

# Perceptions of primary school teachers on the disciplines related to the learning of organisation leadership

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## Summary

### Introduction

The increase in the recognition of the learning organisation theory since 1990s has substantially changed the approach to the organisation management – social capital and organisation culture have been prioritised. Peter Senge (1990) defines learning organisations as “the organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations are set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together”. According to Senge the leadership of a learning organisation is based on five disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. On the basis of their focus the disciplines can be divided into two categories: the personal level (personal mastery and mental models) and the organisational level (shared vision and team learning). Systems thinking involves both levels. When managing an educational institution it may be difficult to draw clear borders between different disciplines as they are closely connected and influence each other.

The ability to recognise opportunities and to be responsible for the choices made is a precondition for personal mastery. It entails personal vision on, and notion of, the organisational context. A person who has attained personal mastery has an adequate perception of the actual state of affairs and focuses on his/her personal image. This affects the knowledge and actions of teachers during the learning process (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Fullan et al., 1998; Marinah & Omar, 2004). The success of organisations depends, inter alia, on the mental models, decisions and behaviour of its members (Mumford, 1992). Mental models influence directly what

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humans do, and how they do it (Vygotski, 2014). Understanding of each other's mental models and expressing one's own view is essential from the perspective of team learning.

Shared vision that triggers changes forms the basis for the comprehensive development of an organisation (Nikkanen & Lyytinen, 2005). Shared vision is built upon personal visions of all the employees within the organisation. Common elements have to be found in personal visions so that employees can see the common path and principles of operation that help to implement the vision (Schults, 2012). The headmaster of a school has to keep the targets and vision of the organisation in sight, point out the strengths and competencies of the team, and draw attention to the aspects that need to be improved (Nikkanen & Lyytinen, 2005; Pont et al., 2009). Team learning can be achieved only if team members start to learn from each other (Senge et al., 2012). This requires readiness for co-operation, communication, diversity and consistency among the members of the team and the ability to resolve conflicts, as well as the existence of motivating micro-climate (Chang, 1994).

Systems thinking is the foundation upon which the learning organisation is built (Senge, 1990). Systems thinking can be learnt and taught and organisations can promote the culture that facilitates the distribution of systems mental models between employees (Martin, 2005). The aim of this study is to find out which disciplines of leadership of a learning organisation are prevailing in the teachers' perception, in order to develop a leadership model of an effective educational institution at personal and organisational levels. On the basis of Senge's theory on the learning organisation, the following three study questions were formulated:

1. Which disciplines of learning organisation prevail in the descriptions given by primary school teachers?
2. What are the profiles of teachers on the basis of disciplines of the learning organisation?
3. What are the typical perceptions of teachers with different profiles on the personal and organisational level disciplines of an effective educational institution?

## Method

Within the framework of the study 47 primary school teachers from 28 Estonian schools who taught basic subjects from Grade 1 to Grade 3 were interviewed. The sample was formed on the basis of the location, type of

school and the size of classes. This article analyses the interviews carried out with 45 teachers. The interview consisted of 15 basic questions that were divided into the following thematic blocks:

1. The professionalism of a teacher and his/her knowledge of teaching;
2. Perceptions and mental models of a teacher;
3. Functioning of a school as an organisation and a shared vision;
4. Co-operation and team learning at school;
5. Systems thinking at personal and organisational level.

The interviews conducted with the teachers were fully transcribed and analysed by the method of targeted thematic analysis. Senge's (1990) disciplines of the leadership of learning organisation were used as the main theme, sentences or sets of sentences that expressed a conceptual whole were used as analytic units. By using analyses that were focused either on teams or individuals, the differences between the average results of teams and between the teachers with different profiles were identified (Bergman et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 2007).

### **Major results and discussion**

It appeared that primary school teachers described more thoroughly the personal level disciplines of the learning organisation (personal mastery and mental models). The organisational level disciplines (shared vision, team learning and systems thinking) were expressed in a more modest manner than in the teachers' perception. Teachers were most detailed in their descriptions about their personal mastery that was connected to the teachers' everyday work and teaching skills, and how they control the learning process, communicate with pupils and motivate them (Åkerlind, 2003). Teachers described more frequently also their mental models. Being aware of these models allows the alteration of them and dealing with more profound beliefs that include self-efficacy, specialist knowledge and cultural influences (Khader, 2012). Both, the personal mastery as well as mental models appeared substantially more frequently in teachers' interviews than the disciplines related to the organisational level (systems thinking, shared vision and team learning). Differences appeared also in the organisational level disciplines: notions on team learning and shared vision were more commonly expressed than systems thinking. The frequency of mentioning systems thinking was especially low, which may be related to the lack of the relevant theoretical knowledge of teachers (Khader, 2012). However, the shared vision within an organisation and team learning are important for

supporting operations of individual employees in the organisation (Kim, 1993).

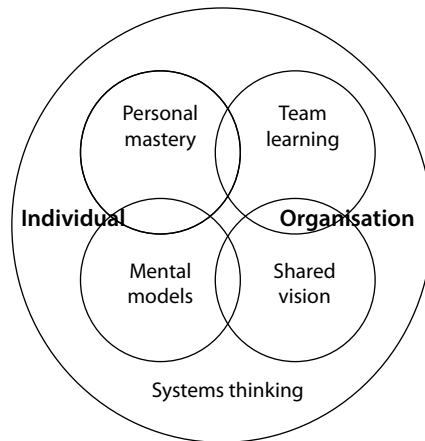
The analysis of systematic differences between teachers' perception related to the organisational management that was carried out on the basis of the themes contained in their interviews revealed seven teacher profile groups (each contained from four to seven teachers). The teachers of two groups were characterised by the high level of personal mastery and mental models or high level of personal mastery and systems thinking. This may be explained by the fact that teaching has always been connected with teacher's professionalism (Harrison, 2013) and a headmaster has an important influence on the facilitation of teachers' professional development. It is important to co-ordinate teachers' professional development at school (Pont et al., 2009). The teachers of one of the profile groups were characterised by the high frequency of describing mental models. The success of organisations is dependent on mental models, decisions and behaviour of the members of these organisations (Mumford, 1992).

Two profile groups stood out describing very thoroughly everything related to the organisational level, but did not speak much about personal level. One of these groups was characterised by the shared vision of their organisation and the second group was characterised by a very high level of systems thinking. The description frequency of other leadership disciplines was very low. The building of shared vision in an educational institution is based on teachers' personal visions and objectives (Elenurm, 2004; Scholtes, 1998), as well as the integration of different actions of teachers at the level of the school's curriculum (Kukk, 2010; Kuusk, 2008). The integration of a curriculum is necessary for ensuring that teachers, as well as students, are able to link different competencies. That lays the foundations for the development of systems thinking at the school.

Two smaller profile groups were characterised by a great difference between personal and organisational level disciplines. It is possible to assume, on the basis of teachers belonging to these groups, that the management of certain schools may lack dynamics or maybe the teachers did not understand their exact role and tasks within the organisation (Rogers, 2002). In order to ensure the satisfaction of teachers it is important to offer them a stable organisation and development opportunities (Salumaa, 2007). In a learning organisation it is important to focus on the development of activities that ensure the quality of the learning process (Garvin, 1993; Nikkanen & Lyytinen, 2005; Pedler et al., 1991; Senge, 1990). Teachers, also need to know that their working methods are appropriate, and

they should expect support from the management staff and the board of trustees of a school, as well as from their colleagues (Pijl, 2010).

Thus, the relatively large number of profile groups revealed in the study, and the equal distribution of teachers among the profile groups allows the presumption that the management of Estonian educational institution is variable – no leadership model that is preferred in many schools prevails over others. Managing a modern educational institution requires, in addition to personal mastery, also the use of the rest of the disciplines of Senge's learning organisation. In order to create an effective management model of an educational institution the perception of primary school teachers were analysed on the basis of Senge's disciplines of leadership of a learning organisation (Senge et al., 2003). Senge presents the management principles of five disciplines of a learning organisation and according to him all disciplines are equal. On the basis of the results of this study it is possible to argue that the management of an educational institution cannot be linear by the management disciplines, but it should be hierarchical (see the Figure below).



**Figure.** The model of effective management of an educational institution by organisational and personal levels

The results of the study can be compared with the approach of Yang and others (2004) where the disciplines of a learning organisation were described through three levels: an organisation, team and individual. The model of effective management of an educational institution created on the basis of the results of this study, a three level model stood out, but the setup of the levels was different: individual, organisation and the systems thinking as the most comprehensive discipline covering both of them.

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