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Teaching equality in vocational education through a game practice

Experientially and Emotionally Involving Teachers and Students

Authors: Jari Karttunen & Anna-Liisa Parkkinen |

Introduction

In 2019, Finland brought questions of equality and inclusivity to the fore of international conversation. “Equality forms a core value for Finland and its people, and the best symbol of Finnish equality is a personal pronoun from the Finnish language: *hän*. The third-person singular pronoun *hän* is neutral in terms of gender and social status, so it represents equal opportunity. It is ‘she’ and ‘he,’ all at once, and it has always existed in the Finnish language.” In the spirit of promoting inclusivity and equality, Finland introduced the world to *hän* as well as the gender-neutral thinking behind it (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2019).

Schools’ impact

In 2019, *Lasten ja nuorten säätiö* (Children and Youth Foundation), *Tieto Corporation* and *Tulevaisuuskoulu* (Futures School) conducted a survey research focusing on young people and their views and beliefs concerning the future. Over 4,300 upper school students between the ages of 13 and 16 responded to the survey. The survey revealed that most respondents (55%) considered school to be the most important opinion leader on future-related questions. Therefore it is important to acknowledge schools’ and teachers’ impact on young people’s views on equality and its future (Lasten ja nuorten säätiö, Tieto & Tulevaisuuskoulu, 2019).

A wider concept of gender equality

The Gender Equality Act in Finland is intended to ensure equality between men and women. It also prevents gender discrimination and improves the position of women, especially in working life. The law supports equal access to education as well as professional development for both men and women. Since 2005, the law has obligated some educational institutions to draw up a functional equality plan (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2015).

Though Finland can be considered one of the world’s leading countries in nurturing gender equality, a lot still needs to be done. For example the question of care duties is a topic that needs to be solved in a shared manner between men and women. Pay equality still leaves a lot to be desired, as does handling the problem of violence against women (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2019). Although Finland is internationally perceived as one of the leaders in gender equality, the gender segregation of working

life is still exceptionally strong, and gender selection into different occupations effectively takes place already at school (Tanhua & Laitinen, 2019).

The concept of gender equality should be seen in a wider context in the sense that gender diversity is included in it. Although this view may be overshadowed by the debate on statistics, it remains an essential element of gender equality and its fostering. A non-binary gender spectrum should be present in an equal society (Tanhua 2019). A non-binary spectrum supports the inclusivity of all genders, thus Finnish legislation acknowledges either female or male as an official gender. The National Institute for Health and Welfare states also that for some people, sex determination is not significant, or they do not want to do it (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2019). Despite the current legislation, Finnish organisations and institutions do give individuals an opportunity to report their gender as other or refraining from defining it.

Supporting equality work in vocational education

The Finnish Government's goal is to raise Finland into a leading country in gender equality and improve equality in different sectors of society (Finnish Government 2019). This applies to schools and educational institutions. Vocational training practices have a major impact on the realisation of equality. The *Tasa-arvoa ja reformia* project (Equality and Reform) is a national project in Finland providing consultative training in gender equality. The project produces training and materials to support this work in vocational training institutions in Finland. It is run in cooperation with actors from all five Finnish Schools of Professional Teacher Education Units in Finland. The aim is to also bring along the personalisation of studies and development of work-based education in accordance with the themes of Equality and Parity. The name of the project reflects the reform of vocational upper secondary education in Finland that was implemented in 2017. Its goal is to meet the demands of future working life and unify vocational education steering and financing systems (Government Publications 2016). *Minä olen Lumo* (I am Lumo) is a game created in collaboration between JAMK subproject of *Tasa-arvoa ja reformia* (Equality and reform) and Children and Youth Foundation project *Taidot elämään* (Skills for life). Lumo is a student and the key figure in the game. Lumo is a Finnish name that is gender-neutral. This choice respects the core value of the Finnish pronoun *hän* and its neutrality. It also gives the players the opportunity to reflect on gender and non-binary questions in the learning community as well as in the study field they have chosen as their vocational education.



The game developers Jari Karttunen and Anna-Liisa Parkkinen satisfied after a game workshop for VET teachers.

The game enables you to focus on questions that Lumo faces during their studies following the transition to working life as a professional. The topics discussed and solved during the game are e.g. their choice of vocational study field, their experiences of learning, teachers, and study counselling. As the game progresses, Lumo, the teachers and study counsellors deal with their experiences, emotions and perceptions of social class, income, studying, learning, career planning, challenges and successes.

Conclusion

The Finnish education system also relies on the proficiency of teachers and other personnel. All personnel are encouraged to develop their own work as well as participate in the quality management of their institutions, the idea being that everyone is the quality manager of their own work (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). The equity and parity work in vocational education should be assessed as part of the quality features. Too often we may find Finnish teachers supporting equality in their profession yet not actually teaching these themes. We perceive the teachers' profession to be future work in implementing equality in vocational education for a better working life in Finland. This requires an internalised perception of how and why teaching these features is an essential part of the teachers' work in vocational education. *"Playing the game gave me an opportunity to think deeply about these themes as well as my personal relation to equality and parity. That the game itself has no fixed answers or solutions is an advantage, because it challenges yourself, your beliefs and your actions"* (n.n.), stated one of the teachers after taking part in the game. According to the feedback from the workshops, it seems the game itself is ready to be introduced to Finnish vocational education.

From our experience, it seems teachers need more material, tools and personal experience in order to implement equality in their classes and teaching work. This is possible through experiential learning in teachers' workshops. This enables the possibility to give some thought on how the game core is applied to varied student groups.

The game *I am Lumo* supports teachers' work for coequal vocational education, equal opportunities for vocation as well as a more equal working life in Finland. The *Tasa-arvoa ja reformia* project will run until the end of 2020. To ensure that **the game *Minä olen Lumo*** becomes more accessible, high priority is given to translating the game manual into Swedish and Sámi languages as well as English.

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