

Non-participation – a Challenge for Adult Education?

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Introduction

Most of adult education research deals with participation and participants in adult education. The general pattern of participation in adult education is very well known among adult education researchers and practitioners. There are numerous studies about adults attending different kinds of adult education including for example research on how adults have experienced their studies and what are the benefits of adult education to the participants themselves and to the society in general. Even if a lot is known about participation, there is much less information available on non-participants or those who do not participate actively. In this paper the aim is to focus on *non-participation* in adult education in Finland, where lifelong learning has become an increasingly important component of national educational policy.

People regularly encounter situations that call for the learning of new things, and new abilities to operate in the complex society are becoming essential for coping both at work and in everyday life. One answer to respond to these demands is recognised to lie in formal adult education¹. It is known, however, that there is a tendency for adult education programs to fail in reaching their objectives. For example McGivney (2001, 152) states that we have ignored the lessons of the past as there is evidence on working with under-represented groups, but this evidence has been neglected. Instead, considerable time and resources are spent on research and national enquiries that rediscover much of what has long been known. McGivney argues that in spite of vast research and investment in adult education programmes the participation patterns in adult education have remained virtually unchanged.

In this paper my aim is to ponder what adult education surveys tell about non-participation and the reasons related to non-participation. I also bring into discussion some findings from the interviews among those adults who do not find attending adult education as a possible choice for themselves.

Data

Both quantitative data (The Adult Education Survey 2000) and qualitative data (life history interviews) are used to analyse adults' participation and non-participation in education. The Adult Education Survey 2000 (AES2000) is the fourth survey carried out by Statistics Finland on the subject of participation in adult education and training. The target population of the AES2000 are permanent residents of Finland aged 18 to 79. The data were collected by face-to-face interviews from February to June 2000. In this paper I analyse briefly the responses of those aged 18 to 64 (n=3422) and concentrate mainly on the work force (n=2524).

The qualitative data is based on a life history approach. The data has been collected in 2003 by means of narrative life story interviews from those adults who in terms of established vocabulary could be defined as

¹ In 2003, the Finnish government launched a new five-year adult education programme for raising the qualification level of adults. The Finnish Adult Education and Training Initiative (*Noste*-programme) aims to the raising of the educational level of those adults who have not completed secondary level of education. The objective of the programme is that adults aged 30-59 years with only compulsory school background belonging to the labour force either attend education leading to a vocational degree or study parts of a degree. (see Moore & Antikainen 2003)

non-participants in adult education (n=12)². There have been problems in trying to collect the interview data. Snowball sampling has been used to get in contact with the interviewees after the efforts to reach interviewees via the labour force bureau failed. The unemployed who regularly come to meet the employment authority did not use the opportunity to give a life history interview in the two periods that were organised in the bureau. In snowball sampling there have also been some refusals. Thus, it seems very problematic to get into the 'core' of non-participation. However, with the qualitative data it is possible to scrutinise the interpretations of the meaning of education in the wider context of the life course.

The interviewees were asked to tell informally about their educational paths and working life. The interview data include experiences and choices in education and work, and the views about the importance and meaning of formal education and work. The interviews have lasted from one to three hours, were recorded and later transcribed. These adults' accounts of their lives - formal education and work being in the centre of the interviews - are seen to represent shared cultural ideas about the meaning of education and work. In this way individual life stories *"are not isolated, individual affairs but reflect and constitute the dialectics of power relations and competing truths within the wider society"* (Bron & West 2000, 160).

Patterns of participation in adult education

There are results that are repeated in adult education surveys both nationally and internationally (e.g. Belanger & Valdivielso 1997; Blomqvist et al. 2002). For example Gorard and Rees (2002, 101) refer to numerous studies done in the 1990s in Britain that have recognised the groups that participate least in adult education. Unemployed, and others with low incomes, the unskilled and unqualified, ex-offenders, part-time or temporary workers, those with learning difficulties or low levels of basic skills and some ethnic groups are the least likely to participate (see also McGivney 2001, 21-22). The results of Finnish adult education studies repeat the pattern, even if the non-participant groups are not named and categorised as clearly as for example in British studies. Participation in adult education is not evenly distributed among all adults, those with higher levels of education participate more than those with lower levels of education, women participate more than men, those employed participate more than those unemployed. (e.g. Blomqvist et al. 2002.)

In AES2000, adult education and training refer to education that is organised specifically for adults. A person is defined as a participant if s/he participated in the last 12 months in at least one adult education situation that lasted six hours. Thus, participants vary from those who attended some educational situation for one day to those who studied the whole year in adult vocational institution. Using this definition, 54 percent of Finnish population aged 18-64 participated in adult education in the last 12 months. Table 1 shows the pattern of participation in adult education by educational level. Educational level is divided into three categories using the classification used in the national register of educational degrees³. It is worth noticing, however, as Kokkila

² The interviews have been collected in two different projects. In 'Non-participation as a challenge to adult education' the aim is to analyse non-participation as a cultural phenomenon. The other research project concentrates on the implementation of *Noste*-programme. The collection of interview data is still in process.

³ In AES2000 level of education was determined on the basis of the Unesco International Standard Classification (ISCED), which has been adapted to the Finnish education system. The original scale was combined into three categories as follows: the primary/lower secondary category (ISCED 0-2) consists of people who have completed no more than primary or comprehensive school; the upper secondary level (ISCED 3-4) comprises those who have completed upper secondary general or vocational education as well as those with specialist vocational qualifications related to working life skills; the tertiary category (ISCED 5-7) consists of study lines at a vocational institution requiring 2-3 years after upper secondary education and lower and higher academic degrees, polytechnic (AMK) qualifications, as well as licentiate's and doctor's degrees (Blomqvist et al. 2003, 98).

(2003, 35-36) has pointed out in her study about the *Noste*-target groups' attitudes towards education that the respondents can define their educational level differently than the definitions used in statistics.⁴

Table 1. Participation in adult education (%) by highest level of educational attainment, population aged 18-64 (n=3422, N=3 260 000⁵).

	Participated in last 12 months	Participated earlier	Has never participated	Total
Primary or lower secondary (ISCED 0-2)	37	52	11	100 (N=920 000)
Upper secondary (ISCED 3-4)	51	43	6	100 (N=1 430 000)
Tertiary (ISCED 5-7)	76	23	1	100 (N=910 000)
Total	54 (N=1760 000)	40 (N=1304 000)	6 (N=196 000)	100 (N=3 260 000)

Participants in adult education clearly have a higher educational level than those who do not participate. Adults with primary or lower secondary level of education participate least. Most adult learning takes place outside educational institutions, provided by the employer at the workplace or in the form of in-service training, but participation activity varies strongly according to socio-economic position (see e.g. Moore & Antikainen 2003; Moore 2002). While 84 percent of upper white-collar employees participate yearly in adult education, the corresponding figure among blue-collar workers is 45 percent. It is noteworthy, however, that the participation rate of blue-collar workers has increased in the 1990s even if the first half of the decade was a time of deep economic recession in Finland.⁶

Almost half of adult population (46 %) did not participate in adult education in the previous year. This cross-sectional figure seems quite large, but if we take the perspective of the life course, only six percent of Finnish adult population seems to be without experiences of adult education. The age criteria used in AES2000 brings in also the age groups of students and conscripts, who are active participants in learning and education even if they do not participate much in learning arranged specifically for adults. The six per cent of adult population that say to have never participated in adult education corresponds to 200 000 persons. If we leave out students and conscripts, the 'core of non-participation', those who have no experiences of adult education is limited to 150 000 persons.

The high participation rate becomes more evident if these results concerning Finnish adult education are compared to those presented for example by Gorard and Rees (2002). In their survey on participation in lifelong learning (n=1104) in Wales they could classify 31 percent of respondents as non-participants. Non-

⁴ In the age group of 30-54, 22 percent of those who according to the register have primary or lower secondary level of education claimed that they have secondary or tertiary level of education. On the other hand, 17 percent of those with secondary level education informed that they have not finished any vocational training.

⁵ Weighing coefficient is used in all tables, n= number of respondents, N= population (see Blomqvist et al. 2003, 115).

⁶ In the first adult education survey in 1980 (AES80), the participation rate for blue-collar workers was 23 percent and 56 percent for upper white-collar employees (see Blomqvist et al. 2003). As the unemployed participate less than those who work, it is worth mentioning that at the time of AKU2000 interviews 10 per cent of the labour force was unemployed or furloughed. The unemployment rate is not evenly distributed among occupational positions and educational levels. While only 4 percent of those with higher education were unemployed, the corresponding figure among those without upper secondary level of education was 12 percent.

participants reported no extension of their education immediately after ending compulsory school, no continuing education in adult life, no participation in government training schemes and no substantive work-based training (Gorard & Rees 2002, 44). Similarly, McGivney (2001, 13-15) reports of the NIACE study in 2001 on adult learning (n=6310) where 33 percent of respondents informed of no participation in learning since full-time education in youth.

Obstacles of participation in quantitative data

In AES2000 the respondents were asked about the obstacles of participation in adult education. They could choose from ready-made statements, and the following figure 1 shows how respondents belonging to the group of employees chose when they were given ready statements about the possible causes behind non-participation in employer-sponsored training.

Table 1. The main obstacle to participation (%) in employer-sponsored training by previous participation (employees aged 18-64, n=1638, N=1 161 970).*

	In last 12 months (n=1103)	Earlier (n=483)	Never (n=52)	Total (n=1638)
Time pressure in the workplace	49,8	30,2	25,0	43,2
Employer does not offer training	11,4	30,6	46,2	18,2
Lack of suitable training	12,6	12,6	11,5	12,6
Difficulties in getting into interesting training	6,6	4,8	3,8	6,0
Lack of interest	4,0	5,0	9,6	4,5

* Obstacles mentioned in the questionnaire: 'poor quality of training', 'no benefit from training', 'lack of information on opportunities', 'employer does not appreciate training' and 'fear of failure' were not significant as obstacles for the respondents.

The most important reason preventing employees from attending employer-sponsored education is time pressure at work. Half of those who had participated in adult education in last 12 months thought time pressure to be the biggest single reason that stopped them from participating. Those who had never participated in adult education emphasised more often than participants that their employer does not offer training or that they lack interest.

Even if there has been a lot of development in measuring and anticipating participation in adult education, it has been stated that this kind of instrument cannot clearly point the reasons of non-participation or the obstacles of participation (Cutz & Chandler 2000). A survey can only produce a partial picture about non-participation, and the most difficult to reach are the views of those who do not participate. Gorard and Rees (2002, 44) pay attention to the fact that this group is most frequently ignored in adult education research as they are unapproachable through lists of participants. To a certain extent the same applies to surveys. In AES2000 the non-response rate is highest among those with lowest educational level (who are known to participate the least). From those with tertiary education 18 percent refused the interview, but the proportion of refusals among those with primary or lower secondary level of education was 26 percent (Blomqvist et al. 2002, 130).

'Non-participants' talk about education

In the interviews, the 'non-participants' in adult education have told their life stories where education and work have been in the centre. With help of the interviews another view on the obstacles of participation is opened up. In this way it is also possible to learn more about those cultural patterns of non-participation in adult education and learning that are manifested for example as differences in participation between social classes (e.g. McGivney 2001, 18; Gorard & Rees 2002, 8).

Negative experiences in school are to some extent present in our interview data. It is noteworthy, however, that the first school years are remembered to have been pleasant without any major problems. There also seem to be gendered differences in the ways the interviewees tell about their school experiences. Men tell about starting to experience school as uncomfortable in their teen-years when they were on their last years of compulsory schooling. This experience is missing from the life stories of women interviewed in this study. The

negative experiences men tell about include problems and arguments with the teachers, restlessness in the classroom and problems in learning certain subjects. (see also Moore & Antikainen 2003)

Q: You mentioned maths?

A: Well, yes, it still terrifies me. [...] Maths was like, there is not much good to say about it. [...] and still today I haven't needed any hypotenuses or anything else, I have done just great, I think why do they bang these. Of course for someone it could be useful, for some nothing. I am just happy without those. (male, age 37, unemployed)

A female interviewee, who at the time of the interview had been in 16 different jobs, tells in the following interview extract about her relationship to formal education. Her jobs include different kinds of work in restaurants, bars and cafeterias as well as different jobs in delivering goods.

But I think going to school is really difficult, like I have immediately gone to working life, and I thought then that it's so easy if you do not have to do anything else than study. But when I took that van driver course, there was much more than driving, you sit there from 8 am to 4 pm on lessons, so there those subjects that didn't interest me, they disgusted me. After that I said that I'll never say studying is easy. It really is a lot of work. Many times I tried to sit and read for an exam, but I just couldn't remember. Of course it was different with those subjects that I was interested in, but... Studying is not easy, especially if it is not in place and interesting. (female, age 51, works)

All in all, 'theory' (referring to theoretical subjects taught at school), general education and sitting on the school bench are issues related to formal education that come up in the interviews. As cultural representations these issues carry a negative label.⁷ It would be, however, problematic to interpret these experiences merely as learning difficulties as the interviewees told about significant learning experiences in other contexts where they were able to learn and had the motivation to learn.

These findings are similar to those that Illeris (2001; 2003) has reported of. He states that adults might only have very little desire really to learn something if the studies are not meaningful to their life. When Illeris (2003, 14-17) analyses adult education in Denmark, he draws attention to the ambivalent identities adults have in the context of formal education and how adults tell their reasons for being in adult education in contradictory ways. The contradictions are present especially in the situation, where adult education has become a part of labour market policy and (according to Illeris) most participants attend only because participation is more or less compulsory (see also McGivney 2001, 12).

If school and subjects related to theoretical thinking have a negative label, it can be understood why the less educated with negative experiences from school tend not to participate in formal studies at adult age. The interviewees of this study gave reasons for their non-participation in a very definite way – school is something that is not for them. Instead, they gave work a high value much in the same way that the unemployed did in the study conducted by Paldanius (2002) in Sweden. Having work or getting work is their major goal in life.

Q: What about the future, is it possible that you'll study something?

A: If it is in the way that I should go to sit on the school bench, then no, not any more. If I just could go straight to work. It is just a false belief that you learn it at school. Not that staging post any more, that you first go to school and from there to work. (male, 48, unemployed)

⁷ Here I concentrate on the interviews of adults. In another study about young people's problems in 'becoming adults' I got similar wording about school and education. The words of a 23-year old interviewee that I have presented in some seminars are well remembered. The interviewee expressed his attitude towards education by saying that "*F..k those theory lessons*" or "*I am not going back on the school bench any more*". (see Korkeakoulutieto 2002, 36-37.)

Well, it is that I wouldn't start to go on the school bench any more, because of my age. But like these courses connected to my work, these meetings, they are OK.

Q: Don't you have a new course or some education here (= in the work place) now?

A: Yes, there is, but not me. Now we could apply for this new education, but I am not going to, I am not able to do that any more, I couldn't any more.

(female, age 45, works)

When asked about learning, Finnish adult labour force gives work experience a great significance. The respondents of AES2000 state almost unanimously that their skills and knowledge are based on work experience. Finnish adults are not as confident about the significance of education for their knowledge and skills as they are about the significance of work experience (Moore et al. 2003; Moore & Antikainen 2003). In the interviews those who have not been so keen on attending formal education or adult education tell how they see the connection between learning and work. In the following extract the interviewee tells about his previous occupation that he stayed working in for twenty years before becoming unemployed.

It was there at work, and the employer, that I learned there, little by little, [the employer] watched over my work there, handworks is precise work. In that way you slowly learn that job when someone watches it there beside you.

(male, unemployed)

All the interviewees, both men and women share the view that work teaches you the occupation. In a way this is an expected result of these interviews, because most of the interviewees do not have formal vocational qualifications.

No I haven't taken any courses. I have really just gone there off-hand. It is the previous worker that has worked there, she has taught me.

(female, works)

Conclusion

Participation in adult education is not evenly distributed among Finnish adult population. Even if the participation rates in Finland are high in international comparisons, those who would benefit most of adult education participate the least. Similar non-participation patterns have been repeatedly reported in other national contexts and in international comparisons (e.g. Belanger & Valdivieso 1997). Efforts to level these differences have not been fully successful even if in Finland there has been levelling of participation rates of different socio-economic groups in the last twenty years. Based on a multitude of studies about adult education it is accepted that participation and activity tend to accumulate. This places a challenge to the promotion of active citizenship as well, especially when it is planned to involve educational interventions (Moore & Antikainen 2003).

It is a challenge for research and researchers to gain knowledge also from those adults who do not participate in adult education and who so easily are ignored and neglected in adult education studies. It has been very problematic to find interviewees among the group of non-participants, and the label 'non-participant' has a negative sound in itself as well. The fact that the efforts to find interviewees through the labour force bureau failed suggests that the unemployed might relate research interviews as control and power used over their independence. Even if the aim of our interviews is not to try to affect the non-participants' ideas and attitudes about education, it has proved to be extremely difficult to find the competing truths (Bron & West 2000) about education and learning that those who are not reached by research might hold. As cultural representations, 'research', 'researcher', 'university' and 'interview' might hold similar negative labels for the non-participants as

'education', 'school bench' and 'theory', and research in itself might not be meaningful in lives of the less educated.

It is a common interest among educational policy planners, researchers and adult educators to aim for 'lifelong learning for all'. This is an issue that might not be shared by the whole adult population. For example Paldanius (2002) who studied the problems of recruiting unemployed to participate in education in Sweden comes to the conclusion that among unemployed it can be rational to be uninterested or not to participate in adult education because the unemployed do not see education as a means to improve their life situation.

Non-participation is an interesting cultural phenomenon, and it seems to take similar forms and patterns in many post-industrial countries. So far in the interviews among non-participants there has been no open resistance to the values and ideals of (lifelong) learning society. Instead, those interviewed have told about a life where education does not play a significant role. The 'non-participants' seem to have found their own way to live in the society without the commitment to education.

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