met by companies selling services in a market. . . . Neoliberals have had astonishing success in creating markets for things whose commodification was once almost unimaginable: drinking water, body parts and social welfare among them. (p. 100)

Neoliberalism also advocates the idea that "a rising tide lifts all the boats", which means that wealth creation, eradication of poverty and everyone's well-being, can be achieved by maximizing market transactions and increasing productivity (Harvey, 2007, p. 64). However, that leads to strong individualism and competitiveness. Competition between states or individuals is seen as useful and is strongly encouraged, since it is supposed to result in higher efficiency, productivity, and innovation (Harvey, 2007). In addition, according to the neoliberal doctrine, it is believed that individuals are themselves always responsible for their own well-being, and all the failures that happen to them are caused by their own personal mistakes or misfortunes, rather than some possible systemic flaws or problems. This strong individualism creates a divide and alienation in society, as well as in labor markets, which are characterized by anti-unionism (Harvey, 2007).

Under neoliberalism, "the powers of trade unions and other working-class institutions are curbed or dismantled" (Harvey, 2007, p. 168). Since the state powers are lessened and social welfare provisions are reduced, "the individualized and relatively powerless worker then confronts a labor market" (Harvey, 2007, p. 168). Social security and provisions, such as pensions or health care, become the responsibility of the worker and depend on their individual choice and affordability. Then, according to Harvey (2007), "the figure of 'the

disposable worker' emerges as prototypical upon the world stage" because workers are being less regarded, and they can be easily replaced (p. 169). This also leads to a growth in part-time and contract labor and "insistent roll-back of entitlements and security" of the working class (Connell, 2013, p. 113), which increases social inequality in addition to restoring and strengthening "class power to ruling elites" (Harvey, 2007, p. 156). Because of this, neoliberalism can be also defined as a class project where a small and wealthy elite group tries to take back control and gain power over society (Harvey, 2007). Connell (2013) also tends to agree by claiming that "neoliberalism is the latest mutation in a sprawling world-wide regime, which forged a new settlement between military, political and business elites in the global periphery, and their counterparts in the metropole" (p. 101).

Harvey (2007) also notes how flexible labor markets lead to increasing emigration as well as allowing businesses to move abroad to find much cheaper and often exploitative workforce. It is also important to note that the neoliberal agenda has had a strong negative effect on lower class women due to reduced social securities. This becomes especially prominent in many post-Soviet countries (such as Lithuania), where, as Harvey claims, "the loss of women's rights through neoliberalization has been nothing short of catastrophic" (2007, p. 170).

Austerity is another feature of neoliberalism that reduces social security, since the strict cutting down of public expenditure mostly affects the most important services of the public sector, such as education, healthcare and social security. Governments adopt austerity policies, instead of borrowing money, in order to respond to economic crises or hardships. However, as Sommers and Woolfson (2014) claim, by making the decision to choose austerity as a means to endure economic problems, governments select the labor, but not the capital, "to bear the primary burden of the 'necessary' adjustment" (n.p.). In addition, scholars point out that austerity measures have had an impact on labor's employment rights and accounts to "a massive attack on social living standards across the European continent" (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014, n.p.).

### **2.5.1 Neoliberalism in Lithuania**

In 1990, when Lithuania gained independence during the collapse of Soviet Union, many significant changes took place, since the country was turning a new page in its history which was marked by the strong need to eradicate Soviet ideology and to adopt new Western values. The fast turn from the state-run industries towards capitalism and a free-market economy was made by the adoption of a so-called shock therapy (Klein, 2007). Shock therapy in Lithuania and other Baltic states can be defined by extensive privatization of state-run enterprises, liberalized prices, foreign investments, and the opening of the economy and the markets for international trade (Juska & Woolfson, 2014). This rapid transitioning to a new economic

model resulted in a “particularly harsh brand of neoliberal capitalism” (Sommers & Woolfson, 2014, n.p.), since at that time of the transition the neoliberal ideas were thriving around the world (Juska & Woolfson, 2014). These changes had a crucial impact on Lithuanian society. Part of the population faced serious challenges and these struggles are said to have had a “traumatizing” or devastating effect on them, due to growing poverty and the loss of previous social securities. However, other members of society became even richer and gained more power, i.e., because of increased inequality (Juska & Woolfson, 2014).

As a response to the 2008 economic crisis, the Lithuanian government imposed harsh austerity measures that had a serious socio-economic impact. According to Juska and Woolfson (2014), the adoption of austerity policies caused a decrease in wages and a high increase in unemployment, which led to growing poverty. Because of the economic crisis and the poor financial conditions, emigration rates skyrocketed, which had a negative economic impact, as the Lithuanian population started to decrease, and the country lost a significant part of its labor force. However, the free movement of labor is one of the features of the neoliberal agenda, since people are held to be responsible for their own well-being and struggles (Harvey, 2007; Juska & Sommers, 2014). The European labor markets became easily accessible to Lithuanians when, after putting many efforts to become a member of the European Union, the country in 2004 achieved membership.

The 2008 economic crisis led to social unrest, many demonstrations and protests, which were encouraged by the claims of the Lithuanian labor unions that said the new strict economic reforms were “a direct attack on their members’ living standards and job security” (Juska & Woolfson, 2014, n.p.). According to Juska and Woolfson (2014, n.p.), growing social inequality and economic disparity have divided Lithuanian society into “winners” and “losers”. This can be explained by the fact that the lives and career choices of the Lithuanian post-transition generation are often marked by “social and professional orientations and aspirations (mediated by the system of education) and directed towards the goal of entering the more privileged primary labor market” (Juska & Woolfson, 2014, n.p.). In Lithuania, there is a strong tendency to believe that a secure life can be achieved through a career in the public sector, especially state sector or local administration. Since this strong sense of insecurity tends to be prominent in Lithuanian society, due to very limited social security and welfare, people tend to look for secure employment. Therefore, the “winners” are considered to be those who are employed in the state administration, which is considered as a more secure and stable career option rather than the manufacturing or service jobs in the private sector (Juska & Woolfson, 2014). This shows the economic precariousness of the private sector, caused by neoliberalization in Lithuania that led to increased insecurity of private sector jobs.

### 2.5.2 Neoliberalism in education

As was briefly mentioned in the previous subchapter, neoliberalism tries to dominate society in every domain (Harvey, 2007). The field of education is no exception (Ball, 2016; Connell et al., 2009; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Harvey, 2007). According to Harvey (2007), efforts were made by the ruling capitalist class to capture the universities and implement neoliberal values in education. That resulted in the creation of so-called think tanks, which are biased and strongly ideologically oriented research institutions, that promote one-sided neoliberal policies, and whose recommendations are adopted and followed by governments. Ball (2016) also claims that neoliberalism negatively impacts education and affects the teaching profession. According to Ball (2016), the neoliberal reforms that are taking place in many educational systems around the world, deprofessionalize or reprofessionalize educators. He draws particular attention to neoliberalism by claiming that neoliberalism is not only about politics and economy, but also about how we think and what we do, since neoliberalism is pervasive “in the head, in the heart, in the soul” (Ball, 2016, p. 1047). Neoliberalism significantly affects education as well as how individuals perceive it, which leads to the “economization of education in a variety of forms” (Ball, 2016, p. 1047). Under neoliberalism, there is a tendency to make public sector institutions, for example schools and universities, more like businesses. Increasing managerialism and the growth in managerial positions in educational institutions has shifted power away from teachers to school managers, because the emphasis is on accountability and performativity (Connell et al., 2009; Graeber, 2018).

In addition, different forms of privatization are taking place that change the meaning of education “from a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity” (Ball, 2016, p. 1049). The relationship between parents and children as well as parents and teachers have been affected due to increasing commodification of education. The “culture of clientelism” becomes more prevalent in education institutions by giving more power to parents (Deslandes et al., 2015, p. 140; Rubin et al., 2020). Giroux and Giroux (2006) add to this point:

Neoliberalism has become one of the most pervasive and dangerous ideologies of the twenty-first century. . . . Its logic . . . has insinuated itself into every social relationship, such that the specificity of relations between parents and children, doctors and patients, teachers and students has been reduced to that of supplier and consumer. . . . Under neoliberalism, everything is either for sale or is plundered for profit . . . schools more closely resemble either jails or high-end shopping malls, depending on their clientele, and teachers are forced to get revenue for their school by hawking everything from hamburgers to pizza parties. (p. 22)

Standardization and assessments are some of the main features of neoliberalism in education. Lately, in many countries, a significant focus has been on various forms of assessment and

measurements that, it is believed, should improve productivity and educational achievements. Ball (2016) argues that a strong emphasis on performativity and accountability in neoliberal education reduces teachers' professionalism. This is because the increased importance of tests, audits, reports, benchmarks and assessments increases the workload, creates unnecessary stress and misdirects the attention of the teachers' away from the real aims of teaching. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 60) claim as well, that prescriptive policies and "massive workload"<sup>2</sup> make teachers "lose focus" because no time is left for reflection and professional development that are profoundly important in teaching. Because of expectations about performativity, teachers spend a significant and increasing amount of time "reporting what [they] do, rather than doing it" (Ball, 2016, p. 1054). This, according to Ball (2016), leads to reduced trust in education and teachers, as well as lack of respect for the teaching profession. It also means that assessments, audits, reports, etc. not only measure and monitor the performance of students, educators, and educational institutions, but also have a serious impact on the shaping of teaching which is becoming more and more focused on achieving the goals of assessments and reaching the required benchmarks. Nussbaum (2010) claims that teachers' "biggest hope is to stuff [children] full of facts so that they perform well on national examinations" (p. 140). As a result, teachers are forced to concentrate on good results and perform well on the assessments (Sahlberg, 2011), which also causes them to feel more stress, insecurity and uncertainty at work. As Ball (2003) explains:

Information is collected continuously, recorded and published . . . and performance is also monitored eventually by peer reviews, site visits and inspections. Within all this, there is a high degree of uncertainty and instability. A sense of being constantly judged in different ways, by different means, according to different criteria, through different agents and agencies. There is a flow of changing demands, expectations and indicators that makes one continually accountable and constantly recorded. We become . . . unsure whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others, or as well as others, constantly looking to improve, to be better, to be excellent. And yet it is not always very clear what is expected. (p. 220)

Ball (2016) argues that "in the regimes of performativity, experience is nothing, performativity is everything" (p. 1054). In addition, teachers tend to have less freedom and fewer chances to use and develop creative teaching methods in their teaching, and to work as autonomous experts of the teaching profession whom society trusts. Because of the same reason, teachers struggle to take a holistic view of education (Connell, 2015). It reveals that under neoliberalism, the main goal of education and teaching is not knowledge for knowledge's sake,

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<sup>2</sup> For more on increased workload, see Fitzgerald et al. (2019); Fullan (1996); Jóhannesson (2006); Timperley & Robinson (2000).

or intellectual, moral and emotional development, but rather measurable performance, profits and competitiveness. This idea goes in line with human capital ideas that see the main goal of education as preparation for the labor market by gaining necessary skills and knowledge that would lead to direct personal gains and profits in the free market (Connell, 2013; 2015; Connell et al., 2009). This outlook on education is, according to Connell (2015), likewise the neoliberal view of education. However, it is important to understand that “in education not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts” (Ball, 2016, p. 1054).

Due to the same reasons, Nussbaum (2010) also raises serious concerns about current education systems and the goals of current education being reshaped into those of market systems. She strongly advocates for the importance of humanities and liberal arts that seem to have become undervalued as disciplines and are slowly dying out in some education systems around the world, because the emphasis is being placed on the subjects that develop the skills that could be useful for economic growth production. Nussbaum (2010) claims:

Given that economic growth is so eagerly sought by all nations, especially at this time of crisis, too few questions have been posed about the direction of education, and, with it, of the world’s democratic societies. With the rush to profitability in the global market, values precious for the future of democracy, especially in an era of religious and economic anxiety, are in danger of getting lost. (p. 6)

For this reason, Nussbaum tries to raise awareness of where the education systems are leading and what values are being propagated when “education systems all over the world are moving closer and closer to the growth model” without acknowledging how “ill-suited it is to the goals of democracy” (2010, p. 24). She stresses the importance of the cultivation of critical thinking, moral and democratic values that are crucial for global citizenship when living in a such globalized world, where everything is becoming more and more interdependent (Nussbaum, 2010). She believes that empathy, solidarity, justice, responsible citizenship, and critical thought cannot be nourished without humanities. However, under the neoliberal model of education, according to Nussbaum, students’ abilities to think critically can be seen as dangerous “if what is wanted is a group of technically trained obedient workers to carry out the plans of elites” (2010, p. 21).

Individualization and competition in education and the teaching profession is another feature indicating neoliberalism in education. Under neoliberalism, cooperation, support, and “other forms of collective relations among workers are replaced by performative competition” (Ball, 2003, p. 219). Assessments, audits, ever-increasing accountability, and emphasis on measurable achievements tend to increase competition not only between students and

educational institutions, but between teachers as well (Connell, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011). However, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012; also see Sahlberg, 2011) argue that cooperation between educators, as well as the sense of support and community, lead to the building of social capital, which is considered as a crucial element for the development of teachers' professionalism. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) criticize the business capital view of teaching that is prominent in some educational systems. The business capital view of teaching sees the teacher's job as possibly emotionally demanding, but otherwise simple and quite easy, easily replaceable by online teaching and technologies, as well as not requiring high professional qualifications and life-long learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Teachers are considered as inexpensive and easily dispensable work force whose performance should be measured by various assessments as well as audits that should lead to higher performativity, while teachers' wages should depend on students' performance and the meeting of targets (2012). However, Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) propose and argue for a very different view of the teaching, i.e., the professional capital model.

The professional capital model of teaching is based on the view of the teaching profession as a difficult and sophisticated professional work that requires high levels of education that cannot be obtained in a short period of time. On the contrary, high professionalism cannot be achieved without continuous improvement, reflection, and life-long learning. The professional capital model of teaching is based on the principle that professionalism in the teaching profession is built from the combination of human capital, social capital, and decisional capital (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In other words, professionalism requires individual professional knowledge and skills, collaboration between colleagues, and the ability to make critical judgements and decisions (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Cooperation and collaboration between teachers are seen as a crucial element in achieving higher professionalism, while teaching is understood as collective work (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011). This is in contrast to neoliberalism, where competition and individualization in education tend to increase alienation and isolation in the teaching community. Therefore, not only teachers, but also schools, should become less competitive and isolated from one another in order to share professional knowledge and practices that would help to develop and improve the whole teaching profession.

## **2.6 Feminization of the teaching profession in Lithuania**

The teaching profession in Lithuania is strongly gendered, with women occupying a significant majority of the teaching positions, with even higher numbers at primary schools (Cerych, 1997; Purvaneckiene, 2012). According to OECD (2019) data, the gender imbalance is undoubtedly visible in the Lithuanian education institutions, as 85% of all the educators are



women. Due to this reason, feminist education theory, especially Connell's (1995; 2000; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) theory of masculinities, is important to fully understand the complexities of the teaching profession. According to Connell (1995; 2000), there is a clear distinction between masculinities and femininities as socially constructed concepts, that define certain actions, social practices and behaviors attributed to different genders. Masculinity is not only a personal identity, "it is also extended in the world, merged in organized social relations" (Connell, 1995, p. 29). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (1995; see also Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840) refers to practices that lead to "men's collective dominance over women" but it also indicates the dominance of some masculinities over other masculinities that are considered as subordinate. According to Donaldson (1993), hegemonic masculinity can be defined as a set of idealized characteristics of manhood, such as physical strength, toughness, financial stability and superiority, individualism, confidence, and competitiveness. These traits are totally opposite to sensitivity, emotionality, empathy, nurturance, passivity, and cooperativeness that are considered as feminine traits.

Deeply rooted characteristics of different genders might be noticed in the selection of professional occupation and division of labor (Connell, 2000). The author claims that the capitalist system "separates a masculinized sphere of production" from "a feminized sphere of consumption and domestic labor" (Connell, 2000, p. 63). A certain division of labor based on gender appeared when men were seen as breadwinners who earn wages, while the homemaking and child-raising responsibilities that are unpaid were left for women (Connell, 2000; Wallerstein, 1995). According to Drudy (2008), this tends to be clearly the case in teaching of young children, when the female teacher is being seen an "ideal primary teacher" "based on essentialist belief that a woman's nature tends to make her better with children" (p. 312). Drudy (2008) argues that domestic ideology, i.e., that women's careers should be consistent with domestic chores and responsibilities, is still perceptible in many countries. She also claims that "feminization of teaching is a cumulative historical and social process" (Drudy, 2008, p. 312). This division of labor is based on socially constructed gender norms and stereotypes that determine the orientation of women's as well as men's career choices and opportunities. It can be argued that the strongly engrained stereotype that men must be financial providers for their families influences their career choices. As such, men tend to select the career path which provides good and solid income, as well as helps them to maintain and express the idealized characteristics of manhood: superiority, dominance, and individualism.

On the other hand, those professions that do not offer financial stability and have low prospects are not attractive to men and are occupied by women. Howe (1977) introduced the term pink-collar jobs to name women's occupations, while calling women pink-collar workers.

According to Howe (1977), pink-collar jobs are those occupations that can be characterized by low wages and limited career development opportunities, and that are mostly performed by women. Caretaking jobs and service jobs fall under this category. However, currently, the term pink-collar job is also used to refer to teaching jobs that in many countries around the world are predominantly occupied by women. Gender segregation can also be noticed in the education sector when men more often tend to take the managerial supervisory positions in school systems, as well as through work specialization where women tend to teach humanities, while men teach science, math, etc. (Connell, 2000).

When discussing the feminization of the teaching profession, it is also important to address what the term profession actually means. Drudy (2008) claims that different opinions exist on whether teaching is a real profession or not. She states that “an occupation [as it is argued by scholars, e.g., Johnson, 1972] is called a profession when it exercises collegiate control, i.e., when it is the primary authority defining the relationship between the giver and receiver of its services” (Drudy, 2008, p. 315). Consequently, since teachers tend to not hold the sufficient control over their work, it could be argued that teaching is not a real profession (Drudy, 2008). From this perspective, teaching differs from doctors or accountants’ jobs since these professionals tend to have more control over their work. Drudy (2008) also claims that “teaching is not afforded the same professional prestige as many other occupations which require university degrees” (p. 316). The term profession is mostly associated with “jobs and career paths that were, from their inception, male dominated” (Drudy, 2008, p. 316). According to O’Connor (1998) and Drudy (2008), in many countries, research has revealed that the more any occupation is dominated by women, the higher the chances are that it is poorly paid.

Furthermore, Graeber (2018) states that teaching as well as other caring jobs that have high social value tend to be low paid. It can be explained by the fact that caring jobs are often perceived as socially and morally rewarding jobs because they give happiness and fulfillment to people who perform them (Hargreaves, 199; Graeber, 2018). Also, caring jobs are often seen as easy because they mostly require the natural human characteristics, such as understanding, kindness and empathy, while needed qualifications and professional knowledge are minimized. For this reason, caring jobs are often underpaid (Graeber, 2018). Therefore, it could be argued that the lack of professional standing of the teaching profession is related with the lower status of this occupation, as well as higher feminization, since men tend to select those professions that are more highly regarded and higher paid.

In addition, it is also important to address the implications of occupational segregation of labor by gender under neoliberalism. Neoliberalism presents itself as a gender-neutral agenda that highlights the importance of individuality and individual traits while praising the ones with

the best entrepreneurial skills (Connell et al., 2009). It can be referred to as “career-open-to-talents” (Connell et al., 2009, p. 332). However, neoliberalism thrives in a world which is gendered, where an individual has “the attributes and interests of a male entrepreneur” and the “unregulated power of transnational corporations’ places strategic power in the hands of particular groups of men” by weakening women’s position (Connell, 2000, p. 51). Connell (2000) claims that it is “a part of social construction of masculinity, that men and not women control the major corporations and the great private fortunes” (p. 23). Arguably, that is the reason for why women so often occupy the so-called pink-collar jobs that men tend to be not willing to perform. Also, neoliberalism curbs the public sector by narrowing it and shrinking public employment as well as transferring power from the state to the private sector and markets (Connell, 2005; 2009; Harvey, 2007). This strengthens gender inequalities and weakens women, because women mostly rely on the public sector for income, e.g., teachers, nurses, social workers, and caregivers, while men dominate the private sector and in the markets (Connell, 2009). This results in lesser social security and higher insecurity and precariousness by which women are especially affected (Connell, 2005; 2009). According to Connell (2005), the rise of neoliberalism and the shock doctrine in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet countries, such as Lithuania, “has been followed by a sharp deterioration in the position of women” because of sustained domination of masculinities induced by the neoliberal system that gives the advantage to men (p. 1815).

Therefore, it seems that occupational segregation by gender is enforced and sustained by hegemonic masculinities as well as gender norms and roles that are exacerbated under neoliberalism, which tends to see men as the dominating gender (Connell, 1995; Mazeikiene & Dorelaitiene, 2012). This might be a potential explanation for why the teaching profession in Lithuania is feminized and men are under-represented. Since teaching is about nurturing children, which is historically more related to the sphere of domestic labor performed by women (Wallerstein, 1995), and requires some of the characteristics that are considered as feminine, it might be the reason why teaching in the neoliberal era is not seen as a “real” profession, and why it is often underpaid and undervalued (Drudy, 2008; Zelvys, 2004).

This concludes the previous six sections that outline some important background points and theories that provide insights into the research topic. The post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms that have taken place in Lithuania tended to shift towards the economic paradigm and Western educational practices, with the emphasis on accountability, effectiveness, benchmarks and targets. Today, the Lithuanian teaching profession confronts serious challenges such as the ageing teaching community and lack of new recruits. From this, it can be argued that the teaching profession in Lithuania has been affected by neoliberal educational reforms that have led to various difficulties that teachers encounter today.

Consequently, this has resulted in lower attractiveness of the teaching profession that is enforced by the high feminization of this occupation.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

A qualitative interviewing approach was selected to conduct this qualitative study and obtain the data from teachers' interviews, with the goal to answer the following research questions: How have the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania affected the teaching profession and teachers' professionalism? What are the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania?

For a long time, qualitative interviews have been a crucial qualitative research method (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kalekin-Fishman, 2002; Oltmann, 2016). Kalekin-Fishman (2002) claims that "interviewing actually has substantive significance at the heart of the enterprise of the social sciences" (n.p.). Interviewing can be seen as a human interaction or conversation. Through conversations, people share their experiences and gain new knowledge. The research interview is considered as "a professional conversation" "that has a structure and a purpose" (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). It differs from casual conversation when certain views are being spontaneously expressed, and instead interviewing "becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge" (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). Braun and Clarke (2013) also agree with Kvale's definition. They define interviewing as "a 'professional conversation' [Kvale, 1996] with the goal of getting a participant to talk about their experiences and perspectives, and to capture their language and concepts, in relation to a topic that [the researchers] have determined" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 77).

Therefore, qualitative interviews seemed to be a suitable method and design for this study. Since this study was aimed at delving deeper into the challenges that teachers face in relation to educational transformations, interviews provide rich in-depth data about teachers' work experiences. According to Oltmann (2016), an interview is "the most direct, research-focused interaction between researcher and participant" that allows one to gain insights of the participant's perspective (Kazmer & Xie, 2008, p. 258; cited in Oltmann, 2016, n.p.). The relationship between interviewer and participants is not entirely equal, since the interviewer is controlling the situation by raising follow-up questions in order to collect the data that would help to answer research questions (Kvale, 1996).

Kvale (1996) uses "a traveler on a journey metaphor" to refer to "interviewing as a construction of stories" or new knowledge (p. 4). Thus, this interview inquiry was conducted within the social constructivism framework. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), social constructivism argues that "what we know of the world, and ourselves and other objects in the world, is constructed (produced) through various discourses and systems of meaning we all reside within" (p. 30). This means that there is no one single truth and "there are

knowledges, rather than knowledge”, since every person constructs subjective meaning of his or her experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 30; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, it implies that the way how people experience and perceive the world is influenced by various social, cultural, ideological, etc. contexts that differ from person to person.

### **3.2 Sampling and participants**

For this study, it was important to select the participants with many years of experience in teaching, since it was important to gain understanding of how they have perceived the post-Soviet educational changes. Thus, qualified primary school class teachers (grades 1–4) who had 25–45 years of professional teaching experience were selected. Due to the limited time and size of the research, eight women teachers were interviewed. However, it is believed that six to ten interviews should provide sufficient amount of data for a small size research project (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The participants were selected from four different educational institutions located in the same county in the southern part of Lithuania. The selection of participants from four different schools, rather than one, ensures that a wider range of the Lithuanian teaching body is involved. The location of the county in question was considered strategically important due to its close proximity to the other largest cities of Lithuania. The capital of this county is quite densely populated and surrounded by smaller municipalities.

Convenience sampling, referring to the sample that is accessible to the researcher, was used to reach out the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Close relatives of mine who work in primary schools in the same county helped me to contact teachers who agreed to take part in the research. Snowball sampling was also used to find interviewees in those cases when participants showed willingness to use their networks to help to find more participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Teachers teaching a single subject (such as religion, music, and English teachers) were excluded, since they do not have as many responsibilities as class teachers, who are responsible for dealing with students’ social problems, class management, communication with parents, etc. All the teachers who were interviewed are women because there were no male class teachers working in the research sites.

Semi-structured interview questions were used to guide the interviews. Such questions are intended to allow certain freedom for the participants to express themselves and build their narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As Braun and Clarke (2013) claim, in semi-structured interviews “question wording and order are contextual, and responsive to the participant’s developing account” (p. 78). The interview questions were formulated with the goal of collecting data about primary school class teachers’ experiences. The questions were open-ended. They helped to gain insights into the following aspects that relate to the research questions: how teachers perceive and evaluate educational transformations and reforms, the

current status of the teaching profession, as well as challenges and opportunities they confront in their work (see Appendix A).

A pilot interview had been conducted. A Lithuanian primary school teacher who had around 40 years of professional teaching experience participated in a face-to-face pilot interview, which took place in Lithuania a few months before the data collection began. The interview questions were slightly revised after the pilot interview, which provided some new insights at that stage of the study.

### **3.3 Data collection**

The data was collected by interviewing qualified primary school class teachers (grades 1–4) in Lithuania, who had 25–45 years of professional teaching experience. In January 2022, eight teachers were interviewed through face-to-face interviews that were conducted in Lithuania. The participants are 50–65 years old. All of them have a teachers' degree in primary school teaching.

All the interviews (except one that was conducted online via Microsoft Teams) took place at the schools where the participants work, since all of them invited me to come to their schools for interviewing. The participants' workplaces seemed to be the most suitable place for the teachers to be interviewed because of their very busy work schedules. For this reason, the interviews took place in the classrooms or reading rooms right after lessons were finished. Each interview lasted approximately 20–55 minutes. Before the interviews, I briefly introduced my research topic and its main goals to the teachers. I also made sure that participants would familiarize themselves with an informed consent form that addresses the ethical concerns before signing it (Appendix B). The interviewing was done in Lithuanian, the mother tongue of the participants. The interviews were recorded on a voice recording app.

The participants were excited to take part and to share their experience; however, some of them admitted that they were a little bit worried at the very beginning, because being interviewed was a new experience for some of them. I assured them that there is no reason to be worried, since there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, and all the experiences and thoughts they will share with me would be highly appreciated. Thus, after the first few introductory questions, even those more hesitant teachers eventually opened up and felt free to express their opinions. In the end, the participants were happy for participating and having an opportunity to talk about their work and to be listened to. Some of them expressed appreciation for being able to express themselves, for having someone who is interested in their issues and willing to listen to them talk and understand their perspective.

The semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure the direction of the interviews. Being a novice researcher, I found that having the interview guide helped me to feel more

confident and relaxed throughout the very first interviews. However, I did not strictly follow the interview guide, since participants' answers required follow-up questions to flexibly explore their perspectives and to obtain in-depth data. During the interviews, I also took notes of the things that seemed to be relevant.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2013; see also Clarke & Braun, 2017) was used to analyze the collected data. This model of analysis proved to be the most useful because of "its flexibility in terms of research question, sample size and constitution, data collection method, etc." (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). As the authors claim, this data analysis method tends to be a good choice for beginner researchers since it is not too difficult to handle in small scale research projects. In addition, reflexive thematic analysis is beneficial while working with varied and broad qualitative data, collected through face-to-face interviews because it gives more flexibility for interpretation. According to Clarke and Braun (2017), thematic analysis "can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives" (2017, p. 297). The role of the researcher is also emphasized, which is significant for interview inquiry and other qualitative studies, since the participants and a researcher work together to create meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, according to Braun and Clarke (2019), in reflexive thematic analysis, themes are seen as "creative and interpretative stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves" (p. 594).

Although thematic analysis offers a lot of flexibility for the researchers, transparency and reflexivity on how thematic analysis is being applied is required (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2012; 2017) state that it is important to articulate whether an inductive bottom-up or a deductive top-down approach to thematic analysis is being selected as an overriding approach. The inductive or bottom-up approach "is driven by what is in the data", whereas in the deductive or top-down approach "a series of concepts, ideas and topics" are being brought to the study "to code and interpret the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 3). However, often researchers use a combination of both (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The approach used for this study tends to be a mix of both with the deductive approach as the predominant one. This can be explained by the fact that this study is informed and based on theoretical assumptions that also had some impact on the development of the interview guide and the themes. Therefore, the reflexive deductive approach was used to analyze the collected data.

After conducting the interviews, I prepared the data for the analysis. I transcribed the interviews thoroughly word by word and then started to analyze the data. I followed "a six-



phase approach to thematic analysis” introduced and defined by Braun and Clarke (2012). First of all, I took time to familiarize myself well with the data by reading it a couple of times and making notes. After that, I started to code the data that seemed to be significant for my research questions. I followed the advice by Braun and Clarke (2012) to code all “the chunks” of the data that seemed to be in some way potentially relevant, since at a very early stage of analysis it is sometimes difficult to know what is relevant. As Braun and Clarke (2012; 2013) indicate, the codes can be semantic and latent. The coding of the collected data was done by using the mix of both semantic and interpretative codes.

When the initial coding had been completed, I worked with the codes to search for the themes. The initial codes that seemed to have some similarities and some “unifying features” were grouped together into initial themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the next phase of the analysis, I carefully reviewed my initial themes in connection with my dataset and the coded chunks of data. Thereafter, I developed four themes and began drafting subchapters according to them. In the writing process, when the themes were being developed and revised, it became apparent that it was better to have three themes instead of the original four. After that decision, more revision was conducted, and three final themes were developed (see Chapter 4). As Braun and Clarke (2012) stated the main goal of the final phase of the analysis is to produce a report which tells “a compelling story” about the data, based on the analysis which is “embedded in a scholarly field” (p. 11). Thus, in the *Discussion* section, I explored three topics by providing my own interpretation of the findings in the light of the theoretical background.

### **3.5 Ethical issues**

While conducting qualitative research, it is important to address the ethical issues. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), identification of a researcher’s personal values, biases, mindset, and assumptions, is necessary since the researcher plays an important role in the data collection and its analysis. I was aware that I also have a certain worldviews, values, experiences, and beliefs that might have shaped my thinking and my work, especially those of being critical of the neoliberal developments. I understood that I needed to be objective and careful to not impose my assumptions and biases while interviewing the participants, working with the collected data and drawing conclusions. Reflexivity is a crucial strategy that should be employed in every qualitative study to achieve the depth of analysis and conduct a rich study, since the researcher plays a significant role in the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), reflexivity in research “refers to the process of critically reflecting on the knowledge we produce, and our role in producing that knowledge” (p. 37). Thus, personal reflexivity in the research process helps to acknowledge that the researcher’s

mindset and perception of the world can influence knowledge production (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As Creswell and Creswell (2018) state, it is important to be aware of participants' rights and needs, because sensitive personal information might be revealed. Therefore, the anonymity and confidentiality for all the participants is ensured. Pseudonyms were given to every interviewee so that their real identity would not be revealed while presenting the findings. Their workplaces are also not named. Before taking part in the research, all the participants were introduced to the research and its aims and were asked to familiarize themselves with the informed consent form (see Appendix B). By signing it they agreed to take part in the research and gave permission to use the collected data in the following pages. However, the participants maintained a right to withdraw from the research at any time during the data selection process.

### **3.6 Limitations and strength**

It is important to note that certain limitations of this study can be identified. One of them is the limited number of participants due to the limited time and the size of the research. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that the small sample of participants does not allow to make generalizations. However, the participants of this study, who had 25–45 years of professional teaching experience, provided rich and in-depth insights regarding the research questions. The patterns and similarities identified in the data allow the creation of a certain understanding about the teaching profession in Lithuania from the interviewed teachers' perspective, as perceived by the interviewed teachers. On the other hand, it is also important to understand that younger teachers could have provided different perspectives and opinions than the older and more experienced teachers. However, the intention of this study was to focus only on those teachers who had spent many years in teaching, since it was deemed important to analyze their reflections on the educational changes and reforms.

Logistics can be seen as another limitation of this study. Since I live in Iceland, I had to plan a trip to Lithuania to conduct face-to-face interviews. Therefore, I had quite limited time for interviewing the teachers. Lithuanian teachers tend to have very intense work schedules, and January is an especially busy month for them due to the end of winter term. For this reason, I had to be as flexible as possible to plan the interviews in accordance with the teachers' availability. In January 2022, I met with the teachers to gather the data. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and high infection rates, I had to postpone some of the first interviews since a few of my participants were not able to meet me as was planned. That made me feel worried whether I would manage to conduct the interviews during my stay in Lithuania, because while I stayed there the infection rates between students and teachers were especially high around

that time. Fortunately, later on, I managed to meet the teachers in person and to successfully conduct all the interviews. However, one of the teachers could not make it to meet me in person while I was in Lithuania, due to the previously mentioned circumstances, but she was willing to take part in the study. That is why one of the interviews was conducted online via Microsoft Teams. All in all, I do not think that it had any negative impact on the quality this study.

## 4 Findings

In this chapter, the findings that depict the work experiences and opinions of eight primary school teachers in Lithuania who took part in this study are presented. The main task of the research is to gain understanding of how the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania have affected the teaching profession and teachers' professionalism, as well as to indicate the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania.

The themes are: (1) changes and challenges of the teaching profession, (2) the prestige and status of teaching as a job, and finally (3) the feminization of the teaching profession. Two of these themes address the impact that recent changes and reforms have had on the teaching profession, while the third theme explores the feminization of the teaching profession. Each theme will be presented in greater detail in the following subchapters.

### 4.1 Changes and challenges of the teaching profession

The first theme that was generated from the data reveals that teachers felt that over the years their job had changed and become more challenging and more difficult as time has passed. They named multiple reasons for why they perceive their job as more difficult compared to how it was back in the day. Participants addressed the rapid changes, increased workload, the introduction of IT in education, higher requirements for teachers as well as higher demands for students, and the issues concerning inclusion as having an impact on the teachers' job.

The majority of the interviewees claimed that throughout their teaching careers, and especially lately, they have experienced many changes and reforms in the education sector. Many of them tended to perceive those changes and reforms as unsystematic, chaotic, and too rapid. According to some of them, due to rapid changes, teachers do not manage to adapt and learn new things that are needed to provide high quality teaching. For instance, Maria stated:

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

As a result, this has likely had an effect on educational achievements and teachers' professionalism, which was affected by uncertainties and distractions due to the rapid changes. Also, some of the interviewed teachers perceived these changes as ineffective and not helping to achieve the desired outcomes. In addition, a few interviewees criticized the adoption of foreign practices, if the foreign examples are being strictly followed. They stated

that sometimes foreign ideas and methods are being adopted without even considering if they are applicable in the Lithuanian educational context. As Laura claimed:

Those who are reforming our education really like to copy some foreign examples and apply them to our system that is totally different from those abroad. There is this jumping from one thing to another, that maybe something will fit, but then there is lack of substance . . . lack of a general picture . . . everything is incoherent.

Therefore, the teachers indicated the lack of well thought out, well planned, systematic changes that would actually lead to expected results.

All the interviewed teachers also talked about a significant increase in workload. They claimed that higher workload causes them stress and makes them feel exhausted, since it is difficult to manage all the tasks. Some teachers said that work-related tasks tended to occupy their free time, that is why it became more difficult to find time for their families, personal interests, etc. The participants also mentioned that at the beginning of their teaching careers, teachers mostly had to devote their time to tasks directly related to teaching, while later on other types of tasks were introduced, such as participation in various projects and seminars, implementation of digital technologies into teaching, development of digital teaching material, etc. For instance, Anna, who has the longest teaching career of all the interviewees, about 45 years, claimed that over the years the workload has been increasing. She said:

I remember that when I started to work at school, there was teaching the lessons, preparation for lessons, evaluation of students' assignments and that was it. If you wanted, you could organize some extracurricular activities.

Another teacher, Laura, also saw the increased workload as one of the most significant negative changes, since the teachers' job became "never-ending". Laura stated:

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

While talking about increasing workload and new tasks most of the participants claimed to believe that the growth of IT and the introduction of new technologies in education has added to the increasing workload and made the teachers' job more difficult. Maria said:

24 hours a day, start to be not enough [for all the tasks]. . . . All the modern technologies were supposed to make our job easier, but they did not. Actually, they increased the workload.

Rita also added to this point:

Teachers should not have to spend a couple of hours creating a single digital exercise that is being completed by students in five minutes of a class. Teachers should have free time. Nowadays teachers do not have any time.

Therefore, some teachers perceived digital innovations as not necessarily helpful, especially when it came to the already high workload. Successful application of innovations and technologies in teaching, as Rita implied, requires time from teachers who already face a scarcity of time. However, most of the interviewees seemed to think that in general digital innovations can be useful and should be applied in the teaching process, and that a “digital world should make teachers’ job easier” (Rita). The problem lies in the fact that teachers themselves argued that they did not have time to be innovative with modern technologies and create their own digital exercises or other teaching material from scratch. Thus, some of them talked about the need for digital innovations to be made into ready-to-use product; that would make the teachers’ work easier without requiring significant extra effort and time. In addition, this teachers’ perspective can be also influenced by the fact which some of the interviewees noted, that older people do not feel as knowledgeable and comfortable with new technologies as the younger generation.

In connection with the high workload, other interviewees also identified increased requirements and demands to teachers. Some of them held a view that nowadays a teacher, as Laura put it, “has to be a know-it-all”. The interviewees noted that lately teachers are required to have more competencies than before. Thus, teachers often have to take part in various seminars and training classes that are supposed to help them to develop new skills and competencies. Some of the interviewees also pointed out that the increased demands are not only coming from the education system or management, but also parents who tend to be more demanding these days regarding their children’s education, and that puts additional pressures on teachers. As Silvia said:

Nowadays it seems that parents expect teachers to prioritize and only attend to their own child. They forget that there is a group of children that a teacher is responsible for.

Maria also added to this point by claiming that modern parents have unrealistic demands for teachers. She said:

There is this thinking that every time, every moment, a child has to be noticed, seen and attended to . . . I think it is simply the exaggerated expectations.

However, a few participants acknowledged that requirements have increased not only for teachers, but also for the students. As Laura said:

Now everything is increasing in arithmetic progression. Just as the universe is expanding, all the requirements and needs are expanding and increasing. And the pace of life is immensely fast and relentless.

Laura implied that nowadays children need to develop more skills and higher competences because of the increased demands of an ever-changing world. These constant developments and changes in lifestyle have made the teachers' job more demanding and difficult. For instance, the participants also talked about educational curricula that, in their opinion, are way too broad. Due to vast educational curricula and the resulting pressures to cover many different topics in limited time, they felt that their teaching had become surface level. Silvia said:

Everything has to be fast—jumping in big steps. There is a lack of stability: for example, if today I am supposed to be teaching nouns [as part of the grammar curriculum], I should teach that topic deeply, slowly, and step by step. But no, one day we have to teach one thing while the next day another. In our current education system, there is so much rush, shallowness, and the lack of thoughtfulness. So much of everything but at the same time nothing.

Therefore, Silvia claimed that her students were not being provided with in-depth teaching, as she did not have the opportunity to teach each single topic extensively, due to the requirements of the curricula and the teaching material. In addition, because of the increased teaching pace and demands, students became deprived from feeling the happiness and pleasure that knowledge and learning process should provide.

While talking about difficulties at work, the teachers often addressed the teaching of children with special educational needs. All of the teachers interviewed in this study mentioned inclusion as a factor which has made the teacher's job more challenging. They pointed to various problems that they faced due to the increasing number of children with special educational needs who have to be included in regular classrooms. The interviewees perceived inclusion as a bad decision made by policy makers, or as Silvia put it, a "step backwards". They claimed that having children with special educational needs in their classrooms negatively affects their teaching, causes frustration, and disturbs the classes. For instance, Anna said:

The biggest problem is that those children are in our classrooms. You plan your lessons in the best possible way, you believe that it will be a great class, but in the end, after all, you just want to cry . . .

She implied that students with special educational needs are perceived as obstacles that turn teaching into a more difficult experience and more demanding work for teachers. In addition, lack of professional knowledge, as well as lack of teachers' aides, exacerbates the problems that teachers encounter while teaching children with varied needs. Rita explained how much she had to struggle to receive help and how degrading it was for her:

I had four children with special needs in my classroom, and I hardly ever got teachers' aides. I have been struggling for three months, I have been called all kinds of names by a child with mental impairment . . . that is downgrading. He was biting me and so on. . . . Those in charge should pay more attention to these things. If there is a request to get teachers' aides, the response should be immediate.

Rita's example suggests how lack of support and aides make teachers very agitated against inclusion, since they are often being left alone to deal with difficulties. As such, the perception of children with special needs as being obstacles is reinforced. In line with what Rita said about the lack of support, Sophia also talked about insufficient support:

It has been said that we will get teachers' aides and that lots of teaching equipment will be provided, but somehow, we do not receive that help. That is why I am having big doubts if those children will be integrated, only the lessons will be disturbed.

All in all, while contemplating on the development of the education sector and the experiences of their teaching career, the interviewed teachers talked about the changes that made their work more difficult and caused certain challenges in their everyday work. The interviewees perceived educational changes as chaotic, disconnected, and unsystematic. The increasing workload and the issue of inclusion were emphasized by all the interviewees as causing the greatest difficulties. In addition, rapid changes, the growth of IT and higher demands for teachers from parents, as well as the education system and higher educational requirements for students, have had a direct impact on the teachers and have made them perceive their job as more challenging as time has passed.

## **4.2 The prestige and status of teaching as a job**

The participants emphasized many different factors that have affected teachers' prestige and status of teaching as a job. The interviewed teachers claimed that increase in paperwork, lack of financing, increased accountability and lack of freedom as well as trust, growing responsibilities, lack of support from management, lower respect, lack of strong labor unions, job precariousness and low teachers' salaries had an effect on the prestige and status of



teaching as a job. However, despite this, the interviewees still perceived their job as significant and fulfilling.

The teachers contended that there had been a significant increase in paperwork as time had passed. As they noted, paperwork such as various questionnaires, reports and project writing, tended to overwhelm their time. Some of the interviewees perceived the paperwork as pointless, time consuming, and even excessive. They said that they would rather devote the time for improving their teaching methods, finding more interesting material for classes, or creating engaging exercises for students, than to have to spend their time filling in various documentation. A few of the teachers who were interviewed said that often school management required the teachers to complete the paperwork very quickly, as Rita said:

You are being told: “I need this information by 12 PM today”. Well, but right now, today, I am teaching the classes . . .

As a result, most of the interviewees argued that too much paperwork tended to disrupt the teaching and to consume teachers’ energy.

Lack of financing for education is the next point that has affected teaching and the status of teachers’ job. The participants mentioned multiple cases when they had experienced that the lack of financing had an impact not only on the quality of teaching, but also on the teachers’ personal income. Laura said:

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

Some teachers claimed that they were not being provided with enough equipment and tools that are needed for teaching. To make lessons more engaging and not so theoretical, the teachers had to spend their own money to buy the additional tools, since the schools could not provide all the things that the teachers needed. One teacher pointed out that they also had to persuade the students’ parents and ask them to provide certain tools for classes. Consequently, the low budget of the schools often tended to prevent teachers from developing innovative exercises and making the lessons more engaging, due to the scarcity of certain supplies. Some teachers also revealed that their schools lacked digital innovations or that access to them is complicated, due to the limited presence of digital technologies such as smart e-blackboards, iPads, etc.

Moreover, the interviewees emphasized that they felt too little freedom and lack of trust in teachers. They claimed that for them, it is very important to feel support from the school management and education system, which should also allow teachers to work more

independently. Here, the teachers also expressed their opinions about standardized testing and other assessments of their work. While discussing standardized testing, the participants were divided in two groups. Half of them strongly criticized standardized testing by claiming that they perceived them as an unneeded practice. They argued that standardized testing does not show the achievements and real knowledge of students, and also causes the students to feel stress. The teachers saw such tests as an additional task to their already high workload. Furthermore, they contended that standardized assessment limits teachers' freedom since they have to concentrate on the knowledge needed for testing. Silvia claimed:

When we try to prepare for testing, we jump from one thing to another instead of slowly teaching some topics and then maybe evaluating our students' performance ourselves and seeing what they have achieved.

Some of the teachers in this group also said that the introduction of standardized testing at the primary school level brought some confusion in the teachers' job. They claimed that, on one hand, teachers were made to believe that testing does not need to be taken very seriously. Standardized assessment should only be seen as a helpful practice to measure the students' knowledge as well as improve the teaching. However, on the other hand, the teachers claimed to be stressed about low performance of their students. If students do not perform well, the teachers are being blamed and face criticisms from the school management for not reaching high scores. Some teachers also pointed out that teachers should have more freedom and should be trusted to measure their students' achievements and make the needed conclusions, since only the teachers can objectively see their students' progress while working with the students day to day.

The other half of teachers did not criticize standardized testing, but held the opinion that testing can be useful for improving students' achievements. However, all the interviewed teachers collectively agreed that standardized testing should not be applied to rank and compare educational institutions or teachers. Ranking and comparison was perceived as a negative thing that adversely affects the teaching community. Anna pointed out that:

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

The teachers also had strong opinions that school rankings cannot be seen as depicting a fair story, since schools and students are too different to be compared. For instance, standardized tests are not adapted for students with special educational needs who usually throughout

their everyday education receive easier tasks and additional help. That is why, the presence of children with special needs often draws down the performance of a class or school. Thus, this can be seen as a significant flaw of testing and rankings. In addition, school ranking has also had an effect on the teaching body by creating unnecessary stress, tensions and competition between teachers. Rankings of schools that are usually openly revealed to the public contribute to the image of the teaching profession. All of this taken together serves to negatively affect the respect towards the teaching community and education sector, which is the next point of the research findings.

While sharing their thoughts and experiences, the teachers also often talked about respect towards teachers, which they perceived had lowered as time passed. A significant majority of the interviewed teachers claimed that at the beginning of their careers, they had felt more respected by society. Teachers were regarded as educated professionals who were to be trusted. Besides that, some of the interviewed teachers said that back in the day, they themselves felt prouder about their occupation than they are now. A few interviewees stated that nowadays the media portray the Lithuanian teaching body mostly negatively while positive stories are being told very rarely. In addition, all the participants mentioned that nowadays management, politicians and especially modern parents are quick to blame and criticize teachers and their work. Maria said:

Nowadays teachers are blamed for everything, for all the bad things. If someone does not like something, if there is distance learning and a child cannot connect to an online class due to technical problems, then that is the teacher's fault. If a student does not do well at school, [for example] did not learn to add, then that is the teacher's fault. If a student does not know how to write a letter, then that is the teacher's fault. Teachers have to take responsibility for everything. From the management it is the same, we also face a lot of pressures. We have to meet the expectations, but our capabilities are not unlimited. We cannot change the whole world.

In line with Maria's claims, Silvia also pointed out:

Now parents are very confident. They feel they have a right to comment, compare, etc., and this is constantly growing. Sometimes a single sensitive event or example is enough to start hearing from everyone how terrible that school is, how terrible that teacher is . . . . While actually we would also like the parents to be more active, to engage more in the life of the classroom and to help out. But to criticize is always much easier.

The participants tended to perceive that the lowering respect for the teaching community is linked to growing teachers' responsibilities. The teachers said that they are being made responsible for too many things by parents, while the parents did not understand that they

themselves have a significant role to play in their children's nurturing and education. The interviewees expressed their view that many responsibilities that used to belong to parents, nowadays have been shifted towards teachers. That only exacerbates the lowering of prestige and respect towards the teaching profession. The teachers also emphasized that teaching seemed to be the only occupation that faces so many criticisms, where anyone can have an opinion about teaching and feel entitled to openly question teachers' work. For instance, Diana said:

Teachers have a degree in teaching, and they know how to teach children. Very often parents feel that they can teach the teachers. But it is nothing like that in other professions. An electrician is never being told how to install a lightbulb, but when it comes to teachers, parents dare to say that we have to do this or do that. This should change . . . there should be respect and acknowledgement that a teacher is a specialist in his or her field.

Therefore, Diana indicated that nowadays teachers tend not to be treated as experts in teaching who should be highly regarded and trusted. Many teachers also noted feeling the lack of support from the school management and education system. The teachers claimed to often encounter pressure from the school management. For instance, Sophia stated that in case of disputes, the management often stood on the parents' side without offering any support for teachers. She said:

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

In addition, the interviewed teachers seemed to be distrustful towards labor unions, or reluctant to join and take part in a teachers' union. None of the interviewees was a member of a union at the time they were interviewed. Some of them said that they had been members of a union before, but withdrew their membership. For instance, Julia explained her decision to leave the union by saying:

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

According to the interviewed teachers, the powerlessness of the union to make any changes was the main reason for why they left it. Many of them stated that they had not noticed any difference between being a member or not. Some also implied that they were not members

of a union because other teachers who work in their school did not belong to a union. However, most of the participants agreed that teachers' labor unions are needed for teachers, but they need to be active and capable of defending teachers' rights. A few participants expressed their view that the lack of a mechanism to defend teachers' rights has led to the pacification of teachers, that they have become more silent, powerless and complicit.

Consequently, the defenseless teaching body has sometimes had to encounter precariousness and a scarcity of jobs. Some participants claimed that they had experienced serious worries and uncertainties whether they would keep their job. Due to high emigration numbers, which led to a decrease in the number of new students, teachers had to face the fear of losing their jobs. A few interviewees acknowledged that in order to stay at work, they were forced to collect their own group of students by visiting kindergartens, as well as private households, to advertise themselves and encourage students and their parents to choose them as teachers. The teachers perceived it as a downgrading experience, since they were being turned into salespeople selling their services, while parents had the right to select the teacher they liked the most. Anna shared her experience by saying:

The principal was saying to us: "You collect your group of students, you keep your job. If not, you will not work . . . someone needs to be fired" . . . We had to go to people's homes . . . some people opened the door, some people shouted at you that they do not want to send their children to your school, others set their dogs to bark on you . . .

Julia also told a similar story:

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

Therefore, job insecurity and the measures taken to maintain the job tend to lower respect for teachers as well as the attractiveness of the teaching profession. Besides that, all the interviewed teachers held the opinion that low teachers' salaries are the main reason why teaching is not highly respected. They claimed that Lithuanian teachers are strongly underpaid, since there is a clear discrepancy between workload, responsibilities and salary. For instance, Maria claimed that "teachers' salary allows you to fulfill only your very minimal needs", while Rita believed that "teachers' salaries are below the poverty line". In addition, some of the participants expressed their disappointment towards the government and the Ministry of Education, that often promise the higher salaries for teachers, but in reality, their

promises hardly come true. Others claimed that the Lithuanian teachers often feel exploited, since they are not being decently valued and adequately paid for their work and devotion.

The only factor that motivated teachers to stay at schools is their passion for teaching and the satisfaction they get out of working with children. Some teachers also pointed out that they, who belong to an older generation of teachers, are more complicit about unfair salaries, while the younger people seek jobs that are higher paid. As a result, according to the interviewees, young people do not see teaching as an attractive career option. As Diana said:

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

However, despite various negative factors that teachers encountered at work, all of the interviewed teachers claimed that being a teacher is very meaningful work. They perceived teaching as a crucially important occupation. As Maria said: "A doctor, a priest, and a teacher—three professions that everyone unavoidably needs throughout their life". While Julia claimed that "educated society depends on teachers". Also, the interviewees saw the role of a teacher as very significant not only for society in general but especially for students. Since teachers are performing many different roles, one of the most important is to support children and ensure their emotional well-being. Silvia pointed out that:

A teacher is always that person to whom the unhappy or hurt child comes, to whom he or she talks to, and from whom receives compassion, help and support.

As such, "a teacher feels almost like a family member" (Silvia), since teachers build a special connection with their students. Some interviewees also claimed that they feel a lot of responsibility and care for their students even when they no longer teach them. Therefore, a deep connection with some of their students gives fulfillment to the teachers as well as motivation for them to carry on. As Rita said:

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

In addition, the teachers said that the ability to share their knowledge with their students, as well as seeing their students excited and proud of their academic achievements, make teachers happy. A few interviewees also pointed out that working with small children makes them more youthful and provides them with motivation and energy. Thus, they perceived teaching as an enriching and fulfilling experience and occupation.

All in all, the interviewed teachers provided many points that addressed the prestige of teachers and status of teaching as a job. They claimed that the prestige of teaching has declined due to various reasons, such as excessive paperwork, lack of financing, lack of trust in teachers, growth of teachers' responsibilities, pressures from management, job precariousness and a lack of strong labor unions. As such, these factors have negatively affected the status of teaching as a job, which has also become less respected and less paid. However, despite many challenges and difficulties that had an impact on teachers' perception of their work, teachers still believed that their job is meaningful and fulfilling.

### **4.3 The feminization of the teaching profession**

This theme focuses on exploring the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania. Teachers were asked to share their thoughts about why the primary school teaching level in Lithuania is predominantly occupied by women. There were no male class teachers working in the schools of the interviewees. The participants brought up various points on this matter that are related to low teachers' salaries, low prestige, and the belief that women are better suited for working with children.

According to most of the teachers, the low teachers' salaries are the main reason why men do not choose to work in primary schools. They think that the low salaries make teaching unattractive for men. Low income prevents even those men who would like to teach from starting a teaching career. This is related with the belief that men are supposed to be so-called breadwinners; that it is their responsibility to provide for their families and ensure financial stability at home, since a man is "the head of the family" (Anna). For this reason, as the interviewed teachers implied, men simply cannot afford to work in primary schools. Maria contended:

Being a teacher, you cannot create a wellbeing for your family. Also, the school can pay you only as much as it can pay. While you can do the impossible, or achieve the best results, but anyway you will be told that there is no money to pay you more.

In addition to that, some of the participants also mentioned the lack of career development options. They claimed that teaching as an occupation tends to have very limited opportunities for advancing one's career, compared to other professions where various promotions are more common. According to the interviewees, men are assumed to be more naturally career seekers, so for them, having the chance to climb the career ladder is very important. That is why even those men who teach often try to achieve higher positions in schools' management or education system rather than staying in teaching.

The other reason for why very few men teach in primary schools in Lithuania is related to the previously mentioned issue of low prestige and the status of the teaching profession. A few of the participants claimed that men tended to seek not only well-paid jobs, but also those jobs that are highly regarded in society. For instance, Silvia stated that “for a man to work at school is not prestigious”. Therefore, since teaching is not considered as a well-respected and attractive occupation, men do not choose it as their career path. One of the participants stated that often men who teach in primary or pre-primary levels are being misunderstood and seen as effeminate.

In addition, most of the interviewed women teachers tended to perceive the absence of men in primary school teaching as normal and a matter of course. “Teacher is a mother” as Maria said, who supposed that teaching is inherently a women’s occupation. Most of the participants tended to hold the same view and claimed that teaching small children, such as primary schoolers (grades 1–4 in Lithuania), is a women’s job. They believe that women are naturally more capable and better with small children. In contrast, men find it uncomfortable to show the love, empathy and care that is a part of educating children. For instance, Diana said:

The teaching profession is womanly because primary school children are still quite small. They need warmth and love. Maybe I am discriminating against men by saying it, but men are naturally more manly. Maybe men are not very good at dealing with small children. Men can be caring, but to show love, to hug a small child, is difficult for them.

Also, according to some interviewees, men struggle to lower themselves to the children’s level, and they see it as childish and unmanly. Others also pointed out that men do not have enough patience that is needed in teachers’ job. However, some of the interviewees talked about the need for male teachers in the primary education sector, since men could make a great input into the teaching profession.

All in all, the interviewed teachers tended to perceive the teaching profession as a woman’s job. While the low teachers’ salaries, limited career development opportunities and low respect towards teachers, only strengthen the feminization of the teaching profession. Therefore, the absence of male teachers in the primary school level seemed to be considered as a matter of course.



## 5 Discussion

In this chapter, the findings of this study will be discussed in view of the post-Soviet Lithuanian educational developments and the theories that were presented in Chapter 2. The research questions of this study are how the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania have affected the teaching profession and teachers' professionalism, as well as what are the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania. To answer these research questions, neoliberal theory (Ball, 2016; Connell, 2009; 2013; 2015; Connell et al., 2009; Harvey, 2007) and feminist theory (Connell, 1995; 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) are used to explore findings of this study. The discussion part is divided into three subchapters that focus on certain topics and provide implications for the research questions. These are the following:

- Intensification of teachers' job
- Respect and attractiveness of teaching as a job
- The gendered implications of the teaching profession

### 5.1 Intensification of teachers' job

One of the topics that needs to be discussed and explored in greater detail is the intensification of the teachers' job. The interviewees brought up many aspects that indicated the greater intensity in teaching as an outcome of educational changes and reforms. Work intensification can be identified through the increased amount of paperwork and various additional tasks, growing teachers' responsibilities and demands for teachers, as well as teaching children with special educational needs, which was perceived by the interviewees as an additional task rather than an integral part of the job.

Increasing workload was perceived by the interviewed teachers as one of the most negative developments in the educational changes. High workload is often strongly correlated with stress, decreasing job satisfaction, lower motivation, and burnout (Fullan, 1996; Timperley & Robinson, 2000). The increasing number of tasks can also lead to longer and often unlimited working hours, as well as an imbalance between work and personal life. Some of the interviewees experienced their job as over-demanding, or as one participant said, "never-ending", and that is why less and less time was being left for their personal life.

The participants claimed that nowadays the Lithuanian teachers have to complete many additional tasks that were not required in the past. That goes in line with the claims and

findings by Fitzgerald et al. (2019), Fullan (1996), Jóhannesson (2006) and Timperley and Robinson (2000), who also discussed the overload in the teachers' job. Greater diversity of additional tasks, such as development as well as participation in various projects, paperwork, community activities, communication with parents, attending seminars and meetings, became a significant part of teachers' work life. Additional tasks, especially the paperwork and other bureaucratic chores, distracted teachers from their actual work, since more and more time and energy had to be devoted for the completion of extra tasks. Paperwork was perceived as often unnecessary and sometimes even pointless activity. According to Fitzgerald et al. (2019), "increased and unmanageable workload", especially in terms of paperwork, is "a symptom of a neoliberal approach" in education, due to increased accountability requirements (p. 627). Fullan (1996) claimed that overload in teaching is one of the main obstacles to successful educational reforms, since teachers have to deal with "multiple innovations and myriad policies" all at once (p. 420). This complies with the interviewees' claims about rapid changes, the need to develop new and higher competencies, as well as growing teachers' responsibilities, which is the next discussion point.

The expanding scope of teachers' tasks also created additional responsibilities and pressures for teachers. The role of the teachers, according to the interviewees, tended to become wider, since new duties have fallen on teachers' shoulders. Higher demands from parents also exacerbated the problem of intensification of the teachers' job. As stated by the interviewees, nowadays, parents are more demanding than before. Consistent with Jóhannesson's (2006) findings, due to social changes, now teachers and schools tend to be more strongly engaged in the upbringing of children than they used to back in the day. The interviewed teachers claimed that modern parents tend to expect that teachers should always attend to and respond to the needs of their child, while ignoring the fact that teachers are responsible to a group of students. However, according to the interviewed teachers, the parents themselves are not actively engaged in their children's education and nurturing, but tend to shift their own responsibilities to the teachers and school. Esteve (2000) explained the increasing responsibilities for teachers by saying that it is "a historical fact" (p. 199). Lately, parents have less authority over their children and spend less time with them (Esteve, 2000). This can be explained by the fact that nowadays most of the mothers have "to work outside home" (Esteve, 2000). Besides that, the growing number of divorces and single parents also has a strong impact on children's emotional health and well-being (Esteve, 2000). Thus, there is an expectation that "all aspects of education should be dealt with at school, even the teaching of those human, emotional and moral values", because children are not being taught those things at home by their parents (Esteve, 2000, p. 200).

In addition, it is important to address the complexities of inclusive education in the light of intensification of teachers' job. The interviewed teachers had strong opinions about inclusion as causing many difficulties in their daily work. Some of them even claimed that the efforts to achieve higher inclusion was a negative decision made by policy makers, or even a "step backwards", as one of the interviewees contended. It is important to note that Lithuania was one of the many countries that signed the United Nations' *Salamanca statement* in 1994 that made inclusion a global educational agenda (Adomaitiene, n.d.; UNESCO, 1994). In 2010, the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) was also ratified by Lithuania. After the ratification of this convention, inclusion of children with special educational needs into regular schools has been one of the main educational goals stated in the latest Lithuanian educational strategies (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013; Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2020). Since Lithuania is a member of the EU, the country also has to comply with European regulations and fulfill the obligations related to higher inclusiveness in education. Therefore, in regular schools, the number of children with special educational needs has been growing according to the interviewed teachers (see also Visuotinė Lietuvių Enciklopedija, n.d.).

However, the interviewed teachers did not perceive inclusion as positive or really necessary. In contrast, it could be argued that inclusion added to the teachers' already high workload and numerous responsibilities. To teach students with varied educational needs is a challenging task, especially when most of the teachers lack professional expertise and skills to respond to the different educational needs of students with difficulties or impairments. Since teachers who worked in regular schools are used to teaching those students who are without impairments, inclusion was seen as an extra burden. As such, inclusion can be perceived as an additional task that has been appointed to teachers because of new educational policies and changes, consistent with the findings of Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014). Some interviewees claimed that the presence of students with special educational needs strongly affects the teachers' job by bringing more instability to the classrooms, as well as making teachers more stressed and disappointed. Also, the teachers' job has become even more demanding, since teachers are not always provided with teachers' aides who should help to minimize the teachers' tasks and responsibilities, while teaching students with special educational needs. Most of the interviewees perceived the lack of teachers' aides and claimed to have struggled to receive assistance.

Thus, it could be argued that greater inclusion of children with special needs into regular classrooms, without providing all the needed support and help for the teachers, is also related to austerity policies that are about cutting expenditure (Harvey, 2007; Sommers & Woolfson, 2014). The interviewed teachers acknowledged that the help and support that is needed for

providing high quality education to all the students was lacking due to limited financing. Therefore, implementing policies of inclusion without providing the required help and support can be seen as a way to save costs due to limited resources. Then, teachers who struggle to receive help perceive inclusion as an additional task. As Sommers and Woolfson (2014) stated, labor but not capital is being made “to bear the primary burden of the ‘necessary’ adjustment” when austerity measures are being adopted (n.p.). Esteve (2000) also pointed out that teachers often experience a mismatch between the requirements and demands as well as available resources to accomplish them. Thus, teachers are expected to work on new goals or implement some changes, while the means and resources for doing so are lacking or even missing (Esteve 2000). It is not surprising then, that teachers have become skeptical about, or agitated against, new developments, or in this case greater inclusion. Due to lack of professional knowledge regarding inclusive practices, as well as insufficient support, it seems that inclusion has become a challenging issue for teachers, in spite of being a crucial human right that should be pursued and fostered in all regular classrooms.

## **5.2 Respect and attractiveness of teaching as a job**

The next topic that needs to be discussed in detail is respect towards, and attractiveness of, teaching as a job. The interviewed teachers pointed out certain aspects of their work that could be seen as leading to lower respect and attractiveness of teaching, as well as arguably reflecting neoliberal features in education. The below discussion is divided into five sections about different aspect in each section.

### **5.2.1 Increased accountability and performativity**

Standardized testing and rankings are a clear indication of the increasing accountability and performativity in education (Ball, 2003; 2016; Connell, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011). In Lithuania, national pupils’ achievement testing began in 2012, even though the first national attempts to assess students’ achievements were made in 2002. The very first participation in international standardized testing IEA TIMSS was in 1995 (Nacionalinis egzaminu centras, n.d.). Also, since 2014, every spring, primary school students from grade 2 and grade 4 take national standardized test (Nacionalinis egzaminu centras, n.d.; Eurydice, 2022).

The interviewed teachers had different opinions about standardized testing. Some of them strongly criticized testing for being unnecessary and not revealing the actual achievements of the students. Others claimed that testing can be rather useful. However, all the interviewees had negative opinions about comparisons and rankings that became a part of standardized assessment. Teachers and schools are being compared with one another based on their students’ performance in standardized assessments. According to Ball (2003), performativity

is “a technology, a culture, and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions” (p. 216). The performances indicate “productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’” that are crucial in neoliberalism (Ball, 2003, p. 216; Harvey, 2007). Increasing productivity, maximization, and competition are one of the main features of neoliberalism in education (Connell, 2009; Harvey, 2007). It is believed that competition can lead to better results and achievements (Harvey, 2007). However, the interviewed teachers perceived comparison and ranking as unfair since students as well as schools are too different to be compared. Besides that, standardized assessments cause stress not only to students, but also to teachers. Some of the interviewed teachers acknowledged to be worried about their students’ performance in standardized assessments, because teachers face criticisms and are made accountable for the poor performance of their students. Ball (2003) calls it “the terrors of performativity” (p. 216).

Therefore, pressures to perform well and produce good results strongly affect teachers and their teaching. According to Nussbaum (2010) and Sahlberg (2011), due to performativity with the emphasis on benchmarks and measurable results, teachers tend to concentrate on the knowledge needed for testing. Besides that, Ball (2003) argues that teachers become deprofessionalized. Increasing performativity and accountability brings uncertainty and instability because of various assessments, inspections, audits and “regular publications of results” that are the “mechanics of performativity” (p. 220). It also complies with the teachers’ claims about increased paperwork due “to demands of performativity” that consume a lot of teachers’ time (Ball, 2003). As Ball (2003) stated, teachers tend to spend more time “reporting what [they] do, rather than doing it” (Ball, 2016, p. 1054). As a result, teachers tend to be less trusted and respected, while their role as autonomous experts tends to diminish.

The interviewed teachers made similar claims that teachers should be allowed to have more freedom and should be more trusted. Some of them even held an opinion that teachers are the most competent to assess their students’ progress and achievements, because they are professionals who are well acquainted with their students while teaching them every day. The interviewees also acknowledged the lack of space to maneuver while teaching, as well as the need for more flexibility to make their own judgements while deciding which direction to take to respond to the needs of their students. But, according to Connell (2009), “neoliberalism distrusts teachers” and their judgements (p. 217). Thus, under marker-oriented neoliberalism, schools and teachers have to “make themselves auditable” (Connell, 2009, p. 218). This leads to the perception of teachers as technicians who teach according to strongly defined methods and curricula, that are considered as “best practice”, resulting in desired achievements that are easily measured (Connell, 2009, p. 224). However, Ball (2016) argued

the contrary, that “in education not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts” (p. 1054). Therefore, the neoliberal model of education and perception of the teaching community excludes and disregards the multiple roles that teachers usually perform, for instance, emotional labor that is a significant part of teaching. All of that has a significant impact on students and their parents, which is the topic of the next subchapter.

### **5.2.2 Parents as customers**

Under neoliberalism, the main purpose of education appears to be the production of human capital (Connell, 2013; 2015; Connell et al., 2009). In other words, educational institutions provide students with knowledge, attitudes, and skills that are needed for the labor market. The greater the skills and knowledge, the higher personal as well as market profits will be achieved (Connell, 2013; 2015). As such, education is “the business of forming the skills and attitudes needed by a productive workforce” (Connell, 2013, p. 104; 2015, p. 186). When education becomes more commodified and marketized, the roles of students as well as parents change. Parents are seen as customers who make individual choices while selecting an educational institution for their children (Connell, 2011; 2013; 2015; Rubin et al., 2020). Therefore, schools as well as teachers compete in order to attract more students. Educational institutions seek to produce high scores in standardized testing to be competitive and attractive (Sahlberg, 2011). For instance, in Lithuania, various rankings of educational institutions based on students’ performance in standardized tests, *matura* exams, etc. are being announced twice a year in the educational magazine for wider society called *Reitingai* (Ranking). The announcement of those rankings gets quite a lot attention in Lithuania and rankings are being widely discussed.

Moreover, the interviewed teachers noticed not only some changes in the parental role regarding children’s upbringing, but also changes in how parents view teachers. The interviewees claimed that modern parents often have too high and unrealistic expectations for teachers. Nowadays, parents are also quick to criticize and freely judge educators. The interviewed teachers acknowledged to feel pressures from parents who tended to blame educators for poor academic performance of their children or other difficulties that children encounter. Therefore, it could be argued that parents exercise the power and rights of customers and feel entitled to judge and complain. According to Deslandes et al. (2015), the “culture of clientelism seems to give more power to parents than they had in the past and to open the door to greater expectations and greater demands on the part of the whole society” (p. 140). Since in the system driven by market values, “the customer is always right”, teachers become silenced and have to yield to parents. As some of the participants noted, in case of conflict or dispute, even the school management tended to stand on the parents’ side rather

than with the teachers. It could be argued that management tries to maintain a good image of their school and make parents, who are perceived as customers, satisfied. As a result, the teaching body becomes less respected and more powerless.

### **5.2.3 Job precariousness and defenseless teaching body**

Some of the interviewees revealed to be subject to precarious working conditions that made them worried about losing their job. As a result of the decreasing number of students and increasing competition between schools, teachers had to find and form their own group of students to maintain their job. To do that, teachers had to attract students by advertising themselves when visiting kindergartens or even private households. The teachers said that this was a downgrading experience, and it can be argued that this turned educators into salespeople who must sell their service. Such practices and experiences not only affect the general image of the teaching body, but also have an impact on the teachers' perception of themselves. It also leads to individualism and competition between teachers which often is a sign of neoliberalism (Connell, 2009; Harvey, 2007). As is argued by some scholars (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011), contrary to individualism, cooperation is crucially needed in the teaching communities.

However, in a market system the workforce is often insecure (Connell, 2013). As Connell (2013) stated, job insecurity has also been increasing among the teaching communities. As such, there is a growing number of part-time and occasional jobs (Connell, 2013; 2015). According to OECD (2016) data, some teachers in Lithuania face unclear distribution of working hours and do not have full-time employment. Moreover, anti-unionism or weakening of labor unions is one of the features of neoliberalism (Connell, 2013; 2015; Harvey, 2007). In the neoliberal era, when individualism is strongly emphasized, the workers tend to be less united while the rights of the workforce tend to decline.

In Lithuania, there are two main labor unions that represent teachers and workers of education sector. It is not clear how many teachers in Lithuania belong to unions, since such information is not being collected by the Ministry of Education (Jakubauskas, 2019). According to information provided by the labor unions themselves, together they approximately unite 15,000 members (Jakubauskas, 2019). This does not seem to represent the majority of teachers, as this number is rather small considering the fact that 42,616 teachers were working in Lithuanian educational institutions in the academic year of 2018–19 (Lithuanian Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2019).

Accordingly, none of the interviewed teachers were members of teachers' labor unions at the time they were interviewed. Some of them used to belong to a union in the past, but later withdrew their membership. The main stated reason was that the unions were ineffective and

incapable of representing the teachers and defending their rights. Others claimed that they did not belong to a union because none of their colleagues were in a union. However, some of the teachers admitted that labor unions are important and needed for a teaching workforce, but emphasized that unions should be active, strong and capable of defending teachers' rights. The absence of strong teachers' labor unions might also have a certain impact on low teachers' salaries, which is discussed in more detail in the next subchapter.

#### **5.2.4 Low salary – lower attractiveness**

While talking about attractiveness of teaching profession, the interviewed teachers pointed out that low teachers' salaries are the main demotivational factor preventing young people from becoming teachers. The participants claimed that teachers in Lithuania are strongly underpaid, since there is a big mismatch between the salary and the workload, responsibilities and demands. According to OECD (2021) data, Lithuanian primary school teachers receive lower average salaries than the average primary school teachers' salary in OECD countries. Low teachers' salaries affect the social standing of the teaching profession and limit its competitiveness in the labor market (Lietuvos svietimo darbuotoju profesine sajunga, 2021).

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

#### **5.2.5 Lower respect but still meaningful and fulfilling job**

Despite the many challenges and difficulties that teachers often encountered in their jobs, the interviewees still perceived teaching as an important, meaningful, and enriching job. All of the interviewed teachers claimed that they enjoy caring for and working with small children. The teaching job provided them some fulfillment and satisfaction. According to Hargreaves (1996), primary school teachers find the greatest satisfaction „not in pay, prestige or promotion” but



in the “*psychic rewards of teaching*”, which are “the joys and satisfactions of caring for and working with young people” (p. 173). As Hargreaves (1996) argued, commitment to care and nurturance is strongly perceived by most of the primary school teachers and often it is seen as a (main) motivating factor for choosing teaching jobs. This goes in line with the interviewees’ claims when most of them said that they chose to become teachers because they love children. Hargreaves (1996) defines care as an “interpersonal experience of human nurturance, connectedness, warmth and love” (p. 145). The interviewed teachers also talked about feeling connected to their students. The teachers acknowledged to deeply care not only about the academic achievements, but especially about the well-being and happiness of their students. They pointed out that primary school students, who are quite small children, also feel some affection for their primary school teachers, who are their very first teachers. Thus, teachers experience emotional reciprocity in their work because they often receive love and appreciation from their students, and that makes their job enriching.

### **5.3 The gendered implications of the teaching profession**

Since the teaching profession in Lithuania is strongly gender-divided and there were no male class teachers working at the research sites, it is important to discuss the gendered implications of the teaching profession in Lithuania. In Lithuania, women teachers outnumber male teachers in the primary school teaching level. Thus, the interviewed women teachers provided their own opinions on why primary school teaching is strongly feminized.

It is interesting that women’s over-representation in the teaching profession, as well as the absence of men in primary school teaching, was not perceived as problematic, but rather as a natural thing. The belief that women are better with children, since women are more capable of showing love and care, is related to gender stereotypes that lead to job segregation by gender. The deeply rooted and socially constructed stereotypes about different genders seemed to be widespread in Lithuania. As such, the women’s sphere is usually defined by domestic labor, nurturing of children and other jobs that are related with caring (Connell, 2000). Men, however, often try to comply with the characteristics that are attributed to ‘a real man’ or a superordinate form of masculinity which is called hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995, Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). According to Donaldson (1993), the idea of hegemonic masculinity entails that men are not able to take care of small children and actually do not see the need to do that, while women’s relationship and bonds with children are considered as crucial. Thus, the interviewees seemed to hold the view that teaching small children is difficult for men because they do not possess those personality traits and characteristics, such as empathy, love and care, that are needed for teaching primary schoolers who are 7–10 years old in Lithuania.

On the other hand, since a “teacher is a mother”, as one of the interviewees said, it is a matter of course that women dominate in teaching. This complies with Drudy’s (2008) claim that the female teacher is perceived as the ideal teacher for small children, because women’s nature makes them better with children. In contrast, Donaldson (1993) claimed that active parenting tends to have little to do with the notion of manhood, although pointing out that care-giving activities and behaviors are often seen as unmanly. That is why men who teach small children can be seen as inferior type of men, since they do not conform to the established norms of idealized manhood.

Also, the low teachers’ salary was often addressed as one of the main obstacles for why men do not choose to teach in primary schools. As the interviewees claimed, men simply cannot afford to work at schools, since teachers’ salaries are too low to provide for a family and ensure the well-being of one’s own children. This reveals that the image of a man as a breadwinner is strong in Lithuania. It implies that men’s duty is to ensure the financial stability and security for the family. That is why men tend to choose those jobs that are higher paid rather than to adopt a teaching career. As Wallerstein (1995) stated in his analysis of historical capitalism, work has been divided into productive and unproductive work. Productive work has been considered as “money-earning work” that was supposed to be performed by men in a workplace that is outside the household (Wallerstein, 1995, p. 24). Therefore, it can be argued that men still feel pressure to conform to the norm that they need to have ‘productive’ and ‘real’ work, that would be highly paid. As a result, women mostly are left to occupy lower paid jobs that are sometimes called pink-collar jobs (Howe, 1977). Caretaking jobs such as nursing, taking care of children or the teaching of young children, can be considered as pink-collar jobs that are mostly performed by women.

In addition, as stated by the interviewees, men tend to choose those occupations that offer more career development options. It has to do with stereotypes about real manhood and masculine nature when men are perceived as more competitive, active, and tough (Donaldson, 1993). Then, for men, having the opportunities to climb the career ladder is important since it allows them to live up by the established norms and stereotypes. Also, according to the interviewed teachers, men do not find the teaching profession attractive due to its quite low prestige in Lithuanian society. As Drudy (2008) pointed out, the professional standing of an occupation has an impact on men’s career choices. She claimed that there are doubts whether teaching can be called a profession since teachers do not “exercise collegiate control” over their work (p. 315). On the other hand, mostly those occupations that were men-dominated tended to be referred as real professions (Drudy, 2008). Therefore, it could be argued that, since teaching is a women-dominated occupation, it tends to lack professional

standing, prestige and solid pay. All of this reinforces the feminization of teaching as a job, because low pay and prestige makes it unattractive for men.

All in all, the feminization of the teaching profession in Lithuania is a complex matter caused by various stereotypes and societal expectations that are related to pay, prestige and professional development choices. Deeply engrained gender stereotypes seem to be quite strong in Lithuania where men are expected to have well-paid, respectable, manly jobs that allow them to perform the breadwinner's role. Therefore, socially constructed gender norms affect men's career choices and maintain the division of labor.

This concludes the previous three sections that discussed the intensification of teachers' job, the complexities that relate to the respect and attractiveness of teachers' job, as well as the gendered implications for the teaching profession. It could be argued that all these topics indicate certain neoliberal features in the current Lithuanian educational system. The clearest examples of neoliberal tendencies could be increasing accountability and performativity measures, changing teachers' and parents' roles and the growing insecurity of the teaching workforce. This can be seen as an outcome of educational transformations with the shift from the socio-cultural orientation of education towards an economic paradigm. The direction of the transformations was influenced by global developments and Western educational practices. As a result, the neoliberal turn in education tended to have a rather negative impact on the Lithuanian teaching profession, which is strongly feminized and currently faces some serious challenges.

## 6 Final words and conclusions

The Lithuanian education system underwent many changes and reforms that had a significant effect on the teaching community. Nowadays the Lithuanian teaching profession is encountering many challenges that cause serious concerns not only among educators but also among wider society members. There is an ongoing public debate about the forthcoming shortage of teachers in the very near future due to the low attractiveness of teaching as a job. Because of this, I became very interested to delve deeper into this topic and to hear the primary teachers' perceptions about the challenges as well as new opportunities that they have been facing throughout their teaching carriers. Therefore, the research questions of the study were the following:

*How have the post-Soviet educational transformations and reforms in Lithuania affected the teaching profession and teachers' professionalism. What are the gendered implications for the teaching profession in Lithuania?*

Even though there were certain limitations to this study (see section 3.6), I managed to collect rich data through semi-structured interviews with eight primary school women teachers in Lithuania who have 25–45 years of professional teaching experience. The thematic analysis of the data revealed an intensification of the teachers' job and other complexities that are strongly related to the respect for, and attractiveness of, the teaching profession. In addition, primary school teaching was perceived as a women's job due to deeply engrained gender norms and stereotypes that maintain occupational segregation by gender. Some features of neoliberalism and neoliberal developments were also indicated in the Lithuanian primary school level, after the in-depth analysis of the findings. Thus, it seems to be evident that the post-Soviet educational transformations in Lithuania were affected by global neoliberal educational tendencies that had an impact on the Lithuanian teaching profession.

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, some recommendations can be identified. The need for greater consideration of resistance to widely spread market logic and neoliberal developments in education can be suggested. The belief that education is just about gaining knowledge and skills needed for the labor market should be questioned. As such, education should be perceived in a more holistic way, when the nurturing of moral values, human rights, critical thinking, democratic citizenship, and emotional wellbeing are being seen as educational goals (Nussbaum, 2010). This model would contrast with the "teacher-as-technician" model which is common under neoliberalism (Connell, 2009, p. 224).

Since increasing accountability has led to growing paperwork, significant amount of paperwork should be lifted from teachers' shoulders. That would allow teachers to devote

more time for professional growth and improvement of their daily practices, such as development of new creative teaching methods and inclusive practices, as well as adoption of innovative technologies.

Greater support mechanisms and professional help should be provided and made more easily accessible for students with special educational needs and their teachers, especially regarding the lack of teachers' aides. That would help teachers to respond to the varied needs of different students more easily and effectively, as well as providing higher quality education to all the students, while students with special educational needs would receive proper support. In addition, it would help to achieve greater inclusion and ensure every student's right to education, as well as strengthening human rights and respect for diversity. Teacher education programs should also address inclusion more extensively to provide the needed professional skills and to encourage more positive attitude towards inclusion.

The results of standardized assessments should not be used to evaluate teachers' work or make judgements about teachers' competencies. Performance in standardized assessments should not lead to comparisons and rankings of teachers or schools, because that creates unnecessary stress and competition between teachers. It also leads to teaching for tests and lack of trust in teachers. Instead of increasing individualism and competition between educators, cooperation and community values should be emphasized. That would result in collective responsibility and would build greater social capital that is crucial for a highly professional teaching body (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In addition, greater cooperation between educators would help teachers to deal with challenges and difficulties.

The requirement for teachers to have a masters' degree in teaching could be considered as a decision for creating greater career development opportunities for teachers that are currently quite limited. A greater variety of career development choices could lead to higher attractiveness of the teaching profession, that would help to attract young, motivated teachers who are currently very needed in Lithuania because of the aging teaching community.

All in all, I hope that this research is a small contribution to a greater understanding of the complexities that Lithuanian primary school teachers have encountered in their work, in relation to educational transformations. This research has helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the Lithuanian educational transformations and complexities of teachers' job. The analysis of the collected data also revealed the need for more studies on the issues covered in this research.

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## Appendix A: Interview questions

- How long have you been working as a teacher?
- Why did you choose this profession?
- What kind of educational degree do you have in teaching?
- What has been the most enjoyable part of your work?
- Did you face any difficulties and challenges at work? If yes, did you receive any help or support to cope with those difficulties?
- Do you feel stress at work? If yes, what causes you to feel it?
- Have you experienced any changes, small or large, during your teaching career? If yes, what is your opinion on those changes? What impact did they have on the teaching profession in Lithuania?
- What is your experience and opinion about standardized testing?
- Are you a member of a labor union?
- Do you feel your work is important and does it give you fulfillment?
- Have you ever considered leaving the teaching profession? If yes, then why?
- What do you think about how you are paid for your work?
- What do you think about why women teachers dominate in primary school teaching in Lithuania?
- What do you think is the general opinion on the teaching profession in Lithuania?
- Do you think that the attitude of wider society towards the teaching profession has changed in the last 20-30 years? If yes, then how?
- Do you think the teaching profession in Lithuania is attractive for new recruits?
- Can you name any changes or reforms that are needed to make the teaching profession more attractive?

## Appendix B: Informed consent



### SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

#### Challenges and opportunities for Lithuanian teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Consent form

##### Dear teacher

I have asked you to participate in this study which is a part of my master's thesis. Its aim is look at the challenges and opportunities that the Lithuanian primary school teachers have been facing since the country gained independence in 1990. I am interested to hear about teachers' work experience as well as opinions about the Lithuanian teaching profession.

The interview is likely to take up to one hour. Each participant will be given a pseudonym for the sake of anonymity.

The study is a part of a master's study program in International Studies in Education at the University of Iceland. The thesis supervisor is Professor Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson ([ingo@hi.is](mailto:ingo@hi.is), tel. +354 525 5523/+354 869 4217).

##### Signatures

I have read this information, and I agree to participate. I understand that the interview will be recorded, the material will be used solely for research purposes, including a possible publication of research articles, and the recording will be destroyed on completion of the master's thesis. I also understand that although I have freely agreed to participate, I can withdraw from the participation after the interview has been conducted.

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Signature of the participant – place and date

I thank you for the participation. I will not reveal information about you or your school, or tell anyone anything personal about you that will be talked about in the interview. Only I and my supervisor will have access to the research material.

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Signature above the line – Karolina Kunceviute ([kak65@hi.is](mailto:kak65@hi.is))