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Teachers' understanding about education decision-making processes at the macro, meso and micro levels

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Abstract

Recent changes in the Estonian education system have been altered in concordance with changes in the socio-cultural context and decision-making processes at the macro, meso and micro levels. The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' opinions regarding the education system and its regulations on different decision-making processes at different levels. Forty-five primary school teachers from 28 Estonian schools participated in this study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, and thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Teachers expressed more negative feelings about not being included in the processes made at the macro level. At the meso level, the teachers were familiar with decisions supporting their professional development. Teachers also mentioned that they should be more recognised in the processes made at the micro level. Teachers need to be more involved in the decision-making processes and in school management to feel that their work is valued.

Keywords: Educational system, decision-making processes, primary school teacher, interview.

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1. Background

According to the socio-cultural approach, context is a key aspect of the development of human knowledge, values, understandings and behaviour. Such development is conditioned by outward influences and experiences as well as contains inner changes (see Vygotsky, 1928/1994). The transformation of more democratic values is visible in the recent decades in the Estonian education system. Many fundamental changes have taken place (e.g., school reform, a network of schools) and competence-based approach has been chosen as the main concept behind curricula. In concordance with these changes, decision-making processes and their regulations have been altered on the macro, meso and micro levels.

2. Regulations on macro level

Policy initiatives on the macro level include the ongoing redefinition of responsibilities for education across administration levels (Santiago, Levitas, Rado & Shewbridge, 2016), which has a decisive role in shaping educational systems. In recent years, Estonia has placed considerable emphasis to improve the quality of the educational system and looks at international standards and best practices. The establishment of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (2014) as the main reference for education policy, the curricular reform in education (National curricula for upper secondary schools, 2011) and a competence-based career system for teachers have changed the teaching workforce at the local level. There is great autonomy for the school management involved in teaching in Estonia (Santiago et al., 2016). National standards offer an opportunity for government and school leaders to monitor educational activities by learning outcomes and teachers' capacity for reporting (Sachs, 2016). Teachers should teach pupils general skills to become active citizens and workers, but they are mainly involved in the control of students' knowledge instead of moulding their design (OECD, 2015).

On the other hand, the activities of educational institutions are regulated by the various regulations, curricula and tests such as TALIS and public data. Political debates on the quality of teachers mainly relate to teachers' salary as well as their seniority and age distribution (Goodson, 2014). In 2015/16, there was an increase in teachers' salaries in 24 EU countries. The lowest minimum statutory salary in primary and secondary school was registered in Lithuania (36%). The country with the highest minimum annual salary was in Bosnia and Herzegovina (194%). In Estonia, the minimum statutory salary was 72.2% (see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016 for details). Speaking about Estonian teachers' average age and teaching experience, they are higher than in EU countries in average (47.9 years for age and 21.6 years for teaching experience).

3. Processes at meso level

Changes in Estonian society and education (e.g., the number of students declined by 22% and teachers by 13%, the number of general education schools fell to 10%) have led to the need to reform a network of schools (Poder, Veski, Kirss & Lauri, 2014). Successful school leaders complement structural mechanisms (e.g., goal-setting, curricular organisation, student assessment, and teacher evaluation) with cultural tools (e.g., values, vision, and collaboration) in their efforts aimed at school improvement (Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood & Jantzi, 2003). Meso-level decisions include a control system and affect the development and management decisions in educational institutions, in so far as how flexible leaders are in guiding, recognising and supporting teachers' professional development. Freedom of choice for the organisation of studies, plans, content and teaching methods is one of the meso-level decisions, the content of substances and repertoire of methods for teaching (see also Kwakman, 2003).

Many teachers establish their professional development plans by taking into account the school development plans (Santiago et al., 2016). Teachers' professional development is defined as a complex

process, which requires the cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively (Avalos, 2011). Surveys have shown large variations across and within countries in the extent of professional development of teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; OECD, 2016; Schleicher, 2016). Often, professional development is disjointed in one-off courses. However, the teachers in the TALIS survey reported that the most effective development is through longer programmes that involve collaborative research for improving teaching effectiveness (Schleicher, 2016).

The school owner (i.e., state, municipality, private) may also advise teachers to take specific professional development activities. Successful development programmes include learning activities that promote teachers' learning communities (OECD, 2016; Schleicher, 2016). Teachers' commitment to the school as an organisation has been identified as positively related to increased effort, performance and professionalism (Geijsel, Slegers, Stoel & Kruger, 2009). Mutual cooperation may give teachers the opportunity to jointly solve the problems, and to get feedback, help and support (Kwakman, 2003). At the meso level, a shared vision is important (Montuori, 2000; Nikkanen & Lyytinen, 2005). Through initiating a vision, school leaders contribute to building a vision in schools that reinforces the personal and social identity of followers with the organisation. Thereby, collective cohesion is increased and individuals may be more willing to internalise organisational goals as their personal goals and have more confidence in their ability to attain the shared vision (Geijsel et al., 2009; Griego, Geroy & Wright, 2000).

4. Processes at micro level

The development of a favourable learning environment plays an important role in the school climate (Kitsing, Taht & Kukemelk, 2015) and regulations (Kwakman, 2003). Processes at the micro level include primarily the teacher and her/his work environment: learning content and activities and decisions related to recreational activities provided by the school. Teachers' work efficiency within schools affect relationships with leaders and colleagues (Takahashi, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2002). Geijsel, Slegers, Stoel and Kruger (2009) pointed out that the organisation of the school (e.g., the participation of teachers in decision-making and teamwork) and changes in the management also promote the professional development of teachers. It has been shown that teachers' learning is also influenced by factors such as teaching efficacy, personal autonomy and perceived control (Coburn, 2004; Spillane, Reiser & Reimer, 2002).

It is also believed the effectiveness of teachers is closely linked to their behaviour in the classroom. For example, high-efficiency teachers are better planners, organisers and they are more enthusiastic (Allinder, 1994). Teachers need these skills, especially if they work with large classes. Due to the more passive role of pupils in larger classes, teachers have to engage in a whole class teaching (Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown & Martin, 2007). Therefore, teachers have to cover all types of contact, including different procedures and routines. The learning outcomes of pupils are also linked to the efficiency of the teachers involved in teaching activities (King, 2014; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005).

5. Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this study is to find out teachers' understanding regarding the Estonian education system and its regulations on different decision-making levels. The following research questions were formulated:

- 1) What kind of macro, meso and micro level decision-making processes are described by primary school teachers?
- 2) How do primary school teachers understand their professional development in the context of decision-making processes in schools?
- 3) What kind of differences are expressed in the perceptions of primary school teachers about decision-making processes, given their age and teaching experience?

6. Research methods

6.1. Participants

The study was conducted in the framework of the larger project, with the purpose to assess the effectiveness of Estonian basic school (Toomela, 2010). Altogether, 45 primary school teachers from 28 Estonian lower secondary schools (15 urban and 13 countryside schools) participated. This article analyses the interviews carried out with 41 teachers, who taught main school subjects to students from Grades 1 to 3. The teachers' average age was 42 years (SD = 7.44, min = 26, max = 58) and their average teaching experience was 17.49 years (SD = 8.68, min = 1, max = 39).

6.2. Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews, with an average length of 40 min were used for data collection. The interviews were transcribed and analysed in two steps, using thematic analysis method (Etelapelto, Vahasantanen, & Hokka, 2015). First, a targeted thematic analysis was used to choose the main themes and sub-themes. With the aim of enhancing the reliability of research results (Bazeley, 2013), both authors have read interviews and implemented analytic units: sentences or sets of sentences that expressed the main concepts. Then, the interviews were re-read, by monitoring labelled sections in the context. Three main themes were selected due to the theory of the decision-making processes descriptions at the macro, meso and micro levels; the sub-themes were based on hits of teachers' interviews (see Table 1). The labels of analogous sub-themes were adjusted in the discussions.

In the second phase of the coding, MS Excel data table of interviewed teachers was submitted, where the sub-themes were distributed within the main themes. The data table was filled using a dichotomous coding: 1 – positively expressed sub-theme in the text; 0 – absent from the text sub-theme; □1 – negatively expressed sub-theme in the text. Each teacher calculated the total score of three main themes based on sub-themes (min = 6, max = 41).

Table 1. Sub-themes and examples from interviews by three decision-making levels

Themes	N	RF	Sub-themes	Examples
Macro level	65	0.21	Education policy	<i>Financial resources</i>
			Curricular reform of education	<i>Possibility to individualise curriculum</i>
			Autonomy for the school management	<i>Salary/learning materials</i>
Meso level	112	0.36	School organisation	<i>Lack of teachers</i>
			Shared vision	<i>Competitiveness of the school</i>
			Teacher professional development	<i>Continuous training/feedback to teacher</i>
			Teaching effectiveness	<i>Teaching methods/class size</i>
			Teacher learning communities	<i>Teamwork/learning from each other</i>
			Cooperation	<i>Merge of subjects</i>
Micro level	133	0.43	School microclimate	<i>Relationship between colleagues</i>
			Teachers' participation in the decision-making processes	<i>Different meetings</i>
			Work experience	<i>Recognition</i>

Note: RF – relative frequency

7. Findings and discussion

7.1. Decision-making processes at the macro, meso, and micro levels

Based on teachers' descriptions, there were opposite views on decision-making processes in the Estonian education system. Several curriculum reforms have affected teachers' work, and therefore, they expect stronger stability in the education system. There should be local discussions that comprehend all levels of education, different interest groups and cooperation on the municipal level before any curriculum reforms (see also Santiago et al., 2016). One teacher with a long teaching experience explained: *Constant insecurity: after one decision there will be a new government and they will take a new decision. The school is not a place for experiments like that.* (T1)

Also, teachers who were included in the earlier study, conducted by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (Henno & Granstrom, 2012), marked the lack of learning and financial resources in putting together new curricula for schools. The same problem was also expressed in our study: *For example, there aren't finances to buy instructional videos.* (T2). This is especially true for schools whose financial resources depend on the size of the municipal budget.

T3: *But when you are in a municipal school, then, decisions what you can buy and what not, depending on the municipal wallet. ... There should be some kind of national aid, so teachers could get themselves modern equipment.*

T4: *For example, we never have the money to organise events or give out awards.*

Santiago, Levitas, Rado and Shewbridge (2016) suggest that one solution to this problem might be that teachers have to merge little schools and/or schools that are close together; so, that they would have single management and single budget for both the schools.

One-third of the interviewed teachers noted the low wages when talking about the shortage of funds. The teachers' salaries depend on many factors, including the number of pupils in class, curriculum requirements, municipal finance strategy and priorities (Murnane & Steele, 2007; Santiago et al., 2016). The evaluation of teachers and principals, comprising their salaries, is linked to qualification requirements and deliverables (Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020, 2014). Half of the interviewed primary school teachers noticed problems regarding the curriculum. Differences were revealed in their opinions, especially for teachers from rural schools. They complained that the curriculum was overloaded for the students.

T2: *In the curriculum, it isn't taken into account that we live in a changing world and we don't have to teach every little thing that we have ever learned.*

T5: *Today's curricula does not offer time for children to recurrence and embed.*

Many primary school teachers also referred: *Studying should not be so based on facts, it should be more creative.* (T6). One teacher also said that *textbooks and programs are done by too many theorists.* (T7). In earlier studies (Henno & Granstrom, 2012; OECD, 2016), most of the teachers complained that curriculum should include more practical work, and be related to everyday life.

The importance of cooperation between teachers (see for National curricula for upper secondary schools, 2011) was noted by teachers. However, only a few teachers found that the national curriculum allowed merging of subjects: *In my opinion, there should be more project-based tasks to merge classes.* (T8). It has been similar in the previous study, where three-quarters of teachers found that participating in working groups help to merge subjects (Henno & Granstrom, 2012). In addition, OECD (2016) study emphasised that Estonian teachers should focus more on group projects that cover several subjects and be connected to everyday life.

According to Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020 (2014), the role of the school leader is to create an environment where every student's growth obtains attention, appreciation of their potential

and individual differences. However, one-third of the teachers found something positive in the national curriculum. For example, they highlighted that teachers had an opportunity to choose for themselves the teaching methods and a schedule: *Teaching methods are chosen by me, according to children. Sometimes one, sometimes another one.* (T9). A few teachers also mentioned that it was possible to individualise curricula: *Who is a poor learner, gets an opportunity to choose if he/she memorises this text or poem or if he/she wasn't to learn to read expressively.* (T10).

7.2. Teachers' professional development in the context of decision-making processes in schools

According to Geijsel et al. (2009), teachers whose efficiency is higher than on average stage use more contemporary teaching methods, experiment, practice and participate in activities supporting their professional development. Although we could assume that fast social changes would make novice teachers more prone to changes in the curriculum (Geijsel et al., 2009), the current study showed that teachers with 11–20 years working experience were more oriented to changes in curriculum. They were more positively oriented to their own professional growth and participation in training: *Certainly, continuous training would be good.* (T11). However, many schools do not have the funds to do so. One teacher added: *All the time they give advice but there could be some training for teachers, for their soul or personal needs, not that we teach and grow all the time.* (T12). Same problems were mentioned in the study of Muijs and Lindsay (2008).

Many previous studies have indicated teachers are interested in their professional growth (Henno & Granstrom, 2012; OECD, 2015; OECD, 2016; Santiago et al., 2016; Schleicher, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of school leaders is to give regular feedback to teachers and support their growth (Kwakman, 2003). In the case of evaluation of teachers' knowledge, skills and capabilities and offer them training and/or workplace-based courses, the school leaders have to consider related expenses. Some teachers pointed the shortage of teachers (see also Murnane & Steele, 2007), on the basis of which they are not satisfied with the school organisation.

T5: *We get people who are on a full-time job somewhere else. In my mind, we should get back to the time when it was an obligation to work as a teacher after graduation if you learned at public expense.*

T13: *For example, I'm coming for two days ... I have prepared lesson schedule accordingly, but it is not always good for students and teachers, who are working full-time, as they may have lessons in the afternoon.*

Almost half of the interviewed teachers mentioned the effectiveness of their work, which related to the number of students in the classroom. The older teachers were mostly satisfied: *The classes are pretty small, which is good.* (T14). However, it was pointed out that a large number of students in the classroom do not allow the teacher to approach the student individually: *There are too many lessons in some classes, there should be more individual subject lessons.* (T6). Blatchford, Russell, Bassett, Brown & Martin (2007) also noted the efficiency of working in small classes, and suggested, it made it easier to detect problems of every student, to identify their individual goals and give them feedback.

Cooperation has an important role in establishing concordance in the school environment, and it contributes to the achievement of the common objectives and movement towards the vision (see Geijsel et al., 2003). It has been found that the school management that focuses on a shared vision and cooperation will increase the competitiveness of the school (Montuori, 2000). In our study, only a few of the primary school teachers indicated a lack of a shared vision. However, it is very important that the cooperation would involve both teachers and educational institutions as well as the schools and local governments and the private sector (Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020, 2014).

7.3. Differences in teachers' understandings about decision-making

While half the primary school teachers mentioned the high level of control of the school leader, the positive microclimate of the school was approved by almost all of the teachers: *In our school, there's a*

really good relationship with my colleagues and we're helping each other. (T10). It has a very significant impact on the effectiveness of the teaching, including the teachers' behaviour in the classroom. Kwakman (2003) noted that the effectiveness of the teachers is also influenced by the organisational design of schools. In the context of the learning burden, one-fourth of the interviewees expressed dissatisfaction, most of them were older than 45 years.

T10: *I think that the burden on the teacher should be reduced.*

T15: *The state has placed a primary school teacher in an unfair situation where it has established a norm burden.*

Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020 (2014) specifies that the task of school managers is to distribute the workload of the teachers in a uniform way. Organisation of school management, including activities of coordination system, was satisfied with three-quarters of interviewees, half of them have teaching experience of 11 to 20 years. However, one primary school teacher noted: *I miss the fact that I cannot deal with children as much as I want because there are all kinds of meetings and paperwork* (T8). Three-quarters of the primary school teachers, who participated in our study, mentioned that school administration acknowledged teachers, but sometimes too little.

T7: *For example, on Teachers' Day, the best colleague is rewarded, issued a piece of paper where you need to scratch one name: you think the best teacher. I'll make a mess. I don't know anything about other teachers' work.*

Although TALIS (OECD, 2016) survey positively point out that the Estonian teachers' advantage is their long-term experience in teaching, this study showed that the teachers with long work experience (over 21 years) felt a lack of recognition for their work.

8. Limitations and conclusions

Some methodological limitations of the current study should be considered. First, the study was based on interviews with 41 teachers – the number is rather small to enable generalisation of the results to a larger population. A larger sample would have allowed the gathering of more information about education decision-making processes at the micro, meso and macro levels. Second, the study concentrated on primary school teachers' understanding of decision-making processes and their regulations. However, based on the interviews, we cannot fully explain real processes in the education system. Therefore, to further specify, combining different research methods could be used in future studies.

Nevertheless, this study indicated a lack of primary school teachers' understanding of decision-making processes. These processes and their regulations may promote or inhibit teachers' participation in educational institutions and systems. To support the teachers' professional development more effectively, they should be included in decision-making at different levels.

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