

# Teachers' experiences of collaborative learning culture based on examples from Estonian general education schools

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## Summary

The learning organisation is characterised by collaborative development, in which both teachers and management together form a plan for the future. People are motivated by meaningful work and self-realisation (Senge et al., 2014). The learning culture includes an individual, communication, and institutional dimension (Euler, 2010). In order to understand the organisation's learning culture, the study relies on the theory of social practices, according to which innovations are done collaboratively within social networks (Shove et al., 2012). Accordingly, social interactions are understood as interactions between individuals and groups, with an important role in assigning meaning to the activities of the interaction partner (Vihalemm et al., 2015). A discourse analysis of these meanings allows describing how participants in the organisation experience learning culture, and seeing obstacles and resources to support learning culture.

The purpose of the study is to discover how teachers construct their collaborative experiences through social interactions and find out how far they perceive themselves as agents. The goal is to describe the existing collaborative practices. Additionally, we aim, relying on the results of the analysis, to suggest how to support collaborative culture in schools, and to empower teachers. We focus on the following research questions: Through which discourses do teachers make collaborative learning experience meaningful at individual, communication and institutional levels? How do respondents express their agency?

The sample consists of 45 teachers from 15 Estonian general education schools. We carried out the data collection through a semi-structured oral individual interview, based on the questionnaire mapping teachers' collaborative experiences. The questionnaire consisted of 3 parts and 34 statements. Since

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teachers' general attitudes towards collaboration significantly influence the contribution of teachers to collaborative activities (Vangrieken et al., 2017), individual level statements were presented. Then, teachers had to reflect upon communication level statements which map collaborative activities. Lastly, teachers reacted to statements, describing their institutional level. The last level refers to earlier studies which point out the important role of the school leadership in shaping the collaborative culture (Forte & Flores, 2014) and the necessity of the resources (e.g. time and space) that are rooted in teachers' everyday routines (Vangrieken et al., 2015). During the individual interview, teachers contextualised and commented on the statements and their comments fed the discourse analysis. Each interview lasted one hour and was transcribed verbatim.

Critical discourse analysis was used as a method to analyse the material. Discourse is considered as a communication method in particular social, cultural, historical, and political situations (van Dijk, 2005).

The research highlights three main discourses. The collaborative discourse reveals the characteristics of the learning organisation. The competitive discourse: here the respondents do not accept all colleagues or leadership as partners, the satisfaction of the participants in the study is not as high as in collaborative discourse. The non-empowered teachers' discourse is characterised by non-messages. Here, teachers do not believe in collaboration, do not experience leadership support, and have no information or common understanding of the goals.

In the case of collaborative discourse the respondents speak with yes-messages, they use an active voice (*I understand, we communicate*), an indicative mood (*they talk, they show*), name the actors (*I, we, someone*) and name themselves as active participants (*I think, my opinion is*), use verbs which represent collaborative actions (*do, share, discuss*). Collaboration means self-realisation and meaningful work for respondents, learning and experimenting together, and development of the school. These teachers feel a responsibility towards school development. They feel autonomous because they are able to choose the development of activities. Referring to leadership, these teachers are involved in the decision-making processes, the choice of activities is put forward and their efforts recognised.

The discourse of competition is characterised by the fact that the teachers see themselves as resources and perceive (some) colleagues and/or leadership as obstacles. Some teachers describe witnessing partnership relations with colleagues and leadership at their schools. However they themselves keep passive due to lack of motivation, lack of time, interest and/or information. In comparison to the previous group, respondents use a passive voice (*were put, was*

*expected to do*), and expressions that indicate compulsory collaboration (*forced, must be done*). Teachers indicate that they do not see themselves as creators of learning culture, nor do they see themselves as clearly accountable for it. They do not express interest in engagement. These teachers regard the school leadership as coercive and extortive.

The non-empowered teachers' discourse is perceived through no-messages (*do not see, do not know, have not heard, did not do, do not know how, have not understood*). Here, teachers report about lack of resources (time, etc.). These teachers do not believe in collaboration, they feel that they do not receive support from the leadership, do not have information or common understanding of the goals. They do not see their colleagues as resources, therefore, they point out activities that are foreseen by the leadership. These teachers use the non-collaborative linguistic expressions, such as *are obliged to attend, was told to do so, the leadership is enforcing it on us and it must be done in collaboration*. Teachers do not express autonomy in their activities; they do not see themselves influencing the learning culture at their schools. They do not formulate their own or school-related goals, nor perceive themselves as part of the school. They do not communicate with their colleagues, nor do they experience the options they are offered.

Based on the good practices outlined by the teachers in the study and which rely on the characteristics of the learning organisation, we suggest the ideas whereby school leadership can systematically support the collaborative culture at their schools. Namely, school leadership has a significant role in forming conditions for teachers' collaboration (Forte & Flores, 2014; TALIS, 2008; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

1. Teachers are motivated by the possibilities to contribute to the school's development, having the opportunity to create collective vision; they are allowed to select roles, topics, workgroups, and practices. It is important to justify the need for collaboration, interpret the activities together, and take time for it.
2. Collegial learning and supporting each other through different collaborative networks creates a culture of everyday sharing and helps to avoid competition between teachers. The culture of lesson observation and feedback helps to create trust between teachers.
3. Systemic and consistent practices for sharing experiences and learning from each other in the physical environment that offers collaboration at a scheduled time (preferably in the middle of a working day), empowers teachers when adapting changes and implementing innovations.

4. A common information field that takes into account teachers' needs, possibilities and habits (e-mails, message boards, verbal information and other information channels) fosters collaboration and inclusion.
5. Regular collaborative traditions jointly organised by teachers (sports, culture, community activities) significantly increase engagement and the sense of belonging.
6. Teachers' systematic empowerment raises self-efficacy in each teacher. An absence of fear of making mistakes increases the confidence and willingness of teachers to critically develop and test new methodologies and solutions.
7. Personal recognition of teachers, noticing their progress and effort and expressing it in different ways increases the work satisfaction.

Considering our numbers (15 general education schools and 45 respondents), we are able to draw conclusions about dominant discourses. However, it prevents us from evaluating the extent to which these discourse types would be populated within the overall Estonian school-landscape.

*Keywords:* collaborative learning culture, agency, teachers, critical discourse analysis