

Construction of meaning of 'non-formal learning' in policy documents

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the discourse of 'non-formal learning' is constructed in policy documents and to discuss its meanings.

Non-formal education and/or *non-formal learning* is a highly complex phenomena and can be approached from different analytical and theoretical perspectives. As concepts, *non-formal education* and *non-formal learning* have intrigued many authors who admit that confusion with terms and meanings is obvious (Colley et al., 2003; Duke, 2001; Rogers, 2003). *Non-formal education* and *non-formal learning* thematically stand close as terms and have various meanings and contexts. 'Non-formal' in education and learning contexts does not have one clear content and focus – for example, this makes scholars, policymakers, professionals, adult educators and youth workers struggle to understand, explain and develop their practice.

Although there have been philosophical discussions about non-formal education and long humanistic traditions in adult education in Europe (Gustavsson, 2000; Jarvis, 1998; Rogers, 2003), the concept of education and learning has been challenged. Since 1973 when Coombs, Prosser, and Ahmed (1973) submitted their report to the World Bank, education has often been defined according to its functions and formality level as formal, non-formal and informal. The main discourse of non-formal education in the 1970's was 'education for everyone' with separation between formal and non-formal education on the way: non-formal education was seen as learning happening outside of formal education institutions. Later in the 1980's non-formal education was seen as complementing formal education or adding value to it (Norqvist & Leffler, 2017; Romi & Schmida, 2009). Since the 1990's the discourse of non-formal education and learning became more oriented on capabilities. Since 2000 and beyond we see under 'capabilities' discourse more clearly also 'lifelong learning' framework being constructed and 'non-formal learning' used in this

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context. The scene where educational policy (together with goals, terms and concepts) was formed and changed cannot be forgotten – before the Maastricht Agreement the European Union was somewhat cautious in influencing the educational policies of member states, but, after the Agreement was ratified in 1992 they 'pushed' strongly for more cooperation, and clearly stated in the Lisbon Strategy that economic growth together with a well functioning employment market are strategic EU goals to be fulfilled through education (Ertl, 2006; Naumanen et al., 2008).

Therefore we argue, based on the main principles of social constructionism (Gergen, 2009), that the way *non-formal education* and/or *non-formal learning* is constructed is influenced by the interaction between different stakeholders involved, ideology, by different agreements made in certain contexts, and by the language used. We focused our research on understanding how the meanings of non-formal learning are constructed in Estonian policy documents. There is no systematic research or reliable data about non-formal learning and education in Estonia, and no analysis of how the concept has evolved, or terminology that has been used in texts and practice. The conceptual and terminological complexity on one side and its rich variety on the other side posed a research problem: what are the sub-discourses and social meanings of *non-formal learning* discourses and how is *non-formal learning* and *non-formal education* described and presented in Estonian strategic policy documents. The research focuses on the post-Lisbon Strategy period up to now (2000–2018) and looks at the changes taking place in the discourse of non-formal learning.

The sources for the data analysis were Estonian strategic policy texts and documents. Empirical data which are presented in this paper, were gathered from 23 Estonian policy documents which were selected from 78 documents that were on the Estonian Government websites and the Estonian legislation official websites Riigi Teataja using the word 'non-formal'. Further selection was made by the word search (here for clarity in Estonian) 'mitteformaalne õpe', 'mitteformaalne õppimine', 'mitteformaalne haridus' 'mitteformaalharidus' (*non-formal learning* and *non-formal education* in shorter and longer versions) and 'vabaõpe', 'vabaharidus' (translates as *liberal learning* and *liberal education*).

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2001) and the policy trail method (Cort, 2014) were combined. The policy trail method was adapted to describe the policy documents by fields over time, focusing on how these presented the dominant function, the main target groups, and spaces and methods of non-formal learning/education. The critical discourse analysis was then applied to explore the meanings of non-formal learning concepts as used in the policy documents.

Five main non-formal learning discourses were determined, each consisting of two sub-discourses. The discourse of non-formal settings was made up of two different approaches to non-formal education: either it was seen as learning and education taking place in non-formal settings only, or, as a radical alternative, non-formal learning and teaching activities were seen as shaping the non-formal learning experience, even if within formal education settings. The discourse of difference suggested that non-formal education and learning is either similar to the other kinds of learning or that it is different from other kinds of learning. The discourse of inclusion presents a variety of specific target groups explicitly or assumes that everyone has equal chances without checking if they really do. The fourth, system discourse sees the non-formal education and learning either as part of a larger more complex system, or as an entire complex system on its own. The fifth discursive theme, that of recognition of non-formal education and learning, was, in fact, extending through the previous four. It opened up two sub-discourses, *de facto* recognition, and *de jure* recognition. These dimensions become important to defining what the concept of non-formal learning and education entails in Estonia.

Policy trail analysis showed that on the trail of lifelong learning and youth policy non-formal learning is seen as serving the needs of individuals (often in very specific knowledge and skills level), organisations and society in general. It can be argued that non-formal learning is attractive as a target or means of political goals and the non-formal learning concept is largely shaped by experts in that field. Self-affirmation as a citizen and a successful career were emphasised in policy documents.

Regarding the target groups of non-formal learning – it involves all people, but also certain age groups and different vulnerable groups – pointing to the two dimensions of the capabilities discourse as mentioned above. Environments of non-formal learning are not clearly visible through documents which can be explained with the definition of non-formal learning where differentiation between formal and non-formal is stressed and therefore it can be assumed that non-formal learning is always taking place outside of formal settings.

Keywords: non-formal learning, nonformal education, non-formal education, critical discourse analysis, policy trail method