

## Abstract

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From a “Student” to a Lifelong “Consumer” of Education?

Constructions of Educability in Adult Students’ Narrative Life Histories

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The focus of this study was to examine the constructions of the educable subject of the lifelong learning (LLL) narrative in the narrative life histories of adult students at general upper secondary school for adults (GUSSA). In this study lifelong learning has been defined as a cultural narrative on education, “a system of political thinking” that is not internally consistent, but has contradictory themes embedded within it (Billig et al., 1988). As earlier research has shown and this study also confirms, the LLL narrative creates differences between those who are included and those who fall behind and are excluded from the learning society ideal.

Educability expresses socially constructed interpretations on who benefit from education and who should be educated and how. The presupposition in this study has been that contradictions between the LLL narrative and the so-called traditional constructions of educability are likely to be constructed as the former relies on the all-inclusive interpretation of educability and the latter on the meritocratic model of educating individuals based on their innate abilities. The school system continues to uphold the institutionalized ethos of educability that ranks students into the categories “bright”, “mediocre”, and “poor” (Räty & Snellman, 1998) on the basis of their abilities, including gender-related differences as well as differences based on social class. Traditional age-related norms also persist, for example general upper secondary education is normatively completed in youth and not in adulthood, and the formal learning context continues to outweigh both non-formal and informal learning. Moreover, in this study the construction of social

differences in relation to educability and, thereafter unequal access to education has been examined in relation to age, social class, and gender. The biographical work of the research participants forms a peephole that permits the examination of the dilemmatic nature of the constructions of educability in this study. Formal general upper secondary education in adulthood is situated on the border between the traditional and the LLL narratives on educability: participation in GUSSA inevitably means that one's ability and competence as a student and learner becomes reassessed through the assessment criteria maintained by schools, whereas according to the principles of LLL everyone is educable; everyone is encouraged to learn throughout their lives regardless of age, social class, or gender.

This study is situated in the field of adult education, sociology of education, and social psychological research on educability, having also been informed by feminist studies. Moreover, this study contributes to narrative life history research combining the structural analysis of narratives (Labov & Waletzky, 1997), i.e. mini-stories within life history, with the analysis of the life histories as structural and thematic wholes and the creation of coherence in them; thus, permitting both micro and macro analyses.

On accounting for the discontinuity created by participation in general upper secondary school study in adulthood and not normatively in youth, the GUSSA students construct coherence in relation to their ability and competence as students and learners. The seven case studies illuminate the social differences constructed in relation to educability, i.e. social class, gender, age, and the "new category of student and learner". In the data of this study, i.e. 20 general upper secondary school adult graduates' narrative life histories primarily generated through interviews, two main coherence patterns of the adult educable subject emerge. The first *performance-oriented* pattern displays qualities that are closely related to the principles of LLL. Contrary to the principles of lifewide learning, however, the documentation of one's competence through formal qualifications outweighs non-formal and informal learning in preparation for future change and the competition for fur-

ther education, professional careers, and higher social positions. The second *flexible learning* pattern calls into question the status of formal, especially theoretical and academically oriented education; inner development is seen as more important than such external signs of development – grades and certificates. Studying and learning is constructed as a hobby and as a means to a more satisfactory life as opposed to a socially and culturally valued serious occupation leading to further education and career development. Consequently, as a curious, active, and independent learner, this educable but not readily employable subject is pushed into the periphery of lifelong learning. These two coherence patterns of the adult educable subject illuminate who is to be educated and how. The educable and readily employable LLL subject is to participate in formal education in order to achieve qualifications for working life, whereas the educable but not employable subject may utilize lifewide learning for her/his own pleasure.

Keywords: adult education, general upper secondary school for adults, educability, lifelong learning, narrative life history