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## The Impact of Neoliberal Educational Reforms on Teachers Learning Experiences

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### Abstract

Rapid changes in education can cause frictions in society influencing teachers' learning. Inconsistent learning experiences affect beginner teachers' commitment to the profession and professional identity. The aim of the study is to describe and understand teachers' learning experiences starting from neoliberal educational reform in Estonia. Semi-structured interview for 12 teachers, based on the concept of social learning was used. In the first step data was analysed by four components of social learning: community, practice, belonging, identity (Wenger, 1998). In the second step sub-categories were analysed by critical society-related factors. Teachers 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. The role of professional identity building was marginal. However teachers' commitment to the profession was high. The social changes were reflected more in changes of teaching related routines and less in identity. Although rapid changes in society cause frictions in education, those changes are not reflected in teachers' learning experiences as strong as expected.

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## **1. Introduction**

Changes on a global scale in terms of expectations of public education require teachers to anticipate new roles in an attempt to keep up with constant diversifications in society, development of knowledge and increases in access to knowledge (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2010). The changes in society can be more or less visible or recognised but the dramatic change of regime cannot pass without serious influences on personal and professional level. Estonian Education system experienced a change of ideology as in all Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Tinn, Timoštšuk, Mikser, & Ugaste, 2015). Adaptation with such dramatic changes require from teachers not only new knowledge acquisition but also learning in broader social context. As teachers' learning can be characterised as professional identity building (Timoštšuk, 2011), the social changes related learning experiences can be considered as significant for forming and transforming teachers' identity. Thus exploring the period of rapid political changes can light up more socially influenced areas of this kind of professional learning. The more specific aim of the study is to describe and understand teachers' learning experiences starting from neoliberal educational reform In Estonia.

### *1.1 Context of the study*

Learning and teaching are strongly related to context and situation (cf. Kostogriz, 2007; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Teachers have faced tremendous changes under the influence of globalising education reform (Lai & Lo, 2007). A special characteristic of the Estonian context is that, during the last twenty years, our society has undergone great ideological and economic change. Globalisation and economic developments, moreover, continue to affect education in Estonia, constantly forcing teachers to change. Changes, however, can take place at different levels: the roots of professional identity lie at a deep level but a change in behaviour is closer to the surface of the situation (Korthagen, 2004). The major change in professional lives was the revision of learning concept. A new educational system based on social constructivist learning concept, was implemented instead of authoritarian one after the collapse of Soviet regime in Estonia where the key competencies were capacities to learn, act, make judgements and be capable of self-determination (Mikk, Veisson, & Luik, 2008). Available data on Estonian education demonstrate that the curriculum and other educational reforms have been relatively successful. Research on pre-school education (Tuul, Ugaste, & Mikser, 2011) indicated that teachers understand and evaluate positively the broadened conceptual framework of the new curriculum and the greater freedom and autonomy it offers them. The data regarding general education demonstrate that the learning results of lower secondary students are remarkably good. Estonian students have performed on top level in international comparative studies– in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2003, in the Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2006 (science-focused ) 2009 (reading literacy focussed). In TIMSS 2003 (Henno, 2010), Estonia was among the top performers. At the same time the data about teachers refer to problematic areas in education. OECD (2009) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) describes Estonian lower secondary teachers as predominantly female, well educated, disciplined, have progressive educational beliefs, are strong in classroom management and keeping students on task, but they are relatively aged, their teaching practices are quite traditional, they have distant relationships with pupils and their job

satisfaction and self-efficacy indicators are low. The problems with teachers are related to social change. Neoliberal educational reforms and changes in the society require teachers to teach pupils from various backgrounds, and prepare them to function at a sophisticated level in the society. The changes towards liberal educational system have changed teachers' identity and teachers have faced new demands to teacher's profession (Mikk et al. 2008).

### *1.2 Problem statement and research questions*

Rapid changes in education can cause frictions in the society influencing teachers' learning. Inconsistent learning experiences affect beginner teachers' commitment to the profession and professional identity. According to this our research question is: How do the teachers beginning their work during neoliberal reforms perceive and experience their learning?

### *1.3 Purpose of the study*

The aim of the study is to describe and understand teachers' learning experiences starting from neoliberal educational reform in Estonia. Deeper analyzing of the impact of reform on teachers' learning helps to understand more critical aspects of professional identity influenced by transition from totalitarian system to liberal one.

### *1.4 The theoretical frame*

Professional identity- an understanding of professional self defines what can be done (or not done) and what can be learnt (or not learnt). The more the professional identity of a teacher concurs with a description of professional role and external expectations, the more likely a teacher will be successful and stay in the profession (Timoštšuk, 2011). The development of a professional identity has been defined as an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences that may be influenced by personal, social and cognitive factors (Flores & Day, 2006). Thus the identity building can be seen as a constant learning process (Wenger, 1998), which is socially situated (Kostogriz, 2007; Putnam & Borko, 2000).

According to Wenger (1998), social learning requires the existence of four dimensions:

- (1) community – learning as belonging: belonging to a social community in which our activities are recognised as valuable and competent;
- (2) practice - learning as doing: joint action relying on common (shared) historical and social resources, background systems, and viewpoints;
- (3) meaning - learning as experiencing: an ability to experience one's life and the surrounding world as meaningful;
- (4) identity - learning as becoming (someone): an understanding of how learning, in the context of the community, affects and moulds us.

According to Wenger, the critical point of learning is social participation (Wenger, 2009) or, as stated by Lave (Lave, 2009), switching to situational activity. This may not go smoothly. People are positioned differently within the situation, in existing power hierarchies; people have different motives and aims, different experiences and previous

knowledge; they care about different things. Wenger described learning as social participation, an activity that can be described as the process of being active participants in social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (Wenger, 1998).

The focal notions in Wenger's study approaches (community, practical activity, meaning and identity) get a more specific content in the context of the teacher's profession. Trent (2010), Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2010) who have used E. Wenger's study theory in investigating students' professional identity have emphasised the significance of the teachers' belonging to the community in learning to be a teacher. As the teachers' community they consider people who are characterised by common aim, concentration of their attention to the pupil's studying, co-operation, reflexive discussion on teaching and valuation of shared experiences (Imants, 2003; Newman, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996). Practical educational activity is analysed as applied professional skills (In Estonia in the meaning of "Teacher's Professional Standard" (2005)). While talking about teacher's work the notion of meaning is considered to be a recognised, advanced and expressed knowledge of practical activity of teaching (Loughran, 2002). Those practical activities that are meaningful for the learner, create experiences supporting the teacher's development.

Etienne Wenger's learning as social participation theory (1998, 2009) is used in our study to explore teachers' learning during social reforms.

## **2. Methods**

A qualitative interview was chosen because it enables to find out the participants' experiences, perceptions and decisions in relations with their learning.

### *2.1 Participants*

The sample was drawn on the principle that the teachers of Estonian school of general education who started their career in the years of 1990 - 1995 could participate. Twelve female Estonian teachers participated in the study and all interviewees had higher professional education. Eight interviewees were class teachers and 5 were subject teachers (one music, one art teacher and two biology teachers). Teachers had experience of 20 years working on average and the mean age of participants was 45 years. The average duration of the interviews was 45- 50 minutes. The teachers participated in the study voluntary.

### *2.2 Data collection and analysis*

Our interview was based on Wenger's (1998) concept of learning and the questions were as follows:

1. Could you describe yourself as a teacher! What kind of teacher are you?
2. Speak about your professional career starting from the graduation of university until now!
3. How are you studying? What have you studied during your career?
4. What does learning mean to you?

5. How have the changes occurring in the society influenced you as a teacher and a student?

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?”

We used the content analysis which enables to generate detailed insights and tends to identify patterns across qualitative data (Patton 2002; Strauss & Corbin 1998). The two pilot interviews were conducted to confirm that the interview procedure worked and we obtained feedback from the pilot participants. First, all the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then the material was thoroughly familiarised with. The text was abbreviated in this way that inessential text which was not connected with the study aims was removed. Verbal data was read and re-read to identify the interesting themes and develop categories according to Wenger’s (1998) learning theory.

In looking for similarities and differences conceptions were classified into different upper level and lower level categories. These categories were compared with the original data and the borders between the categories were clarified. The categories of different levels were revised until the researchers reached a consensus. The presentation of the results consists of authentic phrases from the interviews, which show the expression of the perceptions of the respondents.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Learning through everyday educational activity*

Teachers overwhelmingly emphasised the significance of studying the components of social learning through educational practice, because all the interviewed teachers named studying through educational activity as their everyday activity. The skills that teachers themselves called experiences, exercises, tricks, methods to be used daily were acquired through practical learning. In practical activity the skills were formed on how to carry out the educational activity so that it would be interesting for the children, the discipline would be prevalent in the classroom and the atmosphere would foster learning. More than a half of the teachers pointed out the importance of creating an environment that would be secure and encouraging for learning and also that such skills emerged in the course of practical activity.

The teachers also stressed that they took part in different courses and trainings, where they sense learning continuously through practical activity. They saw their own improvement and professional development, which had become a necessity for many teachers.

If you constantly improve and develop yourself, it is the thing I can bring immediately to the classroom and try it out (Interview with class teacher).

At the same time it was pointed out that the biggest proportion of learning through practice was still in everyday educational activity and the teachers underlined that learning occurs all the time.

I believe that the most effective learning is learning through experience. And those things that I want to get to know, those I actually experience and those do get attached. .... the more general and theoretical it is, the harder it fixes (Interview with class teacher).

A quarter of the teachers in terms of learning through activities pointed out a connection with changes in a school system: new curricula, different changes in the education system through which new tasks were added and because of which new skills had to be acquired. Several teachers emphasised that they were forced to study daily because the society dictated, how it had to be done i.e. how a teacher had to teach. The teachers explained that very often nothing became better for the pupil and the teacher.

On the other hand the changes that came outside the school forced the teacher to make an effort and study.

I am learning through experience and very fast and I learn something new every day, so that to progress somehow. And it is actually a very good learning, very practical, very fast (Interview with class teacher).

It was pointed out that if the state i.e. the organiser of education reform makes changes, the teacher cannot afford not to manage, but through practical learning i.e. in the course of work they have to relearn things.

### *3.1.1 Learning and new teaching environment*

The biggest need to learn through practical activity has been created by changed study material, technical means and teaching methodology. The majority of teachers described learning through practice in the first years of their career, new study materials were compiled through everyday teacher's work, as the old materials and study books were not usable because of the new system of the organisation of education. Professionally the coping was studied in the school environment, compiling materials on their own, because the old materials had lost the actuality, they could not be used any more. The teachers reported that the preparation of study materials took a long time and it was done very thoroughly, differently from the present situation, in which case the preparation of materials is a creative and obvious process. At the same time all the teachers looked constantly for new material, so that it would be interesting for them as well as for their pupils.

When I graduated from the university, we were the first that were taught in the system of a class teacher (Interview with class teacher).

At the beginning I did not have any materials according to which I could teach, then I learned to make, compile those materials myself. Through that I learned the internet that was studied in the first years (Interview with class teacher).

E-learning was mentioned most of all in case of learning and at the same time they described the situation at the beginning of the teacher's career with no technical means at schools, no internet, no computer programs. The adaptation with e-learning, different technical means including the computer occurred through practice, where besides everyday activity new various different new electronic programs and didactic means of how to use a computer in educational activity was acquired.

When I started work that technical side was very scarce, we started to learn to use the computer. The computer courses were so complicated, now I am doing such

complicated things, that the difference seems so vast, technical development has made the teacher's work much easier (Interview with class teacher).

The development of information technology has been added, it is two-sided, if a person becomes so comfortable, so that I can get it by pressing a button. I am trying one and another. I have had to develop and go along with that, adopt that (Interview with class teacher).

### *3.1.2 Learning and interaction with pupils*

The study materials compiled on the new principles also presupposed new study approaches and concepts. For example work with talented children, children with special needs and children with learning difficulties were pointed out, in case of which the teachers underlined that they did not have any experience while starting work at school. That again required teachers to learn new teaching skills and methods, in case of which learning occurs through everyday practical activity.

According to the teachers, familiarising themselves with these topics has occurred first of all because of the practical need as in the first years of their career there were not such a huge number of previously-mentioned problems in the school environment, the coping of which the teachers have had to learn through practical activity.

When I graduated from university and started my job, the topic of working with pupils of learning difficulties and correctional education emerged.... That topic i.e. the one with the pupils with special needs was not taught at university at that time. That was new for me (Interview with class teacher).

Those notions, that existed at the time I started my studies are not valid now. Those materials cannot be used any more, that is not possible any more. E.g. Estonian language didactics was not what it is at school now (Interview with class teacher).

Also the teachers expressed the redevelopment of the attitude towards pupils and through that also the reevaluation of one's own role in the classroom. It was experienced that at the beginning everything in the classroom was new and interesting and strange. The majority of interviewed teachers considered interaction with children most important, emphasising that it was an area, that had to be studied most at work. For example the teachers mentioned that they learned to be tolerant, firm, consistent, demanding, flexible, creative, motivating and humane in the course of the educational activity.

And on the other hand the thing I do in the classroom is such 'wau' effect, that I am doing it and I actually did not know, that I actually do it (Interview with class teacher).

I did not have any experiences, that is acquired with time. How have you been studying during the time? I was unsure. I have studied confidence, consistency, strictness. In our school system you can't give in so simply, the children must know their limits (Interview with subject teacher).

The teachers viewed as positive feature that the interaction skills improve on the basis of experience with pupils as well as with parents. The interviewees remarked that the concepts that were studied while acquiring the teacher's profession remained often too

theoretical, through which the teachers did not get the real picture of everyday interaction, responsibility that the teachers are involved in. At the beginning of their career the teachers did not have the competency how to interact with parents, how to solve various different problems which were not connected to the teaching of the speciality.

School education, the theoretical basis of which we receive from the university. At school you still start from zero in front of the class and your own class and co-operation with parents, it is not taught at university. How to conduct a parents' meeting, now there is a certain number of experiences, how and what I speak (Interview with class teacher).

A lot of the teachers emphasised that the implementation of the child's development review and new grading systems, above all figurative grading, have added new work tasks which entails acquiring new skills and knowledge through practical activity.

### *3.2 Community – learning as belonging*

As the second component of social learning the teachers emphasised the significance of learning in a community and belonging to the community. In terms of community the importance of a stable integrated team and colleagues' support as an effective factor in staying in teacher's profession was pointed out.

We have a really fine staff and it has influenced the fact that I have stayed for so many years (Interview with class teacher).

In case of teachers the solidarity expresses as carrying out the so-called one activity (teaching) and also as thinking similarly, because all the teachers are connected to common work and aim. The teachers also claimed that new and creative ideas on how to make teaching more effective and how to carry it out in a more interesting way are born in a community, while listening to other teachers, discussing together and learning as a team.

At the same time the teachers describe their personal learning as a community on different levels: on the level of their school (where they work) and on the level of colleagues, on the level of professional association and on the level of the nation-wide network of teachers.

The teachers characterise the colleagues of their own school as a small community, where they help one another, motivate, praise and guide, influence while sharing experiences. Pointing out weaknesses by close colleagues especially is accepted and expected. The existence of a working and unitary team is considered to be a merit, that creates a favourable intellectual environment. A half of the teachers, who have experiences in working at several schools told that school communities i.e. mutual relationships between colleagues play a significant role in terms of the internal climate of the school for the teachers to remain in their job.

The teachers emphasise that in case of a good team they agree to tolerate other inconveniences e.g. longer commute. Whereas the colleague who create negative relationships and emotions are considered to be a learning spot, on the basis of whose behaviour one can change one's own pattern of behaviour.

But I had so much to learn from that teacher, who was such an evil teacher and said such bad things to us that I thought that I would not like to be such a teacher myself (Interview with class teacher).



The teachers consider learning in the community on the level of the professional association as a rather ordinary and effective way of learning. In case of the participation in the work of professional associations the teachers emphasise the importance of involving outside trainers, at the same time they regard them with prejudice, they try to avoid too theoretical problems. On the level of the nationwide teachers' network in case of learning in the community they consider essential the existence of the information technology network (IKT) that offers advice and various different networks that offer solutions in different teaching problems.

### *3.3 Meaningful learning and professional identity*

For the teachers the growing and developing as a person was meaningful. Such a development expands and enriches horizons and enables to get to know different people and experience various environments. Teachers perceive the importance of lifelong learning, because by means of that it is possible to create knowledge and value to be conveyed in front of the class. The interviewees emphasise self-development as the meaning of learning, it is even perceived as compulsion.

I am learning while teaching the others, learning myself, travelling around the world, from my pupils, parents, from the children I know, while listening to the stories of other schools, how teachers work with children and do, then you do get behind your ears (Interview with class teacher).

The interviewees describe identity and role with their long-term professional activity and years of employment. It is explained that this work has been done for so long that accordingly they are strong in that role, thus the teacher's identity has been formed first of all in time.

It is remarkable that in several cases the teacher's identity has become characteristic for the interviewees already before the teacher's career, thus before the beginning of the teacher's everyday work.

It is somehow in blood, I have always wanted to become a teacher, my mother was also a teacher (Interview with class teacher).

The transmitter of the teacher's identity in that case has been the example, either from the teacher's own family or from the teacher's experience at school time. Through examples one's own understanding of being a teacher has been developed, which in general is a basis or motivation spot for becoming a teacher.

### *3.4 Critical society-related factors*

The teachers expressed the opinion that they have been influenced considerably by different education reforms and various education arrangements, which often have not brought along the expected positive changes in education. On the contrary the pressure from outside the school only weakens the teacher's position, through which the teacher's role becomes more insecure. The teachers often sense that their role is becoming more insecure and there is a contradiction between school and society.

In case of communal belonging the interviewees stressed the importance of acting as a stable teachers' team. Teachers are converged by common profession, common aims and learning together. As to the meanings of social learning the teachers emphasised, that growing as a person and development have created better prerequisites for being a successful teacher. Identity and one's professional role was associated first of all with years of employment and long-term experiences.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

In the historical overview of educational reforms in the last twenty years in Estonia it is pointed out that cardinal changes have occurred in the Estonian educational landscape (Tinn et al. 2015), at the same time no profound studies have been carried out in Estonia about how the occurred changes on the personal as well as social level have directly influenced the teachers' professional development and identity. The aim of the study was to describe and understand teachers' learning experiences starting from neoliberal educational reform in Estonia. Etienne Wenger's learning as social participation theory (1998, 2009) was used in our study to explore teachers' learning during social reforms. The Estonian school teachers who started their career in the years of 1990 - 1995 were interviewed.

We found all aspects of social learning (Wenger, 1998) present in teachers' interviews about their professional life and learning experiences. Nevertheless some domains of learning are more evident than others. Our results indicate - most of all the influence of learning on doing came forward in the results and after that came the influence of belonging to the community. The other components, meanings and identity of social learning appeared in the results in a more modest way.

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, applied in the classroom, were essential. Really vast changes have occurred in the teachers' educational activity since the first years of their teacher's career. Those changes were connected with getting to know and using of new innovative teaching methods (e.g. group work and project learning) in the classroom. Teachers became compilers and developers of the curriculum and the practitioners of alternative grading strategies. Besides the former means like study books and workbooks the teachers had to start using means of information technology immediately. The interviewees perceived that the learning environment must become safer and more encouraging for learning. They had to start teaching pupils with different social background and those who were talented or those with special needs. 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-centred. The interviewees started to think about the pupils' learning, how their teaching supports the individuality, interests and critical thinking of each pupil, how to encourage pupils to learn together. The changes in the educational activity were also connected to the communication experiences with different parties (above all with parents). Compared to the earlier decades the parents had become more critical and demanding in terms of their children's teaching. Such a new learning experience was a real challenge for the teachers.

The above results are in accordance with the earlier studies, on the basis of which practical and everyday experience is more important than looking for a deeper meaning for the experience (Trent, 2010; Timoštsuk & Ugaste 2010).

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. Hence the conflict why teachers perceive their professional identity modestly, first of all through their professional role or through the expectations and requirements of the society and school, but they experience less the so-called sense of individual professional self. Hence emerges a study area for the future.

The results confirmed the situational character of the teachers' learning and teaching, which the interviewees sensed as constant adapting to changes and readiness to cope with changes. The teachers have had to cope with and get used to the situations, where the pupils' difference is a norm and the teacher must be flexible carrying out the teaching activity with children with special needs. At the same time the interviewees consider the readiness and coping with different changes as a strength of their teacher's work. All this confirms that the teacher's profession is context specific and when situations change the teachers are forced to change and develop professionally.

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