Educational Generations and the Futures of Adult Education: A Nordic Experience

ARI ANTIKAINEN & JUHA KAUPPILA
The University of Joensuu, Joensuu
Finland

Abstract

In our study of the meanings of education and learning in people’s lives, we investigated educational generations in Finland. Our analysis is based on Karl Mannheim’s concept and theory of social generation. This approach resulted in the differentiation of four educational cohorts living in contemporary Finnish society, three of which provided distinct core life experiences and educational experiences for analysis. These are: the war generation with scant education (born before 1935), the generation of structural change with growing educational opportunities (born 1936-55) and the welfare generation with many educational choices (born after 1955). In this article, we review the characteristics of these generations, and analyse the dynamics of their educational courses and experiences. We conclude that their core experiences of education can be summarised in two basic narratives: the narrative of national culture and that of economic structural change. Finally, we argue that such generational change reflects the more general rationalization of Western culture and society. Based on this argumentation, we consider the futures of adult education based on the application of Weberian social theory and its conceptions of material and formal rationality.
Educational Generations and the Futures of Adult Education: a Nordic Experience

ARI ANTIKAINEN & JUHA KAUPPILA
The University of Joensuu,

Joensuu

Introduction

Finnish society has been changing rapidly since World War II. Linked with these changes, age-related differences in educational levels in Finland are the greatest overall of the OECD-countries. With these points in mind, we use the concept of “generation” to examine the processes of gaining an education and learning in Finland.

In this paper, we describe three different experiential educational generations we found in our study on contemporary Finnish society. The meaning of education, especially formal education, varies for people of different age groups. When studying generation dynamics, other learning environments are present in a more explicit way as well. Finally, we discuss possible futures for adult education based on scenarios of continuing social and educational change in this Nordic context

Data and analysis

Data for our study on educational generations consist of two-phase interviews with people of various age groups, and different social and cultural backgrounds (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin & Kauppila 1995 and 1996; Huotelin & Kauppila 1995). We call these people ‘different Finns’ (n=44). The first phase was a narrative biographical, or life story, interview. Thematic questions about identity and education were asked at the end of the first interview as well. The second phase was a more focused thematic interview. The resulting material comprised approximately 3000 pages, which were compressed to 300 pages with coding.

In our study, Kauppila, Antikainen and Houtsonen drew on different organising concepts in their respective analyses: Kauppila employed the concept of life-course, Antikainen used learning experience, and Houtsonen worked with the concept of identity. Analyses of the same data, from these different perspectives, guaranteed discussions among the researchers, and produced comparisons between interpretations.

In our generation analysis, we analysed the data in two ways. First, we classified the data according to educational cohorts. In addition to age, these cohorts were based on the structure of opportunities, that is, on changes in social mobility, in the educational system and in participation in education (Antikainen et al. 1996, 34-37; Pontinen 1982; Roos 1987; Jarvela 1991). Then, by intensive reading of both interviews and coded data which we organized according to Bruner’s (1986) terminology, we were able to interpret the core experiences of each cohort. This resulted in what Mannheim (1952) called generational locations, and we call experiential generations. So far, we have not analysed generational groups or fractions in a systematic manner, but this topic is discussed in a preliminary way in the section on generation dynamics.
The future alternatives of adult education are presented as three scenarios. The scenarios are based on a theoretical interpretation of the results of generational analysis as a reflection of the basic tendencies of social and educational transformation in Finnish and Nordic society.

**The Oldest Generation: Education as an Ideal**

In the analyses by Kauppila and Huotelin, the oldest generation consists of people born in 1935 or earlier. They are now approximately 66 years of age or older. We call this generation 'the war generation with scant education’. Their life stories tell of hard work and struggle to provide a livelihood for their families. These people have faced several situations of distress in their lives, and their experiences during the war, and during the rebuilding after the war, are strongly present in their life stories. Their prospects for education were minimal, and in the old binary school system, people were classified according to their education. We interpret their core experiences, a kind of identity, in the following way: life was a struggle for the older generation, and education was an ideal for them. People of this older generation, and those of the next, or middle generation, used a surprisingly small amount of education or educational experience throughout their lives. What they learned, stayed and developed within them. For example, our first informant, Anna, began creating needlework before she was old enough to go to school. She continued this hobby at home, in household school, and study groups. She describes herself as, 'someone who has obtained a matriculation (equivalent to A-levels) in needlework’.

The oldest generation of our study was divided into groups, based, in part, on the social classes that date back to the days of class society. The Civil War in 1918, 'the whites’ against 'the reds’, highlighted the barriers between these classes in a terrifying way (Alapuro 1988). Regardless of class, however, all groups considered education as an ideal in their narratives. Often this ideal was emphasised when someone was unable to gain education, or when his/her education was discontinued. For example, Helvi (b. 1927), the wife of a working farmer, described her feelings when she learnt that she could not receive money from her father, or from The Guardianship Board, to attend a six-week course in Helsinki: 'Listen, The Guardianship Board

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Education as an Ideal</th>
<th>Education as a Means to Career Progression</th>
<th>Education as a Commodity or as Taken for Granted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War generation with scant education (-1935)</td>
<td>EDUCATION AS AN IDEAL</td>
<td>EDUCATION AS A MEANS TO CAREER PROGRESSION</td>
<td>EDUCATION AS A COMMODITY OR AS TAKEN FOR GRANTED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation of structural change with growing educational opportunities (1936 –1955)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare generation with many educational choices (1956-)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REALITY</td>
<td>Scant opportunities for education, war, parallel school system (1921-1957)</td>
<td>Educational opportunities increase, structural change, a new parallel school system (1958-1975)</td>
<td>Many educational opportunities, welfare state, economic recession, unemployment, comprehensive school system (1975-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>Material experiential environment has central importance, situations of distress, intensive experiences, struggle, education as an ideal</td>
<td>Institutional experiential environment has central importance, education has instrumental meanings</td>
<td>Symbolic experiential environment has central importance, education is considered a commodity and taken for granted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPRESSION</td>
<td>Work, breadwinning, war connects stages of life</td>
<td>Work has central importance in people’s lives, work and education become more linked</td>
<td>Several choices of educational institutes, self-searching, own identity and hobbies have central importance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The future alternatives of adult education are presented as three scenarios. The scenarios are based on a theoretical interpretation of the results of generational analysis as a reflection of the basic tendencies of social and educational transformation in Finnish and Nordic society.
didn’t grant me the money and when I left from there, I cried all the way home. That was the end of my road to learning.’

Allan (b. 1930), who owned a large farm and is an international expert in his field, had similar feelings when his university studies were discontinued: ‘Well, the most negative (educational) experience for me is that I never graduated. I guess I can’t think of anything else that would be negative.’ Despite this, he later worked as a university teacher.

The oldest person we interviewed, Aatu (b. 1909), has an academic degree, but he was not satisfied being an amateur researcher in local and national history. He would have liked to continue his studies to become a real professional historian.

Helvi’s narrative has different content, but Allan’s and Aatu’s narratives are not very different in form. From a reader’s point of view, my impression is that the oldest generation was never satisfied, regardless of the education level they achieved. There was always a hope of continuing their education, a hope that was not often fulfilled.

Descriptions of education’s civilising nature can be found in the interviews. Oskari (b. 1921) tells about his experiences at elementary school: ‘The teacher was called Henna Semanen, a gentle and nice woman, but she kept us under strict discipline. If someone was fooling around, she wasn’t afraid of approaching this pupil and saying, now put your hands on the desk. Then she would hit this pupil on the hands with a ruler. … The upper form teacher, Artturi Paananen, was very strict and he had quite a temper, too. Many times he cut the boys down to size. He used to hit them in a cruel way, though. Those days it was acceptable for a teacher to hit the boys.’

The educational narratives of all generations are survival stories, but the narratives of the oldest generation emphasise that aspect more than those of other generation cohorts. Kauppila suggest that: for them, ‘life is a struggle’. Although it is clear that for this generation, higher education meant a higher social status, their educational narratives highlight (popular) educational stories, rather than instrumental descriptions of progressive professional careers. We can make the argument that from the modern perspective, this group could be called the generation of popular education and enlightenment, or, to be more precise, the second generation of popular education and enlightenment. In this account, the first generation of popular enlightenment are those born in the last decades of the 19th century or the first decades of this century when Finland became independent, Finnish was adopted as an administrative language (instead of Swedish and Russian), public elementary schools were established also in rural districts, and local parish government was developed. At that time nationalism was a ‘civic religion’ (E.J. Hobsbawm), but it was also a reaction to underdevelopment. This response involved first the intelligentsia, then wider strata of the middle class, and finally the masses (Alapuro 1988: 85-100). Later, we refer to this history and tradition as a narrative of national culture.

The Middle Generation: Education as a Means to Career Progression

The next generation, the so-called middle generation, consists of those born between 1936 and 1955. They are now 45 to 65 years old. We call this generation ‘a generation of structural change with growing educational opportunities’. Work is a focal point in their life stories, too, but now work is often connected with education, and for many it opens up a progressive career path. Structural changes in Finland forced many people to move from the countryside to urban areas in search of work. Educational opportunities were opening, but the school system was still a binary or parallel school, even though it had been restructured. The first to take advantage of educational opportunities were the children of upper and middle class families. According to our interpretation, a characteristic of middle generation experience is that ‘work is a central meaning of life, and education functions as a means to professional career progression’. Professional career building and the meaning of education - especially formal education - are present particularly in the narratives of men. It is more difficult to consider education as an enlightening process in these narratives. We know the narratives of this generation more comprehensively than others do, as many Finnish authors have written about the migration to towns.

When we began our research, our aim was to divide the middle cohorts into two generations. Among the older cohort of the middle generation, we found it was mainly the children of the middle classes who went to upper secondary school. Among the younger cohort, the social backgrounds of upper secondary school pupils were different, as children from lower social groups had started going to secondary school. Kauppila and
Huotelin did find a common core experience for these two cohorts, however. It is worth while to remember Ville’s (b. 1941) expression of his reasons for not going to secondary school. He chose to attend a technical school and college: ‘I had this feeling inside, that like, I should go to this school and educate myself more, but secondary school felt like such a dream, only the rich children could go there, and this was the image that people had.’

Both Ville and Arto (b. 1937) were capable of using the professional education they gained in a similar way to the older generation. As Arto says: ‘Without education, thinking of where I come from, without any possibility for education I can’t even think of where I would be and what I would do. Or maybe I would be six feet under ground.’

The middle generation is still one of enlightenment, even though the meaning of education is found in its instrumental nature. Their education and enlightenment process is different from the oldest generation, however. Among the oldest generation the focus was on ideal patriotism - no matter if it was right wing or left-wing patriotism - but now the focal points are belief in science and in the power of expertise. A secular, social moral code has replaced a moral code based on religion (Koski 1998).

The Youngest Generation: Education as a Commodity

The youngest generation in our study consists of those born in 1956 and after. They are 45 years old or younger now. We call this group ‘the welfare generation with many educational choices’. It should be noted that our first interviews were carried out in 1992 - 93, when experiences of the economic recession were not yet defined. Thus, the whole group of under 46-year-olds was placed in the same generation cohort in our analysis of their core experiences.

Symbolic experiential environments, such as media and entertainment, have a central importance in the life stories of this generation. According to our interpretation, there are two characteristic features of this generation: hobbies as a meaning for life, and the feeling that their own identity is a problem. Educational opportunities have increased and become a tangled knot of choices. General education in particular is seen as a commodity and may even be taken for granted. For example, Jarmo (b. 1966) told the interviewer: ‘Passing my matriculation exams (equivalent to A-levels) didn’t mean anything to me, it’s only a piece of paper that you get. ... that paper doesn’t have any meaning, well, only if you want to go on and do some postgraduate studies, then you don’t have to waste two-three years for matriculation exams.’

Asta (b. 1962), however, feels that learning languages and gaining typing skills have been useful to her: ‘I was just counting that next, no, in the autumn two years ago it was 20 years since I started school, and I still haven’t graduated, so, I’ve been sitting at school for the best part of my life. But the most useful thing of all has been the typing skills that I learned in commercial college. That’s something that I’m using all the time, and it’s a very useful skill to have.’

Jani (b.1971) was one of the youngest people we interviewed. He says that the lower grades of comprehensive school were a disappointment to him: ‘Our teacher was like, there were no signs of any discipline, none at all, and that went on for six years and crazy things went on all the time. It’s a wonder that I learned how to read.’ On the other hand, he felt that the last years of comprehensive school, especially the tenth grade, were very useful, and he has positive feelings about the team spirit, freedom and co-operation in the classroom.

Taru (b. 1970) was fed up with school, and she explained why: ‘It was, it was like we were being on this conveyor belt or something, my class left from a biology lesson and another group went in, and my class would go and have another lesson, so that was the conveyor belt, one group first, then another group and the same thing was taught for them, you had to move on in a certain time limit and I found that so deadly boring, I didn’t like it at all, and that’s why, well, there were big fights about that at home, too.’

Taru points out that she was fed up with school because it was such a boring place she could not motivate herself to attend. This approach resulted in her being absent on numerous occasions during comprehensive school, and finally discontinuing her studies in upper secondary school. Later on in life, she started a makeup artist course and continued her education in vocational school, studying costume design. This kind of an education history is not unusual for the young these days.

In comparison with the older generation, changes in the meaning of education for the younger generation are considerable. Whereas education was an ideal for the older generation, it is now a commodity, one that is taken for granted. Society has become more rationalised and consumer-oriented, and education is just a part
of this generation’s everyday life. These factors are eroding the enchantment of education. The ideal is taken for granted and considered boring, but the youngest generation still feels that it is appropriate to gain some education, explicitly because of its instrumental nature.

Compared to the earlier generations, it is easy to note the growth of reflexivity and self-centrality among the young generation (NOTE 1.). A caricature of this individualism and growing reflexivity can be drawn from the contrasting narratives of an old reindeer farmer, Niilo, and our young costume design student, Taru. Niilo refused to answer our question about how he feels about himself and his persona. The interviewer tried to persuade him, but Niilo said that doctors and professors may very well have an identity, but he does not. Taru’s reply to the same question, ‘Who are you, how would you describe yourself?’ was quite the opposite: ‘I am very determined, also friendly, make friends easily. I think I am a laid-back person and very natural.’

In the Shadow of Economic Recession

The meaning of education has changed, but the story does not end with the younger generation. We have studied the effects of economic recession as well. In Finland, the economic recession of the early 1990s was more profound than that of 1930s. The unemployment rate exceeded 20%. Thus our starting point was the assumption that the meaning of education changed during the economic recession in much the same way as it did during the post-war rebuilding period, and then during the flourishing welfare state. We did not find any clear proof of this, however. It is possible that long-term social change has been a more influential factor than the economic recession. Still, the economic recession did cause considerable changes. First, getting a job became more difficult, and that is why many young people, and some of the adult population, rushed into educational institutes. Second, as Kayhko and Kurkkko have shown (1997), school became a haven for the young unemployed or those who were threatened by unemployment. It was easier to watch and explore what was going on in the world from this haven than from the cold and tough labour market. School also had a symbolic meaning: it prevented one from being labelled as a looser.

Generation Dynamics

As researchers, we were very surprised to find that there are many common, shared experiences within each cohort. Our analysis was based on Mannheim’s (1952) terms of ‘generational location’, which we call ‘experiential generation’ (cf. Virtanen 1999). This approach may be one reason for our finding of shared experience. We did not study generation as an actuality or ‘mobilised generations’ as they are also called, nor did we examine generation units or fractions.

Certainly, our study brought out differences within each generation and some possible or materialised effects of those differences. We have referred to the disintegration amongst the oldest generation. The history of liberal adult education is connected to this disintegration as well. Hunger for education and culture was common for both core groups, but only one of them was able to gain higher, formal education. This created social movements with informative and ideological activities. The educated cohort tried to guide these activities into civilised channels, which would also adapt to higher level powers. The institutionalisation of social movements and their activities created new structures in Finnish cultural and educational systems. In an industrial society and welfare state, these institutional structures provided a base for the comprehensive school system.

While education was an ideal for the older generation, it was a means to career progression for the middle generation. The ideal of education was still present in social movements which received support from the state, but the instrumental value of education became the core experience when people moved to towns from the countryside, from agriculture and forestry to industry and services, and attended courses, schools or gained experience at work. As several Finnish novelists have described, this instrumental value of education was not familiar to those who stayed in the countryside, but even they experienced it indirectly through their children, relatives or friends. There is another group of people who are unfamiliar with this instrumental value of education as well - the traditional middle-class in towns and cities, including the old upper class and traditional intelligentsia.

We understand that the narrative of economic structural change becomes as important as the narrative of national culture, and education as an ideal. Later, the narrative of structural change became dominant. This is easy to understand in light of the post-war history of Finnish society. Finland lost a substantial part of Karelia
and some areas in Kainuu and Lapland to the Soviet Union, displacing 400 000 Karelian immigrants (e.g. Mead 1988). This created a major refugee problem in a country of only 4 million people. The problem was solved by establishing about 100 000 new small farms for the Karelians. Thus, until the 1960s, Finland was more agrarian and less industrialised than other western European countries. Between 1960 and 1975, modernizing Finnish society underwent one of the most rapid structural transformations in Europe. In 1950, 41 % of the economically active population was employed in agriculture and forestry. By 1960, 32 % were still employed in this sector. This population dropped to 18 % in 1970, 9% in 1972, and finally, 8 % in 1980. The same modernization and structural change took almost a century in Sweden, and there it occurred in two stages. First, people moved into industries and later into the service sector. In Finland, a majority moved straight to the service sector. The education system was a channel of migration, and education was an important personal resource for and individual migrant.

There is an international addition to this narrative among the younger generation, first in the form of commodities and entertainment, and later in direct experiences. In the prosperity of a welfare state, education is taken for granted, but it is also a matter of self-search and choices. These choices are about a professional career, but also about life in general. Therefore Houtsonen (1996: 61), when studying the self-descriptions of young people, found a group which was using education for making a social or a personal dream come true. Some of these people belonged to social groups with related lifestyles (Antikainen et al. 1996: 61), such as feminist or ecological groups. They were choosing elements from institutional education to match the old liberal adult education tradition, as they wanted to be able to use their education to live life according to their own values. We observed the same phenomenon when studying significant educational experiences. Sometimes, in transitions or situations of life crisis, such as when a partner dies, or someone faces divorce or unemployment, the meaning of education can change and take on new emphasis for the individual. This applies to all generations.

Houtsonen (1996: 204-205) has studied the cultural construction of educational identity. His research clarifies the ways in which people use their education in their life course for constructing their identity, and how re-grouping occurs within generations. According to Houtsonen, the educational choices of most interviewees happened almost automatically, because they had assimilated a frame of reference from their experiences, cultural environment and lifestyle. They were using this frame of reference when making educational choices. Exceptions to this cultural manuscript were easiest to note with adults. An inner challenge, such as a desire to have a more meaningful or challenging job, or an external necessity, for example losing a partner or getting ill, sometimes created a new awareness and made the individual think things over. As a result, they changed their plan for life and education.

In situations like this, people become more aware of the cultural resources that are available to them, such as information, skills, images, or equipment that they can use for solving problems or developing different ways of functioning. Learning processes occur when people encounter a problematic situation in life, which they try to solve with new resources. These resources become a part of their identity. Antikainen (1998) has described this process as a 'significant learning experience' (cf. Merriam & Clark 1991). In the new society of uncertainty and risks, we must control our lives through continuous reflexion and self-study (Beck 1986; Beck et al 1994). Continuous learning is a necessity to enable us to manage a globalized economy and our individualised life course. Learning can continue throughout our lives, as the concept 'lifelong learning' expresses, but it can be 'lifewide' as well, by combining the formal and informal ways of learning. 'Life-wide learning' can prevent our identity from becoming too one-dimensional and rigid, which is the besetting sin of formal learning (Antikainen et al. 1999).

The futures of adult education

The above analysis of the meanings of education dealt with education in general. What kind of foundation can this analysis provide for investigating the futures of adult education? Our approach was very inductive, similar to grounded-theory method. However, it is very tempting to interpret change in the meaning of education - from ideal for the old generation, to instrument of career progression for the middle generation, and further to commodity or taken for granted for the young generation - by using concepts from classical social theory.

According to Marxist theory, this generational change reflects the commodification of education (Wexler 1987, 70-71). Max Weber’s (1922) theory on the rationalization of Western cultures, in particular, applies to
the interpretation of this educational change. Weber’s typology of social action was based on ideal types that
do not exist in reality as such. Anyway, we can not avoid the interpretation that, besides rationalization,educational change means the victory of goal-oriented rationality over value-oriented rationality.

Weber also made the corresponding distinction between formal rationality, based on abstract calculation,and material rationality, based on religious or ethical principles. In fact, he argued that Westernrationalization leads to the end of authentic action. According to Weber’s pessimistic view, this process of
disenchantment means the displacing of material rationality and free choice by bureaucratic iron gage withformal rationality and system constrains.

We take Weber’s theory seriously, and construct the following scenarios of adult education based on theWeberian way of thinking. The scenarios were written before we found Suoranta’s (2000) essay on thefutures of adult education based on conceptions and meanings of good life. It is interesting to note that these	wo exercises share a lot in common.

Scenario 1: adult education in the iron gage of formal rationality and bureaucracy

This scenario means a future without surprises. Marketization and corporatization of adult educationwill continue. Education is linked to employment and intended mainly for the educated middleclass. Learning, even reflective learning, occurs typically in formal environments and bureaucraticorganizations (Jarvis 1987, 179-182).

The case of Finland seems to deviate from this tendency in that female participation in general or personalinterest-related adult education is rather high (Blomqvist et al. 1999). This fact can be explained, however, bywomen’s high education level, but still low status in the hierarchies of working life. It would be surprising ifthis scenario without surprises was realized in straightforward manner, and without resistance.

Scenario 2: adult education as a nest of material rationalization and communality

This scenario is the opposite of the first one. In this scenario, adult education would succeed inkeeping its material and value rational nature, or even return to the kind of situation that has beencharacteristic of Nordic popular adult education. How is this possible? As indicated in our lifehistory studies, at life’s turning points or crises the significance of education can increase andexpand. Often in these significant learning experiences, learner’s relationships with significantothers of learning have a very communal nature. Living in the middle of risks and insecuritiesmeans an increasing need for this kind of learning and education. So, the potential group ofparticipants has much wider social and cultural background than in the first scenario.

A typical example of this kind of education is community education. Grounded in the locality andparticipation, community adult education is challenging the concept of schooling and education (Lovett1982, 49). The major problem is to secure sufficient resources for education. A social movement behind theeducation makes it easier to mobilize an acquisition of resources.

Scenario 3: the future of adult education is open

Both scenarios above can be criticized as too black and white. A future is more versatile when itincludes increments from both visions. In fact, we can argue that Western societies are destined tobe in continuous conflict of the agents of formal and material rationalization. The remarks on themeaning of informal learning presented in the previous section also support this scenario of an openfuture. The realization of goals such as “Lifelong learning for all” requires us to make non-formal andinformal learning visible and supportive to common educational goals. In this discourse, thefuture of adult education will be decided.

These three scenarios are so general they can be applied more broadly to alternatives for the future ofeducation. For instance in Finland, the discourse of lifelong learning addresses the general timing of alleducation, and questions such as the school entrance age and the length of studies at various educationallevels.
Notes:

1. The difficulty in the concept 'generation' lies in the fact that one cannot separate the influence of history and age. In principle, it is possible that as the younger generation ages, work and professional career will gain the same importance for them as for the older generation. However, it is easy to theorise that the importance of work and career cannot be the same as it was before in the circumstances of a welfare state and growing industrialism.
BIBLIOGRAPHY.


