

## Operational experience of support groups at educational institutions in Latvia

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**Abstract:** Adult learning may be implemented as formal, informal and nonformal learning. All of the said types merely complement each other. Thus a diversity of content, form and methodology in learning is provided along with versatile learning achievements on the part of the participants. In order to implement substantial changes within the pedagogical process, one is required to implement forms of further education that expands the social interaction experience of teachers. Such opportunity is provided by informal learning. It is based on the work within peer support groups. The operation modes of peer support groups and the types of formation may be different. One employee may simultaneously take part in a number of support groups. The task of the group is to assist the individual in solving an urgent issue of such individual, so he/she could obtain new ideas and test them in practice. Peer support groups are generally guided by the two following principles: 1) learning takes place together with others and with the help of others; 2) learning is based on a problem that is common and urgent to all participants. The analysis on the experience of schools in Latvia shows that working groups are being formed, however, peer support groups as a specific type of group and the opportunities thereof, in the further education of teachers is a little known and seldom used concept.

**Keywords:** further education, methodological work, peer support group

### Introduction

Peer support groups are a widely popular form of work in a learning-capable organisation. In order to complement the learning traditions of educational institution employees and promote a sustainable existence of the institution, it is highly important to exert determined efforts to organise peer support groups and facilitate the operation thereof. The aim of the present article is to provide a theoretical description of peer support groups and observe the experience of use among schools in Latvia. Materials and Methods: Literature and empirical data obtained via questionnaires and discussion in Latvian schools from 2006 - 2012 were analysed in the framework of the present article.

### Methodology

Materials and Methods: Literature and empirical data obtained via questionnaires and discussion in Latvian schools from 2006 - 2012 were analysed in the framework of the present article.

### Results and Discussion

Further education is one of the directions for lifelong and adult learning. Today, adult learning manifests itself in the following manner:

- formal learning (takes place at an educational institution in accordance with the specific programme. A document certifying the education was acquired is issued at the end of the Programme in one of the following forms: diploma, certificate etc.)
- informal learning (most often at one's place of employment. In most cases it is done either in large or small groups. No document is issued for such type of learning, but nevertheless it may be included in one's resume);
- nonformal learning (this type of learning often takes place without one realising it amongst the various activities of one's daily routine).

It is important for the development of any organisation as well as for that of its employees that all three types of learning are included in the further education system and thus complement each other. The hierarchy of principal learning areas plays a key role in adult further learning. The theoretical basis of such hierarchy is formed by the learning pyramid (Figure 1). Such pyramid has three levels, each of which is crucially important to and influential in the development of the region, specific institution and each employee:

1. company or organisation level;
2. inter-company level;
3. regional level. (Land, 2009)

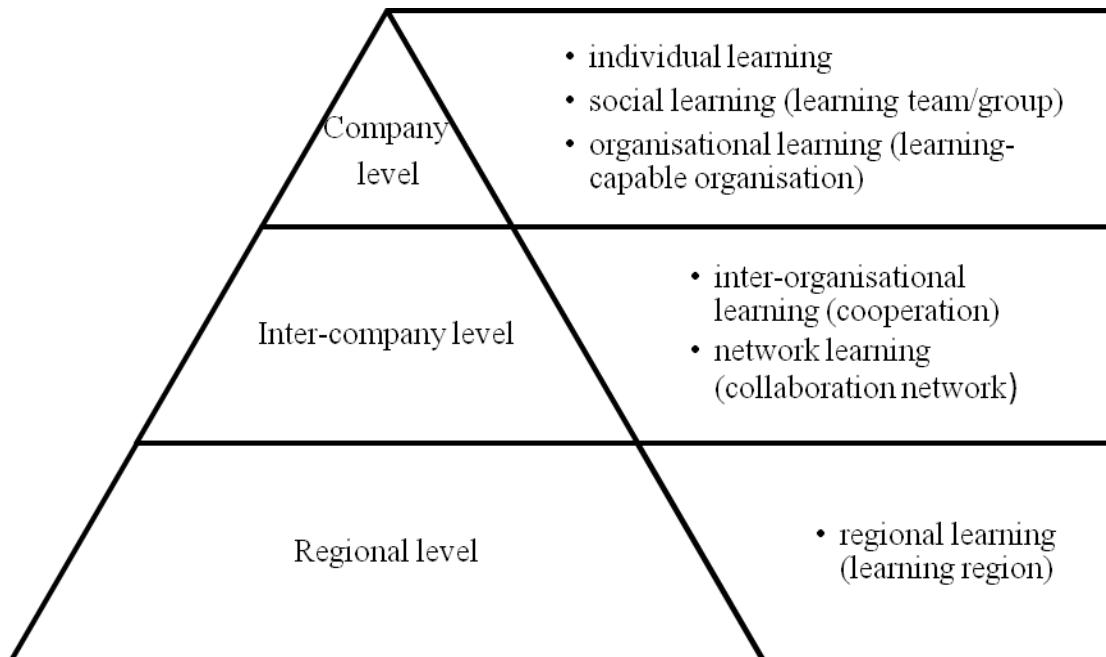


Figure 1. Learning Pyramid

Various types of studies and learning may take place at each level: individual, social, inter-organisational, network etc. In the meantime various study and learning opportunities may be offered which traditionally form a part of qualification improvement process. It promotes a development of the organization at a number of levels simultaneously. Depending of the level, at which learning takes place, different areas and levels of operation are influenced, as well as the validity and efficacy of the learning process may differ. Each level takes advantage of different study models and learning tools. Thus a diversity of content, form and methodology in learning is provided along with versatile learning achievements on the part of the participants.

Opportunities of learning and the influence thereof may be observed at various levels: global, regional, group and individual. The analysis of works from various researchers (Oderheim, 2010; Montano, 2005; Kalve, 2012) allows one to emphasise the characteristics of each level (Figure 2).

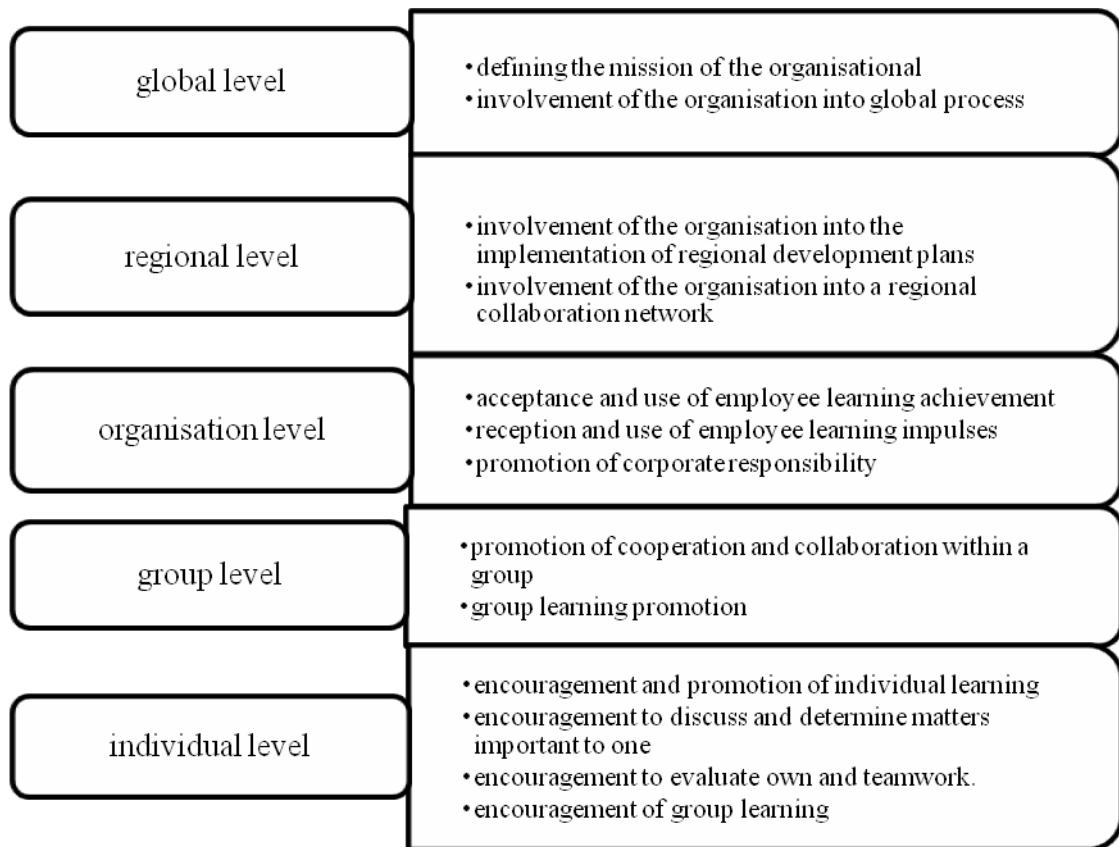


Figure 2. Influence of informal learning

All three types of learning (formal, informal, nonformal) influences teacher's qualification and one's achievements at work. However, teacher surveys conducted at Latvian schools from 2006 - 2012 show that Latvian teachers consider various qualification or further education courses at the primary types of education thus giving preference to formal education. During interviews teachers indicate that such attitude is caused by primary requirements that are set forth further education of teachers because only such courses offer an education certificate which approves the number of lessons attended because this effectively is the only way for the teacher to prove that he/she has improves one's professional level.

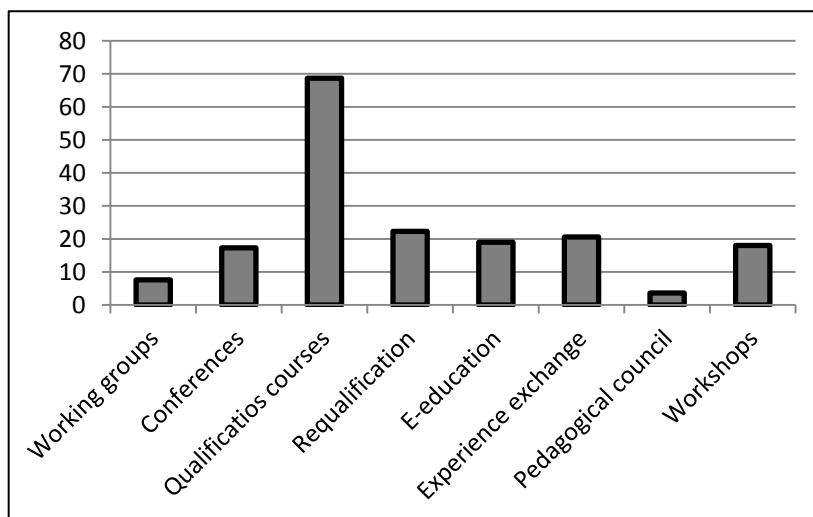


Figure 3. Teacher learning priorities

In the meantime with the statement of courses being the principal form of further education, some teachers argue that a number of other forms of further education are more effective and important to the professional development of the teacher. For example, work with various projects, supervision of

student research papers and others, because a teacher that learns together with its students becomes an example and a genuine authority in the eyes of the students.

In order to implement substantial changes in the pedagogical process, one is required to implement such forms of further educations that expand opportunities and experience of teachers' social interaction. Such opportunities are offered by the aforementioned informal learning. It is based on work within peer support groups which particularly manifests itself in self-organisation of learning as well as it ensures cooperation. Both qualities are considered to be features of good and modern learning (Kāpostā, 2012).

Depending on the objective and the content of the task at hand, peer support groups may be:

- permanent they are long-term groups with a stable set of members. Over time, such groups may become teams where participants have permanent roles and division of functions. One of the most common examples for such groups in the school environment are methodological commissions and managerial teams.
- temporary - formed for implementation of a specific project. The make-up of the members in such groups for each project may be different and the duration of operation of the groups is also limited: as soon as the task for the purpose of which the group was created is completed, the group is disbanded.

The formation of peer support groups may also vary:

- administrative or formal. The group is formed as per the direction of the head of institution. The head not only sets forth group but also determines the members of the group and often appoints the leader of such group. Groups that are created in the above manner observe a number of formal conditions and procedures during the course of their operation, including, working planning harmonised with the administration, recording of all activities, a strict reporting system etc.
- voluntary. Such group is formed via a mutual cooperation between the employees. The objectives and task of the group are set by the participants of the group themselves. The work and atmosphere within such group is of a voluntary nature regulated merely by agreements between the members. It is possible that the make-up of the group changes do to biased reasons in the course of performing the task.

One person may simultaneously take part in a number of peer support groups, but often enough, such person implements a different function in each of them. Thus the social experience of the employees is expanded

Finnish researchers Ahokas, Alamaa, Hansen, Johansson and others (Peer-group Mentoring..., 2012) describe and analyse a number of areas of application for peer support groups in the informal further education of teachers:

- promotion of new teacher adaptation;
- promotion of school's corporate governance;
- improvement of specific areas in teacher's professional competence.
- improvement of multi-professional competences.

Thus peer support groups constitutes a social form of methodological work implementation with a wide range of application.

Finnish researchers Aspfor, Heikinen, Landenmaa (2012) also define peer support groups as follows:

- common responsibility in the improvement of each other's competences;
- interaction of expertise and mutual dependency;
- diverse interaction: diverse experience;
- various opinions;
- various basic knowledge;
- individual responsibility in the improvement of own competences and learning (an investment that provides an additional contribution to the support group);
- responsibility of the support group's internal operation;
- self-assessment of the support group.

The task of the group is to assist the individual in solving a urgent issue of such individual, so he/she could obtain new ideas and test them in practice.

The operation of peer support groups are guided by the following principles:

- learning takes places together with others and with the use of assistance of others;
- the learning is based on a problem common and urgent to everyone involved.

The work of the peer support group yields a:

- solution to the specific problem;
- understanding of problem solving is obtained or improved;
- participants in the group have come to know themselves and other participants better.

It is obvious that some of the aforementioned parameters are applicable to any group but there are also characteristics that are only true for peer support groups.

In the context of Latvian teachers it must be said that employees of Latvian schools (heads and teachers) are not always aware of the definition (Figure 4) of the term "peer support group" (there was a sufficient number of survey participants who had not known the term before) and the opportunities it offers in terms of the teacher further education (Figure 5).

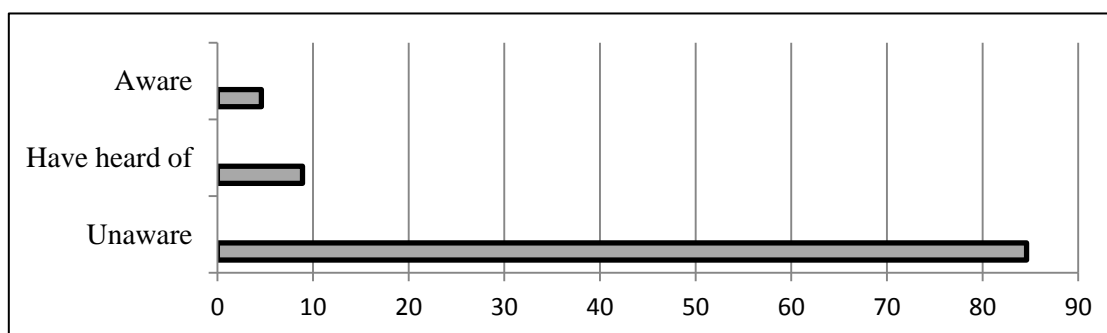


Figure 4. Awareness of peer support groups among employees of Latvian schools

The analysis of the Latvian theoretical guidelines and practice for schools (Krūmiņa, 2012; Šmite, 2004) shows that groups are formed with a number of purposes:

- management of educational institution's methodological work (methodological councils; teacher council; education programme groups);
- improvement of specific teacher competence (methodological commissions)
- organisation of specific events;
- search of innovative ideas and implementation of such ideas into the pedagogical work.

In order to summarise teacher experience in terms of group work, teachers were offered to assess in terms of parameters that characterise peer support groups (see Figure 5). A summary of data obtained allows concluding that teachers focus on on the direct operation of the group and implementation of the tasks while little attention is given to the learning of the group and each participant individually. This verity is further emphasised by teacher responses on the results of group work. All respondents indicated that the result is the task accomplished and the quality thereof, which is not always available while working individually. But in response to the question of what is the personal benefit of working in a group, majority (~75%) of respondents revealed that they had not considered group work from such perspective before, while remainder (~20.8%) said that it has been an opportunity to hear different opinions.

Notwithstanding the fact that other research has been conducted in Latvian on organisation of group work (Akopova, 2007) along with development of various group work organisational methodologies, this aspect still enjoys relatively little attention in practice. However, only if teachers are going to know the group work opportunities and underlying mechanisms thereof, they shall be able to effectively apply them in their work and teach their students to work in a group.

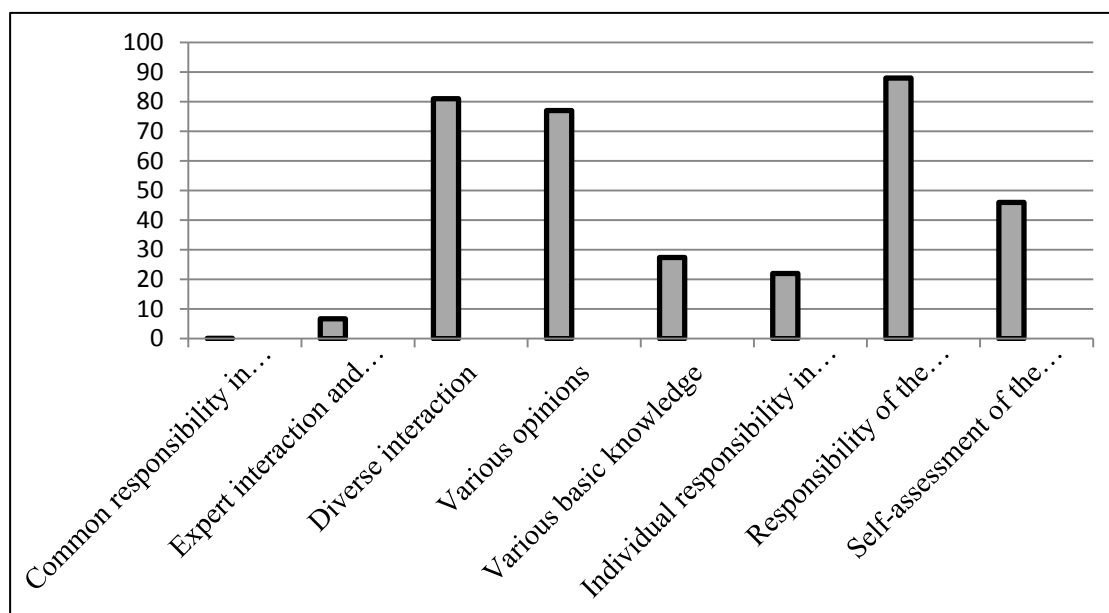


Figure 5. Awareness of the operation of peer support groups

## Conclusions

- The task of the group is to assist the individual in solving a urgent issue of such individual, so he/she could obtain new ideas and test them in practice.
- While research in the field has been conducted as well as group work organisational methodologies have been developed, Latvian teachers still have low awareness of such methodologies.
- Peer support groups as one of the forms of informal learning is little known in Latvian schools.

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