# PERSONALITY FACTORS AS BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE ESTONIAN YOUTH WORKERS´PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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***Abstract.*** *The article dealt with one aspect of the professional growth basic elements. The issue of the Estonian Youth Centers youth workers´ professionality has been relevant for many years, as employees often exchange. Expectations for youth work as a promotion of non-formal education are high. There is no research that explained the issues related to the youth workers professional growth, including personal factors. The theoretical framework of the research created Ruohotie, Tamm, Clarke and Hollingsworth concepts of professional growth. The purpose of this research was brought to the light youth work specialists´ opinions about the personal factors of the professional growth. For qualitative data collection semi-structed interviews were conducted with 35 Estonian youth work specialists in 2016-2018. The results showed that in eight key-topics important opinions were received. Most attention should be given further to the youth workers´ internal motivation, treatment and professional identity. Mostly were explained the high expectations to the youth work generally. Interviews revealed a different commitment to everyday work, that could have resulted from their different education and professional training or attitudes towards education. The needs for further clarification are: occupational and organizational elements of youth workers´ professional growth.*
***Keywords:*** *Estonia, personality factors, professional growth, youth work, youth worker.*

## Introduction

The multifaceted nature of youth work (YW) and the often-changing context of the youth worker´s everyday work causes increasing expectations and demands on their professionality. Youth worker supports the personal development and learning of young people outside the school, family and work, and creates the conditions necessary to achieve it. It is important to design non-formal learning (NFL) activities, as well as to support young people´s NFL, and to interpret this experience and achievement with young people (Noorsootöötaja Kutsestandard, 2018). Therefore, the youth worker's responsibility is high and coping with work tasks is expected. High staff exchanges, occupational mobility creates uncertainty for the quality of youth work and raises the question of how effectively the non-formal education is expected to support the formal education in Estonia (Conradsen, 2017; Veigel, 2017). There are 280 youth centers in

Estonia (Pirk, 2018). In the light of demands and expectations of European and Estonian YW, youth workers must deal and be considered as educational staff. Very often the youth worker´s work is associated with solving youth social problems and work with NEET-youth (youth which are neither in employment nor in education or training; eg Tugila program in Estonia). During 2005-2018 various studies showed the high mobility of Estonia youth workers in youth centers and shortage of personnel with special education. Professional youth workers will need long-term employment in the sector to develop and hone their skills (Tamman, 2018; Conradsen, 2017; Veigel, 2015). Thus, the youth workers' professional growth as a professional perspective is important research subject and youth workers´ opinions about personal factors are essential.

The research problem: due to the frequent changes in staffing, it was necessary to study the characterization of the youth workers´ personal factors as the basic elements of the professional growth. The aim of this article was brought to the light youth work specialists´ opinions about the personal factors of the professional growth. The research questions were: (1) which characterized the youth worker motivation? (2) What is work coherence and job dedication in youth work specialists´ opinions? (3) What characterized the professional identity of youth workers? Answers were achieved by a qualitative approach. Semi-structed interviews with 35 Estonian youth work specialists from 14 counties were conducted in 2016-2018.

## Theoretical background

Youth workers' professional growth as a professional perspective is important research subject and important to understand its´ basic elements. Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2014-2020 (2013) explained that it is necessary to increase the number of people with professional qualifications. Youth worker quality can be assessed on the basic of the professional standards of the youth worker. The competencies had been described in the occupational standards.

Researchers from different countries have been paying attention to professionalism and it is important to note that the youth worker is a semi-professional (relatively new profession, lack of recognition in society and lack of evidence-based). Noordegraaf (2007) defining a new form of professionalism as a hybrid professional. They are "open" professionals, experts: practitioners who do not have a strong institutional background and who have acquired professional knowledge on a non-formal and informal basis through lifelong learning but are trying to establish their own professions.

Astroth, Garza & Taylor (2004) raised the issue of high mobility among youth workers in the United States and explained the problems. They noted that

most of the employees started to work with great energy, enthusiasm, but they were characterized by a lack of awareness of the development of young people, which could also lead to faster job abandonment. At the same time, there were explained the professional skills and their development, the professionalism and its´ value, the self-efficacy of youth workers. In Estonia, it is important to note these too, and to support professional growth. Tamman (2018) argued to address more customized work-oriented work, which is a prerequisite for employees' desire to relate their work with their own skills and interests. In this way, the worker can raise his own job satisfaction and hedge his retirement intentions.

Professional growth is a natural part of human life, because it supports the coping with work tasks. Ruohotie (2005) said, that this is an ongoing learning process for working life knowledge and skills necessary to obtain that come using the official competent to handle changing requirements. Professional growth basic elements are follows:

- personality factors: motivation, expectations, professional realistic approach (knowledge of strengths and weaknesses), the need for achievement, willingness to manage the situation, dedication to work, coherence with work, strong sense of professional identity. Experienced success and the desired benefits make up the personal professional growth potential. Important is the profile of life, the family - and home roles, health and professional support;
- occupational factors;
- organizational factors (Ruohotie, 2005; Tamm, 2008).

Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) argued that the components of the Interconnected Model of teacher´s professional growth are: personal domain, the domain of practice, the domain of consequence and the external domain. Personal factors were dealt in their model as more important domains.

The job satisfaction relates to work attitudes. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1989) pointed, that job satisfaction depends on the success of the job. It is affected by motivational and hygiene factors. Motivation involves the nature of the work, achievement needs, development opportunities, trust and accountability. Hygiene factors are: wages, conditions, - quality of management, personal life. Motivation refers to internal motivations, causes, and forces that influence its activity (Vadi, 1995).

A professional identity develops through professional practice and, when interpreted, becomes aware of what has shaped their understanding of practice and their professional identity (Kelchtermans, 1993). Professional understanding of experience is the starting point for supporting professional development. Identity as a narrative self-interpretation that develops in the dialogue between different positions, which, through various social processes, are affirmed in a

social environment and values, when the motives are influenced by the content and behavior of the identity and the creation of the meanings, the over-situation objectives (Hermans, 2012; Tennat, McMullen, & Kaczynski, 2010). Motivated employees who are sufficiently related to the work and commitment to this, obviously, is also interested in the challenge of this occupation. In supporting circumstances, the development of his professional identity is probably considerably larger than it has become clear from researches. Among workers who experience moments of not-knowing what to do, many often describe their thoughts and reactions to the phenomenon in occupational and existential terms. In many cases, the vocational crises following experiences of not-knowing contribute to burnout and youth workers' decisions to leave the field (Veigel, 2018). Transition from academic education to professional world poses a great challenge for any young person individual; Anspal (2018) argued that teachers with a better-educated teacher identity have been found to be more professional-proof and ready for work. Therefore, training should support the development of a professional identity, that is, finding a balance between oneself and a person as a professional.

An increase in the management function requires a different approach to the professionalization of the youth worker's office. At the same time, the competences needed for management are sometimes contrasted with special knowledges and skills (Noordegraaf, 2007). The personality model describes the importance of spirituality and personality traits in professionalism; emphasis on customer focus and knowledge, but knowledge is an important addition to the way of thinking, spirituality, dedication and passion. What matters is not only, what the professional "knows" about, but also what he "thinks" (Van Ruler, 2005).

Youth work is entwined the idea of non-formal learning - guided learning process, which is characterized by thought-out and conscious youth activities, including fixed and formulated learning outcomes (Dunne, Ulicna, Murphy, & Golubeva, 2014). The principle of youth work is to support young people's development, freedom of expression and active participation, enforceability and inclusiveness (Declaration of the 2nd European Youth Work Convention, 2015). One of the goals of the Youth Development Plan for 2014-2020 is to work more effectively in the youth field, one of its outputs being to increase the educational impact of such youth work and support youth work quality in developing young people's key competences. This means the need to understand the learning process in the context of youth work, to support learning and to create a favorable environment for the development of young people (Veigel & Reedik, 2017). The current Youth Development Plan 2014 - 2020 (2013) presented the concept of youth as a resource. Therefore, taking into the account of all above, the youth worker can do a great deal and differently, through activities, methods,

cooperation, networks, projects to direct the youth field, including their daily work. The fun and educational aspect of activities are important (Merton, 2007). Youth workers are educators, trainers and therefore capable of designing educational goals in their daily work. The question remains at the level of the person - who is he/she? What are his/her knowledges, skills, interest, desire? What is coherence with work and commitment?

## Methodology of research

This research applies a qualitative research strategy, based on a phenomenological approach. For qualitative data collection semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 35 Estonian youth workers and experts (youth centres/YC/directors, youth field coordinators); 5 men and 30 women from 14 counties, mostly worked in cities and who has worked in the speciality for at least 2-3 years. Most experts had worked as a youth worker. During 2015-2017 in Estonia various youth workers´ studies and courses participates were mostly women (86 %). Pilot interview was conducted with youth worker and the other with YC director, who had over four years work experience. After this the questions were developed and clarified. Interviews were conducted individually in 2016-2017 (30), and for confirm the focus of the basic elements extra in 2018 (5). They lasted usually from 1 to 2h, were recorded on tape. The interviews were carried out in a quiet place at the university or at work place. This was considered important in order to maintain objectivity and to create an atmosphere in which interviewees would not were afraid to share their experiences and to express viewpoints that might be critical of their study experiences. The interview takes place in a social context. Both the interviewer and the interviewee brought to an interview with their past, age, position, expectations and beliefs (Wengraf, 2001). A common understanding will be created during the interview. The data-driven thematic analysis process included six phases. First, all recorded interviews were transcribed, read and initial ideas noted. Next, initial codes were generated regarding the phenomenon. In the third phase, the different codes were sorted into potential sub-themes and key-topics. Subsequently, the content of the created sub-themes and main themes were checked. In the fifth phase, all sub-themes (36) and key-topics (8) (Table 1) were refined and named. In the last phase, the final analysis was written. In the focus of the research were personal elements as youth workers´ professional growth basics.

The anonymity of the sample was ensured. Protecting participants and respecting their right to make decisions regarding their participation were the core ethical principles guiding the treatment of the participants in the research. Before research, the participants were informed of the purpose of the research

and how the information they would give would be used (e.g. through anonymous quotes). Participation was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. No sensitive questions were asked.

## Results and discussion

This section explains how interviewees perceived their opinions about youth workers´ personal elements in the context of professional growth.

**Motivation.** It turned out rather internally short-term motivation and mostly project-based work has increased. It was clear that, youth workers´ assessment of managers´ support for solving their tasks independently was high (Tamman, 2018) and external motivation important. Internal motivation was a causal (a pleasing activities). Sometimes there was even an attitude that education is not important for cope with daily work. Lifelong learning principles, including learning in networks, were not often understood and awareness.

*Tabel 1* **Main key-topics and sub-themes that constitute the pattern of meanings the youth workers attributed to the personal factors**

| Key topics | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| Motivation | Rather internally short-term motivation |
| | Supported by the outside (colleagues), rather external motivation Youth satisfaction (feedback) motivates most |
| | Internal motivation is a causal (a pleasing activities) |
| | Residence close to the workplace |
| | Suitable occupation |
| Expectations | Youth work has high expectations (activities with NEET-youth, educational goals, work-training, internationalization, etc.) Valuing more the youth work |
| | Desire to be more autonomous |
| | Routine free work |
| | Teaching key competences in non-formal learning |
| | Experts' expectations related to greter professionality |
| Realistic professional approach | Different special trainings leading by youth worker Mostly project-based work rather has increased |
| | Flexibility is appropriate for the elderly workers |
| | Well-established volunteers |
| | Networking, its´possibilities varies locally, but supports y.workers |
| | 2-4 years experienced worker had theoretical knowledge in practical work and often innovative views |

| Work dedication and work coherence | Youth workers are rather more dedicated periodically<br>The decreasing contact work will changed the nature of the work |
| | Altruism may sometimes occur |
| | Pleasant tasks and possibility to choise options were revealed |
| | Health could be as the factor in the future work choices |
| | Youth workers like the work with young people |
| | Less experienced youth workers argued that, rather does not operate in the area after the 3-5years |
| Professional identity | Experts have a strong professional identity supported by professional development |
| | In many youth workers are rather questionable professional identity, as they also deal with other specialties,<br>Partialy youth workers have level in other occupation |
| Achievement needs | Could be higher among youth workers |
| | For experts, especially noticeable and valued |
| Situation control, leading | Rather noticeable among youth workers periodically<br>Difficulties are caused by the youth behavior |
| | Powed in the case of youth work experts |
| Health | Work conditions are very different |
| | Often deteriorating mental health |
| | Burnout, or risk for it |

*„I do not agree, that to be youth worker, you must learn. You must to be very motivated to do this work".* Revealed that, on several cases youth worker worked alone*." When I came to work, I was completely alone for 6 months, I worked alone for a long time".* Such situations were rather demotivated and didn´t support professional development. Youth satisfaction (feedback) and youth development motivated workers mostly. *"I am motivated, complicated, interesting, feedback from young people if you see that a young person who is at risk of prison, but you see that he has gone to work".* According to Noordegraaf (2007), the description of "open" professionals was as follows. Knowledge is an important addition to the way of thinking, spirituality, dedication and passion (Van Ruler, 2005). Interviewees with professional education had more success and were more professional in the context of expectations for youth work.

**Expectations.** Experts´ expectations were related to greater professionality and teaching key competences in non-formal learning. *".. To get up from the table upstairs, go to the open space, go somewhere in the field, play ..all the action is still with the young people".* Revealed desire to be more autonomous. Youth work valuation differs from regions. Routine free work was often expected in youth work, but the opposite was true in the cases unexpectedly. *"Many employees were on the computers and as if they were doing projects..".*

Professional youth workers will need long-term employment in the sector to develop and hone their skills (Conradsen, 2017; Veigel, 2015).

**Realistic professional approach.** The work of a youth worker can be seen in integration with different disciplines: natural sciences, sports, psychology, art, languages, culture, music, IT ect. It turned out that mostly hobby activities, counseling and project-based work were increased. 2-4 years experienced worker had (better) theoretical knowledge in practical work and often innovative views. *"With regard to goals, quality of work. At the moment, I'm not happy with the work of a youth worker sitting at the table and waiting while young people go talk with him"*. Technology should be used more for smart youth work.

**Work dedication and work coherence.** Youth work is value-based. *"It's not easy, because every person is not fit for work here. He must have ethics, values in place, an understanding of how to deal with young people. Also, often a teacher does not fit into this job because he can´ not understand simply because he is like a school for him"*. A dedicated youth worker created a suitable environment for young people. *"The attitude towards the building is quite different.. That's their home and a safe place to come here, if you feel.."*. Employee professionalism supported work coherence. A skilled worker will better cope with the job and is more professional. *"Some young people are coming ... those who come back here if their life is very difficult or if they can´ not handle it themselves"*. Altruism may sometimes occurred and overwork, for example, in camps, during events, but it was accepted by the employee.

**Professional identity.** Many interviewees work else in different professions, so there was no clear professional identity. Youth worker identity involves both the individual and the social nature: it develops through social interactions in social contexts. Youth worker´s short-term motivation and studies did not provide enough support for the development of a professional identity. *"My studies changed to become more demanding of myself and my work. I'm looking at something from another angle and more demanding than ever"*. Partialy youth workers had level in other occupation. A professional identity develops through professional practice (Kelchtermans, 1993). It turned out that experts had a strong professional identity supported by professional development. Most of them worked before as youth workers.

**Achievement needs.** It turned out that aspect could be higher among youth workers. *"I'm not a specialist in any special field, but that (YW) the organizational work and I like to feel that I should be able to organize, to do it, to do the negotiations"*. Developing reflection skills should be supported and taught and maybe students should be given more responsibility for reflection, so they can develop more confidence in their own judgments. Ruohotie (2005)

explained experienced success and the desired benefits make up the personal professional growth potential.

**Situation control, leading.** Management knowledge, skills and attitudes also ideally required the acquisition of academic education. *„I can´not be a cultural organizer, to produce consumers in society.. I'm the person who supports and stands next to youth and we work together, I can help you do everything, then I can help you analyze what was well, what's wrong, what can be improved..".* It was important to apply the skills and knowledge of the employees and, if possible, to link them with their interests and the meaningfulness of the work (Tamman, 2018).

**Health.** Flexible working hours were often good for intervieewes, but it depends from workers´ family, health. Workrooms in the basement were not pleasant generally. *„Evening work-hours do not allow for a normal family life..and you would like to leave”.* In addition to work-stress influenced on their own mental health. *“I began to think that this terror began to assume the brains, because it was doing the opposite of what I recommended, and then it happened that I thought, however, that I would not leave my job after 1 boy”.* It turned out that age was considered an important factor in the context of professional growth. *“With age change my health and I will change my profession..go to social work”.*

## Conclusion

From research emerged, that more attention should be given further to support better youth workers´ professional development, to maintain their internal and long-term motivation, and treatment. Individual work is one way to increase work-life balance and stay in the workplace customization, but it must be supported by the professional mentor. Employee professionalism supported work coherence. High expectations to the youth work requires workers to work professionally, coping with everyday work and be more focused on success and achievements. The preparation of youth workers is very different and the setting goals of non-formal learning, including educational, is rather random. Many youth workers can be treated as representatives of hybrid professionals, which confirmed that vocational training a youth worker level 4 is necessary (incl. work-based learning), which is not available in Estonia. Different commitment to everyday work could have resulted from their education and professional training. There were rather few interviewees, who had youth workers professional identity. Less experienced youth workers rather will do not operate in the area after the 3-5 years. There is a need for a sustainable program/curriculum for motivated beginners and trainings for advanced youth workers. Interdisciplinarity, internationalization, entrepreneurship and other

important topics can only be properly addressed by motivated, professional and committed youth workers. Experts understood the content of the field, but it is hard to train and mentoring many new colleagues constantly.

The growing tendency to work while studying must take more the focus on reflective activities, which help to combine the professional and personal aspects of becoming a youth worker: developing youth worker identity.

Health and wellbeing are important factors that affect many youth workers do decide for benefit of the profession. Mental health concerns associated with the behavior of young people and tension for right decisions, responsibility. Prevention of altruism could be under the spotlight.

The study limitation was qualitative methodology, which does not allow for extensive generalizations, but it was necessary to obtain the information that other methods would have been difficult. This topic should be explored in the other aspects of professional growth basic factors.

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