

LEARNING EXPERIENCE THAT TRANSFORMS TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

Transforming of teaching and learning paradigms in education has been a long-standing object for debate. Various educational reform movements have formed along with divergent views on what quality education is. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a world-wide disruption not only to the continuity of education, but to the existing teaching strategies and learning modes as well. Teachers had to reorient their professional activity towards remote and hybrid teaching within a short period of time. This creates a crisis-like learning situation that requires not only the acquisition of practical skills, but it demands the transformation of the teaching activity itself. Learning associated with such transformations deserves closer examination.

The aim of this article is to discuss the theoretical and the practical underpinnings of a study which aims at conceptualizing learning experiences of teachers that have accompanied the transformations of their professional activity during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. In-depth literature review was performed using both key word search and reference chaining to discover key authors, key texts, and key ideas. Further on central concepts were analysed and methodology was developed for researching the learning experiences teachers have undergone during the COVID-19 pandemic that have transformed their professional activity. Interpretivist subject-centred approach in line with social constructivism is applied.

The article concludes that the central concepts – learning experiences of teachers, transformative learning, professional activity of teachers – serve to build a logical and compatible research framework. Narrative interview along with documentary method of interpretation and theoretical sampling forms coherent and validated methodology.

Keywords: *Learning experience, teachers' professional activity, COVID-19 pandemic, transformative learning, professional development*

Introduction

In addition to the world-wide disruption COVID-19 pandemic has created to the continuity of education through school closures, it has challenged the existing teaching strategies and learning modes as well

through crisis-induced remote teaching and learning (The World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, 2021). Educators around the world were forced to attempt mastering remote and hybrid teaching within a short period of time, thereby fundamentally restructuring their professional activity. COVID-19 crisis demanded not only the acquisition of practical skills, but also teaching activity itself had to be transformed and re-created in ways that were unexplored to most. Both a challenge and a professional learning opportunity, learning associated with such transformations deserves closer examination.

Transforming of teaching and learning paradigms in education as the dominant models of thought or conceptual systems has been a long-standing object for debate. In Latvia the topic of paradigm shift was especially relevant during the restructuring and democratization of the state education system after independence was restored in 1990 (Blūma, 1999; Briška et al., 2006). Now the topic protrudes due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic (Prudnikova, 2020) portraying the scale of changes to the teaching and learning practices as similarly notable. Though only through passing of time it would become evident if the lessons learned through COVID-19 pandemic have an effect on teaching and learning in the long run.

Apart from larger societal processes, various educational reform movements have formed to achieve paradigmatic changes in education as well, with mixed results. While the dominant Global Educational Reform Movement, which Finnish education expert Pasi Sahlberg criticizes and abbreviates as GERM (Sahlberg et al., 2017), seems to lessen its influence, contemporary theorists emphasize the collaborative professionalism of teachers as the core driver of educational improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Thereby it becomes more evident that structural changes per se don't effect the desired change in the teaching practice, there are more dynamic, social, and subjective processes involved.

Educational change takes place not only on a systemic and organizational level, even more so the deepest change affects the learner on a personal level. Transformative learning theory by Jack Mezirow (Mezirow, 1991) provides one of the most intriguing explanations of a deep learning that affects the belief systems and conceptual understanding of an individual. This change has been well documented in research and a metatheory has developed that aims to "describe and explain dramatic changes in how people experience, conceptualize, and interact with the world" (Hoggan, 2020, p. 111).

This article discusses the framework of a study aiming at conceptualizing learning experiences of teachers that have accompanied the transformations of their professional activity during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. This article builds on the research carried out as a part of doctoral dissertation project on learning experiences of teachers (Goba-Medne, 2019; Goba,

2019). The central question of the study is: What learning experience(s) transform professional activity of teachers in the situation of COVID-19 pandemic? And vice versa: How are the transformations in teachers' professional activity reflected in the learning experience(s) of teachers? Accordingly, in-depth literature review was performed using both key word search and reference chaining to discover key authors, key texts, and key ideas. Further on central concepts were analysed and methodology for researching the learning experiences teachers have undergone during the COVID-19 pandemic that have transformed their professional activity was developed. Interpretivist subject-centred approach in line with social constructivism was applied. Experiences are going to be analysed through the theoretical lens of transformative learning theory (Hoggan, 2020; Mezirow, 1991), using the activity system's model derived from expansive learning theory (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

Methodology

In-depth literature analysis was carried out to build the theoretical framework of the study as well as its methodological framework. The initial research interest was connected to the drivers of learning for educational change, taking the perspective of teachers and exploring their learning journey. The initial literature list consisted of key books and research articles on general adult learning theories (Illeris, 2009; Jarvis, 2006), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991, 2009), expansive learning theory (Engeström, 2009; Engeström & Sannino, 2010), teacher professional development (Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011) and learning experience (Dewey, 1938/1997; Eberle, 2014). The list was expanded through keyword search in research databases and via search engines on the internet, accompanied by citation chaining (browsing through reference lists to discover linked citations that are useful for the research as well as discovering more key authors, frequently cited sources on the matter etc.) and tracking of previous and further work of core researchers and co-authors. In this way it was possible to identify flaws and weaknesses in the research that was addressed with later articles or other researchers. Through this work patterns started to emerge that elucidated the role of perspective transformation through transformative learning as a mechanism that transforms teachers' professional activity and drives educational change in contrast to reform movements that prioritize formal incentives and institutional and administrative changes. Therefore, subject centred approach was chosen for the study along with principles of interpretivism and social constructivism. COVID-19 pandemic entered the study as a conjunctive space of experience (Bohnsack, 2010) for teachers

that both served as a common biographical occurrence and was also a crisis that deemed impossible the unchanged continuation of the existent educational practice.

To further construct the methodological framework of the study, documentary method of interpretation (Bohnsack, 2010) along with narrative interview (Nohl, 2010) was identified as a qualitative design method that can penetrate the deeper and implicit structures of meaning of an individual or a group that drive action rather than depict the explicit or literal meaning of the text. Compatibility of the method and the theoretical framework will be discussed as well.

Results

First, literature analysis provided a context for the overall challenges that teachers as learners face apart from the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes complex societal processes like the volatile nature of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), crisis of attention and the multiplying sources of distraction in the digital era (Crawford, 2015), the ideology of endless self-improvement paired with hedonism (Brinkman, 2017). It contrasts with the intellectually demanding nature of schooling, the need for sustained concentration, effort, and self-discipline associated with good learning outcomes of students. Teachers are seen as the backbone of education requiring to somehow extinguish all interferences and obstacles while promoting the development of students to their full potential. Therefore, it is not surprising that the school as an institution historically shows the tendency of encapsulation (Engeström, 1991) – safeguarding its community from the interferences from outside and creating a rigid subculture that tends to resist change (Labaree, 2012). Regretfully, the school encapsulation tendencies also promote the reciprocal professional isolation of teachers. It contradicts the findings of contemporary research that positions collaborative professionalism at the core of teacher professional development (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018) – emphasizing reciprocal learning primarily in the workplace as a long-term activity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) rather than the short-lived out-of-school learning activities dominating the field.

Second is the support for meeting the challenges of modern teaching. In Latvia the support for teacher learning varies greatly across schools and tends to be incidental. The system for continuing professional development of teachers in Latvia is rather a decentralized ecosystem: there is no coordinating body that would organize a centralized database for the supply of approved learning activities nor to exclusively organize those activities (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021), there is no requirement for teachers or schools to form a professional development plan (*ibid.*),

wide spectrum of organizations are entitled to provide teacher professional development activities, however, the available data, let alone research, on the activities implemented and their effectiveness nationwide is scarce. Funding conditions vary as well – there are both funded and paid programs available to meet the general requirement of hours spent for professional development tri-annually. Teachers are expected to decide upon the programs to choose in collaboration with school administration, in practice the extent of targeted planning across schools is unclear.

Thirdly, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a turning point, a crisis that exacerbates the issues of teacher support already present in the education system as well as denies the chance to continue with the existed teaching practice, creating a pressing learning situation in the current timeframe for schools around Latvia and worldwide.

Therefore, it became evident that subject-centred qualitative research design would serve the purpose of explicating the way different factors interact in the professional development of teachers in Latvia, elucidating the learning challenges teachers face in practice. To construct a nuanced understanding of the research problem, central theoretical concepts were elaborated: learning experiences of teachers, transformative learning, professional activity of teachers. Further, methodological framework was elaborated for researching learning experiences of teachers.

Learning experiences of teachers

The concept 'learning experiences of teachers' evidently encompasses all experiences of teachers that result in learning. However, experience as a concept is ambiguous for empirical research. It is practically impossible to access the lived experience of another person while it is being formed – as it is a reflection of an individual's interaction with the environment in several modalities – in the senses, bodily sensations, emotions as well as mental representations and immediate interpretations. Experience expressed as narrative inherently loses its multi-modality as language itself involves reduction (Eberle, 2014). Yet learning inevitably occurs through experience (Jarvis, 2006) and promotes capacity change of some sort (Illeris, 2007), which requires time to take effect. Therefore, it makes sense to study learning experiences retrospectively (as conceptualizations, memories, reflections) to grasp the effect an experience has had on a person as well as to allow for the formation of new models of action based on the changed conceptions.

For the sake of this study the whole of a teacher's experience forms the starting point for the identification of the learning experiences that have transformed the way teacher performs professional activity – either through changes in attitude, feelings, opinions, or behaviour. This wide scope

enables to determine various factors contributing to changes in teaching practice – not only the institutionally provided opportunities such as professional development programs, but any context that may foster learning. Experience is formed in the context of the whole lifeworld of a person, which comprises all the aspects of the world an individual has encountered, such as surroundings, people, ideas, occurrences, and oneself. The Husserlian notion “lifeworld” characterises the intersubjective nature of human experience (Huserls, 2002), as well as its dependency on the variety of experiences and the environment of interaction (Jarvis, 2006). We may learn only from what we come in contact with, hereto not all experiences are equally educative (Dewey, 1938/1997), some may even provoke defensive or regressive change (Illeris, 2007).

Experiences in general and learning experiences in particular may be seen as immensely diverse, therefore hardly comparable. However, there are biographical events and other commonalities that form a lens for studying this diversity. The COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as one of these conjunctive spaces of experience (Bohnsack, 2010) and a common sphere of comprehension, wherein all the teachers have gone through similar events.

Transformative learning

There is a wide array of learning theories tackling different aspects and facets of learning. The concept of transformative learning coined by Jack Mezirow (Mezirow, 1991) depicts learning that is restructuring rather than additive in its nature. Based on grounded theory research, it depicts how in certain circumstances adults change their frames of reference (meaning perspectives or habits of mind) that guide their thinking and behaviour. Mezirow depicts disorienting dilemma as a state in which a person discovers that their current perspective or the “sets of assumption and expectation” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 92) is problematic and lacks in the ability to adequately interpret or make meaning of the experience in question and guide action. This disorienting situation may foster learning that is characterised by perspective transformation and, according to Mezirow, typically follows a 10-step process. However, as transformative learning has evolved to become a metatheory comprising the work of numerous researchers, different vectors of the progress of transformative learning have been identified. Therefore, Chad Hoggan defines it as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualises and interacts with the world” (Hoggan, 2016, p. 77). The transformative change is characterised by its depth, breath, and relative stability, meaning that the person has experienced significant learning, it has affected several contexts of their life and the changes are relatively permanent over time (ibid.).

Accordingly, transformative learning theory serves as a lens for interpreting learning experiences of teachers, identifying if through COVID-19 pandemic significant and irreversible changes have occurred in the way teachers experience and conceptualise their professional activity as well as carry it out in practice. There is an inherent complexity of challenging the existent teacher beliefs and attempting transformative learning and cultural change in schools, therefore analysis of the existing research on the topic helps elucidating the various aspects fostering or hindering such learning. As the core concept of transformative learning is tied to self-reflection and critical examination of problematic assumptions (Mezirow, 2009), it could be delineated that the primary cause of those assumptions being problematic is the contradiction between one's frames of reference and the situation those fail to tackle. Learning is an attempt to resolve this contradiction. Teachers' professional lives inevitably encompass such contradictions, there is no need to artificially construct dilemmatic situations to foster transformative learning. The prime value of research in this field is to identify meaningful and efficient ways to support the resolution of the existent contradictions teachers already face. In fact, striving to do otherwise, apart from creating an unnecessary emotional burden, risks fostering indoctrination rather than transformative learning (Hoggan et al., 2017).

Professional activity of teachers

To further narrow down the scope of this research, not just any transformative learning that is experienced by a teacher is considered – rather it is the transformative learning that concerns the professional activity of the teachers in Latvia. The concept of professional activity comes from the work of Yrjö Engeström, who defines activity as a cultural system with seven general elements or nodes: subject (in this case – teacher), instruments (curriculum, methods, aids, ideas etc.), object of the activity (students and their growth), rules (formal, informal, or technical), community, division of labour, and outcomes (learning outcomes, professional performance assessment) (Engeström, 1987; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). This triangular model of activity places the work of the teacher in the social context, considering its intersubjective nature, general social structure, and historicity as well as the central role of students and their development.

Contrary to the notion of teacher professional competence, the system of professional activity may be seen as primarily practice based – the actual expression of competences in practice, given the circumstances (Goba-Medne, 2019). Rooted in pragmatism, Engeström's theory provides a holistic and systemic view on the complexity of human activity, allowing to

analyse the interplay of the components as well as contradictions between them within the activity system's model and its network relations to other activities (Engeström & Sannino, 2010).

Research framework for teacher learning experiences

The three main concepts of the theoretical framework of this research discussed so far point towards a qualitative research design, which typically explores the meaning that individuals or groups attach to a construct (Creswell, 2014). In fact, qualitative methods have been dominating the research on transformative learning (Laros et al., 2017; Taylor & Snyder, 2012), and the concept of learning experience, as discussed here, requires interpretive and subject-centred approach as well. Research on activity within the research strain of expansive learning typically rely on interventionist methodology (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), which may be considered mixed method or hybrid.

Northern American transformative learning theory has become increasingly popular in Europe as well. Arnd-Michael Nohl conducted research on transformative learning phases or steps using narrative interviews which were then interpreted according to documentary method of interpretation (Nohl, 2015). By doing so he combined northern American transformative learning tradition with continental European methodological research traditions, with noteworthy results. Narrative interview is characterised by its avoidance of detailed pre-structuring, going beyond question-answer dynamics, it rather aims to “achieve a cogent formulation of the initial central topic designed to trigger a self-sustainable narration” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, p. 62), followed by a quasi-improvised questioning phase to clarify aspects of particular interest by the researcher (ibid.). Narrative interview has the advantage of documenting a certain part of a person's biography from their subjective perspective, reducing the interviewer's impact on the interviewees narration, as well as allowing the story to unfold according to its inner logics. This type of interviewing is considered highly valid in recollecting biographical experience of participants, whereas less so concerning historical facts (Nohl, 2015).

Rooted in ethnomethodology, documentary method, when applied to the data gathered via narrative interviews or group discussions, allows to reconstruct the frameworks of orientation of the interviewees, to identify if those have changed over time as well as to create typologies. Frameworks of orientation denote the structure underlying depictions interviewees make and are considered synonym to *habitus*, “habitualized practices, based on the incorporated experiential knowledge of the actors which guides their activities” (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 101). Transformations in these orientations reflect the concept of perspective transformation – the

change studied by transformative learning theory (Nohl, 2015). Therefore, documentary method allows to study experiences typical to transformative learning.

Such research benefits most from using theoretical sampling and the principle of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 2015) – purposeful and conscientious selection of participants ensures reasonable time allocation and data amount/usefulness ratio, ensuring requirements of theory building are still met.

Discussion and conclusions

Beyond doubt the COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious challenges to the work of teachers around the world. Researching the subjective side of these challenges, which is subject to great variability, involves the use of interpretive rather than measuring means. Transformative learning theory may serve as an interpretive lens for studying learning experiences of teachers, identifying if through COVID-19 pandemic significant and irreversible changes have occurred in the way teachers experience and conceptualise their professional activity as well as carry it out in practice. To construct a theoretical framework for researching these experiences the activity system's model serves as a systematizing frame that respects the contemporary understanding of teacher professional development as a collaborative and work-based endeavour.

In fact, narrative interview paired with documentary method of interpretation has been validated in the research practice, such as of studying success and failure in educational experiences (Gerhartz-Reiter, 2017) as well as of studying occurrences of transformative learning (Nohl, 2015). As a research strategy, however, documentary method doesn't call for an extensive theoretical framework as it builds on "the incorporated experiential knowledge of the actors which guides their activities" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 101), which are in turn developed into multidimensional typologies through comparative analysis in a process kindred to grounded theory (ibid.). Therefore, the task of the theoretical framework is twofold: constructing the basis for the central topic of the narrative interview and interpretation of the results provided by the documentary method. Thus, it is also explicated if the theoretical framework is adequate in regard to the empirical reality characterised by the typologies of orientations and implicit meaning. As an example, scholars have addressed the critique to transformative learning theory in relation to the vague principles by which transformative learning is distinguished from any other learning (Hoggan et al., 2017). Demonstrating how a theory fails to address aspects of empirical reality is also a valuable contribution to research.

The aim of this article was to discuss the theoretical and the practical underpinnings of a study which aims at conceptualizing learning experiences of teachers that have accompanied the transformations in their professional activity in the COVID-19 pandemic situation. It may be concluded that the central concepts – learning experiences of teachers, transformative learning, professional activity of teachers – serve to build a logical and compatible research framework. Narrative interview along with documentary method of interpretation and theoretical sampling forms coherent and validated methodology.

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