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A European study investigating adult numeracy education: Identifying challenges and possible responses

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Abstract

Numeracy is a critical competency needed by adults to navigate their way through tasks in their personal and professional lives. Hence, it is critical that efforts are made to identify and address challenges that prevent adults from developing the numeracy skills needed to engage in society. In this research we identify the challenges facing adult numeracy eduction across Europe. A survey, which sought to investigate the main challenges faced by adult educators and policy-makers when delivering numeracy programmes, was distributed to leading figures in adult numeracy education in EU states. Twelve countries responded and challenges identified related to the lack of a standardised definition of numeracy, the lack of a standardised framework to support adult numeracy education and the need for professional development for adult numeracy tutors. In this paper we look at how these challenges manifest themselves in different jurisdictions and offer suggestions for overcoming these challenges in future.

Keywords: numeracy, adult education, professional development, challenges

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Introduction and overview of literature

There are many important topics of study in the field of adult education, however recently adult numeracy has been at the forefront and indeed a priority of adult education around the world. Gal et al. (2020) ascertain that adult numeracy is a field which is of growing interest to economies internationally. Numeracy skills are critically important for the adult population in order to allow adults to meaningfully engage in society; to ensure good job prospects and in turn the opportunity to earn a reasonable wage; and furthermore to protect their physical and mental wellbeing (Carpentieri et al., 2010; Parsons & Bynner, 2005; Tout et al., 2017). Research shows that adults with higher competency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in today's mathematised world, tend to have better outcomes in attaining a job than their less-proficient peers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016). On the other hand, low numeracy levels amongst adults can also contribute to intergenerational cycles of inequality and disadvantage in families (Carpentieri et al., 2010). Coben et al. (2003) summarised the impact issues relating to poor numeracy can have when they outlined how low levels of numeracy not only affects the individual but also economies and societies as a whole. As such, it is vital to have a numerate society in order for an economy to flourish and people to reach their full potential.

Despite the clear and obvious need for adults to be proficient in numeracy, international studies suggest that many adults struggle in this area. In the United Kingdom, a study conducted by National Numeracy (2019) found that 56% of adults displayed numeracy skills which were the equivalent to that expected of a primary school child, while only a quarter of the adult population displayed levels of proficiency in numeracy at or above the level expected of a 16-year-old In addition to reports such as this, the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies [PIAAC] has also been used regularly by Governments and policy makers internationally to determine adults' level of proficiency in the area of numeracy. This international assessment measures adults skills and competencies in a number of different areas, including numeracy, literacy, information processing and problem solving skills). In this assessment adults are categorised into one of six proficiency levels for numeracy and a description of each of the different proficiency levels is provided in Table 1 (OECD, 2016, p. 49).

The most recent PIAAC study shows that, on average, across all 28 OECD countries surveyed, 22.7% of adults are performing at or below Level 1 (OECD, 2016). In essence, these adults are not capable of going beyond one-step processes in the area of numeracy, nor are they capable of dealing with problem scenarios where the numeracy component is not explicit. In contrast to this, the corresponding percentage of adults performing at or below Level 1 for literacy is 18.9%, thus showing that adults performance in the area of numeracy was substantially lower than that of literacy, albeit neither are at the desired level. Furthermore, in some European countries, such as Turkey and Greece, a much higher proportion of adults (38.47% and 24.98%, respectively) are performing at or below Level 1 in the area of numeracy (OECD, 2016). At the other end of the spectrum, results from the 2016 survey shows that, on average, only 1% of adults are performing at the highest possible level (Level 5). While these figures are concerning, the review of data in these reports revealed much more worrying trends upon closer inspection. As part of the PIAAC study each country's score for numeracy proficiency was calculated. The OECD average score for numeracy was 263, thus suggesting that the average adult performed at Level 2 on the proficiency scale. However many European countries[1] including Turkey (216); **Spain** (246); **Greece** (252); France (254); **Ireland** (256); Slovenia (258); Northern

Ireland (259) and Poland (260) all performed significantly worse than the OECD average (OECD, 2016).

Table 1. Description of proficiency levels in numeracy

Level	**Descriptor**
Below Level 1 <176	Tasks at this level require the respondents to carry out simple processes, such as counting, sorting, performing basic arithmetic operations with whole numbers or money, or recognising common spatial representations in concrete, familiar contexts where the mathematics content is explicit with little or no text or distractors.
Level 1 [176, 226)	Tasks at this level require the respondent to carry out basic mathematical processes in common, concrete contexts where the mathematical content is explicit, with little text and minimal distractors. Tasks usually require one-step or simple processes involving counting, sorting, performing basic arithmetic operations, understanding simple percentages, such as 50%, and locating and identifying elements of simple or common graphical or spatial representations.
Level 2 [226, 276)	Tasks at this level require the respondent to identify and act on mathematical information and ideas embedded in a range of common contexts where the mathematics content is fairly explicit or visual with relatively few distractors. Tasks tend to require the application of two or more steps or processes involving calculation with whole numbers and common decimals, percentages and fractions; simple measurement and spatial representation; estimation; and interpretation of relatively simple data and statistics in texts, tables and graphs.
Level 3 [276, 326)	Tasks at this level require the respondent to understand mathematical information that may be less explicit, embedded in contexts that are not always familiar and represented in more complex ways. Tasks require several steps and may involve the choice of problem-solving strategies and relevant processes. Tasks tend to require the application of number sense and spatial sense; recognising and working with mathematical relationships, patterns and proportions expressed in verbal or numerical form; and interpretation and basic analysis of data and statistics in texts, tables and graphs.
Level 4 [326, 376)	Tasks at this level require the respondent to understand a broad range of mathematical information that may be complex, abstract or embedded in unfamiliar contexts. These tasks involve undertaking multiple steps and choosing relevant problem-solving strategies and processes. Tasks tend to require analysis and more complex reasoning about quantities and data; statistics and chance; spatial relationships; and change, proportions and formulas. Tasks at this level may also require understanding arguments or communicating well-reasoned explanations for answers or choices.
Level 5 ≥ 376	Tasks at this level require the respondent to understand complex representations and abstract and formal mathematical and statistical ideas, possibly embedded in complex texts. Respondents may have to integrate multiple types of mathematical information where considerable translation or interpretation is required; draw inferences; develop or work with mathematical arguments or models; and justify, evaluate and critically reflect upon solutions or choices.

In addition to the aforementioned low levels of proficiency in the area of numeracy, research also indicates that many adults also hold negative attitudes towards numeracy. Feelings of fear and anxiety, which is commonly referred to as 'mathematics anxiety' among the adult population, is a well reported emotion in this field. Mathematics anxiety has been defined by Richardson and Suinn (1972) as 'feelings of tension …that interfere with the manipulation of numbers and the solving of mathematical problems in a wide variety of ordinary life and academic situations*'* (p. 551). While Martinez and Martinez (1996) determine it to be a construct with multiple causes, many link its origins to negative classroom experiences from the past (Tobias, 1993; Klinger, 2011). Such

experiences may include the use of traditional teaching methodologies, where mathematics involves the memorisation of formulae, and the following of rules and procedures (Prendergast et al., 2014). While many adults recognise the cultural and societal benefits of being numerate, they still report it to be a difficult and demanding skill that they often fear and dread (Swain et al. 2005). For example, according to the work of Breen (2003) and Southwood (2011), mathematics anxiety, is the emotion often reported by adults when confronted with numeracy tasks and it has a negative impact on their willingness to engage with numeracy and on their performance in the domain. Furthermore, Klinger (2011) found there to be a strong relationship between adult innumeracy and maths anxiety. However, Carpentieri et al. (2010) found that emotions relating to fear and anxiety were not only reported by innumerate adults or those with low levels of proficiency in numeracy, but adults who are highly qualified and successful also often lack confidence in their mathematical ability. Such findings highlight that negative dispositions towards numeracy are prevalent among the adult population, regardless of their mathematical capabilities, and this further emphasises the strong correlation between the affective domain and academic performance in a subject area, especially in the area of numeracy.

Due to the ramifications of poor attitudes and poor performance in the area of numeracy, it is of paramount importance that potential causes of these issues are investigated. However, despite acknowledgement of the existence of such problems and despite calls from policy makers and government bodies for adult numeracy to be prioritised, it still remains an under-researched and under-theorised field. There is a dearth of research in the field of adult numeracy and very few researchers have sought to identify the challenges or obstacles that are contributing to poor performance and poor attitudes towards numeracy among the adult population. It is this gap in the literature that this study is seeking to address. However, prior to this the authors will consider some findings in relation to numeracy education that could help identify some of the problems and issues relating to numeracy discussed to date.

Issues in the teaching and learning of numeracy among adults

One of the first issues facing the teaching and learning of numeracy identified in the literature is in relation to the definition of the term numeracy. The first concern in relation to the definition of numeracy, is the plethora of terms used to define numeracy internationally. O'Meara et al. (2022) outline how a multitude of different and evolving definitions and terms have been used when describing numeracy and numerate competencies in the past. A review of literature in the field of numeracy, shows that there exists many comparable terms for numeracy such as mathematical literacy or quantitative literacy. The terms used often depend on the country or jurisdiction, and these can be used interchangeably in some instances, without distinction. This can lead to a vague and confused understanding of the concept of numeracy.

Quantitative literacy is the term used for numeracy in the United States and is defined as the ability of a person to work effectively with quantitative data in all aspects of life (Steen, 2001). The Quantitative Literacy Design Team (2001), which developed this notion, acknowledged that quantitative literacy also included positive dispositions towards mathematics and an appreciation for the use of mathematics in society. They argued that numeracy plays a vital role in cultivating informed citizens and supporting democratic government. However, the Quantitative Literacy Design Team noted that although people believe quantitative literacy to be important, there is little agreement on one unified definition. This leads to a second issue in the teaching and learing of

numeracy, the lack of a clear definition of numeracy. Frejd and Geiger (2017) revealed that while numeracy is a word that is recognised internationally, there are many different interpretations and definitions of the term. Likewise, Hoogland & Diez-Palomer (2022, p. 21) ascertain that '…there is no a single, consensual, definition for numeracy'. Instead, the term numeracy has a multitude of definitions with many definitions portraying a very narrow view of numeracy. The initial concept of numeracy was first introduced in 1959 in the Crowther Report, whereby the word 'numerate' was defined as a word to mirror the image of literacy, while also including the skills necessary to think quantitatively. This initial definition is quite vague and led to many people seeing numeracy as a component of literacy. Later in 1982, the Cockcroft report offered a broader definition when they ascertained the word 'numerate' to have two attributes: 'The first of these is an 'at-homeness' with numbers and an ability to make use of mathematical skills which enables an individual to cope with the practical mathematical demands of his everyday life' and the second characteristic is the ability to 'have some appreciation and understanding of information which is presented in mathematical terms, for instance in graphs, charts or tables' (Cockcroft, 1982, p.11). This definition, while broader, began to link numeracy to basic mathematical skills and such interpretations of numeracy have persisted in the intervening years. For example, when more recent policy documents discuss the term numeracy there is a tendency to suggest that numeracy is the basic mathematical skill embedded in the description of literacy (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2011; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2006). In addition to this, Gal (2016) reports that numeracy is sometimes referred to as a skill that is learned primarily in school, while others believe numeracy is part of the mathematics curriculum. Madison and Steen (2008) discuss how the term numeracy came to refer only to simple arithmetic skills, normally attained in the early years of life. However, this view of numeracy as basic mathematics skills has, of late, been contested and criticised. For example, the asessment framework for the second cycle of PIAAC is very reluctant to define numeracy as basic mathematics skill (or a compendium of basic arithmetic skills). Instead this report ascertains that numeracy is now seen as 'a sophisticated capability requiring more than just arithmetic calculations and basic mathematics.' (OECD, 2021, p. 113). The definitions presented thus far all have subtle but important differences, highlighting the lack of consistency across the explanations of numeracy. This, coupled with the simplistic view of numeracy that permeates the literature, means that it is difficult for policy makers, adult educators and the general public to fully appreciate the importance of numeracy and furthermore reiterates the need to fully understand what is required for the meaningful teaching and learning of numeracy.

The second potential challenge identified by the authors in the review of literature in adult numeracy education, was in relation to financial support and the availability of funding to support adult numeracy education. While research has shown, that there is currently a strong focus on the importance of numeracy provision, the funding provided to enhance the teaching and learning of numeracy to adult learners continues to be deficient. Perso (2006) highlights that government bodies in Australia place a strong emphasis on improving the literacy and numeracy skills of young people but the focus is predominantly on literacy. There is an abundance of funding for literacy programmes which has improved teachers' understanding of literacy, which in turn improved the literacy skills of the young people. On the other hand, Perso (2006) explains how there is a lack of funding for numeracy programmes. While literacy is an essential domain for numeracy, given that the development of numeracy skills among adults would be extremely difficult without those adults having good literacy skills, it is still important

that a balance, in terms of the funding made available for literacy and numeracy programmes, is achieved internationally. In a subsequent Australian study, Westwood (2008) describes the funding for research into literacy interventions as exceeding what was offered in the numeracy domain and describes this as one of the main reasons that numeracy policies have been neglected until recent years. Carpentieri et al. (2010) reiterated this sentiment in relation to adult education when it was stated that, 'in the field of adult education, literacy has consistently taken prominence over numeracy' (p. 9). Furthermore, in the UK Parsons and Bynner (2005) acknowledge that people worldwide recognise the importance of literacy skills but they are of the belief that numeracy skills continue to be undervalued and underappreciated.

The review of literature has identified issues regarding a clear definition of numeracy and the lack of funding available for numeracy education. Such issues undoubtedly have an impact on the opportunities available to adult learners to engage in numeracy initiatives; on adults' academic performance in the area of numeracy and on their disposition towards numeracy. As such, the authors are keen to investigate if these are the only challenges facing adult numeracy providers in Europe or if there are other challenges hindering the meaningful teaching and learning of numeracy to adult learners. The literature review has shown that a significant research effort is needed in order to fully understand and address the challenges of improving adult numeracy education around the world. This paper discusses challenges identified in Europe as part of the development of the Common European Numeracy Framework (CENF) and furthermore it seeks to offer some suggestions for overcoming some of these challenges going forward.

Research question

In light of the extensive literature review the authors ascertained that there was a dearth of research in relation to the specific challenges facing those involved in adult numeracy education. As such, the following research question was identified to guide this research:

1. What are the most significant challenges and obstacles affecting the meaningful delivery of adult numeracy education across EU states and how can these obstacles be overcome in the future?

Methodology

To address this research question the study employed a survey research design. According to Visser et al. (2000), survey research is a methodology that involves the collection of data from a sample drawn from a well-defined population at a given point in time. Surveys and questionnaires containing questions about a topic of interest are at the heart of this methodology. As part of this research design the authors created a research instrument which allowed them to collect a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. The authors intended to get a large response rate from the 44 European countries and they felt there may be a higher response rate if they used a research instrument that was easy to distribute and one that the participants did not find too time consuming to complete. In addition to this, they were cognisant of the need for the research tool used to be distributed internationally in a convenient and efficient manner. As a result, for the purpose of this study, an online questionnaire was designed using the Google platform and was distributed to national adult education agencies across 33 European jurisdictions. The authors requested that those responsible for co-ordinating the teaching and learning of numeracy to adults in each of these jurisdictions complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaires were designed with the help of a Research Advisory Group (RAG), which consisted of four leading academics who have conducted much of their research in the field of adult numeracy and numeracy education. English was the native tongue to two members of the RAG and the second language for the remaining two members. The academics involved in this group were experienced in their positions and were recruited using a purposive sampling method (each academic was part of the wider project team). The academics in the advisory group were not research subjects and as such did not complete the questionnaire. Rather they were invited to participate on the basis of the expertise they could bring to the research and the contemporary experiences they have in similar peer groups to the research participants (Murphy et al., 2013). Their remit was to advise the authors on the development and distribution of the questionnaire and to provide a key stakeholder perspective to any of the issues raised in the literature review. There were two meetings held with the RAG. Prior to the first meeting the authors had conducted an extensive literature review investigating the teaching and learning of numeracy to adults internationally that would underpin the study. This enabled the authors to identify various issues associated with numeracy education and these issues were discussed with the RAG during the first meeting. The issues included society's understanding of numeracy, adult education and the provision of numeracy education in this setting. Following this discussion, a structure for the online questionnaire was put in place and key areas for investigation were decided upon. The second meeting of the RAG involved the piloting of the research instrument with the four academics. They advised that the wording of some questions was ambiguous and at times misleading, particularly for an international audience and made some suggestions for rewording. Other issues relating to phrases or terms that had different meanings in different jurisdictions were also identified by members of the RAG. Finally, recommendations were also made regarding the inclusion of a new section in the questionnaire which focussed on the working definition of numeracy. This advice was heeded and an additional section was added to the questionnaire. Finally, the RAG also gave the authors some advice in relation to the identification of participants for the study and provided a list of contacts that they had in adult education settings across Europe.

The questionnaire consisted of seven sections. The focus of each section along with the type of questions asked in each section is described in Table 2.

This paper will focus specifically on different items in the questionnaire that focussed on challenges facing adult numeracy education. These items were found in Section B and Section D of the questionnaire. The questionnaire items that were analysed for the purpose of this paper were:

B2. Is there a standard definition for numeracy for adults in your jurisdiction?

B6. Do literacy and numeracy for adults have the same status in your jurisdiction? Please explain.

D1. Who mainly educates adult learners in numeracy in your jurisdiction?

D2. How often do teachers or volunteers receive professional development for teaching numeracy?

Table 2. Nature of Questions in Online Survey

Section	Focus	No. of Questions	Question Type
A	Demographics	7	6 open-ended 1 multiple choice
B	Concepts & policies for adult numeracy education	15	2 dichotomous 7 open-ended 5 multiple choice 1 Likert scale
C	Content & practice	11	1 dichotomous 8 open-ended 2 multiple choice
D	Teachers/trainers & volunteers	5	1 dichotomous 1 open-ended 3 multiple choice
E	Learners' experience of numeracy and levels of proficiency	7	6 open ended 1 multiple choice
F	Working definition of numeracy	7	1 open ended 6 Likert scale
G	International co-operation and support	3	3 open ended

The sampling method employed for this research study was convenience sampling. Whilst non-probabilistic sampling methods, such as convenience sampling, are considered a limitation the research team and the RAG, due to their own experience in the field, had well-established, formal working relationships with many policy makers and academics who had many years expertise in the field of adult numeracy. Many of these people were responsible for the co-ordination, organisation and delivery of adult numeracy education in their jurisdiction and so we felt they were best placed to answer the questions in the online survey. The sampling frame for the study was the 33 EU countries in which one member of the research team had a connection with the body/organisations responsible for adult education. In order to disseminate the survey, in each of the 33 jurisdictions, an organisation was contacted and invited to participate or alternatively nominate another individual or organisation in their jurisdiction whom would be in a better position to offer insights into the provision of numeracy education in the adult population. In using this approach 52 people/organisations were contacted and 12 jurisdictions nominated an individual who submitted a response to the survey. This response rate of ~37% is in line with the expected response rate of 40% for online needs assessment surveys (Archer, 2008). Once these responses had been submitted the research team were in a position to begin the analysis phase of the study. The quantitative data was recorded, summarised and analysed using the computer package SPSS. The open ended questionnaire responses were transcribed and analysed using NVivo. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse this qualitative data. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns/themes across the data set. It is used to examine the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences and thus was relevant to this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research team followed Braun and Clarke's six step approach when conducting thematic analysis on the qualitative data:

1. Familiarising oneself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes

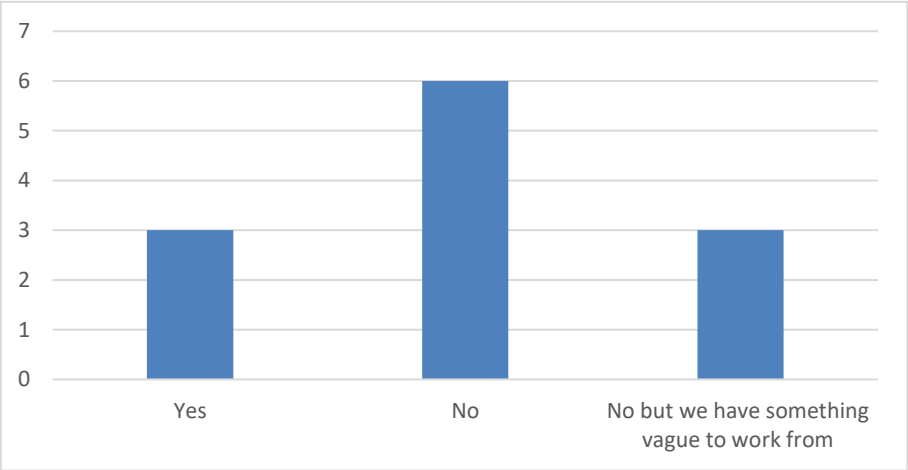
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing a report

Each of the authors worked individually during the initial three phases and derived their own codes. The coding allocated by each researcher was then compared during phase 4 and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved by the authors before the coding scheme was finalised in phase 5. The findings that emerged from both the quantitative and qualitative data will be discussed in the next section.

Findings

The first challenge that emerged in this study was in relation to a lack of clarity surrounding what numeracy entails. This issue first came to the fore when respondents were asked if there is a standard definition for numeracy in their jurisdiction. In total 12 people offered a response to this question and the results are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Responses when asked if there was a standardised definition of numeracy used in their jurisdiction



From Figure 1 it is evident that in three-quarters of the jurisdictions involved in this study there was no standardised definition of numeracy. Respondents from six jurisdictions reported that there was no definition adopted from international reports, or otherwise, that they use when teaching numeracy. Instead, respondents in these jurisdictions believed that individuals each arrived at their own conceptualisation/interpretation of numeracy, although there was often consenus in these interpretations as indicated by respondent 10:

> R10: No [standardised definition], but there is a widely accepted view

The authors believe that the lack of a standardised definition for numeracy will have a multitude of knock-on effects for the teaching and learning of numeracy and will result in numeracy being misconstrued by adult learners and educators alike. This latter issue around the lack of appreciation or understanding of numeracy, what it entails, its scope, and the role numeracy skills play in the life of adult learners was also identified through a second item on the survey. When asked to outline the terms used for adult numeracy in their jurisdiction two responses featured much more frequently than any other. The first,

mentioned by four respondents, was that numeracy was considered the equivalent of basic mathematical skills or a ‘basic knowledge of mathematics’. Sample responses include:

> R3: basic knowledge of mathematics
> R10: …numeracy is normally descried as basic or everyday maths

This, according to Goos et al. (2019), Tout et al. (2017) and OECD (2021) amongst others, is an extremely narrow conceptualisation of numeracy and highlights that without a standardised and modern definition of numeracy, it will continue to be a term that is misunderstood and misrepresented in the field of education. The findings from our study also show that a second common term used to describe numeracy across a number of European countries is ‘mathematical literacy’. This was the response offered by a further four respondents.

> R9: There is no Spanish word for numeracy and we translated as “Alfabetizacion matematica” (Mathematical literacy)

Defining numeracy as mathematical literacy or as a mirror image of literacy in a numerical sense presents another challenge for numeracy education and a challenge that was again identified in responses offered to a variety of items in the survey and relates to the status attributed to numeracy education, particularly when compared to literacy.
This second challenge that emerged when analysing the qualitative data collected in response to the survey item ‘Do literacy and numeracy have the same status in your jurisdiction? Please explain’ found that only two of the respondents asserted that numeracy and literacy were held in the same regard in their jurisdictions. A sample response from one such jurisdiction was as follows:

> R11: Yes both are listed within the framework of basic functional literacy in adult education.

However, the vast majority of jurisdictions (n = 10) believed that literacy was held in much higher regard than numeracy, with two of these jurisdictions reporting that efforts were being made in recent years to address this imbalance. The following sample responses give some indication of the scope of the challenge numeracy in adult education is facing in this regard:

> R2: No literacy is actually more important and visible than numeracy. Probably affected people can hide this [numeracy] weakness in their daily lives and there is a lack of awareness in society.

> R6: In the past this was not the case and literacy took precedent. However, numeracy has been gaining more importance in recent years.

> R3: Yes, according to the law (Federal Act) numeracy is part of the basic skills, which must be promoted by the federal state and the regional states (cantons). Basic skills are: (a) Reading, writing and oral expression in a national language; (b) “basic knowledge of mathematics” and (c) application of ICT. De facto, financial flows, public awareness and the political will to support reading, writing and language skills are disproportionately higher compared to support for numeracy.

> R8 : Numeracy is merely seen as part of (multiliteracy) so in that sense it doesn’t appear to be an equal to literacy.

These responses clearly highlight that literacy is held in higher regard than numeracy across the majority of European countries. This was also an issue raised later in the questionnaire when respondents were asked to identify the biggest issue that faced numeracy education going forward. The following response from Jurisdiction 5 reinforces the idea that numeracy is seen as a poorer relation to literacy:

> R5: Hidden behind literacy – 'literacy and numeracy' So often within discussions of literacy and numeracy, the two are written and spoken of in combination as if they are a single skill, with literacy frequently used as a proxy for both.

While the response from Jurisdiction 6, above, offers some hope for the future of adult numeracy education, the response from Jurisdiction 3 highlights an additional layer to this problem. Notably, they assert that while official state documents attribute equal status to numeracy and literacy, the situation on the ground is quite different. They believe that in their jurisdiction the financial support available for literacy, the public awareness of literacy and the political desire to develop literacy skills supersedes that of numeracy, irrespective of what is stated in policy documents. This must also lead us to question those jurisdictions where it was reported that numeracy and literacy were of an equal standing. Despite a small number of respondents (n = 2) in this study professing that numeracy and literacy were equally weighted, the rationale underpinning their belief in this regard was that policy documents attested to this (see response from Jurisdiction 11). However, as many research studies have found in the past (Quirke, 2018) and as has been discovered in this study what happens in practice can often differ quite substantially from what is advocated for in policy documents. Additionally, when the authors analysed the responses to this question, another challenge that arose was in relation to a lack of awareness of the importance of numeracy and negative attitudes that persist towards numeracy among society. One respondent argued that society perceive mathematics to be difficult which may contribute towards the prevalence of negative attitudes:

> R12: Bias towards difficulty of mathematics

Another respondent stated that society are not aware of the importance of numeracy which in turn has an effect on the way in which it is viewed when compared with literacy.

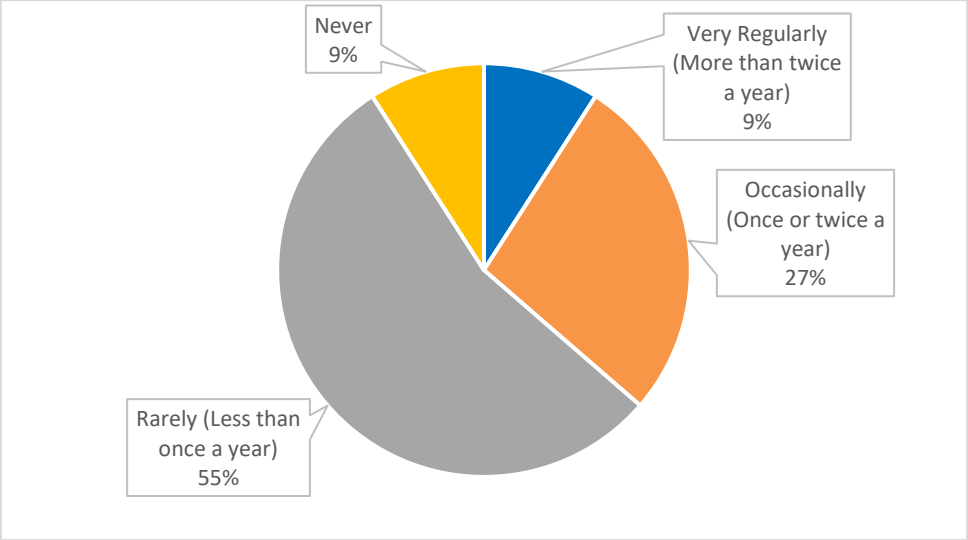
> R1: a lack of awareness around the importance of numeracy.

As a result, while over eighty percent of respondents in this study indicate that numeracy is viewed less favourably compared to literacy, the true extent of this problem might be even greater than that reported here.

The final challenge noted by the authors was in relation to the responsibility for delivering numeracy programmes to adult learners. Respondents to the survey were asked to provide details about the people who deliver numeracy programmes to adult learners and to describe the training/education that these tutors received in relation to the teaching of numeracy. Initially, the findings in relation to numeracy tutors were positive in that six of the eleven people that responded to this question indicated that professionals (i.e. those with a recognised qualification in the area e.g. qualified teachers in the subject area) were the only people responsible for the delivery of adult numeracy education in their jurisdiction, while a further two respondents indicated that the responsibility for the delivery of adult numeracy programmes lay with both professionals and trained personnel. Only two respondents indicated that untrained volunteers were responsible for the delivery of adult numeracy education. However, when the authors further investigated the level of training that these professionals/volunteers received, a more concerning

picture began to emerge. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to describe how often teachers/volunteers received professional development in the area of numeracy education. The responses are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Summary of responses in relation to how often do professionals/volunteers receive professional development for teaching adult numeracy



Respondents from 11 different European countries offered a response to this question. Figure 2 shows that the majority of jurisdictions (n = 7) reported that tutors of adult numeracy rarely or never received professional development in the area of numeracy, while on the other hand only one country reported that professional development is made available to these tutors more than twice a year. The importance of professional development for teaching cannot be understated, as will be discussed in the next section, and hence the findings to emerge here present a significant challenge that must be overcome if looking to improve the teaching and learning of numeracy among the adult population.

Overall, the three challenges discussed thus far were identified as the most pertinent issues facing adult numeracy education across European jurisdictions. Many of these were also explicitly stated by respondents when asked what they believed to be the most significant challenges facing numeracy education in the future.

Discussion and conclusion

Government bodies and educators around the world have advocated that numeracy is a skill that all adults need to possess. However, the results from this study identified some challenges in relation to supporting the development of adult numeracy. The authors identified three challenges that emerged from this research study which may have an effect on adult numeracy education, namely; the lack of a clear definition of numeracy; an imbalance in the attention and funding afforded to numeracy when compared with literacy; and a dearth of professional development opportunities available for adult numeracy tutors.

This research study explored the standardised definitions of numeracy in different jurisdictions and it emerged in the findings that there is a lack of clarity around what numeracy entails. The review of literature showed that very often the meaning of numeracy may be embedded in a definition of literacy (Ministry of Education, 1959; UNESCO 2006). As presented in the findings of this paper, over 75% of respondents were not aware of a standardised definition of numeracy in their jurisdiction. The study was conducted across 12 different European countries, the majority of which do not use English as their first language, and this could have been a factor that contributed to this finding, since Bolstad (2019) claims that numeracy is a relatively new phenomenon which can be difficult to define, especially as it is not a term that easily translates to different languages. Regardless of the cause, these findings support the work of Frejd and Geiger (2017), who acknowledge that there are many different definitions of numeracy and they argue that this can often lead to misunderstandings regarding the role of numeracy development within the field of education. The findings from this research study relating to a standardised definition revealed that there is a need for a clearer definition of numeracy that can be utilised across different jurisdictions. It is essential that those responsible for teaching and developing numeracy in adult education are provided with a clear standardised definition of numeracy which will further support their own understanding of numeracy. Consequently, a common standardised definition for numeracy needs to be developed and work has commenced on a framework to support teaching and learning of adult numeracy, as part of this European project (Hoogland et al., 2021). Further research is now required into the suitability of this framework and how it can be used to develop policy makers and the general publics' awareness and understanding of the term 'numeracy'.

The second challenge identified as part of this research study was in relation to literacy and numeracy holding an equivalent role in adult education and society as a whole. Literacy and numeracy are often referred to as essential skills that everyone needs to possess to engage fully in society but it is well recongised that neither receive the investment or recognition required in international policies. However, despite issues neing identified in the provision of both numeracy and literacy education to adult learners, it is acknowledged that developing skills in literacy often takes precedence over numeracy. This research study found that only two respondents agreed that literacy and numeracy are afforded the same status with one respondent stating 'Yes both are listed within the framework of basic functional literacy in adult education.'. However, the fact that the respondent justified that both skills are part of the 'functional literacy' framework reinforces the idea that numeracy is seen as part of the broader skill of literacy. O'Donoghue (2002) argues that because the term numeracy was introduced after the term literacy, often the two terms are merged together or sometimes numeracy even becomes a subset of literacy. This notion that numeracy is part of the overall competency of literacy was highlighted even further when the majority of respondents argued that theoretically government bodies place a strong emphasis on improving both literacy and numeracy skills, however, they argued that the focus on the ground is predominantly on improving literacy. Carpentieri et al. (2010) state that in order for an economy to continue to grow, it is necessary to improve both the literacy and numeracy skills of the adult population, with more emphasis now needing to be placed on the latter. Moreover, this research study revealed that funding is one of the factors that contributes to the imbalance and inequity between literacy and numeracy. Respondents believed that in their jurisdiction, the financial supports available for literacy development, along with the public awareness of the importance of literacy and the aspiration by government bodies to develop adult literacy skills exceeds any supports for numeracy development, irrespective of what the

policy documents state. As a result, the authors argue that it is necessary to place a stronger emphasis on numeracy so that people view literacy and numeracy as equally important. They also support the notion that literacy and numeracy are very distinct competencies and numeracy should no longer be seen as a subset of literacy.

The final challenge identified as part of this research study, was the lack of professional development to support tutors in teaching numeracy in adult education settings. This research study revealed that firstly there is a need for a standardised definition for numeracy, which in turn will help support tutors in facilitating adult numeracy development. This study also revealed that the people responsible for facilitating and teaching numeracy programmes rarely receive any supports or professional development to help them in their mission to develop the numeracy skills of adult learners. Bennison et al. (2020) argue that there is a lack of professional development in relation to teaching numeracy in post-primary school settings. A similar issue was revealed as part of an Irish study in the adult education context, whereby it was recommended that tutors supporting adult learners' development of numeracy skills need to have the necessary qualifications and furthermore should attend Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to support them in their job (National Adult Literacy Agency, 2021). However, this study reveals that this is not a problem confined to Ireland. Instead, it is evident that there is a lack of CPD for professionals who deliver the adult numeracy programmes across Europe and this needs to be addressed and prioritised if we are to improve the numeracy competencies of adults in Europe. Research needs to be conducted into what constitutes effective professional development in this field and based on the findings from such a study programmes of professional development need to be developed for adult numeracy tutors internationally.

While there were some limitations associated with this study, most notably a lower than desired response rate, the authors believe that a number of recommendations can be made based on the findings of this European research study. The first recommendation is to identify a standardised definition and framework that can be used across multiple jurisdictions when supporting adults numeracy development. As mentioned previously, this work is already underway as part of the Common European Numeracy Framework Erasmus project (Hoogland & Diez-Palomer, 2022). Secondly, it was obvious that literacy and numeracy are not competing on a level playing field. This study revealed that the majority of European countries who completed the survey perceived literacy to be more important, with some arguing that it was due to the negative public perception towards mathematics and others arguing that literacy development receives more financial support. Therefore the authors recommend that key stakeholders promote numeracy development in a positive light and can do so by ensuring more financial supports are made available to the adult numeracy education sector. This, in turn, will support and recognise the equal importance of literacy and numeracy. Finally, the findings of this study revealed the need for more continuous professional development for tutors who are facilitating adult numeracy education programmes. Additionally, the authors recommend that the tutors who are responsible for delivering and facilitating adult numeracy programmes possess the necessary knowledge and qualifications for teaching numeracy. It is essential that those responsible for developing adults' numeracy skills have a deep understanding of numeracy, along with the necessary teaching strategies to support the adult learners development and programmes need to be designed internationally to help tutors develop the required knowledge and skills for this endeavour.

The findings presented in this paper raise many questions about the provision of numeracy in adult education. Furthermore, the study helps to reiterate the fact that adult

numeracy education is complex. However, action has now been identified in this study that could help to restore balance in the emphasis being placed on the key skills of both numeracy and literacy for adult learners international. Such reccommendations, if heeded, have the potential to result in better proficiency in numeracy among adult learners across the continent which in turn will help alleviate some of the issues associated with low levels of numeracy such as lower incomes, employment stuggles, and health problems. Likewise, the recommendations made in this paper could potentially lead to improved adult education in the future, and in particular numeracy programmes, ensuring that the emphasis is placed on developing adults as active citizens that can live, work, socialise and critically engage in modern society in a confident and appropriate manner.

Notes

[1] Those countries in bold are involved in this research study.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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Bounded advantages of higher education regarding young adults' participation in nonformal education

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Abstract

The article uses insights from the capability approach as a theoretical framework. It investigates the potential of higher education to provide fertile advantages regarding young adults' participation in nonformal education and whether this potential is bounded by people's individual characteristics and the wider social context in which they live. Applying descriptive statistics and multilevel modelling, we conducted a secondary data analysis of the Adult Education Survey for 29 European countries. The findings go beyond previous research by clearly demonstrating that the fertile advantages of higher education regarding participation in adult nonformal education are not absolute and straightforward. They are bounded not only by certain important individual characteristics (such as individuals' social background and household income) but are also context-dependent. More concretely, they differ among countries and depend on various country-level factors, such as level of innovation and economic growth.

Keywords: nonformal education, higher education, young adults, capability approach, comparative analysis

Introduction

Several contemporary societal processes – such as constant changes in all social spheres, demographic dynamics, the ageing of societies, and the growing number of more

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knowledge and skills-intensive jobs – have led to the increasing importance of constantly improving one's knowledge and skills. Keeping in mind these developments, it is understandable why the issue of participation in adult nonformal education has recently attracted the attention of many scholars. Studies (e.g. Boeren, 2017; Groenez et al., 2007; Lee & Desjardins, 2019; Roosmaa & Saar, 2012; Weaver & Habibov, 2017) have identified numerous factors at the micro, meso and macro levels that are associated with participation in adult nonformal education.

One of the most significant factors at the individual level that influences participation in adult nonformal education is educational attainment, especially the possession of a higher education degree. Studies have revealed that there is a widespread cumulative advantage. Thus, in most countries, people with higher education are more likely to be involved in continuing education in comparison to those with lower levels of education (e.g., Blossfeld et al., 2014; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Kilpi-Jakonen et al., 2015). Summarising their findings, based on analyses of longitudinal data for 13 countries, Vono de Vilhena et al. (2014) conclude that their hypothesis that more-highly educated individuals 'would be more likely to participate in non-formal education. . . has been systematically corroborated in most of the countries. . . with the exception of Germany and Denmark' (p. 359). This raises an important question about the context-dependent character of the advantages of higher education regarding participation in adult nonformal education. However, to the best of our knowledge, the available body of literature is framed mainly within human capital theory and includes only a few examples of differentiated analysis that takes into account the interaction between higher education and other micro and macro factors (e.g. Cabus et al., 2020; Dämmrich et al., 2014).

Against this background, this article aims to explore in more depth the relationship between higher education and participation in adult nonformal education. More concretely, we investigate the potential of higher education to provide advantages regarding participation in adult nonformal education and whether this potential is bounded by people's individual characteristics and the wider social context in which they live. At the theoretical level we aim to demonstrate the heuristic power of the capability approach (see Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2011) for studying adult nonformal education and for understanding the role of having higher education for participation in it. Empirically, we analysed data from the Adult Education Survey (AES) via descriptive statistics and logit models with random effects.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline our theoretical considerations by discussing the meaning of the main concepts used and insights from the capability approach as a framework for understanding (participation in) adult nonformal education. We used these considerations to delineate a research strategy and formulate our hypotheses. Then we present the data and methods used to test them. This is followed by the results and discussion sections. The conclusions section sketches the main findings regarding how the application of the capability approach enriches the conceptualisation of the functioning of higher education as a factor influencing participation in adult nonformal education, and it outlines limitations of the study and areas for future research.

Theoretical considerations

Lifelong learning and adult formal and nonformal education

The concept, practices and policies of lifelong learning can be regarded as a reflection of certain major socio-structural characteristics of societies of late modernity (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021). The increased 'permeability' between different social spheres,

the new status of knowledge and constant social change becoming essential characteristics of modern societies explain both the hybrid character of lifelong learning and its importance for individual and societal well-being. Recognising the hybrid character of lifelong learning means acknowledging that it is a principle of learning and education that leads to the emergence of an assembly of different practices and that it includes different kinds of knowledge and skills within different perspectives – purposeful and spontaneous, formally institutionalised and informal, aimed at individual professional realisation, but also at personal development and enhanced civic engagement. Thus:

> the lifelong learning paradigm offers a master concept for thinking about the whole of education and training systems including all learning from early childhood education and care, initial formal education, higher education, vocational education and training, and other adult education. (Desjardins, 2020, p. 10)

Adult learning and education are defined as 'a core component of lifelong learning' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016, p. 6). However, even a glimpse at the literature clearly shows that there are different definitions of adult learning and education. Some authors use adult education and adult learning interchangeably (Kilpi-Jakonen et al., 2015), others prefer the generic concept 'adult learning and education' (Milana et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2016, p. 6).

Among international organisations and from a policy perspective, it is widely accepted that learning includes a triad: formal, nonformal and informal (European Commission, 2001). Formal education is institutionalised, intentional and planned and its programmes are recognised as such by the relevant national education authorities, whereas informal learning is not institutionalised, less structured than either formal or nonformal education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UNESCO-UIS], 2012). According to one of the first definitions of nonformal education (NFE), it refers to any organised systematic and programmatic educational activity carried out beyond the formal education system, which is intended for different groups of the population through selected types of learning (La-Belle, 1981).

The distinction between formal, nonformal, and informal learning has been contested in the academic literature. It is argued (Desjardins, 2020; Hodkinson, 2010; Rubenson, 2019) that the boundaries between formal and informal learning are blurred and that most learning contains a mixture of informal and formal elements as far as the content of a given activity could be classified as formal, whereas its purposes, process and location as informal. Thus, it is obvious that efforts for a more in-depth understanding of the main concepts related to different forms of education and learning and their relationship should continue.

We accept that adult learning is a broader concept than adult education, which includes all forms of adult learning, both institutionalised and informal. We conceptualise adult formal education as '[e]ducation specifically targeted at individuals who are regarded as adults by their society' and that 'occurs as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification' (UNESCO, 2009, p. 27; UNESCO-UIS, 2012, p. 78). However, to a lesser degree, adult NFE is also an institutionalised and structured learning process. This understanding is in line with the definitions of formal, nonformal and informal education, which have been used in the Adult Education Survey (see Eurostat, 2023).

The main characteristic of NFE that distinguishes it from formal education is that it does not lead to certification for a level of education. Even if a certificate is obtained at

the end of the training, it has no legal value (Boeren, 2016). NFE includes diverse learning opportunities and focuses mainly on activities that are most often voluntarily and consciously chosen by individuals (Sulkunen et al., 2021). NFE can have different functions and individuals may have different motivations for participating in it – they can enrol in courses for acquiring new skills or upgrading already acquired ones in order to foster their professional realisation, but they can also attend different seminars during their leisure time or take courses on volunteering with the aim to benefit their community. It is also important to emphasise that NFE activities can be undertaken by individuals at different stages of their life courses, that is students, young adults, or older people.

Insights from the capability approach as a framework for understanding (participation in) adult nonformal education

In essence, the capability approach is based on a view of living as a combination of various 'doings and beings' (called 'functionings'), with quality of life assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functionings (Sen, 1993, p. 31). The concept of 'functionings' reflects the various things that a person may value being or doing. Such things vary in complexity – from the very simple, like being well-nourished, to the more complex, like being happy (Sen, 1992, p. 39). In contrast, a person's 'capability' refers to the alternative combinations that are feasible for that person to achieve. Thus, Sen envisions capability as a kind of freedom (Sen, 2009). This freedom is related to opportunities and, more specifically, to the way a person achieves the outcomes they value.

Every person has a specific capability set that refers to all the things they can do or be and that actually determine their life choices. In this sense, the capability approach is extremely sensitive to the importance of '[t]he autonomy of the agency aspect of a person' and to 'the view of persons as responsible agents' (Sen, 1985, pp. 203-204). It helps to link structure and agency through so-called conversion factors. These factors relate to the differences between people and influence how a person can be, or is, free to convert the characteristics of a given good or service into freedom or achievement. Different authors have proposed different classifications of these conversion factors (Bøhler et al., 2019; Crocker & Robeyns, 2009; Robeyns, 2005). We share the view that their classification should refer to the level they operate on: micro, meso or macro, as this reflects our understanding that participation in lifelong learning and adult education is a layered phenomenon and that taking into account different layers and nested structures allows us to better explain why people do or do not participate in lifelong learning activities (Boeren, 2017).

Nussbaum (2011) emphasises that the importance of education has been at the heart of the capability approach since its inception. From the capability approach perspective, education can play a role as a means, an end, and a conversion factor (Chiappero-Martinetti & Sabadash, 2014). It conceives of education as one of the dimensions of human life and human development which is important both for its own sake and for its contribution to the expansion of capabilities in other spheres of life. It should be emphasised that from the capability approach perspective, individual educational attainment (degree and years of education) should not be the sole measure related to (adult) education, but inequalities in participation in (adult) education have to be defined as important indicators of the development and well-being of nations, groups and individuals. Therefore, the study of the influence of factors at different levels on involvement in (adult) education becomes extremely important. However, with a few exceptions (e.g. Walker, 2012; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021), there is a large gap

in the research concerning the application of the capability approach in the field of adult education, particularly regarding NFE.

Although very influential, the capability approach has also provoked criticism (for an overview, see Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021, pp. 58-61). Thus, it is criticised as failing to fully capture the interactive relationship between individual capabilities and social structures (Ibrahim, 2006) as well as being 'unclear [about] how the conversion factors combine with each other' (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2018, pp. 231-232). Given this, we think that there is a need to further strengthen, both theoretically and empirically, this aspect of the capability approach – crucial as it is in the analysis of participation in NFE. This is why we try, in the following analysis, to combine the conceptualisation of capability as an evaluative space for measuring inequalities with the concepts of *fertile functionings* and *corrosive disadvantage*. To the best of our knowledge, they have not been combined in the study of higher education and NFE.

In their book *Disadvantage*, Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit (2007) introduced these two concepts. Whereas fertile functioning refers to 'those functionings, the securing of which is likely to secure further functionings', corrosive disadvantage is defined as a 'disadvantage the presence of which yields further disadvantages' (Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007, p. 10). Discussing education as an example of fertile functioning, they concluded that:

> lacking education is always a very corrosive disadvantage, . . ., whereas its fertility appears to be much more context-dependent; both in terms of which other functionings we are concerned with, and how many other people in society are educated to the same level (p. 144).

Nussbaum (2011) calls for greater theoretical clarity and notes that Wolff and de-Shalit 'do not distinguish as clearly as they might between functioning and capability' (p. 44). According to Nussbaum (2011), '[f]ertile functionings are of many types, and which functionings (or capabilities) are fertile may vary from context to context' (p. 44). In turn, corrosive disadvantage is 'the flip side of fertile capability: it is a deprivation that has particularly large effects elsewhere' (p. 44).

In their answer to Nussbaum's critical remark, Wolff and de-Shalit (2013) point to the difficulties in distinguishing capability from functioning and outline that:

> [m]any functionings are in fact capabilities for other functionings – [f]or example, literacy is a capability and reading is a functioning, … [b]ut reading is not only a functioning; it is, at the same time, a capability, for example, for studying, or for driving (p. 162).

Wolff and de-Shalit also refer to other problems – for example, that functionings can be observed while this is not possible or not so easy for capabilities (p. 163) – in order to defend their preference for speaking about fertile functionings instead of fertile capabilities. We believe that this discussion is important for the development of the capability approach and should continue in future studies. As already stated, the focus of our article is on higher education as a factor in participation in adult NFE via the capability approach. Higher education is a functioning, but it also often represents an input to other functionings – employment, a good salary, further learning activities, civic activity, etc. That is why we will use the neutral term *fertile advantages*, suggested by Wolff and de-Shalit (2013). Taking into account Nussbaum's emphasis on the context dependence of the fertility of a given capability or functioning, in the following analysis, we ask not only *whether* but also *where* (i.e., in what social contexts) further advantages will correlate to having higher education in relation to participation in adult NFE.

Trying to measure the freedom (capability) of girls in school settings, Vaughan (2007) distinguished between two types of capabilities: capabilities to participate in education and capabilities gained through education. While the first type of freedom refers to the abilities and opportunities that a child possesses to participate fully in the learning process in school, the second relates to the contribution of education to various spheres of human life outside of education. In our article, we use the notions of *capability to participate in education* and *participation in education as functioning* and apply them to adult NFE. We define *the capability to participate in adult education* as a person's freedom to be involved in adult education that they have reason to value. Participation in adult education as functioning reflects involvement in adult education as an activity that is valuable for a person.

The notion of the capability to participate in adult education clearly refers to individual opportunities to be involved in education, that is, the freedom to take part in educational activities that one has reason to value. It makes it possible to better justify why it is important to look beyond formal education – in our case, to adult NFE as well as to the role of higher education for it. More concretely, this concept highlights that the act of participation is an act of freedom and that education (and continuing education) can be both a valuable end in itself and a way to increase other capabilities. Focused on how higher education is associated with participation in adult NFE allows us to show that a higher level of education may foster both the capability to participate in adult NFE and the achievement of involvement in adult NFE (functioning). An assessment of the capability to participate as an act of freedom and the achieved functioning would involve analysing *both constraining and enabling factors* that might affect the freedom of a person to attend various forms of adult education. Examples of factors at the micro level related to adult education are gender, age, ethnicity, level of education and work experience. Factors at the meso level may include regional or local institutional educational arrangements, the state of the local economy or employers' perceptions and practices, whereas factors at the macro level refer to various national institutional arrangements in the sphere of education, macroeconomic conditions and economic structures (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021).

One of the features of capability is that it is not directly measurable. This problem has been noted by Robeyns (2003, p. 85), who tries to evaluate gender inequalities in the space of capabilities but concludes 'given that we have little direct information about people's capability levels, we could start by taking group inequality in achieved functionings as indicative of inequalities in capabilities.'. Although Sen (1992) gives priority to capability instead of functionings as an evaluative space, he also stresses that there is no difference between focusing on functioning or on capabilities and that capability refers to a combination of all the potential outcomes (functionings) available to an individual. With these considerations in mind, we will use the functioning of NFE as a proxy for the capability to participate in NFE.

Research strategy and hypotheses

We share Nussbaum's (2011, p. 145) understanding that the 'fertility of a given capability, and the corrosiveness of a given capability, are empirical questions whose answers are likely to vary with time and place'. That is why, in the second part of this article, we will present an empirically based study. The research strategy of our study is built on the above theoretical considerations and literature review. We operationalise higher education as a fertile functioning in relation to participation in adult NFE as

advantages that having a higher education degree brings for participation in NFE to people with different individual characteristics who live in different social environments. While social structures influence human capabilities, as Ibrahim (2006, p. 402) emphasises, 'capabilities can also alter the pre-existing social structures rendering them more conducive to individual and communal well-beings'. The mutual relationship between capabilities and social structure is reflected in the understanding of the context-dependent fertility of a given capability/functioning. That is why, in order to reveal the fertile advantages of higher education on the capability to participate in adult NFE, we will focus on the *interactions between factors at micro (individual) and macro (country) levels*.

In Development as Freedom Sen (1999) argues:

> We use incomes and commodities as the material basis of our well-being. But what use we can respectively make of a given bundle of commodities, or more generally of a given level of income, depends crucially on a number of contingent circumstances, both personal and social (p. 70).

Sen (1999, pp. 70-71) goes further and identifies five distinct contingent circumstances that should be taken into account when making interpersonal comparisons of people's well-being which would otherwise be hidden if we rely solely on the metrics of income for evaluations of well-being. Among them are personal heterogeneities in terms of person's age, gender, disability and distribution within the family, i.e., the influence on a person's capability of services, networks, social/economic capital, provided by the family. Depending on all these factors one and the same income, or social background, can have different effects on people's well-being and activities, such as participation in (adult) education. Previous research also shows that participation in lifelong and adult education 'is a deeply unequal matter' (Boeren, 2016, p. 24). Studies have revealed that adults' socioeconomic status (measured by their parents' level of education) is among the most important socio-demographic characteristics revealing unequal distribution in lifelong and adult education (Desjardins, 2015). Another individual characteristic of considerable importance for participation in lifelong learning is household income (Kim et al., 2004). Given these theoretical insights and empirical findings we expect that:

> *Hypothesis 1a:* There is an interaction effect between having a higher education degree and young adults' social background on the likelihood of participating in NFE.

> *Hypothesis 1b:* There is an interaction effect between having a higher education degree and household income on the likelihood of participating in adult NFE.

According to Walker (2007, p. 135) 'the capability approach requires that we look beneath at the real freedom or opportunities each student had to achieve what she valued'. Sen (Drèze & Sen, 2002) explains that:

> [t]his crucial role of social opportunities is to expand the realm of human agency and freedom, both as an end in itself and as a means of further expansion of freedom. The word 'social' in the expression 'social opportunity' […] is a useful reminder not to view individuals and their opportunities in isolated terms. The options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do (p. 6).

Social opportunities are created by the institutions in different social spheres – economic, political, cultural – and differ among countries. As stated above, Nussbaum emphasises that the fertility of functionings depends on the specificity of social context. That is why participation in adult NFE varies not only between individuals but also between countries

(e.g., Blossfeld et al., 2014). Authors (Austin, 2016; Bøhler et al., 2019), working in the framework of the capability approach, pay special attention to the crucial role of the state of economy in a given country for the development of people's capabilities. A recent study (Capriati, 2022) finds a strong mutually reinforcing relationship between human development, GDP and innovation. It argues that the capability approach and the human development theory:

> can provide the normative framework for the development of the social and institutional context in which innovation systems (ISs) develop and that ISs approach can offer a strategy for growth which is conductive to the expansion of capabilities (Capriati, 2022, p. 374).

The role of economic factors, such as GDP and level of innovation, for participation in lifelong learning has been demonstrated in several empirical studies. Groenez, Desmedt, and Nicaise (2007) suggest that economic growth will positively influence participation. Other authors (e.g., King & Sweetman, 2002) also reveal that during an economic recession there is a decreased participation in education due to individuals' reduced capacity to cover educational costs. However, some studies provide evidence that this relationship is counter-cyclical: when young people observe that there are fewer jobs available and the future seems uncertain, pursuing further education can be regarded as a good alternative to bad career prospects (e.g., Ayllón & Nollenberger, 2021).

A number of studies have also confirmed a positive relationship between innovation and lifelong learning participation (Boeren, 2016; Groenez et al., 2007). Keeping in mind the above theoretical considerations and empirical results, we can expect the following:

> *Hypothesis 2a:* There is an interaction effect between economic growth achieved in a given country and higher education on the likelihood of participating in adult NFE.

> *Hypothesis 2b:* There is an interaction effect between a given country's level of innovation and higher education on the likelihood of participating in adult NFE.

Data and methodology

Data

The empirical basis of the present article includes individual-level data from the most recent wave of the Adult Education Survey (AES) from 2016. The AES covers the resident population aged 25–64 years. The reference period for participation in education and training included the 12 months prior to the interview. We limited the analysis to 29 countries: 27 EU countries at the time of the survey[1] and two partner countries (Norway and Switzerland). Our analysis is also restricted to the group of young adults age 25-34, since, according to data from AES 2016 this is the age group characterised by higher involvement in NFE[2]. To obtain the same number of cases for each of the models, categories for missing values in any of the individual-level variables were omitted from the analysis using listwise deletion. It was important to do this in order to compare the coefficients, but also to compare the country-level variance, intraclass-correlation and log likelihood while entering new variables. Thus, the final analytical sample consisted of 33,304 individuals, was gender-balanced (49.55% women) and had a mean age of 29.67 (SD = 2.88). We used the weighted data (respweight) from the AES when presenting descriptive statistics and percentages and we used unweighted data for the multilevel regression analyses.

The data at the country level were extracted from the Eurostat website [Date: 07.01.2022; Code: tec00115] and the European Innovation Scoreboard 2017 report (European Union 2017, p. 90). These data were taken as of 2015.

Variables

In order to measure participation in adult NFE as a functioning, we followed the way Eurostat measures it in its official statistics. More specifically, we transformed the answers' codes (0-99) of the question: *In how many such nonformal learning activities have you participated during the last 12 months* into two categories: 0 for those who reported no activity and 1 for those who reported one or more activities. Such activities may refer to participation in courses, workshops, seminars, guided on-the-job training or private lessons with different motivation both job-related and personal development. This dummy variable was used as a *dependent variable* in the analysis. The question does not take into account the purpose of the activity – job-related or non-job related – and includes all activities with the intention of improving knowledge or skills in any area (including hobbies) either in leisure time or in working time.

The main independent variable included at the individual level was having a higher education degree (1 = yes). In order to test hypotheses 1a and 1b, we included interaction terms between having a higher education degree and the following variables: parents' education as an indicator of social background (1=low [including persons without a parent with higher education]) and net monthly household income quintile (ref. category fifth quintile [Q5], which represents the highest income group).

Two independent variables were included at the country level: the real gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate (as an indicator of economic growth) and the innovation index (as an indicator of level of innovation).

GDP is defined as the value of all goods and services produced less the value of any goods or services used in their creation (Eurostat, 2024). To measure the growth rate of GDP in terms of volumes, the GDP at current prices is valued in the prices of the previous year and the thus computed volume changes are imposed on the level of a reference year.

The innovation index is a composite measure that consists of 27 indicators from 10 innovation dimensions at the country level: a) human resources, b) attractive research systems, c) innovation-friendly environments, d) finance and support, e) firm investments, f) innovators, g) linkages, h) intellectual assets, i) employment impacts, and j) sales effects. It ranges from 0 to 1. (Full details on the index methodology are available from European Union, 2017, pp. 78-79).

Descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent and control variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of models' variables, weighted individual-level data (respweight)

Variables	Type	Mean	Standard deviation	Observations
Dependent				
Participation in nonformal education (NFE) (Ref. No)	Binary	0.481	0.500	33,304
Independent				
Having higher education (Ref. No)	Binary	0.387	0.487	33,304
Parents' education (Ref. High)	Binary	0.731	0.444	33,304
Net monthly household income quintile (Ref. Q5)	Binary	0.203	0.403	33,304
Q4	Binary	0.213	0.410	33,304
Q3	Binary	0.214	0.410	33,304
Q2	Binary	0.194	0.396	33,304
Q1	Binary	0.175	0.380	33,304
Control				
Gender (Ref. Male)	Binary	0.496	0.500	33,304
Current labour market status (Ref. Full-time employed)	Binary	0.620	0.486	33,304
Part-time employed	Binary	0.122	0.327	33,304
Unemployed	Binary	0.120	0.325	33,304
Inactive	Binary	0.139	0.346	33,304
Sought out information on learning possibilities (Ref. No)	Binary	0.316	0.465	33,304
Country-level				
Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate	Continuous	2.5	1.839	29
Innovation index	Continuous	0.458	0.162	29

Empirical analysis

To test our hypotheses, we employed a series of logit models with random effects. These models were considered appropriate because our dependent variable was binary and because the individuals (Level 1) in the AES were nested in countries (Level 2). Multilevel models are usually required in cases in which the intraclass correlation (ICC) is higher than 0.1 (Hox et al., 2010). Clustered data imply that the observations are dependent, but multilevel models account for a nested structure by including random intercepts at higher levels (Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2012). In contrast to fixed-effects models, we could include variables at Level 2 using random-effects models. Finally, multilevel models were chosen as appropriate because they allow for the estimation of cross-level interaction effects[3].

These models were estimated using the xtlogit command in Stata 16. Following Rabe-Hesketh and Skrondal (2012), we interpreted the results with the odds ratios conditionally on the random intercepts of the models.

Results

The extent to which young adults participate in NFE differs considerably across European countries. The baseline model for NFE (Model 0) resulted in an unconditional ICC of 0.128. which is in line with studies in the area of education, which often report an intraclass correlation of 0.1 (Hox, 2010). This shows that about 12.8% of the variation in the likelihood of participating in NFE is due to differences between the countries where young adults live and the structure of the data is clustered.

There is also great variation across countries with regard to the gap in participation rates between young people with and without higher education. It ranges from 7.75% in Hungary to 31.59% in Croatia. Regardless of this, in all European countries studied, young adults with higher education tend to participate more in NFE than their counterparts who have not attained a higher education degree (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participation rates in nonformal education by groups of young adults having higher education or not in 29 European countries, % (Source: AES 2016, weighted data [respweight])

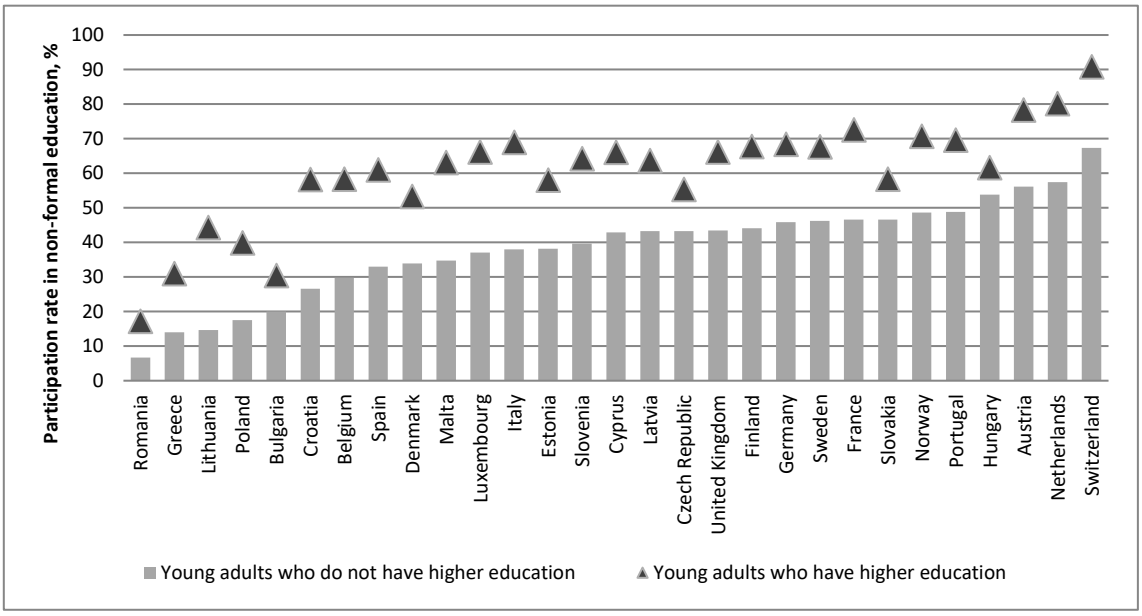

Table 2 displays the results of the logit models with random effects, analysing the likelihood of participation in NFE. To account for the soundness of significances in the models, in addition to interpreting the odds ratios with at least 5% significance, following Bernardi et al. (2017) instead of standard errors, we also present the confidence intervals of these estimates. Model 1, in which all individual-level characteristics have been added, shows that the odds of participating in NFE are 1.86 times greater for young adults who have a tertiary degree than for those who do not have such a degree, given the other covariates. Regarding the other independent variables at the individual level, low parental levels of education and monthly household income had a negative relationship with participation in NFE. These results clearly indicate that the lack of both economic and cultural resources constrains continuing education through nonformal activities.

Models 1a and 1b tested the extent to which the hypothesised association between higher education and the likelihood of participating in NFE was moderated by the educational level of the respondents' parents and their household income.

Table 2. Logit models with random effects showing associations between having higher education (HE) and participation in nonformal education (NFE), and cross-level interactions between having HE and selected country-level characteristics, Odds ratio

	Model 0	**Model 1**	**Model 1a**	**Model 1b**	**Model 2**	**Model 2a**	**Model 2b**
Having HE: Ref. No							
Yes		1.863**	1.649**	1.547**	1.863**	1.860**	1.850**
		(1.764,1.968)	(1.494,1.819)	(1.380,1.734)	(1.763,1.968)	(1.761,1.965)	(1.751,1.955)
Parents'education: Ref. High							
Low		0.749**	0.681**	0.746**	0.751**	0.750**	0.751**
		(0.706,0.795)	(0.624,0.743)	(0.704,0.792)	(0.708,0.797)	(0.707,0.796)	(0.708,0.797)
Net monthly household income quintile, Ref. Q5 (highest)							
Q4		0.889**	0.887**	0.800**	0.887**	0.887**	0.883**
		(0.823,0.961)	(0.821,0.959)	(0.714,0.896)	(0.821,0.959)	(0.821,0.959)	(0.817,0.954)
Q3		0.722**	0.722**	0.649**	0.721**	0.722**	0.718**
		(0.668,0.782)	(0.667,0.781)	(0.581,0.725)	(0.666,0.780)	(0.667,0.781)	(0.664,0.777)
Q2		0.643**	0.642**	0.561**	0.641**	0.641**	0.637**
		(0.591,0.699)	(0.591,0.699)	(0.501,0.629)	(0.589,0.697)	(0.589,0.697)	(0.586,0.693)
Q1 (lowest)		0.584**	0.584**	0.491**	0.582**	0.582**	0.579**
		(0.534,0.639)	(0.534,0.639)	(0.436,0.552)	(0.532,0.636)	(0.532,0.637)	(0.529,0.634)
Low parents' education X Having HE			1.187**				
			(1.059,1.331)				
Q4 X Having HE				1.185*			
				(1.016,1.382)			
Q3 X Having HE				1.186*			
				(1.016,1.385)			
Q2 X Having HE				1.294**			
				(1.097,1.525)			
Q1 X Having HE				1.480**			
				(1.246,1.759)			
GDP growth rate					1.010	0.879	
					(0.899,1.372)	(0.705,1.096)	
Innovation index					1.645**		1.486**
					(1.314,2.060)		(1.233,1.791)
Cross-level interactions							
GDP growth rate X Having HE						0.907**	
						(0.862,0.954)	
Innovation index X Having HE							1.092**
							(1.034,1.154)
Constant	0.885	1.036	1.123	1.159	0.981	1.036	0.995
	(0.686,1.141)	(0.805,1.332)	(0.868,1.452)	(0.896,1.499)	(0.806,1.195)	(0.813,1.321)	(0.816,1.214)
Country-level variance	0.483**	0.426**	0.425**	0.420**	0.237**	0.394**	0.244**
Intraclass correlation	0.128	0.115	0.114	0.113	0.067	0.107	0.069
Log likelihood	-21289	-19026	-19021	-19015	-19017	-19018	-19013
BIC	42599	38187	38189	38207	38191	38191	38182

Notes: Models 1-2b are controlled for gender, current labour market status and sought out information on learning possibilities. Confidence intervals in parentheses. N (individual level) = 33,304. N (country level) = 29. Significance: * $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.01$.

In line with *Hypothesis 1a*, the odds of participating in NFE among young adults whose parents have low educational levels are 18.7% higher in cases when they possess a higher education degree in comparison with their counterparts whose parents' education is also low but who do not have a degree. *Hypothesis 1b* is corroborated by lower household

income being statistically significantly associated with a relatively higher capability to participate in NFE among young adults with a higher education degree.

Models 2a–2b tested the cross-level interaction terms between having a higher education degree and some selected country-level characteristics. To facilitate their interpretation and to provide comparability of results, both continuous country-level variables were standardised and entered into our analysis, being mean-centred and having a standard deviation of one. This means that the interaction terms show the difference in the odds of NFE between young adults with or without higher education when the country-level variables were at their highest observed value compared to when they were at their lowest observed value. Although we did not find any association between the GDP growth rate of a given country and the likelihood of young adults participating in NFE (Model 2), we did find that the interaction term between higher education attainment and the GDP growth rate of a given country was statistically significant (Model 2a). In this case, it is negative. This supports *Hypothesis 2a*. Model 2 shows that there is a positive association between the innovation index of a given country and the likelihood of young adults participating in NFE. This association remains positive even when we add an interaction term between this index and having higher education (Model 2b). Therefore, *Hypothesis 2b* was also corroborated.

Discussion

The results obtained demonstrate that participation in adult NFE depends on individual-level factors, such as individuals' social backgrounds and – mainly – on having higher education. These results are in line with previous studies (Blossfeld et al., 2014; Boeren, 2016; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021; Desjardins, 2015; Lee & Desjardins, 2019). Inspired by ideas from the capability approach, the analyses in the present article go further and reveal some findings that enrich the research on participation in NFE and its association with higher education in different social contexts.

First, the article shows that the extent to which higher education provides fertile advantages regarding participation in adult NFE is bounded by individual characteristics. The findings that higher education provides more fertile advantages for young adults whose parents have lower education levels and who have low household incomes show that higher education broadens the capability for these young adults to participate in NFE. We interpreted these results as an indication of the empowerment role of higher education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021) and its capacity to mitigate inequalities in participation in NFE.

Second, our study provides evidence that the fertility of higher education with regard to participation in NFE is context-dependent and is immersed in different countries' environments. Thus, we found a counter-cyclical relationship between the likelihood of participation in NFE among holders of tertiary degrees and economic growth. More concretely, having a higher education degree confers fewer advantages regarding participation in NFE if young adults are living in countries with high economic growth. We suggest that this finding does not indicate that young adults with higher education face more constraints and increased educational costs. Rather, it shows that the improved economic situation in these countries (more jobs and credit opportunities) allows people with lower levels of formal education to invest in improving their education.

The result that a higher education degree can confer more advantages regarding participation in NFE if young adults are living in countries with high innovation levels than it does for people who do not live in such countries can be viewed as a sign that highly innovative societies need constant updating and skills improvement. It also

suggests that people with higher educational degrees are more likely to constantly update their skills, as has been shown in other studies (e.g., Blossfeld et al., 2014). Another possible interpretation is that higher education graduates in these societies value NFE for its own sake to a greater extent, but this needs to be checked in a separate study.

Third, there are at least two explanations in the literature for the finding that higher education is one of the most relevant variables when exploring participation in adult education (Groenez et al., 2007). First, on the supply side, it costs less to train people who have already acquired a high level of human capital through school. Second, on the demand side, each additional training course offers the learner a cumulative comparative advantage. The analysis in this article suggests that the strength of these explanations may vary in different social contexts – thus, the explanatory potential of the demand side could be greater in more innovative societies than in less innovative ones.

Fourth, our finding that having a higher education degree brings fertile advantages with regard to participation in NFE is not at odds with human capital theory and its statement that 'learning is a way to invest in human capital that is formally no different from education, on-the-job training, or other recognized investments' (Becker, 1993, p. 68). Our analysis, however, goes beyond this view and shows that the fertility of higher education regarding the capability to participate in NFE is not absolute, straightforward, or independent of individual characteristics and the wider social context.

Conclusions

The present article provides a comparative analysis at the individual and country levels of the fertile advantages of higher education regarding participation in NFE among young adults in Europe. It reveals the heuristic potential of the capability approach for studying adult education and NFE. The application of the capability approach, on the one hand, allows us to better conceptualise participation in NFE and grasp the interrelation between higher education and participation in NFE. On the other hand, it provides – to the best of our knowledge – the first attempt to use the concept of fertile capability or functioning as a framework for a quantitative empirical study and thus stimulate its further development.

The article contributes to the literature on higher and adult education by: 1) applying the capability approach in conceptualising participation in NFE as both a capability and functioning; 2) exploring how the concept of fertile functionings or advantages can enrich our understanding of the link between higher education and participation in adult NFE; 3) demonstrating that this link is bounded by some important individual characteristics and also differs among countries with different social environments; and 4) defending the need for an integrated approach to the analysis of participation in adult learning, incorporating the influence of factors at different levels.

The analysis presented in this article has two limitations. First, we used information about participation or not participation in NFE, which does not capture the quality of NFE activities and 'intensity' of participation (the amount of time spent in NFE activities). Second, we have limited our analysis mainly to the factors operating at the micro and macro levels. Thus, we have not investigated the role of the supply of NFE at the meso and macro levels because of the lack of appropriate empirical data. Extending the analysis by overcoming these limitations is a fruitful direction for future work.

The present article raises other important questions that deserve further research. At the theoretical level, there is a need to deepen our understanding of issues such as how the fertility of higher education depends on its inner characteristics (e.g., on its quality, specialty, content of programmes). It is also worth further investigating the mechanisms behind the obtained results and how they function in the current crisis-laden (such as

Covid-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine) socio-economic situation. Future research may also include studying the fertile functioning of higher education separately for different types of NFE (e.g. job-related and non-job-related) and other age groups and accounting for whether the involvement in NFE has been paid by the participants or by somebody else (employers, trade unions, government). A special attention deserves the attempt to link the advantages gained from having a higher education degree for participation in NFE with different types and functions of NFE. More concretely, for participation in which forms of NFE and with what purpose is the influence of higher education attainment more pronounced.

We studied participation in NFE as a functioning. It is worth attempting to measure the capability to participate in adult education and adult NFE. This will allow us to capture the different opportunities young adults have for adult education, or whether they have reason to value the type of education in which they participate.

Another possible direction for future research would be to explore other possible factors at the micro and macro levels that make the fertility of higher education context-dependent. For example, gender and employment status at the micro level, and a country's democratic or welfare regime, level of massification of higher education and a country's values (level of trust, individualism/collectivism) at the macro level. Such attempts to combine theoretical conceptualisation with empirically based analyses could serve as an incentive not only for a better understanding of both higher education and NFE, but also for formulating inclusive policies regarding these types of education that take into account the specificity of different social groups.

Our analyses and findings have clear policy implications. They demonstrate the need for the development of more sophisticated social policies regarding participation in adult learning which may be driven by different motives and may have different functions. It does not occur in a vacuum but depends on factors at different levels that refer to individuals' life paths and the social environments they live in. That is why, to be more effective, social policies in the sphere of adult learning should not be 'one size fits all' and formulated top-down. Rather, they should be based on a more differentiated approach that takes into account individuals' characteristics and the socio-economic context of a given country.

Notes

1 Ireland was excluded from the analyses because there are missing cases regarding net household income.

2 Participation rate in education and training by age, Eurostat, data code: TRNG_AES_101, last update: 09/06/2023. See also Boeren (2016).

3 The models' specifications with the corresponding equations are available at request.

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Discourses on quality in Swedish adult education

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Abstract

Swedish municipal adult education has many providers. The overall responsibility for this service still lies with the municipalities, entailing the enactment of national policy with respect to providers. This study puts focus on the discursive enactment of policy concerning quality in adult education. Five discourses on quality are identified through interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students, namely that quality is about formal demands and processes, that it is a matter of student focus, that it is about teachers' competence and working conditions, that it is about teaching, and that quality depends on the student group. School leaders focus on formal and organisational aspects of quality, while teachers and students focus on actual processes in the classroom, connecting to their own work and lives. Compared to national policy, the local discourses are limited mainly to studying, teaching, organisation, and short-term outcomes, while long-term aims in national policy are less prominent.

Keywords: municipal adult education, policy enactment, quality, Sweden

Introduction

Adult learning and the provision of high-quality adult education, contributing to economic, social, and personal development, is promoted in European education policy (Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2015; cf. Milana & Mikulec, 2023). In Sweden, municipal adult education (MAE) is an extensive activity, with more students than for all upper secondary schools combined. In recent decades, MAE has undergone an extensive process of marketisation, and today a large part of adult education is run by private education providers who are publicly procured. The development is an example of the 'Nordic path' towards privatisation and marketisation of education, with neoliberal reforms of the welfare systems, identified by Verger et al.

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(2017). This Nordic path is similar to the state structural reforms guided by neoliberal ideas that have taken place in the UK. A different path to privatisation is, e.g., the historical private-public partnerships with influence from religious and other ideological interests, and a high level of privatisation of education, in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain (Verger et al., 2017). Regardless of such developments, 'quality' is still a central concern in adult education (e.g., Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Egetenmeyer & Käpplinger, 2011; Mark, 2004; Možina, 2014; Mufic, 2022b). This article provides examples of how quality is discussed and enacted in Swedish MAE. Here, the municipality might run adult education by itself or hire private providers, but it is still the municipality's responsibility to ensure that the education provided follows national guidelines (Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Holmqvist et al., 2021). The municipality's responsibility covers both cost and quality, with quality being scrutinised by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. The number of external providers means that quality control is very important for municipalities to ensure that providers maintain sufficient quality. In some municipalities, the large number of providers also creates competition between schools, in which case it is important for schools to be able to demonstrate high quality to attract students to their programmes. However, a key question when talking about quality is what the concept refers to.

Quality in adult education can mean many things, in connection to economic, social, and individual ends (Boshier, 2006). Boshier discusses how policy often puts focus on standards and outcomes rather than on the quality of the process of education, where the perspectives of students and teachers are particularly important to understand the meaning of quality. Mufic and Fejes (2022) conducted a policy analysis of what is included in the concept of quality in MAE. They show how flexibility and individualisation emerge as two important factors in measuring and reporting quality. These factors are also seen as the solution to many quality problems. However, it is unclear what is included in the factors of flexibility and individualisation, how these factors are interpreted and enacted by different actors, and what else is included in the concept of quality in MAE.

The focus of this study is on quality in MAE, but not quality as defined by national policy and the Schools Inspectorate. Instead, this study focuses on the discourses of quality expressed by actors in the practice of adult education – school leaders, teachers, and students (cf. Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Mark, 2004). Previous research by e.g. Bjursell et al. (2015) and Bjursell (2016) shows that the marketisation of adult education means that school leaders often spend a lot of time on various quality control systems that are introduced as control mechanisms to measure the quality of different providers. Andersson and Muhrman (2022a) have conducted a survey of all municipalities in Sweden who run MAE, showing that these control systems often focus on quantitative factors such as throughput and grades. Less attention is paid to qualitative quality factors, which require visits to providers when fulfilment is assessed.

The aim of this article is to analyse what discourses on quality in adult education are expressed by school leaders, teachers, and students, and how these discourses can be understood as discursive enactments of the national policy discourses on quality in MAE. The findings will conclude in a discussion concerning the differences in interpretation and translation of adult education policy by these actors in MAE, and what this could mean for quality and quality management in the enactment of adult education.

MAE in Sweden

Swedish MAE is an extensive educational operation with 372,000 students in 2022, or 7 percent of Sweden's population aged 20-64 (Swedish National Agency of Education

[SNAE], 2023). At MAE one can study courses in theoretical subjects, corresponding to courses in compulsory and upper secondary school, vocational courses corresponding to upper secondary school, and courses in Swedish for immigrants (SFI). Teaching is organised in the form of separate courses, typically equivalent to five weeks' full-time studies. Vocational courses are however possible to combine in cohesive training programmes ('course packages') for a defined vocation. Adults are eligible to participate in MAE from the year they turn 20, if they are judged to meet the conditions necessary to pass the course. The municipality must give all applicants the opportunity to study courses at the basic level (corresponding to compulsory school) and courses at the upper secondary level that give access to university studies, but there is no requirement to admit everyone who applies for other general or vocational courses. If there are more applicants than places for the latter courses, those who are considered to have the greatest need for the training will be given priority (SFS 2011:1108). There is no cost to study at MAE and students can apply for public student assistance for their livelihood during their studies.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been an intensive market exposure of MAE, which means that many external, private actors, mainly for-profit providers, have established themselves in this education market. The municipalities can choose how they want to organise adult education, but most municipalities procure external providers to some extent, with the argument that this is necessary to achieve the requirements for a wide range of courses and flexibility (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a; Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Muhrman & Andersson, 2022). In 2022, 51 percent of MAE was organised by publicly funded, independent institutions, mainly owned by private companies (SNAE, 2023). It should be noted that this procurement does not necessarily mean a 'quasi-marketisation' in the way that characterises the development with voucher systems in the UK and for independent schools in Swedish compulsory and upper-secondary school (cf. Lewis, 2017). I.e., in MAE, the municipality procure the provision, and this might result in only one provider of a certain course and if so no choice or 'customer role' for the adult student, but there are also municipalities that have more providers and options to choose between (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a). And, regardless of provider, the municipality is always responsible for the quality and accessibility of adult education for its denizens.

Policy enactment in Swedish MAE

This article is part of a larger study where we investigate the organisation of adult education in marketised MAE with a focus on the enactment of national policy. Here, we have particularly chosen to focus on how different actors (school leaders, teachers, students) describe quality in relation to adult education by answering the question of what they think characterises 'good' adult education.

Ball et al. (2012) and Braun et al. (2010) describe how almost all policies contain a measure of freedom that gives smaller or larger room for interpretation. Policy enactment is about how policy is interpreted and reinterpreted by different actors within an institution and within the degrees of freedom that exist. Within the school, there are many actors at different levels who interpret and translate policy relating to the school's activities, ranging from politicians to principals, school leaders and teachers. The interpretation of policy is also affected by societal influences, as well as local historical traditions that may be embedded in institutions. According to Ball et al. (2012), one consequence of this is that policy can be given completely different interpretations in different institutions and contexts, and that the relationships that exist with society as well as the local culture can both hinder and enable actions taken to interpret policy. Sometimes policies can be both contradictory and unclear, with a large scope for

interpretation, which means that interpreting policies in the local context risks being messy and incomplete. Policy enactment includes three interweaved aspects – a material, an interpretive, and a discursive aspect (Ball et al., 2012). In this study, focus is placed on how policy is interpreted and expressed in certain discourses on quality, while material aspects could be present as examples given by different actors.

Furthermore, Ball et al. (2012) have ascertained that there are certain policy discourses that express what, for example, 'good' teaching is, as well as discourses that define schooling. Two central policy discourses that have been identified in Swedish adult education are individualisation and flexibility – however, the master discourses that define Swedish adult education concern employability, skills supply, integration, and perhaps most of all marketisation (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a, 2022b; Muhrman & Andersson, 2022). In this article, however, policy enactment is examined with a focus on descriptions that can be related to quality in marketised adult education. To conduct this analysis, we need to review how quality is visible in the policy for Swedish MAE.

Quality in adult education policy

The overarching policies that regulate Swedish MAE are the Education Act (SFS 2010:800), the Adult Education Regulation (SFS 2011:1108), the curriculum for adult education (SNAE, 2017) and syllabi for different courses (SNAE, 2022) (the latter are equivalent to those in compulsory and upper secondary school). In the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, ch. 4, § 2-8), it is stipulated that the principals in adult education must conduct quality management by systematically and continuously following up, analysing, and developing education in relation to the national goals. It is important to note that it is always the municipality that has the overall responsibility for quality control and quality management, even if external providers are engaged to conduct education. The overall aims of MAE are formulated in the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, ch. 20, § 2) and stipulate that:

- adults must be supported and stimulated in their learning,
- adults must be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills to strengthen their position in working and social life and to promote their personal development,
- adult education must provide a good basis for the students' further education, and
- it must form a basis for the national and regional competence supply for working life.

The Education Act (SFS 2010:800, ch. 20, § 2) also stipulates that 'the starting point for the education of an individual student must be the student's needs and life conditions'. Further, the Adult Education Regulation (SFS 2011:1108) and the national curriculum (SNAE, 2017) state that education should run continuously, throughout the year, that the supply of courses should be flexible in terms of study pace and distance course options, and that there should be continuous admission.

In the curriculum, as in the Education Act, overall goals for adult education are described, but also more detailed goals for three different areas: 'Knowledge', 'Education choices – work and social life', and 'Assessment and grades'. Even in the curriculum, the importance of individualisation is highlighted with reference to the fact that the target group is heterogeneous, with individuals who live under very different conditions and different goals with their education. According to the curriculum, adult education must also be flexible with different working methods, course length, and content, so that it can

be adapted to the needs of the individual. It must also be possible to combine studies with work.

Quality as a concept is only mentioned in the curriculum in relation to the fact that cooperation with other educational institutions such as folk high schools, schools for higher vocational education and universities, as well as cooperation with labour market partners and society, is necessary for quality in education. It is also mentioned that the students must have access to and the conditions to use teaching materials with good quality.

It is stipulated in the curriculum that both the teachers and the school leaders for MAE have a professional responsibility to qualitatively develop educational activities and that this requires constant follow-up, evaluation of the activities, and testing of new methods. However, the principal has the overall responsibility for the pedagogical work, and the responsibility for conducting development and follow-up in relation to the national goals set out in the curriculum and the Education Act (SFS 2010:800). Bjursell et al. (2015) point out that Swedish adult education has long-standing traditions – despite this fact, adult education is constantly changing to adapt to societal needs. There are national guidelines that the municipalities must adhere to – one such guideline is that quality management must be carried out, but there is also room for interpretation in the policy which means that there are different targets that can be emphasised by different municipalities, as well as similar divergence between the municipal and the national level.

The responsibility for assessing the quality of MAE lies, as mentioned previously, with the Swedish Schools Inspectorate. But since quality is largely left undefined in the national policy, Mufic (2022a) shows that the inspectorate is forced to enact policy through their own interpretations, and through creating their own guidelines for what quality is within MAE. Even though the importance of high quality in education is often mentioned, Mufic and Fejes (2022) show that there is often no clear definition of what quality means, and that it is common for policy documents to rather focus on describing what is missing or what is not quality. Mufic's (2022a) study also shows that the Schools Inspectorate's interpretation of quality becomes very determinative for school operations, and that there is uncertainty in how to work and deal with other definitions of quality than those available in the Inspectorate's quality reports. Andersson and Muhrman (2022a) show that quality is often measured via statistics which, for example, relate to throughput or student achievement of goals. But Mufic (2022b, 2023) argues that quality in MAE is more than what can be captured in numbers – it is also about what students and school staff involved in the education system describe as quality, which is in the focus of this article.

Previous research

In this article, we are studying what characterises high-quality or 'good' adult education. The focus is put on the interpretation of what quality is and the enactment of these interpretations in local quality discourses. An important part of this process concerns what teachers and students see as quality in teaching adults. There are some studies dealing with various aspects of teaching adults (e.g., Choy & Wärvik, 2018). However, there are not as many studies on the organisation of adult education on an overall level, or studies of how adult education policy is enacted in local practices.

As was described above, present-day Swedish adult education is strongly characterised by marketisation, with procurement and external private providers. It can be seen in previous research that marketisation is not a new phenomenon (Hake, 2016). Other studies show that the marketisation of education is also a global phenomenon. For

example, Mikulec and Krašovec (2016) show how marketisation in Slovenian adult education policy is related to policy on a European level. There are some studies focusing on the marketisation of Swedish MAE in general (e.g., Bjursell, 2016; Bjursell et al., 2015; Fejes & Holmqvist, 2019; Fejes et al., 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2021), but only a few studies concern policy analysis in relation to marketisation (Fejes & Olesen, 2016). Nor are there many studies of quality in adult education. In an earlier part of the current research project (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a), we provided an overview of how municipalities in Sweden combine internal and external MAE providers. The results showed that marketised Swedish adult education is complex, with diverse procurement and many short-term contracts, which leads to difficulties in controlling quality of courses outsourced to many providers as well as working with long-term quality development. The study also showed the importance of quality control systems when hiring external providers, and that those systems are often extremely resource-intensive in administrative terms (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022a).

Fejes and Holmqvist (2019) point out that quality assurance systems have become important because of the marketisation of adult education with procurement by external providers. Their results also reveal that policy enactment at the local, municipal level strongly influences the outcomes of controls on MAE. In turn, Bjursell (2016) and Rönnberg (2012) describe a tension between desirable levels of market freedom and its consequence regarding the need for administrative control and quality assurance that is often seen in marketised education systems. Bjursell et al. (2015) and Bjursell (2016) studied quality in MAE from the perspective of school leaders, and Bjursell (2016) identified different metaphors in school leaders' discourses regarding adult education, with the most common understandings identifying education as learning, as a market, and as administration.

Egetenmeyer and Käpplinger (2011) argue that it is important to understand that what is considered high quality education can be seen differently depending on what interests the involved actors have in relation to education – a politician probably raises different criteria for what constitutes 'good' education than what a school principal or a municipal denizen does. According to Egetenmeyer and Käpplinger, different interests in education and different interpretations of quality can lead to tensions and contradictions. This relative character of quality, with definitions made based on different interests and values, is also pointed out by Možina (2014). There are some studies where different perspectives on quality in adult education are identified. For example, Mark (2004) shows how quality can be viewed in many ways, and he promotes a stakeholder perspective on quality in adult education to capture different perspectives. Mark describes how managers often were concerned with financial issues, teachers with their own teaching practices, and students with the relationships to their teachers. Boshier (2006) studied the perspectives of students and teachers. He shows how both these categories emphasise the central role of the teacher. I.e., for both, the teacher is more important even if they also see the role of the students for quality in education. In addition to this, teachers see the professional and administrative support and the physical environment of the school as particularly important, while the social context is more important for the students. Armstrong (2007) concludes that the interpersonal skills of teachers and their encounters with the students are particularly important for students' experience of quality. Managers agree with this, but they do not show the same detailed understanding of the interpersonal relationships, which emphasises the importance of including the student voice in quality discussions.

When Swedish MAE is outsourced to external providers, quality criteria are stipulated in the agreements that must be followed by the providers. Mufic (2022a),

however, shows that there can be problems when quality criteria are moved 'from one context to another context', and when a standard is set with respect to various quality indicators that must be achieved, without these being anchored among market actors. According to Mufic, teachers can begin to question and actively oppose rules that are set if they believe that these are not favourable to students. It is then relevant to question whose quality it is that is actually stipulated.

According to Fejes et al. (2016), one of the aims of introducing the market system in adult education was that competition between many providers would presumably lead to the introduction of new pedagogical approaches and the attainment of higher quality. However, instead of following the quality systems and guidelines that were introduced, the teachers resisted by ignoring or reshaping the system in a way that they claimed to guarantee quality for the students. Mufic and Fejes (2022) also describe that quality in market-oriented adult education often focuses on things that are easy to measure, such as throughput or goal achievement, and that this can lead to self-fulfilling pursuit of fulfilling the criteria rather than a focus on developing pedagogical work. In policies for adult education, individualisation and flexibility are strongly emphasised and are something that, among other things, is measured by the Schools Inspectorate (Mufic, 2022a). Henning Loeb and Lumsden Wass (2014) claim that the focus on measuring these factors in quality evaluations, however, can give almost the opposite effect, since focus on individualisation and flexibility can entail conditional and instrumental measurement that does not consider the individual students' life circumstances and thus becomes difficult to use for quality-improving purposes.

It seems to be important that quality management really takes into account individual life conditions. Masdonati et al. (2017) show in their study that those who participate in adult education are heterogeneous concerning life paths and experiences, which makes it important to adapt teaching to the individual.

In summary, previous research shows that the concept of quality is not clearly defined in relation to adult education, but that, despite this, there are extensive quality evaluations in the market-exposed Swedish system with procurement and many external providers. It is also evident that high quality can be seen to have different meanings depending on who in the adult education system one asks. However, there is little research on what quality can be considered to be in relation to the policy pertaining to the market-exposed adult education system. Therefore, our study can contribute new knowledge.

Method

This article is part of a larger study of policy enactment in Swedish MAE. Here, the focus is put on policy enactment of quality in MAE by analysing school leaders', teachers', and students' descriptions of what they consider to be high quality in adult education or, in simpler terms, 'good' adult education.

This analysis is based on interviews with 17 school leaders, 40 teachers, and 41 students from six municipalities. Most school leaders and teachers have been interviewed individually, while most student interviews have taken place in groups, but all three categories include both individual interviews and group interviews, depending on what has suited the interviewees best. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some interviews have also taken place digitally, while most interviews that took place before and after the pandemic were done physically.

The interviews were based on three different interview guides, adapted to each category (school leaders, teachers, and students). The questions referred to many different aspects of MAE, some of which have been about quality management. One question pertained

specifically to what the interviewees considered 'good' or high-quality adult education. It is mainly the responses to this question that form the basis of the analysis in this article, but also responses to other questions touching on aspects of 'good' adult education have been included.

All interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Braun and Clarke's (2006) model for thematic analysis includes six steps that involve finding initial codes in the data that can be categorised and combined into themes that capture phenomena in relation to the study's purpose and questions. The interviews were analysed together to find both common themes and themes that differ between the categories. The answers may differ to some extent between the participants within a group (school leaders, teachers, students), but the focus here was not on intra-group analysis, but on finding common themes within each group in order to make a comparison between the groups. Quotations from the interviews are used in the results to illustrate examples from the themes we found in the analysis. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, and the quotations have been translated into English.

We have handled all data confidentially and have been careful to ensure that it is not possible to trace the quotations or empirical descriptions in the article to individual persons or municipalities. To ensure this, all information in the quotations that can be traced to individual municipalities or individual persons has been removed.

Findings

In the analysis of the interviews, we have identified five different discourses that express ideas of what quality in adult education is about, and that could be understood as local interpretations and translations of the national policy discourses.

Discourses on quality expressed in adult education

Quality…

- … is about formal demands and processes
- … is a matter of student focus
- … is about teachers' competence and working conditions
- … is about teaching
- … depends on the student group

The ideas of quality that are expressed by school leaders, teachers, and students are similar but also somewhat different. Firstly, the foci of the different discourses are presented, and secondly, the similarities and differences between the three groups of interviewees are presented and discussed.

Quality is about formal demands and processes

The first discourse puts focus on formal demands and processes concerning quality. These aspects of quality relate both to national and local policies and regulations. There are demands concerning certain ideals and outcomes to strive for, as well as processes of quality management that are identified as important to establish in the local organisation of services. There are also local demands, e.g., concerning the providers' or municipality's economic situations, that stem from conditions of procurement and contracting of external providers that are translated into this discourse.

The ideals and outcomes to strive for are often expressed in terms of grading and throughput of students. Grading is seen in statistics on throughput and outcomes, but it is often put forward that the grading process should also be characterised by valid, reliable, and legally secure assessments. Here, the school leaders have more focus on throughput, but are also expressing the importance of legally secure assessments. Teachers and students are more focussed on the goal that grades should be valid and reliable and really reflect the students' knowledge, and routines to prevent cheating are also described as a sign of quality.

> After all, we are a politically controlled organisation. The politicians want SFI to go faster and have better throughput. [...] But then it is more connected to the big mission. It's not kind of linked to the quality of teaching in that way, I would say. Rather, it's more structural, more organisational. Then they can step in and say: 'Hey, now you have to man up here and deliver.' (School leader)

> Then I think a good quality thing is that all schools should be forced to have written tests for each course, instead of other solutions, […] because it shouldn't be so that students can slip through the education without learning anything. (Teacher)

> And that they have some kind of control that we get everything we need so that there is no one who kind of sits and writes straight out of a book. (Student)

Another formal demand that is central in this discourse is flexibility. Study opportunities are required to be flexible, to meet students' needs, and this is related to how MAE is organised and the conditions for contracting different providers.

> […] these education providers, they are actually quite superb at being flexible […] the number of students goes up and down, and still be able to conduct a good teaching with very few students. [...] So they are very good at it, that just the flexibility for the individual. (School leader)

However, such a flexible organisation with multiple providers could also mean quality problems for the validity of assessments:

> But the problem is now that we are 15 different providers. [...] We can try here, but we have no idea what our competitors... what requirements they set or do not set in order to set passing grades or high grades for their students. Because we have no insight into it. And that's a big shortcoming! (Teacher)

The formal processes concern the organised quality management, which also involves students via e.g. student surveys. This should be performed according to certain routines and be documented to fulfil the quality requirements.

> Yes, we have an annual cycle. It's quality-wise. We work from an annual cycle so that we know when to follow up. [...] Quality reports. [...] It's an annual cycle we also follow when it comes to quality. [...] Think we work with quality all day. […] Complaint handling, case management. (School leader)

These examples indicate how the quality management could become primarily connected to material 'tools' and local formal demands. However, there are also expressions of quality where the formal demands are referred to in terms of the national policy expressed in syllabi and curriculum:

> I think it is very important to safeguard the quality of adult education in the way that you really have syllabi and curriculum in mind all the time, because I personally feel that adult

> education has become very much like a market issue, what is the customer looking for? (Teacher)

Students' progress should be monitored on a regular basis according to the individual study plan of each student. How follow-up work is done, concerning both students' progress and teachers' work, is described as crucial for quality by school leaders:

> Thus, a success factor for education is of course follow-up, to constantly follow up, that... that the teacher follows up with his student: 'How's it going? Where are you going? How does it work in relation to that?', so, formatively watch, all the while following the student. That the school leader follows the teacher and sees: 'Are we on the same track in... in as well... on this unit?', and so on. The follow-up is really important in throughout the organisation. And if the student gets follow-up, then they will not drop out to the same extent. It will get better quality. (School leader)

On a more general level, there are also ISO certificates that education providers can use to ensure the quality of their organisation. However, this does not seem to be widespread and is only 'vaguely' mentioned by one of the school leaders interviewed.

> Firstly, we are ISO qualified, what is it called ISO, what is it called, ISO qualified, is that it? ... Certified, so yes, there was the word, I lost it. Aa. And it's also a stamp of quality because then we are continuously inspected all the time in all systems and so on. (School leader)

Quality is a matter of student focus

The second discourse puts focus on the students, from an organisational perspective. Central ideas here concern how adult education is organised based on students' needs, life conditions, and life situations, but also the learning outcomes and the output for students.

> Firstly, it must be easily accessible, that is, easy to apply. You must have flexibility and that's where distance learning comes in as well, that you should be able to adapt your lesson times, I think is important for an adult. [...] I usually say that I get the students' time here, so then I have to deliver something too so that they do not go here in vain. (Teacher)

The students are in focus through individualisation enacted on an organisational level, with a broad supply of courses that are flexible and broadly available, adapted to students' needs. The actual outcomes of studying, in terms of grades and outputs such as admission to university or employment, are also encompassed in this discourse. Fair treatment and assessment are other central aspects of the student focus. It should be noted that here the flexibility and fair assessment are not primarily formal matters, as in the previous discourse, but something that concerns the opportunities and treatment of individual students.

> So I think quality should be to be fair to all students whether they go to that teacher or the other. That they receive the same amount of help, that is, assessment or the assignments should be based on the course syllabi. That you do not choose, it must be something that is 'a school for everyone'. Everyone, regardless of which adult education provider you go to, you should have the same conditions. (Teacher)

A factor that is also visible in this discourse is resources – sufficient resources must be available for these aspects of quality to be realised. The following quotations from a

school leader and a student illustrate central aspects of the student focus, individual adaptations and support that in turn will require resources to be implemented.

> […] you have to have that student mindset as well, based on the individual as well and what is good for the individual. That with extra adaptations and things, that are a really important part of adult education because a lot of people who come here, yes there is a huge breadth of our students, they have a foreign background, maybe weak in language or they have gone to Swedish school but have failed all the time when, huh, maybe have some diagnosis, dyslexia or something else then. (School leader)

> […] there must be counselling and such [support] available and support because I think that many of those who have ended up at MAE are, like, those who have had problems with school before, so then there must be available support so that they do not have the same problems again. (Student)

Quality is about teachers' competence and working conditions

In the third discourse, the teachers are in focus. Here, quality is firstly about teachers' formal and actual competence, both for teaching and in the teaching subjects. Secondly, quality is about the conditions under which teachers can utilise, maintain, and develop their competence. This includes working conditions with a reasonable workload, and conditions for continuing professional development, collegial exchange and cooperation, etc.

> But I think what we have here is that we have licensed teachers basically only. We have no unauthorised substitutes, but all are experienced teachers and we have more training than is really required! For example, Kim who has a doctorate, we have many senior lecturers and we have many teachers with PhDs. […] that does not have to say anything about teaching in and of itself. But I think we have teachers who have a foundation in their knowledge plus we have long experience. I believe that we have a humble attitude to what we do and that we are sensitive to the students we have. I think that's what you hear when we talk to the students, they feel that here at our school there are such good teachers – they often say that, and I think that is the good quality of our adult education. (Teacher)

> To conduct good teaching, you should also need to have, but trained teachers, but also trained teachers are not enough. […] So that there must also be a good team behind as support. (Teacher)

There are some differences in how this discourse is expressed by the different groups. The school leaders primarily emphasise formal competence, e.g. as it is 'materialised' in the form of a teaching certificate. They also highlight the provision of competence training as a quality assurance measure.

> Then we have competence programmes for the staff. We have [NN], which sells company training programmes, and all teachers or all staff can take as many as they want and sign up for them. It is quality assurance. (School leader)

The focus of the teachers is rather put on how quality is attained through deep knowledge and a teacher collective where knowledge is shared. For students, teaching competence is central to quality, and that they meet teachers who are knowledgeable, communicative, and see them as individuals:

> But you feel very vulnerable and therefore I think it is important that you as a teacher are very pedagogical and accommodating with the person who comes in. (Student)

> I think mostly pedagogical teacher. The teacher must understand what we need and our pace, not just keep going. [...] That is, that they are engaged but also that yes, they can answer questions during the lesson and such. (Student)

Quality is about teaching

The fourth discourse also concerns the teachers, but with a focus on their teaching. Thus, quality in this discourse is about how teaching is planned and realised. There are different aspects that are identified as central to quality in this discourse. One aspect which is touched upon is that enough time for teaching is required to be able to cover the course contents in a reasonable way. Further, interaction with students is viewed as important for quality, preferably in physical meetings in small groups rather than online.

> I think it is fine as it is now, as well, that there are not so many people. The teacher has time for each student. I think it would be good if this was the case in all schools. (Student)

> I think that adult education on site [...], beats distance learning every day of the week. [...] You have a context, you have a class, a classroom, and you can ask your teacher a lot more things. You get much more inspired, I think, when you sit together with a few others and study. (Teacher)

The interviewees often express the belief that there should be many work tasks to practice, and that feedback should be prompt and distinct. Teaching should be inclusive, insofar as all students are seen clearly by teachers, and there should be thoroughgoing individualisation that really starts from the level of the students.

> One aspect that [...] is absolutely central, it is [...] how you treat the students. How do you look at them in relation to what you are doing and things like that. That we are actually here for them [...] first of all, get to the right level, that is the first thing. [...] Then they feel that they can and that they will succeed. (Teacher)

Finally, the teaching methods should be in alignment with the contents of the course, e.g., including laboratory work in science and examples from society in social sciences. This can be a problem in distance learning.

> Then there are the challenges of distance learning. And it's exactly these practical elements, laboratory sessions. That you ensure that you maintain the quality that should actually exist around those elements. That's super important. (School leader)

These different aspects are also more or less part of how the different actors express what quality is about. The school leaders highlight formal aspects such as alignment with relevant teaching methods, which could be enacted e.g. through school-based rather than distance teaching. Teachers talk about interaction with students, time, individualisation, connections to society, and the actual planning and contents of teaching. The focus of the students is to be seen by teachers, to receive plenty of feedback on tasks, and to get opportunities to apply knowledge in practice rather than only having it mediated by teachers.

> I think teachers would plan some practical projects […] Making a presentation mostly about this practical. [...] I think it will be more efficient and better. [...] Because when you learn, you have to test and talk. Otherwise, you'll forget about it. (Student)

Quality depends on the student group

In the fifth local discourse identified here, the focus is on the interaction between students. Thus, quality depends on the exchange between them. This exchange could improve the quality of education, but it could also be a factor that reduces quality when interaction does not work as expected. This discourse is mainly expressed by students, but also teachers talk about the value of student interaction for quality.

Cooperation between students improves quality when they can help and learn from each other.

> And with group discussions it's pretty good. Some can speak good Swedish, some cannot. But we understand what they are talking about, and we can help and then we can move forward together. (Student)

However, interaction is also described as a potential disturbance that has a negative influence on quality. Students have experienced such disturbing interactions, which they describe in terms of lack of mutual respect and also as a consequence of different cultures among the students.

> Because when we are in classrooms and are mixed from different countries, there is a bit of a culture clash because the one from one country can disturb others... Some groups and people speak too much in the classroom and then it becomes other languages while we try to read and write in Swedish. I find that very disturbing, it should be improved. (Student)

Comparison of discourses expressed by school leaders, teachers, and students

These five discourses are identified in the groups of interviewees as wholes – school leaders, teachers, and students. Looking closer at these three different groups, we can identify somewhat different foci in what the groups express, depending on their different positions in adult education.

School leaders

The focus of the school leaders is closely connected to the formal responsibilities that they and their organisations have in providing adult education. Firstly, there are formal demands and processes that school leaders are expected to follow, concerning quality management and output, which is reflected in their ways of describing quality. The demands on output, students passing their courses, are central for the school leaders, but they also describe valid and legally secure assessments as important for quality, not the least when it comes to routines to prevent cheating.

The connection between quality and teacher competence is mainly referred to in terms of the importance of formal competence and teaching certificates. However, school leaders also highlight the role of competence development and collegial learning, which are other parts of their responsibility. Furthermore, concerning teaching, the main focus of school leaders regarding quality pertains to whether formal demands of the curriculum and regarding different subjects are fulfilled, for example concerning laboratory work in science. They tend to identify some quality problems in distance teaching and point out that certain elements of the courses might require school-based teaching, which could be a reason for providing some courses internally instead of contracting external providers of distance courses.

Teachers

The teachers express a quality focus that is closer to their teaching. The formal aspects of their quality ideas put focus on the learning outcomes of the students, and also pertain to whether assessments are valid and reliable. Actual teaching competence is more important for them than formal competence, including deep subject knowledge, but also the shared knowledge of the teacher collective. Particularly, the teachers express the importance of a student focus and of quality in teaching. Good teaching requires good working conditions for the teachers, which gives time for interaction with the students, individualisation, as well as connections to society.

Students

The discourses of quality expressed by the students connect to their life situations and highlight the value of flexibility and freedom of choice. Actual teaching competence is also important, as they want to meet a teacher who is knowledgeable, communicative, and sees them. The relationship to the teacher is important for good teaching, which is signified by e.g. interaction and support, variation in methods, many work tasks and extensive feedback. Finally, the interaction and exchange in the student group, cooperating and helping each other, is a quality factor that particularly the students mention as important.

Concluding discussion

As we described initially, the Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) stipulates that MAE should put focus both on students' learning and on its outcomes in terms of knowledge, personal development, a strengthened position in social and working life, a basis for further education, and skills supply in the labour market. The national policy also has an emphasis on flexibility and individualisation to meet the needs of adult students, and the municipalities are responsible for quality in MAE. However, besides these general statements, the policy is rather unclear in what defines quality in adult education more exactly, which leaves a certain degree of freedom to the municipality, and to the Schools Inspectorate and its national quality assurance (Mufic, 2022a).

Policy vs. local ideas of quality

From the five discourses of quality and how these are expressed by the different categories of interviewees, we can see how national policy is interpreted, translated, and enacted in various ways (cf. Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Egetenmeyer & Käpplinger, 2011; Mark, 2004). The school leaders, on the one hand, focus particularly on the formal and organisational aspects of quality (cf. Bjursell et al., 2015). As representatives of the municipality and its providers, they are expected to fulfil the formal requirements and expectations, which is reflected in the ways they describe quality (cf. Mark, 2004). However, as Mufic and Fejes (2022) point out, such requirements could induce a focus on what is easy to measure rather than on more essential aspects of pedagogical development – what Boshier (2006) describes as a focus on standards and outcomes rather than on processes.

Teachers and students, on the other hand, have focus on the actual processes in the classroom, and on the connection of educational quality to their own work and lives. In their ways of expressing the quality discourses, the teachers criticise the formal, organisational ways of translating policy into practices such as continuous admittance,

flexibility with distance and short courses, and marketisation with a multitude of providers. These enactments could be seen as signs of quality according to policy, but according to what the teachers express, the influence of emphasising such performance inputs on the actual quality of teaching and students' learning is negative. Similar to what Fejes et al. (2016) and Mufic (2023) describe, the teachers rather promote quality connected to what is favourable to students. The students, however, are more positive towards flexibility in MAE. For them, flexibility means more options to combine studies with work and private life, which is a relevant aspect of quality for them. Still, the teachers and their teaching are central for quality education, according to themselves as well as the students (cf. Armstrong, 2007; Boshier, 2006; Mark, 2004). As noted above, the student group also is a factor that particularly the students themselves describe as important for quality in adult education. Such individual conditions are also important to consider in adult education with its heterogeneous student group (cf. Boshier, 2006; Masdonati et al., 2017).

What is notable in the findings from the interviews is that the expected long-term outcomes of adult education emphasised in policy are less prominent in the discourses on quality that were identified in the analysis. This concerns long-term outcomes such as further education opportunities, skills supply, and not the least inclusion in terms of students' subsequent position in social and working life. The focus is rather on the conditions for studying and teaching. This includes for example the way adult education is organised, how students are treated – especially the personal support they receive from teachers, and the short-term outcomes of knowledge and grades.

Policy enactment in local adult education practices

This study puts focus on the – sometimes messy and incomplete – translations of national policy into local discourses with a focus on how ideas on quality are expressed. What could such discursive enactments mean for local adult education practices? Compared to the national policy discourses, the perspectives expressed here are more limited to studying and teaching, organisation, and short-term outcomes. What is then the role of long-term aims expressed in national policy in local practices? When certain parts of a national policy are less prominent in local discourses on quality, an interesting question for further investigation in different contexts is whether these long-term aims are still present in other ways within local policy enactment, or whether they actually are neglected in local practices. For example, in the Swedish case this question further concerns whether theoretical courses on the upper secondary level are preparing students for the actual demands posed in higher education, beyond the formal qualifications that are required for admission, and to what extent adult education actually promotes inclusion in social and working life. When it comes to vocational courses, the local enactment of skills supply is of interest. As discussed earlier (Andersson & Muhrman, 2022b), MAE tends to get a supplementary role in the skills supply, when courses preparing students for work in elderly care and childcare are dominating offerings. This makes MAE a 'buffer' that is filling gaps in the skills supply that upper secondary school cannot fill. In this context, such a rather narrow supply of courses could also result in subordinate labour market inclusion of migrants with few alternatives to choose between. Further investigations could identify similar 'messy' policy enactments in this and other national contexts.

The focus of this article is on teachers', students', and school leaders' own descriptions of what they consider to be quality or 'good' adult education. These descriptions have led to the themes we have presented in the findings. Of course, there

may be other hidden organisational practices associated with quality that were not reported to us by the interviewees. Further studies of the enactment of quality in adult education should analyse how prominent the enactment of policies' more general long-term aims is in local education practices, as compared to the role of short-term aims concerning e.g. students' learning and flexible study opportunities and the influence of local quality discourses overall. What is the role of formal demands for measurable outcomes, processes of quality management, teachers' competence and working conditions for teaching, the student group, and flexible study opportunities? And are there contradictions between central and local as well as long- and short-term quality discourses, or could all such discourses actually be integrated in local policy enactment?

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Cultivating the biophilic self: Urpo Harva as a theorist of environmental adult education

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Abstract

This article presents ecological thinking of the Finnish educational philosopher, Urpo Harva (1910–1994). Harva's theories of adult education are strongly linked to the theory of self-cultivation developed in Finnish educational theory particularly in the early 20th century, according to which adults need to develop themselves as moral agents in their relations with others and the ecological environment to reach mature adulthood. In addition to his work as a professor, Harva was an active social debater, writing a significant number of columns and essays for Finnish magazines. The present article uses abductive content analysis on 31 of these columns and essays written between 1971 and 1994 to uncover the basics of Harva's environmental adult education theory. The analysis showed that readers are encouraged to adopt a "biophilic" or nurturing attitude towards nature, as this will provide the necessary skills for ensuring a more sustainable future.

Keywords: environmental adult education, self-cultivation, biophilia, Urpo Harva

Introduction

As the first professor of adult education in any of the Nordic countries in 1946, Urpo Harva (1910–1994) was a seminal influence in his field (e.g., Heikkinen et al., 2019). One of the key ideas he promoted was that adult education should above all else work towards an ecologically sustainable future (see e.g., Harva 1955; Alanen 1994; Salo 1994). Testament to Harva's pioneering role is that he first put forward this idea already in the 1950's. Indeed, Harva identified himself as the first professor in Finnish academia to include in his teaching nature conservation, environmental education, and active critique of the ideal of continuous economic growth (Salo, 1994). Although awareness of environmental destruction and the lethal effect of unrestrained economic growth on it is

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widespread (e.g., IPCC 2022), discussions on these the topics are still marginal in the field of adult education (see e.g., Schöni 2022; Berkowitz et al., 2005).

Due to the current threats to the environment, there is an urgent need for developing environmental adult education[1] (henceforth EAE) not only in practice but also in theory (e.g., Walter 2009; 2020). In the field of adult education community learning and development (e.g., Gregorčič, 2017), democracy education (e.g., Wildemeersch & Fejes 2018) and citizenship education (e.g., Kloubert 2018) provide a strong theoretical basis to deepen the development of more environmentally sustainable lifestyles in both theory and practice (Walter, 2009). In addition, I argue that the history of Finnish educational theory includes fruitful way to enrich the theory of environmental adult education: the theory of self-cultivation (in Finnish *itsekasvatus*[2]). By self-cultivation, I mean a goal-oriented educational activity directed at the self, in which a person develops her or his own thinking, her or his ability to reflect on her or his feelings and her or his own actions in a relational relationship with other people, the environment and society (e.g., Kallio & Pulkki 2022; Kallio et al., 2022; Saari et al., 2022; Saari 2021).

Self-cultivation as an exercise proceeds from reflection to the transformation of practical action and finally to the collective effects of action, and its different phases may also occur and develop simultaneously. Therefore, self-cultivation can serve as a meaningful method of environmental education, as it allows adults to critically examine prevailing social norms and the values that guide their own actions (Kallio & Pulkki, 2022; Kallio et al., 2022). Self-cultivation can take place as part of the non-formal and non-vocational adult education field in the Nordic civic education system (see Manninen, 2017) but its practice does not necessarily require any kind of structured educational structures. Self-cultivational exercises can include, for example, reading circles, keeping a diary (*hypomnemata* in ancient Greek), meaningful conversations with a close friend aimed at locating the ideas and values hidden in everyday life that guide one's behaviour (Nussbaum, 2008; 2018; Hadot, 2002), or practising meditation, such as the *metta* exercise that develops Buddhist kindness (e.g., Frewen et al., 2015).

Urpo Harva (e.g., 1963; 1964; Alanen 1994; 1997) was one of the Finnish theorists of self-cultivation, and he saw that adult education should engourage and support the ability and willingness of adults to self-cultivate. Harva also carried out this work, for in addition to developing the theoretical side and contributing to academic debate, he also took seriously his role as a folk educator (in Finnish *kansansivistäjä*). For more than 40 years he participated in various public debates, and over 100 of his columns and essays were published in Finnish journals (Mäki-Kulmala, 1995; Alanen, 1994; 1997), the last of which appeared only three months before his death (Harva, 1994).

Harva's adult age was a very ideologically tense time in Finland due to WWII and post-war development, development of welfare state, Finland's geopolitically unique position as a Cold War buffer state and the rise of Marxism in the universities which have arguably affected his philosophies (e.g., Koski & Filander, 2013; see Harva, 1982b; 1987c; 1990b; 1991b). Despite of this, Harva was nicknamed the 'modern Socrates' as he was always eager to debate with anyone – whatever the topic (Mäki-Kulmala, 1995). Towards the end of Harva's life, growing ecological concerns began to take precedence over remaining politically unaffiliated and in the 1980s he decided to join the green movement (Alanen, 1994; 1997; Mäki-Kulmala, 2010; Filander, 2012).

Urpo Harva has been remembered as a value philosopher of adult education; I argue in this paper that he should also be understood as a theorist of environmental adult education. Harva's published essays and columns on environmental topics all share the ethical concern that adults cannot achieve maturity in a society based on consumption alone (e.g., Harva, 1964; Mäki-Kulmala, 1995). I therefore suggest that Harva, in his

essays and columns, encouraged his Finns readers to adopt a *biophilic*, nurturing attitude to both living and non-living things in nature (e.g., Blom et al., 2020, pp. 8-10; Orr, 2004, pp. 131-152). This nurturing attitude Harva suggested could be achieved, I argue, by active inner work of self-cultivation which I interpret as cultivating both the knowledge and emotions that would further ecologically more sustainable habits (e.g., Harva, 1982a). It should be noted at this point that biophilia and its opposite, *biophobia*[3], are terms that Harva himself never used. However, since the meanings of the concepts correlate well with Harva's thinking, I have decided to utilise them in this article, as they help to locate Harva's thinking in the international research field.

To build my argument, I use Harva's essays and columns to shed light on his otherwise largely neglected efforts to make environmental awareness a key part of adult education through self-cultivation. Although many in Finland (e.g., Jaaksi, 1997; Vilkka, 1997; Alanen, 1994; 1997; Värri, 1997; Mäki-Kulmala, 1995) acknowledge Harva's environmentalism and its connection with adult education, only two pieces of research have so far been published of his ecological thought by the Finnish philosophers Leena Vilkka (1997) and Vesa Jaaksi (1997), respectively. While there is some discussion of Harva's work in the international literature (e.g., Heikkinen et al., 2019; Saari et al., 2014; Koski & Filander, 2013; Filander, 2012; Räsänen, 1997; Jones, 1986), studies into his ecological ideas are quite non-existent. One reason for the scarcity of research, even in the Finnish research literature, must surely be because Harva did not publish any one piece specifically devoted to the subject (Vilkka, 1997; Jaaksi, 1997). The only way to put together his environmental theory of adult education is by combining his various columns and essays with his earlier theories.

To do this, I analyse 31 environmental articles written by Harva between 1971 and 1994 (listed at the end of the article), including 16 columns and essays that have not been systematically analysed before. The text sample is thus the largest body of journal data to date that has been used to explore the principles of Harva's environmental adult education. Given the importance Harva attached to popular education, the analysis is based on the idea that these texts summarise the key features of his environmental thought. I analyse the data using an abductive content analysis guided by the following two research questions:

1. What are the societal structures Harva thinks should be targeted by environmental adult education in the pursuit of more ecologically sustainable practices?
2. What forms of self-cultivation does Harva think might question the values these societal structures represent?

These two research questions together form the synthesis of my research aim, which is to locate the main philosophical premises of Harva's environmental adult education. In the article, I interpret Harva's environmental education as an exercise of self-cultivation which is carried out in the way outlined in research question 1, within certain social structures, and in the way outlined in research question 2, through a certain kind of self-cultivation.

I begin the article by describing the field of environmental adult education and its philosophy, especially in the Nordic countries and in Finland. Secondly, I present the historical development of theory of self-cultivation in Finland and the closely related environmental awareness that is intrinsically linked to it, which will provide theoretical background for Harva's thinking. With this theoretical background, thirdly, I examine the main features of Harva's thinking and his work as an academic and teacher of popular education. Fourthly, I briefly outline how I have carried out the research. Fifthly, I present the result of my analysis, biophilic self-cultivation, and outline its main features. Finally,

I summarise the main findings of the paper, assess the choices I have made in it and consider the reflective contribution Harva's thinking can bring to the current discussions.

Foundations of environmental adult education

Environmental adult education is a relatively new field which, as the name suggests, aims to increase environmental awareness through adult education. EAE first emerged as a concept in academic international discussions during the 1970s (Haugen, 2009), though at the grass-roots level of popular education, it had been going on for some decades already (e.g., Walter, 2009; 2020; Clover, 2003). As with popular and adult education in general (e.g., Koski & Filander, 2013), the biggest challenge facing EAE has been its limited class appeal to only the middle classes (Haugen, 2009).

Canadian professor of adult education Pierre Walter, following the philosophical framework of Elias and Merriam (2005), identifies five major philosophical approaches that have historically guided EAE theory and practice: liberal, progressive, behaviourist, humanistic, and radical. I will use these philosophical premises to fulfil the aim of my article. All of these premises include non-formal learning approaches too (Walter, 2020), such as self-cultivation.

The liberal EAE approach has its rationalist roots in the classical philosophy of Ancient Greece and Rome, and thinkers such as Socrates (Walter 2009; 2020, p. 315). The teachings of the ancient philosophical schools also figures in the historical development of self-cultivation (e.g., Hadot, 2002), and prevailing educational theories in the west (e.g., Salo, 2007; Saari, 2021). But when it comes to the modern day, Walter (2009) sees American medical doctor, activist, and professor Alice Hamilton (1869–1970) as the founder of the liberal EAE approach since she scientifically proved how industrial toxins were damaging the environment. Instead of the liberal EAE, the most popular and well-known underlying philosophy of EAE is progressive, which originated in the 1920s in the footsteps of John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of education and relies on an experiential and learner-centred approach as the philosophical basis for environmental adult education (Walter, 2009; 2020, p. 315).

The third philosophical premise, behaviorism, emerged in the 1970s and focuses on shaping of the human behavior in the society by affecting the mind through rewards and punishments following stimuli. The complete opposite of behaviourism is represented by humanistic EAE theory which focuses on the spiritual growth of the individual after on the stories of ancient people since the beginning of time utilised and developed by, for example, transcendental philosophers in the 1800s such as Henry David Thoreau (1817–1962). The fifth philosophical premise is called radical EAE and it focuses on collective consciousness raising and direct activism in the spirit of Paulo Freire's (1921–1997) liberating education aiming towards a more socially just society. In the radical EAE emerged especially after mid-1980s, this philosophical orientation is broadly reflected in various areas of adult education that emphasise social learning, for example in the field of transformative learning and popular education, rejecting the behaviourist approach entirely but incorporating partly humanist and liberal philosophical premises. (Walter, 2009, pp. 14-20.) Since the last decade, various new forms of environmental adult education based on the philosophy of radical EAE have developed significantly (Walter, 2020), including, for example, ecojustice education introduced by Martusewicz et al. (2020).

Interestingly, radical and progressive approaches of EAE in particular continue to feature in current academic debates on the subject; while liberal, behaviourist and humanistic approaches are largely excluded, despite being the most commonly used

starting points in environmental education fieldwork (e.g., Walter, 2009; 2020). However, as Darlene E. Clover (2003) remarks, the ecological crisis has its roots in the ideological and systemic connection between government and big business, so EAE alone will never be enough to repair the current crisis. Nevertheless by creating awareness and encouraging social activism in individuals, EAE is paving the way for societies to become more ecologically sustainable (e.g., Walter & Kluttz, 2020; Kluttz & Walter, 2018). By encouraging critical evaluation and intersectional understanding, issues such as using land sustainably, can be combined with pushing for the dismantling of colonialism and hierarchical thinking, as they all contribute to current ecological problems (e.g., Walter, 2020). In Europe, for example, EAE is now integrated as part of citizenship skills and is being developed in various research projects and initiatives (e.g., EPALE, 2020).

In Finland, environmental adult education (in Finnish *aikuisten ympäristökasvatus*) has a long but marginalised history as a concept (Manninen & Nokelainen, 2021, p. 141). In 1971, just as EAE was starting to get mentioned in international research, the values that had traditionally been cherished in the field of Finnish adult education since the 1850s were changing dramatically: it was no longer generally thought that prosperous and flourishing people would form a stable society, rather, this general view was replaced with the economically driven ideology of continuous growth. In other words, economic growth was seen as representing individual growth and well-being on a larger scale (Koski & Filander, 2013). In this version of Finnish society, there was very little call for environmental adult education and indeed by the 1990s, it was the case that only one book was published about the subject (Kajanto, 1992) under that term (see Manninen & Nokelainen, 2021). Today however, the pendulum has swung back, and ecosocial education (in Finnish *ekososiaalinen sivistys*) – focusing on Earth's ecological limits, human rights, and a sustainable global economy – is quite popular once again in Finnish educational theory and EAE discussions (e.g., Manninen & Nokelainen, 2021, p. 141).

History of environmentally conscious self-cultivation in Finland

In the late 19th and early 20th century, several Finnish educational philosophers advanced the theory of self-cultivation (Sivonen, 2006). It was strongly inspired by the idea of the ancient Hellenistic schools that one should have a moral responsibility towards others as part of the aspiration to be a cosmopolitan, i.e., a world citizen (e.g., Nussbaum, 2019; Grayling, 2007). It also had its roots in the nascent labour movement and romantic nationalism that gave birth to Finland as an independent nation (Koski & Filander, 2013). This Finnish tradition included a number of thinkers who believed that self-cultivation included the idea of cherishing and appreciating nature and life in all its forms. In other words, human beings could not flourish without close connection with nature (e. g., Kallio & Pulkki, 2022). In this respect, I interpret these theories of self-cultivation as an early form of EAE.

Self-cultivation has its roots in ancient philosopher Cicero's (106–43 BC) *cultura animi* – the idea that the development of the soul being at the foundation of western philosophy and society – and in the first part of the 20th century, a lot of Ancient Greek philosophy was translated into Finnish (Paakkola, 2007). One of the first educational philosophers in independent Finland to focus on adult education and the theory of self-cultivation was Zachris Castrén (1868–1938). He defined self-cultivation as the expansion and deepening of human knowledge and the cultivation of emotions in the manner of the ancient ideal (Koski & Filander, 2013, p. 590; Alanen, 1994). However, he did not overly stress the fact that every adult should be willing to cultivate themselves;

the most important thing was for a nation simply to guarantee the possibility that those who were interested could do so.

After Castrén, several educational theorists linked "cultivation" (which literally means shaping the earth) and self-cultivation to humankind's relationship with the natural environment. Unlike Castrén, for instance, Santeri Alkio (1862–1930) – who was also a politician – thought it the duty of every citizen to ensure they were civilized, in the sense of being morally informed and aware of their environment. Alkio was in favour of promoting a civilized agrarian culture based on self-sufficient small farmers living in harmony with nature and God (e.g., Mäki-Kulmala, 2012).

Another who advocated a closer relationship with nature was Juho August (J. A.) Hollo (1885–1967), believing there was a mysterious life force hidden in everything that grows (Hollo, 1931; Harni & Saari, 2016; Kallio & Pulkki, 2022). Hollo was clearly indicating that a person should educate oneself holistically to be part of nature on a larger scale than just the land they were cultivating. In this respect, Hollo's theory is very close to the humanist EAE approach (Walter, 2009; 2020). At roughly the same time, his contemporary – Jalmar Edward Salomaa (1891–1960) – was developing his own view of self-cultivation as the mission to discover one's personally defined inner calling, and among his pupils was Urpo Harva.

When Urpo Harva in his turn became a professor, in his social debates he emphasised the importance of "civilising the soul" and self-cultivation by bringing people closer to nature (Alanen, 1994, p. 297; 1997, p. 28). Both Alkio, Hollo and Harva base their thinking on the humanist premise that the organic environment exists fundamentally for human beings. This view, now understood as anthropocentric, is in line with the moral view of early 20th century adult education about the uniqueness of human beings in relation to other living beings (Koski & Filander, 2013).

Urpo Harva – Professor, philosopher and popular educator

As the university's Chair of Adult Education in Tampere (1946–1973), Harva placed theories of adult education within the broader framework of educational theory and practice (e.g., Jokinen, 2017; Alanen, 1997). These broader frameworks pointed out the shortcomings in contemporary society's increasing reliance on technology to solve all its problems, and the dangers of this uncritical reliance for educational theory (Vilkka, 1997). Harva's seminal role in Finnish adult education (in Finnish *aikuiskasvatus*) lies in the fact that he defined and named the field, along with its various concepts (Alanen, 1994; Mäki-Kulmala, 1995; Harva, 1981). By the 1970s, however, the practices and values of adult education had changed quite significantly and rapidly from the way Harva originally defined them (Jokinen, 2017).

In the process of developing the theory of adult education in Finland, Harva was clearly intent on challenging practitioners of it to really question the values and norms behind their field (Harva, 1955; Mäki-Kulmala, 1995). The need to be aware of this value base in adult education is still relevant because, as Leena Koski and Karin Filander (2013) point out, Finnish adult education has throughout its history shaped its fundamental values and operating principles to match the prevailing societal value bases. Harva strongly opposed an education geared towards current labour-market needs; according to him, adult education should instead be focused on the holistic development of adults, to enable them to develop their unique personality, with educational structures amenable to this development (Alanen, 1997). The priority was thus to develop the willingness and ability of adults to cultivate themselves – in line with the Finnish tradition of self-cultivation (Harva, 1955; Alanen, 1994).

According to Harva (1963), self-cultivation required the adult to be constantly motivated to develop themselves, and for this development to be visible in the way they interacted with others. The major difference between Harva and the ancient Hellenistic traditions of self-cultivation, is that he was emphasising the well-being of the individual over that of society (Autio, 1997, pp. 41-42). Society could only become great, Harva reckoned, once the individuals within it had discovered what they needed to achieve maturity through self-cultivation (Mäki-Kulmala, 1995; Alanen, 1997).

As well as self-cultivation, Harva (1955) felt that adult education was about treasuring and valuing the environment one lived in. Reminiscent of Hollo's thoughts on this matter, Harva had the following to say:

> The concept of conservation has nowadays become an extremely relevant topic because, as industry expands, more of nature is being destroyed and we have become increasingly cut off from it. Because our nation is lagging in the field of conservation, our cultural landscape is also being destroyed. This is because conservation is not only concerned with things of economic value, but also those which have aesthetic and moral value. As questions of conservation apply to many kinds of adult education, the topic should be given more attention than previously. (Harva 1955, pp. 53-54).

Harva continued to link adult education with nature conservation until the end of his life. When Harva retired from his professorship, he increasingly moved to share his ideas on environmental protection through columns, essays and commentaries published in Finnish newspapers. He even joined the Green movement in the 1980s and become one of the founding members of Finland's Green Association for the Protection of Life (VESL) (Vilkka, 1997, pp. 194-196) which still exists to this day. Interestingly, in her analysis of Harva, Leena Vilkka (1997, p. 205) draws attention to the fact that Harva's environmental philosophy seems to resemble much the environmental philosophy of Harva's American colleagues at the time. However, Vilkka does not specify which American philosophers she is referring to – nor does Harva himself actively bring the ideas of his international contemporaries to the discussion.

In spite of his many newspaper articles that could be seen as nature conservation activism, Harva (1987b) defined himself only as a "greenish humanist". This suggests that he saw humanism as the central basis of his theories, and indeed the strong humanist undercurrent of his thinking is widely acknowledged (e.g., Alanen, 1994; Jokinen, 2017). Harva, however, did not understand humanism as the natural value base for human action, although its achievement in individual action was not entirely impossible (e.g., Alanen, 1997, p. 36). Adopting a humanistic attitude to life required a lot of work – it was an educational challenge.

By the end of his life, however, it was clear that Harva had moved from careful academic impartiality to a more radical agency which he felt obliged to express in his public columns, whether or not these met with the approval of his academic contemporaries. Although Harva had always been a very active debater, he had hitherto always remained neutral; but now, towards the end of his life, he was making real the kind of adult education he saw as important in his educational theories. Although he did not consider himself an active green activist, his diligence as a writer on environmental awareness suggests otherwise.

Applications of abductive content analysis

The data for the study consisted of 31 environmental columns and essays written by Urpo Harva and published in the Finnish newspapers Aamulehti (n = 26) and Vihreä lanka (n

= 5) between 1971 and 1994 – a full list of which can be found at the end of this article. Aamulehti has been published in Tampere since 1881 and is still the second largest local newspaper in Finland. Urpo Harva is known to have written more than 100 columns for the paper during his lifetime between 1961 and 1994 (Jokinen, 2017). After 36 years in print, Vihreä lanka became the best-known magazine supporting the green movement in Finland, yet however its last issue was published in December 2019.

As Harva saw his role as a popular educator important and continued to write diligently for local newspapers even after his retirement (Alanen, 1994; 1997, p. 33), I see the texts as educational efforts to influence public opinion. Since Harva's theory of adult education is based on giving adults the capacity for self-cultivation (Harva, 1963; 1964), I interpret the newspaper articles in this light as materials that encourage and support the practise of self-cultivation.

I utilised abductive content analysis as my analysis method in this article. Abductive content analysis is described as a theory-driven method of analysis, as the analysis of the data starts with the conditions of the data content, but is finally integrated into an existing theoretical framework (e.g., Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The method of analysis does not proceed systematically, step by step, but forces the researcher alternately to approach and distance themselves from their subject and to engage deeply with their subject, allowing new knowledge to emerge through time-consuming and in-depth reflection (Earl Rinehart, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Kenny Earl Rinehart (2021, p. 3) even argues that abductive analysis is a potential response to the current intensity- and time-pressured research field: because it inevitably takes time, its results are also often more reliable than those of inductive or deductive content analysis.

In this article, the abductive analytical approach is reflected in the way how I first formulate a general idea of Harva's environmental education and its philosophical starting points, based on newspaper articles. I then extend my analysis by considering the theoretical premises central to Harva's thinking; namely that adult education should always support the possibility of practicing self-cultivation. From these premises, I form the actual result of an abductive content analysis, i.e. I interpret Harva's environmental philosophy as a pratice of self-cultivation and, based on the data, I formulate a social framework of unsustainable structures that are central to the practice of self-cultivation.

I made use of the ATLAS.ti software to analyse the data and the analysis proceeded as follows: in the first step, I coded the data into 31 thematic categories, such as 'technology' and 'overconsumption'. I then created eight subcategories from these thematic categories around which I built the argumentation of the article. These were 'value philosophy', 'humanism', 'desirability', 'avoidability', 'moral agency', 'self-cultivation', 'biophilia' and 'biophobia'. I chose to focus on the last four of these in this article, as they were the most comprehensive and contained codes for the largest number of data collection.

The use of these four sub-categories meant that enough data had been collected to reach a saturation point and that no further value could have been added if more data had been collected. Indeed, the same themes seem to recur again and again in Harva's texts, often using the same ancient Greek examples, notably Icarus flying too close to the sun or the Greeks' own fear of technology (Harva, 1979; 1982a; 1987a; 1987c; 1988c; 1988f; 1991a). Another of Harva's favourite examples is the vicious 'new science' of René Descartes (1596–1650), based on dualism, which he claims has put nature at the service of humanity and thus sown the seeds of destruction for the current ecological crisis (1971; 1982a; 1987a; 1987c; 1990a).

The ethical issues involved in this research are worth mentioning, since abductive content analysis is always an interpretation of what is written. By starting from the data

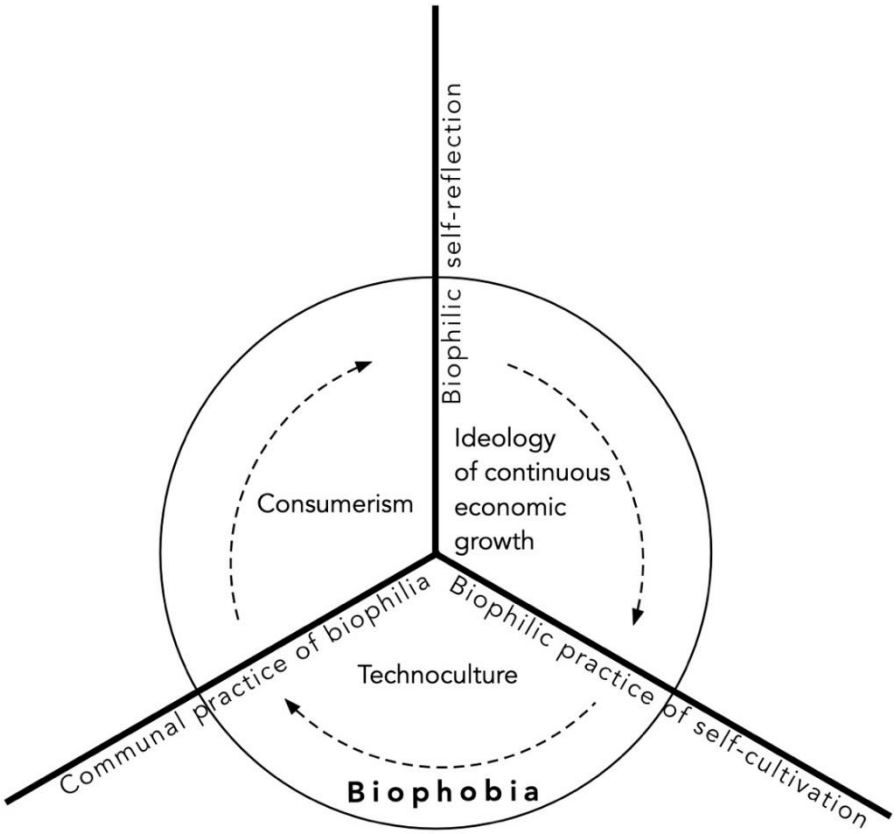
itself, I have done my best to avoid the bias that would result from reading my own hypotheses into the data. Therefore, I only deepened my understanding of Harva's theory after I had already analysed the data once – and then deepened my analysis further utilising Harva's theory. However, despite these precautions, the results of the analysis are still my interpretation of what Harva has written, and are of course influenced, for example, by the stories I have been told before about Harva's personality and behaviour – for example by Emeritus Professor Veli-Matti Värri and Associate Professor Karin Filander. My interpretation may also have been influenced by other historical texts written by Harva or commenting on his thinking that I have not realised to mention in this article.

Self-Cultivation in Harva's footsteps: Cultivating the biophilic self

I present the results of the analysis in Figure 1 below, where the wheel represents the social values and structures that Harva considers harmful to the environment and people because they perpetuate ecological unsustainability. In this sense, the values and structures within the wheel, namely consumerism, the ideal of continuous economic growth and technoculture, reduce people's opportunities for an ecologically sustainable and good life. In my interpretation, the values and structures within the wheel in Figure 1 are permeated by a biophobic attitude that seeks to dominate and control nature, and in doing so leads to an ever deeper alienation from nature (e.g., Orr, 2004, pp. 74-77; pp. 131-137).

The wheel in Figure 1 is intersected by three sticks that prevent it from moving. They illustrate, as a result of my analysis, the forms of more ecologically sustainable, biophilic, self-cultivation that can mitigate the effects of the ecologically unsustainable values and structures described within the wheel. The first stick describes biophilic self-reflection, which allows to recognize and acknowledge the moral challenges people face in a society where values and cultural norms influence their thoughts and behavior (e.g., Harva, 1960, pp. 71-73, 89-90; 1955, pp. 28-30, 32, 43-46). The second stick describes the practice of biophilic self-cultivation, i.e. how concrete biophilic practices can be used to achieve a more ecologically sustainable change in behaviour and thinking, and self-cultivation through a variety of exercises (e.g., Harva, 1960, p. 90; 1955, pp. 50-55). The third stick extends personal biophilic practices into communal ones: that is, it involves the practice of self-cultivation through interaction with others and action in community (e.g. Harva, 1963, pp. 89-90, 118-120).

Figure 1. Framework of biophilic self-cultivation (author's own figure)



Defining the wheel: Rotten roots of ecocrises

According to Harva, the ecocrisis has its roots in modern natural science, which originated in Europe with the Cartesian dualism of philosopher René Descartes. Harva (1987c; 1988a; 1988b; 1988c; 1988e; 1991b) calls this new era *technoculture*. Whereas previously nature and its mysteries had been treated with respect, technoculture led to a tendency to see all the environment only in terms of matter. This materialism also includes animals, which have been left in the role of *automata* without emotions or cognitive abilities (Harva, 1971; 1982c; 1987a; 1991c). This cultural norm has created the need to control nature through a growing collective knowledge – modern natural science.

Technoculture causes suffering to nature, animals, and humans alike, because it disconnects people from their natural connection with nature (Harva, 1987c; 1988b). In this, Harva's thinking is similar to that of, for example, the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900-1980), who argued that human suffering is fundamentally caused by the loss of connection with nature as understood in capitalist societies (Fromm, 2001). Fromm's books were widely translated into Finnish in the 1960s and 1970s, when they were read with enthusiasm, especially by Finnish teachers (Moisio, 2008, p. 138). In this sense, Fromm's works may also have contributed to Harva's thinking, although he does not mention this possible connection himself.

Harva sees *consumerism* as a destructive form of instrumental thinking. He writes quite bitterly about advertising, especially billboards, and how they take us away from our natural environment, not only aesthetically but also morally (Harva, 1978; 1988c; 1988i; 1990c). According to Harva (1978; 1986a; 1988b; 1988d; 1988g), people become

overly secularized by advertising and begin to value consumption more and more, and this in turn isolates people further and further from nature. The consumer culture is therefore, according to him, an obstacle to mature adulthood, as it causes people to become too attached to material values at the expense of spiritual ones (Harva, 1964; Mäki-Kulmala, 1995).

Consumerism, on the other hand, is fuelled by *the ideal of continuous economic growth*: for Harva, it is the real rotten root of modern society, leading to ecocrises. According to Harva (1978; 1988g), the most problematic aspect of the idea of continuous economic growth is its religious aspects:

> Today we live under the spell of an ideology of economic growth, an ideology that has taken on the characteristics of a religion. This religion has spread, or is spreading, everywhere, regardless of economic and political systems. Continuous growth is seen as the salvation of humankind from poverty, disease, social injustice, even, to some extent, from the tyranny of death. The ideology of economic growth sees nature merely as a raw material for industry, which humans can use at will to satisfy their material needs. (Harva, 1978)

The best way to counteract these cultural norms of continuous economic growth and relentless consumerism, Harva ventures, is to nurture our link with nature back to health. He also recognises the naivety of assuming that the current technoculture would ever want an equitable balance between humankind and the rest of nature (Harva, 1979). Reflecting contemporary Cold War concerns, he paints a stark reality:

> Cultural evolution is now in a dangerous state. The most painful point is the conflict between nature and humankind; humankind's relationship with nature has been shaken, endangering its very existence. Culture is torn by life-threatening contradictions, such as capitalism versus communism, rich versus poor nations living under the threat of the atomic bomb. (Harva, 1982b)

Here Harva's text strongly resembles the concept of biophobia – it reflects a fear of living nature, an emotional reaction to an uncontrollable and immeasurable nature, which is one of the main problems of contemporary society by preventing the sustainable use of the earth's limited resources (e.g., Orr, 2004, p. 136). In 1982, after watching a documentary on industrial meat production in a rather sentimental state, Harva wrote about how indifferent – one might say biophobic – attitudes are instilled in children from a very young age:

> This writing is a protest for animals. That is why I also protest against butterfly collecting. Butterflies are among the most beautiful, fragile and helpless creatures on Earth. Collecting them has become a fad. Even children are taught to capture them, to push them into glass jars and to murder them with poison. In this way, an attitude towards animals is instilled in children from an early age, the horrific results of which were seen in the film 'Animals'. (Harva, 1982c)

Thus, as I argue in this paper, Harva seems to be pursuing a new cultural ideal of living according to ecologically sustainable principles and values – that is, Harva was formulating a form of cultural ecological reconstruction (e.g., BIOS, 2019). Harva thus focused both on the power of enlightenment, i.e. his environmental thinking has traits of liberal EAE (e.g., Walter, 2020, p. 315), and on appealing to the reader's relationship with nature on an emotional and spiritual level, i.e. his thinking at this stage also seems to have traits of humanist EAE (e.g., Walter, 2020, p. 316). What seems to be central to him in these writings is precisely to maintain the role of the popular educator and his goal in

accordance with his theories of adult education (Harva, 1955; 1963): to educate the reader and, on the other hand, to appeal to reader emotionally as well – in my interpretation, to encourage self-cultivation.

The sticks to stop the wheel: Cultivating the biophilic self

The first step in self-cultivation is to practice self-reflection and orient oneself towards a reflective attitude towards oneself, the society and the environment. Harva (1980, p. 13) stresses that it is necessary for human beings to reflect on the ethical issues central to life – and the human relationship with the ecocrisis-permeated environment is clearly such a central ethical issue for life. As I have noted before, Harva seemed to have gone to great lengths to bring into the public discussion a critical perspective on current social practices and values that perpetuate ecologically unsustainable structures. The basis of these practices and values is found in a techno-materialist approach to the environment. According to Harva, capitalism and the ideal of continuous economic growth maintain and reproduce this instrumental relationship with nature and perpetuate the values associated with it at the level of society. Because Finnish adult education has historically changed its form according to prevailing societal values, the way to define mature adulthood, active citizenship and, for example, work-based adult education are still closely linked to the ideals of economic growth (Koski & Filander, 2013, p. 595).

Harva (1964, p. 50, 57) opposed such an economic growth-oriented task of adult education and argued that the whole field should rather be harnessed to promote meaningful leisure activities alongside nature conservation work by supporting practice of self-cultivation. Harva made it clear that people should seek personal fulfilment less in work and more in leisure (see also Mäki-Kulmala, 1995, pp. 29-30; Alanen, 1997, p. 35). This is quite radically different from the general consensus in the 20th and 21st centuries, which values creativity, flexibility, emotional control and total dedication to work (see Koski & Filander, 2013, p. 594). Perhaps Harva's thinking today could be thought of as a good mirror for the extent to which economic interests guide our education and placement in society, and how this value base in turn influences the mitigation of deepening ecocrises in society.

Researchers Pasi Takkinen and Jani Pulkki (2022) draw attention to our relationship with the technosphere as an important part of environmental education, since even so-called 'sustainable growth' is still growth, and not necessarily enough to avert ecological disaster. Urpo Harva (1989; 1991b) did not completely reject the idea of sustainable growth, but he also believed that people's current standard of living, or at least their expectations of what it is, must change:

> I believe that technologists can invent pollution-free cars, planes, ships, non-toxic fertilisers and pesticides, and other technoculture that is environmentally friendly, such as solar energy. However, it takes so much time that, in order to preserve nature, humans are forced to compromise a great deal on economic growth. (Harva, 1991b)

Given the limited resources of the planet, multi-faceted educational efforts are needed to promote the adoption of more ecologically sustainable practices on a larger scale. While responsibility for more ecologically sustainable practices is not only the responsibility of individuals, but rather of governments and large corporations (e.g., Clover, 2003; Davies, 2016), individuals can be part of a collective movement that drives change towards more ecologically sustainable practices (e.g., Kluttz et al., 2020; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Saari et al., 2022). Communal practice of self-cultivation can serve as a means of motivating such civic engagement, as it is a method for perceiving and reflecting on the relationality of

human life. Through deep reflection, practices and finally, communal aspects of one's behaviour, a change in the value system that guides individual's behaviour thus becomes possible during the process of self-cultivation (e.g., Kallio & Pulkki, 2022; Kallio et al., 2022).

Indeed, Harva (1963; 1980, p. 13) writes that a practice of self-cultivation helps people to reflect on the ethical implications of their own actions and to perceive one's own responsibility for the well-being of the environment and other people. Above all, however, he urges people to take for their fellow human beings at the national level:

> Market forces are spoken of as if they were natural laws over which human has no control. However, *market forces can be countered by more powerful moral forces* (italics added). If we are so morally reckless that we buy foreign food cheaper than domestic food, we will put an end to our agriculture, increase the number of unemployed by six figures and have to pay them unemployment benefits. (Harva, 1992a)

This moral responsibility to others did not, however, include the global South or even other Western countries, let alone other animal species. In this sense, his vision of communal act of ecologically sustainable practices, biophilia, is quite limited compared to, for example, aims of modern radical EAE, since he did not recognise global human responsibility and unjustly distributed resources, let alone the impact of, just to name one, colonialism (see, Kluttz et al., 2020). As philosopher Heikki Mäki-Kulmala (2010) writes, it seems that Harva did not develop a biosphere-centric worldview because it would have been in stark contrast to the fundamental humanist approach to his thinking. However, Harva's humanism did not exclude the great human responsibility for the environment: caring for nature (Harva, 1978; 1982a; 1986c; 1988b; 1988c; 1988g; 1988h; 1989) and opposing technological values (Harva, 1979; 1982a; 1986c; 1987a; 1987c; 1988a; 1988b; 1988d; 1990a; 1991b) was necessity to survive, even though in his thinking human was always superior to other species and nature (Harva, 1971; 1979; 1982a; 1986c; 1987a; 1987b; 1987c; 1989; 1990a; 1990b).

Just as adult education, according to Harva, did not fulfil its potential to promote ecologically conscious, biophilic self-cultivation, neither have organised religions been successful in transmitting more ecologically conscious values. For Harva, it was not so much that beliefs themselves had caused the ecological crisis – Harva (1971; 1988a; 1989) strongly defends Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism, for example – but that the Lutheran and Catholic churches in particular are "shameful" institutions because they have positioned themselves in many societies as the forerunners of modern science (Harva 1988c). On the basis of these ideas, both Vilkka (1997, pp. 202-203) and Jaaksi (1997), drawing on Harva's own words (1978), define Harva as formulating a kind of 'theology of nature' in his ecological thinking.

Thus, the basis of Harva's self-cultivation seems to be a progressive EAE approach, based on a strong emphasis on spiritual, personal connection and on encouraging experientialism (Walter, 2009; 2020, p. 315). He seems to have encouraged an appreciation of nature as a precious gift to be experienced (Harva, 1982a), and highly valued the pursuit of a unique and individual relationship with the natural world around us (Harva, 1971; 1978; 1982c; 1987a; 1988c; 1988g). Such a strong unique relationship with nature is often described in the research literature as a biophilic attitude (e.g., Blom et al., 2020; Joye & De Block, 2011; Orr, 1995; 2004, pp. 131-152; Rolston, 1995; Wilson, 1984). Drawing on these points, I argue that Harva's writings encouraged Finns to adopt an environmentally caring, biophilic attitude, and thus I understand his theory of environmental adult education as essentially an attempt at biophilic self-cultivation in which this nature-nurturing attitude is cultivated.

My argument that Harva's writings encourage the adoption of a biophilic attitude towards nature is further supported by the fact that the concept of biophilia centrally involves the role of emotions (e.g., Blom et al., 2020; Orr, 2004). Indeed, Harva (1982a; 1987a; 1988g) acknowledged the important role of the presence of emotions in extending one's moral responsibility towards nature. He saw that answers to the question of the absolute value of nature cannot even be found rationally (Harva, 1987a; 1982a; Vilkka, 1997, p. 198), but 'In nature, we can experience experiences that are difficult to describe, such as the 'speech of silence'' (Harva, 1982a). Since Finnish theory of self-cultivation has encouraged, as an educational activity, to include the cultivation of both knowledge and emotions in practising self-cultivation, and Harva (e.g., 1963) also sees the practice of both skills as an important part of self-cultivation, it makes sense to attach his thinking to a strong concept of environmental emotions – especially when my aim is to locate the environmental-philosophical starting points of his thinking.

At first glance, the strong presence of emotions seems to move Harva's EAE theory towards a more humanistic starting point, but according to Walter (2009; 2020, p. 316), the humanistic EAE approach is characterised by the fact that the achievement of an emotional connection does not aim significantly, or at least not primarily, at changing human behaviour. Rather, it relies on the self-directed nature of human beings and assumes that each person is essentially morally good and acts in accordance with their own morality. This differs from Harva's view that humans did not naturally know how to act according to humanistic virtues, but they had to grow in order to develop as a moral agent (e.g., Alanen, 1997, p. 36). Thus, while the humanist EAE approach seeks to enhance human happiness and self-esteem (Walter, 2020), it does not, in my view, adequately account for Harva's efforts to influence the actions and thinking of his readers. The attention to emotions and experientialism combined with an action-driven grip locates Harva's environmental adult education rather within the progressive EAE approach (Walter, 2009; 2020, p. 315).

Thus, the philosophical starting points of Harva's EAE theory seem to be, on the one hand, a progressive approach in the light of his columns and essays, but also, on the other hand, liberal approach through the Finnish theoretical tradition of self-cultivation. Harva sees it as important both to create an experiential connection to nature by seeking its proximity and, on the other hand, to acquire knowledge about the state of the environment – even if it arouses strong emotions (e.g., Harva, 1982c). For Harva, the most important thing seems to be to encourage his readers to biophilic self-cultivation through these two approaches.

These philosophical premises underlie the three sticks shown in Figure 1: they prevent the reinforcement of ecologically unsustainable social values and structures and together, as a result of my analysis, form a model of biophilic self-cultivation. In it, (1) *biophilic self-reflection* guides a change in action and thinking that requires an experiential approach to the environment, a realisation of the link between self and environment, and a recognition and acknowledgement of the social norms that maintain and further degrade the ecological state of the environment (Harva, 1971; 1978; 1982c; 1987a; 1988c; 1988g), (2) *the practice of biophilic self-cultivation* involves concrete action to effect this change in one's life, i.e., the adoption of new, more environmentally friendly values to guide one's actions (Harva, 1955; 1963; 1979; 1980; 1989; 1990a), and (3) *the communal practice of biophilia* extends one's sphere of action through interaction to the wider environment through one's interactions with other people, animals, and the environment (Harva, 1960, pp. 118-120; 1987c; 1988e; 1991a). In this way, biophilic self-cultivation expands from the individual's internal reflection, contemplation, and practice towards a communal perspective, and each of these stages of self-cultivation that

prevent the wheel from turning works overlappingly and partially simultaneously, influencing not only the individual's own thinking and action but also others through their actions.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that Urpo Harva's columns and essays were part of Harva's popular educational mission to encourage Finns to adopt a biophilic attitude towards the environment. Since Harva saw encouraging self-cultivation as the background to all adult education activities, I argued that his background motive in the environmental writings that were the subject of my study was to encourage his readers to be environmentally aware in their self-cultivation, i.e., to engage in biophilic self-cultivation. As a result of my analysis, Harva seem to emphasises a strong experiential, emotional connection with nature, and the concept of biophilia is used in contemporary literature to describe the environmental relationship portrayed by Harva.

My first research question sought answers to the social structures that environmental adult education would need to respond to in order to succeed in its mission of building a greener future. The social structures that emerged from the data were technoculture, consumerism and the ideal of continuous economic growth. Interestingly, the debate on capitalism, to which Harva's theory is also closely linked, is not active in the field of adult education (Milana et al., 2021), although the discipline is in many ways attached to markets (e.g., Schöni, 2022).

In my research as a second research question, I sought answers to what forms of self-cultivation in my data texts and in Harva's academic books could challenge these social challenges that Harva identified for environmental adult education. These were biophilic self-reflection, the practice of biophilic self-cultivation and the communal practice of biophilia, which functioned as sticks that could help stop the previously defined cycle of social structures.

Based on these two research questions, my research aim was to locate the philosophical premises of Harva's EAE theory. I utilised the five philosophical starting points of environmental adult education as defined by Walter (2009; 2020), and Harva seemed to form his own EAE theory from a combination of progressive and liberal approaches; his aim, based on my analysis, was to increase the reader's knowledge of the environmental catastrophe (liberal EAE) and, on the other hand, to emphasise experientialism and deeply personal relationship with the environment (progressive EAE).

At this stage, it is worth reminding that the aim of this article was also to provide the first in-depth analysis of Harva's environmental philosophy in the 21st century. In the absence of recent research on Harva, many aspects that overlap with his environmental thinking have been left out of this article. For example, I would have liked to have studied in more detail Harva's personal transformation from a politically uncommitted academic to a rather radical environmental activist, as this would also shed light on Harva as a partly inconsistent, sometimes emotionally based figure (e.g., Harva, 1978; 1982c; 1988a; Alanen, 1997, pp. 32-33) and thus as a human breaking the normative image of the "white academic man", dedicated to the causes he considered important. Unfortunately, this and many other research topics are beyond the scope of this article.

Critical attention should also be drawn to the fact that my material is not independently capable of shedding very deep light on the features of Harva's environmental thinking (see Jaaksi, 1997, p. 207). My article therefore aimed at outlining Harva's environmental thinking and locating his starting point in the field of

environmental adult education in order to prove my claim that Harva can also be considered a theorist of environmental adult education. This is an interesting finding, as it shows that Finnish environmental adult education theory has been developed earlier and more extensively than is often acknowledged. At the same time, Urpo Harva's significant contribution to the discipline of adult education as its first professor in the Nordic countries is extended beyond basic concepts and philosophy to environmental education theory. The debate can continue on the extent to which the theoretical tradition of self-cultivation in Finland, which formed the basis of his theories, can be considered a precursor to environmental adult education.

Notes

1 Also known as adult environmental education (AEE), but to link this paper on the previously more widely established expression on research field, I will use the form of environmental adult education (EAE).

2 It should be mentioned that literally the Finnish term 'itsekasvatus' would be translated into English as 'self-education', but since this translation does not match the meaning of the Finnish equivalent of the concept, I will instead use the concept 'self-cultivation' in this article (see more, Varpanen et al., 2022, pp. 351-352).

3 The concept of biophilia and necrophilia, which refers to biophobia, were originally developed by the German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1900–1980). Biophobia was first used as a counterpart to biophilia by the American biology professor Edward Wilson (1929–2021), who enriched the concept of biophilia by including a concern for everything in nature (Wilson, 1984; 1993; Blom et al., 2020; Joye & De Block, 2011, p. 190).

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Appendix

List of Analysed Columns and Essays

Harva, U. (1971, October 9). Luomakunnan huokaus [The Sign of Creation]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1978, September 2). Luontosunnuntai [Nature Sunday]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1979, February 17). Luonnon vikapisto [Nature's Mistake]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1982a, June 25). Ihminen ja luonto [Human and Nature]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1982b, October 16). Elossasäilymisoppi on pelastusoppi [The Doctrine of Survival is the Doctrine of Salvation]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1982c, November 27). Eläinten filmi [Animal Film]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1982d, September 22). Linkolan puolustus [Linkola's Defense]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1986a, July 7). Pako maaseudulle [Espace to the Countryside]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1986b, September 1). Vihreä yhteiskunta [Green Society]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1987a, June 18). Ihminen ja luonto, erottamattomat [Human and Nature, Inalienable]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1987b, July 27). Matka Hämeeseen [Trip to Häme]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1987c, November 28). Tuhoaako ihminen elämän? [Does the Human destroy the Nature?]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988a, January 11). Vihreä jumaluusoppi [Green Theology]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988b, February 8). Vihreää tiedettä [Green Science]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988c, March 21). Kristinusko ja luonto [Christianity and Nature]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988d, May 5). Vihreitä mietteitä [Green Thoughts]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988e, May 16). Väestönkasvu [Population Growth]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988f, May 30). Eläinten oikeudet [Animal Rights]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988g, December 24). Vihreä joulu, luonnon juhla [Green Christmas, Nature's Celebrity]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1988h). Mitä Harva todella tarkoitti [What Did Harva Truly Meant]. *Vihreä lanka 1*/1988.
Harva, U. (1988i). Ohjelmakeskusteluun [Discussions Concerning Program]. *Vihreä lanka 13*/1988.
Harva, U. (1989). Pentti Linkolan antihumanismi [Pentti Linkola's Antihumanism]. *Vihreä lanka 47*/1989.
Harva, U. (1990a, March 18). Ekoetiikka yhä tärkeämpi etiikan ala [Ecoethics is More and More Important Part of Ethics]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1990b, September 10). Johannes Salminen hyökkää tuulimyllyjä vastaan [Johannes Salminen is Attacking Against Windmills]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1990c). Huomautuksia Vihreän Liiton ohjelmaluonnokseen [Notifications on The Green Associations Program Draft]. *Vihreä lanka 8*/1990.
Harva, U. (1990d). Urheilu tuhoaa luontoa [Sports Destroying Nature]. *Vihreä lanka 35*/1990.
Harva, U. (1991a, April 7). Voidaanko luontoa vastaan tehdä rikos? [Can a crime be committed against nature?]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1991b, December 19). Syntymä, lisääntyminen, kuolema, suhde luontoon [Birth, Reproduction, Death,Rrelationship with Nature]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1992a, February 28). Luonnonläheisyys on itseisarvo [Closeness to Nature is an Intrinsic Value]. *Aamulehti*.
Harva, U. (1992b, October 22). Väestönkasvun hillintä kehitysavun ehdoksi [Population Growth Control as a Condition to Development Aid]. *Aamulehti.*
Harva, U. (1994, April 26). Turhaan Linkola paavia syyttää [Linkola Blames the Pope in Vain]. *Aamulehti.*

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Post-critical perspectives in Social Movement Learning: The case of deconsumption

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to highlight the potential contributions of the post-critical perspective to social movement learning (SML). To achieve this aim, the study employs a thematic analysis of findings derived from a systematic literature review on deconsumption (an umbrella term understood as rejection of consumerism together with materialistic values prevalent in the Western consumer societies, encompassing movements such as voluntary simplicity, freeganism etc.). Identified themes are presented within the framework of post-critical pedagogy and analysed through its lens. This approach allows the researcher to demonstrate the implications and insights of the post-critical perspective in SML and adult education. This article argues that integrating the post-critical perspective into SML can yield a novel understanding of pertinent issues within this subfield. Such an application not only broadens the scope of adult education but also expands post-critical pedagogy itself.

Keywords: deconsumption, consumer society, ethical consumption, post-critical pedagogy, social movement learning

Introduction

In their *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (2017), Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski attempt to name and describe new observable trends and currents of thought which go beyond the critical perspective currently dominating social sciences. Although the title of their work may evoke different connotations, the manifesto defines that which is already present, rather than proposing a set of actions directed at realizing some vision of the future. This does not make their work superfluous, as it sheds light on a way of thinking that is often overlooked and marginalized, yet valuable and worthwhile (Hodgson et al., 2017). This way of thinking has been called ‘post-critical pedagogy’. Since ‘post’ means

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'after' or 'later than', post-critical pedagogy is a perspective that comes after the critical one. Rooted in the critical tradition, it does not reject its postulates. It represents a kind of evolution – and not revolution (Hodgson et al., 2017).

The post-critical paradigm has gained traction in certain realms of adult education, particularly within higher education studies (Hodgson et al., 2020). However, its application remains unexplored in other domains, such as social movement learning (SML). This paper argues that integrating the post-critical perspective into SML can yield a novel understanding of pertinent issues within this subfield. Such an application not only broadens the scope of adult education but also expands post-critical pedagogy itself.

The primary objective of this paper is to elucidate the potential contributions of the post-critical perspective to SML, shedding light on its implications and insights. To achieve this goal, the article explores the phenomenon of deconsumption, defined as an active rejection of consumerism (Bauman, 2008), coupled with materialistic values prevalent in Western consumer societies (Baudrillard, 1998). While certain deconsumption practices have been discussed in the context of SML, linking deconsumption with adult education (Popławska, 2020; Walter, 2013; Etmanski, 2012; Sandlin & Walther, 2009), a more in-depth exploration within the realm of SML is warranted due to the movement's particular relevance to contemporary challenges such as climate change, consumerism (Bauman, 2008), and social inequality.

This study undertakes a thematic analysis of findings derived from a systematic literature review on deconsumption practices. By identifying key themes, the paper examines them through the lens of post-critical pedagogy, establishing connections with existing theoretical frameworks in the domain of post-critical studies. Through this analytical approach, the paper demonstrates how numerous deconsumption practices can be comprehended from a post-critical perspective. Given that the selection of a theoretical framework inherently prioritizes certain issues while overlooking others, the paper will only discuss those aspects of deconsumption which are deemed significant from the post-critical perspective.

The first segment of the paper will include an examination and reconstruction of the fundamental principles of post-critical pedagogy. Afterwards, the term 'deconsumption' will be explicated and contextualized alongside other pertinent theoretical concepts. Following this, the systematic literature review method will be outlined, accompanied by a concise portrayal of the research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques. The subsequent section will present the research findings within the framework of post-critical pedagogy. Lastly, a dedicated segment will be devoted to a discussion on potential implications for SML.

Post-critical pedagogy

The most effective approach to present the main characteristics of post-critical pedagogy seems to lie in its juxtaposition with the critical tradition. While the latter concentrates on negative aspects of the world, such as: oppression, struggle, discrimination, and alienation; placing utopian visions of the society in the future, post-critical pedagogy strives to highlight the positive dimensions of the present world, caring for them and nurturing them, thereby showcasing the potential for transformation in the here and now. Consequently, post-critical pedagogy focuses its reflection on those aspects of life which are overlooked and undervalued within the critical perspective, presenting them as intrinsically valuable. A fundamental difference between critical pedagogy and post-critical pedagogy lies, therefore, in their distinct attitudes toward the world. Critical pedagogy often stems from a sense of hatred towards the world, perceiving it as

overflowing with evil. In contrast, post-critical pedagogy adopts an attitude of love towards the world, affirming and cherishing its positive aspects, motivating individuals to explore and pass on these virtues to future generations (Hodgson et al., 2017). Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020) describe these two stances as mutually exclusive. The perspective of love involves an expansive view of the world, wherein one recognizes and celebrates its value. The attitude of hatred narrows one's focus to specific adversities to be challenged and overcome.

Post-critical pedagogy is closely associated with philosophy of responsibility – in contrast to critical tradition's alignment with philosophy of emancipation, as suggested by Zamojski (2014). Though not established as distinct schools of thought, these terms encapsulate certain philosophical orientations. The philosophy of emancipation perceives the world as oppressive and controlling, urging humanity to emancipate itself via reason and a suspicious attitude. This perspective employs a language of conflict, war, strategy, resistance, and oppression (Zamojski, 2014), which resonates with the previously examined attitude of hatred towards the world. Conversely, philosophy of responsibility regards the world as fragile and subject to human mercy. It impels humanity – which poses a threat to its state due to various technological advancements – to nurture and care for it (Zamojski, 2014). Humanity is, therefore, summoned to assume responsibility for the world. This necessitates the acknowledgment of the intrinsic good present in the world – a good that is endangered, vulnerable, and within the sphere of human influence (Zamojski, 2014).

It is crucial to emphasize that post-critical pedagogy does not oppose the critical tradition; instead, it acknowledges and appreciates its numerous accomplishments, particularly the unmasking of various mechanisms of oppression and discrimination (Hodgson et al., 2017). As noted by Ergas (2017): 'Education certainly requires a response to relevant issues of inequality and oppression raised by critical theorists; nevertheless, there is also a need to introduce a balancing positivity [...]' (p. 58). The authors of the manifesto assume a similar perspective: 'We could, of course, show more of the ways in which education today is marketized, privatized, data– and output–driven, and we will no doubt continue to do so in a certain manner. But we know this.' (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 80). Post-critical pedagogy builds upon the insights of the critical tradition, which has effectively exposed numerous threats to the existence of positive aspects of the world. Due to these threats, these aspects are now placed in the centre of attention and nurtured (Hodgson et al., 2018).

The necessity of adopting the post-critical perspective in social science finds further validation in Latour's assertion that criticism has 'run out of steam', and lost its transformative potency (Latour, 2004). As has been noted, in the critical paradigm, the world is perceived as inherently filled with evil. This leads to a demand of continuous, never-ending work of exposure and unmasking. Consequently, the pursuit of an ideal state of the world remains elusive, as the reality opposed by criticism persists endlessly, with acts of oppression, power dynamics, and injustices being constantly reproduced[1] (Hodgson et al., 2018). Moreover, as suggested by researchers: '[…] we have no grounds to believe that debunking reality – giving further proof of the wrongs inherent to the world – will make people change their actions, and therefore, will change the world itself' (Hodgson et al., 2018, p. 17).

As has been suggested, post-critical pedagogy shares the critical belief in the potential for transforming and renewing the world (Hodgson et al., 2018). In this perspective, however, it is characterized by a state of 'hopeness' in the present. This attitude is different from naïve optimism since it does not entail uncritical acceptance of the current reality. Rather, it involves a genuine recognition of the value inherent in

humanity's present actions. 'Hopeness' denotes the capacity to perceive the good that exists in the here and now, a good that is deemed worthy of preservation and protection. The authors' preference for the term 'hopeness' over 'hope' arises from its nuanced meaning. 'Hope' inherently looks towards a future yet to be realized (Lewis, 2017, p. 32). 'Hopeness' is to be understood as 'hope without the hoped for' (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 150), which makes it consistent with post-critical emphasis on the present moment.

Another crucial aspect of post-critical pedagogy is its assertion that certain principles are worth defending, which stands in contrast to current post-structuralist relativism (Hodgson et al., 2017). It is, however, important to note that post-critical pedagogy is based on an attitude of 'principled normativity' rather than 'procedural normativity'. Principled normativity moves away from conventional approaches focused on achieving desired goals through adherence to recognized norms or established theories. It is not founded on *a priori* norms that reality must conform to. Instead, principled normativity emerges *a posteriori*, arising from performing activities perceived as valuable and meaningful. When guided by principled normativity, individuals adopt an attitude towards their actions which does not involve imposing a predetermined goal to be attained (Hodgson et al., 2018). It is centred on the premise: 'X is good and, therefore, deserves attention and care.' This stands in contrast to procedural normativity, characterized by the notion: 'X is good, so Y should be done to attain X.'

Post-critical pedagogy is further grounded on the concept of pedagogical hermeneutics. Unlike the dominant belief in the critical paradigm, which often regards community and commonality as unattainable, pedagogical hermeneutics presents an alternative perspective. It perceives the potential for communication and collaborative action as both feasible and carrying transformative potential. In this view, community is regarded as a task to be accomplished, something to be caused (Hodgson et al., 2018). Pedagogical hermeneutics rejects the notion that mutual understanding is unreachable and instead embraces the conviction that establishing a shared space is possible, even amidst individual differences (Hodgson et al., 2017).

There is a growing body of literature employing and discussing the perspective of post-critical pedagogy, and while the discourse surrounding its propositions is engaging and captivating, certain aspects hold greater relevance to the present article than others. Post-critical scholars have so far directed their attention mostly towards higher education (Hodgson et al., 2020), teaching and teachers (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019), or upbringing (Hodgson & Ramaekers, 2019), which might appear distant from the matter at hand. However, as will be shown in this paper, the outlined concepts can effectively be applied to the context of social movements and SML^2, broadening the range of subjects that fall within the scope of post-critical pedagogy.

Deconsumption

The term 'deconsumption' holds major significance in this paper and requires a clear explication, due to its relative novelty and potential lack of clarity. Contemporary post-industrial Western societies are commonly denoted as consumer societies in academic discussions (Golka, 2012; Bauman, 2005; Baudrillard, 1998). Members of these societies exhibit an inclination towards accumulation of wealth, particularly valuing novelty. Such attitudes have been met with critique from various theoretical viewpoints, including: postmodernism (Bauman, 2007; Jameson, 1997), degrowth theory (D'Alisa et al., 2020), posthumanism (Soper, 2012), ecofeminism (Cochrane, 2020), critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2012; Melosik, 2012), and others.

Central to grasping the meaning of deconsumption is Bauman's concept of consumerism (2008), which serves as a key reference for understanding the essence of deconsumption – an endeavour that involves its deliberate rejection (or an attempt to do so). There is a crucial distinction between 'consumerism' and 'consumption', based on two elements. Firstly, consumerism is rooted in the logic of constant dissatisfaction, perpetuating an insatiable cycle of constantly emerging needs. Secondly, the attributes inherent in consumption practices – such as: the cult of novelty and material acquisition, tendencies toward accumulation, the pursuit of immediate gratification and social prestige, prioritization of aesthetics over ethics, as well as an aspiration for individuality and originality – transcend their conventional boundaries, permeating other spheres of existence. As articulated by Bauman: '[…] the pattern of consumer behaviour gains hegemony in social and private life' (Bauman, 2008, p. 14). Thus, consumption patterns extend into numerous domains of life. These 'contaminated' areas encompass: interpersonal relationships, domestic spaces, identity construction, communal interactions, educational and developmental realms, professional pursuits, as well as socio-political commitment (Bauman, 2008).

Given that the prefix 'de-' commonly signifies reversal or undoing, the term 'deconsumption' is interpreted here as an endeavour to diminish, reverse, or unlearn consumerist behaviours. In essence, deconsumption entails a rejection of consumerism as defined by Bauman. This concept involves a deliberate refusal to participate in the perpetual cycle of dissatisfaction and acquisition inherent in consumerist patterns, aiming instead to attain contentment with fewer material possessions. Deconsumption constitutes a conscious disengagement from the spectacles of consumption and a principled resistance to the values and notions characteristic of consumerism. Therefore, it also involves a decontamination of the previously mentioned spheres of life.

In literature, this phenomenon – alongside related concepts – is also referred to as: 'ethical consumption' (Humphrey, 2016), 'subconsumption' (Baudrillard, 1998), 'anticonsumption' (Ziesemer et al., 2021), 'sustainable consumption' (Brough et al., 2016), 'green consumerism' (Akenji, 2014), and others. This terminological chaos is further amplified by differing interpretations from various scholars. At times, these terms are treated interchangeably, while in other instances, they evoke distinct connotations. To mitigate this confusion, the present paper adopts the term 'deconsumption' exclusively, avoiding its interchangeable use with other terms. The selection of this term is motivated by its affinity with the concepts of 'degrowth' and 'deconstruction'. Deconsumption, as understood here, entails a deconstruction of the prevailing mindset of consumerism, and endeavours to, at least partially, realize the ideas of degrowth. Importantly, deconsumption possesses a broader scope than ethical consumption, as its practitioners may be guided by self-centred motives, such as personal well-being and self-development, in addition to – or instead of – altruistic concerns.

It becomes evident that numerous contemporary social movements fall, to varying extents, within the scope of deconsumption. These movements encompass: voluntary simplicity, veganism, freeganism, minimalism, the zero-waste movement, eco-village initiatives, fair trade movement, and others. However, it is crucial to recognize that not all manifestations of these orientations can be categorized as deconsumption. For instance, an individual can adopt a vegan lifestyle without any major unlearning of consumerist practices due to the extensive availability of various vegan products. Consequently, members of these movements are classified as deconsumers only when their actions entail a rejection of consumerism (or an attempt to do so).

Method and research design

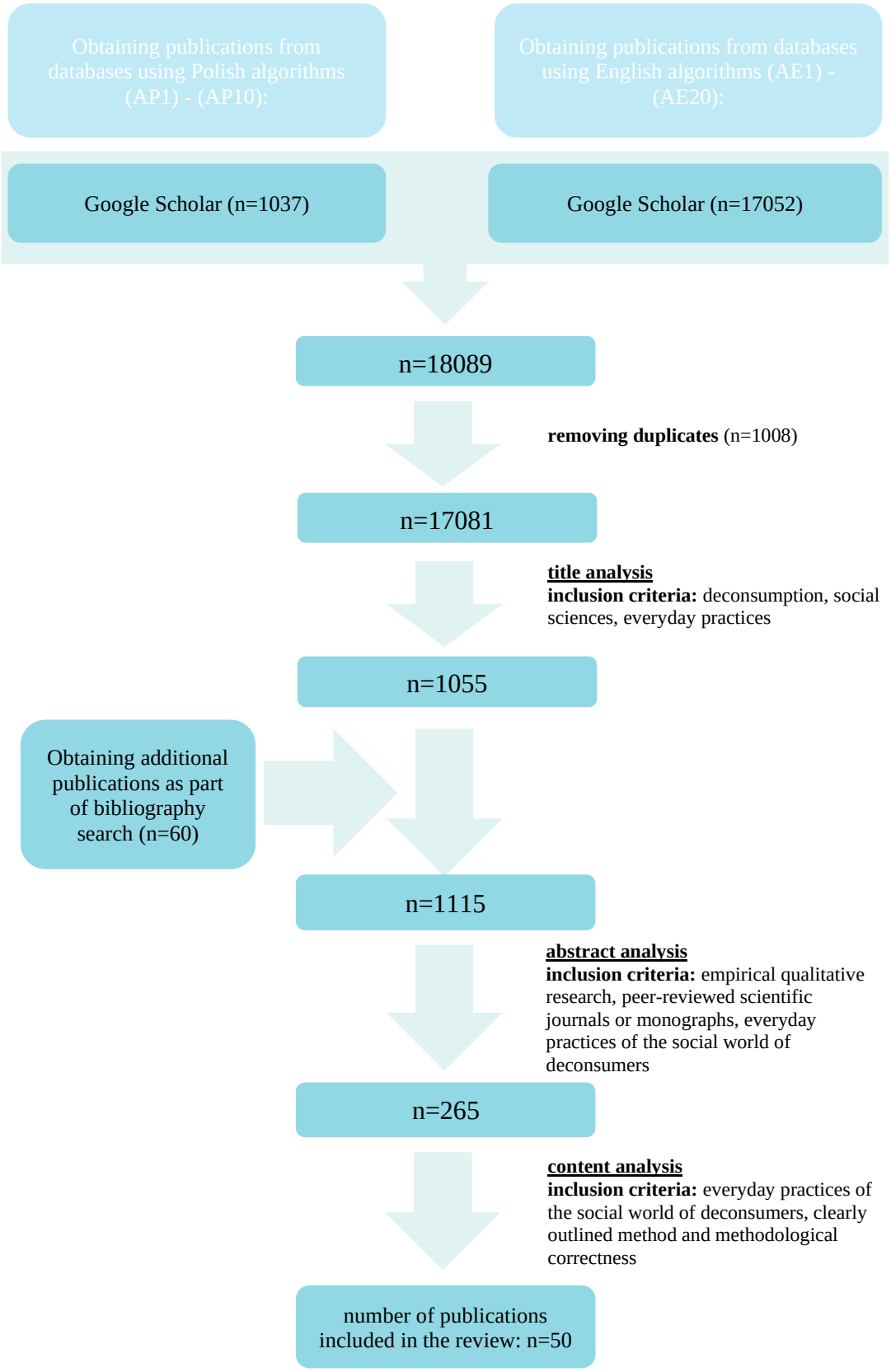
The literature review on the everyday practices of the social world of deconsumers was carried out employing the systematic review method (Petticrew & Rogers, 2006)[3]. The data corpus for the present research was constructed following the systematic review guidelines articulated by Makowska (2020) from October 16 to December 30, 2022. Initially, a systematic review of systematic reviews was carried out in order to shape the review's purpose: identifying studies concerning everyday practices of the social world of deconsumers. Research questions were formulated, including a pivotal one for this article: What are the principal themes derived from trans- and interdisciplinary investigations of deconsumers' everyday practices? The review's scope was defined in five tasks: (1) encompassing various manifestations of deconsumption (e.g., voluntary simplicity, freeganism, minimalism); (2) addressing diverse aspects of deconsumers' everyday practices, such as: values, social connections, self-presentation, artifacts, ideas, challenges, inspirations etc.; (3) encompassing English and Polish literature; (4) summarizing existing knowledge on the social world of deconsumers, highlighting research directions and gaps[4]; (5) promoting deconsumption discourse in education studies (pedagogy).

Subsequently, a pilot review (Kusztal & Piasecka, 2020) has been conducted to determine the inclusion/exclusion criteria for the review, which incorporated:

1. peer-reviewed journal articles or chapters in peer-reviewed scientific monographs
2. publications from 2012 onwards
3. social science research (e.g., sociology, psychology, pedagogy/ education studies, marketing, management, anthropology, media studies, cultural studies, political science, ethnography, development studies)
4. research on deconsumers' everyday practices
5. empirical qualitative research
6. works featuring well-defined methodology and methodological correctness

The pilot review unveiled terminological ambiguity in the context of deconsumption, as well as an interdisciplinary nature of this phenomenon, which influenced keyword selection and search algorithms. Initial research indicated the viability of limiting the search to the Google Scholar database due to its multidisciplinary nature and extensive records. In the following stages, a comprehensive review (October 18 - December 17, 2022) was conducted employing the established keywords, with research selection stages visualized in the following diagram:

Diagram 1. The Flow of Literature Search and Selection. Source: Own elaboration based on Mazur & Orłowska (2018).



The last stage involved data extraction followed by a quantitative, and then qualitative analysis and synthesis of research results, which allowed for the selection of key themes, exploration of current research directions and the state of knowledge, as well as insight into the issue of everyday practices of the social world of deconsumers.

(Post-critical) Research findings

In line with the paper's objective to explore deconsumer practices from the post-critical perspective, the presentation of results will be organized alongside the framework of post-critical pedagogy, which – on a more general level – includes: affirming positive aspects of the present, acknowledgment of the critical tradition, transformative hopeness in the present, pedagogical hermeneutics, principled normativity, and philosophy of responsibility.

As discussed, post-critical pedagogy seeks to affirm the positive dimensions of the present, based on an attitude of love towards the world. Taking into account numerous critiques directed at post-industrial consumer societies, and the widespread calls for sustainability due to environmental and societal concerns, the deconsumption movement can be construed as a positive phenomenon in the present. Everyday practices of deconsumers encompass various activities that seem to ignore the dominant consumerist cult of novelty and fashion, as well as the inclination to discard older possessions – as discussed by Bauman (2011). Deconsumers partake in producing their own goods for personal use (Anantharaman, 2022; Mendonça et al., 2020; Hoelscher & Chatzidakis, 2020; Duda, 2020; Kala et al., 2017; Kraleva, 2017; Carfagna et al. 2014; Kramarczyk, 2015; Brombin, 2015; Wilczak, 2016; Papaoikonomou, 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2012; Isenhour, 2012). They engage in repairing or repurposing pre-owned items (Hoelscher & Chatzidakis, 2020; Mendonça et al., 2020; Duda, 2020; Papaoikonomou et al., 2016; Wilczak, 2016; Majdecka, 2013; Papaoikonomou, 2013; Isenhour, 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2012), and redistribute unused possessions through diverse platforms as well as exchange chains (Wilczak, 2016; Bly et al., 2015; Chatzidakis et al., 2012; Isenhour, 2012). Their shopping habits are restrained, characterised by enhanced reflection and consideration during decision-making processes, often requiring additional time and effort (Saraiva et al., 2020; Duda, 2020; Pelikán et al., 2017; Kraleva, 2017; Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016; Kramarczyk, 2015; Isenhour, 2012). They also exhibit indifference towards fashion trends and display a lack of esteem for widely endorsed brands, which typically enjoy a favourable status in dominant discourses. (Kramarczyk, 2015; Papaoikonomou et al., 2016; Papaoikonomou, 2013; Pelikán et al., 2017; Isenhour, 2012; Bly et al., 2015).

The emergence of these practices shows that deconsumers are able to think, imagine, and act 'otherwise', with some immunity to the dominant logic, which implies the processes of unlearning (Andreotti, 2009). While it is true that some deconsumers do make concessions (Anantharaman, 2022; Atkinson & Kim, 2014; Isenhour, 2012), it remains a fact that these practices, albeit intermittently followed, represent attitudes that diverge from the consumerist orientation. Consequently, these practices might be construed as positive aspects of the contemporary world – examples of different, more sustainable ways of existence. In contrast to the critical perspective that centres on negative aspects of consumerism, its omnipresence and inevitability, the post-critical standpoint can emphasise domains where a different way of life is possible, chosen and pursued in the present moment.

Within the post-critical framework, deconsumption can be viewed through the lens of Badiou's concept of 'event' (*l'événement*), which signifies an unforeseen occurrence

that remains inconceivable and absent within the confines of the established status quo or dominant discourse (Badiou, 2005). While deconsumption may bear resemblances to historical practices like asceticism and cynicism, its emergence within the logic of consumerism appears unpredictable and even 'impossible.' Vlieghe and Zamojski propose that the possibility of the 'impossible' emerges from the fact that the existing order is essentially a social construct rather than an immutable natural law (2019, p. 31), despite the apparent naturalization of culture, as discussed by Bourdieu (2004, p. 8).

Discussing the concept of *l'événement* and its impact on the established order requires the use of Badiou's idea of 'fidelity to the event.' When choosing to illuminate the realm of deconsumption, an inherent fidelity to the event of deconsumption is assumed. This entails ascribing notable significance to it, deeming it possible, and, perhaps inadvertently, disrupting the entrenched idea of consumerism being an all-encompassing issue (Badiou, 2005, p. 335). As outlined by post-critical scholars (Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2019, p. 31), it is crucial to unveil and accentuate *l'événement*, thereby explaining its meaning and importance for the world. Therefore, researchers who study and write about a certain *l'événement* themselves assume fidelity toward it, actively participating in its explication and affirmation.

Since fidelity to *l'événement*: 'creates something new (a counter-state, an exception) within the dominant order, not in opposition to it' (Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2019, p. 35), deconsumers exemplify it by harnessing existing opportunities within the dominant system to cultivate non-consumerist lifestyles. They use that which is available within the established order, without the necessity to escape it entirely. Evident illustrations include: the utilization of public transportation and bicycles (Anantharaman, 2022; Pelikán et al., 2017; Kraleva, 2017; Isenhour, 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2012), propagation of deconsumption ideas and values through social media platforms (Mendonça et al., 2020; Przecherska, 2019; Wilczak, 2016; Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016), and – most importantly – the resourceful practices of freegans capitalizing on urban waste abundance – a lifestyle contingent entirely on the wastefulness of city dwellers (Pelska, 2022; Barnard, 2016).

The notion that deconsumption can be regarded a positive phenomenon of the present world gains further traction as deconsumers themselves engage in discourse concerning various advantages stemming from their adopted lifestyle. Due to reduced consumption needs, they frequently curtail their work hours, simultaneously diminishing their engagement in shopping-related activities. This reallocation of time affords them extended periods of leisure, which they devote to pursuits such as hobbies, interests, interpersonal relationships (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020; Duda, 2020; Mendonça et al., 2020; Kala et al., 2017; Przecherska, 2019; Wilczak, 2016; Zaritska, 2015; Pelikán et al., 2015; Howell, 2013; Kramarczyk, 2015; Isenhour, 2012), and fostering a connection with nature (Kala et al., 2017; Zaritska, 2015). Another crucial implication of deconsumption is the enhanced capacity to identify personal needs, which is related to psychological well-being and a sense of an authentic life (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020; Kramarczyk, 2015). The absence of haste in daily affairs translates to heightened mindfulness during interpersonal interactions (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020). Furthermore, alignment with individual values and convictions brings deconsumers a sense of contentment and fulfilment (Kala et al., 2017; Wilczak, 2016; Zaritska, 2015; Howell, 2013). An increased sense of agency emerges as another frequently discussed benefit (Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017; Wilczak, 2016; Carfagna et al., 2014; Lindeman, 2012; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012.). It, therefore, becomes evident that participation in deconsumption communities creates opportunities for personal growth, self-development, as well as informal and non-formal education, as documented by various studies (Anantharaman,

2022; Saraiva et al., 2020; Casey et al., 2016; Wilczak, 2016; Savio, 2016; Zaritska, 2015; Kramarczyk, 2015; Brombin, 2015; Cherry, 2014; Howell, 2013; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012.).

It is worth remembering, however, that the post-critical perspective is never possible without the critical one, and the awareness of evil is necessary to properly care for that which is good (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 82). Since post-critical pedagogy builds upon the foundations laid by the critical tradition, the challenges faced by deconsumers should not be entirely ignored. Despite their adept utilization of certain aspects of the consumerist order, and their ability to align with their principles while still engaging with society, they encounter various infrastructural and social obstacles. Infrastructural challenges encompass issues such as: lack of affordable repair services (Wilczak, 2016), inadequate cycling infrastructure (Anantharaman, 2022), limited access to healthcare services and job opportunities in rural areas (Kraleva, 2017), and insufficient information about the production processes of various goods (Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017; Shaw et al., 2016). Social obstacles include: difficulties in participating in consumption-centred social rituals (Boström, 2021); challenges in finding like-minded partners (Kowal, 2016); societal pressure to conform to consumer norms (Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016; Isenhour, 2012); the notion of a societal 'glass floor' that sets minimal consumption standards (Boström, 2021); and gender-related stereotypes tied to consumption choices, such as the association of meat consumption with masculinity (Mycek, 2018).

Given the prevailing consumerist ideology in Western societies, the presence of these challenges is to be expected. The criticism directed at consumerism has been instrumental in giving rise to the deconsumption movement, rendering it challenging to investigate this phenomenon without any critical context. Nevertheless, irrespective of the obstacles encountered by deconsumers, the examination of their experiences maintains a post-critical essence, as they persist in realizing their ideals and leading non-consumerist lifestyles despite the difficulties. The post-critical perspective acknowledges this critical unmasking of hindrances while also highlighting the positive aspects that thrive in spite of them. Deeming deconsumption a 'positive aspect of the world' does not mean that one becomes ignorant of the various problems related to this movement, extensively discussed by critical researchers (see e.g.: Carrington & Chatzidakis, 2018; Littler, 2013). It is simply not the task of this paper to further the critical perspective but to transcend it. From a post-critical standpoint, the researcher adopts a perspective of understanding 'what' and 'how' deconsumers accomplish rather than solely focusing on the need for their emancipation or the evil intricacies of the system.

As has been mentioned, post-critical pedagogy's concern with societal transformation is characterized by the attitude of 'hopeness' in the present, asserting that the potential for change exists in the current moment rather than being reserved solely for some project of a desired future. The present-day transformative significance of deconsumers' actions might be illuminated by the concept of prefigurative politics. The term encapsulates the idea of enacting within the present the ideals and values one aspires to see in a future transformed society, without waiting for a 'revolutionary disruptive event' in the future (Monticelli, 2021). Rather than plotting a series of actions leading to a desired outcome, prefigurative politics involves immediate behaviours that align with the envisioned reality. In a similar vein, post-critical pedagogy draws from Rancière's notion of verification (1991), which entails practical engagement premised on the assumption of a different reality. Verification '[…] is about making something come true by affirming it in practice' (Hodgson et al., 2018, p. 13). Zamojski calls such activities 'interventions':

> Intervention in post-critical research consists of introducing by the researcher into the social status quo that which is non-existent and impossible from the point of view of critical knowledge about the human world. The researcher therefore disturbs this status quo by initiating actions that can be taken by other people in very different ways. Therefore, he or she makes a proposal of joint action of a certain quality to the subjects; actions based on specific axioms. If his proposal is taken up by others, these axioms will become true, i.e. they will be put into action, they will be realized in the actions of people (Zamojski, 2014, p. 15).

Likewise, deconsumers actively 'verify' the possibility of a lifestyle contrary to consumerism through their interventions – by living in accordance with their convictions within the present order, despite the prevailing belief in the entrenched dominance of consumerist norms. Such prefigurative politics is seen as particularly valuable in the post-critical perspective, which believes that only *l'événement* has the capacity to reconfigure the status quo. As stated by Zamojski (2014): 'From the point of view of the world, an event [*l'événement*] is an incomprehensible utopia, and from the point of view of people faithful to the event, it is the essential measure of reality, it is the starting point' (p. 10).

Therefore, daily practices of deconsumers might be viewed as exemplifications of prefigurative politics. They entail a rejection, an unlearning of the consumerist paradigm and instead embrace new norms and values. Notably, some individuals involved in the study perceive their routines as expressions of political involvement, asserting that their everyday actions lead to socio-political transformation (Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017; Carfagna et al., 2014; Cherry, 2014; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012; Portwood-Stacer, 2012). At the same time, there are those who do not explicitly consider themselves politically active but still address societal needs by, for instance, establishing independent educational facilities and centres catering to mothers (Kala et al., 2017). As can be noticed, the socio-political engagement among deconsumers extends beyond their household routines. Scholars frequently identify instances of 'soft' activism within deconsumer communities. Such instances include: motivating others to adopt similar lifestyle changes (Costa et al., 2014), sharing knowledge and information with individuals not practicing deconsumption (Saraiva et al., 2020; Wilczak, 2016), arranging educational events like lectures and seminars (Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017; Chatzidakis et al., 2012), participating in cooperative volunteering (Gowan & Slocum, 2014), creating independent organizations (Chatzidakis et al., 2012), and establishing independent product certification systems (Papaoikinomou, 2013). The validation of interpreting deconsumers' everyday behaviours as manifestations of prefigurative politics is further reinforced by their profound recognition of socio-political and economic problems related to consumerism (Duda, 2020; Gupta & Acharya, 2019; Farkas, 2017; Casey et al., 2016; Bly et al., 2015; Carfagna et al., 2014; Howell, 2013.), as well as the altruistic motivations reported by some of the research participants (Pelska, 2022; Gupta & Acharya, 2019; Kowal, 2016; Shaw et al., 2016; Bly et al., 2015; Howell, 2013).

Examining deconsumption through the lens of prefigurative politics and Rancière's concept of verification reveals an additional aspect of social transformation carried out by deconsumers. The establishment and cultivation of close-knit relationships and communities plays a central role in their actions. This aligns with the perspective of post-critical pedagogical hermeneutics, which asserts the feasibility of creating shared spaces and nurturing communal bonds, regardless of individual differences (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 16). Perhaps the most basic form of community discussed within the reviewed research is represented by online groups that materialize through diverse social media platforms. These digital realms foster a sense of belonging often difficult to achieve in offline contexts (Mendonça et al., 2020; Zalewska & Cobel-Tokarska, 2016; Majdecka,

2013). Other research participants, however, concurrently engage in offline deconsumption communities (Mycek, 2018; Kraleva, 2017; Savio, 2016; Wilczak, 2016; Howell, 2013; Papaoikonomou et al., 2012; Chatzidakis et al., 2012). In line with posthumanist values, certain communities extend to include cared-for animals (Morris, 2022). The sense of community often transcends fellow deconsumers, as exemplified by Hungarian ecovillagers who perceive connectivity with the whole global sphere (Farkas, 2017). Deconsumption communities offer a supportive platform for idea exchange (Howell, 2013; Anantharaman, 2022; Savio, 2016; Casey et al., 2016; Wilczak, 2016; Brombin, 2015). Notably, mutual help constitutes a significant thread within these circles (Saraiva et al., 2020; Gowan & Slocum, 2014). Amid the competitive attitudes of Western capitalism, eco-villagers and freegans shift from individual consumption, learning collective production and cooperation (Farkas, 2017; Savio, 2016; Gowan & Slocum, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2012). The democratic essence of these communities is evident through their recurrent collective discussions aiming at finding common solutions to various problems (Casey et al., 2016; Chatzidakis et al., 2012).

Social bonds and the capacity for meaningful interpersonal relationships play crucial roles in deconsumers' lifestyles. These areas of life are treasured, and they contribute to a feeling of satisfaction with life. Research on deconsumers often explores the realm of profound interpersonal connections, valued for their own sake (Duda, 2020; Kala et al., 2017; Lee, Ahn, 2016; Dimova, 2016; Savio, 2016; Zaritska, 2015; Gowan & Slocum, 2014; Chatzidakis et al., 2013). Within this context, the capitalist celebration of individualism encounters criticism (Farkas, 2017). The significance of community-building in facilitating deconsumption lifestyles becomes evident. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, these communities also demonstrate a willingness to educate and include outsiders. Beyond merely verifying the feasibility of adopting a non-consumerist lifestyle, deconsumers also verify the possibility of establishing, nurturing, and valuing communities. In line with pedagogical hermeneutics, they reject any preconceived notions about the impossibility of communal living (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 16), unlearning hyper-individualism. Instead, they operate on the premise that communal bonds are attainable within an individualistic society, effectively manifesting this possibility at the same time. The examination of this aspect of deconsumers' lives, therefore, holds considerable interest for researchers adopting a post-critical perspective, valuing commonality, and seeing community as a task to be accomplished (Hodgson et al., 2018).

The post-critical idea of principled normativity denoting actions undertaken for their intrinsic value rather than their potential outcomes, becomes apparent in the attitude of certain deconsumers who recognize the adaptive capacity of the capitalist economy in response to evolving social realities and alternative consumer orientations. While research participants actively partake in socio-political endeavours, they acknowledge the limitations of their actions in inducing sweeping societal change at a macro level. Their continuation of the deconsumption lifestyle stems from the fact that it allows them to reproduce these alternative practices within the system. This is deemed valuable in itself due to the agency, responsibility, reflexivity, and heightened life satisfaction it engenders (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). Hence, deconsumption need not exclusively be construed as a means to an end – as a pursuit of a desired sustainable future – and evaluated primarily based on its macro-scale impact. The post-critical concept of 'pure means', introduced by Agamben, illustrates this attitude well. According to the researcher, human activity might be viewed either instrumentally, as means *to* a specific end, or as 'pure means', i.e. means *without* an end (Agamben, 2000; see also: Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). Embracing a post-critical stance may guide researchers away from fixating on instrumental assessments

(regarding the impact of deconsumption movement on the world), and instead prompt an emphasis on various positive aspects of this lifestyle, appreciating it as a value in its own right.

It might be observed that the theme of responsibility and ethics of care emerges within the reviewed literature, establishing a strong connection between the subject of deconsumption and the post-critical philosophy of responsibility. As previously noted, a significant number of deconsumers frequently advocate altruistic principles, actively concerning themselves with the welfare of animals, fellow humans, and the planet itself (Pelska, 2022; Gupta & Acharya, 2019; Kowal, 2016; Shaw et al., 2016; Howell, 2013). Nature is perceived as both valuable and fragile, with humans considered its integral components entrusted with the duty of care. Deconsumers transcend the conventional anthropocentric worldview, transitioning towards a more posthumanist perspective, wherein humanity is regarded as an intrinsic part of the environment. Nature ceases to be treated instrumentally but is respected instead (Kunchamboo et al., 2017; Kraleva, 2017; Brombin, 2015; Howell, 2013). The concept of 'new materialism' also finds mention, denoting the restoration of the interconnected relationship between objects, individuals, and the natural world (Carfagna et al., 2014). Consistent with the perspective elucidated by Zamojski (2014), deconsumers acknowledge the presence of the good in the world, the good characterized by its vulnerability and susceptibility to human influence; the good for which humanity is responsible. In the context of deconsumers, this extends to nature and animals, but also beyond – encompassing social bonds and human agency.

Contributions to SML

The foregoing discussion has already deleneated various instances of SML within the context of deconsumption. These instances encompass, among others, such activities as: unlearning the logic of consumerism, and learning (or teaching) about its hazards; fostering self-awareness through the recognition of personal needs; nurturing reflexivity and critical thinking by expanding the knowledge of socio-political, economic, and environmental intricacies linked to consumption; acquiring new skills in the area of repairing, redistribution and production of goods; learning communal life by engaging in the formation of social support networks and democratic communities; unlearning the anthropocentric logic inherent in capitalism; and so on.

It is also worth mentioning additional SML-related endeavors, such as: informal instruction in the form of establishing normative frameworks adhered to by community members (Pelska, 2022; Savio, 2016; Majdecka, 2013), as well as the deployment of artifacts as moral reminders (Barnard, 2016). Physical space and artifacts also serve as catalysts for reflexivity enhancement. Research on Irish eco-villagers unveils practices like placing stickers depicting power plant pollution next to light switches or using large rocks to weigh down trash bin lids. These actions instigate moments of reflection within daily routines, ensuring a sustained consideration of the costs associated with production and consumption, preventing them from receding into the background (Casey et al., 2016). This aligns with McGregor's (2014) non-anthropocentric perspective on SML, positing that space and artifacts also play a role in the dynamics of social movement learning.

From the post-critical standpoint, the informal and non-formal educational practices of deconsumers can be interpreted as manifestations of their attitude of love towards the world, which is understood as a perpetual commitment requiring continuous effort and responsibility (Hodgson et al., 2017), and a desire to present that which is loved to the broader world (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019). Deconsumption undeniably demands a

significant investment of time and effort, involving activities such as: thorough research (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020; Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017; Shaw et al., 2016; Costa et al., 2014), modification of one's habits (Kramarczyk, 2015), acquisition of necessary knowledge (Mendonça et al., 2020; Cherry, 2014; Papaoikonomou & Alarcón, 2017), and the like. Themes of engagement, care, and learning consistently emerge across diverse studies addressing the phenomenon of deconsumption.

The principal contribution of the post-critical perspective to SML seems to lie in its approach to social transformation and research subjects. Post-critical pedagogy views social movement participants as articulating and realising a collective vision or ideal in the present, echoing Eyerman and Jamison's concept of 'cognitive praxis' (1991; also referenced in Leung, 2011). A notable distinction, however, aside from the emphasis on cognition, is that the cognitive perspective remains inherently instrumental. Eyerman and Jamison (1991) discuss the utopian mission of social movements, wherein new knowledge generated through cognitive praxis is considered a means to an end – a potential catalyst for broad societal transformation, representing steps towards a larger, albeit elusive, objective. It embodies an attitude of hope rather than post-critical 'hopeness' (hope without the hoped-for). As has already been highlighted, in the post-critical perspective deconsumption does not have to be viewed as a pursuit of a desired sustainable future or assessed based on its macro-scale impact; it can be treated as valuable in itself.

The post-critical perspective aligns closely with Finger's (1989) viewpoint, opposing the instrumentalization of individuals who constitute 'vehicles of modernisation' and advocating for a shift in adult education where personal transformation is regarded as a seed for social transformation. While the apparent opposition to the instrumental approach is reminiscent of the post-critical perspective, it differs from it in at least one important aspect. With the concept of pure means (Agamben, 2000), post-critical pedagogy rejects any form of instrumentalization, allowing the SML researcher to forgo utilitarian assessments. Whereas Finger (1989) postulates that individual transformation *leads to* social transformation, the post-critical researcher may contend that individual transformation *is* social transformation – social transformation takes place simultaneously with an individual one. This understanding draws inspiration from Rancière's concept of verification as discussed earlier: rather than waiting for a different reality, one assumes and acts as if that reality were already true, thereby affirming this truth in practice. The notion that individual transformation is synonymous with social transformation aligns closely with the assumptions of many NSM scholars who '[…] have assumed the individual and the collective as two opposite ends of a spectrum in their conceptualisations of collective learning' (Kuk & Tarlau, 2020, p. 599).

The post-critical concept of *l'événement* introduces an additional dimension to SML: the role of the researcher. As previously noted, fidelity to the event is not exclusive to the participants of a social movement; researchers studying these movements also exhibit fidelity to the event, actively engaging in the SML process by dedicating care and attention to the movement and disseminating knowledge about it. The researcher can, thus, be considered an active participant of the SML process. Taking the example of deconsumption, the researcher, by highlighting peripheral aspects of the world that defy the dominant logic of consumption, performs a form of intervention. In much the same way that deconsumption can be viewed as *l'événement*, research on deconsumption also qualifies as *l'événement* because it transcends the predominant emphasis on critiquing the contemporary consumerist paradigm. Scholars investigating deconsumption demonstrate fidelity to the event of deconsumption by introducing innovative perspectives within the prevailing scholarly order (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019).

When examining SML from the post-critical perspective, it becomes apparent that the focal points are not centred around power dynamics, oppression, and emancipation. While the rich critical tradition continues to unveil and critique various instances of the reproduction of oppression and inequality, as has been done by numerous SML theorists (Kuk & Tarlau, 2020), a complementary role for the post-critical perspective emerges. It seeks to provide counterbalance by highlighting, preserving, and affirming that which is deemed valuable: hopeness in the present, socio-political engagement, democratic decision-making, self-efficacy, reflexivity, community building, mutual support, responsibility, care for the world, and so on. Such an approach to social movements ensures that these aspects do not become overlooked or neglected in the relentless pursuit of unmasking concealed oppressions.

Lastly, it is imperative to acknowledge that this paper serves as a preliminary exploration into the integration of the post-critical perspective into SML. Its purpose is to extend an invitation to fellow researchers, encouraging their participation in applying this framework and delving deeper into its potential implications.

Notes

1 This might be observed in the reproduction of the inequality of power in classrooms where teachers are seen as emancipators and students as being in need of emancipation from an outside source (Lewis, 2017, p. 24). Such a reproduction has also been partially discussed by Freire (2005) in his concept of the banking model of education.

2 It should be noted that certain post-critical concepts have been omitted in this paper due to their irrelevance to the matter at hand.

3 The method has been elaborated on in an earlier paper discussing other results of this literature review (see: Szyszka, 2023).

4 The present paper does not discuss gaps in deconsumption research. Those have been discussed elsewhere (see: Szyszka, 2023).

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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Member education in three Finnish parliamentary parties: Analysing the purposes and preconditions through the lens of practice architectures

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Abstract

This study investigates the purposes and corresponding preconditions of member education practices in three Finnish political parties using the theory of practice architectures. To accomplish this, it examines the educational endeavours of three Finnish parliamentary parties—namely, the Centre Party of Finland (Suomen Keskusta), the National Coalition Party (Kansallinen Kokoomus) and the Social Democratic Party of Finland (Suomen sosiaalidemokraattinen puolue). The study draws on the theory of practice architectures, which provides a framework for examining the arrangements comprising the preconditions underlying practices—that is, purposeful endeavours based on established human courses of action. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows. What are the main purposes of education within the studied political parties? What preconditions enable or constrain the educational practices related to those purposes? The findings reveal that the Centre Party of Finland aims to foster expertise among its entire membership in a consistent and impactful manner, emphasising educational planning and supporting political ambition. Moreover, the National Coalition Party's political education aims to foster members' expertise and success, as supported by individualisation, while the Social Democratic Party of Finland's party-political education focuses on engaging members and renewing the party, which are pursued through offering open educational opportunities and considering both local preconditions and historical knowledge. In conclusion, the identified purposes seek a balance between ensuring equality and supporting hierarchy among the party membership, while the identified preconditions indicate understandings of the political party as either a collective actor or an arena in which individual political actors operate.

Keywords: political parties, party-political education, theory of practice architectures

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Introduction

Political parties play a key role in the political systems of many countries, particularly in representative democracies, providing citizens with possibilities to influence political agendas and decision-making (Bladh, 2022, 2023; Sartori, 2005). To fulfil this role, political parties offer various forms of learning and education, ranging from the orientation of new members to training for party leadership. Considering the multiple challenges related to distrust and polarisation that liberal democracies have been facing (Wildemeersch & Fejes, 2018), including anti-democratic tendencies (Garcia & Philip, 2018; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020), it is important to elucidate the educational aspects of party-political activities. This contributes to comprehension of the prerequisites for democratic processes, where citizens' informed decision-making and understanding of political processes are key. Previous research on adult education has largely focused on political and democratic issues (Fejes et al., 2018; Heikkinen, 2019; Laginder et al., 2013; Schugurensky, 2006; Zeuner, 2013). In particular, in the research on learning within social movements, the link between societal processes and learning is notable (Atta & Holst, 2023). However, there has been limited research on political parties from the education perspective.

The Nordic societal context provides an interesting setting for investigating the educational endeavours of political parties. In the Nordic countries, it is notable that the educational backgrounds of political decision-makers are heterogeneous. Unlike the situation in certain other countries (e.g. Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom or École National d'Administration in France), there are no elite universities favoured by future politicians in the Nordic countries (Godmer & Gaxie, 2007; Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019). Rather, it appears that future decision-makers in the Nordic countries acquire their skills and influence in other settings (Huttunen, 2012). Historically, Nordic popular education played a significant role as a provider of political education for citizens seeking to hold positions of trust and influence, and this tradition might still influence how political parties view their role as educational actors (Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019; Nordvall & Malmström, 2015; Pastuhov, 2021).

Thus, the present study draws on an interest in party-political education, as organised by the political parties themselves, possibly informed by the Nordic tradition of popular education. Consequently, the aim of the study is to investigate the purposes of the member education practices of three Finnish political parties, as well as the underlying prerequisites, using the theory of practice architectures. This theory allows for an examination of party-political education as comprised of social practices and of the underlying prerequisites for it (Heikkinen et al., 2018; Kemmis, 2019). More specifically, this study focuses on the educational projects—that is, the main educational purposes (justifications and goals)—that can be discerned in the views of party representatives with educational responsibilities. As such, the study addresses the following research questions. What are the main purposes of education within the studied parties? What preconditions enable or constrain the education practices related to those purposes?

To answer these questions, this study examines the educational endeavours of three Finnish parliamentary parties—namely, the agrarian Centre Party of Finland (Centre Party), the moderate right-wing National Coalition Party (NCP) and the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP). These parties primarily organise their educational activities in cooperation with their affiliated study associations (i.e. the Association for Rural Culture and Education [MSL], the National Education Association [Kansio] and the Workers' Educational Association [TSL], respectively). The Centre Party (founded in 1906), the SDP (founded in 1899) and the NCP (founded in 1918) are traditionally

referred to as the largest political parties in Finland (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016; Saarinen et al., 2018), and they are considered established because they (or their predecessors in the case of the NCP) have held seats in the contemporary Finnish Parliament since its establishment in 1906. Today, the NCP and the SDP remain among the largest parties, considering both member numbers and voter turnout in elections, while the Centre Party, despite having the highest number of party members of all the Finnish parties, has secured only between 11% and 15% of the voter turnout in the most recent elections (Mickelsson, 2021). Still, all three parties have established party organisations based on local chapters and a party hierarchy (Mickelsson, 2021), which develop and provide educational activities for party members, among other roles. The selected parties and their affiliated study associations represent three different political positions: the Centre Party has agrarian roots, while the NCP and the SDP represent the political right and left, respectively. This enables an examination of education practices based on various ideological perspectives, thereby allowing for reflection on possible contingencies of an ideological character.

In this study, the terms 'party-political educational practices' and 'party-political educational endeavours', as well as 'member education', are used synonymously to refer to the activities of interest—that is, to the forms of party activities that political parties organise and provide for their members for developmental and educational purposes. Thus, the term 'education' should be understood broadly in this context, albeit with the caveat that it does not specifically refer to non-formal learning, which takes place alongside other activities (Heikkinen et al., 2018). This delimitation aligns with how the interviewees respond to the interview questions, as will be illuminated further in later sections.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, Finnish party-political conditions are introduced, which is followed by a review of the previous literature. Next, the theoretical framework employed in this study—namely, the theory of practice architectures—is elaborated. Then, the empirical data are presented, along with an elaboration of the study's analytical considerations. The presentation of the research findings first focuses on each party individually, after which the results are jointly summarised. Finally, in the subsequent section, the research findings are discussed in relation to previous research and a few concluding remarks and suggestions for future research are offered.

The Finnish (party-)political setting

Since 1906, Finland has had a unicameral parliament and universal suffrage, reforms implemented when the country was a Grand Duchy under Russian rule, although legislation implemented during Swedish rule, which ended in 1809, was still in effect. Finland declared its independence in 1917 (Eduskunta, 2023; Jääskeläinen, 2020). In recent decades, Finnish parliamentarism has grown stronger, strengthening the role of political parties in governance, as the president's leadership of domestic affairs has been replaced by stable majority governments (Raunio, 2004). Moreover, since the 1990s, these coalition governments have been formed on the basis of established practices, resulting in stable and ideologically broad cabinets (Raunio, 2021).

Today, Finland is a multi-party Nordic welfare state characterised by a culture of political consensus (Huttunen, 2022; Rainio-Niemi, 2019), with Finnish people displaying high levels of trust in political institutions (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016). This era of political consensus is considered to have begun in the 1960s and 1970s, when a corporativist system of broad income policy agreements was established (Kiander

et al., 2011; Mickelsson, 2021). However, the corporativist system has been weakened since then, with global economic competition increasingly affecting Finnish society, including the country's political parties (Mickelsson, 2021).

When compared with other Nordic countries, political parties in Finland are juridically regulated to a higher degree because national legislation interferes in both party finances and party rules, including choosing candidates, regulating campaign work, ensuring intra-party democracy and governing member influence (Sundberg, 1997). Still, the role of political parties in contemporary Finnish society has been said to show tendencies towards increased professionalisation and individualisation. Regarding views on political parties' societal roles, tendencies towards the increasing individualisation of party members have been noted, marking a shift from understanding parties as collective societal actors to perceiving parties as arenas for individuals to engage in politics (Mickelsson, 2021). Political parties' roles among the electorate have also been weakened due to lower voter turnouts and declining numbers of party members (Raunio, 2004). As in other Nordic countries, the elected party-political representatives in Finland make up a notably heterogenous group when compared with other multi-party democracies, although the tendency of party members to have higher social positions than the general population has increased in Finland in recent years (Koivula et al., 2020).

During the previous parliamentary mandate period of 2019–2023, 10 parliamentary parties were represented in the Finnish Parliament, which consists of 200 seats (Eduskunta, 2023). As seated in Parliament from left to right (number of seats in brackets), there parties were as follows: Left Alliance (16), SDP (40), Green League (20), Centre Party (31), Liike Nyt Movement (1), Swedish People's Party (10), Christian Democrats (5), NCP (38), Power Belongs to the People (1) and Finns Party (38). All registered parties with seats in Parliament receive financial support based on the number of seats gained during the latest general election (Jääskeläinen, 2020; Prime Minister's Office, 2023). Seven of these registered parliamentary parties (not the Liike Nyt Movement, Christian Democrats and Power Belongs to the People) cooperate with a specific study association, maintaining close ties in terms of both steering and realising the study content. The study associations can apply annually for state funding (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

Previous research

Previous studies on the relationship between political parties and education have largely approached the issue from sociological or political science perspectives. In such studies, education has mainly been used as an explanatory variable when investigating, for example, the educational backgrounds of political officials or the impact of educational background on party membership (Godmer & Gaxie, 2007; Huttunen, 2012; Koiranen et al., 2017).

Research on the educational endeavours of political parties in contemporary times is scarce, especially in the Finnish context. Previous research exploring party-political education has primarily focused on left-leaning political parties, wherein party-political education seems to occupy a central position. For example, a study on the education provided by Swedish left-wing parties suggested that, in educating new members, the focus is on creating a sense of belonging without any explicit political persuasion, as it is assumed that members have already internalised the party's ideological premises (Arriaza Hult, 2022). Moreover, a study on labour union education in Sweden revealed both ideological and practical roles, including ideological training and the development of members' skills (e.g. organisational skills), as well as roles in networking and

advancement within the party hierarchy (reference removed for anonymity). Such research indicated that decreasing membership numbers and members' diverse backgrounds render party-political education increasingly important from the parties' perspective.

Research on the education provided by the Chinese Communist Party has also shown that party-political education serves both ideological and practical purposes. Indeed, the education delivered by the Chinese Communist Party reaches not only the entire party membership but also government officials, military leaders and individuals in the business sector (Pieke, 2009; Shambaugh, 2008). In addition, some studies have explored the education offered by parties with different ideological backgrounds. For example, research in the Singaporean context showed that organised learning within local communities is linked to the social control exercised by the ruling party, the People's Action Party (Flowers, 2005).

The previous research on contemporary political education also includes studies conducted in parliamentary contexts. For instance, parliamentary representatives' education has been examined from the perspective of professional development (Lewis & Coghill, 2016), while studies performed among women serving as local parliamentary representatives in Canada and India revealed that these women seek practical skills, communication skills and factual knowledge to enhance their political influence (Clover & McGregor, 2011). However, the latter study also found that the training provided to representatives of all the investigated parties did not effectively challenge the structures favouring men, as identified by the women representatives. A doctoral thesis examining the recruitment of female parliamentarians in North Karelia, Finland, as well as their educational history throughout the 20th century, indicated that women developed the necessary skills for parliamentary roles, especially through political women's organisations at the beginning of the 20th century and, after the Second World War, when in elected municipal positions (Huttunen, 2012). In this research, party-political education did not play a significant role, and references to it were mainly related to early 20th century parliamentarians.

There is some historical research of the Finnish context on party-political education and the connection between educational practices and party activities. Historical links, especially between organised political education and the labour movement (Hakoniemi, 2021; Heikkinen, 2019; Koskinen, 2018; Suoranta, 2007), as well as agrarian movements (Heikkinen, 2019), are evident. Educational endeavours within the labour movement aimed to foster social awareness and raise class consciousness. Moreover, connections between the trade unions and party-political education can be seen throughout the history of the labour movement (Jansson, 2012). In Finland, the ideological background of organised popular education in general has been blurred under the guise of societal unity (Heikkinen, 2019), which may explain why the educational practices of political parties have been scarcely addressed in Finnish research on adult education. Furthermore, in contemporary times, popular education in Finland has been seen as maintaining an increasingly close relationship with the state, primarily through state funding and legislation. This development has somewhat eroded the ideological basis of Finnish popular education and shifted its activities towards more customer-oriented and performance-based approaches (Pätäri et al., 2019).

In summary, research specifically focused on the contemporary educational endeavours of political parties is scarce. Drawing on historical research, it can be observed that political parties' educational practices have played significant roles in promoting democratic societal change and consolidating democracy. Based on prior research, the contemporary educational practices of political parties have both practical

and ideological purposes, and they may even be directed towards social control (Clover et al., 2011; Flowers, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008).

Practice architectures in the study of party-political education

In this study, the theoretical and methodological framework is based on the theory of practice architectures, which provides a lens to examine the preconditions that underlie educational practices (Heikkinen et al., 2018). More specifically, practice architectures offer a perspective on the multidimensionality of educational endeavours, wherein different ways of acting are intertwined with each other (Kemmis, 2019). From the perspective of the theory of practice architectures, the purpose of education is to support and promote a good life rather than solely to impart knowledge. From this stance, education is seen as an 'initiation into practice', with an 'initiation into knowledge' serving as an intermediate step in the process (Heikkinen et al., 2018; Kemmis, 2019). For research endeavours, this means shifting the focus from knowing to being and becoming, and also directing research interests towards the societal dimensions of both education and knowledge.

Here, practice is understood according to the definition suggested by Heikkinen et al. (2018, p. 369): 'Practice [...] is a collective entity of procedures in use' (the present author's own translation). Practices are thus seen as collective human activities, consisting of commonly established ways of doing things or performing shared projects, thereby representing collective and intentional actions. Practices, viewed through the lens of practice architectures, consist of sayings (interactions and understandings), doings (various actions) and relatings (people's relationships with one another and the surrounding world) (Mahon et al., 2017). As a result, practices are multidimensional and intertwined with their historical contexts. While practices are stable, they are situationally shaped and continuously changed by the influence of participating individuals and surrounding preconditions (Kemmis, 2019).

Practice architectures, in turn, make up the preconditions that influence practices. More specifically, practice architectures consist of three types of arrangements or preconditions: 1) material-economic, 2) cultural-discursive, and 3) social-political. Thus, educational practices are founded on specific prerequisites that allow education to take place with specific, limited resources. For example, the physical environment, economic resources and available tools create preconditions for the implementation of educational practices. Additionally, diverse linguistic prerequisites are related to and influence the unfolding of educational practices, including vocabulary, speech patterns and ways of thinking influence practices. Moreover, social relationships, both vertical and horizontal, should also be considered, while people's relationships in terms of both solidarity and power struggles further shape practices.

The foundational assumption of the theory of practice architectures regarding the basis of educational activities is well suited to the context of political parties, which is assumed to be ideologically informed and value-based. Indeed, the educational practices inherent in party work can generally be considered value-based. For instance, it is assumed that values play a central role in the justifications for education choices made by party-political education officials. Aside from being value-based, the theory of practice architectures views one purpose of education as changing people's actions and ways of doing things, which can also be expected to align with the objectives of political parties.

Research material and analytical procedures

The primary empirical material analysed in this study consists of interviews with representatives of the Centre Party, the NCP, and the SDP. The interviewed representatives were party officials responsible for party-political education and education coordinators from the parties' respective study associations (a total of six individuals). The interviews were all conducted in the spring of 2019. They were semi-structured interviews, focusing on outlining the parties' member education practices—that is, how party members are educated, what educational aims the parties have and how the parties' member education can provide pathways to influence for members. To deepen the understanding of this interview material, three types of documents were also gathered from the three studied parties (the document search took place in April 2022): the main statutes of the party organisation and the most recent programme of political principles (28 pages for the Centre Party, 23 pages for the NCP and 140 pages for SDP; 191 pages in total). These documents were chosen to provide background insights into the practices at play regarding member education in the three parties. The analysis, however, mainly drew on the interviews, as they were deemed to provide sufficiently rich data.

The interviewees were approached because, given their positions, they were assumed to be able to elucidate the official considerations of their party-political education. Thus, the interview material provides a specific, limited perspective on the justifications for party-political education within the Finnish parliamentary parties that have traditionally been the three largest parties in Parliament (Saarinen et al., 2018). Each interview involved two interviewees, one from the party office and one from a study association closely associated with the party. In this regard, the representatives of the Centre Party and the Finnish Rural Education Association (*Maaseudun sivistysliitto* [MSL]) were interviewed together, as were the representatives of the NCP and the National Education Association (Kansio). Similarly, the representatives of the SDP and the Workers' Educational Association (*Työväen sivistysliitto* [TSL]) were interviewed together. The interviews ranged between 50 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes in length, and they were transcribed into a total of 65 pages. The interviewees were provided with the interview questions and information about the study in advance. They were assured that their responses would be reported anonymously and that they could contact the researcher at any time to withdraw their consent to participate. The interviewees also had the opportunity to ask questions about the research during and after the interviews. The interviewees gave their consent for the interviews to be recorded, and the interview material was transcribed verbatim to facilitate the analysis.

The analysis, which employed the theory of practice architectures, delved into the practices described by the interviewees as well as the structures that enable certain practices and hinder others. In this study, the analysis using the theory of practice architectures focused on the interview material, which means that it primarily provided insights into how the practices were discussed and, therefore, what cultural-discursive arrangements could be discerned from the discussion. Through the comments of the interviewed experts on party-political education, the interview material also offered the opportunity to examine, albeit indirectly, other arrangements—namely, material-economic and socio-political prerequisites—that shape party-political educational practices.

During the analysis, the interview recordings were listened to thoroughly to ensure that the researcher kept the intonation, hesitations and other nonverbal communication in mind. The analysis relied on the theory of practice architectures, whereby in the first stage of the analytical work, the central purposes of member education within each party were

identified, as expressed in the interviews. In the second stage of the analysis, each party's interview data were examined to identify all the statements that conveyed different ways of talking about party-political education (sayings), implementing it (doings) and the (power) relations that it is involved in creating or through which it is possible to realise certain outcomes (relatings) (cf. Kemmis, 2019). This allowed the examination of the practice arrangements that enable or constrain the party-political education offered and practiced by the three parties.

In the following sections, the research results will be presented and considered through the lens of the theory of practice architectures, addressing the two research questions previously established. First, the main *purposes* of education within the studied parties will be identified. Then, the different qualities of the three types of preconditions that enable or constrain the education practices related to those purposes will be distinguished. Initially, the results will be presented individually for each party in alphabetical order, which will be followed by a section that summarises and deepens the results before the concluding remarks are offered. The direct quotes used when presenting the results derived from the interview material were translated by the author. As the material consists mostly of interview data, which are comprised of spoken language, the presentation of the prerequisites for the practices will first focus on cultural-discursive arrangements, which will then be used to provide insights into the material-economic and socio-political arrangements. The accounts given below draw closely on the interviewees' accounts. In the original analytical work, which was performed in Finnish, direct quotes were used to a large extent. The quotes used here were taken from the interviews and included to show the relation between the empirical material and the results. For the sake of ensuring confidentiality, the study will not explicate which interviewee uttered which quote.

The Centre Party: uniform and impactful expertise for all members

The central *purpose* of the education organised by the Centre Party is to offer 'uniform and impactful' party-political education to its large, diverse and geographically scattered membership, who are spread throughout the country. Content-wise, the education provided focuses on 'basic organisational skills' (such as rules and practical ways of working), the 'framework' of political decision-making (such as democratic procedures and legislation) and 'communication skills'. The goal of the education is to provide members with opportunities to exercise influence by fostering 'political ambition' and supporting internal cohesion within the party.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* that shape the Centre Party's education are coloured by expressions familiar from the business world, which can be noticed in the interviewees' vocabulary. For instance, educational materials are 'produced', while education is referred to as a 'service'. The recently developed education campaign material is treated as a 'trade secret', and its confidentiality is maintained to prevent other parties from 'plagiarising' it. Systematic and well-ordered educational planning aims to ensure comprehensive availability, so that the 'information is quickly accessible to members'. Thus, professional and well-organised planning by someone well versed in the subject matter is seen as essential. Additionally, the interviewees emphasise their own experiences serving in positions of trust as representatives of the Centre Party. Professionalism in this context is interpreted as being knowledgeable about both the party and political activities more broadly.

The cultural-discursive arrangements underlying the educational purposes are mostly expressed as three 'challenges'. One of these challenges is the unclear party organisation and the need to educate members about it:

> For many members, when they join the Centre Party, our organisational structure seems very unclear, probably largely because our members are in local associations at the grassroots level. We don't have individual members in the party at all [...]. Where is our own membership? What is local influence?

The second challenge for the Centre Party is a form of 'bureaucratisation', which the interviewees perceive as a difficulty in effectively communicating the party's policies and political decision-making to the public:

> The bureaucratisation of politics can be seen as a challenge for the Centre Party throughout this decade. We need to bring this feeling to the surface more at the Centre Party, and we can see that our competitors, the other parties, have been much more successful in how they operate in a clear and understandable manner and how they present their core message

Partially related to 'bureaucratisation,' the third identified challenge is the need for 'communication skills', which includes tasks such as writing letters to the editors of publications, using social media and interacting with citizens. This challenge is expressed, for example, as follows:

> Many members think that they shouldn't write a letter to the editor unless they have verified every single source and reference down to the smallest detail. This [finishing and submitting opinion pieces] is also a skill that we need to train

The *material-economic arrangements* that influence the Centre Party's education are affected by the change in the party's financial situation that occurred following the election defeat in 2011. Due to the reduced party funding, party-political education 'suffered a big setback'. A significant portion of the Centre Party's member education is organised at the regional level and by the regional organisations, making it challenging for the party office to achieve a comprehensive overview of all the education provided within the party. However, since 2016, efforts have been made to develop educational functions through seeking 'cohesion' in terms of education planning and considering education planning a separate area of expertise. The reinvigorated relationship with the MSL study association plays a key role in this, with an 'education agreement' enabling the payment of a salary to one MSL official and providing financial support for party-political education at the regional and local levels.

The party's candidate education has been reformed in recent years and, as a result, study materials such as a 'candidate's guide' have been developed, in this case in the form of a 'workbook, like an exercise book for elementary school'. In addition, an 'idea map-type sheet' has been developed to 'improve the candidate's own profile development and creation', which is especially useful for new candidates. The parliamentary candidate education also focuses on social media skills and interactivity 'from the perspective of public speaking and meeting people'.

The *social-political arrangements* of the Centre Party's party-political education are constructed and shaped in relation to the dual goals of that education. On the one hand, such education aims to foster a sense of community among its geographically dispersed 'huge membership', while on the other hand, it aims to foster individual members' political ambitions. This dichotomy is outlined as follows:

> Member experience is very important [...]. You get to talk to like-minded people, experience that sense of community'. Thus, while influence is built on a sense of community, the goal of party-political education is also to 'nourish political ambition in a positive sense [...]. Things need to be done together, but individuals are the ones who push these matters forward.

Hence, while Centre Party membership can and should provide a sense of community, the role of education is also to accommodate and allow for differences among individual members to support their selection for positions of trust.

The previously mentioned tendencies towards fragmentation on the part of the Centre Party, both among its members and geographically, mean that regional districts have significant educational responsibility when it comes to helping individual members understand their place in the party organisation and facilitating their (local) efforts to achieve influence. In terms of parliamentary candidate education, however, centralised coordination by the party office aims to provide 'equal opportunities to succeed' to all candidates: '[...] each educational activity is, of course, unique, but the basic educational content is the same, and that is the idea as well'. Therefore, the party's 'fragmentation' is addressed through two different organisational approaches to education. In the case of candidate education, the arrangements are coordinated by the party office, whereas other educational practices take place at the regional level and are 'largely organised and implemented by the regional organisations'.

The NCP: Educational paths to expertise and success

The primary *purpose* of the NCP's member education is to support party members' political expertise and opportunities for influence. The starting point for educational planning is to offer members 'various paths' by which they can find their place within the party and genuinely 'succeed'. The education provided covers the party's activities, administration and opportunities for influence 'through the lens of the party's programme'.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* of the NCP's member education revolve around implementing and following the party's official policies. In the language used by the interviewees, the education is based on the 'ideology' of the NCP and its 'values'. The collaborating study association is referred to as the NCP's 'own' study association, which, unlike the other politically affiliated study associations involved in this study, strictly adheres to the 'pure' political line of the NCP, 'fully adhering to the party's values and ideology and content'. The party-political education provided 'involves coaching, mentoring, development, collaboration and interaction'.

The educational path is individualised according to members' interests, with the aim of supporting members' development, including 'how you can make an impactful contribution in the next few years'. For example, for parliamentary candidates who are not elected, this means that 'we want them to continue to be involved in our activities [...]. We analyse together with them how it went and what they did during this campaign, and then we try to find ways to do even better'. The ideas of efficiency and easy access inform how the organisation of education is perceived: 'We are competing for people's time, so we have to be very efficient'.

The *material-economic arrangements* of the NCP's member education principally rely on the stable resources provided by the study association. The NCP's party-political education supply appears comprehensive. The members' educational 'path' first involves the '*Politiikan sininen lanka*' (Blue Thread of Politics) introduction course (named after the party's colour), which is an 'all-encompassing course where we talk about the party

organisation, its administration and the opportunity to participate'. This is followed by the '*Vaikuttajan akatemia*' (Influencer Academy), which delves deeper into various opportunities for exerting influence:

> Do you want to be an organisation operator, do you want to join the board of a local association, [...] or do you want to run as a candidate in the municipal elections and serve in a position of trust.

In addition, party members are offered access to many other courses, such as 'presentation skills', 'a course about the European Union', organisation training and campaign education.

At the time of the interviews, in addition to there being regional education coordinators who maintain contact with the study association, Kansio employed six people. Moreover, close discussions are held with the party's district levels, with the study association providing support for the party's district employees, 'who know their own members, performing marketing and the assessment of educational needs'. The study association also regularly provides course support to the districts.

The *social-political arrangements* of the NCP's member education primarily revolve around deepening the roles of individual members and thereby supporting their 'success'. In this regard, Members of Parliament and Ministers giving speeches at, for example, seminars provide reminders of the possibility of climbing the party hierarchy. Through party-political education, members develop their commitment to success within the party: 'people who have attended our party-political education become active party members. When they feel that their knowledge and capabilities grow and develop, it correlates with the courage to seek more diverse tasks'.

In other words, the importance of community is emphasised alongside individual success, as networking is seen as an important means of developing expertise. 'We have noticed that education cannot be just a bombardment of content. [...] Yet, you cannot start from purely enjoyable socialising either. Education has to be very carefully planned'. The goal is to achieve a dialogue that has certain characteristics: 'We want people who work with us to act in a certain way according to certain rules, which form part of educated citizen engagement'. Furthermore, this represents an educational challenge that is considered timely in society as a whole:

> Party activities in general probably need some renewal for all the parties. But we don't want to come up with it ourselves; rather, we somehow need to receive signals about the kind of party activities they would find meaningful.

Thus, a community built for political and educational purposes must also include wider society and its citizens.

The SDP: Member empowerment and party renewal through education

The main *purpose* of the education organised by the SDP is to 'empower' party members and 'renew' the party. In this context, 'empowerment' or 'involvement' aims to prompt members to 'influence, communicate and share ideas'. Additionally, the notion of 'empowerment' actually extends beyond the party membership, as many of the educational events are also open to non-members. Moreover, 'renewal' refers to the continuous development of the party. For example, seminars are arranged specifically to invite speakers to 'challenge [the SDP's] current work'.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* of the SDP's party-political education are defined by the emphasis on the concepts of 'empowerment' and 'renewal'. According to the interviewees, 'empowerment' is evident when, for example, the TSL study association 'encourages' district organisations to organise education. From a member perspective, education is empowering and involving, as it is 'comprehensively educating new influencers [members] and transferring the skills and knowledge of more experienced actors'. The education provided is said to convey messages to new members such as 'Welcome to the team, here are the tools. We want to support you in your influencing'. 'Empowerment' is linked to the goal of equality. Thus, separate introductory education is not organised for new members because doing so is considered discriminatory. This way of thinking is explained and justified in the following way: 'There is a saying that a comrade is a comrade to another comrade, and that means that even if you [...] have been the chairman of ten different associations, you do not rise above the new member [...]'. The discourse on 'renewal' is strongly connected to the public image of the SDP as a conservative party and to the need to dispel such an image. 'The SDP is seen as a bit conservative [...]. We can also renew ourselves [...]. We are constantly renewing'. Here, 'renewal' is thought to rely on knowing the party's history and the 'great achievements' through which it can 'orient towards the future'. Education is used to create this understanding. At the same time, education is considered a tool with which people can be 'challenged', both in terms of challenging the party and challenging their own thinking. It is believed that in this way, the SDP can evolve and respond to contemporary challenges.

Regarding the *material-economic arrangements* of the SDP's party-political education, these are built on close cooperation between the TSL and the SDP, which is formalised through an annual 'education agreement'. Educational practices are also organised at the district level. The TSL provides 'educational assistance to organise events in their own area'. This support comes in the form of an 'education plan' and 'materials', and suggestions are made concerning 'experts' who can be invited as speakers. The TSL also provides financial support to districts to cover the costs of organising educational activities.

This cooperation between the party and the TSL, which manifests at both the party office and district levels, enables extensive educational practices. Among the examples of such activities are the 'Organisational Days', an annual event 'open to the entire membership'. In connection with the SDP's educational policy document titled *Osaamispolku 2030* (*Competence Path 2030*), there are open events held on various vision themes, such as 'Early Childhood Education in the Future' and 'Mastering the Changing World of Work'. At the time of the interviews, the party was seeking participants in a programme called 'Future Influencers'. Moreover, a mentoring programme was about to start. During election campaigns, there are webinars provided for candidates. Additionally, there are online environments available for party-political education where educational materials can be found.

The *social-political arrangements* of the SDP's party-political education are based on the pursuit of emancipation through openness as well as the pursuit of renewal through historical and local knowledge. The party-political education is not solely for members: 'The SDP is not a closed movement, and we are interested in many other views than just those of our own members'. In contrast to this aspiration regarding openness, closed events are also organised. For example, the youth leadership programme 'Future Influencers' includes a selection process. Although the lectures within this programme are open, some parts of the programme are only available to selected participants. Similarly, there is a targeted educational programme for the party's 'workgroup

organisation'. This organisation consists of about 450 members and is described as the party's 'crown jewel'. It is clear that education also contributes to building the party hierarchy, although openness is regarded as a key principle in organising educational events.

The SDP's mentoring programme serves as an example of the emphasis placed on historical and local knowledge. Historical knowledge should be localised because 'regions are different', and it is good for party actors to know 'who to contact, what kinds of personal relationships have existed there [...], strategic knowledge'. The mentoring programme is based on the idea that mentors and mentees 'investigate their own area' and also jointly consider how to activate other people in the area. Thus, the relationships among party actors are perceived to be built locally and as part of a historical continuum.

The purposes of equality and hierarchy: Arrangements mediating between the collective and the individual

Table 1 summarises the interview results, outlining the educational purposes and the preconditions underlying those purposes. Despite the differences between the parties, when scrutinised together, the results point to questions related to hierarchy and equality as well as to collectivity and individuality. This aspect will be elaborated on next.

Table 1. Summary of the Results.

	Purpose of Education	*Cultural-Discursive Arrangements*	*Material-Economic Arrangements*	*Social-Political Arrangements*
Centre Party	Provide expertise and 'similar and impactful' education	Education as a product; challenges of 'ambiguous' party organisation, 'bureaucratisation' and communication	Scarce resources, investment in educational planning, development of candidate education and study materials	Supporting community and 'political ambition' both centrally and locally
NCP	Support expertise and success	Education as adhering to the party's principles through efficient, individual 'paths'	Stable resources of the study association, coordinated educational planning on different organisational levels	Emphasising individual members' success through community-based education
SDP	Empowerment and renewal	Education used for 'empowerment' and 'challenges'; debunking the false perception of the party's 'conservatism'	Close collaboration between the TSL and the party office, variety of educational practices at different levels	Emphasising open 'involvement'; historically informed knowledge of local relations

The identified educational *purposes* can be jointly summarised to consider whether party-political education is intended to support equality among members or hierarchical relationships between members. The purpose of education to support an individual's opportunities to exert influence is central, with issues of communication becoming important in all three parties. For the Centre Party, equality and the search for likeminded company are taken as prerequisites, in relation to which education aims to support

individual aspirations. In the NCP, individuals' opportunities are most prevalent and at the fore; however, their education also aims to bring individuals together to share and learn from each other. In terms of the SDP, the purpose of education draws on the idea of treating all individuals as equals, while also empowering individual actors to take on different roles.

The party-political educational *arrangements* or preconditions also raise the question of whether the political party should be approached as a collective actor or as an arena for individual political actors. In all three parties examined, collectivity and communality are central, which may not be surprising when dealing with political parties. The issue is thus whether unity or collaboration between individuals is stressed. In the case of the Centre Party, the purpose of party-political education is formulated so as to draw on a strong tradition of communality and viewing the party as a form of unity. This sense of collectivity is complemented by fostering individual ambition. Within the NCP, communality is referred to as 'networking', making this the clearest case of educational arrangements enabling individuals to act and collaborate. For the SDP, the language in use points to the creation of a collective community that members can become part of. Individual members are welcome to become part of a shared collective; however, they are also encouraged to question the ideas and approaches of the collective.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The aim of this study was to investigate the purposes of the member education practices within three Finnish political parties, as well as the prerequisites underlying those practices, using the theory of practice architectures. The research questions to be addressed were as follows: What are the main purposes of education within the examined parties? What preconditions enable or constrain the education practices related to those purposes? The results reveal how party-political education in the three studied Finnish political parties is arranged with purposes intended to strike a balance between equality and hierarchy among members, as embedded in arrangements providing a party-political collective to join as well as an arena for individual pursuits. While each party emphasises different aspects, such as expertise, success or empowerment, they all grapple with fostering both collective cohesion and individual advancement. These findings underscore the complex interplay between educational purposes and the preconditions informing educational practices, resulting in a balancing act between different, sometimes contradictory, purposes and preconditions.

It can be considered paradoxical that, in a democratic society where an increasing number of people have increasingly high educational attainment, functioning political parties see the ongoing education of their members as important. However, new members are not perceived to have all the information and skills necessary to function as party members. Of course, in all three parties, community support is linked to education, meaning that education is not seen as solely involving the transmission of knowledge and skills. Thus, based on the results of this study, the parties seem to have a need for internal education that focuses on organisational knowledge, communication skills and profiling. The organised educational practices appear to be systematic and established in all three parties, and they are carried out in close cooperation with the study associations. Prior studies have shown that parties offer both knowledge-based, practical and ideological education (Flowers, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008). The present study partly reflects this picture. The purposes of education are especially linked to conveying practical knowledge, but they also relate to electoral success or party development more broadly.

Specific ideological education, however, does not seem to be organised to a greater extent, which has also been found in previous research (Arriaza Hult, 2022).

The fairly pragmatic approaches to party-political education that can be discerned from the results of this study thus contribute to understanding how Finnish political consensus can unfold through party-political activities (cf. Rainio-Niemi, 2019). The results also point to a previously noted tendency towards a scarcity of ideologically informed education in the Finnish popular educational landscape due to efforts to forge societal unity (Heikkinen, 2019). This tendency might be further strengthened by increased tendencies towards individualisation and professionalisation within political parties, placing emphasis on electoral success (cf. Mickelsson, 2021).

Regarding the methodological considerations, it was observed that the analytical work was influenced by the process of translation in quite a fascinating way. As the researcher was working with the empirical material in Finnish, seeking to develop the findings to be comprehensible in English, it was noticeable how many of the quotes initially considered illuminating did not translate well. It is concluded this can be interpreted as pointing towards the usage of specific political jargon but also more broadly towards the intricate situational embeddedness of the educational practices studied, which is not simple to convey outside of the research setting.

For this study, education coordinators from three party offices and party-political education coordinators from educational centres close to the parties were interviewed, which allowed for an in-depth examination of the purposes of party-political education and the preconditions underlying educational practices. For an underexplored research area, it was deemed beneficial to thoroughly work through a limited amount of data. However, the limitations in relation to this approach should be recognised, and further research is required to both complement and contest the results of this study.

More specifically, further research is needed on other political parties. Future studies could also, drawing on similar theoretical approaches to the present study, employ different forms of empirical material to delve into how the different practice preconditions interconnect and whether they integrate or conflict (cf. Kemmis, 2019, p. 90). As the educational responsibility of the party districts appears to be significant for all three parties, further research should also be conducted at the district level. Participatory research would make it possible to delve deeper into, for example, the hierarchies intertwined with party-political education and the practices that renew or challenge related power relationships.

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Aims & Scope

The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

RELA invites original, scholarly articles that discuss the education and learning of adults from different academic disciplines, perspectives and traditions. It encourages diversity in theoretical and methodological approach and submissions from non-English speakers. All published contributions in RELA are subjected to a rigorous peer review process based on two moments of selection: an initial editorial screening and a double-blind review by at least two anonymous referees. Clarity and conciseness of thought are crucial requirements for publication.

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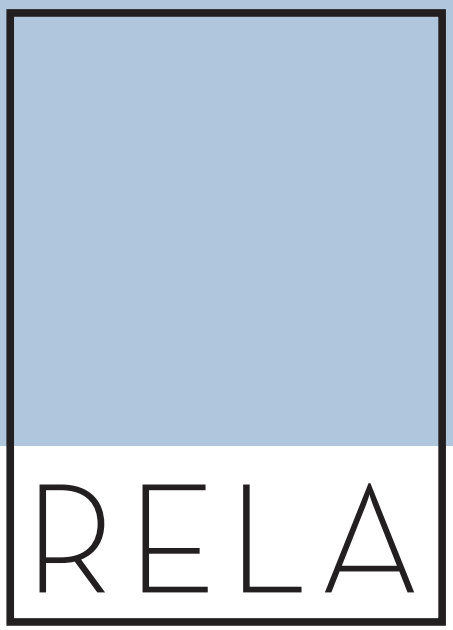

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