

Interview with Iveta Kestere

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Iveta Kestere is a Professor at the Faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, University of Latvia and an expert in the history of education at the Latvian Council of Science. Her current academic interest is in the research methodology for the history of education and education under dictatorship, including history of school reality and history of teaching profession. She is the author of numerous articles devoted to the history of education and the author or co-editor of nine books, among them *The Visual Image of the Teacher* (2012) and *History of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences in the Baltic Countries from 1940 to 1990: an Overview* (2013). She was a guest researcher and lecturer at the KU Leuven, Belgium. She is included in the editorial board of academic journals in Lithuania and Italy. She is a co-convenor of 17th Network (history of education) at The European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) and the Board member of the Baltic Association of Historians of Pedagogy.

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Luciana Bellatalla (L.B.): *Let us begin from your cursus studiorum. Were your university studies addressed to history, philosophy or education? Why and when did you decide to devote your research to history of education?*

Iveta Kestere (I.K.): I entered Department of History at the Faculty of History and Philosophy, University of Latvia, in 1978. My studies took place in a very specific historical context – under the Soviet dictatorship. 1970s was the time when the darkest years with Stalin's terror were almost forgotten but still Soviet people were well- controlled and obedient nation. Watchful eyes of censorship followed all mass media and everyday lives of Soviet citizens. Leaders

of Communist party from Moscow ruled everybody and everything in the republics of Soviet Union, including Latvia.

Looking from today's perspective, studies of history in these circumstances seem a strange choice. Soviet history was less academic field but more part of the Communist ideology with certain propaganda objectives – to legitimize Soviet power in Eastern Europe and convince about superiority of the Soviet Union in the world. However, greatest part of my generation, including me, was «deaf and blind» regarding the endeavors of the Soviet top-historians. If some ideology is permanent and intrusive, people get immunity, namely, they stop seeing and listening to propaganda slogans. It was precisely the case of my generation. We looked at history as it truly is – exciting study field. Additionally, I had a wonderful history teacher at school and many great professors at the university.

Nevertheless, history in the Soviet Union was taught as the history of «acts and facts» and when my third study year began, I felt excused from endless learning of chronicles. At the same time, I was engaged in a part time job as a teacher of primary school and studied courses of pedagogy (educational sciences) with great enthusiasm. Learning of pedagogy was compulsory for almost all faculties of the university because graduates got additional profession – they became teachers. For example, my university diploma confirms that I am «historian, teacher of history and social sciences».

I was quite successful in practice and theory and professor of pedagogy invited me for doctoral studies at the University of Latvia. I smoothly defended my theses in pedagogy (written in Russian and accepted by Moscow) and became «candidate of pedagogical sciences» (today – Dr. paed.) at the age of 29. I was teaching several courses of pedagogy at the university and my professional life was completely arranged.

Then Soviet Union collapsed. Latvia became an independent country in 1991. Lives of Soviet people were turned upside-down, including professional careers. Society was open for new beginnings. Ideas for reforms, including education, came from two sources: firstly, historical experience that positioned education as a national value, protector of culture, and creator of a national identity; and secondly, modern foreign experience, resulting in the importation of new ideas from abroad.

Historians had an exciting possibility to reconsider historical events from the new perspective that was free from censorship and I also decided to return to my origins, namely, I prepared and started to teach study course in the history of education at the University of Latvia and these activities naturally led me to researches in the field.

L.B.: *When you enter your career, which general situation did you find? May you describe the relevance of Communist dictatorship on the organization of study and research activities? Particularly, may you report the situation of history of education?*

I.K.: The main traits of history of education under the Soviet rule were censorship, ban of numerous historical sources and isolation from the democratic world. This consequently led to poor research of some historical problems and eras. For instance, to be able to gain access to archives and library collections about the period of independence of the Baltic States (1918 – 1940), special permission was necessary. Historians, like other members of Soviet society, were categorized according the accessibility of information. Contact with colleagues in the West was almost unrealistic. The limitations created by Soviet authorities on access to time and space produced the opposite effect – in the Baltics, the «Promised Land» became the period of national independence and the West.

However, I am sure that the most long lasting consequences were one-sided Soviet research methodology. It is widely believed that Soviet history research (including education history) was based on Marxist methodology. This was affirmed in the introduction of each publication. In reality, Marxism in the Soviet Union had been reduced to a such a simplistic and ideologies formula for explanation about the world (exploited vs. exploiters, workers vs. bourgeoisie, farmers vs. kulaks, revolution vs. counter-revolution, and socialism vs. capitalism) that even Brian Simon would be hard pressed to recognize Marxist theory in the work of the rank and file Soviet historians (and *vice versa*).

The only state-acknowledged theory for the study and interpretation of history led to declaration of facts without any interpretation and omission of theoretic concepts. A number of historians did not really know or understand Marxism, and for others, who did not acknowledge political dictate in research, chronological descriptions of history became a sort of intellectual escape.

Simplification of theory resulted in simplified reading lists. The history of education syllabus consisted mostly of descriptions of work by Marx and Engels, literature written by Lenin, Krupskaya and Makarenko and textbooks written by Soviet authors. As a result, historians were not interested in reading theoretical literature, and no one really expected them to either.

Even now, after 25 years of independence, I think that historians from the post-Soviet space are still suffering from the lack of appropriate research methodology.

Despite this description of a theoretically and contextually sparse education history landscape, Baltic historians were not a sad, cowed group of people during the Soviet era. On the contrary, they were energetic individuals who initiated active cooperation between Baltic universities during the 1970s. This networking

culminated in the founding of the *Baltic Association of Historians of Pedagogy* (BAHP) in 1999. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR found a well-organized group of Baltic historians of education, who had learned to honestly research history within the time and space defined by Soviet power, although isolated from global processes¹.

L.B.: *When Latvia, finally, conquered its political autonomy, how did studies and university research change?*

I.K.: In 1991, almost during one night, the Baltic States from the Soviet Union republics became the part of Europe, labeled as post-socialism, post-Soviet, post-Eastern European, post-communist, post-1989, post-Cold War, etc. space.

The «overnight changes» did not allow university professors to have a break, so that they could gradually learn and think about the new world order after the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the USSR. They had to go to work and attempt to explain what was happening, to a demanding and impatient student auditorium. Thus, willing or not, supportive or not, the course selection in history experienced more rapid and drastic changes than any other university course of study.

The demand for new content of study courses guided university professors to archives and libraries that offered riches about which any avid historian dreams – vast amounts of previously un-researched files. As a result, history and, ultimately, historians became very popular, because they had at their disposal new information. Historians told their stories enthusiastically, and the public listened with interest.

However, the popularity of historians was not long-term. The legacy of superficial treatment of theory and context, practiced during the Soviet era, soon left historians behind researchers in other fields (philosophers, sociologists, political scientists and pedagogues) who, after a short period of confusion, eagerly learned Western theories for explanation of social processes, including educational ones. Historians, who have been fans of facts, were faced now with the question – so what? History, without the interpretation, understanding and explanation of facts, became uninteresting and unnecessary for society. As a result, the history of education began to lose its place in programs of universities.

Currently, the history of education as research field flourishes, but position in the universities' curriculum is modest.

¹ Regarding development of the history of education in the Baltic States, particularly in Latvia, see: Kestere (2016 and 2014a); Kestere & Ozola (2014), Kestere (2014b).

L.B.: *May you refer to the present situation of Latvian culture in its relations with other European countries Universities? And, above all, could you speak about the relations between Latvian and European educational historians?*

I.K.: During the Soviet times, communication with the colleagues from the Western countries was actually next to impossible. Although ISCHE, which gathers most prominent historians of education of the world, took place in the doorsteps – Warsaw (1980) and Budapest (1982), so far we know only one Soviet scholar participated there and she, of course, came from the center, namely, Moscow.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the Iron Curtain created preconditions for the cooperation among the Baltic scholars and the historians of education in abroad. However, to arrive at the free world several obstacles had to be overcome, which were mainly created by finances, inability to speak foreign languages and the lack of well-rounded education. Therefore only in 2002 the historians of education of the Baltic countries learned about ISCHE that at that year resided in Paris, University of Sorbonne. Since then Latvians who were later joined by Lithuanians and Estonians have regularly attended ISCHE.

These international professional activities, especially ISCHE, provide a great possibility to learn from excellent historians of education from many countries, as well as to share our problems and compare our achievements in the field.

Thanks to ISCHE, the University of Latvia developed cooperation with outstanding historians of education from Europe and USA. I can mention countless examples of this good practice. Vice-Rector of KU Leuven Prof. Marc Depaepe became *honoris causa* of the University of Latvia in 2015. In ISCHE, we met Prof. Luciana Bellatalla and cooperation between universities of Latvia and Ferrara flourishes. Thanks to ISCHE, historians from Latvia had joint projects with Professors Ian Grosvenor (University of Birmingham), Karin Priem and Frederik Herman (University of Luxemburg), Angelo Van Gorp (University of Ghent), Luciana Bellatalla and Marc Depaepe. Professors Christine Mayer (University of Hamburg), Marc Depaepe, Maris Vinovskis (University of Michigan), Luciana Bellatalla, Elena Marescoti (University of Ferrara) and Frank Simon (University of Gent) were invited to our University as guest lecturers for doctoral students and staff. Historians of education from Latvia, in their turn, were invited to Ferrara, Leuven and Luxemburg, as well as was guest researcher at *Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research* where director is former ISCHE President Prof. Eckhard Fuchs. Doctoral students of Latvia almost every year attend the History of education Doctoral summer school, organized by EERA and ISCHE.

Quite paradoxically, historians in Latvia currently know more about the history of education in the USA, Great Britain, Germany and Switzerland than we do about the activities of our neighbors in space of former-Soviet Union.

L.B.: *Humanities are now marginalized in all Western Countries and, particularly, in Europe: what do you think about this general decay? Do you think possible to upset this situation? How can intellectuals and, particularly, school historians contribute to change this cultural trend?*

I.K.: Recently I read a wonderful book *Culture and Educational Reform* written by the Frankfurt am Main Professor, educational historian and philosopher Günther Böhme (2008). He speaks about marginalizing of humanities in the modern world and asks – does the change of values have made a human happier? Turn to technologies has provided greater material welfare – definitely. Nevertheless, a modern human being is not a happy one because as Böhme thinks, he has lost himself. Along with the change of values, his moral reference-points were lost and he does not recognize and understand himself, his true nature. Modern man feels lost. Turns out that impunity is mentally uncomfortable.

Can we change this situation or simply observe it with resignation? Böhme inspires us to believe that duty of the pedagogues is to interfere. He says that a pedagogy that truly cares for education, will raise the question, how can I impact the spirit of the century? Böhme provides an answer about returning of cultural values in education. But culture should reflect value concepts uniting society.

Still Prof. Böhme considers that his opinion is not popular because it does not match to the modern era (*Zeitgeist*). However, I am certain that «old-fashioned» approach of Böhme has been transformed into innovation – it is like a breeze of fresh air in the rationalized, utilitarian, «economized» world of education. In the world, where University (!) Rector during scientific (!) conference in 1990s read out the numbers how much money each scientific discipline have made, probably hoping that representatives of humanities will be once for all convinced about their «uselessness».

Luckily, for all the educators, Böhme is not alone with his thoughts about education through culture and culture through education (*kulturelle Bildung*). Recently we hear louder and louder calls for humanitarian, classical education. Professor of Birmingham University, historian of education Ian Grosvenor talks about *cultural learning*, understanding with this concept updating of historical heritage in the modern society, studying it at schools, including universities (Grosvenor & Myers, 2014). After his initiative on 2015-2016 *European Educational Research Association* (EERA) financed a project *Cultural Learning, Identity and the European Project* (hosted by Gyöngyvér Pataki) that during two workshops in Barcelona and Riga brought together keepers of the cultural heritage (including museum workers) and staff of universities to discuss the best experiences for public engagement in acquiring cultural heritage.

American journalist Fareed Zakaria (*CNN, The Washington Post*) in his best-seller proves that narrow professionally technical education is dangerous and only a man with broad perspective, knowledge in philosophy and languages will be able to understand demands of the society and therefore will make discoveries also in the field of technologies (Zakaria, 2015).

Also Latvian philosophers have expressed their opinion about importance of humanitarian education. They stated that humanitarian sciences are the ones who have created personality of modern, cultivated (or civilized) man, humanities help to avoid blind following ideologies, maintaining moral, critical thinking and after all – common sense (Sīlis, 2015). Maybe we need a new Enlightenment in order people and nations could understand themselves again, return ideals and fortitude to the world? (Kūle²⁰¹⁶). These (naive, romantic?) issues were discussed quite recently in the University of Latvia – on May 11, 2016, when a First Academic Forum on Humanities was held, gathering scientists from various disciplines (including sciences) and discussing situation, challenges and possible future development scenarios of humanities in Latvia.

I think that humanities stand a chance, if we will not remain silent ourselves.

L.B.: *According to your experience in Latvia and in Europe, are there any topics becoming prominent in educational research in the last twenty years? Is history of education leaving behind theories and a philosophical approach to deal with the material conditions of schools and what is called the «historical and educational heritage»?*

I.K.: When speaking about prominent topics in history of education in the Baltic States, I should again step back to the Soviet times.

The goal of the Soviet Union was to create a unified Soviet nation with Russians and the Russian language at its centre. World society was almost convinced of the existence of such a nation – it is no wonder that even today, academia in Europe continues to conflate the Soviet Union just with Russia, excluding other Soviet territories and peoples – those from Latvia, for example.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, research of, writing on, and teaching of local and national history was the way to become free of totalitarianism and regain the identity that was purposefully battered by «internationalism», as understood by communists.

In the early 1990s, the job of Latvian historians was the creation of national narratives for the purpose of differentiating the history of individual nations from that of the anonymous masses of socialist society. Liberation from dictatorship, at least in the Baltics, was explained as a result of maintenance of national traditions and values, as well as collective memory, throughout the

period of Soviet occupation. The «new history» of renewed nations delivered publicly a clear message: the nations' sense of community assisted in defeating the dictatorship and in regaining independence.

However, the «new» Europeans' renewed sense of national identity, and their enthusiastic presentations was received by world community of historians with reserve and suspicion. In an era of modern globalization and internationalization, little interest appears for national, localized history of education, without reference to a global context. Mention of national idiosyncrasies, in the best case, is considered old-fashioned.

I still remember my first ISCHE experience in 2002 in Paris where I introduced audience with the paper *Teacher training in secondary education establishments of Latvia (1840s-1914)* where I proudly described my newly discovered facts about rising of Latvian national identity in seminaries and special classes of secondary schools opened for teacher training in the 19th century. ISCHE audience was very nice and polite but my presentation didn't awake any interest about the history of education in Latvia. It took many years of my life to find out what expectations meets historical research in international audience.

In order to fit into the general European landscape, national history had to be converted into global history concepts. Researchers in the post-socialist zone wish to match their European counterparts, but they need the skills to be able to adapt the knowledge gained from Europe (McNutt, 2014, p. 134). It is important to be able to «translate» global norms into national terms, and, *vice versa*, to make local history interesting and understandable in the West.

In the same time, of course, research on national history should be continued and will be conducted only by us; foreigners will not do this in our place. Additionally, the «new» national histories could become a source for global research concepts as histories of childhood, gender, textbooks, classroom culture, and others.

Latvian historians of education enter the global stage mainly with Soviet experience that is used to exemplify the influence of political power on education and identify the trends of totalitarianism in education (see: Kestere & Kruze, 2013; Kestere, 2015; Abens, 2015).

The next major research topic of the history of pedagogy in Latvia is the formation of pedagogy as a science (see: Kruze & Ozola, 2013; Kestere & Ozola, 2011). This has become topical throughout the world in the last 20 years², since the field of pedagogy, as a science, has expanded considerably and became more diverse, putting forward a number of questions about the identity of this branch

2 See works by Rita Hofstetter and Bernard Schneuwly, as well as Marc Depaepe.

of science. Research in this direction helps understand the nature of pedagogy and education sciences, as well as the trends of education sciences today.

National history stories can also be told through internationalization – interactions in the education field and the transference of pedagogic ideas across borders. Global meeting points here can possibly be found through the study of the biographies of great pedagogues (see: Zigmunde^{2010a} and ^{2010b}) and the development of pedagogy as a scientific discipline.

The other «great» story is the «average» person's story. Aldrich invites us to raise from oblivion the narratives of those whose «voices have not yet been heard» (Aldrich²⁰⁰⁶, p. 18). I believe that Latvia can be a strong leader here, as biographies of 160 pedagogues have already been published in 15 volumes (Krūze, 2000-2015). The autobiographical genre is on the rise in Latvia; school memoirs are being told publicly by artists, engineers and bureaucrats, teachers and scientists. Wieder has fully understood this and described «need to tell» in his studies on post-apartheid society in South Africa (Wieder, 2004). Memoirs are, to date, a little researched historical source in studies on school culture, image of the teacher, education ideology, etc.

Latvian historians of education also enthusiastically picked up «visual turn» in the history of education (see: Kestere & Kaļķe, 2015; Kestere, Wolhuter & Lozano, 2012). Usage of visual sources made narratives of history of education more orientated towards school reality (e.g., photos taken in classrooms), more personal and consequently raised interest of students about the history of education. Visual is a «common language» well understandable to the international audience.

I will continue with some words regarding study courses in the history of education. Fuchs has noted a paradoxical situation in which research on historical education flourishes, but the subject continues to take a back seat in study programs (Fuchs, 2012, p. 7). Natural is a question – why? And going further - why should modern day students learn the history of education?³

Course titles show that nothing has changed in 25 years – students continue to study the «History of Education». Obviously impersonal, general, and boring (?). If this was an elective course, I can't imagine any reason why any student would want to read the course description. Why would s/he want to study «History of Pedagogical Ideas» or «History of Schooling», which are the traditional titles of study courses in the history of education?

Very rarely does the curriculum include courses that would capture the student's interest with a concrete issue or analysis of a particular phenomenon. For

3 This question arises from time to time. See e.g.: Salimova & Johanningmeier (1993); Depaepe (2001); Campbell & Sherington (2002); Lowe (2002).

instance – «History of Childhood», «History of Adult Education», «The Historical and Modern Image of the Teacher», «Development of Education Reforms», or «Development of Educational Sciences, its Tendencies, and Perspectives».

It is possible that behind the boring titles, hides very interesting content. Perhaps old flesh hides a new spirit. But today, the history of education, much like other scientific disciplines, are put out into the market and without proper marketing, they do not seem interesting, attractive, or even necessary. If the history of education is currently resting on the laurels of facts that were fresh in the early 1990s and the enthusiasm of the professors of that era, then the end could come very soon.

Teaching at university is closely tied to questions surrounding languages in which literature is presented in history of education courses. Usually, literature is presented only in the national language. This attests to several tendencies – 1) the centre of focus is national history of education, research on local history, and studies of local historians; 2) quite possibly, authors in a specific regions are not chosen for political reasons. For instance, in Latvia, literature in Russian is almost never used, even though a number of the students know the language well; 3) problems in English language skills. At least in Latvia, this last problem is quite serious and its scope and consequences are little known. Lack of foreign language skills in academia continues to be well-hidden, denied, and excused.

In the post-socialist space, history of national pedagogy is taught in almost all universities as a separate subject («Education in Estonian Culture», «Development of Pedagogy in Serbia», «Historiography of Lithuanian Educology», «History of Croatian Pedagogy and School»), as well as part of general history of education («History of Pedagogical Ideas in the World and Latvia», «History of Pedagogy and Bulgarian Education»)⁴. It perfectly matches with the necessity to study and reconsider national histories in the post-socialist space. Also for global audience Kasper-Biermann notes, that it is again topical «...to put the nation into perspective and to (re) determine its significance» (Kasper-Biermann^{2016, p. 95}).

L.B.: *Frequently, in your essays you emphasize the problem of a scientific perspective in the educational problems. Therefore, what do you think of the relations between epistemological questions and historical research in the educational field?*

I.K.: The discipline of history of education in Latvia struggles with the same problems as elsewhere in the world – how to become necessary? The recipe for

⁴ As a member of Standing Working Group at the ISCHE mapping the history of education, I collected information from 14 universities in Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Ukraine and Montenegro. I received data on course titles, education levels (bachelor, master, doctoral), credit points, language of instruction, reading lists, and instructors.

the post-socialist area looks clear – the history of education must become more westernized. However, the question remains: what does that really mean?

A period of revisionism in the history of education started in the West in the 1960s – research field and methods were broadened and enriched under the influence of social sciences. However, these changes did not reach Latvia, as well as other Soviet republics that were living behind the Iron Curtain in the Soviet Union.

In recent years, when the world is open, the slightly bruised and well-worn revisionism of the 1960s is slowly entering the Baltic States. Latvian researchers have gradually joined the global society in which the objective of the history of education is not a self-aimed reconstruction of the past, but a discussion about significant social problems applying history for their understanding and explanation. I believe, that the most important objective of researching and teaching of the history of education today is to explain topical problems in the field of education using the classical methodology of the history research (hermeneutics), as well as methods of sociology.

However, historians should not provide practical recommendations on solving of current problems in education.

Historical experience also serves as a means for creation and evaluation of new ideas. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the duty of the past is not to confirm the correctness of today's views, in other words, to celebrate a present. The history of education should be viewed in its entirety without pulling out individual facts in order to confirm some considerations of today. The history of education should not serve for the legitimization of some pedagogical theory or system.

I am deeply convinced that modern, problem-based research into the history of education enriches the university curriculum with reflections, discussions and considerations about significant issues and phenomenon in the field of education and society as a whole.

L.B.: *You recently became a member of the Scientific committee of ISCHE. How do you interpret your role in an international context?*

I.K.: I was a member of Executive committee of ISCHE from 2012 to 2014. Currently, I am co-convenor of Network 17 (History of Education) at ECER and board member of the Baltic Association of the Historians of Pedagogy.

The great challenge for my colleagues and me was organization of ISCHE 35 in Riga in 2013. As ISCHE 35 took place in the post-Soviet space then its theme was related to the past experience – education in the conditions of

dictatorship. However, the final formulation of the topic was wide enough for the scholars with different interests to find their place in the conference: *Education and Power: Historical Perspectives*. University of Latvia welcomed 244 historians of education from 37 countries – they came from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, China, Columbia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Mexico, New Zealand, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK and USA. ISCHE 35 as usual was academically oriented– its participants represented around 130 universities; there were 101 professors and 42 doctoral students among the participants. Some 200 papers that analyzed several theoretical problems connected with the relations of education and power in a historical perspective were presented in English, German, French and Spanish. After the conference the ISCHE 35 organizers among whom there were representatives from Universities of Latvia, Tallinn and Vilnius received many thanks and this is still an event to remember.

My further intensions are related to cooperation with historians of education in «less visible» countries of Europe. I have met excellent historians of education from Bulgaria and Serbia who don't have chance to attend ISCHE. I would be happy to engage them in international projects.

I am personally very proud and happy to cooperate with wonderful colleagues, historians of education from Italy. I would be glad to develop further connections between Italy and the Baltic States. Currently, I am a member of *Permanent International Interuniversity Group of Comparative Research in Politics and History and Theory of Education* (SPECIES) led by prof. Giovanni Genovesi, as well as member of Scientific Committee of journal *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche* at the University of Brescia. My papers were published in Italy (e.g., Kestere & Stikāne²⁰¹⁵) and colleagues in Latvia are always enthusiastic to learn about the history of education in Italy (Bellatalla & Dženovesi, 2016; Kestere, Marihina Gunta & Mareskoti, 2015).

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