Managing sudden change of working practices in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background and aims

As the COVID-19 pandemic reached Finland in Spring 2020, a far-reaching lockdown was imposed on the society. This happened rapidly in the middle of March, and private and public organizations in different fields had to create ways to re-organize their work to be able to function in the changing situation. In the field of education, this change was vast and sudden, as schools were set to the remote mode only in a couple of days, leaving not much time to prepare for the change before it happened. Hence, teachers found themselves in a situation, where they had to organize work with their working community via online tools, while also doing their teaching work remotely. In this study we examine this change in the light of Knowledge Management and ask, how did the teachers in Finnish primary and secondary schools experience the sudden change from work done in classrooms and face-to-face meetings with the working community to virtual work done online. Our focus is in examining the role of Knowledge Management (KM) in developing new working practices during the remote period. Previously, KM has not much been utilized to understand and develop work at schools in Finland, and also in general, studies on KM in primary and secondary education are rare (e.g. Lee et al. 2010; Zhao 2010). Schools as environments have been viewed to foster more independent and individual work than sharing knowledge with the whole organization and the working community (Lee et al. 2010). However, during past decades, the new practices of teaching have emphasized collaboration and pair teaching, which give the schools possibilities to develop their joint knowledge base (Meirink et al. 2010).

On a large scale, the research on KM can be viewed from two different starting points. One view emphasizes the role of technology and focuses on the management of information tools and resources, whereas the other view underlines the human factors in creating and maintaining a productive environment (Orzano et al. 2008). In our study, these two views are combined, as we analyze both the human factors and information technology and tools participating in managing and creating change, as organizations re-organize their actions and practices. KM is viewed in our study as a process of assuring that an organization can fulfil its strategic and practical goals as effectively as possible, by organizing its information and knowledge processes, practices and systems to support this (Choo 2016). This is understood not only as a matter of management and environment, but also as individuals' and community's actions which contribute to this in practice (Tsoukas 2009; Värk & Reino 2020).

Methods and data

Our data consists of nine in-depth interviews (ca. 12 hours in total) of Finnish teachers about their experiences of shifting from contact to online teaching, conducted in summer 2020 via Zoom. The interviews were part of a research process set up in collaboration with the learning management system developer Qridi. The participants of this study had answered a survey on online teaching experiences during the pandemic and agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and in the preliminary analysis of the data, the teachers' descriptions on the change to remote work were thematized and divided into three categories: knowledge management as 1) a practice in the community, 2) using and providing technology and tools, and 3) participants' own strive to manage and organize work.

Preliminary findings

In the presentation, we will present preliminary findings of our study, which suggest that the change from contact to virtual teaching was experienced as a challenge to schools in terms of management, tools and interaction. However, the teachers were able to develop new practices of working in interaction with the school community but also students and parents. In the COVID-19 situation, this all was conducted and communicated remotely, and our study reveals also the connections between management of schools and possibilities to share, receive, use information and knowledge in this new remote situation.

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