INVESTIGATING TEACHER LEADERSHIP: FRACTIONS OF TEACHER LIFEWORLD EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. *The phenomenon of teacher leadership has been investigated over the past few decades. The purpose of the current paper is to explore the phenomenon of teacher leadership through investigation of lifeworld experience of Lithuanian in-service teachers in terms of eight lifeworld experience fractions: selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project, discourse and moodedness. The focus group interview method was applied in order to explore the opinions and experiences of teachers. In total, 5 focus group interviews with 12 teachers were conducted. The research results indicate that the fractions of selfhood, moodedness and sociality are the most salient for Lithuanian teachers. The interpersonal nature of teacher leadership, the need of social persuasion and capability to sustain a successful interaction with students are discussed.*
Keywords: *teacher leadership, fractions, teacher lifeworld experience.*

Introduction

The current research is built on the assumption of the American educator Maddie Fennell: *"From the minute they step foot inside their classrooms, all teachers act as leaders"* (ASCD report, 2015, p. 7), and focused on the issue of teacher's "bottom-up" leadership, mainly on the question of being a teacher leader at school.

There are three main issues, defined by the research on teachers' leadership: first, teachers' leadership is often equalized with formal administrative leadership (Williams, 2015). In practice such an attitude mean that teachers view themselves as leaders only if they are formally involved in administrative work. At the same time, teachers' leadership is being opposed to principal's (or administration's) leadership and defined in terms of vertical versus shared leadership (Pearce & Sims, 2000). And this contradiction may be called as the concept of "top-down" and "bottom-up" leadership.

Secondly, it is standardized and recognized in terms of set of skills and competencies, regardless of the school's context. For instance, the Teacher Leader Competency Framework (2015) refers to teachers' leadership as to driving force that leads to students' learning improvement and increasing teaching

effectiveness through coaching others, driving initiatives, self-improvement and leading teams. Gill (2006) had called such approach as "how to do leadership" and "emphasized that this does not do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of leadership or the variety of leadership contexts, neither does it provide tools for supporting reflection on leadership practice which is where active knowledge-creation about leadership is generated" (p.11). In other words, teachers themselves clearly generate the most "organic" and "authentic" knowledge of what constitutes their leadership, in contexts of their countries and schools. According to teachers' educator Robyn Jackson (ASCD report, 2015), when leadership becomes a professional standard, and teachers cannot get to the highest levels of promotion unless they will exercise some kind of leadership behavior, then leadership is no more a choice, but the requirement and standard of performativity, which mitigate teachers' desire to be leaders and give them little control over their activities: "We standardize it … suck the life out of it" (p. 15).

Hence, the third tension derives from the nature of teachers' leadership knowledge. In contrary to standardized and explicit knowledge of becoming a leader, the tacit knowledge is difficult to capture, and it remains poorly investigated (Janson & McQueen, 2007). If we refer to a teacher's leadership as a complex relationship-based process, then knowledge about this process remains silent, as it derives from everyday actions, experiences and reflections. From one hand, teachers learn how to lead others from their practice, through action, successfully solving practical problems; from another hand, teacher may learn from their followers in everyday situations, responding to different issues and solving various problems. And the problem is that this accumulated knowledge remains tacit and unrecognized by teachers. Therefore, the research questions of the present study are: How teachers recognize they are leaders for their pupils? What does it mean to be a leader for pupils? What does it mean to be a teacher that students are following?

Literature review

The shift in leadership paradigm. The significant attention was given to the idea of leadership within the last 30 years and several distinct approaches and leadership styles have been identified by the theorists (Pearce & Sims, 2000; Houghton & Yoho, 2005; Gill, 2006). According to the main typologies, leadership has been represented by four distinct perspectives: directive leadership, transactional, transformational and empowering. *Directed leadership* derives from the Theory X management stating that workers must be directed, controlled and threatened with punishment (Arslan & Staub, 2013). This approach to leadership employs the usage of power, close supervision and command. *Transactional leadership* makes an emphasis on the provision of personal or

material rewards to pursuit desirable behaviors (Houghton & Yoho, 2005). *Transformational leadership* may be contrasted to previous types due to its emphasis on relationships creation and communication between leaders and employees. *Empowering leadership* is focused mainly on enabling followers' self-management and self-influence, focusing on intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards (Anderssen, Konradt, & Neck, 2012). Gill (2006) concludes, that leadership paradigms differ in terms of their focus, depending whether leadership is situated in the person, position or process. In case of *personhood*, the features and competencies of a leader and the leader-follower relationship are primary. In *positional* leadership, the main emphasis is on power, authority and hierarchy of the leader within organizational systems. In case leadership is seen as a *process*, the main focus is given to interactions and mutuality of relationships between leaders and followers (Gill, 2006).

Teacher leadership at school. According to Gill (2006), the educational theories on leadership build their understandings from the business theories. Thus, researcher states that directive and transformational leadership gained its popularity within educational organizations at the beginning of 21st century, when strong emphasis had been put on the role of school principals, who could communicate the schools shared vision and maintain the positive change at school.

The rapidly changes occurred within the context of school leadership in the past two decades, particularly reflected in a shift from domination of headship, focused on the individual endeavor of school principal and/or school administration towards the collective action of all school community for school improvement (Mujis & Harris, 2007). The leadership in education nowadays is seen in terms of collective cooperation of educational institution members. Within the literature, the concept of teachers leadership is defined in different ways, however, the most commonly it is defined as the process when teachers are enabled to influence their colleagues, principals or other members of school community in order to contribute to improvement of teaching and learning practices (Hunzicker, 2012), bringing the positive change and school improvement and enhancing learners' achievement and learning, implementing teaching and managerial responsibilities (Mujis & Harris, 2007).

Recent research on leadership suggest that learning leadership from the documents is impossible (Gill, 2006), and moreover, enabling leadership with "romanticized" features and imposing them to teachers trigger their resistance and opposition (Carroll & Nicholson, 2014). In addition, most research regard teacher leadership in terms of competency, skills and abilities. Leadership of teacher is seen as a desired, inherently good competence or requirement, "must have" for all teachers. However, current research views leadership of teachers as a latent process of constant acquisition and formation of tacit knowledge. As Rodd (2006)

claimed that the research on teacher leadership remains focused mostly on investigating what leaders do and what kind of attributes they possess; although, leadership is multifaceted and embedded into a reciprocal relationship. Indeed, the issue of what do teachers experience in the relationship with their followers (students, members of teacher community) remains poorly investigated.

The paradigm shift on the role of teachers in school improvement and student performativity enhancement, makes teachers' empowered leadership crucial for education of 21st century (Kimwarey et al., 2014). Moreover, the school principal, being in superior position, is supposed to create an environment and opportunities for enactment of teachers' empowered leadership in terms of teachers' involvement into decision-making, recognition of their expertise, autonomy and trust. Empowered teachers influence their colleagues or the whole school community in order to improve the practices of teaching and learning (Hunzicker, 2012), which contributes to school improvement and enhances student achievement and learning (Mujis & Harris, 2007).

Methodology

The currents research was focused on the investigation of teachers' lived experience of being a leader for pupils within the professional environment and the phenomenological lifeworld research approach was implemented. The main goal of lifeworld research is to discover, describe, analyze and clarify the essential meaning which is inherent to a certain phenomenon of research interest (Dahlberg, 2006; Dahlberg et al., 2008). And the research questions are *what does it mean to be a leader for pupils? What does it mean to be a teacher that students are following*?

Data collection procedure. The data collection procedure included a conduction of 5 interviews with the group of 12 teachers working at private Primary school. Qualitative semi-structured focus group interviews were applied. The interviews were aimed at revealing the experience of teachers' professional lifeworld in relation to teaching and pupils' learning in order to get teachers' insights about their leadership experience. The topics of interviews varied and were related to the concept of teacher leadership experiences. The first, opening interview, was aimed to familiarize the participants with the goals and tasks of the research. The second, third and fourth interviews were aimed to collect the information about how teachers experienced leadership in relation to concepts of authority, respect, dignity and professional development. The last, finalizing interview was aimed at getting a feedback from the respondents, to clarify certain issues and doubts concerning the research.

Research participants. In the phenomenological research, the potential respondents are required to have a certain kind of experience needed to produce

the knowledge. Therefore, the research participants were required to be employed as a teacher at the moments of participation in the research, to have a relevant teaching experience (at least one year of teaching experience) and not to hold any kind of formal administrative position at school. The 12 participants of the focus group were employees of the same private Primary school. Most respondents were female aged from 24 to 45, working as classroom teachers. There were two male respondents, aged 29 and 27. The participants were recruited applying convenient sampling strategy, as the school administration allowed to conduct the research with their employees. The research took place in the teachers' working place, at the time free from professional duties.

Data analysis. The records were transferred into computer and the copies of records were made in order to avoid the loss of data. Then, every interview was carefully transcribed verbatim. The transcribed texts were carefully analyzed. The process of analysis included a multiple reading of the text in order to explore and discover the places were the research question was highlighted the best. The next step included the extraction of the smallest meaningful units (subthemes), which were later joined into wider themes. In order to systematize the data and reveal the diversity of aspects and attributes of teacher leadership experience and enrich the descriptiveness of the study, the themes were analyzed in terms of eight lifeworld experience fractions: selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project, discourse and moodedness (Ashworth, 2016).

Research results

Self-hood. The fraction of self-hood implies one's priorities, cares, concerns, understanding of own social identity, feeling of one's presence, autonomy and sense of agency (Ashworth, 2016). Teachers viewed their everyday leadership and linked their professional identity to certain personal features related to their individual endeavor into learners' success.

Being reliable
"Teacher, by no means a punisher, not an autocrat, but a man who still sets boundaries, children want to feel safe in this age. Good teacher is an authority - it may be because, for example, pupils feel safe with her because she has drawn boundaries." (T8)

Teachers believe that creation of positive and safe surrounding is a foundation of relationship with children and, thus, they highly prioritize setting of boundaries or rules of behavior and communication. These rules, according to respondents' views, create a positive surrounding for children and helps to come to mutual agreement.

Relying on erudition

Teachers perceive their expertise as one of the most important attributes of everyday teaching and authority. The recognition of learners serves as a positive assessment of teacher's effort.

> There was a funny situation when pupils encountered something in the encyclopedia: "No, there's something unclear, let's ask the teacher - she'll definitely answer." They came to me, and I really heard it for the first time - and I still must hold on and admit that I will search to fully answer them. Because otherwise: "How is it? It is impossible for the teacher not to know!" (T3)

Keeping professional dignity

As a result, teachers view their dignity as a counterweight to unjust behavior of other members of school community. They demand an external respect in order to sustain own sense of dignity. This attribute is seen as an individual teacher's necessity in order to assure equal rights and sustain the reputation.

> "Well, when I say I respect myself, I try to maintain my human dignity all the time, and if you are treated unfairly, take care of yourself. Just defend all your rights." (G1)

Sacrificing (Being a role model)

Teachers dedicate their personal free time striving to accomplish all necessary or urgent work during workday. They view this endeavor as a sacrifice and equalize the sacrifice to a great teacher work.

> "We work hard every day and make a lot of sacrifices, even for our family account and health account. Every day we just try to work as well as we can." (T5)

The respondents viewed their professional identity inseparably from other members of school community. Their leadership may be seen in everyday work and endeavor into learners' growth and improvement. At the same time, teachers require respect and desire to be acknowledged, thus, seeking for a balance between their effort and reward.

Sociality. The fraction of sociality refers to relationship with others and attention payed to them, in other words it is about interpersonal relations. The question is how others are viewed within the experience and in which ways relationships may be affected (Ashworth, 2016).

Being trustworthy

The respondents viewed the trust as a key sign of their effort acknowledgement. The trust of individual child is perceived as a reward and a signal of interpersonal relationship establishment. Hence, teachers feel they exercise power and this power is deliberately given by their followers. And teacher's openness and care resulted her authority and students' emotional well-being and affection.

> "From my own practice, I could say what it really means to me the respect of students. When the student comes in and asks, "Teacher, can I talk to you in person?" And then a learner starts talking about something from his or her personal life." (T7)

Adjusting to learner's pace (Balancing)

Teacher emphasized her willingness to find an individual approach to each student and create a suitable atmosphere, evoking learners' emotional attachment and loyalty. The contact between teacher and learners starts in the early morning and, thus, from the very beginning of the day teacher adjusts own desires and habits to learners' pace in order to maintain healthy interpersonal relationship.

> "The smallest problems of all kinds are, for example: when you keep an eye contact, greeting children, pay attention to what is pleasant to them, or uncomfortable. Some children may hug you while others prefer to do not. In this way you respect their choice since the morning."

Acknowledging learner's contribution

Creation of possibility to demonstrate student's abilities and providing them with positive feedback stimulates learner's positive reaction and empowerment. Maintaining the equality in teacher-learner relationship enhances their emotional attachment and provides a common ground for mutual understanding.

> "We maintain the equivalence when being together and learning from each other, showing that teachers are also doing mistakes. We consider children's opinions, observations and suggestions. And in general, we do a lot of things together." (T2)

Embodiment. The fraction of embodiment refers to one's feelings about one's body, disabilities or emotions (Ashworth, 2016). In terms of teaching, the respondents mostly referred to their experience of different emotions, mainly contacting with pupils' parents.

Experiencing positive and negative attitude (Balancing)

Teachers viewed their emotional state as balancing between positive and negative emotions dealing with stakeholders (learners' parents) within the working environment. Sometimes teachers experience negative emotions, as a result of conflicts with parents. After they may experience positive feelings or calmness as a result of parents' recognition and acknowledgement.

> "Yes, we are balancing. Sometimes during the day, those [parents] attack you, you argue with them emotionally, but the next day you remain silent. And because there is that balance - sometimes you get frustrated, sometimes you get arise." (T6)

Temporality The fraction of temporality implies that all experiences are being lived within a certain time flow. It is about how time, duration and biography influence the experience (Ashworth, 2016). Teachers' experience of time is viewed through planning and coping with challenges that appear in times.

Reorienting plans

The professional activity of teachers can be viewed as strictly planned and scheduled. This temporality can be regarded as expected set of events. However, the respondents emphasized a spontaneity in their planned work. This spontaneity is caused by the interdependence of school actors and responsibility division which not always act in a prescribed and planned way. Hence, other members of

school community need to cope with unexpected situations and put additional effort.

> "We plan both lessons and assignments, and we divide into weeks, and each teacher is responsible for a certain week. You're calm, but you don't get anything on Sunday, no plans, no tasks, you get nothing when you get to work, and then you must get out of the situation. Even if you do not have the materials, you still need to make lessons and accomplish your weekly goals." (T3)

Planning and personal time

Another important issue, emphasized by the respondents, was the balance between personal and professional lives in terms of dimension of temporality. Teachers believed that well-planned personal life is the basic condition for accurate time division for accomplishment of professional needs and responsibilities. At the same time a well-established routine is regarded as one of the professional strengths.

> "You just need to better plan your personal life to make everything in time. And lesson planning is important, because you need to know what topic to teach next. We teachers know what will happen in June, what day, what event, who will be there, who is responsible." (T1)

Spatiality. The dimension of spatiality refers not only to certain geographical locations and spaces, but also to meanings allocated to those places and social norms embedded within them (Ashworth, 2016).

Accepting the prescribed norms

Teachers strongly connect their professional identity to the environment and context they work in. They accept the prescribed norms and embed them into own behavior, especially when dealing with leaners and their parents. From one hand, it provides certain guidelines of conduct for representing their educational organization; however, from another hand, the artificial school rules to some extent, inhibit the possibility to express personal position, and thus, practice teacher leadership.

> "…when we come in [to school], we open the door, leave our own opinions behind, and adopt the rules that are here, we adopt the rules of conduct that are here, and we must behave as required of us. Oh, not the way we would like or the way we think it is right. Because we are the face of this school." (T9)

Project. Almost all things and occasions I the lifeworld refer to the fraction of project. Ashworth (2016) defines the project in terms individual's beliefs in own abilities to carry out the things they are committed to.

Acknowledging

The teaching is viewed by the respondents as a valuable mission which aspires for future positive changes. This understanding is inevitably linked to teachers' beliefs about their abilities to achieve the mission. And these beliefs are being persuaded by important others (in this case by family and friends). We may see that social persuasion to believe in one's mission and acknowledgement of

capabilities empowers teachers and promotes a positive self-perception of teaching profession.

> "I've been getting a lot of positive comments. But [friends] are saying: "You are probably a good person when you have chosen [teaching]" or "You create! Your job is different than others because you add value. You develop personalities. And you're like changing that society and everything is in your hands." (T11)

Predicting consequences (Being responsible)

Another important aspect relates to teachers' commitment to inspire their learners and instill the conventional values which will help the child to behave in an appropriate way. Teachers are trying to predict the consequences of their work, although, they do not question whether they possess the capabilities to teach the right system of values to their learners.

> "We are aware that pupil is not a paper, not a document, and every mistake can cost someone's life. That responsibility and daily respect for the child, knowing that someday they will grow up... and I believe they will be different in society. We instill those values, those rules, so that when pupil's doing the right thing, he[she] feels good." (T12)

Discourse. The fracture of discourse, according to Ashworth (2016) questions what kind of terms are being used to describe the experience and what cultural norms surround the experience. Thus, there is a need to examine what words are being used by teachers to describe their leadership experiences, and what cultural norms are embedded.

Cherishing personality

The experiences related to teacher leadership are inseparable from teachers' links with their learners. Teachers viewed their duty and mission in cherishing the personality of every child. This may be regarded as a social norm of school practicing a children-centered approach.

> "That is, we cherish values, nurture children as personalities, not humiliate them simply because of their misconduct, treat each other with dignity and nurture them." (T10)

Being involved

The desire to be involved and influence the school decisions may be also viewed as a certain form of school culture. We may see that teachers negatively perceive the expression of force and power from the school administration.

> "If the decisions that affect us are made with our involvement, but not some force from above that is, I think, a respect." (T8)

Moodedness. The mood can be understood as an atmosphere that surrounds the experience. Teacher leadership experience is viewed by the respondents as being encompassed by the sense of positive disposition and creativity, which help to avoid a routine and maintain good social relationship.

Being positively disposed

> "Our strengths today are positivity in the classroom, in relationships with colleagues, in self-motivation." (T2)

Being creative

"The creativity need to be everywhere: in the design of plans, in the conduct of lessons, in the ability to approach the student, in avoiding routine, in organizing events, outings, and more. Every step you have to take a creative look to avoid that routine and it would be fun for you and for the kids." (T6)

Conclusions

Educational reforms, aimed to search for effective schools, have been shifting from the principal-based management, emphasizing the development planning in schools, assurance of education quality, the curriculum programs implementation in education and giving the key role to efforts of teacher community or individual teachers (Hunzicker, 2012).

Today the teacher leadership is regarded in terms of teachers' day-to-day experiences, as embedded into teaching practice. The investigation of lifeworld experiences of teachers clearly demonstrates the dependence of teacher leadership on the context they are working within and may be maintained and empowered by the support of school community, social persuasion, sense of autonomy and involvement. Teacher leadership is inseparable from and interconnected with their followers (learners) who are viewed as equal participants of the educational process. The capability to sustain a successful interaction with learners is perceived as a core attribute and goal of teacher leadership within the classroom.

The current research was conducted with a group of teachers working at the same private Primary school, in other words, the sample of respondents was quite homogeneous. Therefore, additional research needs to be conducted within wider and more diverse auditory of teachers from different types of schools and different teaching subjects.

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