

Teachers' Perspectives on the Education Process: Identifying Challenges and Promoting Sustainable Solutions

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Abstract

The responsibilities of a teacher are diverse and intricate. Societal shifts, political developments, and rapid technological progress have added further layers of complexity to teachers' daily tasks. The current research endeavors to analyze how teachers, with varying levels of experience and backgrounds, adapt to these changes in education and perceive opportunities for further development. The aim of the article is to study Latvian teachers' perspectives on education in Latvia and identify areas for improvement. To reach the aim, focus group discussion was conducted involving six teachers from diverse backgrounds.

Through content analysis, the study identified the primary challenges facing the current education process in Latvia: 1) prolonged, ineffective educational reforms; 2) challenges in rural education; 3) inappropriate teacher training; 4) the need for adaptive teaching methods; 5) the importance of cooperation among teachers and with parents. Addressing these areas could lead to significant improvements in the Latvian education system. The analysis sheds light on several issues within education, including the dynamics of teacher–pupil roles, the quality of educational outcomes, and pupil attitudes.

Keywords: Challenges, changes, education process, sustainability, teachers.

Introduction

The core objective of sustainable education is to inspire individuals and communities to participate in learning that strengthens their abilities to intentionally

reshape systems and frameworks in ways that are ethical and promote sustainability (O'Brien, 2012). Due to their anthropogenic nature of people everyday action implementation, education for sustainability is becoming complex. Anthropocentrism, egocentrism and egoism often cause changes in the human being, i.e., changes in sensitivity and sensibility occur that are naturally necessary for human adaptation to the environment (Salīte et al., 2021).

Teachers have a unique role to play in building a new social contract for education. Teaching is a complex, intricate and challenging vocation that labors in the tensions between the public and the personal (UNESCO, 2021). It implies that teachers must adjust to societal changes, even if they may not personally agree with them. They need to be willing to modify their teaching methods, even if they believe their current practices are effective, e.g., integrating new technologies into the teaching and learning process as necessary.

Throughout various eras and locations, teachers fulfil diverse social roles and functions. Cultural perspectives on the roles of teachers can vary widely – they may be seen as public servants and intellectuals, professionals and artists, community leaders and catalysts for change, holders of moral authority, and guardians of future generations' well-being. Many of the most influential figures in history are named as teachers – spanning from spiritual leaders and scientists to ancient philosophers and mathematicians, all of whom have not only advanced humanity's collective knowledge but also imparted wisdom to those they taught (UNESCO, 2021). Teachers are often seen as a unique group of professionals due to their specific working conditions (Roeser et al, 2022).

The success of any educational organization relies significantly on the effectiveness of its teachers, who are responsible for imparting knowledge, supervising learners, and improving the quality of instruction (Hoque et al, 2023). This highlights the reality that teachers of varying ages, experiences, and educational backgrounds interpret their roles differently, making it challenging at times to align new perceptions and attitudes about teaching within society's expectations. Therefore, when studying teachers' perspective on the educational process, it is crucial to take into account their individual experiences as both learners and educators, their professional backgrounds, personal achievements, and other personal factors that influence their views and attitudes.

Theoretical Framework

To gain a deeper understanding of Latvian teachers' perspectives on the education process, it is essential to provide insights into the Latvian education system, educational policies, and the objectives aimed to be achieved through education in Latvia. According to Education Development Guidelines 2021–2027 (2021), the overarching goal is to provide quality education opportunities to all Latvian residents in order to promote the development and realization of their potential throughout life and to improve their ability to change and responsibly manage the constant changes in society and the economy.

In order to implement the overarching goal of the guidelines for 2021–2027, four interrelated educational development goals have additionally been set:

1. qualified teaching staff;
2. a contemporary, high-quality educational program centered on cultivating skills sought after in labor market;
3. support for everyone's development;

4. sustainable and efficient management of education system and resources.

Highly qualified, competent, and excellence-oriented teachers and academic staff members are indispensable for the successful functioning of any educational institution. These professionals possess the expertise to impart a broad and profound range of knowledge, fostering intellectual growth and preparing children for their careers. The quality of education directly hinges on the professionalism of teachers and academic staff, as well as their capacity to enhance the efficacy of the learning process (Parsons, 2012).

Moreover, the ability to cultivate pupils' motivation and enthusiasm for learning content is crucial. It is essential to employ adaptive teaching methods that cater to the diverse needs and learning styles of pupils. Within the educational framework, it is imperative to provide opportunities not only for acquiring theoretical knowledge but also for developing critical thinking, analytical skills, and problem-solving abilities – all of which are essential for pupils' future professional growth (Parsons, 2012). The educational offer should be responsive to the evolving needs of the labor market, featuring a flexible structure that adapts to new tasks and professional opportunities. Therefore, an educational curriculum emphasizing contemporary skills not only imparts necessary knowledge but also hones practical skills and prepares individuals to navigate the dynamic demands of the everyday life. Such education serves as a bridge between academic learning and a successful professional career.

Supporting the growth of all individuals is a fundamental objective, requiring a comprehensive and tailored approach to nurturing individuals across all stages of life – childhood, youth, and adulthood. Central to achieving this goal is establishing support mechanisms that foster physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development (Thomas & Depasquale, 2016; Finnveden & Schneider, 2023).

Achieving sustainable and effective management of the education system and its resources is crucial to providing high-quality education that meets societal needs and fosters sustainable development. This goal requires strategic planning and prudent resource allocation to ensure the long-term stability and efficiency of the education system.

A sustainable education system integrates principles of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. This entails educational policies and practices that promote the well-being and development of both current and future generations, while also preserving natural resources and environmental equilibrium. Such a system is oriented towards achieving long-term objectives and guarantees accessibility and quality education for all members of society (Finnveden & Schneider, 2023).

Effective management of resources is essential for an efficient education system. This includes prudent financial management and optimization of human resources. Developing effective budgetary planning mechanisms ensures that available funds are utilized efficiently (Belchior-Rocha et al., 2022). Similarly, optimizing human resources involves providing teachers and staff with opportunities for professional growth, fostering motivation, and enhancing work efficiency.

Furthermore, the education system must remain flexible and adaptable to meet evolving societal needs and rapid technological advancements. Embracing innovation continuously improves educational quality and aligns with current educational objectives.

Lastly, public engagement and dialogue are integral components of a sustainable and effective education system. Involving the public in the development and implementation of education policies enhances transparency, accountability, and

mutual understanding (Gutierrez-Bucheli et al., 2022). This approach ensures that the education system remains effective in both the short and long term, embedding sustainable values and principles across all its endeavors.

Education should be approached in a nuanced manner, considering diverse internal and external factors that shape it, necessitating a view through the lens of complex adaptive systems theory.

Key elements of complex adaptive systems theory include:

- self-organization: the system's capacity to autonomously organize and form structures from disparate elements, without external direction;
- adaptation: the system's ability to adjust to environmental changes in response to new circumstances and challenges.
- non-linearity: relationships and interactions within systems are not straightforward and linear; they can be intricate and non-linear;
- interconnectedness: the emergence of novel properties, structures, or behaviors within a system that cannot be predicted solely by the behavior of individual elements;
- reversibility: mechanisms and interactions within a system that can reverse and contribute to its dynamics and adaptation (Akgün et al., 2014).

Complex adaptive systems theory finds application across various disciplines such as organizational management, ecology, economics, and sociology. It provides a fresh perspective on understanding system behavior and structure, emphasizing dynamics, adaptability, and complexity (Andersson et al., 2020).

Educational institutions, like other organizations, exhibit characteristics of complex adaptive systems. Viewing them through this lens helps educational professionals understand the complexities involved in initiating and sustaining various changes. Complex adaptive systems theory emphasizes using data and information to comprehend how the system operates and enhance its effectiveness.

In order to analyze quality of education, it is necessary to get insight into quality culture. Quality culture in an organization encompasses two key elements: a cultural or psychological component and a structural or managerial component. The cultural aspect involves shared values, beliefs, expectations, and a commitment to continuous quality improvement among individuals within the organization. This element focuses on fostering a collective dedication to maintaining and enhancing standards of excellence in all aspects of operations. Conversely, the structural or managerial element pertains to the institution as a whole, encompassing defined processes and systems that promote quality improvement and coordinate individual efforts toward common goals. This component ensures that organizational practices and procedures are systematically designed to support and sustain high-quality outcomes across various functions.

Together, these elements – cultural/psychological and structural/management – are crucial for fostering a quality learning environment. They enable educational institutions to uphold rigorous standards, promote continuous learning and development, and effectively respond to evolving educational needs and challenges (Saffar & Obeidat, 2020).

Quality within an educational institution plays a crucial role in facilitating targeted data collection and analysis. This enables the assessment of learning outcomes, identification of challenges, and identification of opportunities for improvement. A strong quality culture fosters individual and collective responsibility for maintaining and enhancing educational standards. Moreover, complex adaptive systems theory

promotes an open and stimulating environment that encourages innovation and adaptation. These values and behavioral norms contribute to improving the institutional culture and relational dynamics (Ouyang et al., 2023; Priyadarshini & Purushothaman, 2022).

Both complex adaptive systems theory and a quality culture emphasize sustainability and continuous improvement. Implementing these approaches enables educational institutions to develop a sustainable educational model that meets evolving societal needs and supports ongoing learning and development.

The aim of the research: To study Latvian teachers' perspectives on education in Latvia and identify areas for improvement.

Research questions:

1. How do Latvian teachers perceive the quality of education in Latvia?
2. What improvements do Latvian teachers suggest for the education system?

Research objectives:

1. to analyze Latvian teachers' perspectives on the quality of education in Latvia;
2. to identify areas for improvement within the Latvian education system based on teachers' insights.

Method

Procedure and Data Collection

The data for the study were collected during a focus group discussion organized as part of an educational forum. In December 2023, the Latgale Industrial Technical School hosted this forum. The event aimed to involve teachers, staff, and senior year pupils from general and vocational educational institutions in discussions about current issues in the educational process. Within the forum, a focus group discussion was held to explore teachers' satisfaction in working with both young people and adults. The teachers themselves took the initiative to participate in discussions about their experiences working in the education sector. These discussions were primarily driven by the teachers rather than the moderator.

Focus group discussions are frequently employed as a qualitative method to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. This approach seeks to gather data from a purposefully selected group of individuals, rather than from a statistically representative sample of the broader population (Nyumba et al., 2018). The study employed a single focus group, which is a type of the interactive discussion of a topic by a collection of all participants and a facilitator as one group in one place. This is the most common and classical type of focus group discussion (Morgan, 1996). It has been widely used by both researchers and practitioners across different disciplines (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996).

In the current article, the authors will analyze only focus group discussion participants' answers to the question:

- What are your views on today's education system in Latvia, including pupils, educators, and the learning process itself?

As the forum was organized in a hybrid mode, it provided the opportunity to record the discussion and later transcribe it.

Participants

The study involved six teachers from one region in Latvia, consisting of four females and two males, aged between 27 and 62, with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 34 years. The participants represented a variety of specialties: an English teacher, a history teacher, a social pedagogue, a vocational education teacher specializing in design, a lecturer in higher education specializing in educational sciences, a former school principal, and a physics teacher. In addition to their teaching roles, some participants had other work experiences such as librarians, school principals, and administrative positions. They had taught at different educational levels, from primary to higher education, in diverse settings including both urban and rural schools. Participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in the focus group discussion and their diverse experiences within the Latvian education system.

Data Analysis

One of the qualitative analysis techniques that can be used to analyze focus group data includes content analysis. Data coding is carried out in two phases. The first phase, known as initial coding, involves creating a wide array of category codes without limiting their number (Charmaz, 2006). During this phase, the researcher lists emerging ideas, draws relationship diagrams, and identifies keywords frequently used by respondents, indicating important themes. In the second phase, called focused coding, the researcher refines the initial codes by eliminating, merging, or subdividing them. This phase focuses on identifying recurring ideas and broader themes that link the codes (Charmaz, 2006). This coding process can also generate quantitative data, allowing for comparisons across different focus groups, group dynamics, individual participants, or specific statements made by participants (Morgan, 1995). Content analysis enables a systematic coding of data by organizing the information into categories to discover patterns undetectable by merely listening to the tapes or reading the transcripts (Robson, 2006).

In order to perform quantitative content analysis, the authors used word cloud. A word cloud is a visual summary of a document highlighting the most important words and their frequency in a document (Chandrapaul et al., 2019). The size of a word in the cloud highlights its frequency of occurrence in the document. The visual appeal instantly gives an idea about context of the document.

Results

The authors conducted both quantitative content analysis, focusing on the most frequent words to gain a general insight into the theme, and qualitative content analysis to delve deeper into the main issues regarding teachers' perspectives on the education system in Latvia.

The results of quantitative content analysis are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Most Frequent Words Describing Teachers' Views on the Latvian Education System



The findings from the quantitative content analysis, depicted in a word cloud, emphasize the importance of key players in education: teachers, children, and parents, and highlight their roles and relationships. For teachers, it is their profession and daily work. For children, school is the place where they spend most of their time. For parents, it is where their children receive their education. It is clear that well-designed education reforms and ideas will not succeed without teachers who can effectively implement them. The analysis points out the central role of children in the education process. According to the latest trends in teaching and learning, the education process should be designed to complement the needs of a pupil. Lastly, parents are crucial too, as their support and involvement play a vital role in ensuring a successful and high-quality education for children.

The qualitative content analysis of teachers' perspectives reveals several key areas affecting the quality of education in Latvia: 1) prolonged, ineffective educational reforms, 2) challenges in rural education and 3) inappropriate teacher training, 4) the need for adaptive teaching methods, 5) the importance of cooperation among teachers and with parents. Addressing these areas could lead to significant improvements in the Latvian education system.

Prolonged, Ineffective Educational Reforms

Teachers express their view that the Latvian education system experiences cyclical changes and historical recurrences. Despite various reforms and new initiatives, core issues remain unresolved, leading to repeated mistakes. The analogy of a journey, with periods of progress and regression, illustrates their perception of an ongoing struggle to achieve a stable and effective education system: *"It seems the education system goes through cycles. Over the years, having read the history of pedagogy, I observe that certain processes repeatedly emerge and fade away, while new ones are constantly introduced. Yet, fundamentally, nothing seems to change. We move from one extreme to another, occasionally making some progress, but ultimately finding ourselves back at the same challenges"* (Lecturer at a higher education institution). This recurring

pattern impacts entire generations, suggesting a need for more sustainable and impactful reforms.

Challenges in Rural Education

A significant concern highlighted is the disparity in education quality between urban and rural areas. The socio-economic decline in rural regions affects the quality of education, with fewer resources and lower pupil performance compared to urban settings. However, it is important to emphasize that this situation is not due to teachers' low work quality or inadequate equipment at schools. As a former school principal and physics teacher said, *"It is no secret what the socio-economic situation is today in the countryside, especially in border areas. Compared to 30–35 years ago, when I was running the school, the countryside had intellectuals as well as doctors and teachers in the villages. Today, this citizen group is disappearing, and children are moving to the city with their parents. Teachers now work with the children who remain in the countryside"*. Education policies may not always consider the unique needs of rural schools, leading to a one-size-fits-all approach that does not effectively address rural challenges.

Teachers are critical of the focus of the Ministry of Education on quantitative metrics, such as class size and enrolment numbers, over qualitative aspects of education. There is a perceived neglect of discussions about improving educational quality, which is overshadowed by numerical targets. This emphasis on quantity over quality is seen as a barrier to meaningful progress in enhancing the education system.

Inappropriate Teacher Training

Additionally, current teacher training programs are seen as inadequate. Teachers criticize these programs for being overly theoretical and lacking practical preparation, which they believe hinders the ability to provide high-quality education. The critique of current teacher training programs highlights significant concerns about their effectiveness in preparing educators for the realities of the classroom. Teachers argue that these programs are excessively theoretical, lacking the practical components necessary to equip them with the skills and experiences needed to deliver high-quality education: *"We have allowed teacher training to become inadequate. If we're now suggesting that a teacher can be trained in just 72 lessons and then enter the classroom, that is not sufficient"* (A former school principal and physics teacher). This issue is seen as a major impediment to educational improvement, as well-prepared teachers are crucial for fostering effective learning environments.

The Need for Adaptive Teaching

The analysis reveals a recognition of the generational shifts among pupils, which necessitates changes in teaching approaches. Teachers emphasize the importance of understanding pupils' perspectives, making the curriculum relevant, and adapting teaching methods to better engage pupils: *"When I reflect on the teachers of my own schooling days, they were figures of authority. The way young people perceive us has shifted; they expect a different approach than what we experienced. It's challenging to accept this change and to engage them with lessons that are not only relevant and interesting but also educational. Teaching demands continuous learning – learning alongside them, learning from them, and constantly evolving"* (A vocational education teacher specializing in design). This adaptive approach is viewed as essential for maintaining pupils' interest and improving educational outcomes.

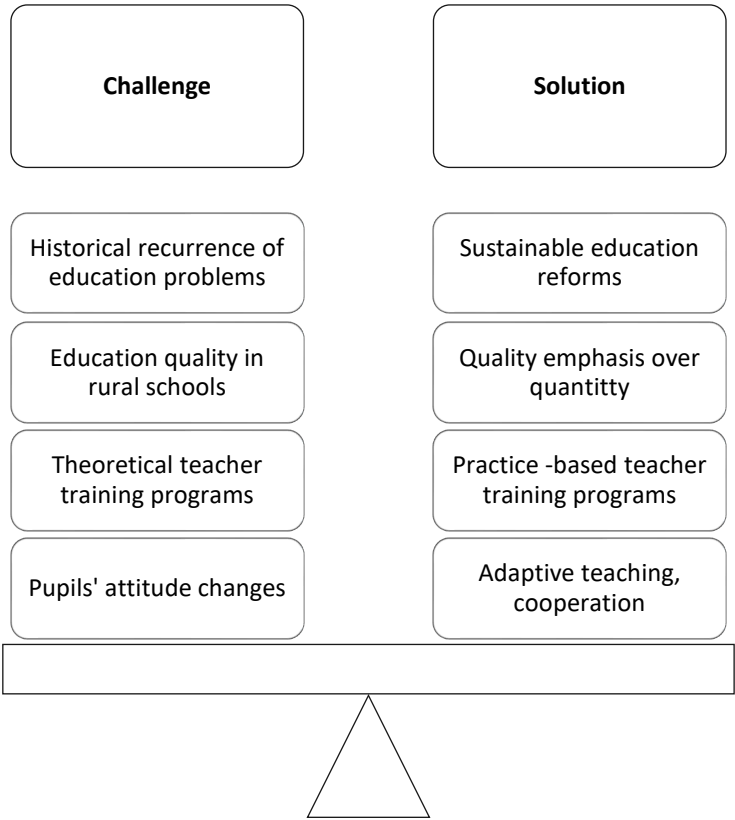
The Importance of Cooperation Among Teachers and With Parents

Cooperation among teachers is identified as crucial for professional development and improving education quality. Experienced teachers acknowledge the value of learning from younger colleagues who are proficient with new technologies. This mutual learning and cooperation are seen as a key to enhancing teaching practices and educational outcomes. A supportive professional environment that encourages sharing knowledge and skills is considered beneficial for both teachers and pupils.

The increasing responsibility placed on parents in the educational process is another significant theme: *"Certainly, parents today shoulder more responsibility than in the past. I recall my own school days and compare them to the demands placed on mothers by schools nowadays"* (A social pedagogue). Teachers note that many parents are unsure how to effectively support their children's education, highlighting the need for better communication and guidance from schools. Improving parental involvement and support is seen as critical for creating a supportive learning environment and enhancing pupils' performance.

The qualitative content analysis highlighted both the primary challenges in education and potential solutions to address them (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Challenges in the Latvian Education System and Proposed Solutions



The Latvian education system faces several challenges, including historical recurrences of persistent educational issues, disparities in educational quality between rural and urban schools, theoretical shortcomings in teacher training programs, and shifts in pupils' attitudes towards learning. To address these challenges, sustainable education reforms are crucial, aiming to implement lasting changes that improve overall educational standards. Emphasizing quality over quantity metrics can redirect focus towards meaningful educational outcomes rather than mere enrolment numbers. Furthermore, reforming teacher training programs to be more practice-based can better equip educators with the skills needed to effectively engage pupils in diverse learning environments. Additionally, promoting adaptive teaching methods and fostering cooperation among teachers, pupils, and parents are essential strategies to create supportive and effective educational environment.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is important to note that the views and beliefs expressed by teachers during the focus group discussions were primarily shaped by their experiences, resulting in wisdom of insight. Wisdom of insight we understand as the "ability to use past experience for evaluation of specific problem situations in the present in order to make ethical decisions about the required course of action that would promote the collective good in the future for a greater number of people" (Salīte et al., 2009, p.16). In the context of the current research the "collective good" refers to education quality.

Analysis of teachers' perspectives on education revealed three main stakeholders who determine the education process and its quality: teachers, children, and parents. The primary challenges in education and their potential solutions were also related to these three stakeholder groups. As previously mentioned, no educational reform will be successful if the main people responsible for its implementation – teachers – are not ready and willing to change, develop, or even continue working in this profession in the long term.

Inappropriate teacher training, lack of cooperation among teachers, and the inability to adapt teaching methods to pupils' needs were identified as the main challenges. The findings of the current study indicate that improving teacher training requires more practical experiences, such as supervised direct experiences in observing, identifying, assessing, planning, and teaching children, as well as excursions to schools. This aligns with the findings of other studies (e.g., Nketsia et al., 2020; Oss, 2018). Additionally, training successfully motivates teachers to engage in continuous learning efforts by building strong teacher networks and fostering collaborative work with colleagues (Sumaryanta et al., 2019). The workplace environment is an important factor that can either promote or hinder cooperation among teachers. Kravale-Pauliņa et al. (2023) state, "creating a supportive organizational culture that is fair, encouraging, recognizes personal freedom, promotes cooperation, provides a comfortable working environment and favourable atmosphere" (p. 215). For many teachers, a supportive working environment can be more important than salary or other benefits.

Adaptive teaching aligns with a student-centered instructional approach, emphasizing that one size does not fit all. This approach, supported by the teaching philosophy of differentiated instruction, suggests that teachers must tailor their methods to accommodate learners' varied characteristics by providing multiple avenues for learners to acquire content, process information, and express their learning (Nketsia et al., 2020). Furthermore, this approach underscores that quality in education

is more important than quantity. In classrooms with 30 or more children, it becomes very challenging to provide individualized, adaptive teaching.

The importance of parents' involvement in their children's education process was also highlighted. Generally, global trends indicate that parental involvement is low (e.g., Maimad et al., 2023). This could be due to demanding job responsibilities, the belief that teachers are primarily responsible for children's education, and busy social lives. However, some studies suggest there is no correlation between parental involvement in activities such as parenting, learning at home, volunteering, school decision-making, collaborating, and communicating, and pupils' academic achievement (Maimad et al., 2023).

The limitations of the study should be noted, i.e., (1) the study was conducted within one country; (2) the research sample consisted of only six teachers; (3) only one data collection method – focus group discussion – was used; (4) the focus group participants could have influenced each other's views, and teachers with potentially different perspectives might not have felt comfortable expressing their opinions.

The study could be extended to include a larger number of respondents by involving a quantitative data collection method, such as a survey. Additionally, discussing potential solutions to improve education quality in Latvia in more detail would enhance the study.

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