

## **Teachers' professional learning experiences during the neoliberal educational changes**

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Globalisation as a worldwide change sets new expectations of public education and expects from teachers adapt new roles to keep up with constant diversifications in society and development of professional knowledge (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2010). In the context of those global changes it's important to ask how teachers themselves perceive their professional learning experiences and how teachers describe and reflect their learning during neoliberal educational reforms. In Estonia there are no extensive studies about influences of occurred neoliberal changes on a personal level. The aim of the study is to analyse and describe teachers' professional learning experiences during the neoliberal educational reform in Estonia. Analysing teachers' professional learning experiences during the changes allows to make decisions on the success of reforms and policy changes. Possibility to reflect their own learning experiences gives teachers better chances to face changes in their profession because problems with teachers profession are related to social change. Qualitative research approach has been taken for current study. Data collection is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews. 27 Estonian teachers were interviewed. The interview focused on four components of social learning: community, practice, belonging, identity (Wenger, 1998). The results revealed all aspects of social learning. Most teachers perceive and describe learning by doing (teachers' daily practice) as a professional learning experience, belonging to the community is also highlighted. The other components (meaning and identity) appeared in teachers' learning experiences in more modest way. Teachers also describe their professional learning as continuous process where experiences in school context and contacts within local teaching community are more important than belonging to other social groups. All this confirms that the teacher's professional learning experiences helps them to cope with neoliberal educational changes.

**Keywords: teachers' professional learning experiences, neoliberal changes, social learning theory**

### **Extended summary**

Most previous studies of neoliberal educational reforms and changes have focused on the macro level, mostly the educational policy has been discussed. Views from teachers, who are identified as key educational participants, regarding such a policy shift have seldom been discussed. (Wong, 2008)

As the experiences of teachers during the neoliberal educational reforms reflect how teachers think and describe themselves as teachers, a direct link can be followed between teachers professional identity and socio-political context (Leonard & Roberts, 2014) because teacher professionalism is a socially constructed concept (Lai & Lo, 2007). As changes in society cause conversions in education policy and affect teaching in all educational levels, it is good cause to analyse and describe teachers' professional learning experiences because learning itself is a social process (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Wenger (1998) gives knowledge a personal dimension, knowledge is giving meaning to one's own experiences and life in general. Teachers' professional learning takes place mostly in school environment and teachers have to be prepared to face different changes in local and global level. According to Wenger (1998) social learning requires considering of four dimensions or components of learning which are contextually influenced: meaning of learning; practical activity, community, and professional identity.

In Estonia education system experienced a change of ideology, decentralization and pluralisation. The majority of in-service teachers in Estonia started working in a different social system. The aim of the study is to analyze and describe teachers' learning experiences during neoliberal educational reform in Estonia. The research question is how teachers perceive, describe and reflect their professional learning experiences during neoliberal educational changes?

Qualitative research approach is used for current study. Data collection based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews based on concept of social learning was used. Semi-structural interview has been chosen because there is a combination of open and closed questions. Interviews enable to find out the participants' experiences and perceptions in relation to their learning. Components of social learning (Wenger, 1998) are good theoretical framework to analyse reflection of different teachers' learning experiences during neoliberal educational change.

All participants belong to the same generation and started their professional career in period of 1990-1995. Teachers had experience of 20 years working on average and the mean age of participants was 45 years. Interviews usually lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. The teachers participated in the study voluntarily.

Teachers were asked to describe themselves as teachers and speak about their professional career starting from the university graduation until now, they were asked to describe and explain how they were studying, what they have had to study during their career, and what the learning meant to them. All these topics were discussed with each teacher and during the interview the interviewees were asked to specify their thoughts by asking from them, for example "Would you explain that more" or "Give me an example" or "What do you mean by that word or sentence?"

The interviews were transcribed and read and re-read to identify the interesting themes and develop categories according to components of Wenger's

(1998) learning theory. Among the categories, similarities and differences were explored and subcategories at varying levels of abstraction were created. Lastly, categories from the theoretical framework of the study were compared and analysed so that the category system may be incorporated in a theory.

The results revealed all aspects of social learning. Teachers' commitment to the profession was high. The social changes were reflected more in changes of teaching related routines and less in identity.

The meaning of learning manifests itself above all in acting through practical experience and working daily together with colleagues, by means of which they feel that they belong to teachers' wider community. For the teachers, the practical teaching skills that could be used and applied in the classroom, were essential. The interviewees perceived that the learning environment must become safer and more encouraging for learning. In the course of long-term teaching activity the teachers' study concept changed, they started to regard pupils as partners, thus the teaching became more pupil-centered. The changes in the educational activity were also connected to the communication experiences with different parties (above all with parents). In the communal belonging the interviewees emphasised the importance of acting as a stable team. The teachers are converged by mutual profession, aims and learning together. From the meanings of the social learning the teachers emphasised that growing and developing as a person has created better prerequisites for being a better teacher. The teachers presented identity and their professional role sparingly, seeing it to be linked above all with the years they have worked and long-time experiences.

The neoliberal social changes are reflected in the personal meaning of teaching and in changes of everyday routines but support of colleagues helped to cope with changes and the personal context of learning eclipsed social context of learning. The results indicate - the influence of learning on doing came forward the most, followed by the influence of belonging to the community. Although rapid changes in society cause frictions in education, those changes are not reflected in teachers' learning experiences as strongly as expected.

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