BETWEEN EMPOWERMENT AND CONTROL: A State Intervention into Participation in Adult Education in Finland

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The Finnish government started a new national programme ‘NOSTE’ for the period of 2003-2007 aiming at raising the educational level of those 30-59-year-olds who have not completed a full secondary education. The official objective of the programme is “to improve the employment and career-development of those who have at most the primary level education, to alleviate the shortage of work force caused by the retirement of the baby boomers and to have an effect on the degree of employment”. I discuss the Initiative as a state intervention into participation in adult education in the context of changing Nordic welfare state.

1. Introduction: Why a National Programme for People with Low Education?

How was it possible to have the idea and to make a positive decision on a special national adult education programme for people with low education in Finland? Obviously, it resulted from many factors.

The firstly, from a comparative perspective, the rate of participation in adult education and the rate of functional literacy are high in Finland, but the differences in participation by social class, initial education and age are greater than in other Nordic countries and a bit over an OECD average. Thus the government felt pressure to improve the image of adult education in this respect.

Secondly, the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) was an active agent in this issue. Many working people with low education are members of SAK and the influence of globalization is clear in their jobs. Numerous companies have been transferring jobs into countries of low wage. This trend is called ‘a China-phenomenon’ in Finland. On the basis of numerous studies conducted in Europe and North-America, Walter Heinz (Marshall, Heinz, Krüger & Verma 2001, 23) concludes that they present a rather pessimistic prediction:
‘education-to-work transitions will become more precarious, regional disparities of employment opportunities will become more pronounced, work organizations will continue to create gendered careers, and the balancing of life spheres (family, education, and employment) will become more demanding’.

This is also the case in Finland, although the basic structure of welfare state still exists. Thirdly, the age structure of population is changing rapidly. The Finnish society is graying and baby-boomers approach the retirement age. The rate of unemployment is high but at the same time shortage of manpower is threatening. Also employers have an interest to support the programme.

The fourth reason is that the development of status and funding of vocational adult education centers have been very unstable. The programme could mean a more stabilized development for these centers.

The establishment of the ‘Noste’ programme was approved in the collective bargaining agreement with employers, unions and government, and then in the agreement between the parties of new government in 2003.

2. Nordic Welfare State and Globalization

The Finnish education system consists of pre-primary education, 9-year comprehensive school, post-comprehensive general and vocational education, higher education and adult education. The Government’s goal is ‘to streamline the system and develop it in accordance with the principle of lifelong learning and to make it internationally compatible’. In line with this goal polytechnics were established at the side of universities in 1990’s, a more comprehensive pre-school system is under construction and adult education, especially vocational adult education and in-service education, has expanded and reorganized. In 1980’s, the principle of lifelong learning was realized in the form of vertical integration of formal education. Since 1990’s, also informal education/learning and horizontal integration between education and work has been emphasized. Thus, four criteria Torsten Husén (1974) gave for ‘a learning society’ are realizing: i) people have an opportunity for lifelong learning, ii) formal education extends to the whole age group, iii) informal learning is in a central position and self-studies encouraged and iv) other institutions support education which in turn depends on them.
Between 1960 and 1975 Finnish society underwent one of the fastest structural transformation in Europe, to become an industrial, capitalist society and simultaneously a Nordic welfare state. Since the late 1960’s the ideal of a comprehensive education system has been the major rationale behind Finnish education policy (Antikainen in press). In the post-1980s period, the welfare state has transformed to the direction of ‘competition state’ (Streeck 1998, 180-186; Kettunen 2004, 290-291). The concept implies that the state still plays a crucial role and at the same time globalization means a profound change in the methods the states employ. There is not, however, a single but various competition state strategies. One of them is called a ‘shielders’ strategy’ by Palan and Abbott (1999, 103-120). It is applied especially in small Western countries, like the Nordic countries, and characterized by a ‘dualist economy’. An openness to and thus dependence on world markets in some sectors, like in electronics in Finland (or should I say in the Nokia Mobile Valley), is combined with the protection of some other nationally highly-valued sectors.

Kettunen (2004, 291) argues, that the ‘shielders’ strategy’ faces three major problems. One is an increasing asymmetry between capital and labour, second is a diminishing ability of a nation-state to preserve selectively sheltered sectors in its economy, and third problem is the fate of egalitarian values and social solidarity. I like to argue, that these tendencies and problems can be interpreted to lie behind the ‘Noste’-programme, too. The programme was initiated by trade unions and employers, and its organization is based on the tripartite collaboration with government, employers and unions. The programmes’ official goals are more economic than socio-political. (Antikainen in press.)

From a broader comparative point of view, Castells and Himanen (2002) state, that Finland has uniquely created a ‘virtuous cycle’: the successful information society makes the continued financing of the welfare state possible and the welfare state generates well-educated people in good health for the information society. A peculiar national identity is the third element of this mixture of the knowledge society (Castells & Himanen 2002; Antikainen 2002) Nowadays, it is often mentioned that Finland has succeeded well in international comparisons of education, Finnish children perform well in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Finnish adults’ participation rates in adult education are high and their functional literacy level is shown to be on a high level in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (OECD 2001; Väljärvi et al. 2002; OECD & Statistic Canada 2000). The above described developments of the Finnish society are behind these results.
3. Patterns of Participation in Adult Education and the “Noste”-programme

3.1. Nordic Pattern and Finland

The publications and data of the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS) and the Finnish Adult Education Surveys give a general view of participation and functional literacy among adults in Finland. During the last two decades, participation in adult training has more than doubled. In the 1990’s, the participation rate of 18-64 years old population has increased from 45 to 54% (and to 57% in the group of 16-65 years old). From a comparative perspective, the major structural features are as follows:

- there is a lot in common with other Scandinavian countries, primarily a high participation rate and a high rate of functional literacy
- differences by socio-economic status, initial education and age are, however, greater than in the OECD countries on average
- regional differences are clear but average
- female participation in adult education and literacy skills may be the highest in the world (Blomqvist et. al. 2002; Linnakylä et. al. 2000; OECD & Statistics Canada 2000).

According to Tuijnman and Hellström (2001), no one-dimensional Nordic model of adult education exists. Yet there are distinguishable Nordic patterns including a high participation rate, a high share of public funding and public suppliers, and a high share of personal interest (liberal) adult education.

3.2. Social Class

Participation in adult education and training is structurally determined most by social class (socio-economic status), secondly by level of education and thirdly by employment status. Table 1. shows the participation rates by the level of education (FAES 2000).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE
3.3. Gender

The effect and influence of sex and gender on participation are great and central in the Finnish society. There is a female majority among educated population. The rate of participation in adult education by the national survey is 59% among female adults and 49% among male adults (Blomqvist et al. 2002). This is the case, although the benefits of participation are more common among male participants except “other effect” (other than instrumental-economic ones) (FAES 2000).

3.4. Target Group of the “Noste”-programme

Approximately 20% of 30-59-year-old adults have not finished secondary education, they do not have an upper secondary qualification. Compared to people with secondary or tertiary education, a member of this group is in average older, more probably man, more probably single or divorced, less probably salary earners and less probably upper-white collars employee (Kokkila 2003, 41). Still majority of the group, 54%, are salary or wage earners and 11% are entrepreneurs. By socio-economic status 45% are blue-collars, but the amount of white-collars is considerable 39%.

Many people in the target group have participated in adult education in recent years, although they have not completed a degree.

Concluding, the structure of the target group is heterogeneous, but the proportion of lower social classes is higher than among the population in average. Thus, the definition of the target group does not result automatically a change in the pattern of participation in adult education. It is essential what kind of good practices or innovations will be created in the programme and will they be transferred into other forms and fields of adult education.

4. ‘Noste’-programme as an Intervention into Participation and Reaching-out Activities

The background of the programme comes from the policy issues mentioned above. Yet the objectives concerning economy and employment have become central in the politically oriented preparation phase of the programme. According to the decree, the objective of the programme is
‘to improve the employment and career-development of those adults who have at most the primary level education, to alleviate the shortage of work force caused by the retirement of the 40’s baby boomers and to have an effect on the general degree of employment’.

The programme is influenced by the challenges of the Nordic welfare state regime and its labor market model, and its precursor can be found in the Swedish Adult Education Initiative (kunskapslyftet) (Rubenson 2001, 2003; Abrahamson 2001).

The programme includes activities seeking to encourage re-entrance into education: reaching-out activities, information and guidance, and activities aiming to give support to studies (e.g., counseling). This is in line with the findings of Tuijnman and Hellström (2001), who claim

‘public support seems to have a crucial effect on the participation by those least likely to enroll in adult education and training’.

While the SAEI has educated half a million adults in five years, it has not succeeded in changing the model of non-participation of the group that is the most difficult one to reach, i.e., that of men with the least education and with long unemployment histories. The anticipated numerical outcomes of the Finnish programme are more modest. In 2003 the financial resources should allow approximately 3000 students to begin their studies, and the number of students will be about 10 000 per year in the next years. The programme will not educate more than about 10 % of the entitled people.

I would like to point out the study-pilot activities launched by the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions SAK that use peer-groups and peer coaching. The peer workers nominated to competence-pilots act as study-counselors. Examples on successful projects that have relied on peer coaching can be found in many projects in the field of public health or education.

Whether ‘Noste’- programme proves to be successful in its reaching-out activities depends according to my hypothesis at least on the following issues:

- Does the information on education reach the cultural meanings that education has for the target group?
Does the information on education reach the persons whose phase of life would be favorable for education?

Are there personal and social relations (family, work community) that support participation and learning?

Has the programme or the project not only plans for organization and management but also for facilitating a sense of community and leadership? Does the programme gain trust of the target groups?

Is it possible for the participants in education to understand and learn the language and cultural code of the instruction and counseling?

By our life history studies, the most common meaning of education in the Finnish culture can be to manage the life, and then the meaning of education varies by social group and life situation (Antikainen & Harinen 2002). Transitions are often favorable phases for education and learning (Antikainen 1998). An individual’s decision to enter education is preceded by negotiations in family and work place (Moore 2003). Trust and communal relations are needed in education (Antikainen & Kauppila 2002).

5. Organization and Implementation of the ‘Noste’-programme

The Parliamentary Adult Education and Training Committee dealt with the problems in adult education practices in its report (Ministry of Education 2002). The committee report proves how some regulations of the welfare state include contradictory ‘push-and-pull’ effects, and the financial benefits for studies at adult age are not on an adequate level. Due to these problems the financial support, taxation and fees of education for an adult student are under investigation (Arajärvi 2003).

The Finnish Adult Education and Training Initiative, ‘Noste’-programme is a state-promoted intervention on adult participation. I would like to argue that the organization of this programme includes the following potential opportunities in promoting the participation of those with low educational level, and that we can see these opportunities in the light of a dialectics of emancipation/empowerment and control (Antikainen 2003; Moore & Antikainen 2003):

1. Labour market parties and the state are committed to the programme.

   In terms of emancipation, these commitments could facilitate the participation of those members of the target group who are depending on the support and/or reward of state, employer or union. In
terms of control, these commitments could mean strengthening of state control and especially corporative tendencies in education policy.

2. As a separate and specific programme, ‘Noste’ facilitates financial support and study guidance for the participants. In terms of emancipation, a specific programme and its earmarked funding could guarantee those resources go to the target group. In terms of control, a specific programme could mean strict regulation and bureaucracy.

3. Implementation of the programme is based on local network organization.
In terms of emancipation, a local network organization could facilitate the collaboration of different actors (adult education centers, vocational adult education centers, schools, employers, unions, entrepreneurs, local authorities) and the use of resources available or even some creativity. In terms of control, it is grounded to remember that beyond this fashionable network organization there still lays a layer of market orientation and also an oldest layer of bureaucratic organization there.

4. Learning at work is central although many kind of education is available.
In terms of emancipation, it is lot of evidences how significant work and work experiences are for the target group. In addition, learning at work means a connection to their everyday life and its central community. Learning at work and work-based-learning are successfully applied in education of young people with school problems in Finland. It makes possible to strengthen students’ identity and sense of social responsibility (Komonen 2001).
In terms of control, learning at work could mean relative narrowness of education.

5. A separate budget is provided for study guidance.
In terms of emancipation, face-to-face study counselling is a needful and proper way to support the target group’s education.
In terms of control, counseling is only able to reproduce dominating social structures given from above in the time of uncertainty (Onnismaa 1998).

6. The Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK) is actively participating in the programme. In terms of emancipation, there are some new education policy actors, especially SAK, involved the programme. This can change the field of education policy to a less unequal direction.
In terms of control, strengthening of corporative tendencies is also possible.

6. Conclusion

I am arguing that the emergence of the ‘Noste’-programme for people with low education can not be explained and understood without the rapid graying of the Finnish society and considerable differences by social class and age in adult education in otherwise rather successful adult education
system. In the context of a Nordic welfare state competing in the world markets, the official goals of the programme emphasize economic goals but socio-political goals have also a role to play.

The impact and success of the ‘Noste’-programme depends i.e. on the interests and logics of action of the collective actors or partners of the programme. Some actors are public and state-directed; some actors are private and market-directed.

The definition of the target group, financial support of students, study guidance and reaching-out activities have probably a decisive role in the implementation of the programme. They can have and should have some impact and influence on the rest of adult education, too. Finally, members of the target group as adult citizens make the key decisions in the implementation of the programme. To reach a success is not easy.

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