

Non-formal education for adults as a step towards employment and social inclusion

As a part of the Nordic countries, Finland has quite a long tradition of Liberal Education, which partially goes back to the beginning of the 19th century in Denmark, where Nikolai F.S Grundtvik (1738–1872) founded a new pedagogy based on the ideas of the Enlightenment and the ideal of the direct interaction between the teacher and the students and learning throughout life (<https://www.folkhogskolor.fi>).

Adult education centres, folk high schools, learning centres, sports training centres and summer universities are the main providers of the non-formal education in Finland nowadays. (Finnish National Agency for Education).

The ideal of the folk high school and the non-formal education taking place there, differs from the formal education in the sense that it is free from the state government and that the participation in the Education happens voluntarily. (Abrandt Dahlgren Carlsson 2009: 145, Finnish National Agency for Education). The Finnish National Agency for Education describes it like this:

“Liberal adult education institutions offer studies that improve civic skills, social studies, general education studies and studies for hobby-based or interest-based information and skills acquisition. The goal of instruction organized in the form of liberal adult education is to promote people's versatile development and wellbeing as well as the realization of democracy, pluralism, sustainable development, multiculturalism and internationalism. Adult education emphasizes self-motivated learning, a sense of community, and inclusion.”

The learning process in this kind of educational environment is connected to the complete life situation of the person. As an alternative to the purely instrumental approach to knowledge, where knowledge is gained for a specific purpose, the liberal adult education includes a holistic point of view of people and knowledge. The development of the individual experiences of the participants should be emphasized in the activities at the institution. (Abrandt Dahlgren Carlsson 2009:146)

This also means that there is not necessarily a course curriculum on a national level, instead these are written on a local level by the liberal education centres themselves. Nowadays this

is changing as some courses already has a curriculum, that of course must be adapted to the local circumstances.

In the case of Borgå folkakademi for example, the Dog consultant program does only have a locally written curriculum. The Extra chance program for teenagers who have finished elementary school and need to get higher grades or special support for personal or social reasons, does have a national curriculum, as it contains central parts of the general and compulsory learning for the elementary school.

When it comes to the Swedish courses for immigrants, they have been formal in the sense that they are approved by the Employment office as they are seen as an important step towards work life, but the participants have only received approved or attended as grades at the end of the course. From August this year onwards, the Swedish course will have a new curriculum, locally designed of course, but still based on the one written at the national level. The students participating in the course can also get grades and can get the course registered in KOSKI, a national information resource platform for education. This platform is used to register formal education but will now also be taken into use for the non-formal education as well for those who ask for it.

In other words, the liberal education centres like the folk high schools tend to see themselves as places where the personal journey of the participants often is considered as important as the goal of the course itself. But this on the other hand does not mean that the studies at the folk high school are not being useful, on the opposite. The folk high schools and mainly the role of them is to give a second chance to individuals at adult age that lead to a more formal value such as a return-to-work life. (ibid. 147).

The social aspects of this kind of studies are obviously essential. The students or participants are given a lot of support and space for their own personal growth to success in other more formal aspects of life. An important part of the concept and the folk high school experience is that the participants can live at the school and everybody has lunch and a coffee break together Monday to Friday.

At Borgå folkakademi all the students and the teachers have lunch together every day and apart from the learning plan of each course, there is also cultural and social programs taking place along the school year. This year for example we have organized an event where the

participants from all the courses organized and participated in workshops about the Agenda 2030 and sustainable development.

Despite the informal environment both in the sense of courses and teaching, the result at a more formal level is evident, which can often be seen after the participants have finished their studies at Borgå folkakademi. Many of the immigrant students from the Swedish courses have continued their studies at a Swedish speaking vocational school and/or have started to work at bilingual or Swedish speaking companies. Some of the participants from the Dog consultant program have started their own business or have found work at pet shops.

From a wider point of view, the liberal adult education institutions and folk high schools have flexibility thanks to being free from a nationally steered content. This flexibility gives us an important role in reacting on quick changes in society such as the many asylum seekers suddenly arriving from Central Asia in 2015 and the Ukrainian refugees arriving now in 2022. At Borgå folkakademi a Swedish course for Ukrainians was organized already from the beginning of May, when refugees had started to arrive at the beginning of March.

Finally, the courses organized at a folk high school in Finland is a concrete example of how and why the nonformal education for adults can lead to work, other studies and social inclusion through a formal course content that is adapted to the circumstances of the participants in the way it is being taught and the way the participants are receiving support for their individual, social and intellectual growth.

Sources

Abrandt Dahlgren, Madeleine & Carlsson, Irma (ed.). *Lärande på vuxnas vis-vetenskap och beprövad erfarenhet*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

<https://www.folkhogskolor.fi>

<https://okm.fi/en/liberal-adult-education>