

Agency and development of key competences in nonformal learning contexts

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Summary

This paper provides a conceptual mapping of key competences in non-formal education (NFE) contexts. *Key competences* refer to transferable skills and knowledge that transcend domains of practice and support developing an active citizen, ready to take responsibility for their own life in socially responsive ways (Kikas, 2015; Westera, 2001; De-Juanas Oliva et al., 2016). In Estonia, several definitions and taxonomies of key competences are at work. European Council (2018) has defined key competences for lifelong learning, while national curricula of basic education (PRÕK, 2018) and general education (GRÕK, 2018), standards of vocational education (2019) and higher education (2019) provide their own definitions, listing their context-specific key competences to be developed at all levels of education.

It is unclear how the systems of such key competences are related or what is the role of NFE in developing key competences listed for formal education contexts. Education strategy (EEÕS 2014) prioritises learner-centred education while national curricula maintain that the teachers assess the level of key competences acquired by a student in or outside of school. This would require cooperation between formal education and NFE professionals within the community. Research so far shows that schools are underperforming in demonstrating the development of key competences (Valk, 2019). There is also lack of attention on key competences in NFE contexts (Dibou & Rannala, 2019).

Our goal is to find out how are key competences and agency of participants reflected in policies and practices related to NFE. The following research questions guide us: 1) how do policymakers and NFE facilitators construct development of key competences in NFE; 2) how do NFE facilitators construct the agency of participants in the learning process.

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We refer to the following key competences: values and cultural competences; social and citizenship competences; cultural competences; entrepreneurial competences; self-determination competences; learning to learn competences; digital skills and competences; maths, science and technology-related competences.

For our empirical study, we used a variety of methods that entailed several steps of data collection and analysis. As our sample, we explored the post-2000 Estonian policy documents (n=23) from six fields (adult education, youth work, culture, environment, economy, and wellbeing) that construct NFE (Karu et al., 2019). We analysed how the aims they construct for NFE in their specific policy domain relate to key competences. We then conducted focus group interviews (n=17) with NFE practitioners (n=59) representing the six fields in question to understand how their reflections of various aspects of NFE relate to key competences.

The policy documents were selected so as to mention NFE at least once. We carried out a critical discourse analysis to distinguish how they define the aim or function of NFE in the context of their field. We then did the close reading of those aims, to highlight specific codes carrying a meaning that could relate to developing key competences. We later related each emerging code to one of the key competences, mapping specific thematic discourses for each key competence in each of the six thematic fields. We managed to show that even though the term *key competences* may be absent from the policy document, the policy makers may have still proposed that key competences be developed within the NFE setting. Three key competences were present across five of the six fields, two in four fields, and three in just two or even less. We describe the emerging thematic discourses of key competences as they appeared in policy documents.

The interviews were intended to gather facilitators' understandings of what NFE is, exploring their definitions of formal and NFE and learning, prompting to describe the learning environment and methods they relate to NFE settings, and inquiring about their visions for the future of NFE. There was no direct mention of key competences in the questions nor in the answers, and instead, we will analyse how key competences are reflected in the focus group discussions. Applying sociological critical discourse analysis (CDA) following Wodak & Krzyzanowski (2008) we explored the corpus of two focus interview transcripts per field, altogether 12 interviews with NFE practitioners (n=46). We used data triangulation with different researchers running the first round of thematic analysis of the data to find the mentions of key competences that align with the pre-set list of eight. Then we determined if the interviews with NFE practitioners of each field covered any of these.

Indeed – while practitioners did not use the term *key competence* or names of specific key competences, the way they described their views and experiences with NFE revealed a myriad of occasions and opportunities to develop key competences in NFE. Some of the eight key competences were referred to more prominently across all fields, others were represented very modestly. Given the richness of the meanings related to each of the competence, we systematised them across the interviews into two to five meaningful categories per competence and thus provided a map of discourses of key competences that reflected the way NFE practitioners discuss learning in NFE.

Following our theoretical framework whereby developing key competences enables supporting agency in the learners, we also sought to analyse how *agency* emerges when NFE practitioners discuss NFE in the focus group interviews. We distinguished between the agency of the learner and the agency of the facilitator, especially recognising it in the phases of goalsetting and assessment of learning activities.

Our results show that practitioners construct NFE as supporting learner agency, extending responsibility for the learning, goalsetting and assessment to the learners themselves. They appear to oppose the external assessment of learning fiercely, as the way they see learners benefit from NFE is often related to different kinds of difficult to measure key competences that the learner becomes aware of later in their life. This also means they see nonformal learner as bearing intrinsic motivation to learn, interest to direct their own learning, and able to reflect on their learning process and results – or, full of agency. If some do not, the practitioners describe these learners' lack of agency.

In turn, their dominant concept of the practitioner in NFE reflects their supporting role in the learning process that involves careful but often masked facilitation of learning contexts that would enhance the learning experience and support the learner in achieving their goals. This intertwines with the less prominent concept whereby the practitioner performs the role of a teacher in the more traditional sense, providing knowledge, skills, confidence, or any other resource. The two approaches were present in all the interviews across the six domains. However, even in the cases where *teacher agency* was stressed, this was done in the context of full respect towards the learner and an aspiring cooperative approach to the learning (see also Smith, 2017). On the other hand, where *facilitator agency* was underlined, the practitioners decidedly rejected the notion that there was no role for them as practitioners. If anything, they saw a need for professional standards for adult educators since this kind of guidance is demanding.

It appears then that in NFE development of key competences is directed and dependent on the learners, their needs and preferences, their environment

and demands it makes, as well as learning and didactical methods used in NFE, but not the policy documents in the field. Cooperation and communication between parties involved were proved relevant as foreseen by national curricula (GRÖK 2018, PRÖK 2018) and described by researchers studying agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Smith, 2017). The interviewed practitioners confirmed that development of key competences occurs daily, which was more than could be assumed, judging by the policy documents. It is possible that policymakers do not realise the role that NFE has in this (Valk, 2019, Männiste, 2019), and thus, common understanding of the meanings given to key competences should be sought (see also Kikas and Toomela, 2015).

Our analysis suggests that NFE context should be seen as an important facilitator for developing key competences. It should complement the role that formal education system has, by providing a very different learning setting that provides both the learner and the professional with enough agency to secure success.

Among the limitations of the study is the fact that the most recent strategies and policy documents were not taken into account. Since the policy trails were only analytical, as was our attempt to create focus groups based on the six thematic fields, it is possible that the specific comparison using fields is less fruitful already by design. Inclusion of policy documents across the fields and interviewing diverse groups of NFE practitioners provided us with a unique opportunity to reach at a conceptual map of discourses for the eight key competences in the field of NFE.

Keywords: nonformal learning, nonformal education, key competences, general competences, assessment, agency