CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE THROUGH EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the meaning of education in people’s everyday lives and life histories. For our purposes, education is understood as a part of culture, and culture as a meaning system between actors and structures. For each person, the meaning of education depends on how it helps or hinders them in constructing their life-course and life style. The data in this study consists of interviews collected from a range of people, young and old, employed and unemployed, living in Finland. Foundations of community and moral legitimation are investigated using school text books and curricula. In this era of secularized morals based on social grounds, being excluded from schoolmates’ friendships may be a hard fate for a young person. According to our key observations and interpretations of the interviews, education has different meanings depending on the socio-historical context and an individual’s life situation. These different meanings are not sufficiently captured by functionalistic research or contemporary technocratic evaluations of education. In a late-modern culture requiring lifelong learning, education may offer individuals an identity that is too rigid and unidimensional, in addition to “positive” meanings. This situation challenges us to renew and diversify educational research and policy planning.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to give a general idea of our project, “Education as a constructor of identity and culture,” and its diverse substudies. Our project studied the meaning of education in peoples' everyday lives. Thus, education was not analyzed as a part of politics or political economy, but was understood as a cultural activity, the meaning of which depends on how it helps or hinders people to construct their life-course and life style. The study was not limited to formal education. The most extensive substudy investigated the meaning of education and learning in a person’s life through comprehensive narrative biographical interviews. In principle, the interviews dealt with everything related to the interviewees’ schooling and learning, from everyday
informal learning to non-formal adult education, and institutionalized or formal learning. The following central questions were raised in our research plan: What views of education do people express in their own voices? What are the meanings of education in people’s life-courses and everyday lives? What kind of culture and society does education produce?

This article is divided into six sections. The findings of comparative structural studies examining Finnish education and Finland as a learning society are reviewed in section two. We did not actually investigate the structures, but one must be conscious of both structures and actors in order to study the culture.

The presentation of five substudies begins in section three, with Koski’s study exploring changes in the moral legitimation of schools. Koski treats schools as communities and producers of communality. Her data includes ABC-books and school curricula.¹

Section four addresses the meaning of education and learning in the lives of Finns, and is divided into three parts. Kauppila examines educational generations in modern Finland. This substudy is our first response to the question “How has education constructed the life-course of Finns?” Antikainen searches for turning points in individual learning biographies. He calls these turning points significant learning experiences. This section closes with Houtsonen’s examination of educational identities. His text offers a new interpretation of the relationship between educational identities and lifelong learning. Data for theses studies consists of two-phase interviews with people of various ages and different social and cultural back-grounds. We call these people “different Finns” (n=44). The first interview was a narrative biographical, or life story, interview. The second phase was a more focused thematic interview. Thematic questions about identity and education were present at the end of the first interview as well. The resulting written material comprised about 3000 pages, which coding compressed to 300 pages. Kauppila, Antikainen and Houtsonen draw on different organizing concepts in their analyses: Kauppila employs the concept of life-course, Antikainen uses learning experience, and Houtsonen works with the concept of identity. Analyses of the same data, from these three different perspectives, guaranteed discussion between the researchers, and a comparison of interpretations (Antikainen et al. 1996, 16–17, 108–109; Antikainen & Huotelin 1996, 8–10, 310–313).

Three studies focusing on youth comprise section five. Komonen presents different paths to placement in education, and the processes of vocational orientation of the young who have dropped out. Her observations and interpretations challenge the dominant stereotypical view of these issues. Her study data consists of biographical and thematic interviews with 33 young people, 17 to 25 years of age. Interviewees were drop outs from vocational schools, and not conscious of another study place during the time of discontinuance. In addition, the interviewees had be to re-starting education at the time of the interview. The interviewees’ gender and age, as well as the time between their discontinuance and re-start of studies, or their present school type were not
defined. The young person’s experiential life story, their life as experienced, and their subjective conferring of meanings were emphasized in the interviews. Komonen broadened and sharpened the vertical picture and its parts offered by the biographies through the use of a thematic interview in conjunction with the biographic interview. The adjusted interview concentrated on several very important themes central to the research question: family background, school experiences, educational choices, work experiences and future plans. She used qualitative micro-level analysis to examine dropping out of education in the context of a life-course perspective. The analysis found that dropping out is part of, and a result of, certain life processes. Tensions around dropping out and re-starting education emerged in the material, and shaped Komonen’s development of four paths to “placement in education.” She named the paths, playing the education game, dropping out from the education game, negotiating about education, and surviving to education. These paths describe the many forms dropping out may take as a part of placement in education.

Käyhkö presents the results of a study concerning the school attendance of young, working class people which she conducted with Tuupanen. All the young people performed well at comprehensive school, but some of them chose to attend vocational school, while others went on to university after upper secondary school. What meanings do these young people give to education? Käyhkö, together with Kurkko, has also studied unemployed young people and those under a threat of becoming unemployed. What does school mean to them? Data concerning the working-class youth was collected using the biographical method. The empirical data is comprised of 10 biographical interviews, or life stories, and thematic interviews from those who have attended university, and 10 from those who studied at vocational schools. A comprehensive section of the thematic interview was used to complement the biographical data, and contained questions concerning education, school memories, family, hobbies and friends. The interviews averaged 2 hours in length. Criteria for selecting our interviewees included working-class background, completion of compulsory education at a comprehensive school, and good school performance. By using the concept of life-course, and applying the biographical approach, a young person’s whole lifetime was studied. The young person’s everyday life was conceptualized as three different learning environments or spheres: the family, school institution, and leisure-time. We concentrated on these environment in our theoretical framework, method, and the young person’s stage of life. Finally, social class, generation and gender analyses are incorporated in our observations.

Data concerning the unemployed, and those under threat of becoming unemployed, consists of three separate groups of narrative biographical interviews and thematic interviews (n=40): the young persons of the “Different Finns” data (n=7, with the addition 4 re-interviews with young persons) (Antikainen et al. 1996); the “young with working-class backgrounds” (n=20) (Käyhkö & Tuupanen 1996, 1997); and the “unemployed young persons” (n=13) (Kurkko 1997). Thus, we have connect-ed three collections of data which were originally gathered for other purposes. The extent of the data collection with the
biographical method, and the centrality of education in the data facilitated a “re-reading” of the material. The 19 young men and 21 young women interviewed ranged from 17 to 29 years of age. Common to all of them was that they thought about their lives in the period between school leaving, and entering the labor market. The purpose of our analyses was to find an answer for the question “What place or meaning do the young themselves give to school and education in a societal situation where educational possibilities are good, but it is difficult to get a job?” Education, the possible influence of the economic recession, and young persons’ plans and conceptions about future decisions were themes that were raised. From a labor market perspective, the data is divided into studying 25 young persons (n=25), 13 of which studied at vocational schools, and 12 at university, and 15 graduated unemployed young persons (n=15), 4 of which completed comprehensive school, 4 upper secondary school, and 7 a vocational qualification.

How should we read our research results? We can separate societal actors and social structures and see the object of our study, culture, as a meaning system operating between the two. If we want to understand or change the function of the educational system, it is useful to know the meaning structure created between the system and the actors. We examine this meaning structure as the meanings of education and learning.

In the following texts, each researcher has written a one or two sentence statement encompassing their central interpretations of their work. They have discussed these statements together, and each author has written a slightly more comprehensive report, in Lutheran catechism style, about what he or she means in the statement.

2. WHAT KIND OF LEARNING SOCIETY IS FINLAND?

A background and long-term goal of our study is to answer the question above regarding the special character of Finnish society, and its position among other societies and cultures. In this article, we can only answer the broader background question about how the Finnish education society is ranked in an inter-national comparison. The structural factors discussed in this schematic presentation have been leading, in part, to the cultural questions which we have studied.

The rapid expansion of education has created educational differences between generations. These differences are more vast in Finland than in any OECD country. It was thought to be groundless to compare Japan with Finland, especially after the economic recession in the 1990s. There is at least one similarity between these countries, however, for both Finland and Japan have experienced an unprecedented rapid change of economic life, and a related increase in education since the Second World War. This is referred to by British historian Eric Hobsbawm (1994, 290) in his book on the history of the millennium (cf. Antikainen et al. 1996, 11). Hobsbawm observes that in the early 1950s, over
half of the economically active population both in Japan and in Finland worked in agriculture and forestry, but by the beginning of the 1980s, this share had decreased to 10%. Hobsbawn describes this as a change in individual life-histories. A young man or woman from a rural area has experienced an amazing life change since returning from the war. It is not a coincidence that reports pertaining to educational policy of the OECD show that Japan and Finland, together with the other Nordic countries, are leaders in the implementation of lifelong learning in their educational planning (OECD 1998).

One way to evaluate the implementation of educational equity is to examine education as a part of social mobility between generations. That is, how family background, indicated usually by parents’ social class or social strata, influences children’s educational careers and roles in social life. Education is one, perhaps even the most important, avenue of social mobility and resources in modern societies. Belief in education as an avenue of social mobility is strong in Finland. According to studies, this belief is not groundless, however, it is often too optimistic. In the social reproduction, education is primarily a selective social factor which passes the social differences from one generation to another. Apart from structural transformations, and so-called structural mobility, patterns of social mobility are quite similar in all countries where a market economy and the nuclear family are central social institutions (Dronkers 1997). For example, in a comprehensive comparative study of thirteen countries, a slight, but observable and measurable leveling down in different social classes’ participation in education was found to have happened only in the Netherlands and Sweden (Shavit & Blossfeld 1993). This leveling down in the Netherlands and Sweden was thought to be due an equalization of the standard of living and life style, rather than to democratization of school systems. Norway and Finland did not participate in the study. According to Lindbekk (1998), a leveling down has happened in Norway, too.

Finnish researchers have had heated discussions as to whether educational differences between classes have grown or diminished. This discussion arose out of problems related to research data and concepts, however. So far, findings based on a more thorough examinations show that the differences between classes have diminished. The class mix of those who have completed the matriculation examination (Valkonen, Pensola & Jalovaara 1998; Bathory & Leimu 1994; Määttä 1996), the secondary level of education (Pöntinen 1990), or the university level (Määttä 1992; 1995 and 1996; Nevala 1999; cf. Ahola 1995, Kivinen & Rinne 1996) has become more equal. Educational careers of the post-war baby boom generations have a profound influence on the construction of more equal opportunities. I think that Finland could celebrate its development of equal opportunities just as Swedish researchers do in their book (Erikson & Jonsson 1996).

University students have been a topic of the most heated discussion. New research data and analyses based on them, however, show the clear educational equalization rates of the 1960s was followed by a significantly minor equalization rate in the 1970s. During the 1980s, the equalization rate dropped...
below the 1970s level. It is not a coincidence that equalization was slower in the 1970s; it relates to the slow growth of university education during that decade. It is not a question of the disappearance of differences between classes, however. According to the evaluation of the National Board of Education, the change has turned in the direction of greater inequality in the 1990s (Lindström, Jakkusihvonen & Lipsanen 1996). I suggest this change is related to three matters. First, in the industrialization of Finland in the last decades, the education of children of working people and farmers was seen as a question of equality. In the 1990s, Finland is an information society to a great extent, where middle classes are a key group. Education of middle class’ children in a globalizing and individualizing society is not a similar question of equity. Secondly, inequality in our society has increased in general, and inevitably this influences education. Thirdly, decentralization of School Administration, and more free selection of schools by parents make room for the growth of inequity if the new principal local actors do not prevent this development (cf. Whitty et al. 1998).

Traditionally, men have been more highly educated than women, but during the last few years women have caught up with men, especially in the European Union as Jönsson shows in her article (Eurostat 1997). Finland is one of the leading countries when the diminishing of sex-related differences in education is considered. As in other countries, the majority of students in upper secondary school and at university are women. A female majority in vocational education is rare, however. This kind of majority exists, besides Finland, only in Spain, Great Britain and Sweden. Women are still in the minority among postgraduate students in universities, and all areas of vocational education are clearly either male or female dominated. Finally, the average salary and status in a man’s working life are higher than in the life of a woman with a corresponding education.

Differences between ethnic groups have not been studied much in Finland. A self-evident truth has been that Finland is a very culturally homogeneous country. If compared internationally, one must admit that Finnish culture has been homogeneous, but it does have a diversity of its own as well. The Finnish school system has not been able to meet the needs of Romany culture, nor do schools in many other countries. The Saami people received an ABC book and teaching in Saami (Lappish) only in the late 1970s. The Swedish-speaking Finns have a well organised school system of their own.

An education indicator report of the OECD suggests that a university education produces a higher benefit in income and employment in Finland than on average in other OECD countries when compared with upper secondary level education or education below this level (OECD 1998a). Completing only compulsory education does not guarantee decent financial possibilities either in Finland or in the other OECD countries. According to Suikkane’s (1998) research team, a totally new social order is developing in the labor market.

According to international studies of school achievement, Finnish comprehensive school pupils are top readers when compared with pupils in other participating countries; this reveals the high status of literacy in Finland.
The Finns rank lower in mathematics and natural sciences, however. In fact, that pupils do not feel satisfaction with schoolwork, and experience school as a depressing place, seems to be a Finnish and Russian speciality (Linnakylä 1995; Prucha 1997).

About 48% percent of Finnish adults participated in adult education during the 12 month period preceding the Adult Education Survey conducted in 1995 (Blomqvist et al. 1999). Compared with the 6 countries taking part in the International Adult Literacy Study (IALS), the degree of participation is fairly high in Finland. The Netherlands reported 38% participation, Canada, 39%, Poland, 14%, Sweden, 53%, Switzerland (German-speaking area, 45%, French-speaking area, 34%), and the United States, 41% (Belanger & Valdivielso 1997; Belanger & Tuijnman 1997). If time spent on adult education is compared, Finland—together with the United States—place significantly lower. In Finland, the growth of participation in adult education from the 1970s to the middle of the 1990s - from under 30% to 48% - corresponds to Belanger and Tuijnman’s (1997) characterization of the “silent explosion” of adult education in the studied countries.

Different rates of participation in adult education follows differences in education levels and socio-economic status. Compared with averages for the IALS countries, Finnish people with the basic, and even secondary level diploma, participate significantly more in adult education. when sex-related differences are examined, the total participation rate of men, and their participation in adult education in general regardless of their social status, is higher than women in almost all IALS countries. Only in Sweden—and Finland—is the participation rate for women higher than the corresponding rate for men. According to a Canadian study, the 1998 participation rate for Canadian adults has risen to 51%. The participation rate for women of 51% was higher than the rate for men at 49%, however it varied in different provinces (Livingstone et al. 1998; NALL 1998). In all provinces of Finland, women’s average participation rate in adult education was higher than men’s (AKU 1995). Since most adult education relates to work or a vocation, it is obvious, that on average, the unemployed participate less in adult education than the employed (Silvennoinen 1999). It is remarkable that 19% of employed people and 16% of unemployed people in Finland participate in other than work-related adult education similarly (ibid., p. 43). The adult education participation rate of 18 to 64 year old unemployed Finns, is 27%. When compared with the IALS countries, this is clearly a lower participation rate. In Sweden for example, 45% of 16 to 65 year old unemployed people participate in adult education. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland, 38% participate, and in Canada the participation rate is 32%. According to international comparisons, then, Finland is a country of high participation, especially female participation, in adult education, where differences in education level and social class are below the average and, but differences between the employed and unemployed exceed the average.

The concept of a learning society requires the examination of informal or everyday learning. Unfortunately no comparative studies have been
The first national survey study in Canada revealed that Canadians spend 15 hours per week, on average, for everyday learning. This is five times the number of hours spent in organized adult education (Livingstone et al. 1998). According to David Livingstone’s interpretation, formal education and adult education are ships sailing the sea of everyday learning. We do not know the situation in Finnish society, but we agree with Anthony Giddens that keeping a life story of learning going, in circumstances of increasing risk and individualization, requires a reflexivity which is not possible without everyday learning. This is supported by our comprehensive qualitative study (Antikainen & Huotelin 1996).

3. CHANGES IN MORAL LEGITIMATION

Individual meanings for education are always given within social space which are significantly defined by community meanings related to generation, gender, residential area, and ethnic identity. The individual giving of meanings, including the structuring and construction of identity, have significance in the symbolic structures of society as well. The prevailing moral order is probably the most important of these structures for the raising of children in our society, although its educational effectiveness is not immediately apparent. Individuals, their immediate activities and educational institutions are evaluated in relation to the moral order. What is considered good, bad, right, wrong, desired or undesired at a given time becomes the yardstick for measuring morality, and thus, the success of education as a whole.

As a child grows to be a member of a community, we expect that moral commitments, and the reasons for them, will be communicated to the child. Morals can be taught and learned in many ways: through practical deeds such as the everyday practices of a school; through the setting and teaching of norms, prohibitions, and orders; or through providing advice and recommendations to the child. A final way is to convey through tales and stories the cultural understanding necessary to face life situations and the different possibilities for good actions. Morals have been examined here through their narrative forms and contents, including the changes that have occurred during this century. The data consists of 57 Finnish ABC books and elementary readers, pedagogical texts including national and local curricula from this century. The most essential question is how the basis for legitimation, where concepts of good and bad are measured and by which actions are justified, has changed. What does it mean on one hand, to raise a human being to be a member of a community, and on the other hand, to define an ideals qualities of a community to which the child is to be raised. (Koski 1998, 1999).

The concept of moral legitimation, on which upbringing is based, has changed radically during this century. Traditional morality was based on Lutheran Christianity and related to the ideal of “divine harmony.” In the 1960s, this was replaced by a new ideal of “social harmony.” This change meant that the aim of child raising to produce a humble, obedient and parent respecting child
was no longer valid. Rather, the goal became to produce a child whose being is related to an autonomous commitment to friends, harmony, being happy together, and commonly-held rules for achieving this state. Morality secularized when the moral cosmology based on Lutheran Christianity turned into a cosmology based on social arguments. When the transcendental God was no longer the wellspring of morality, ordering interpersonal relations of authority and obedience, we had to use new symbols to define the essential nature of human beings, and what constituted a good human being within community. The most important symbol is friendship, both as a deed and form of thought that generates good for a community and individuals. Friendship is defined as a feeling of spiritual and social security. It binds individuals and communities together by generating an ideal of a community which produces good individuals.

There are two main problems with a moral cosmology based on social harmony. First, it requires that the community where children are raised must be absolutely good, so that the child can become good when he or she commits to its rules. Second, it imposes friendship as the only possible way for a child to become a part of the community. When a child has no share in the symbol of friendship, he or she is existentially left outside the security of the community, without the chance to grow to be a good member in a good community. This from of moral order requires everyone's commitment to the same ideals, and to accepting every individual as a member of the community although the individual would not fulfill even the basic requirements established within the moral order (for example, would not keep himself or herself clean and tidy). Both absolute goodness of the basis for morality and idea, that every human being is worthy of good were qualities earlier seen as attainable and plausible only for God. In definitions of moral cosmology, the bad, or the evil, cannot exist within a community defined as transcendentally good into the place where God used to be. Thus, the evil must be attached to the individual's improper ways of life, habits of eating or physical exercise, or the loss of self-control. A child who is left outside the community seems to fall into a position of being doubly "bad": the child is friendless and lonely, and due to being friendless, the child is doomed to improper ways of life.

When moral legitimation is grounded, and acquires its goals through an attachment to social legitimation, and individual's commitment and moral choices are highlighted. This is especially true in pedagogic theory and curricula. Goals of educational policy, such as equality, become attached to an individual's personal choices by legitimating educational approaches which emphasize competition and personal capabilities as a basis for possibilities. Equality has become to be defined as an abstraction, without meaningful social relations to actual individual chances (Koski & Nummenmaa 1995, Koski & Paju 1998).

From the viewpoint of educational effectiveness, analysing the symbolic changes of moral order may offer an interpretative basis for questions about child rearing.
For example, why has raising well-mannered, respectful children who are responsible for the community become more difficult? It also gives an interpretative perspective for understanding the diversification of experiences across educational generations, and the loss of the meaning of school in learning experiences. Moral upbringing based on Lutheran Christianity gave meanings to everything by attaching them to transcendental will. Through the legitimating power of this will, it was possible to tie the child tightly enough to the definitions of school, and simultaneously, to establish meanings in a more powerful way than is possible within the moral cosmology based on friendship, rules and common compliance. The more difficult it becomes in the society, where shared moral commitments seem to be disintegrating.

4. MEANINGS OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN THE LIVES OF DIFFERENT FINNS

A biographic study about different Finns, people with different social and cultural backgrounds, was structured around the following key concepts and research questions: 1. Life-course: How do Finns use education in constructing their life-courses? 2. Identity: What do educational and school experiences mean in the production and formation of identity? 3) Significant learning experiences: What kind of significant learning experiences do people have? In what kind of environments have these experiences originated? In our analysis, a person’s life story was constructed based on a narrative biographical interview and a thematic interview which deepened aspects of the biographical information. A life history was produced by placing the life story in a socio-historical and situational context. In other words, it is a contextual analysis where individual and social meanings of education and learning are found in the life histories (Antikainen & Huotelin 1996).

4.1 Educational Generations

How has education constructed the life-courses of Finns? An answer to this comprehensive question can be developed using a life-course perspective by classifying the common experiences of education described by people of various ages with different education levels. The changing meaning of education as a constructor of life-course can be crystallized generation by generation as follows:

"Meaning of education has changed from an ideal of the oldest generation to a self-evident fact for the youngest generation."

According to our interpretation, there are three societal generations with different educational experiences in Finland today (Huotelin & Kauppila 1995; Antikainen et al. 1996, 34-52; Kauppila 1996; 1998). The oldest generation
was born in 1935 or earlier; during the interview they were 62 years old or older. We call this generation “the generation of war and scant education.” Their biographies describe hard labour and struggles to make a living for their families. They have experienced several situations where they had no alternatives from which to choose; experiences of war and reconstruction have marked their lives. Educational opportunities for this generation were scant, and education in the old binary school system was a segregating factor. We interpret their central experiences, a sort of common identity, as being one where their lives have been a struggle, and education was their ideal. Members of this generation, and also representatives of the middle generation, were able to utilize amazingly scant education or learning experiences all their lives. Once they had learned something, they did not forget it, but rather developed it.

The next generation, or the middle generation, was born between 1936 and 1955; during the interview they between 42 and 61 years old. This generation is called “the generation of structural changes and increasing educational opportunities.” Work has a central meaning in their biographies too, but it is often connected with education, and for many this is the key to a developing career. Structural change causes migration from rural areas to population centres. This generation has opportunities for education even though the educational system remained a modernized binary school system. These opportunities are first utilized by children of the upper and middle classes. In our interpretation, experiences of the middle generation are characterized by the fact that work is a central content of life, and education is a tool, especially in vocational careers.

The youngest generation was born in 1956 and later; during the interview these people were 41 years old or younger. This generation is called “the generation of welfare and many educational choices.” It is worth mentioning that the basic interviews were done in 1992 and 1993, when experiences of economic regression had not yet crystallized. Thus, on the basis of their core experiences, all of the people under forty years of age are placed in the same generation, despite their heterogeneity. Symbolic experience environments, such as the media and entertainment, have a central role. Selection of educational institutions, leisure-time hobbies, and looking out for oneself are typical content in the biographies. Educational opportunity has become a game of choices. According to our interpretation, the lives of the younger generation are characterized by the centrality of hobbies, and by their experiencing the self as a problem. Education—especially general education—is experienced as a commodity or actually a self-evident fact. Thus, the change from the oldest generation is quite remarkable. Education became first a tool and then a self-evident fact. The rationalization of society, the birth of a consumer society, and the shift to education as a part of daily life of a whole generation shatters the enchantment with education. The ideal becomes self-evident and even boring, however, the young think that getting an education is relevant, especially because of its instrumental nature.
As researchers, we were surprised at the number of common and connecting experiences of members of different generations. Certainly there are internal differences between people and groups within the same generation. While studying the young persons’ self-definitions, Jarmo Houtsonen found a group which used education in order to implement a social or a personal dream, as he called these representatives of social movements and corresponding life-styles (Antikainen et al. 1996, 61). Representatives of feminist or ecological movements, for example, selected educational content according to an old liberal adult education tradition, even in institutional education. The subject to be learned had to be useful in the implementation of a life based on their adopted values. As well, an examination of significant learning experiences shows that the meaning of education may have changed or become emphasized, especially in certain life-course transformations or in actual crises (see Antikainen 1996).

Finally, if we want to influence the meaning of education given by the young, we should discuss the relationship between life in school and life outside of school.

4.2 Significant Learning Experiences

Credit for the concept of significant learning experience can be given, in part, to Anna, a 66-year-old Karelian housekeeper and mother of the family. Anna's interview indicated that there may be clear turning points signifying an education and learning biography in one’s life story. I started to call these turning points significant learning experiences. I defined them in relation to life-course and identity as follows: learning experiences that, on the basis of a life story, seem to have guided an interviewee’s life-course, or to have changed or strengthened her or his identity, are significant learning experiences (Antikainen 1996, 252–252; 1998, 218–219). My central interpretation of this research is that:

"There are significant learning experiences in everyone’s life stories. In our society of risks they keep lifelong learning going either with joy or pain."

What do I mean by this statement?

Significant learning experiences are not part of an institutional life-course, but are life events which are directed to the future and contain creativity and participation. According to interpretations we did together with the interviewees, everyone had this kind of experience. In some environments, however, no such experiences occurred. We found it difficult to observe them in institutional education, and their situational context was often found to be transformations in life-course. It was not only a question of joy of learning, but also pain of learning.

Traditionally, it has been thought that accumulating learning experiences keeps individuals’ lifelong learning going. Theoretically, it can be argued that since learning experiences acquired in a societal situation are
dominated by uncertainty and risks, significant learning experiences have an even more central role.

Observations regarding environments for significant learning experiences led to a discussion of the relationship between learning in a formal school environment and informal or everyday learning. It seems, more than we previously understood, that both approaches are needed in learning. By re-reading the life stories from this perspective, our first interpretation was that accumulation of significant learning experiences in everyday learning keeps the learning biography going and open, even for learning in formal education settings (Antikainen 1996, 1997, 1998).

4.3 Educational Identities and Lifelong Learning

In this section, I evaluate the condition of our educational system by examining cultural structuring of educational identities. From these observations, I draw conclusions concerning the organization of lifelong learning in a postmodern, flexible market economy such as Finland. My observations are: 1) Our educational system is a field of rigid and unidimensional identities. 2) When people use resources of education they are conditioned significantly by their earlier life experiences and identity constructed on the basis of them. 3) Rigid and clearly defined identities produced by school experiences may limit areas of learning and impede learning in new areas. My conclusion is: an educational system which provides and produces flexible and versatile identities must be created for lifelong learning (Houtsonen 1996, 1996a).

From the perspective of lifelong learning, the relationship between education and identity can be understood as an interactive process continuing throughout the life-course. Identity guides the utilization of educational resources, and education produces a certain identity that guides learning and applying for education in the future. An educational system can be seen as a field of different educational sectors and levels, which provide different typical identity models or conceptions about who I am, what can I do, and how I learn; these models are used by people to construct their identity and life-course.

Interviewees used education as a resource for constructing their identity and life-course in two different contexts in their lives. The first context was an anticipated (institutionalized) application for education related to a period of life, or a life situation. An example of this is a normal choice of education or career which a person makes on the basis of his or her identity, according to action models provided by his or her cultural group. The person has to decide only what kind of education he or she will apply for; other questions related to identity or life are not involved. A steady life-course within the life style and culture of a certain group gives the person a crystallized conception about himself or herself, and about which education appropriate for a such a person. Thus, the educational sector and level chosen by the individual, including typical identities related to them, seem to be a natural continuation of his or her life thus far. There is nothing in this situation that forces the individual to question himself or herself,
and his or her way of life; it is as if the human being has been socialized in advance to a certain education and its typical identity. From this point of view, we can understand educational reproduction as a consequence of the children of different social or vocational groups applying for education that is typical for them. A carpenter's son applies for carpentry in a vocational school, and a farmer's child selects forestry at university.

The utilization of educational resources manifests itself in different contexts of a life-course as well. Sometimes people face different challenges in their lives, especially in adulthood, such as a need to have more significant work, or to address external constraints like the death of a spouse or becoming seriously ill. Often, these unforeseen events make people discuss who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. While a person becomes more conscious of him/herself and life, she/he also become more aware of available cultural resources, like education, by which he/she can construct his/her life-course and identity. Thus, person’s area of schooling and learning may expand.

Frequently, when people face unforeseen or non-institutionalized problems, they apply for education in order to solve problems related to their life-course and identity. These educational selections are not necessarily a natural continuation of the earlier life. Rather, the individual may look for an educational sector that enables a new direction in their life, and provides the related typical identity. This event can be a long-term process where the person tries, even at random, several different areas of education. The circle of educational reproduction can be broken by using education in the re-construction of identity, especially when related to challenges and constraints in a life-course. After the death of a spouse, a commercial college graduate becomes a nurse, or following a spinal illness, a farmer becomes a master builder.

Despite the fact that education seems to be a very significant positive resource in the event of a break in life-course, when an individual must reconstruct his or her identity anew, these events are often very difficult and severe experiences for the people in question. Growing from an old identity into a new one is often compulsory, with no available alternatives. The process may be prolonged, and contain several experiments. This may be because the educational system provides quite rigid and clearly defined identity models which require an unambiguous answer to the question of who he or she is in order to attach to the models. The consequences of this are observable in an especially clear way in our ethnic minorities, who have been treated poorly by our educational system. From the minorities we interviewed, we learned that the Saami people struggled to connect materials related to different identities. They succeeded, in part, despite the requirements of the system; they can be both Saami people and Finns. However, these experiences of re-socializing are very hard. The requirements of the clearly defined identity of Romany people meant staying outside the educational system.

The educational system as a field of typical identity models manifests itself in relatively rigid and clearly defined conceptions about who I am, what I can do and how I learn. In turn, these conceptions can influence the way
people use the resources offered by education in the future. The first example of a rigid identity is the young person’s habit of defining themselves as either “theoretically” or “practically” directed learners. Through these self-definitions, the young both open and close avenues of education and areas of learning. It is worth noting that these self-definitions strengthen one another because their meanings and typical characteristics are provided by mutual juxtaposition. When a young person says yes to one of these identity models, he or she rejects the contrary one: because I am like this, I cannot be like that.

Another example concerns people’s early learning experiences at school; these experiences seem to strongly condition the construction of a new identity through later education. Learning experiences from primary or comprehensive school form a relatively permanent conception of our place in the field of learning, or a typical conception of our abilities, ways of learning and suitable knowledge. Thus, when we construct an identity through education in the challenging or compulsory situation of a life-course, we may select an entirely new sector, but one that still corresponds to, and strengthens, our earlier conceptions of ourselves as a learner.

What kind of conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing observations? An educational system should be understood as a field where people generate both their material and symbolic experiences. I have attempted to understand the symbolic aspect of the educational system by examining the cultural construction of educational identities. Utilization of educational resources cannot be understood only on the basis of material conditions, such as the number of student places or the scores on an entrance examination. We must understand as well the symbolic conditions by which we organize and experience the reality related to the educational system, for instance issues related to personal identity. These can be as powerful, as enabling, or as limiting prerequisites as the material conditions when applying for education. Education does not give people only a materialized degree or vocation, but simultaneously, it provides a symbolic conception of who the person is, what he or she can do and how he or she learns. In some respects, these are the factors that either open or close opportunities for learning in future.

If the analyses of the post-modern Finland, land of a flexible market economy, hold true, we are living in an era of scattered and constantly changing meaning systems, where new vocations and jobs appear, and old ones disappear all the time. Our life-course is uncertain and fragmentary. We continuously face unforeseen situations which force us to fashion our identity over and over again. It has been said that one needs lifelong learning in a world like this.

My observations indicate that education manifests itself as a significant resource in challenging and compulsory breaks in a life-course, when a human being must construct his or her life and identity anew. Thus, I can say that lifelong learning takes place all the time, and people can use education as a resource for the construction of their life-course and identity. On the other hand, these situations are often crises, and learning is not voluntary. Lifelong learning should take place in other situations too.
Our educational system does not seem to be well prepared for lifelong learning in a world of ambiguity, uncertainty and change, especially if the quite rigid and clearly defined typical identities generated by the system are examined. Early learning experiences at school generate a quite permanent conception of oneself as a learner, and this conception, in turn, directs later learning and application for education in a significant way. In addition, the rigid and clearly defined identity types require an unambiguous answer to the question of who he or she is as a person. Under ambiguous and multicultural circumstances, this can lead to unidimensional identities, to many groups being forced outside the educational system, and to human suffering.

The world of uncertainty and change needs a system which offers less typical and more multidimensional identities than the prevailing one. In a world of broken life-courses and uncertainty, the system must offer more flexible and versatile ways for very different people to construct their identities. These people would then have a positive conception of themselves as learners. They would consider themselves both “theoretical” and “practical,” and they would manage well in our constantly changing world.

5. THE YOUNG IN CHANGE

5.1 Young Vocational School Drop-Outs

My dissertation research investigates vocational school drop outs who have begun their studies anew. I examine their paths to placement in education and the vocational orientation processes of the 1990s post-modern education society, with all its options and compulsory choices (see Komonen 1999). In an education society, the transformation from childhood to adulthood is expected to occur as we advance along a learning continuum. In this environment, the interruption of studies, or dropping out, has engendered a strong moral stigma. Discussions pertaining to educational policy and other academic debates, consider young drop-outs as a subgroup of marginalized people, an educational underclass, whose interruption of studies is seen as the final point in an educational career.

Although the research subjects in my dissertation study had some common characteristics and experiences in their life, it is not possible to paint a clearly defined “portrait of a drop-out.” Dropping out, as part of an education placement path, can take very different forms.

Dropping out should not be seen as a self-evidently negative event. For some young persons, it is an obvious “method of constructing a career.” Dropping-out of one educational sector, and entering another, is one choice made by participants in the vocational orientation process. It is intended as a way of replacing a seemingly bad choice with a better one. Instead of dropping out of studies altogether, the individuals move to another form of education through dropping out and starting in a new educational option. Dropping out as a way of changing study places is even more common in the secondary level, where
competition for such places has increased. While it is difficult to make plans, it is even more difficult to implement them; the meaning of educational selection was observable in the background of most stories.

Dropping out is not always a conscious and deliberate choice. Some young people drifted into a marginal position at the beginning of their education path, or at the latest, when postgraduate training positions were allocated. Dropping out for these people cannot be examined only from the fundamental question of vocational orientation. The reasons for dropping out were often found elsewhere, either outside the school institution, as individuals coped with their lives, or inside the school institution, in the relationship between the student and the school. When a person drifted into dropping out, it led to them moving away from the whole educational system. Often, in this case, restarting studies meant the creation of a new relationship to the educational system in the form of taking a “second chance.” For young men with a negative attitude towards school—the biggest group of nuisances from the perspective of school authorities—re-starting education seemed to require sensible work experiences. Work practice and employment provided this group with an opportunity to find an interesting work area, and the process resulted in such a positive relationship between formal education and everyday learning that it led the young men to restart their education.

When young people are searching for the right education for themselves, it is too easily seen as a negative attitude towards education. Their educational choices are seen as final and decisive, and dropping out is regarded as their ultimate educational destiny. The process of placement in education is long and difficult. Dropping-out as an in-between, temporary phase in a prolonged and difficult education placement process, is part of more and more young people’s lives. Their later educational experiences, or their future lives, are not necessarily branded negatively as a result, however. The central finding of this study can be crystallized as follows:

“Dropping out of vocational school does not necessarily mean dropping out of all education. On the other hand, it is possible to start education again as a 'second chance' even after long breaks.”

5.2 Young People with Working-Class Backgrounds

In a study examining school attendance of young people with working-class backgrounds (Käyhkö & Tuupanen 1996, 1997), young women and young men with equally good school achievement, who end up attending vocational school or university, are compared with each other. Their school history, from comprehensive school to vocational school or university is examined. According to our analysis, differentiation between groups, on the basis of gender, or level of education, were meaning of family for the young person’s
education career, the young person's attitude towards education and their earlier school experiences including leisure-time activities, especially reading as a hobby.

It is interesting that young people from similar backgrounds give very different meanings for education in their biographical and thematic interviews. Different meanings they give for the stages of formal education, and the learning environments, are aptly described by headings like “Comprehensive school—a self-evident fact, but a challenge for university student girls,” “Vocational school—a quick way to vocation,” “Upper secondary school—an intermediate stage on the way to somewhere,” and “University—a fulfilment and disappointment.”

Passing on a vocation within the family does not seem to be a decision with limited alternatives for those who have chosen vocational school. They are happy with their life and vocation. Often, young women’s satisfaction is fulfilled by doing some form of handwork. Young men think that they will have a “masculine vocation,” or they believe that they will provide for themselves. Pupils at vocational school can be described as a group of academically non-ambitious young people, who are loyal to the traditions they inherited from their families. University students, especially young women, detach themselves from their family model and culture at an early stage. Female university students formed the most divergent group. They had experienced all of their schooling as a challenging learning environment, and their clear, intrinsic value of cultural orientation was observable. They were ambitious, motivated to perform, and had adopted the role of a quiet, decent, and conscientious schoolgirl. By means of this role, they progressed successfully in education. The orientation of male university students was more instrumental, geared to a career and standard of living comparable with the young women. They detached themselves from a model of manual work by entering a university, however, they respected the manual work of their male relatives.

In addition to social class, the influence of gender is clearly seen in the meanings individuals have given to education:

“Girls desire to fulfill themselves through education—vocational school pupils do it by hand and university students through educating themselves—was opposite to the boys’ more instrumental orientation.”

On the whole, this study focusing on young people with working class backgrounds allows us to see elements which influence their educational careers such as activities in childhood and different phases and environments of adolescence, as well as structural factors in education that can be influenced.

5.3 Unemployed Young People and Those Under Threat of Becoming Unemployed
One substudy (Käyhkö & Kurkko 1998) examined the place of school and education during the economic recession from two different perspectives, that of unemployed, still studying young people, and young people under threat of becoming unemployed. The most central finding of this study can be crystallized as follows:

“School is a haven for the young and it prevents becoming labeled as unemployed.”

School is a haven for unemployed young people, and for those under threat of becoming unemployed who are still studying (cf. Storage hypothesis). School is not only a material or social safeguard, but its symbolic meaning is central: according to the young, being at school prevents them from being labeled as class B citizens, a term they used in their interviews. Those who are still studying perceive school as a safe place where they have an opportunity to wait and think about their future choices. Paradoxically, they do not want to think about their future very far in advance, because they never know what will happen. The unemployed preferred school over unemployment as an alternative. They emphasized that they wanted to save face in front of other people, that they did not want to be seen as “losers.”

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the research plan for our study, we presented a rather heuristic hypothesis which suggested that education has several and also emancipating or liberating meanings at the biographical level in Finnish society. After reading our report, you may draw your own conclusion as to whether you agree or disagree with our interpretation. However, we argue that our study supports this hypothesis. Our common central conclusion is that:

“People use education in different ways depending on socio-historical situation and life situation.”

Education has no single meaning, and it is not sensible to evaluate it on the basis of a single goal, or one unchanging goal. As a result, we consider functionalistic research and modern evaluation of education inadequate. Evaluation should move from its technocratic, modernization thinking to a position of reflexive modernization. In other words, as Young states in his article, evaluation must move from the supremacy of information technology and information systems, to a reflection of modern science as it is addressed by human subjects. An illustrative example of the problems related to the evaluation of education is the drop-out rate in schools, which is apparently always interpreted as a failure of the educational institution. According to Komonen’s findings, this does not necessarily hold true.
In our books (Antikainen et al. 1996, 86–87; Antikainen & Huotelin 1996, 293), we developed the following list of social meanings for education: 1. Education as resource, 2. Education as status, 3. Education as a producer of conformity, and 4. Education as individualization. If we examine education in relation to welfare, we observe that, depending on the context, education may be a constructor of the material standard of living (having), of solidarity (loving) and of fulfilling oneself (being) (Allardt 1976). The education and learning biographies we examined can be described with one expression: they are survival stories.

Preliminary conclusions about the relationship between education, learning and other institutions can be suggested. The meaning of family as a caring institution and community is still essential; obviously not even the welfare state has been able to change it. The meaning of family was examined in our biographical study as the basis for cultural resources. Structuralists use terms such as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990), or pedagogic ethos, which Karisto and Monten (1997) refer to as the “internalized willingness to education and its regulative cultural environment.” The boundary between education and work has become even more vague, and it may continue this trend in the future. Often, leisure-time hobbies have seemingly post-modern subjective power. The picture painted by our biographic study of the relationship between education and other institutions cannot be interpreted in a totally post-modern vein. Certainly the meaning of education given by the young has become more vague and versatile, but even for vocational school drop outs, the value of work is what brings them back to the world of education.

The meaning of levels of education have been only mentioned in the foregoing text. From the biographical perspective, the diminishing subjective and symbolic meaning of general education seems to be a threat. On the basis of our observations, vocational education seems to have preserved quite well its experienced meaning. If examined from another perspective, vocational education is the one that should open up to its environment under competitive circumstances. Where higher education is concerned, I refer to the experiences of our young research team. Those who have received a lengthy education will have many kinds of transitions in their life-course after graduation. Under different circumstances, these transitions are the luck of life, but under circumstances of competition and accountability, without inherited wealth they may become a burden.

Colloquially speaking, we might say that surprisingly many “positive” meanings of education were found in our study. A single interesting example is the school as a symbolic haven for the young under threat of unemployment; they see the school as saving them from being labeled a loser. On the other hand, Koski’s conclusion concerning changes in the moral legitimation of school is worth remembering. If friendship is the only possible way for a child to become part of a (school) community, being excluded from friendship may be a hard fate indeed. Houtsonen concluded that the identities offered by the present educational system, such as the young defining themselves as being either
“practical,” or “theoretical,” are too rigid and unidimensional for lifelong learning.

NOTES

1. Data has been introduced in the publications concerned.
2. In these studies, the comparison group for new university students consisted of age group 15 to 24 years. More and more new students are older than this, for example every fifth student in 1994 was older (Nevala 1999, 31). Since the share of clerical employees in the population is continuously growing, and we know that the socio-economic situation of parents of adult students on average is lower than young students (Moore 1999, 102–103), this procedure means moving in a direction of inequality. The growth of the share of students’ parents classified into group of “others,” (students, retired people etc.) to over 25% in the 1990s, may have a corresponding meaning.
3. There is a slight difference in interviewees’ ages between the Finnish Adult Education Survey 95 (AKU) and IALS. The population of AKU consists of 18 to 64 year-old-people and 16 to 65 year-old-people in the IALS. This difference corresponds the differences in the concept of adult. Also, questions about participation in adult education are asked a slightly different way. The IALS contained a more open-ended question, and different forms of education are itemized in the AKU. The differences do not have an effect on the observations and interpretations presented in the text.

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