

Aims of Political and Citizenship Education in Finland

This article examines the guidelines and objectives of political (societal) and citizenship education in Finland during the past 40 years approximately. During this relatively short period, different programmes have arisen which aptly reflect changes which have taken place, in viewpoints, in the social atmosphere, and in citizens' political interests. The article is concerned with the reports of two committees, the Adult Education Committee and the Lifelong Learning Committee, since the beginning of the 1970s, the Government's Policy Programme (2003–2007), and the aims of political and citizenship education defined in these committee reports and policy programmes.

1. Roots of Finnish adult education

The birth of Finnish adult education in its present form in the 19th century was affected by a variety of ideologies and movements. The idea of Enlightenment had come from Europe and created the intellectual foundation for spreading education more extensively among the population. Not only did the effects of industrialization change the existing infrastructures, they also created a need for learning. Apart from these influences, there were other national factors with solid connections to the promotion of education among the common people. The labour movement, the youth association movement and several others were active trailblazers of popular enlightenment. The role and importance of nationalism (in terms of national awakening) has often been seen as the empowering factor that ignited and strengthened the provision of popular education for adults. The idea behind educating the masses was that, once they became educated, the less fortunate would increasingly be motivated to engage in the development of society as a whole (e.g. Toiviainen 1999, Lahtinen 2006, Pantzar 2007).

Naturally, the protagonists of these various ideologies and social movements also had their own aspirations arising from their views of life and conceptions of the world. Their common goal can be seen as the promotion of enlightenment among citizens. In addition to several other objectives, the intention was to create a sustainable basis for democracy and participation. This can be seen as a preliminary phase of modern societal engagement and citizen participation. At that time, educators' aspirations were still predominantly bound by their ideological background. This situation continued for a relatively long period in some adult education activities. A strong division along political and ideological lines continued among educational organizations associations up until the 1970s, in study circle activities in particular. In other liberal adult education sectors, the need for and more extensive public provision of social and political education had become a theme of discussion as early as the 1920s. This

type of education had its heyday in the period that extended from the end of World War II to the 1970s.

In this article, I shall examine the guidelines and objectives of political and citizenship education during the past 40 years more closely. During this relatively short period, different programmes have arisen, which aptly reflect changes that have taken place in viewpoints, in the social climate and in citizens' political interests.

2. The changing challenges of political and civic education

During the history of organized adult and lifelong education, the role of political and civic education has varied in significance. This education has been carried out with diverse goals, contents and ideological backgrounds for different target groups, in various educational settings. I venture to claim that, since the beginning of the 1970s, the significance of political and other society-oriented adult education has decreased in all industrialized countries. The statistics which show that adult participation in these kinds of courses, classes and lectures in formal and non-formal education has fallen support this argument (Blomqvist et al. 1997 and 2002). But this development does not necessarily mean that citizens today are less interested in political and societal topics than they were some 40 years ago. The present situation can be explained in two ways.

First, it is important to realize that the present so-called information society we are living in has meant that the role of institutions and organizations of formal education has diminished relatively since the 1970s. Simultaneously, the significance of other learning environments (such as informal learning settings) and information sources has grown. At present, for instance, both conventional (electronic and printed mass media) and novel media (Internet etc.) give today's citizens excellent opportunities to seek up-to-date information and knowledge, and also to ask questions about politics, society and other topics relevant to them. According to Klein an information-rich society offers powerful new means to exercise the right to political participation. For example, as the technology of voting changes, electronic voting systems offer both benefits and risks for elections (Klein 2005).

From the perspective of informal learning as a field of civic (citizenship) education, the media constitutes an extremely difficult field to assess. It should be remembered that one of the basic features of informal learning is that the source, or producer, of information and knowledge does not primarily act like formal educational institutions, which systematically strive to support the target group's learning. In principle however, all products of the media are of a type that can be seen as activators of (informal) learning, but the "non-planned" nature of informal learning supported by the media means there is also a risk of achieving unwanted learning results. From the perspective of the aims and contents of lifelong learning (e.g. active citizenship)

it is also essential to realize that developing media competence must be realistic and appropriate (Pantzar 2006).

Secondly, there is no doubt that formal education institutions are too inflexible in the face of the challenges of contemporary society, which is changing with increasing speed. One of the main tasks of the formal education system in a modern society is to carry out the socialization process. This process is unquestionably good at retaining rather than breaking the traditions, values and beliefs of the nation.

3. Adult education policies and the changing conceptions of citizen participation

The political essence of adult education, its independency, tasks, structures, financing etc., its role in society as a part of the whole education system has not been globally uniform. In the Nordic countries, the significance of the State and political parties as background forces and ideological leaders of adult education has been very strong historically. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, the State has given strong financial support to the education of adults, especially in adult education centres, residential folk high schools (*folkhöskola*), study circles of study centres and public institutions of vocational adult education, for some 80 years.

The parliamentary Adult Education Committee (1971–1975) defined four main tasks for Finnish adult education policy:

- (1) educational equality
- (2) development of vocational skills
- (3) development of political (societal) preparedness
- (4) cultural development – personality development

The Committee defined the objectives of political and societal education as follows:

Independent and critical societal thinking of citizens, preparedness and competence of collaboration, skills to recognize own political and societal rights and responsibilities, participation in decision-making, preparedness for internationally shared responsibility, to be conscious of needs for societal changes (Kom 1975).

The Committee stated that political education is the central task of the whole societal education system, aiming at the peoples' general preparedness to participate in and influence democratic decision-making, both in public affairs and in workplaces, organizations and other communities. The Committee defined the education of persons elected to a position of trust as one of the central tasks of adult education. In the 1970s, the public sector had no difficulty in recruiting citizens to different positions of trust, although at that time, the number of positions, for example in local government, was higher than today. Now this recruiting work seems to have become much harder. This development is related to a decreasing interest in party policy and party membership on the part of citizens.

A deeper analysis of the long history of Finnish liberal adult education reveals that, until the end of the 1980s, the political education organized by study centres, especially in open lectures, courses and study circles, was also used as a tool of narrower ideology-based party political as well as labour organizational purposes. During the last twenty years, study centres have been obliged to liberalize the aims and contents of education aimed at different population groups. This development has theoretically provided a better starting point for pluralistic political and citizenship education. One can justifiably go so far as to argue that these tasks and aims of political education defined by the Finnish Adult Education Committee (Kom 1975) have begun to function, but very slowly, some 15 years after publishing the final report of the Committee. There is no doubt that the report of the Adult Education Committee had been influenced by the thoughts presented in the International Education Commission report "Learning to be" (UNESCO 1972). This report emphasized the importance of political education, but also stressed the citizenship-centred nature of educational aims. These aims have been seen as the opposite of the strict dogmatic use of political or other ideological elements in education.

The Finnish Government set up a committee in 1996, which was tasked to prepare a national strategy for lifelong education. The final report of the committee was published in the latter half of 1997. From the point of view of educational policy this report diverged from the lines of former educational committees. The most essential change was the very strong orientation towards the economy. The role and significance of economic questions, in the field of education as well, was now found to be more important, central and dominant than ever before. One of the most interesting consequences of this ideology was the back-seat role that it gave to the former priority. It is very difficult to find any references to the political and citizenship education of adults in the pages of the report. In addition, its understanding of the essence of the individual was very one-sided. The tasks and significance of education and learning were seen primarily from the point of view of the individual's roles in working life, rather than in the community, the family or private life (Kom 1997).

In the strategy report the aims of contents in education were briefly defined. The aims of lifelong education are: "supporting personality development, strengthening of democratic values, maintaining of active communities and social togetherness, and promotion of innovations, productivity and national competitiveness" (ibid.).

In the report there is no detailed information on the implementation of these aims. On the other hand, the report brings out the significance of non-governmental activities as producers of educational and social capital. It suggested, for example, that non-governmental organizations are links between individuals' needs and political decision-making. These organizations keep up discussions about the aims of societal development. From the point of view of life management it is important for all people to have the possibilities to learn to recognize societal changes and to assess influences of those changes in their individual life (ibid.).

As the Adult Education Committee, this Strategy Programme also emphasizes the importance of the education of individuals elected to a position of trust. This has been found to be one of the cornerstones of functioning democracy.

4. Government's cry for help – the Citizen Participation Policy Programme

4.1 Background – Decreasing political activity as the headache of policymakers

In Finland, participation by citizens has always been characterized by a certain degree of formality or institutionalization. As such, the definition of Finland as a “country of tens of thousands of societies” is correct. However, this has no direct bearing on citizens’ activity in societal decision-making, public discussion, or the expression of opinions. Informal societal discussion and criticism takes place in various forums (pubs, market squares, among friends, etc.) – in places where speech and action generate minimal impact on society. Nevertheless, the individual’s sense of satisfaction at “having actually spoken one’s mind” is naturally positive.

With this background, the Citizen Participation Policy Programme is one of four policy programmes adopted by Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen’s I government (2003–2007). According to the Programme, its purpose is to strengthen Finnish democracy. Within the framework of this Policy Programme, different development processes have been launched in the fields of education for active citizenship, societal participation and civic society (Policy Programme 2004).

According to the Programme director, Seppo Niemelä, the main reasons for the creation of the Policy Programme were:

- *problems with representative democracy* – manifested as falling voter turnout in elections, dwindling number of party memberships and weakening confidence in the institutions of society
- *active citizenship and civil society* – civil society has been understood as the social foundation of democracy; active citizenship is the essential goal of lifelong learning policies
- *the radical change in the position of the nation-state* – citizenship has to be understood in the context of its local, national, European and global role (Niemelä 2005)

4.2 Problems with representative democracy

The decreasing interest and lower participation in party policy or political activities connected with so-called representative democracy (e.g. elections) at local, national and EU-level has been a phenomenon recognized in almost all European countries for some 20 years. In this situation, the most important question from the point of view

of a democratic society and active citizenship should be expressed as follows: Why is it that citizens are not interested in participating in elections, membership of political parties and further activities of representative democracy?

Statistics on voting activity among different parts of the population show, for example, that the younger generations have been more passive than the older. How could we interpret this lack of interest? Does it have something to do with level of knowledge or education? The answer to the latter question is simple: the passivity of the younger generation has nothing to do with their level of education, because they have a longer, wider and more diverse educational history than the older generations. Besides that, the opportunities for getting information and knowledge about political structures and decision-making systems are extremely adequate today. The younger generations, especially, have more interest in other ways and channels to political and societal participation and influence.

So, without doubt, there are other motives for non-participation in traditional political activities. Perhaps the younger generations, and other so-called passive citizens of the rest of the population, have experienced the political infrastructure, decision-making systems and societal power of politicians as ineffective and insignificant in their own immediate daily life.

In these circumstances, socially excluded citizens such as the less educated, the unemployed, the poor, and even some pensioners and others have the weakest tools for solving personal and social problems. These socially impoverished groups and citizens, who do not perceive any meaning in societal or political participation, are, almost without exception, also educationally passive. In other words, they are not interested in participating in different formal and non-formal educational settings. If society continues to be interested in these citizens and in their rights and well-being, the decision-makers and those socially responsible will have to find new ways to try and activate these people.

Based on the data compiled from the "World Value Survey" (WVS) material, it may be stated that, considering the four institutions examined, Finnish people have the highest confidence in the police, and the second highest in their legal system. Their confidence in the nation's parliament and civil servants is distinctly lower.

From 1992 onwards, national attitude surveys have included citizens' ideas regarding the role and significance of social movements in political activities. These have been examined using the statement: "In present-day Finland, social movements are much more effective in conveying citizens' opinions to decision-makers, compared to political parties". Currently, the great majority of Finnish people seem to trust social movements' ability to convey citizens' opinions to the political decision-making process. In the 1990s, more than 50 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, either completely or to a certain extent. However, the proportional share of those who agree

has decreased over time. In the opinion surveys conducted in 2002 and 2004, the share of those who agree had fallen below 50 percent. In 2004, however, the number of people agreeing with the statement was still three times higher than that of those disagreeing (Paloheimo 2006).

4.3 What can we do to foster active citizenship?

According to the Policy Programme, civil society is the social foundation of democracy, and active citizenship is the essential goal of lifelong learning policies. The latter means that different educational settings would also have a prominent role in trying to reach the set goals (Policy Programme 2004).

One of the most profound questions in the Policy Programme is: What can the State do to foster citizen participation? This is a clear, but at the same time very odd question, assuming as it does, that it should be the business of the State to activate citizens. And this is a good example of the traditional relationship between the State and citizens in the Nordic countries, a legacy of the Nordic welfare-state idea. The consequences of this tradition are varied. One of them is the relatively weak ability or willingness of citizens to display spontaneous and independent societal activities in informal settings.

Two fundamental questions regarding the active role of the State in increasing the participation of citizens have been defined as follows: (1) How is active and democratic citizenship learned and how is it taught? (2) How can old and new methods for citizen participation be developed and combined? (ibid.)

The project leader, Niemelä, has considered methods to foster civic participation. He has identified three fields of methodology:

- access to information and public debate as prerequisites
- representative democracy
- direct participation

In the first field, Niemelä sees the importance of media and access to information as a foundation of democracy. Thinking about this alternative from the perspective of lifelong learning as a possibility to increase civic participation, we can easily conclude that learning of this kind will happen within informal environments (Niemelä 2005).

Opportunities for informal learning have changed radically since the 1970s. Especially learning and information-seeking environments based on modern information and communication technologies have created a space, where citizens and diverse interest groups can independently form opinions on society, politics and decision-making. This space also gives excellent possibilities for novel types of educational interaction and networking which could be called "modern net-based study circles", for example.

The essential activities of representative democracy are party activity connected with ideological-political goals, election arrangements and voting (encouraging people to vote). Representative democracy has, in the Nordic countries, strong traditions and a central status in the whole political system and decision-making process – which is why every citizen needs to be familiar with the basic elements of this part of the political system.

And how will this be realised? Knowledge about political systems, about local, national and supranational decision-making processes, and about the interdependences between political and other systems of society must form the core of formal (and non-formal) education in the framework of lifelong learning.

In the papers on the Citizen Participation Policy Programme the means and forms of direct participation have been mentioned as follows:

- consulting citizens (events and use of digital networks)
- public participation
- influence (initiatives, panel discussions for citizens and referenda)

In comparison to participation in direct democracy, the Finns come out as among the laziest participants in Europe. Norwegians and Finns, who contacted their representatives most actively, are clearly more passive in this respect. This means that Finnish people are genuinely prepared for direct participation in politics and that we contact our politicians or civil servants more frequently in comparison to other nations. On the whole, the Finns' participation is fairly conventional, with demonstrations excluded from our standard repertoire. On the other hand, however, research results indicate that we do not totally abandon direct means of influence. The Finns' modest readiness to engage in practical demonstrations can also be interpreted as the cause of the non-existence of major conflicts in this country. In addition, conflicts are solved locally by means other than active expressions of opinion (Pantzar 2006).

It is obvious that direct participation is only one way to realize direct democracy or political participation. In the Policy Programme participation has been understood as participation in initiatives organized by active policy makers such as parties, other political organizations etc. Thus the concept of direct participation does not include any different spontaneous civic activities, which could rather be called direct action or influence. But what are the roles of formal education or informal learning environments when trying to help citizens increase their abilities to participate in independent direct action? The purpose is to educate politically critical, societally active citizens, who have a high disposition and skill (cognitive and practical) for information-seeking and processing, and therefore produce politically independent and societally fearless people.

4.4 Concrete action

It appears that the concrete action taken to implement the Citizen Participation Policy Programme can be divided into three operating strategies and three forms of operation:

- various seminars and publications that deal with the prevailing state and development of citizen participation
- familiarizing student-teachers and comprehensive school pupils with the forms of representative democracy in particular
- developing the type of infrastructure that enables people's participation in decision-making using the means and methods now available in an information society

Although these projects have consumed a significant amount of resources, their results have been rather modest. One may even go so far as to argue that nothing has been achieved in terms of citizen participation during the Programme's 4-year implementation period. From the lifelong learning viewpoint, it is quite interesting that adult education was left with a practically non-existent role in the development of citizen participation. Was it the intention to look into a distant future where present-day children and young people will be living the prime of their adulthood? Was it believed that the adult population's civic capabilities were already complete and beyond the reach of education?

5. In search of new means

Following the completion of the Citizen Participation Policy Programme, Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's second Government, 2007, has embarked upon further action. These projects are further away from the field, means and methods of lifelong learning than the preceding Policy Programme. The decision-makers' sincere confidence in the capacity of an infrastructure of information technologically alone to solve problems appears naive. In other words, this attitude may indeed further diminish Finnish people's currently modest concrete participation in societal decision-making. The results of the United Nation's most recent e-Government Survey are downright paradoxical for Finland – a country that was previously regarded as a model of information society development. With regard to the three partial areas included in the analysis, Finland received the weakest rating concerning its citizens' opportunities to wield influence via the Internet. Receiving the 45th place on the global scale should wake up the decision-makers whose idea of education's role and significance in participation appears to deviate from the view held by lifelong learning professionals (UN 2008).

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