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Liminality between the lines: self-defined, socially constructed and ontological constraints in the narratives of Russian-medium school teachers in Estonia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the segregated context of Estonian education systems, where Estonian and Russian medium schools coexist. Using the underrepresented theory of liminality in sociology, the author examines the vulnerable positions of teachers in Russian-medium schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This study employs a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews as the main method, the snowball sampling technique of data collection and a hybrid thematic analysis. The sample includes 27 teachers from around Estonia.

Findings – The findings reveal that these teachers experience different forms of liminality, shaped by self-defined, socially constructed and ontological constraints. These liminal moments foster teacher reflexivity, serving as a catalyst for their transformations while navigating the state of "in-betweenness."

Practical implications – Practically, as Estonia continues to navigate its educational reforms and cultural shifts, recognizing and addressing the liminality of Russian-medium school teachers is crucial for promoting diversity, equity and inclusion within the nation's educational landscape.

Originality/value – The study brings theoretical novelty to the anthropological theory of liminality, combining it with a new empirical case of the Estonian parallel education system, which had been under-explored from the side of the Russian-speaking community (particularly the Russian-medium schools).

Keywords Minority teachers, Liminality, Transformation, Reflexivity, Social reproduction

Paper type Research paper

In memory of professor Ellu Saar

Introduction

Education systems regularly traverse periods of uncertainty due to constant political and social reforms. They may encounter various structural and cultural upheavals, while educators are consistently subject to transformation. The Estonian education system stands as a prominent empirical example of turbulence and success. In 1991, Estonia emerged from the shadows of the "Soviet regime" (Kestere *et al.*, 2020). Alongside other domains such as the economic sphere, social enterprise, and technology, Estonia achieved remarkable success in education, ascending to a leadership position among OECD member states and within the European Union based on its PISA results in 2018 and 2022. The separation from the Soviet past, following Estonia's restoration of independence, followed a dual logic: the emergence of a new social reality compelled the development of innovative relationships with international

I express my gratitude to professor Ellu Saar (Tallinn University) for inspiring the idea behind this article. This paper is in her memory. I am also appreciative of my supervisors professor Krista Loogma and associate professor Meril Ümarik (Tallinn University) for their support. My big gratitude goes to the teachers in Estonian Russian-medium schools for their eloquence and sincerity during our conversations.

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institutions, fostering optimistic future scenarios. Simultaneously, the reconstruction of its collective identity unfolded as an intimately introspective process that oriented the nation towards its historical roots. A particular aspect of this historical past, which was met with reluctance, was associated with the national cultural trauma (Alexander, 2004) and the community that still embodies it—the Russian-speaking community residing in Estonia, comprising 26% of the population according to Statistics Estonia.

Taking "transitional periods and transformation" as a focal point in this article, I delve into a particular facet of Estonia's profound change and liminality (Turner, 1969) – the parallel education system. This system is an integral part of Estonia's journey from its historical past to its present. Despite the comprehensive overhaul of the national education since 1991, aimed at aligning it with national, democratic, and humanist values (Loogma *et al*., 2013), it is evident that two institutionally segregated communities continue to coexist within it. On the one hand, there are schools that provide instruction in Estonian, which themselves signify a form of cultural and professional transformation that has unfolded in Estonia over the past 3 decades. On the other hand, there are schools that offer instruction in Russian, which, within the discourse, are often linked to Soviet pedagogical traditions, lower PISA results at the national level, and the enduring disadvantaged position of their graduates in the labor market (Lindemann and Saar, 2012; Zaichenko, 2021, 2023). Teachers in these Russian-medium schools are frequently depicted in public discourses as existing in a state of inherent isolation and as perpetuating their own somewhat liminal status, not fitting into the advanced educational landscape that Estonia positions itself within (Zaichenko, 2021; Erss, 2023).

Given that the evolving circumstances of teachers instructing in schools where the primary language of education is Russian pose an intricate conundrum, this study employs a qualitative research methodology in combination with the anthropological theory of liminality (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969) to investigate this highly under-explored cohort at a micro level. The principal objective is to comprehend the underlying factors influencing the development of their agency. Despite being often characterized in public discourse as perpetuating conventional practices, these teachers also navigate transformative phases, which, when encumbered by constraints, may not necessarily translate into "established practices" (Archer, 2003). This study seeks to address the following questions: (1) What precisely are the constraints shaping the professional practices of the teachers in the Russian-medium schools in Estonia? (2) What types of constraints render their positions liminal, occupying an intermediate space? (3) How do these teachers traverse through their states of liminality?

To address these inquiries, I employ already mentioned and relatively underrepresented theory of liminality (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; Thomassen, 2009) in social research. This theory offers a nuanced perspective on how the interplay between structure and agency may not invariably manifest in actual practice; instead, the consequence of these interactions can remain elusive, with outcomes undefined.

My data was collected in 2021 and comprises responses from 27 teachers representing various government-funded schools across Estonia. I conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) in which data analysis was interwoven with the interviews from the outset (Charmaz, 2006). Therefore, I employed a hybrid approach, initially proceeding inductively and culminating in theory-led thematic development during the final stage. My analysis leads to the conclusion that these teachers manifest three overarching types of constraints that distinctly characterize their work-related positions as liminal. These constraints encompass the domains of the socially-constructed, the self-constructed, and the ontological. While certain constraints within this framework are amenable to correction, others are inherent to a pre-existing structural context (Archer, 1995) and consequently inalterable. Collectively, these constraints contribute to the liminality of these teachers' positions, rendering them contingent. This dual dynamic perpetuates the replication of their social positions on one hand while simultaneously fostering a transformation of their reflexivity (Archer, 2003, 2007) on the other.

Russian-medium schools in Estonia: limits of liminality

The most significant transformation within the Estonian education system occurred during the collapse of the Soviet bloc. During this period, Estonia shifted from being an "occupied nation to becoming a part of democratic Europe" (Kalmus *et al*., 2020). Education, which had been ideologically controlled during the Soviet era, underwent a radical transformation, embracing innovative changes brought about by an unprecedented influx of information, technological advancements, and the embrace of "national-liberal" values within both the market and cultural spheres (ibid.).

Among the factors contributing to long-standing political and ethnic tensions between Estonia's two largest communities was the presence of a two-tiered education system with schools instructing in both languages. This system exacerbated extensive social stratification, reinforcing economic, cultural, and spatial segregation between these two groups.

National education reforms after 1991 were directed towards the democratization and humanization of schools (Loogma *et al*., 2013). These reforms included the introduction of new curriculum versions in 1989 and 1996 (subsequently amended in 2002 and 2011) aimed at gradually neoliberalizing education (ibid.). This involved decentralizing curriculum development to enhance teachers' sense of ownership (Viirpalu *et al*., 2021), fostering competition as a primary driver of system transformation (Archer, 2013), and granting school headmasters significant decision-making autonomy across all organizational domains. Additionally, it promoted increased parental choice, established new professional standards for teachers, and imposed public accountability rules on schools (Kestere *et al*., 2020), collectively contributing to a thoroughly transformed educational landscape.

Russian-medium schools, as part of the national education system, underwent similar changes, although some scholars contend that they embraced autonomy with the aim of perpetuating the former ideology, continuing to apply "Soviet-era repertoires," especially during the 1990s when they were allowed to use textbooks published in Russia (Oja, 2020).

In 1993, the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act was enacted as part of the Estonian state's efforts "to Estonianize" Russian schools and "to support the harmonization of the educational system," (Kiilo, 2013). The transition of all state and municipal upper secondary schools to the national language, originally scheduled for 2003, encountered insurmountable challenges and was postponed. Concurrently, the Citizenship law, which required knowledge of the Estonian language, was passed, allowing Russian-speaking minorities to obtain citizenship through naturalization only (Vetik, Helemäe, 2011). In 2007, the government began gradually implementing a regulation requiring that 60% of upper secondary studies in all schools be conducted in Estonian by the 2011/2012 school year. The state also actively supported the implementation of language immersion programs (Lindemann, 2013), initially modeled after the Canadian approach and developed with its support.

Teaching subjects at the upper-secondary level in the national language required C1 language proficiency (with intermediate B2 level required for teaching in another language). The state financed numerous Estonian language training courses, including those offered in schools, and provided supplementary materials for Russian teachers. However, this process encountered challenges, with the Integration Foundation (Estonian Cooperation Assembly, 2017) reporting in 2011 that the majority of high school graduates struggled to compete in the labor market, while 70% of Russian-speaking teachers failed to meet language requirements. The issue of language proficiency remained a subject of active public discussion. Additionally, the Estonian education system's gradual success in the PISA international assessment, where it achieved the top position among EU Member States in 2018 and 2022, highlighted a gap as Russian-medium schools consistently lagged "one academic year" behind their Estonian counterparts (MoER, 2019) in this competition.

These policy adjustments, combined with structural challenges such as a declining population (including among Russian-speaking families) and a decrease in per capita school funding (Kestere *et al*., 2020), placed the number of minority schools at risk of reduction. As of

2023, the number of monolingual "Russian schools"[1] in Estonia had fallen from 71 in 2006 to 24 (4.8% of the overall number of schools in Estonia), while bilingual schools decreased to 78 (15%) compared to 92 in 2006.

Enduring political discourses regarding the development of a "seamless Estonian school" that teaches in the national language, increasing concerns about "security related to the Russian threat" (Kalmus *et al.*, 2020, p. 109), and high levels of residential segregation (with Russian households constituting 66% of northeastern Estonia, and particular districts of Tallinn being mono-ethnic Russian) (Statistics Estonia, 2022) all appear to intensify the liminal positions for teachers in schools serving the Russian community. Furthermore, new regulations implemented in 2023 stipulate the transition to a unified education system in Estonian language, scheduled for the 2024/2025 academic year. This transition will commence with kindergartens and primary schools, with the process extending to all stages of education and expected to conclude by 2029/2030. Starting from August 1, 2023, all school principals must possess Estonian language proficiency at C1 level, and by 2024, all non-native teachers must also attain C1 proficiency (Soltz, 2022).

The theory of liminality as a theoretical framework

My hybrid thematic analysis led me to the "theory of liminality" (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969), and I would like to briefly introduce this theory further.

The anthropological theory, initially formulated by Gennep (1960) and expanded upon by Turner (1969), originally focused on the experiences of individuals undergoing "rites of passage" (Gennep, 1960). In anthropology, the term "liminality" is associated with a sense of chaos, ambiguity, or the state "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969), which a social group endures when encountering a time of transition. The "liminal phase" is described as a period of "social and cultural transitions" (Turner, 1969) when the structures that previously maintained social order begin to dissipate, and the ordinary, taken-for-granted structures of life weaken (Szakolczai, 2009). During this period, an individual or social group enters an ambiguous phase of the "unknown". The term "liminality" itself derives from the Latin "limen", which can roughly be translated as "threshold" (Turner, 1969; Fusu, 2017), or more precisely, "a stone placed on the threshold of a door that physically had to be mounted to cross from one space into another" (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 152). This term signifies a zone or space where individuals are transitioning from their previous status or location but have not yet reached their destination and must exert effort to do so.

During the liminal phase of a rite of passage, members of the social group often experience a strong sense of homogeneity and comradeship (Turner, 1969), characterized by the "moment of in-out secular social structure" known as communitas. The transition from one state or set of rules to another typically consists of three phases: (1) separation or the loss of the previous status, involving a break with previous practices and routines, "leaving behind a certain fixed role, status, or identity" (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 148); (2) the margin (or "limen"), representing a cultural or social realm that "has few or no attributes of the past or coming state"; a state of "being on the limit" (Turner, 1969, p. 359; Szakolczai, 2009) or experiencing "anti-structure" (Turner, 1969); (3) aggregation (reaggregation or incorporation), a stage at which new rules, social roles, and order are accepted, signifying the completion of the transition and the attainment of a new structure, while transformation has occurred. It's noteworthy that during the second phase of liminality, members of the transition, the communitas, may exhibit passive or humble behavior, silence, and a tendency to be "ground down to a uniform condition" (Turner, 1969, p. 360). This phase is also characterized by "simplicity", "obedience", and "heteronomy" in contrast to "complexity", creativity, and "certain autonomy" (ibid.). Transformation is typically catalyzed by strong leadership (Turner, 1969) during this phase of "social limbo" (Turner, 1982, p. 24), where attributes of both the preceding and subsequent states coexist. However, the moment of reaggregation or incorporation into the new social order may never come, and the communitas may repeatedly revert to old practices and

patterns. The imitative aspect of liminal situations has been emphasized by Turner (1969) and Szakolczai (2009) when individuals lose the structure that was previously considered "objective". Imitating old patterns in the liminal phase leaves the communitas in an imaginative state of order but prevents real transformation and crossing the threshold. According to Szakolczai (2009), the problems of imitation in liminal situations are intricately linked with questions of leadership – who manages to convince others to follow them as a model (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 154).

In the fields of social and political sciences, the concept of liminality has been applied to discussions about how societies cope with the loss of formal institutions in an era of continuous transitions and rapid meaning formation (Horvath *et al*., 2015). In organization studies, the concept has contributed to the understanding of how organizational liminal processes are managed and which mechanisms are crucial for organizations to navigate through liminal phases (Söderlund and Borg, 2018). It has been used to explore how individuals experience these liminal phases at work, how they develop new identities to face new situations, and what kinds of identities they develop (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015; Paton and Hodgson, 2016). It has also been used to examine the role of "the master of ceremonies" or leadership in liminal times (Boudreau *et al*., 2014; Wagner *et al*., 2012). Liminality has been discussed as a source of creative agency in knowledge-sharing communities by Swan *et al*. (2016). Theory has also traditionally been applied to marginal groups sharing non-traditional "living at the edge" norms or minority groups opposing or continually adjusting themselves to established (majoritarian) norms (Thomassen, 2009). Agency exercised within the bounds of liminal space was discussed by Evans (2017), introducing the concept of "bounded agency", which explores the limits, both structural and subjective, of individuals' beliefs and actions. From her perspective, this is the liminal space where the "reformulation of knowledge into new patterns takes place and is linked to action" (Evans, 2017, p. 90). Contradictory phases of liminality, characterized by the dissolution of "objective" order, place agents in situations where they learn to manage new roles. In these phases, individuals "are expected to move out of this space as they become increasingly competent and confident" (Evans, 2017, p. 91). In this case, individuals' beliefs in openness to opportunities, their ability to "plan orientations towards the future", as well as positive visions of their future, their professional sociability, and readiness to actively search for professional fulfillment and rewards may be particularly tested in moments of social landscape transition (Evans, 2007).

Methodology and methods

The author employed a qualitative research methodology with the objective of elucidating the meanings that teachers attribute to the social problems they encounter in their professional biographies. Specifically, the focus was on understanding the "spaces of uncertainty" that these teachers associate with particular events in their lives (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Utilizing the interview method, the aim was to gain a comprehensive insight into the perceptions of teachers working in Russian-medium schools regarding specific cultural and structural mechanisms that could potentially place them in a state of "social limbo" (Thomassen, 2009). By sharing the same cultural background as the sample, the author positioned herself as an "insider to the field," which enhanced the respondents' reflexivity and strengthened the validity of the data obtained.

Because the sample was deemed particularly challenging to access, a combination of qualitative sampling techniques was employed, including convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling (Flick, 2018). This sampling approach aimed for maximum heterogeneity, without restrictions on region, age, or experience. Sampling ceased once it achieved both breadth (heterogeneity) and depth (data redundancy or "saturation") (Saunders *et al*., 2018). It's noteworthy that qualitative methodologists typically suggest that concept saturation is attained after conducting 20 to 30 interviews (ibid.).

The semi-structured interview guide comprised three sections: past, present, and future. Each section contained questions covering different aspects of teachers' professional backgrounds and their work environment, including education, professional development, school culture, personal values, teaching methods, and future aspirations. The objective was to obtain a rich and reflective account of teachers' professional biographies.

The interviews were conducted throughout 2021. A letter was distributed to all school headmasters in a list of Russian mono- and bi-lingual schools provided by the Ministry of Education and Research. This letter inquired whether any of their teachers were interested in participating in interviews regarding their professional experiences. Teacher participation occurred through headmaster assignments, voluntary interest, and recommendations from colleagues using the snowball technique (Waters, 2015). Several schools declined, citing the sensitivity of the topic as a barrier to open discussion. Each interview had a duration ranging from 45 min to two hours, with an average duration of one hour. Out of the 27 interviews conducted, 23 were held via Zoom, while four took place in person at the school, as per the teachers' preferences.

The sample comprised 27 teachers, predominantly female (25), with diverse teaching experience ranging from five to 55 years. They represented various regions, including 13 from the eastern region, which has a majority of Russian-speakers. Their teaching specialties covered foreign languages (8), natural sciences (6), mathematics (7), history (1), music (1), sports (2), primary school (2, with 3 also having "HEV" specialization [2]), and all educational stages (1-3 stages). Seven held Master's degrees (six obtained in Estonia), while 13 teachers were educated in the USSR. Some of the latter group came to Estonia during the Soviet era, either for personal reasons or were assigned to Estonia from their institutions.

Data analysis

In the data analysis, a hybrid approach was employed, initially adopting an inductive method and subsequently applying a theoretical framework. All data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 22.4.0. Following inductive approach principles (Charmaz, 2006), the data was coded to capture individual patterns of meaning at the micro level. The author used gerund-based coding (ibid.) to remain closely aligned with the data and preserve the participants' perspectives without imposing own biases. Codes were constructed iteratively, interview by interview, with an aim to identify general patterns and organize them into broader inductive categories (Braun and Clarke, 2022). With the intention of elucidating the liminal states of these teachers within their social and professional contexts, the author began exploring recurring "transformative," "reproducing," and "transitional" patterns. This exploration informed further consideration of Gennep's (1960) theory of liminality as a potential explanatory framework.

Overall 247 inductive codes were generated, which were subsequently organized into 14 higher-level categories, including "being constrained by the system", "lacking control over the future", "having nostalgia for the Soviet past", "putting personal concerns over professional" among others. The categories, formed through inductive grouping and labeled using gerunds, encompassed a range of phenomena that depicted teachers' interpretations of the most significant situations in their practices. The author carefully reviewed the interviews once more, specifically seeking indicators of liminality. This process yielded a distinct set of 20 theory-led codes that were referred to as "narratives of liminality". A "Code Relations Matrix" was constructed in MAXQDA to visualize the code and categories intersections within segments. The categories that exhibited the most frequent intersections with the "narratives of liminality" were subsequently organized into themes. It was identified three overarching themes reflecting the "limen" (Gennep, 1960) within teachers' "social dramas" (Turner, 1969): self-defined, socially-constructed, and ontological constraints. The article will present the data through the combination of these themes. Citations from Russian were translated into English while preserving the original respondents' "modality" for this article. To protect

informant confidentiality, location details are omitted, and only gender, subject taught, and years of teaching experience (abbreviated as *"y.e."*) are provided.

Findings

Self-defined, socially-constructed and ontological liminality

Many Russian-medium school teachers unequivocally delineate their "anti-structure" (Turner, 1969) by acknowledging own vulnerability when confronted with work-related challenges. These challenges are not necessarily associated with insurmountable objective obstacles in their professional lives; they may also be linked to personal self-evaluation, with many of them displaying clear liminality across the "national boundaries". The latter are associated with their own national identity ("having a Russian last name," "having an accent when speaking Estonian"); the perceived competitiveness of the labor market ("teachers who speak the national language can surpass me"); and their inability to establish connections with the Estonian-speaking environment, which represents an alien culture where "our culture is not welcome".

In their vulnerabilities, many teachers exhibit noticeable patterns of "simplicity" and "obedience", which Turner (1969) has identified as indicative of liminal periods, when discussing their envisioned future life scenarios. Often, these characteristics of simplicity manifest themselves through teachers' efforts to simplify their futures and make them appear as uncomplicated as possible. An experienced teacher, when queried about her vision for the future in the context of transitioning to Estonian language instruction, expressed it as follows:

> *I'm alone now . . . I do have a daughter, with her family . . . but no one else . . . nothing . . . I don't know where to go from here. The schools are shrinking . . . we mostly have younger teachers here, younger than me . . . so I won't have an opportunity to find another place. Well, what's left to do . . . I'll go to the job centre . . . we have a job centre here - they'll offer you various courses in vocational schools . . . like dishwashing . . . or home crafts . . . that's how they present alternative professions to us . . . that's it . . . I'm really praying to God to be able to work for these 7 years . . . I have left to retire . . . (History, 31 y.e.)*

In connection with the impending closure of Russian-medium schools, some teachers, particularly those with extensive experience, anticipate this as a potential trauma (Alexander, 2004). This anticipation of a traumatic event occurs before the event actually takes place in their lives, resulting in a phenomenon referred to as "anticipated liminality". This anticipation leaves them confined within their established roles and identities. One teacher confides that in Russian-medium schools, they become overly engrossed in their daily work, partly due to their heightened anxiety compared to their colleagues in the Estonian-medium schools:

> *Because we often feel somewhat unstable . . . um, insecure, so . . . we constantly have this heightened anxiety, increased responsibility. Teachers, they put in all their efforts, do everything. But in Estonian schools, it's calm. I mean, I finish the lesson, close the door, and forget about it (F, Chemistry, 30 y.e.)*

Teachers' sense of isolation in the face of the symbolic "margin" (Turner, 1969) they cannot cross is exacerbated by the discursive environment, which they have little control over. Nearly all teachers in the sample confided that they are consistently "scapegoated in media and political discourses", a situation that diminishes their motivation:

> *In the newspapers, it is always mentioned that in Estonia . . . there is a belief that Russian schools face a problem in that Russian children perform worse academically. This is attributed to the fact that teachers in Russian schools received their education during the Soviet era, and they employ outdated and incorrect teaching methods, among other factors. Additionally, Russian teachers rarely participate in Estonian language courses due to their lack of proficiency in the language (F, Mathematics, 20 y.e.)*

Another colleague of hers is adding a political note to that issue, asserting that the entire Russian-speaking community has long been labeled as "occupiers" due to the enduring legacy of the Soviet era:

> *I myself have recently experienced, for example, a strong discomfort with this Russophobia that . . . is becoming so open and widespread in politics now. It's a good thing they've stopped calling us occupiers, but what about my children? Are they occupiers? I mean, this whole "suitcase-train-Russia" thing. My children were born here, and my grandchildren were also born here . . . (F, Mathematics, 51 y.e.)*

She continues with a "between and betwixt" note where her self-defined and socially-constructed liminalities are intertwined, stating that she also doesn't feel that she belongs in Russia: *" . . . We are citizens of Estonia . . . but we are somewhat underprivileged citizens. On the other hand . . . when we get to Russia, they don't recognize us as their own, even though my husband is buried in Russia, my parents are buried in Russia, and I'm originally from there . . . I am a stranger here, and I don't belong there either . . . "*

Liminal moments not only engender new meanings within situations that exist between defined structures and uncertain outcomes (Horvath *et al*., 2015), but they also possess transformative potential. It is reasonable to assert that these teachers' transformative practices originate from their experiences in liminal situations, where many perceive themselves as operating at the margins. Additionally, working with children from disadvantaged families and children with special needs, who themselves are always in a state of transition, many teachers see as their primary professional mission. One teacher, when asked to describe children from the class where she serves as a class teacher, shared that many kids from her class are using chemical drugs as a means to "escape from reality". Furthermore, she demonstrates a tendency to nostalgically romanticize past, favoring a previous "objective reality" over the emerging one:

> *But if we compare the 1990s - and I started teaching in the 1990s - there were also kids who . . . but they were kinder . . . Now, the kids are more ruthless, or I would even say not just ruthless but very harsh. However, this, again, comes from the family. These are already the children of those who grew up in the 1990s. So, this wave is rising among these kids who find it difficult to live in the real world, and they also start to escape again using chemical means (F, Chemistry, 30 y.e.)*

Even though the teachers primarily self-define themselves as saviors of liminal children, these children become their ontological constraints, imposed upon them by circumstances beyond their control. Consequently, their approaches to handling these children remain reflexive and transformative, enabling them to transcend their own established positions and roles and surmount the "threshold" of routine practices.

The most limiting aspect of their professional identity, however, is the mandate to learn and instruct in Estonian. Numerous teachers admit that they struggle with professional development since nearly all opportunities for growth are available only in national language. This leaves them feeling isolated and self-reliant and often leads many of them to fill the knowledge gap through resources they actively seek within the Russian-speaking community. This situation creates a vicious circle, as their attempts to address mentioned deficiency result in media discourses criticizing their methodological proficiency. One teacher puts it this way:

> *Many teachers who do not possess the Estonian language skills necessary to participate in courses are experiencing difficulties . . . currently, there are very few Russian-language courses available in Estonia. They were once more prevalent, but their numbers have dwindled over time . . . If a teacher cannot proficiently engage in these courses due to language limitations, they consequently miss out on important information. Russian-speaking teachers often search for information online, which sometimes involves using materials from outside sources, especially Russian-speaking sources . . . and this leads to criticism from higher authorities for not exclusively using Estonian materials . . . despite the initial encouragement to use materials from various sources . . . and it is not uncommon to find articles in newspapers claiming that Russian teachers are lagging behind in terms of methodological innovations in Estonia because they do not have a strong command of the language and thus do not have access to the information available in the country . . . (F, Mathematics, 21 y.e.)*

The absence of professional development opportunities for the Russian-medium schools teachers and the lower PISA results of these schools in Estonia are intertwined in media

discourses. Although these connections are primarily ideational, they have become deeply entrenched in the teachers' perceptions of reality, rendering them seemingly unchangeable, therefore ontological in nature. One primary school teacher sees this discursive environment as a significant ontological constraint:

> *. . . Of course, it's pessimistic . . . Estonia didn't follow Latvia's path when they switched all schools to Latvian as the language of instruction instantly . . . in Estonia, that didn't happen. Instead, Estonia took a position of Russian schools dying out . . . so, they are not preparing new personnel for these schools . . . we are working with what we have . . . I've already said that we are limited, essentially due to the language barrier when it comes to obtaining new methodologies and some new influences . . . at the same time, they criticize us about the PISA results, saying that the results in Estonian schools are higher than in Russian schools. So, it's like we are not doing enough here. This, of course, doesn't inspire optimism . . .. (F, Primary school, HEV, 36 y.e.)*

Not only the ideational dimension but also one's own reflexivity are capable of generating ontological scenarios for teachers when they encounter the limitations of the "lost objective reality" (Szakolczai, 2009) with which they find it challenging to coexist. A teacher of Estonian language and literature at a large school recounts a situation in which she may be compelled to converse with a Russian-speaking child in Estonian during everyday situations, describing it as a form of "clownery":

> *Well if the plan is . . . to simply rename Russian schools as Estonian, and . . . leave the children as they are, but have Estonian teachers come to them all in one day . . . teachers who only speak Estonian with them . . . and the children would start talking to each other in Estonian too . . . this is, well, I consider it a clownery . . . yes . . . /laughter/ . . . I don't want to participate in the circus either . . . because one thing is to educate a child . . . and another thing is that very often, like when a child comes to their classroom teacher with some problem . . . well, you're not going to deal with it in Estonian, right? . . . if the child needs some emotional support . . . it's like an overly artificial situation . . . (F, Estonian language, 22 y.e.)*

In teachers' narratives, self-defined, socially-constructed, and ontological liminalities are intricately intertwined and inseparable from one another. While the obligation to learn the Estonian language presents an ontological constraint for these teachers, feelings of "not knowing this language well enough" or "speaking with an accent" are often self-defined challenges. Conversely, the shame associated with being blamed for not speaking Estonian and experiencing isolation is socially-imposed. The same complex net of liminal conditions is exemplified by other intersections. For instance, "liminal children" represent an ontological reality for these teachers, as they are significantly influenced by the contexts of disadvantaged families within the Russian-speaking community. Simultaneously, interactions with such children occasionally place teachers in states of uncertainty, prompting them to adopt distinct personal roles and strategies they had not previously encountered (a self-defined liminality). The prevalent discourses surrounding Russian-medium school teachers "producing" disadvantaged graduates for the labor market effectively generate a grand narrative, forming a socially-constructed liminal space.

However, specific conditions are more strongly associated with certain types of liminality than with others. For instance, educators delineated their roles as exceedingly liminal and even marked by self-defined trauma when discussing the signs of ethnolinguistic disparities and their sense of inability to "assimilate" into the dominant national culture. Highlighting a pronounced cultural divide among teachers in Russian and Estonian-medium schools they portrayed the latter as being "safer," more creative, and innovative. Simultaneously, many of them underscored their inclination to align with the values and ideals of the Russian-speaking community they serve. In their narratives, teachers openly expressed their perception of ethno-cultural disintegration as an inherent, profound, and seemingly irreversible phenomenon, while also acknowledging its primarily cultural and symbolic mediation by politicians and the media. Consequently, teachers' "non-integration into the national education system" emerged as a socially-constructed determinant in their lives. Conversely, teachers' incapacity to acquire

and teach in the Estonian language manifested as an unequivocal ontological constraint, ultimately shaping their life-chances and precipitating an enduring state of "betweenness" and a profound sense of non-belonging.

In this context, their transformative practices are oriented toward internal dialogues and reflexivity, which may not always urge them to transform the liminal situation; conversely, they may lead to conformity, maintaining conventionality, reproduction, and a perpetual state of transition. However, as Archer (2003) noted, such a form of reflexive exercise necessitates, at the very least, emotional transformation.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was aimed at delving into the complex and multifaceted experiences of Russian-medium school teachers in Estonia, who find themselves in a state of liminality within the evolving landscape of the Estonian education system. These teachers grapple with a unique set of constraints that intersect and overlap, contributing to their liminal positions. The analysis of the teachers narratives revealed three overarching types of constraints: self-defined, socially-constructed, and ontological.

Self-defined constraints are characterized by the teachers' vulnerability and self-evaluation in the face of work-life (ontological) challenges. They often struggle with questions of identity, national belonging, and competitiveness in the labor market. The anticipation of impending undesired transformations, such as the closure of Russian-medium schools, further adds to their sense of being in continuous transition.

Socially-constructed constraints emerge within the discursive environment in which these teachers operate. They consistently find themselves being blamed for their perceived contributions to the parallel education system in both media and political discourse, which subsequently diminishes their motivation and sense of belonging. The prevailing narrative of Russian-medium schools producing disadvantaged graduates for the labor market becomes a socially-constructed determinant that poses challenges for teachers' professional *modus vivendi*.

These teachers main ontological constraints are rooted in the obligation to learn and teach in Estonian, which presents a significant challenge for many of them. Struggles with language proficiency and the limited availability of professional development opportunities further reinforce their sense of enduring transition which is beyond their control. The lower PISA results of Russian-medium schools are intricately linked to this ontological constraint, establishing a detrimental feedback loop of adverse narratives, which are substantially propagated by both the media and political entities, serving as a primary catalyst for the proposed elimination of Russian-medium schools from the national educational landscape.

Although the concept of liminality remains relatively underutilized within the field of sociology of education, there has been some examination of teachers' liminal experiences across various national spaces in recent studies. For instance, Ozmantar *et al*. (2023) delved into this area, specifically focusing on the liminal identities of refugee teachers, which were elucidated through narrative analysis. The results of the study demonstrate that teachers construct liminal identities, in which the distinction between their status as refugees and their roles as educators is both a subject of ongoing contention and a lived experience. This duality in identity is not only central to their political agency but also plays a crucial role in shaping their subjectivity in own transformative practices. The study conducted by Friedman *et al.* (2020) employing grounded theory demonstrates how an intersectional approach can effectively address the needs of "liminal students" in diverse classrooms, particularly those who belong to marginalized groups such as students of color and those with disabilities. The study by Zaichenko *et al.* (2024) has demonstrated that in various national contexts, teachers' liminality is constructed by the ideational interests of all stakeholders involved. In this particular case, teachers experienced liminality when working with children with disabilities, as these children were discursively excluded from the everyday school practice, being positioned as "standing outside normality".

Current study, which unveils a small part of the segregated context within the Estonian education system, has revealed that in addition to the three overarching types of constraints mentioned earlier, the narratives of Russian-medium school teachers also illuminate the significance of their reflexivity, which plays a pivotal role in their liminal experiences. Reflexivity is a critical aspect of these teachers' professional identities, as they constantly get to grips with their roles and positions within the numerous divergent discourses and policy reforms. They are acutely aware of the societal expectations and perceptions surrounding them, which adds a layer of complexity to their self-evaluation. This reflexivity often manifests as a response to the socially-constructed constraints imposed upon them. They navigate the discursive environment that labels them as "perpetuators of outdated teaching methods" or as "outsiders in the Estonian cultural fabric". This reflexivity prompts them to adapt and develop coping strategies to preserve their professional status quo and maintain a sense of self-esteem.

Although teachers primarily endeavor not to transgress the "limen" of their own culture in their work-related practices, these solutions remain reflexive and transformative for their personal and professional creeds as they go through the phases of introspection and self-examination, questioning their established beliefs (Archer, 2003) and prioritizing their ultimate concerns (Archer, 2003). This reflexive sequence assists them in reaggregating their identities and integrating small, innovative decisions into their established routines (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969), i.e. re-evaluating their roles in the lives of vulnerable children or seeking professional development solutions within an environment primarily constrained by the national language.

The study has revealed that teachers reflexively perceive their own liminality as something "normal". Many of them shared that they have experienced numerous "challenging periods" in life, and being at the margins is more of a structural aspect than an "anti-structure" within their constantly evolving identities.

Previous research on teachers in Russian-medium schools in Estonia (Zaichenko, 2023, 2024), utilizing the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995), has demonstrated how deeply culturally bound they are. In this context, even their predominantly transformative practices ultimately serve the purpose of "cultural gatekeeping" and deliberate reproduction. Another study examining the national context of vocational education in Estonia has revealed that teachers who transitioned from the Soviet era tend to incorporate nostalgia into their professional worldviews (Ümarik and Goodson, 2020). Current study supports this observation within the framework of liminality theory. Additionally, it suggests that teachers, especially in ethnically segregated conditions, may not only be culturally-bound but also "liminality bound". This indicates that their liminal states are consciously chosen as part of practices they reflexively replicate. In this case, liminality may emerge as a phenomenon within their control. It can be a consciously chosen state of "living in the past", a manifestation of their resistance against (negative) majoritarian discourses that fuel nationalist sentiments, or a symbolic marker of their belonging to the community they serve. The liminal aspects of belonging construction for immigrants, as part of their integration practices, have been thoroughly explored by scholars in various national contexts, including non-European ones (Skrbiš *et al.*, 2007).

Teachers' narratives regarding disadvantaged children as their primary professional concern clearly emphasize their personal commitment to consistently occupying spaces of undefined identities and uncertain outcomes. On the other hand, some teachers' endeavors to "fix the future", comprehend, and envision coping strategies for circumstances that have not yet materialized, distinctly reflect their desire to escape from uncomfortable liminal experiences and spaces.

This paper aimed to revisit the highly underrepresented anthropological theory of liminality from a sociological perspective and to substantiate it with the unique empirical case of Estonia. This was achieved through a micro-analysis of the liminal experiences and moments of teachers who inhibit desired social cohesion within the national education system.

By illustrating teachers' transformations through their reflexivity, this approach emphasizes interdisciplinarity, where the intersection between structure and agency is discernible within the individual during liminal periods, as opposed to being attributed solely to external structures (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995).

As Estonia continues to navigate its educational reforms and cultural shifts, recognizing and addressing the liminality of Russian-medium school teachers is crucial for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the nation's educational landscape. The contribution of this empirical and conceptual case to international scholarship can also support other findings, particularly in cases involving underrepresented groups of teachers, such as culturally distinctive teachers or teachers of color (Lai *et al*., 2016; Preston, 2019). These findings challenge the prevailing neoliberal discourses that depict teachers as "agents of change" (OECD, 2019; Saltman and Nguyen, 2022; Taylor, 2023). In this scenario, the prevailing education policy narratives, in which "transformation" and "novelty" are automatically 'commensurate with the "good" (for further insights, see Maccarini, 2019), should adopt more inclusive semantics. This shift should encompass an understanding that profound changes are inherently liminal. Education policies should therefore address these temporal transitions as indications of reflexivity, rather than as manifestations of resistance by the involved agents.

Notes

1. In media discourses the Russian-medium schools in Estonia are often called just "Russian schools"
2. Children with special needs (in Estonian language)

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