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Reinventing Paulo Freire's pedagogy in Finnish non-formal education: The case of life skills for all model

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ABSTRACT

The article contributes to the academic discussion on Paulo Freire's pedagogical thinking as a basis for reinventing contemporary non-formal education. In Finland, Freire's transformational/liberatory theory of adult learning was applied as a framework for developing an adult educational model called Life Skills for All. The pilot project's case studies were carried out with different groups of people during the model's development phase. We describe these cases and discuss what can be learned from them for offering basic and life skills education for adult groups at risk of social disenfranchisement. Our case study analysis highlights some new practices and challenges based on the model's different applications. We argue that even for basic capacity building of employment skills, it is essential to develop a non-instrumental, holistic, and societal educational approach. Elements for such an approach can be derived from both the Nordic and Freirean traditions of adult education. Also, we suggest that the Life Skills for All model benefits learners' agency and empowerment by putting the learner at the center, combining the learning of different basic skills, and emphasizing the central role of the local community in participants' learning activities.

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Introduction

Experiments cannot be transplanted; they must be reinvented.—Paulo Freire (2016, p. 4)

In terms of educational context, present-day Finland may seem far removed from the challenges and concerns that troubled Paulo Freire when he began to develop his idea of liberatory education. However, there is a longstanding tradition in the Nordic countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden—of free, non-formal adult education with critical aims similar to those of Freire, including human capacity building, *conscientização*, and emancipation. This type of adult education is sometimes called 'andragogy' to distinguish it from 'pedagogy' and emphasize the humanistic ideal of empowering individuals and communities in a particular political context.

In this article, we study the Life Skills for All model, the most recent Finnish reinvention of Freire's liberatory theory of adult learning. We analyzed the use of this model in several projects

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aimed at adult learners' capacity building. Three of us belonged to the project's steering group and one to the development team. In the following, we analyze the use of this model in six experimental projects carried out by the training organizations.¹ Our aim was to clarify the benefits of the Life Skills for All model in relation to adult basic and life skills education for groups at risk of social disenfranchisement. The European Social Fund funded the development of the model, whose original purpose was to enhance participants' employment prospects. In what follows, we analyze the cases and point out the connections between Freire's liberatory pedagogy and the educational approaches used in the model. We highlight what we have learned from the pilot cases and reflect on how the model can help reinvent Freire's ideas, not only in the Nordic context but also in similar endeavors of adult education elsewhere.

The Life Skills for All model was developed to improve participants' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills in the context of their everyday lives. The model is centered on applied, informal, and goal-oriented learning and educational encounters based on mutual respect and dialogue. Therefore, the model relies on the study circle as the primary mode of studying and learning. The model's core assumption is that adults are active subjects in their learning processes—that is, they are societal and political actors who, as Freire pointed out, can read 'the word and the world': they possess an understanding of their circumstances and impact the world around them.

Before analyzing the Life Skills for All model, we compare Freire's Southern tradition of emancipatory adult education with the Nordic tradition and take a closer look at Finnish history and the present state of non-formal adult education. We also offer a brief outline of Freire's reception in Finland.

Comparing Freire's Southern tradition with the Nordic tradition

Referring to Freire's legacy as a global public intellectual, Nelly Stromquist pointed out that developments in societies often co-occur, as 'many innovations build on previous human efforts' (Stromquist, 2014, p. 553). A case in point is critical and popular adult education, whose history involves several traditions. Our approach combines elements from the Nordic 'people's education' and the Southern Freirean tradition. Both traditions share general educational aims and pedagogical ideas.

The Nordic strand consists in *folkbildning* ('people's education' in Swedish), or 'kansansivistys' (in Finnish) and is partly based on the German idea of general *Bildung*, which emphasizes personal growth and self-cultivation through enlightenment and cultural education (Koselleck, 2002; Horlacher, 2017). Apart from the German influences, Finnish popular education originated with the Finnish cultural and political national (Fennoman) movement and the Danish and Swedish forerunners of grassroots *folkbildning*. The Hegelian philosopher and statesman J. V. Snellman, a founding figure of the 'idea of Finland' and an advocate of national *Bildung*, stated the following in 1840: 'Finland cannot do anything by force; the power of education is its only salvation' (Snellman, 1840). Another influential 19th-century figure was Uno Cygnaeus (1810–1888), the founder of the Finnish school system, who imported the progressive ideas of Pestalozzi and Fröbel and argued in favor of education for the whole population, including common people and women. The Nordic version of 'people's education' has spread through many forms and institutions, such as folk high schools, perhaps the Nordic countries' most significant contribution to adult education in practice (see Nordvall, 2018, p. 723).

Freire's groundbreaking work has contributed to the development of the Southern tradition of *educação popular* ('people's education' in Portuguese) and inspired critical educators and cultural workers worldwide (see Westerman, 2005; Flowers, 2009). For decades, Freire's thinking has fascinated and inspired educators and social scientists around the world and has transcended cultural, political, social, gender, and demographic boundaries (see, e.g. Darder et al., 2003; Gadotti, 1994; Kirylo, 2020; Mayo, 2013; McLaren, 2015; Peters & Besley, 2015; Torres, 2014;

2019). Freire's philosophy has connected different critical theoretical traditions and leftist educational policies for equality from across the globe.

Whereas the Nordic adult education tradition has remained strong in the Nordic countries, the Freirean tradition has been used, applied, and reinvented around the world. Nowadays, Freire's ideas are known everywhere, having gained a global following (see Peters & Besley, 2015; Torres, 2019).

The Finnish tradition of non-formal adult education

Seeing that our article studies the Life Skills for All model as a *Finnish* reinvention of Paulo Freire's pedagogy, it is necessary to briefly describe the history and the present state of Finnish non-formal adult education and then consider Freire's impact on that field.² Like other Nordic countries, Finland has a strong historical tradition of non-formal, popular, and folk education strands, which originated with several social movements in the second half of the 19th century, such as the women's movement, workers' movement, youth association movement, and the pro-independence Fennoman movement.³

The ethos of free non-formal education initially emphasized every person's right, regardless of their social status, to participate in an open, unlimited process of cultivating their whole being and personality to the fullest (Koski, 2011; Sihvonen, 1996). This ideal is related to Freire's radically humanistic view of liberating education as a *process of humanization*, of becoming a more wholesome human being. Freire saw this kind of education as the elemental counterforce to 'oppression.' According to the most basic definition, oppression is a situation in which someone hinders another person's pursuit of becoming more fully human (Freire, 1970, p. 37).

Certain German strands of the *Bildung* tradition and some of the interpretations of *Bildung* as 'liberal education' in the Anglophone world have had distinctively elitist overtones (Tröhler, 2012). However, the major traditions of Finnish non-formal folk education have underscored the social and equal nature of emancipatory adult education, which nurtures the capacities that every person needs to pursue a good life and participate as a citizen in creating a good society for everyone (Koski & Filander, 2009; Sihvonen, 1996). This egalitarian character of Finnish adult education was partly inherited from the Nordic precursors in adult education, notably the Danish educational and political thinker N. F. S Grundtvig (1783–1872) (Grundtvig, 2011; Korsgaard, 2014), whose influence was crucial in all the Nordic countries.⁴ Due to these Nordic ideals and the socialist labor movement's substantial impact on workers' educational initiatives in the early 20th century (Voionmaa, 1939), the Finnish tradition of *kansansivistyst* or *folkbildning* has been characterized by grassroots and bottom-up qualities, differentiating itself from the elitist traits of the German tradition, which often elevated the concept of *Bildung* and linked it to higher education (Horlacher, 2017).

Scholars have accentuated the particularities of adult education by using the alternative term 'andragogy,' which replaces the Greek etymological root referring to 'child' (*paîs*) in 'pedagogy' with 'human/man' (*andrós*, the genitive of *anér*, yielding also *ánthrōpos*, 'human being/person'). The term was introduced into the English educational vocabulary by Malcolm Knowles (1980). He adopted the concept from the two pioneers of the European tradition of adult education, Alexander Kapp, who coined the idea in the 19th century, and Grundtvig. In North America, the emphasis has been on the individual dimension of adults' development, whereas European andragogy has stressed the socially formative role of andragogy. (Loeng, 2017, 2018; Reischmann, 2015). It is also worth recalling that *anthropology* was at the core of Freire's work. In essence, Freire was an anthropological educator who reflected on 'the totality of the people's historical existence and their world' (Torres, 2014, p. 77). He 'founded an educational movement based, in part, on conducting an ethnographic evaluation of a community to identify the generative themes (or 'dangerous words') which matter profoundly to people and which, for just this reason, contain their own catalytic power' (McKenna, 2013, p. 448).

Following the humanistic ideals (often influenced by Christian and Marxist sources, blended in Freire's radical humanism), the Finnish tradition of emancipatory 'andragogy' has developed important tenets that pay respect to people's integrity and lifeworlds. First, adult persons' dignity and self-determination are valued as the essential starting point of all educational interventions. Second, attention to and appreciation of the unique local and communal social situations and contexts is central in Finnish andragogy to strengthen people's modes of association and interaction instead of extraneous action models. Third, support for social and political participation is understood to be an indispensable element of adult education. People's well-being cannot be disconnected from their political being, meaning that social justice and solidarity are essential for a good life.

These values have thrived in non-formal adult education throughout the latter's history in Finland and form an established and valuable foundation for building new visions of critical and emancipatory adult education. Today, all that is done in this field can rely on the profound Finnish tradition of humanistic educational ideals. Consequently, keeping in mind the similarities between the Southern and the Nordic traditions, it is not far-fetched to introduce Freirean initiatives into Finnish adult education.

Freire in Finland

Freire's ideas have not been foreign to Finnish educators over the past fifty years. Although not visible in mainstream educational policies and practices, Freire's ideas have been present as an undercurrent in the critical strands of pedagogy (for an overview, see Suoranta & Tomperi, 2021). In the 1970s, these ideas were transmitted via contact with radical Swedish educators, who inspired Finnish participants in many cooperative ventures. Finnish educators' initial interest in Freire was related to the vibrant social activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, underscoring the notion of parallel developments of critical education in different parts of the world.

After the initial contacts via Swedish radical educators, Freire's works continued to inspire education theory and practice in Finland in the 1970s and 1980s—for instance, in peace education and social pedagogy. However, the political activism of the 1970s, which laid the groundwork for the original interest in Freire, faded away during the 1980s. Therefore, and due to shifts in academic and practical preferences in adult education, no lasting tradition of Freirean research and pedagogy emerged at the time (Suoranta & Tomperi, 2021).

Proper academic research on and broader practical dissemination of Freire's views began at the turn of the millennium. The signposts of this new phase were the first in-depth research monograph on Freire (Hannula, 2000) and the translation of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* into Finnish (Freire, 2005). During the first two decades of the 21st century, these publications were accompanied and followed by many other studies, seminars, and activities. Different strands of critical pedagogy started to receive more attention overall (see, e.g. Kiilakoski et al., 2005; Suoranta, 2005, 2019). In recent decades, the more focused attention on Freire's thinking within educational and pedagogical research has coincided with and partly resulted from the increased interest in critical pedagogy in its Anglo-American forms. In this sense, one could say that Freire, like so many other influences in modern-day academia, finally arrived in Finland via the US (Suoranta & Tomperi, 2021).

Even so, Freire's influence has been felt more in the fringe areas of education than in the mainstream. Typical examples include educational experiments in participatory action research and social pedagogy among socially excluded and disenfranchised groups. By and large (and as expected), Freire's thinking has received more attention in non-formal adult education—for instance, in workers' unions and leftist study centers—than in the formal education system (Suoranta & Tomperi, 2021). This situation is reminiscent of Freire's distinction between *systematic*

education (devised and controlled from above and thus inevitably non-subversive) and the *educational projects* carried out and organized by the oppressed themselves (Freire, 1970, p. 36).

Nowadays, the field of non-formal education in Finland is broad. The providers of non-formal education can be divided into five primary types: folk high schools, municipal adult education centers, study centers, sport education centers, and summer universities. In sum, approximately 900,000 people—a quarter of the Finns over the age of 15—study each year in these non-formal education institutions located across the country and increasingly operating online (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), 2019).⁵

The Life Skills for All model: The cases of six training courses

The Life Skills for All model is the most recent example of an educational project that takes Freire as an inspiration and builds on his pedagogical ideas. Given the tendencies of Freire's reception in Finland, the model is attractive because it puts Freire at (or brings him back to) the center of adult educational praxis with societal groups at risk of social exclusion and marginalization. Similarly, as Freire's transdisciplinary approach and critical philosophy crossed different borders (see Gadotti & Torres, 2009), the Life Skills for All model has the same border-crossing and transdisciplinary intent.

Being a Nordic welfare state, Finland is not without social ills, such as the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages (long-term unemployment, cumulative economic and social problems, and child poverty) and the challenges of integrating newly arrived immigrants and refugees without proficiency in Finnish. Moreover, many small business owners do not have the necessary skills to run their businesses in digitalized markets. That said, the social and economic problems faced by citizens of a welfare state differ dramatically from those that Freire was confronted with and fought against in the global South, especially in Latin America and Africa, from the 1950s to the 1980s. In Bourdieu et al. (1993) words, the social problems of the Nordic welfare states are *les petites misères*, such as relative poverty, compared to *les grandes misères* of the global South, such as absolute poverty, hunger, homelessness, exploitation, intolerable working conditions, and/or life in war zones.

While many adults possess high-level skills and competencies, a part of the Finnish adult population suffers from low functional and digital literacy and numeracy (Musset, 2015). These deficiencies hinder the chances to learn, develop one's potential, achieve one's aims, and participate in society. However, people do not always perceive the link between the challenges they face in their everyday lives and their lack of basic skills or broader life skills. Also, traditional basic skills training often focuses on narrow aims defined as specific competencies and tasks instead of paying attention to the whole person's needs. Therefore, adults do not always experience basic skills training as engaging.

To tackle these problems, the Siviis Study Centre (one of the twelve study centers in Finland) and the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation mutually developed the Life Skills for All model. The European Social Fund funded the project in 2018–2020. In developing the model, the project team applied the Citizens' Curriculum model used by the Learning & Work Institute in the United Kingdom (see Schuller & Watson, 2009). The model followed the guidelines outlined in the Life Skills Approach in Europe project (Javrh & Mozina, 2018). The original purpose of the European Social Fund grant was to improve adults' employment and integration opportunities ('promotion of employment and skills, as well as social inclusion'). Skills for employment could have been interpreted in the narrow sense as instrumental 'competencies' to 'cope with' the changing world of work and economy. Instead, building on the Nordic and the Freirean traditions, the team thought it was pivotal to develop an approach that would be holistic and emancipatory at its core.

The Finnish model was tailored to work for Finnish adults and the Finnish societal context and adopted a multi-professional approach that crossed sectoral boundaries between social work and education. The Life Skills for All model expanded basic skills thinking to include life skills, emphasizing peoples' ability to solve their everyday-life problems. Peer learning among the participants was crucial for enhancing everyone's involvement in the project. In addition to the learners' peer groups, local communities played a key role, and communal authorities and associations took part in the planning and implementing the training courses.

Instead of separating education and training, Freire claimed that students need technical training to qualify for jobs. However, when teaching, liberatory educators need to critically question the general conditions of the working life and '*unveil* the ideology enveloped in the very expectations of the students' and the training that the educators are giving:

The students need to earn a living, and no one can deny that need or have contempt for that expectation of theirs. At the same time, the pedagogical problem is how to intervene in the training so as to raise critical consciousness about the jobs and the training, too. (Freire & Shor, 2003, p. 492)

We do not want to draw a sharp line between education and training either. Quite the contrary, we question the usual distinction 'between education as an inherently enriching process that is partly under learners' control and training as the narrow inculcation of predetermined skills by an authoritarian figure' (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 64). At best, non-formal adult education as training is a dialectical and relational process of action and pedagogical principles that simultaneously builds skills, critical awareness, and participants' self-confidence. Such training involves a mutual relationship in which all participants—the trainer and the trainee—are trained. Being participatory and democratic in its approach, this kind of adult education is also a political act because it usually serves people's needs and advances personal and social change. (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 85.)

The Life Skills for All model recognized the practical importance of basic skills in managing one's own life and provided a holistic view regarding the development of basic adult education. This holistic view included the following capabilities that everyone was believed to need in today's digitalized knowledge society: basic literacy and numeracy, digital literacy, and various civic, human and interpersonal, health, environmental, and financial capabilities.

By introducing the Life Skills for All model in Finland, the project team sought to advance the following societal goals, which stem from the Nordic and Freirean traditions of non-formal education: increasing public recognition of the importance of basic skills for people and the whole Finnish society; advancing the idea that learning takes place not only in formal learning environments and that non-formal and informal learning are domains of personal growth; fostering a transformative learning approach to basic skills development, which means that learning should involve a change in thinking, action, attitudes, and values; supporting individuals' capacity to function in everyday life and enhancing their personal growth and well-being; and increasing people's capacity for societal participation.⁶

The Life Skills for All model embraces the Freirean idea that educators need to learn from the participants. Here, the principle of crossing borders entails the dialectic of constantly shifting teacher-student positions (Freire, 1985).⁷ The model drew from the Finnish tradition of non-formal adult education, which respects the integrity of adult persons. Besides, as Freire always emphasized, only the participants themselves have experiential knowledge of the challenges that they need to overcome and the needs that they have in their disenfranchised societal circumstances. In the actual training sessions, the project team applied Freire's core pedagogical ideas to the 21st-century understanding of liberatory education as summarized by Schugurensky (2017):

His main legacy for 21st century education is not just a literacy method or a set of techniques but a pedagogical approach based on six key pillars: the political nature of education, problem-posing education, democratic teacher-student relations, conscientization through dialogue, recognition of the knowledge and experience of learners and communities, and co-creation of new knowledge.

Next, we present the six case studies on the implementation of the Life Skills for All model. Each case was an individual training course. Below, we describe the participants' activities, insights, and learning process. The primary data included trainers' interviews and feedback and the project team's reflections. The training courses took place in the cities of Espoo, Helsinki, Turku, Savonlinna, and Vaasa.

Everyday-life planning

The training in everyday-life planning was intended to support immigrant mothers in managing their family life to have more resources to meet their parental responsibilities. The responsibilities included maintaining regular contact with teachers and ensuring their children's wellbeing, learning, and school attendance. The participants contributed to planning the training content, which led to the emergence of the following two main topics of interest: planning family life and managing children's mobile phone use. The first topic was addressed by introducing a wall calendar. The participants considered what to include in the calendar and chose school events and holidays, children's hobbies, and bill-payment dates. Moreover, the calendar encouraged the participants to voice what was challenging and essential in their lives. They spoke of paying bills and more personal things, such as combining household activities and childcare with vocational training. The use of mobile phones also generated lively discussions. The mothers who were particularly concerned about their children being on their phones while walking to school came up with a solution: a parental control app enabling parents to block internet use on their children's phones for selected periods. The women developed a range of digital skills and some Finnish language skills. They asked how they could further improve their Finnish and other basic skills. This demonstrated the need for adult literacy education, as approximately one in 10 Finnish adults has weak literacy skills.

Supporting children's wellbeing

The purpose of the training for supporting children's wellbeing was to enable immigrant parents to keep up with their primary-school-aged children. Special attention was paid to parents' digital skills because, in Finland, communication between the home and the school takes place almost exclusively via digital platforms. Also, children do a lot of their schoolwork digitally. Before starting to learn digital skills, the participants reflected on what contributes to children's wellbeing. They came up with a list that included listening to children, sufficient rest, rules, hobbies, nature, and parental support with schoolwork. The participants also considered how to best support their children's learning and realized that they needed new digital and Finnish language skills. While the training was intended for immigrant parents with children in primary school, only mothers signed up. It turned out that their husbands had been managing the communication between the home and the school up to that point. However, the women wanted to communicate themselves and were eager to learn to use the digital platforms. In this sense, the women tried to free themselves from their potentially oppressed position. The participants appreciated the training's interactive nature and being treated as dignified subjects with their own learning needs.

Appreciating local nature

The training was organized to support the integration of recent immigrants in Finland and involved planning and undertaking two trips to nearby nature destinations. The course theme appreciating local nature was chosen because forests play an essential role in Finnish culture.

The participants shared their nature experiences and used their smartphones to explore different weather conditions, suitable trip destinations and nature trails, and their rights and responsibilities when entering public-access land.⁸ Through these activities, the learners developed their digital, literacy, and numeracy skills. Moreover, they developed their emotional capacities when working through their uncertainties related to wandering in the forest. One participant developed an interest in wild and foraged foods, another wanted to learn about fishing, and a third about different sports undertaken in the forest. The local training partner continued to support the group members in many practical matters, such as using the library, visiting museums, and finding hobby opportunities.

Improving business and finance skills

The training was offered to support single proprietor business owners in developing the necessary skills to manage their businesses successfully to be less likely to encounter financial problems. This one-week course attracted a wide range of entrepreneurs, including a jewelry maker, a video producer, an IT services provider, and a training provider. The participants were supported in identifying their challenges and development goals. The identified goals included developing time management skills, upgrading marketing skills, and sorting out pension arrangements. Then, the participants focused on resolving their challenges during the course with the collective help of the other group members, the trainers, and the local training partners. Based on the feedback, the participants found the training meaningful and beneficial. They particularly enjoyed the atmosphere of trust and the companionship of other people in similar situations. The participants dared to talk about their business-related challenges and express their feelings. The two training partners—organizations that support single proprietor business owners— informed the participants about the advice and support. This lowered the barrier to seeking help early if new challenges arose.

Health and wellbeing for single proprietor business owners

It emerged that the business owners valued support for their health and wellbeing. The project team saw this as an opportunity to explore whether there might be a link between enhanced basic skills and a sense of wellbeing. A group of entrepreneurs was offered a five-day course, and the health and wellbeing theme was divided into physical health, stress management, and tackling addictions. The shared goal was to enhance well-being one small step at a time. The participants received informative talks from health and wellbeing experts and reflected on the topics in small groups. Each participant chose a personal goal that was practical and doable within the timeframe of the training. The goals included creating a plan for improving physical fitness, comparing private pension offers online, and creating a plan for maintaining a balance between work and life goals. Although the goals were personal, the participants wanted to share them due to the sense of trust and companionship in the group. The training provided them with a much-appreciated opportunity to reflect on their well-being and find support for pursuing it. Discovering that other people were facing similar issues was an empowering experience. It turned out that the participants longed for a sense of community.

Life skills for NEET

A local partner organization identified a group of young people who were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and who could benefit from the possibility of enhancing their self-esteem and sense of belonging as well as developing a range of life skills. The critical

elements of the training were planning and undertaking trips to local woods, where the participants picked berries and foraged for edible plants. They also designed and cooked meals together using the ingredients they had collected. Also, the participants had group discussions about their everyday lives, dreams, and plans. The learning ranged from understanding the value of meal planning and healthy eating to the consequences of taking small, short-term loans. The participants learned numeracy and digital skills when planning the trips, reading the recipes, and calculating meal sizes for the group. However, the main benefits of the training went beyond basic skills. The young people developed their collaboration and time-management skills. Their sense of self-worth increased as they received positive feedback regarding their contribution to achieving group goals and improving others' wellbeing. Many participants found support for their hopes for a better future and began making life plans.

Lessons learned from the cases

The six training courses described above were, effectively, study circles that relied on the Freirean principles mentioned earlier. First, the starting point of each training course was a practical everyday-life challenge that the participants shared and wanted to solve. Second, the trainers identified themselves not so much as teachers than mentors who implemented a democratic teacher-student relationship and recognized the participants' knowledge and insights. Third, the primary means of learning in the sessions were dialogue among the participants and learning by doing and experimenting. Fourth, the participants supported each other's education, which generated self-awareness and a sense of solidarity. Fifth, through the dialogues and experimental practices, the participants gained new skills, information, and social awareness, and they even co-created new knowledge. However, perhaps the most important lesson was the fundamental realization that 'I am not alone' and that nothing is lost beyond hope. After all, the future, rather than being predetermined as an isolated individual may think, contains feasible opportunities, which begin to open up with social support.

This article has argued that the Nordic and Southern traditions of non-formal education share many features. The two traditions emphasize freedom, empowerment, emancipation, literacy, oral skills, and local participation (Westerman, 2005, p. 107). The Nordic and Southern educational philosophies are historically based on the principles of ordinary people enhancing their opportunities to study and learn, being conscious of their place in the world, acting on behalf of their political, social, and economic interests, and developing their critical consciousness. However, as Gajardo (2019) has pointed out, the Nordic tradition and the idea of non-formal and popular forms of education have existed in European countries since the 19th century and emerged in Latin America in the 1960s 'mostly in response to social and economic inequalities and in resistance to authoritarian regimes' (p. 100). When pondering Freire's legacy from the Nordic perspective, it is crucial to note that Freirean critical adult education and the Nordic *folkbildning* have, beyond other possible similarities, at least four resemblances.

First, the *folkbildning* (people's education or enlightenment) tradition originated with several social movements (the Finnish independence movement, the women's movement, the temperance movement, the youth association movement, liberal and socialist workers' movements) in the late 19th century in Finland and other Nordic countries. Similarly, Freire participated in various social activities during the years of his intellectual development from the 1940s to the 1960s. In the 1940s, he was involved with political liberalism and radical Catholicism. Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, Freire participated in popular leftist cultural movements (*movimento de cultura popular*) and studied Marxism (see Mackie, 1980; Westerman, 2005; Stromquist, 2014).

Second, the pedagogical approaches employed by the two traditions are primarily experiential. As sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) noted, 'Freire's project includes an epistemological proposal for the construction and appropriation of knowledge, beginning with the

learners' existential experience. The dialogic character of education implies a conception of knowledge as co-construction' (p. 284). Likewise, in the Nordic tradition, a mentor uses the participants' life experiences for teaching and learning, fosters shared authority among the adults, and emphasizes personal, social, and civic development. Discussions and collaborations in study circles play an essential role in Nordic *folkbildning* (Rasmussen, 2013).

Third, the Nordic and Freirean traditions emphasize adult literacy. Literate adults become full members of a society and create their own political identity, as in Finland in the 19th century, where the *folkbildning* tradition was closely connected to developing a new national cultural identity. Critically literate people can be active agents of history and possess their own words; they can participate in cultural and political activities as equals and take the initiative to change the world. As Gadotti (2019) reminded us of the core idea of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 'The word is an instrument by means of which a person becomes the subject of her story' (p. 36). Critical literacy is the key not only to personal development but also to social transformation. Despite the undeniably significant differences in context, the core of emancipatory education remains remarkably similar for the Nordic 19th-century landless peasants, the poor rural *latino-americanos* of the 1960s, and the modern-day immigrants struggling for agency in a foreign land with a foreign language.

Fourth, both Nordic people's education and Freirean pedagogy use a similar teaching and learning method: study circles, or, in Freire's words, culture circles (*círculos da cultura*).⁹ A small group of people meets after work in a study circle, often late at night, to study together. 'Through exchanges of experiences, ideas, and analyses within the group, participants deepen their social, cultural, and political understanding of their environment' (Stromquist, 2014, p. 553). In Freire's cultural circles, it is essential that participants first find the thematic ground ('thematic universe') to develop their literacy and understanding of the world ('critical consciousness'). Study circles support each participant's learning and, at best, deepen the collective sense of responsibility (Allman, 2001, p. 194).

The Life Skills for All model represents a combination of these traditions in non-formal adult education. The training courses were offered to adults who faced economic, social, or other issues in their lives and focused on the links between a specific challenge and one or several basic skills or broader life skills. The participants spoke about their problems and learning needs, and project teams designed each course's theme partly based on the participants' wishes.¹⁰

The key to reinventing Freire's ideas was the project team's reinterpretation of the European Social Fund's somewhat administrative and instrumentalist original assignment through the double lenses of Freirean and Nordic non-formal adult education. These lenses changed the project's original purpose related to adults' basic skills and their teaching to a more holistic and learner-centered endeavor. Empowering individual persons and, through them, their communities became the primary goal.

To conclude, we present three factors that we believe best connect Freire's Southern educational tradition with the Northern tradition of non-formal adult education: putting the person at the center, combining different basic skills, and going local. These factors may apply in other social, political, and cultural contexts, although, as Freire (1987a) put it, 'since education is by nature social, historical, and political, there is no way we can talk about some universal, unchanging role for the teacher' (p. 211); the same holds for the training program.

Putting the person at the center

Learners participated in planning and implementing the training courses alongside the trainers. This participation meant that the learners were involved in determining the aims, contents, and methods. It also strengthened the learners' sense of agency, overall commitment to the courses, and motivation to learn. Moreover, the participants could identify their own development goals

within the boundaries of the group's theme. They not only chose their goals but also planned how to reach them. The trainer and other members of the group offered encouragement and support. The main criteria for these development goals were that the learners should choose them and that reaching the goals should be possible during the timeframe of the courses. The criteria were meant to ensure that the participants achieved concrete results and experienced doing something personally rewarding. The principle of putting the person at the center was particularly important for immigrant mothers, who are at risk of being excluded from social participation both in their community and in society at large. Freire's concept of oppression must be interpreted from the intersectional perspective to understand current forms of oppression, such as immigrant mothers' diversely disadvantaged positions (see Harmat, 2020; Suoranta, 2019).

Combining different basic skills

In the Life Skills for All model, learning took place by resolving everyday-life challenges and using various skills to solve the obstacles identified by the participants. In other words, goal-oriented activity comes first, and skills development follows. New learning is immediately applied to practical situations and in a form that supports positive change in a person's life. To bring about desired changes, adults often need to use several basic skills simultaneously. It is necessary to recognize, to reinvent Freire, that cultural and technological change has made numeracy and digital skills an essential part of today's civic literacy in addition to traditional literacy. By working toward their goals, learners may also begin to develop broader life skills or capacities, including personal and interpersonal, health, civic, financial, and environmental capacities. In addition to the participants' activities to advance their goals, the training courses included discussions with the trainers. The trainers' critical role was to identify and make explicit the skills that each person developed while working on the chosen tasks.

Going local

Learning occurs not only in training groups but also in local communities. The people organizing training course can, for example, come from a charitable organization, an adult learning institution, or a vocational college. The organizers invite local partners to participate in the planning and delivery of the course. Such partners include local authorities, charities, and other parties that can provide advice and support to a specific group of learners. In addition to contributing to the training course content, the partners can offer advice to the participants and support them in finding the next helpful course. Everyday learning environments, such as nature or urban sites, were used extensively in the training courses. Also, the social relationships formed among the learners were especially significant during the courses, as the learners developed their knowledge and skills while interacting with their peers. This collaborative environment offered experiences of companionship and recognition, thus expanding and deepening the participants' sense of community.

Conclusion

The Life Skills for All model has elicited broad public interest among Finnish educators and various organizations in non-formal adult education. Thus far, several organizations and educational institutions across Finland have adopted the model as part of their projects and training activities. An essential characteristic of the model is that it crosses the traditional administrative boundaries between social work, employment authorities, and adult education and training and

takes the adult learners' various needs into account from a holistic perspective, starting with their different life situations. Presumably, the Life Skills for All model's theoretical and practical promise is the result of its Freirean premises regarding adults as learners: the model values every person's integrity, respects everyone's autonomy, cherishes personal growth as a lifelong process, focuses on subjective well-being, responsibility for others, and the environment, and nurtures participants' interdependence.

Over the years, Freire's views have become widely diffused and intermixed with other educational philosophies and traditions, such as Nordic and European non-formal adult education and andragogy. Freire's educational ideas, as Shor (2017) stated, have 'traveled the world encouraging democratic opposition in and out of education, leaving us a treasure of ideas and practices to build from and to reinvent.' However, despite the prevalence of his ideas, it cannot be said that there is a particular Freirean paradigm; instead, there are a plethora of Freire-inspired approaches. Freire's liberatory education and philosophy of hope have strengthened and empowered many people's and citizens' movements, which have been essential in the struggle for social equality worldwide since the 1970s. The Life Skills for All model belongs to this fabric and is part of the progressive global movement to encourage and support people to participate in society and act as history makers. In line with Freire's hope that educators would not import and imitate his ideas but reinvent them (Freire, 1987b, 2014), the Life Skills for All model has refashioned some of Freire's ideas and combined them with the Nordic tradition of non-formal adult education.

Notes

1. The Life Skills for All Model development team collaborated with a total of 10 third sector and six public sector organisations in developing and piloting the model. The learners and many of the trainers were identified and recruited through the partner organisations. The eight key partner organisations were: Aurala Settlement, Association of third sector organisations in Espoo, the Federation of Finnish Enterprises' local association in Espoo, Koskela Primary School, Linnala Settlement, The Finnish Refugee Council, The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (Helsinki), and Samiedu Vocational College. The development process of the Life Skills for All model was divided into four stages: 1. November 2018–February 2019: Benchmarking and planning phase. 2. March–September 2019: Pilot phase in Espoo, Turku and Savonlinna. 3. October 2019–March 2020: Conceptualisation of the model and production of the Citizens' Curriculum in Finland website. 4. April–December 2020: Implementation, trainer training and final testing with the help of training pilots in Helsinki and Vaasa.
2. 'Non-formal education refers to participation in course-form, other than education and training leading to a qualification according to the regular education system' (https://www.stat.fi/meta/kas/non_form_koul_en.html).
3. Finland was originally a part of the kingdom of Sweden, and then ceded in 1809 to the Russian empire with a status of an autonomous grand duchy, until declaring independence in 1917. Towards the end of the 19th century, education became a political question: along with the Finnish language development, education was essential in national identity building, for women and the working class' human rights.
4. Grundtvig's contemporary and compatriot, philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his posthumously published *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* (1849) as follows: 'To be a teacher is not to say: This is the way it is, nor is it to assign lessons and the like. No, to be a teacher is truly to be the learner. Instruction begins with this, that you, the teacher, learn from the learner, place yourself in what he has understood and how he has understood it, if you yourself have not understood it previously, or that you, if you have understood it, then let him examine you, as it were, so that he can be sure that you know your lesson' (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 461).
5. *Folk high schools* (number of institutions is 76) are boarding schools type institutions providing one-year study programs on social sciences, humanities, and the arts. Folk high schools offer summer and weekend courses and arrange vocational training programs. Increasingly folk high schools have added certificate-orientated studies to their plans. *Municipal adult education centres* (also known as 'workers institutes') (177) provide non-formal or non-certificate courses on foreign language learning, arts and crafts, and music. The courses are generally evening classes and predominantly organized as study circles or short intensive courses and run by part-time subject teachers. *Study centres* (12) represent a spectrum of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political parties, and trade unions. The centres offer their member

organizations educational, cultural, and developmental services and supply financial support for these organizations' educational activities. *Physical education centres* (14) operate regionally and provide physical education and coaching for young and adult amateur and professional athletes. Some of them also give vocational training for physical education. *Summer universities* (20) organize courses in cities and smaller towns across the country throughout the year. Collaborating with Finnish universities, summer universities enhance peoples' personal and professional development. Their short-term courses are not degree programs but are open to everyone regardless of age or prior education. See more: Country Report on Adult Education in Finland, 2011; <https://kansalaisopistot.fi/kielet/english/>; <https://www.opintokeskukset.fi/english/study-centres/>; <https://www.urheiluoopistot.fi/eng/>; <https://www.kesayliopistot.fi/summer-universities-in-finland/>

6. The Life Skills for All Model development team collaborated with a total of 10 third sector and six public sector organisations in developing and piloting the model. The learners and many of the trainers were identified and recruited through the partner organisations. The eight key partner organisations were: Aurala Settlement, Association of third sector organisations in Espoo, the Federation of Finnish Enterprises' local association in Espoo, Koskela Primary School, Linnala Settlement, The Finnish Refugee Council, The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare (Helsinki), and Samiedu Vocational College.
7. 'Agronomists, agriculturists, public health officials, cooperative administrators, literacy educators—we all have a lot to learn from peasants, and if we refuse to do so, we can't teach them anything' (Freire, 1985, p. 25).
8. In Finland, as in other Nordic countries (and Estonia), people have large freedom to roam rights (or every person's rights) guaranteed by the law (Tuunanen et al., 2015).
9. Freire invented the idea of culture circles when he once saw how *Movimento da Cultura Popular* (MCP) organized street events where ordinary people viewed Brazilian films, theater, music, and regional culture, and afterwards discussed with local artists, producers, and intellectuals. Freire thought that these dialogues were a suitable way to organize adult education, and eventually literacy campaigns (Lownds, 2019).
10. In the Spring 2020 Covid-19 pandemic changed rapidly the educational sectors' working conditions including non-formal adult education. In Finland many folk high schools, municipal adult education centres, and sport education centres were forced to lockdown, and study centres, and summer universities had to cancel their courses. The developers and trainers in the Life Skills for All model also had to adapt to the changed circumstances and organize part of the training sessions online.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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