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Finnish teachers' participation in local curriculum development: A study of processes in five school contexts

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pfe**Mia Heikkilä** 

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Abstract

For many years, teachers have been involved in developing the national curricula in Finland in various ways. Teachers' involvement in curriculum design and implementation has, during the last national curriculum implementation process, increased locally to strengthen their confidence in and knowledge of the national curriculum's multifaceted content. The purpose of this article is to broaden the knowledge of teacher involvement in the recent curriculum process in Finland; more specifically, to examine *teachers'* participation in local curriculum work. In this qualitative study, interviews were the primary method used to gather empirical data. Hansén's (1998) ideas of different levels of teacher professionalization are used as a framework for the analysis. The results show that ways of organizing involvement, management of involvement and use of time in the local curriculum process are crucial factors in teachers' participation and partly determine their degree of participation. The results also suggest that teachers' awareness of how the curriculum is linked to their collective collaborative and continuous work is relatively high, but it is not entirely clear how the four steps are integrated in the professional language.

Keywords

Teacher participation, curriculum, national curriculum, organization

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Introduction

Teachers are perhaps the most important players in achieving high quality in school development. Teacher engagement and knowledge are crucial for pupils to develop the knowledge and skills needed to succeed academically (cf. Sahlberg, 2015), and teachers' engagement also determines students' success. Teachers' views on their work, of themselves as teachers and of the conditions under which they carry out their duties impact how their work is expressed. In this study, teachers' participation in local curriculum work is examined, with attention to quality implementation, pupils' knowledge development and teachers' professional development, each embedded in the analysis presented. As a framework for this study, curriculum work is considered a way for teachers to develop professionally, to enhance their curriculum knowledge and influence their everyday practices, which can contribute to their enjoyment of their pedagogical work and positively affect quality implementation of the curriculum.

Hargreaves (2000) argued that, generally speaking, the traditional role of teachers as educators who stand in front of the class and instruct students on content is shifting to a role in which teachers work collegially and may not have all the knowledge, but support and facilitate students in identifying strategies for their own learning. This role change was also proposed by Nixon et al. (1997), who used such terms as 'professional codes and practices' to define the changed relationship between teacher and student as well as the changed view of what the classroom is used for and how it is used. Hargreaves (2000: 166) argued that

the puzzle and the challenge for educators and policymakers is how to build strong professional communities in teaching that are authentic, well supported, and include fundamental purposes, and benefit teachers and students alike, without using collaboration as a device to overload teachers, or to steer unpalatable policies through them.

Nixon et al. (1997) argued, in addition, that the development of a new professionalization depends on teachers' degree of participation in the design of professional content. This idea is supported by the finding of Bennett et al. (1992), who asserted that when teachers are not only the receivers of the curriculum, they see themselves as more competent in certain subjects. This can be addressed by organizing curriculum processes (cf. Westbury et al., 2016). Working with curriculum interpretation and transforming the national curriculum into a local curriculum, which is demanded of all municipalities in Finland, is argued in this paper to be a way to raise the curriculum knowledge level of teachers, enabling them to teach relevant content in relevant ways, according to a collegial interpretation of the national curriculum text.

Teachers in Finland are generally satisfied with their jobs (Simola, 2005: 463–464). However, studies have shown contradictory results to this coherent picture of satisfaction, where stress and demands are described as part of what it means to be a teacher in Finland, and elsewhere, today (Webb et al., 2004a). In a study of newly qualified teachers and their initial teaching experiences, the participating teachers expressed surprise about the large amount of work involved and about the fact that so much more than teaching and working with students was involved in the profession (Aspfors, 2012; Nguyen and Loughland, 2018). Curriculum work is one such unexpected responsibility cited. It seems that Finland's teacher education programmes have not effectively communicated that teachers are involved in curriculum development, though being highly research-based. Teachers have stated that

their dedication to working with children, professional freedom and supportive colleagues have kept them in the profession (Webb et al., 2004a), not necessarily the opportunity to influence the content of their work through curriculum development. However, it is interesting to further explore how teacher involvement can be achieved in relevant ways for teachers to experience this being a relevant way of being a teacher. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2015) has described the curricula in Finland not only as a school policy, but also as a tool with which teachers can develop their own pedagogical practices.

Aim and scope

The aim of this article is to study how teacher professionalization can be understood when analysing teachers' participation in curriculum work. This is done by analysing teachers' and principals' experiences and ideas concerning the 2014–2016 national curriculum process in Finland and, more specifically, by analysing teachers' participation at different levels of the process. Principals are understood as providing the work basis for teachers to work professionally and are therefore included in what is being analysed.

The following research questions guided this study:

- How do teachers and principals describe and understand the local curriculum work in Finland and teachers' participation in that work?
- How can teachers' and principals' descriptions be understood in terms of teacher participation in the curriculum development process?

The aspects, among other aspects, of the research questions are here considered ways to understand professionalization.

Literature review

This literature review will bring forward issues concerning teacher professionalism primarily in relation to curriculum work and how that can be a means for teacher professionalization. Hargreaves (2000) analysed the paradigm of teacher professionalization from different eras and observed that perceptions of teacher professionalization were changing and that perceptions were strongly linked to a desire for what the school should achieve. Sachs (2001) argued that there were two, sometimes competing, views of teachers involved in a curriculum process: a democratic professional identity that emerges from the teaching profession itself; and, in contrast, a more management-oriented professional identity imposed by authorities' increasing demand that teachers' work hours be used to complete various forms of documentation (cf. Tirri and Puolimatka, 2000). Competing discourses on these two views of teacher identity have implications for teachers' professional development, as the development needs of the two identities are different. Tirri (2014) noted that the collective identity of Finnish teachers changed 'from being a religious and moral example to become a principled professional person who needs to be able to put moral standpoints of educational meetings'. The quote may seem trivial and obvious but is illustrative of how Finnish teachers have seen and continue to see themselves as professionals. Salonen-Hakomäki et al. (2016) showed how the objectives of Finland's current national curriculum process, discussed in this article, have focused on including teachers in the process, but also

on making pedagogical changes in classrooms and schools. Research shows that pre-service teachers experience a sense of belonging, developed professional relationships and dialogue with staff and peers as well as developed dispositions for ongoing improvement of teaching quality, all factors likely to improve their readiness for teaching when they are involved in professional development projects (Young et al., 2018). The results from a Portuguese study (De Nazare Coimbra et al., 2020) show the potential of supervision, regarding collaborative supervision practices, in peer work, with effective construction of learning communities and improvement of school success. The Portuguese study further showed that supervisors, as middle managers, and teachers positively highlight teamwork, especially in sectoral meetings and in the observation of classes between peers, valuing feedback, reflection, action research and the improvement of pedagogical intervention in the classroom, and this can enhance the aspect of how important the organization of such development work.

Vulliamy et al. (1997) and Nevalainen and Kimonen (2013) discussed the teacher as an actor in the process of implementing revised curricula. The reason for involving teachers in the curriculum development process is most often connected to professionalization, in terms of influencing content, they claimed. Vulliamy et al. (1997) noted that the teacher identity of a teacher in grades 1–6 (with students aged 7–12) acts as a facilitator or catalyst for implementing changes, such as a curriculum change. A strong identity is a tool in the change process, while a weaker teacher identity can make that change more difficult. Vulliamy et al. (1997) also proposed that school size is important regarding how individual teachers embrace curriculum work. In other publications (e.g. Webb et al., 2004b) examining the initial curriculum reforms of 1994 in Finland, which included teachers' great involvement, affected the teachers' own views of their profession. Webb et al. (2004b) reported that many teachers expressed uncertainty about what they are supposed to do and produce, and are unfamiliar with curriculum development processes. Webb et al. observed that teachers did not become stronger in their profession through curriculum work, but rather that they felt devalued and inexperienced. Sahlberg (2007), on the contrary, argued that teachers experience a greater sense of freedom in curriculum work when they do not need to focus on annual national tests or specific tests.

Research on the teacher's role and participation in curriculum processes and decision-making focuses on different aspects of teacher participation (e.g. Choi Wa Ho, 2010; Conley, 1991; Huizinga et al., 2014; Kirk and MacDonald, 2001; Sivesind and Westbury, 2016). Kirk and MacDonald (2001) described a national curriculum project in Australia where the process was said to provide sufficient opportunities to involve teachers. They noted that despite those opportunities, teachers were not actively involved in the work and were not allowed to be active agents, but instead played a secondary role in relation to the actual curriculum writing process. Teachers were being listened to but not allowed to become active owners of the curriculum, noted Kirk and MacDonald (2001), because they did not have access to decision-making regarding, for example, the curriculum content of the texts. In their study they described the events as being 'confronted with having to choose between a top-down and a bottom-up perspective of control' (Kirk and MacDonald, 2001: 566) of the school system. One of their conclusions was that for teachers to be partners in curriculum processes, they must be active agents involved in reshaping the framework and conditions created by the right curriculum processes. Just to be included as a secondary agent is not sufficient (Kirk and MacDonald, 2001). Estonian teachers experience the same secondary involvement in the curriculum process. Study results reported by Mikser et al. (2016) demonstrated that Estonian teachers did not experience ownership of the curriculum due to

compartmentalization and segmentation during the development process. In a Swedish study by Hirsch and Segolsson (2019), several contradictions on various levels in the activity system could be identified, suggesting that the school's way of organizing teacher-driven school-development work – by transforming the rules, division of labour and mediating artifacts of the activity system – enabled collaborative learning and analyses of instruction that involved all teachers at the school.

A comparative study of Finland's and Norway's local curriculum development revealed different strategies in the countries' processes. Molnstad (2015) showed that in Finland, local curriculum work was constructed as a *pedagogical* process for *developing* the local work in schools. In Norway, similar work was constructed as a process for implementing and *delivering* the national curriculum, but not for developing the national curriculum, as in Finland (Molnstad, 2015). This is especially relevant to the study presented here, since how the pedagogical process is organized and carried out has implications for how the developing is done, speaking in Molnstad's terms. The Norwegian process can also be seen in relation to work in Cyprus, where a major educational reform has taken place (Philippou et al., 2013). That study showed that teachers see themselves in different positions on a continuum, ranging from full participants in curriculum development to only implementors of the content.

Erss et al. (2016) discussed how teachers in Estonia, Germany and Finland experienced curricular autonomy. Their results showed that, even though the policy texts in Germany and Estonia promised increased autonomy, it can be, as Erss et al. (2016) expressed it, accompanied by teachers' perceived lack of autonomy. Their study also showed that teachers perceived that social status and involvement in educational decision-making affects their willingness to participate in curriculum work.

As an outcome of a study of leaders in schools, Van Scahik et al. (2020) constructed a typology that provides insights into how school leaders foster collaborative teacher learning. Four types of school leaders were distinguished: (a) *integrators of teacher learning*; (b) *facilitators of teacher learning*; (c) *managers of teacher learning*; and (d) *managers of daily school practice*. Their findings suggest that integration of learning-centred leadership and distributed leadership practices can help school leaders to support collaborative teacher learning.

Perspective on the process of professionalization through curriculum work

Hansén (1998), in his research on teacher education and professionalization, has developed a model of four stages that can represent four didactic competences that teachers are said to need in their work. Westbury et al. (2005) discussed these stages in relation to teacher training and they argued that, during teacher training, student teachers receive through a research-based education the opportunity to develop all these skills. They also argued that a broader content concerning what teaching requires would help student teachers understand these didactic competences in order to implement them into their subsequent active professionalism (see Goodson, 1995). Westbury et al. (2005) and Hansén (1998) described the four skills as follows:

1. The first, basic skill relates to instruction-based activity, which takes place preferably in a classroom situation and refers to the teacher's interaction with students expressed through a variety of teaching methods.

2. The second competence is the individual teacher's ongoing planning and reflection of his or her own teaching, during which the teacher is not in contact with the teacher activity, but focuses on intentions about content, sequencing and time management, for example, which then take the form of daily plans for teaching.
3. The third competence consist of reflections on the collective collaborative and continuous processes surrounding curriculum-related activities taking place in schools and these can be related to the Finnish curriculum's decentralized system.
4. Fourth is the competence that highlights collective reflection as a verbal activity, and it represents both an interaction and internalization of a profession-related common language. Such language is evoked from theoretical and research-related discourse about education but is operationalized by the teacher's own understanding in relation to other classroom activities.
5. In this study, these four competences are used as analytical tools in order to further understand what is needed for teachers to achieve these competences, here in relation to curriculum work.

The first two competences can be said to constitute the core of the teacher's classroom time. The process of 'becoming a teacher' has placed a dominant focus on these first two competences (Hansén, 1998; Westbury et al., 2005).

Westbury et al. (2005) as well as Hansén (1998) argued that these first two stages reflect a traditional understanding of the role of the teacher, or what it means to be primarily a classroom teacher. In the current Finnish curriculum process, a broader definition of the teacher's role is implemented in order to ensure that teachers have the skills necessary to successfully carry out the third and fourth stages which teachers need in a future school. Kärkkäinen's (1999, 2000) qualitative study of two groups of teachers working collaboratively with curriculum development demonstrates how conversation on and development of the common language was central to teachers' collaborative work. There was 'talk about' school, pedagogy and teaching that changed during the time of the collaborative work, that may have been manifested in how the teachers' approach to their work shifted from a classroom orientation to one more focused on schoolwide structures. Kärkkäinen (1999, 2000) also observed that collaborative learning can be seen as a continuous reformulation of the groups' focus on the work, which occurs while the work is proceeding.

The study

The research questions required empirical material that illustrated how principals and teachers involved in curriculum work experience and view teachers' participation in that work. Therefore, teachers and principals in multiple locations were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were considered the most relevant method for gathering data since it was important to capture variation and nuances of experiences. A small-scale document check for background information accompanied the analysis of the interviews.

In qualitative studies, interviews can provide the empirical material needed when there is a need to obtain information about ideas and experiences, since the method enables researchers to directly ask follow-up questions of interviewees (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). Eliciting many individuals' views of the same phenomenon was crucial for this study, since it allows for construction of a larger picture and can increase reliability and credibility of the findings.

Interviews and implementation

The interviews were conducted with teachers and principals who had insight, knowledge and first-hand experience of local curriculum development processes. Interviewees were selected based on recommendations and personal contact. The participant selection procedure was, therefore, purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). This method was also useful due to the time limit of the study. Based on the participants involved, this analysis encompasses five different local curriculum processes of primary schools in Finland. A more precise presentation of each school will follow in the results section.

The risks of purposive sampling are a possible lack of data with which to develop a general picture of the phenomenon and a possible negative impact on the study's validity and reliability. These risks can be reduced by interviewing a sufficient number of participants and by ensuring they are not linked by, for example, a common workplace, language or geographical area. This was done in this study.

In total, 17 interviews were conducted for this study, with 35 people total, including 3 group interviews involving 3–7 participants each. Interviewees included 5 principals and 30 teachers from 5 different primary schools in very different geographical parts of Finland, both in the Swedish-speaking parts of Finland and totally Finnish-speaking parts. Both have the same curriculum. This study's researcher is fluent in both languages.

All participants in the interview were informed about that this research follows national research ethical guidelines (provided by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK, 2012), and that the interviews would not be given to a third party or be used for other purposes than this research. The participants were also informed that they could interrupt their participation in the study at any time.

Analysis process

The aim of the study and the research questions guided the analysis throughout the process. The overall idea for the analysis was to find patterns and themes in the material that answered the research questions. All interviews were transcribed and carefully examined. The thematic content analysis was done in several phases (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018).

Initially, all transcriptions were carefully read, and aspects related to the research questions were marked. In this process, an initial 'rough' analysis was made and some patterns emerged leading to tentative results (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). From this initial reading and rough analysis, two different analytical tracks emerged and were formulated. One touched on curriculum *content*, the *process* organization and how it was received and *implications* for the teaching profession. The other initial track was more discursive in nature, offering a less concrete analysis. That analysis is published elsewhere.

After initially reviewing and marking the material, the markings were coded into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Similar statements or conversation areas were thematized, and the themes were named with headings reflecting the statements and conversations, such as *teacher training*, *approach to learning*, *requirements for teachers*, *process* and *municipal cooperation*. These themes were then further grouped into a structure for analysis. Hansén's (1998) ideas were reflected in the themes that emerged.

Hansén's (1998) idea of teacher reflection explained previously acted as an analytical idea for a more comprehensive analysis. Hansén's ideas provided a perspective for viewing and analysing teachers' experiences and ideas on participating in curriculum work. For example,

an interviewee's reflection could be analysed within the framework of the third competence based on the teacher's understanding of the curriculum work and participation in it. In this study, however, a detailed analysis of each interview applying Hansén's (1998) framework was not done because the material was too limited and ethical considerations did not allow for it. However, some general discussion is based on reasoning according to Hansén's ideas. That is, Hansén's ideas are seen as a way to analyse discourses on teachership in the curriculum process, and are, therefore, appropriate to use here.

Analysing the empirical material in two very different languages posed an unusual challenge but did not affect the results other than necessitating a longer time to arrive at them.

Results

The results are presented as five different analyses of the teachers and principals' participation at the five schools included in the study. This design was chosen in order to demonstrate the differences and similarities found between the schools and also to illustrate how the local work is done differently and how this affects the teachers' different opportunities to participate in local curriculum work. How the five municipalities'/schools' local work is *organized* is a way to exemplify the variation in local curriculum work conditions that appeared, but also to show that, even without national guidelines, similarities can still be found in the practices.

The pattern that emerged in the analysis of teachers' participation is that principals had a clear idea of educational leadership concerning education change and processes, and that teachers' participation was clearly organized. The teachers' degree and type of participation depended on *how the municipality organized the work*, but more so on the *principals' leadership*. The analysis also showed a lack of clarity at times between the municipality's and the principal's governance of the process. In addition, the findings indicated that *time* becomes an actor in the process, as time works in various ways as an organizing principle in teachers' work. To have time – that is, to be given time by the principal – was identified as crucial for teachers' participation in local curriculum work. When the municipality and the principal held different views on the process, the analysis revealed that teachers' loyalty was to the school rather than to the municipality. Likewise, in such examples, the analysis showed teachers criticized the municipality's way of handling curriculum issues.

The principals' and the teachers' voices are included here to illustrate and clarify the results. These presentations of the five processes can be seen as analytical descriptions in which the *organization*, the principal's *leadership* and the use of *time* serve as guidelines for the presentation. The names of the schools are fictitious. Hansén's (1998) ideas of teacher professionalization are reflected on in the conclusion.

Solviken School

Solviken School is a compulsory school that includes preschool through grade 6. It is a relatively new facility in a popular and developing community on the outskirts of a metropolitan area. Participants from this school included the principal and three teachers from what they call 'the curriculum team'.

The school's curriculum process started in 2012 in a somewhat indirect manner, according to the principal, when she was asked to participate in a national curriculum work group that had primary responsibility for developing the basic principles of the core curriculum.

The principal noted this was a useful exercise that she enjoyed and that allowed her to influence the national curriculum content as well as prepare her own school for the process ahead. She noted that the scale of the local work is smaller now than it had been, although it requires more calls than previously:

In a way, we think that the core has already said precisely the things we want to say in our school, and in a way in the municipality we do not need to add . . . much . . . I . . . appreciate this, because we in Finland have also enjoyed such curricula where there has been much more openness about what the municipality should prepare. (Principal 1)

Four to five municipal administration officials, led by an education director, were primarily responsible for the municipality's curriculum process. They invited colleagues, including principals and teachers, to what they called curriculum workshops, each lasting one day, usually held monthly, focused on designated areas of the municipality's schools:

In this municipality . . . fortunately . . . the written product is the minimal part of this process of change. That . . . is the ongoing debate, the ongoing reflection, the ongoing dialogue in the school that is in focus. As principal, I should now lead the change this way. It is not enough to go through this once a month. (Principal 1)

This school started its work with an active curriculum group comprising six teachers, each of whom had ongoing responsibility for specific curriculum issues. Within the more current process, this group took on greater responsibility, serving on the school's different thematic curriculum teams, each of those separately consisting of four to five teachers responsible for developing content in assigned subject areas. The principal also actively participated in developing what the teams presented to the other teachers. The curriculum team noted, however, that time had been scarce, and they needed more time allocated to curriculum work by the following spring.

At the school, the principal created a common peer-learning approach through which teachers continually and systematically shared their curriculum-related and general pedagogical knowledge with each other in various workshops. The principal noted that such a working environment was important because there were directions for curriculum development, as the process could be discussed during the workshops. Several teachers were also asked to participate in the national thematic work groups organized by the Finnish National Agency for Education. The principal viewed this as a professional development opportunity for the teachers, noting that their participation gave the school access to insights and directions in its own work.

Åkerlunden School

Åkerlunden School is a relatively large compulsory school (preschool through grade 6) in a medium-sized municipality located in the countryside near a medium-sized city. At the school, the principal and five teachers participated in the interview.

In this municipality, a small steering committee consisting of four principals, chaired by the head of the Education Department, led the educational work of the municipality. The steering group participated in training sessions and, based on those sessions, organized their work in a slightly different manner. The principal was somewhat self-critical regarding

how the steering group worked in relation to the teachers, and the teachers noted ambiguities in the joint municipal results of the work and in what was expected of their subject-specific work groups.

All municipality teachers served on one subject-specific group, meaning every teacher was in some way involved in the curriculum work. The schools specifically worked with the normative parts, and ‘learned’ them before the subject work began. At Åkerlund School, the principal, who served on the municipal steering committee, had already started the work during the academic year 2014–2015, before the core curriculum was established. The teachers began by discussing the principles of the new curriculum. They then focused on issues such as digital literacy and values culture. During the school year, they also organized workshop sessions for all municipal teachers.

In autumn 2015, the comprehensive municipal subject-specific curriculum group work started. Each subject group included teachers representing all grade levels. This model was chosen to ensure that all teachers understood the new content, as it would serve as every teacher’s working tool after 1 August 2016, according to Finnish law.

One teacher commented on talks that took place in the subject groups as follows:

The discussion has been great, and it is such a pity that we have not got the whole discussions written down. It has been so great to meet with teachers of grades 7–9. It’s also been rather fuzzy, although it has been good. (Teacher 1)

The principal pointed out that different groups were set up to deepen discussions of other parts of the core curriculum, and they had a different rhythm concerning time. The different work rhythms and different internal organizations were also discussion topics.

The principal highlighted another aspect of the time involved; namely, that he sees it as important that teachers have energy left after a curriculum process to also work with the curriculum in their teaching in real life, so to speak. He predicted that energy should be at its maximum in 2016–2020, when the change actually occurs.

Merenneidon School

Merenneidon School is on the outskirts of a municipality consisting of a major city and semi-rural areas. This compulsory school, which operates in a new facility, includes a pre-school. The principal and two teachers who had been designated as curriculum experts at this school participated in two different interviews. Being experts meant that these teachers had gone through more training concerning the curriculum and that their teaching hours were fewer.

This municipality-organized curriculum work is similar to Solviken School. Joint municipal work was governed and organized in workshops and information sessions, in which the curriculum experts and principals from each school participated. Municipal officials wrote text elements, but a steering committee provided professional expertise and took a stand on different topics. The principal also served on the municipality’s steering committee for local curriculum work. She described the work as follows:

So, this committee helps, gives examples and gives information on what should be done at (the) school level concerning the curriculum. And now these big, important sections on school norms that we have processed the experts take to the school level. (Principal 2)

The principal and curriculum experts planned discussion sessions for and shared information with the other teachers. Also, during the previous academic year they participated in various lectures and workshops on the new core curriculum. The principal discussed with the experts and steering committee what needed to be addressed and when in the current curriculum process.

The principal of this school worked also within the municipal process, which she believes was unrealistic in its form. She decided to follow a slower pace, at the school she led, than the speed proposed in the municipality. She pointed out that the first 100 pages of the core curriculum are the most important in the work, and that developing that part of the curriculum takes time.

One expert said they built their process based on knowledge and research, not only on tips and tricks, as she put it:

We ... made efforts last year. As compared with the municipal process, we have taken things easier. And we have always done things based on theory. Clearly theory based. We have had training sessions. We have had workshop-afternoons on how children's learning can be understood. On the concept of learning. Since we have wanted to build from knowledge from which we can then change the practice. (Expert 1)

The Merenneidon School principal called for a clearer municipal principal leadership requirement where principals actively lead the curriculum work. She described principals who did not get involved and delegated too much of the work to the experts. She did not think they saw the need for the educational lead change and processes, for one reason, according to her, because the tradition of working alone is so strong that principals do not manage to break it. The consequences of principals who do not take leadership at their schools, she said, is that too much is left to teachers to read on their own, or work is only done on a small scale with a small group.

One curriculum expert said one of their challenges was getting enough time for the work. It is like constantly being in a hurry, as she put it:

This is after all is demanding work from the beginning, to be a teacher. So then finding the time, when both parts take time. That may be the feeling of a lack of time, when you do not really get to concentrate. However, it is so good that the principal has arranged that I get a substitute teacher for the class so that I can work with the curriculum and bring the process forward. (Expert 2)

Västersundet School

Västersundet School is a large compulsory school in a middle-sized city. Three principals at this school who have different responsibilities, one being the lead principal, were interviewed. In addition, a teaching team of four teachers was also interviewed, two of whom were included in the school's internal curriculum group.

The principal group at this school, working as a team, had full responsibility for the curriculum process. One of the three principals had served as expert to one of the groups at the school. Together with the principals they had participated in one of the national subject

groups that wrote the national texts. Other teachers have been representatives of the national subject groups.

In addition to the principal's work in the curriculum process, the school also had a curriculum team. During the beginning of the process when part 1 of the core curriculum was in place, the group worked extra hard. The curriculum group was formed in 2012, and at that time they had planned what the work would look like, and at what stage various aspects would be processed. Teachers reported that there was a great deal of brainstorming at the beginning, especially on the question of how to get as many teachers as possible included in the process. Initially, the curriculum group comprised six people, with principals as three of them, and then a teacher representative from each stage was included. They met every second month and discussed what needed to be done and how the national road map could be used:

From the previous curriculum process, the only thing I remember, at the school where I was working then, was that somehow, we only got the readymade material, and had to then become familiar with it on our own, while we process every part of it here. So, I think it's a big difference, I do. (Teacher 2)

One of the new teachers commented the process:

This is the first curriculum I'm having to process, and I think it's really interesting, because you feel a lot more familiar, of course, when you have a document that you have been involved in – compared to when it is ready and you just read it, now you must be involved throughout the process. (Teacher 3)

In the autumn of 2015, the school established subject groups, and they started working concretely together. Principals observed that they tried to implement this even before implementing 'this new thinking' to allow for a slow change. For almost two years, they talked about the new core curriculum. Subject content has not changed as much as the core values, one principal said, but the perception of the subjects and of how the school is working is changing.

During this process, according to one principal, teachers experienced confusion and uncertainty about what was expected of them. At this school, they let the teachers specifically try new approaches in the classroom as part of processing the new curriculum, and at those times questions such as 'What is it you really want, and what should we do?' emerged from the teacher group. However, the teachers resolved the dilemmas and devised many ways of working, according to the principal.

Berg Municipality

The last example of how the local work is organized involves the municipal level. Berg Municipality is a small rural municipality with many relatively small school units spread across a fairly wide geographic area. Here, interviewees included the education director (head of all schools and at the same time principal), curriculum expert and a group of six teachers from grades 1–9.

The education director and municipal curriculum expert noted that they have gone through all the modules (known as the digital version of the curriculum and chapters in

the printed version) contained in the core curriculum and have discussed how they could best work with them. In the process, they had created a steering committee comprising representatives from both lower and upper grade levels, some principals and themselves. The committee defined the process. The principals, however, were seen in the municipality as the schools' curriculum work leaders. The steering committee usually met monthly but noted that they needed more meetings to keep up the pace. The education director and curriculum expert have also participated in joint regional training sessions. Based on experience from working with previous curricula, they decided not to start too early to avoid teacher tiredness during the process even before the curriculum comes into force.

In this municipality, the normative elements were handled so that the schools were sent questions, the answers to which they had to discuss and decide on before submitting. Schools were to talk about certain issues in a manner determined by the principal. The answers they compiled were summarized by the curriculum expert.

All teachers were able to choose what subject to work on; this work was done in groups that gathered several times at one of the larger schools during 2015–2016. Each group included a chair and secretary who received extra training for their tasks. Three hours a month were dedicated for all teachers to work on the curriculum in Berg Municipality. All teachers, except the few who participated in the municipal steering committee, participated equally in the curriculum process. The steering committee designed the process this way because the curriculum is the teachers' most important tool, so they all need to know it and feel involved in creating it. In addition to the subject groups' work, the municipality organized joint training sessions with some themes from the core curriculum in focus.

Summary of results

The analysis regarding teachers' participation in local curriculum work shows that the extent and nature of participation depends on how local processes are organized by the municipality. Central in importance are the selection, encouragement and implementation of leadership in the process and how time is used in relation to teacher involvement.

The results show that the requirements for well-considered leadership in a local curriculum process were high, which means the leaders, usually principals, must be able to exercise both change and process management of teachers if teachers were included as active participants. While principals are often the leaders, the results indicate they are not always equipped to exercise such leadership and are sometimes not even aware of what kind of leadership is needed. The principal also serves as an educational leader, as curriculum changes often also involve changes regarding methods and content. The analysis shows that the municipality's organization, framework and conscious appointment of leadership for the process directly impacted both teachers' effective participation and their feeling of being included in the process. The principal's role in the curriculum process is viewed as one of the most important tools for teachers' participation.

In local work, time is shown as a factor impacting teachers' participation. The appropriate use of time highly involves teachers in the process, while unstructured time spent in general does not necessarily strengthen the work, and insufficient time use consistently creates frustration and resignation. The analysis shows that effective time planning is a significant factor in teachers' participation. This may, perhaps, seem like a trivial result, but the work of teachers is, by nature, very time bound. Therefore, in order

for the time restriction to be changed for development work, time needs to be considered during planning.

These three aspects are conditions for teachers' participation and are closely interrelated. A school may, for example, be given significant time by the municipality, but lack principal leadership, which can result in confusion and despair. The local development work varies greatly from municipality to municipality, and also from principal to principal.

These five school contexts exhibited both different and similar curriculum process organizations within the municipalities and schools. Teacher participation may occur in the initial stage within school curriculum groups or through serving as a curriculum expert, or in the second stage by participating in discussions about various aspects of the curriculum. Participation may also be such that it does not take place in two stages, but rather that all teachers are given the opportunity to participate to the same extent. There is no possibility for comparative analysis of the consequences of these two organizational patterns that emerged. The key aspect is that teachers are prepared for active participation. What could possibly be discussed is whether the teachers appointed as curriculum experts or the equivalent have more influence and power than other teachers, which can have negative consequences, depending on how the roles are handled in the organization. The results indicate what Kirk and MacDonald (2001) called neither a typical top-down nor bottom-up perspective on change at a national level, but locally top-down steering can occur.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to study how teacher professionalization could be understood when analysing teachers' participation in curriculum work. This was done by analysing teachers' and principals' experiences and ideas concerning the 2014–2016 national curriculum process in Finland and, more specifically, by analysing teachers' participation at different levels of the process. Principals were understood as providing the work basis for teachers to work professionally and are therefore included in what is being analysed.

Previous research shows that teacher participation in the curriculum development process is a key factor in teachers' professionalization (cf. Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2016). In this study the focus was on how this is done and related to challenges and possibilities. Teacher participation has been organized in different ways within the country, which has direct implications for teachers' participation and their professional development, according to Hansén's ideas on teacher professionalization. One of the key findings in this study is that different local organizations of the work have critical implications for teachers' participation and inclusion in the curriculum process. No general model for teacher participation exists; thus, the conditions and governance of participation require examination.

Sachs (2001) argued that there were two, sometimes competing, views of teachers involved in a curriculum process: a democratic professional identity that emerges from the teaching profession itself, and, in contrast, a more management-oriented professional identity imposed by authorities' increasing demand that teachers' work hours be used to complete various forms of documentation (cf. Tirri and Puolimatka, 2000). In the national curriculum process, both of these views were active. The result of this study further deepens what Tirri (2014) noted concerning the collective identity of Finnish teachers as having changed, and the results imply an even further need for change concerning teacher work. Young et al. (2018) and De Nazare Coimbra et al. (2020) highlight collaborative work and team work as means of professionalization. The results here are in line with that, since

collaborative work and teamwork seemed to be a way of operationalizing the results of this study.

Teachers in the study were being listened to but not allowed to become active owners of the curriculum and this is in line with Kirk and MacDonald (2001). This result shows how teachers who were involved, who participated and were given time to do so experienced a sense of ownership (cf. Mikser et al., 2016). Hirsch and Segolsson (2019) showed how a school's way of organizing teacher-driven school-development work enabled collaborative learning and analyses of instruction that involved all teachers at the school. This is also something that showed in this study – how the organization of the work has an effect on the work itself, and on the feeling of participation and ownership.

Hansén's (1998) idea of four stages of teacher reflection is presented in the article as a basis for the analysis. In these concluding remarks, stages three and four are interesting to reflect upon:

3) reflections of the collective collaborative and continuous processes involved in school-based curriculum-related activities, and

4) collective reflection as a verbal activity representing both an interaction and internalisation of a profession-related common language. Such language is evoked from theoretical and research-related discourse about education but operationalised by the teachers' own understanding in relation to, among other things, classroom activities. (Hansén 1998)

The results of this study suggest that teachers' awareness of how the curriculum is linked to their collective collaborative and continuous work is relatively high, but it is not entirely clear how the four steps are integrated in the professional language. This may need to be accomplished when the curriculum is in force and the concrete process of change is ongoing. Not many of the participating schools reached the third or fourth stage in Hansén's model concerning teacher professionalization. Key terms in those stages can be said to comprise collaboration, process, and collective reflection leading to internalization of a profession-related common language. These terms can be signs of the collaborative and reflection-based curriculum work that needs to be developed further in Finnish teacher professionalization in relation to curriculum work.

The national and local curriculum development processes took more than four years, beginning with a national process that took place from 2012 to 2014 and was then followed by the local process, which mainly occurred from 2015 to 2016. The process has varied slightly since the curriculum was originally created in 1970. Since 1994, when municipal curricula were introduced, the process has been somewhat different. This article's findings show that teachers' participation in the curriculum development process depends on what framework and conditions that process is placed within nationally. The organization, management and use of time in the process are central and vital factors concerning teachers' participation and their degree of participation. The principal's role has emerged as central to the work of local curricula, what teachers' participation looks like and what kind of participation is possible.

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