TRANSFORMATION OF A NORDIC LEARNING SOCIETY: THE CASE OF FINLAND

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Abstract

Transformation of a Nordic Learning Society: The case of Finland

According to international comparisons of education, the outcomes of the Finnish education system and adult learning are very good. The author argues that what underlies this success is the Nordic pattern of welfare state and education together with a peculiar cultural identity.

A Nordic learning society is characterized by lifelong learning, comprehensive education emphasizing equity and interaction between the institution of education and other institutions. The future alternatives of this learning society are depending on the emerging Nordic model of information society based on changing network, national identity and welfare state in the context of Europeanisation and globalization.

Keywords  
Equity, learning society, cultural identity, Nordic welfare society, international comparisons of education, informationalization, educational generations

LEARNING SOCIETY IN THE NORDIC CONTEXT

The idea of a learning society is a contested idea and concept reflecting different interests, different social and educational histories and different visions of the future (Young, 1998, p. 141). I discuss on a learning society in the Nordic context, and study the case of Finland. From a comparative perspective, the socio-political dimension of a learning society is essential in the Nordic context. Equity, participation and welfare state have known as the major attributes of the Nordic model. However, the economic and cultural dimensions and especially the relationship between these three dimensions are interesting as well.
According to international comparisons of education, the outcomes of the Finnish education system are very good. In the OECD Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA), Finnish 15-year-old-students perform excellently, compared to their peers from 32 countries, in reading literacy, mathematical literacy and scientific literacy (OECD, 2001 and 2002). They show the highest performance in reading literacy. In mathematical literacy they were ranked among the best quarter, and in scientific literacy they scored, after Korean and Japanese students, at the same level as students from United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. According to the OECD Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the level of functional literacy of Finnish 16-59-year-old-adults is among the highest in 20 countries for prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy (OECD & Statistic Canada, 2000).

These international comparisons, especially PISA, are often dealt with in the media as if they were the ‘Olympic games’ of education. A more valid way to view the results of these comparisons would be to study the determinants of outputs and further the effects of different national education policies (Psacharopoulos, 1995, p. 280). Thus, PISA and IALS results can provide an opportunity to obtain key information about different ways of solving problems in education and to evaluate the effects of these solutions. What underlies this Finnish success in international comparisons of education?

Finland is a Nordic country who has with her Nordic neighbours many parallels and some differences. In the present globalizing world, it is not justified to speak of a Nordic model anymore, but without doubt there are Nordic patterns in our educational cultures and in educational systems. Torsten Husén (1974, 1986) created the vision of a learning society already in 1970s. He discusses it four criteria: 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. It is obvious that these criteria have not yet been fully realized, but they form a framework for the study of educational change in recent decades (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin & Kauppila, 1996; Antikainen, 2005b).
COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL SYSTEM

The present Finnish education system consists of pre-primary education, 9-year comprehensive school, post-comprehensive general and vocational education, higher education and adult education. In the discussion on the PISA results, the significance of the principle of equity and the place of a comprehensive school system has been stressed. A Nordic group of PISA researchers present this as follows:

The Nordic strategy for building up high quality and equality in education has been based on constructing a publicly funded comprehensive school system without selecting, tracking or streaming students during their basic education until the age of 16. Part of the strategy is to spread the school network so that pupils have a school near their homes whenever possible or if this is not feasible, e.g. in rural areas, to provide free transportation to more widely dispersed schools. Inclusion of special education and instructional efforts to minimise low achievement are also typical to Nordic educational systems. (Lie, Linnakylä & Roe, 2003, 8.)

After the establishment of the present Finnish comprehensive school system in the 1970s and 1980s, the administration of comprehensive schools and the entire education system was very centralized. It was the way to implement the comprehensive reform despite the opposition of right-wing parties and the association of secondary school teachers. In the late 1980s, a significant change occurred, an incremental planning paradigm gained ground and decentralization was implemented. Schools became more responsible for their own management and were supposed to make their own curricula according to the guidelines given by the national board of education. Teachers could choose the pedagogy they apply. Thus, there was a great emphasis on the professionalism of teachers. These measures generated resources for a new development (Antikainen, 2005a).

In the 1990s there has been a trend towards school-based profiles, stronger parental choice, ‘customer’ orientation and, in particular a systematic school evaluation system. The consequences of these more or less neo-liberal changes are under debate. They have been more modest than in many other countries, yet Simola, Rinne and Kivirauma (2002) argue they represent a historical shift in education governance in Finland and in
other Nordic welfare states. However, it is also grounded to argue, that the Finnish case of comprehensive education demonstrates that it is possible to introduce greater flexibility and local autonomy without threaten the wider goals of minimizing inequalities. This issue is under debate.

In any case, in the PISA research the differences between Finnish schools proved among the smallest in the OECD countries, and the gap between high and low performers was relative narrow (Välijärvi, Linnakylä, Kupari, Reinikainen & Arffman, 2002, pp. 24-39). In the constellation of various interrelated factors, students’ own attitudes and activities, especially engagement in reading and interest in reading appear to form the most significant factors by regression analyses for explaining variation in reading literacy (ibid., 15). The next strongest factors were communication between parents and children and family background. For mathematical literacy, self-concept in mathematics was strongly associated with performance (ibid., 22). This was the case for all participating countries. Interestingly, Finnish students tended to be more confident of their mathematical abilities than of their reading skills. Self-concept in reading explained more of the variation in reading literacy performance for Finnish students than it did, on average, across all participating countries (ibid., 20). Active users of computers were also active readers. Heavy computer users scored lower in their the reading literacy that their moderate counterparts, whereas those who did not use computers at all scored as the poorest readers of all (ibid., 20). The performances of Finnish girls were higher than that of boys and in reading literacy the gender gap was widest for Finland among all the OECD countries. In general, the aims of high quality and high equality seemed, however, to have been reached very well in Finland.

LIFELONG LEARNING

In official education policy documents, lifelong education by UNESCO was referred to for the first time in the late 1960s (Ministry of Education, 1969). In the 1970s and 1980s there was a lively debate on the views of UNESCO, OECD and EC which was incorporated into the concepts of lifelong education, recurrent education and continuing education. In practice, formal education and its vertical integration from comprehensive school to post-comprehensive general and vocational education and further to higher education and adult education were stressed. In line with this goal polytechnics were established alongside universities in the 1990s, a more comprehensive pre-school
system is under construction and adult education has rapidly expanded and been reorganized.

A new emergence of lifelong learning occurred in the context of information technology revolution, fast changes in Europe and the membership of the European Union in 1990s. Humanistic aims were replaced by the discourse of human capital and skill formation. The growth of adult education in 1980s and 90s was growth in vocational and in-service education (Tuomisto, 1998, pp. 253-256). Instead of international community, nation-state and its survival was presented as a major function of lifelong learning. (Ministry of Education 1997.) The original, humanistic concept of lifelong learning survived in adult educators' discourse and community. Since the 1990s, informal education/learning and horizontal integration between education and work has also been emphasized (Ministry of Education, 1997a; 2002).

During the last two decades, participation in adult education and training in Finland 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). 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. Thus, what does exist is a Nordic ‘standard’ that can be seen in participation rates, orientation and volume, and in the role of the public sector.

On the basis of numerous studies, it is known that there are also disparities, not only similarities, between the Nordic countries. These disparities emerge especially from the differences in the culture and organization of each country’s working life and in its civil society. From the point of view of lifelong learning, it is highly interesting that the comparatively high educational participation of people aged 55 and more, seems to be associated with the high social capital (indicated by memberships and activities in voluntary associations) in Sweden and with the selectivity of working life (indicated by employment and work contracts) in Finland.
The Finnish state budget for 2003 contained an allocation for starting a new national programme ‘NOSTE’ aiming at raising the educational level of those 30-59-year-olds who have not completed a full secondary education. Initiated by the Parliamentary Adult Education Committee (Ministry of Education, 2002) and the labour market organizations the programme is intended to last for five years until the end of 2007. The number of students will be approximately 10,000 per year. The background of the programme comes from the experiences of the economic recession and unemployment in the early 1990s and the relatively great differences in participation in adult education by socio-economic status, educational level and age that have been confirmed in the IALS-studies (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2001) and in the country evaluation by OECD. 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 Nordic welfare state regime and its labour market model influence the programme, and its precursor can be found in the Swedish Adult Education Initiative SAEI (kunskapslyftet). It is too early to evaluate if this state intervention into participation in adult education able to challenge the class-based pattern of participation.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND WELFARE STATE

The Finnish welfare state has a long history, but the decisive phase was the swift structural transformation that Finnish society underwent between 1960 and 1975. An agrarian society became an industrial, capitalist welfare state. This welfare system was funded by economic growth. The transformation occurred later but much faster than in other Nordic countries. For instance, in Sweden it took approximately one hundred years. The welfare state represents a social pact between labour and capital. Minimum level of social welfare, including education, health, social security, employment and housing were guaranteed. These services were defined as a right of citizenship. Education was seen a kind of ideological edge of the welfare state. Thus, since the 1960s the ideal of a comprehensive education system has been the major rationale underlying Finnish education policy.
The 1980s brought a period of calming structural change and economic boom in Finland. It was followed in the early 1990s by a deep economic recession, in relative terms deeper than in the 1930’s. The successful information society, especially the success of electronics and Nokia’s mobile telephone industry, makes the continued financing of the welfare state possible, although with some cuts and reorganizations. In the context of globalization, the welfare state has transformed in the direction of a ‘competitive state’ (Streeck, 1998, pp. 180-186; Kettunen, 2004, pp. 290-291). This concept implies that the state still plays a vital role and, simultaneously, globalization has resulted in a profound change in the methods the state employs. In education policy, the establishment of polytechnics were already grounded by a national information society strategy of the government.

Based on theories of postindustrial society or informational society, Manuel Castells (1996, pp. 13-18) argues that an informational mode of development with its distinctive social structure is historically succeeding the mode of industrial development. According to Castells’ view, societies are organized around human processes structured by historically determined relationships of production, experience and power. Human symbolic communication in time and space creates cultures and collective identities. Castells states:

“Symbolic communication between humans, and the relationship between humans and nature, on the basis of production (with its complement, consumption), experience, and power, crystallize over history in specific territories, thus generating cultures and collective codes.”

From the point of view of social organization, informational societies are network societies:

“Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture.” (Ibid., 469.)
This is also the case in education. Schools, colleges and universities are establishing partnerships with each other and with actors like companies, employers and unions, citizens’ associations and so on, both locally and globally. Education is more dependent on the development of working life and civil society and in turn education has an impact on the organization of work and civil society by providing ‘legitimising accounts of knowledge and skills required from citizens and of foundations of social systems’ (Meyer, 1977, p. 72).

In a network society the power and influence of traditional political institutions are weakened, while media has a central position. Thus the emerging culture could be called as a media culture. As a counter-force to the media culture, and to the entire global informational market logic, stands people’s search for local cultural identity. In this search or identity crisis, people rely on such old identity markers as nationality and religion. Gender too is a central marker, as well as social movements like feminism and the ecological movement, business connections mediated by the new network, and new opportunities arising from new forms of mysticism. In any case, the global Net and the local Self are the central social forces of the informational society.

Manuel Castells’ theories have been well received in Finland. A powerful Finnish foundation, SITRA, has invited Castells, together with a young philosopher by the name of Pekka Himanen, to study Finland as an information society. In their work, Castells and Himanen (2002) argue that in Finland a unique mixture of technological-economic innovation, welfare state policies and national identity has developed. They compare this Finnish model with Silicon Valley and Singapore in terms of some technological, economic, welfare and openness indicators. Finland comes out ahead this comparison, or should we say that the Nokia Mobile Valley does.

Castells’ and Himanen’s study is interesting. It provides evidence that also in the information society a welfare state is possible and even “a decisive contributing factor to the growth of the new economy on a stable basis”(ibid., 181). However, there are also weaknesses and challenges emerging from new social structures, such as the rise of new inequalities and the contradiction between a strong national identity and integration in a multicultural world producing ethnic prejudices and racism.
NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A HISTORY OF SURVIVAL

Castells and Himanen (ibid.) states, that cultural identity and a strong feeling of nationalism are central elements of the Finnish information society. They legitimize the government’s function in global economic competition if not in the struggle of survival. They also analyze through what kind of experiences this identity is produced. First, they consider the challenge of nature in the form of cold winter. They argue that cold has killed more Finns than war. An extreme example is the Hunger Years of 1867-68 when cold weather delayed the sowing of the crop and then an early frost destroyed the harvest. Consequently 120 000 people, 6.5% of the whole population died. They did not, however, refer to the shortage of food in 1918 and the next decades. In any case, war has also killed a lot of Finns. The civil war in 1918, the winter war and the continuation war against the Soviet Union in 1939-40 and 1941-44 were very bloody ones.

Castells and Himanen list also other constituents of identity like a positive attitude to technology, networks of direct and informal communication, and work ethic that is changing from a Protestant ethic towards the hacker ethic. By the hacker ethic Himanen (2001) means a hobby-like, passionate and creative relationship to work. The basic nature of Finnish identity is, however, developed from the experience of a long history of survival and by Castells’ and Himanen’s credo the information society as a project is not just producing a new Finnish identity but it is the Finnish identity. By the growing hacker ethic an ultimate subversion of traditional Finnish identity can be realized: ”life may become a source of enjoyment rather than a battle for survival”. In our survey study, we did not, however, find any empirical evidence of the hacker ethic (Moore, Tikka & Antikainen, 2003).

If I try to analyze this production and formation of Finnish identity as a story or narrative, I can not avoid some critical questions in my mind. I put them in an exaggerated form: How many and what kind of victims or losers the survival from and coping to this experience will require? Is the Finnish information society more a state
strategy than a national citizens’ project? Is it realistic to believe that the promise of
life as a source of enjoyment will be realized or are there new threats in the horizon?

MEANING OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING BY GENERATION, CLASS,
GENDER AND ETHNIC GROUP

What kind of stories are the individual identity production and formation narratives?
What are the place and meaning of education in these stories? Our research group has
been studying the meaning of education and learning in people’s lives. We have
applied the life-history method in our study. The data were collected by means of
narrative biographical interviews and thematic interviews. In the initial interviews
people told their life-stories and the thematic interviews were based on primary
analyses of the initial interviews (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Huotelin & Kauppila, 1995).
Education is examined as a cultural activity. For each person, the meaning of education
depends on how it helps or hinders her in constructing her life-course and life style. The
key concepts in this analysis have been ‘life course,’ ‘identity’ and ‘significant learning
experiences.’ The interviews have been read and the interpretations have been made on
the basis of these three conceptual perspectives.

The researchers reading the data from the life-course perspective focused on differences
in experiences between age cohorts and found three educational/social generations in
Finland (Huotelin & Kauppila, 1995; Antikainen & Kauppila, 2002). The shared core
experiences of each generation, a kind of social identity, had been formed in youth and
in the context of the major social transformations of that time. We were only able to
systematically interpret two life trajectories here: life and education.

The oldest generation consists of people born in 1935 or earlier. We call this generation
‘the war generation with scant education’. Their life stories tell of hard work and
struggle to provide a living for their families. These people have faced several situations
of distress in their lives, and their experiences during the war, and during the post-war
rebuilding, are powerfully 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, and education was an ideal. The source of educational idealism was nationalism and patriotism. At that time nationalism was not only a ‘civic religion,’ but also a reaction to underdevelopment in Finland. People of this older generation, and those of the next, middle generation, based their lives on a surprisingly small amount of education or educational experience. What they learned stayed and developed within them.

The next generation, the middle generation, consists of those born between 1936 and 1955. At the time of our study they were thus 45 to 65 years old. We refer to them as ‘a generation of structural change with growing educational opportunities’. Work is a central point in their life stories, too, but now work is often connected with education, and it can open up a progressive career path. The historical context of this generation is the swift structural change called “the Great Migration” in 1960-75 that forced many people to move from the countryside to urban areas in Southern Finland or Sweden. Finland became part of EFTA (the European Free Trade Area) in 1961. 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 the middle generation’s experience is that ‘work is the central meaning of life, and education functions as a means of professional career advancement’.

The youngest generation in our study consists of those born in 1956 and after – now in their mid forties or younger. We call this group ‘the welfare generation with many educational choices’. 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. 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 oldest generation, it is now a commodity, one that is taken for granted. Society has
become more rationalized and consumer-oriented, and these changes mean erosion of the cultural 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, especially for its instrumental value.

It should be noted that our first interviews were carried out in 1992-93, when the experiences of the deep economic recession of the early 1990s were not yet defined and Finland has not joined the European Union. Thus the whole group of under 46-year-olds was placed in the same generation cohort in our analysis of their core experiences. Since that time the understanding of the importance of being high skilled has strengthened. Employment follows one’s educational level. Hypothetically, we can describe the emerging meaning of education with the phrase “education as a compulsion to become high-skilled”. It is close to “the ambitious generation”, a typification used in an American study (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Education is, again, becoming a more powerful social selector. Hypothetically, this youngest generation could consist of three generational groups or fractions:

- Those young people who are/are becoming skilled and ambitious young people
- Those young people who are using education “for making a social or personal dream come true”
- Those young people for who “school is a haven” or a hiding place and it prevents becoming labeled as unemployed and losers
- Those young people who are in the process of “exclusion”.

In fact, we do not know yet the shared experience of the youngest cohort: will it be a generation of depression, generation of Internet, generation of globalization or generation of diversification. An alternative future is also possible: instead of a social generation just a cohort and social movements within the cohort.

We would like to argue that the generational change in the meaning of education could be understood through the classical social theories, especially as formal rationalization by Max Weber (1922). This interpretation is supported by the fact that in doing our
phenomenological oriented empirical analysis we did not have any intention of applying classical social theories.

As researchers, we were surprised to find that there are many common, shared experiences within each cohort. Our analysis was based on Mannheim’s (1952) concept of ‘generational location,’ which we call ‘experiential generation’. We did not study generations as actual or ‘mobilized generations’ as they are also called, nor did we systematically examine generation units or fractions. Nevertheless, we made observations concerning differences and distinct groups within each generation. Houtsonen (1996), 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. Many of these people belonged to feminist or ecological activist groups. They were choosing contents from institutional education to match their values and life-styles as in the old popular adult education tradition. We would assume that critics and opponents of globalization would belong to this group as well.

Differences based on social class were clear. For people from lower classes life was more often a struggle than for those from upper classes. Orientation towards “theoretical” or “practical” studies was often determined by social class or one’s parents’ educational status.

In our observations we found many expected on differences in terms of gender. Some female life-stories were full of caring, and some male life-stories approached official CVs. When studying young students from working class backgrounds, Kauppila and Käyhkö (2005) concluded that the boys’ educational orientation was more instrumental than the girls’ were.

We also made some observations regarding differences in terms of ethnic group. The Finnish school system does not properly interact with Romany culture. Up until the seventies at least Sami people as well have had very bitter school experiences, but Sami activists in our sample group at least have used their success in the Finnish education system as a resource in their struggle for their own rights. Education for refugees and immigrants has not been sufficiently developed and institutionalized.
SIGNIFICANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Houtsonen (1996) 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. According to his study, the educational choices of most interviewees happened almost automatically according to the frame of reference they had internalized in the cultural environment and experiences they have lived. Exceptions to this cultural manuscript were easiest to note with adults. An inner challenge, such as a desire to have a more meaningful 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 plans 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 acting. Learning processes occur when people meet a problematic situation in life, which they try to solve with new resources, and these resources become a part of their identity.

I have described this process as a ‘significant learning experience’ (Antikainen, 1998; Merriam & Clark, 1991). In an individual learning biography these experiences form the turning points of the life-story:

“Significant learning experiences are those which appeared to guide the interviewee’s life-course or to have changed or strengthened his or her identity”.

Subjectivization or even empowerment was associated with many significant learning experiences. For young people, hobbies were often places for this subjectivization. This remark is analogical to Himanen’s (2001) hacker ethic. In addition, in analyzing narratives he found some special socio-structural contexts in which education seemed to have empowering impact. They varied widely as one can see from the following list:

- Surviving widowhood for female widows
- Strengthening Sami (Lappish) ethnic identity for Sami activists
- Migration from the countryside to cities for men with health problems
Realization of social and personal dreams for representatives of various social movements.

We are ready to interpret most of the lists of significant learning experiences as *stories of survival and coping*. They depict the knowledge and skills that have been used to cope in life. According to Matti Kortteinen (1992), there are three phases in the Finnish coping or struggling story: 1) “it is tough,” 2) “one tries to cope,” and 3) “one has coped and is proud of it.”

In each significant learning experience, personal and social relations that support learning were easy to find. Learning can be studied in terms of personal relations even in a technological society. Applying the language of symbolic interactionism we called these relations *significant others of learning*. There can be local and distant significant others of learning. Local ones are always concrete human beings; distant ones are often symbolic images.

The relations between the learner and local significant others were more communities (*Gemeinschaft*) rather than associations (*Gesellschaft*). Of course, each organization has both sides, but in these cases of learning experience association or formal organization gives way to a sense of community.

Based on these findings, it is logical to ask how the functional resources of such communities – e.g. family, school, work place and association – have changed in recent decades. The answer is clear: at least from 1990s on there has been a trend of decreasing resources. As communities have a vital role also in the information society, this trend means differences in learning opportunities and a weakening of these opportunities for deprived groups. It should be noticed, however, that the object of this remark here is traditional institutions and identities that Castells (1997) refers to as “legitimizing.” But also in studies of such successful it-development and training cases like the creation of Linux-system or the Upper Karelia Learning Project, it has been demonstrated that the hero has not been only an individual person or persons but a community-like group of peer activists (Himanen, 2001; Oksa & Turunen, 2000).
I am able to draw four basic conclusions regarding our analysis of the meaning of education and learning. First of all, it appears that, as on the level of national identity, there is also on the level of individual identity a narrative of survival and coping. On both levels, the narrative is not only about heroes, but also about victims and losers; the latter not being able to tell their stories. Secondly, education is a rather strong producer of identity. Schools, however, are not self-sufficient in this production; other environments have to take part in the process. Thirdly, from generation to generation the meaning of education has changed. Education has become increasingly instrumental without values of its own. Fourthly, individuals can change the scripts of their lives still at an adult age and to use education and learning for this purpose. Other people’s and the communities’ support is, however, needed to realize this change.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My basic argument is that Nordic patterns of welfare state and education together with a peculiar Finnish cultural identity underlie the Finnish success in international comparisons of education. This system of relations could be called a Finnish learning society. Culturally, it is based on ethos of survival, struggling and solidarity. Politically, its major elements are nationalism, pragmatism and social democracy. It can be characterized by lifelong learning or originally the tradition of popular adult education, comprehensive education and interaction between the institution of education and other social institutions.

However, there are also in-woven paradoxes in the Finnish learning society. Among the paradoxes or contradictions are:

Class and gender. The workings of comprehensive school align themselves more with the middle class than the working class (Räty & Snellman, 1998). In addition, educational choices seem to relate to gendered conceptions of ability (Räty, Kasanen, Kiiskinen & Nykky, 2004). In Finland, the educational level of women is higher than that of men, but the income level of women is lower, mainly due to gendered segregation in the labour market. Although there is no educational underclass in Finland, men, in general, have lower levels of education.
People are drawn to densely populated areas and thus the questions of arranging education both in cities and in sparsely populated areas consist of specific problematic issues. Use of educational technology has been proposed as a solution, but so far actual virtual learning opportunities are underdeveloped and have rather centralized than decentralized the population.

**Multiculturalism.** At the level of discourses, there are idealistic views of multiculturalism and pluralism, which, however, do not relate to actual problem situations in the field of education (Matinheikki-Kokko & Pitkänen, 2002).

**Use of technology.** Information technology is based rather on the terms of the markets than on the terms of its use or users (Suoranta & Lehtimäki, 2004). Technology separates producers of information technology from its consumers.

**Individualism.** Alongside changes in education, the individual and individual choices have become pronounced. In the case of the individual lacking resources, there is a possibility for a negative process and outcome, which results in a lack of control and exclusion (Antikainen, 1998).

**Participation in lifelong learning.** Participation in adult education is at a high level in Finland, but the differences in participation vary greatly according to age and class. Part of the population has received education according to an old industrial model of education, which can limit their possibilities in a knowledge society.

From a general point of view, the future alternatives of this learning society are depending on the emerging Nordic model of information society that is based on economic and technological network, diversifying national identity and restructuring welfare state. One of the key issues is the impact of Europeanisation and globalization on a national learning culture.

**LITERATURE**


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