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STORIES OF ALPHABETISATION[1], STORIES OF EVERYDAY CITIZENSHIP

Abstract
This article studies the notion of everyday citizenship, understood as episodes repeating themselves from 'event' to 'practice', by journeying into several sites of adult migrants' literacy education in contemporary Finland in a storytelling format. Its primary focus lies on the politics of gender in literacy classrooms and the informal sites of literacy learning. It also seeks to develop a method of writing about social change in a politically loaded context which has caused the 'field' of literacy education to remain silent to wider society about its everyday practices.

Keywords
Literacy • Citizenship events • Gender • Integration • Narratives

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This article aims to problematise the notion of literacy in a context where the arrival of so-called illiterates – as they are dubbed by key institutions – challenges everyday practices in Finnish society. Living in an information society demands literacy in myriad ways, ranging from the use of ATMs to form-filling. Following 19th-century nationalist struggles for universal education and the right to literacy in one's mother tongue, Finland has now arrived at a critical juncture, and both friends and critics of current multicultural policies are beginning to debate the question. Could we arrive at new understandings of social relations or political action by interacting with people who have difficulties in reading and writing? How could a theoretical view of citizenship from the perspective of everyday events help in this?

Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, but in practice bilingualism only occurs in cultural pockets around the capital and the west coast. The concept of the 'mother tongue' has emotional connotations for both language groups. Despite official bilingualism, Finland's educational system has been built around the illusion of monoculture and an essentialised 'mother tongue'.

The monocultural model of literacy learning and teaching is no longer valid at any level of the educational system. Schools in urban areas are now genuinely multicultural, and the curriculum has to cater to the needs of second-language speakers. In addition, thousands of newly arrived adult migrants now spend their days in state-sponsored classrooms learning to read and write in Finnish or Swedish, and illiteracy has become a hot topic in work with migrants. One social worker, when asked about her clients, produced a broad analysis of the current situation of 'illiterates':

> Illiterate people, they're a manifold group as well. There are older people, but also very young ones. And then they have different starting points, different motivations, desires and abilities to learn. (...) They're a rather big group, all the time during these years, (...) on the one hand, it is a matter of concern and worry, because you notice that a large number of people, they just don't move on with their lives, not even after several years. So they can't have any opportunities in a society like this to manage on their own – they almost certainly remain long-term clients of social welfare. It isn't so easy to find a job or anything, so how do they support themselves if they lack these kinds of basic skills in our IT society?

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This diagnosis is pessimistic. It emphasises the virtue of managing on one's own and the demands of IT society. For the social worker, it seems difficult to envisage a worthwhile life as an adult citizen with low literacy skills. It is easy to share her worries, but the totalisation of her analysis is striking. 'Illiteracy', expressed as a fundamental lack, is a categorisation imposed from above. In the context of migration, this status is commonly given to those who are literate in a script other than the Western alphabet, as well as to those who are unschooled. Like Blommaert, Creve and Willaert (2006) in their work on Dutch-language classes in Belgium, we have paid attention to moments of 'language-ideological disqualification'.

1 Literacy education in integration policies

The education of adults with difficulties in reading and writing is organised as part of official integration measures for newly arrived migrants. Language education, education about Finnish society and culture, and preparatory courses for the labour market are social rights for migrants. Participation in these brings entitlement to financial support. In principle, the Constitution and the Act on the Promotion of Integration give a solid basis for inclusive policies. Migrants with a residence permit have the same social rights as citizens. In the Nordic countries in general, it is harder to get a residence permit than in many other European countries, but thereafter one's rights are stronger (Brochmann & Hagelund 2011). Formal citizenship means gaining only a new passport and the vote. At the policy level, the Finnish model for migrants' integration is more 'multicultural' than 'universalist', the inspiration being drawn from Sweden, UK and Canada (Koenis & Saukkonen 2006; Parekh 2006; Modood 2007).

Integration education for migrants – the core issue in integration policies – is mostly organised by public educational institutions, taught by trained staff and financed by taxes. Courses are usually full-time, and during the first three years the average migrant gets 10–12 months of language and citizenship education. Some full-time courses are designed especially for people classified as illiterate. However, for people 'outside the labour market' – that is, elderly people, the disabled and stay-at-home mothers – courses are mostly organised as part-time classes, on a voluntary basis at NGO's, or as other short-term projects. Some teachers are professionals, others volunteers. Our data deals with both.

Because of our data sets and the problematic of (il)literacy, the figure of the migrant in our analysis has a strong connotation of refugees. At the time of our fieldwork, the Act of Integration granted rights to integration measures only to a limited group: labour migrants, students and most foreign-born spouses were excluded. In 2011 the right to integration measures was widened, at least in principle.

Although poor schooling is a bigger problem in third-world countries than in the 'western world', all kinds of people can have literacy problems. According to Unesco, one sixth of the world's population and one fifth of women were 'illiterate' in 2000's (Unesco 2010). An estimated 20% of European youth have insufficient reading and writing skills to be able to manage on the labour market. In Finland, in 2006 it was estimated that 1,200–1,500 people of migrant background were illiterate (Opetushallitus 2006; the total number of foreign nationals at the time was about 120,000).

2 Theory: everyday literacy and citizenship events

Fabian (1993) reminds us of the embodied dimension of literacy. Paying attention to voices, bodies and concrete situations allows us to 'keep listening to writing, while writing'. We are indebted to Barton's (1994: 35) concept of the literacy event: 'Our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards which the present is built upon. We change, and as children and adults we are constantly learning about literacy'. Barton built this concept around the notion of speech events presented by Anderson, Teale and Estrada (1980) in their study of early literacy. It encompasses all 'attempts to comprehend graphic signs'.

Street (1988) makes a distinction between literacy events and literacy practices. An event can be identified as a single episode in an individual's or group's life, although it may consist of repetitions; a literacy practice is a consequence of many literacy events with wider social meanings. In the stories discussed below, we identify a repetition of events moving towards becoming a practice. We find individuals developing practices of their own, and other practices offered to them by institutions.

Barton shifts the idea of the literacy event towards an ecological understanding: he emphasises the social-historical aspect of all literacy learning. 'Ecology' means that every library, street corner and community college may contribute to people's stories. Literacies are local, and often supportable by local political will (Barton 1994). The concept is helpful for deconstructing ideas about the 'proper' time and place for learning: it enables us to look at literacy from a lifelong perspective, at moments of self-discovery and transgression, and at informal sites of learning.

The idea of a literacy event can be extended to citizenship education – the process of becoming citizens, particularly in the context of migration when citizenship is not a birthright. Why not study integration processes from the same ethnographic perspectives as sociolinguists have studied literacy teaching and learning? What will happen if the two processes are analysed together?

By using the concept of everyday citizenship, we stress the cultural and social aspects of membership of larger society, and horizontal relations rather than 'big democracy' (cf. Skjeie & Siim 2000: 346). Besides civil, political and social rights and responsibilities (Marshall 1950), citizenship is often conceptualised today in relation to social participation and belonging (e.g. Kivisto & Faist 2007). This has helped feminist scholars to analyse gendered and racialised inclusions and exclusions, both in policy and from the viewpoint of

women's (and men's) lives (Werbner & Yuval-Davis 1999; Lister 2003; Lewis 2005; Phillips 2007; Lister *et al*. 2007; Keskinen & Vuori 2012). Everyday citizenship frames citizenship as practices and doings (Hermes & Dahlgren 2006).

3 Methodology: telling stories

In this article we tell episodic stories from our ethnographic fieldwork. In the following analysis we try to remain as close to the observations as possible, and therefore employ the first person narrator, the observing and analysing 'I', even when the analyses are shared.

Our observations are mainly from large adult education centres, NGO spaces and meetings between social workers and their migrant clients. Other data, interviews and diverse texts around integration policies and integration work serve as background material.

Jaana Vuori's data was gathered during 2003–2005. She interviewed 21 professionals: social workers, healthcare professionals, interpreters and municipal administrators who work with migrant clients on a daily basis. In addition, she carried out non-participant observation in social work as well as participant observation in an NGO setting and in some informative meetings.

Anu Hirsiaho's data was collected in 2005–2008 at Finnish language classes in adult education centres and NGOs. She was mainly engaged in participant observation in the everyday life of these localities, occasionally also working as a volunteer teacher.[2]

Our methodological approach is inspired by ethnography. As Malkki (2007: 164) puts it, ethnography is always simultaneously a critical theoretical practice, a quotidian ethical practice and an improvisational practice, as well as a genre of writing and a practice of representation (also Clifford & Marcus 1986). The representational 'device' employed here is telling stories, an experiment with narrative form. This is inspired by narrative analysis (e.g. Huttunen 2002; Järviluoma & Vilkko 2004: 46–68; Hyvärinen 2008), but perhaps cannot be defined as such. The narratives told here are ours, and were not told nor even commented on by our informants.

Writing our stories as stories enables us to reproduce the emotional landscape of the situations as we remember them. Whether we like it or not, we become advocates for some of the people encountered; we are obliged to choose a point of view that may not be equally beneficial to all parties involved. All parties are vulnerable, as Ruth Behar (1996) would argue, and increasingly our ethnographies seek a balance between the roles of researcher, advocate, witness and activist (cf. Sandford & Angel-Ajani 2006).

There are no objective stories, but there can be stories of ambivalent moments when the choice of sides is unclear from the beginning to the end. The reader can also choose different positions from those of the teller. In retelling these stories, we are actively involved in the politics of time. We have returned to the stories with the benefit of hindsight, and rewritten them several times. Our later experiences have pasted layers onto the hasty sketches they once were. We tell stories of social change, being ourselves immersed in that change.

We cannot fully explain just why we have chosen these events from the many others. We hope that they mediate both the critical and the positive sides of learning and teaching. The first two stories are from the more institutional side of learning, from language classes organised as integration courses. The last three are from diverse situations where illiteracy is talked about and lived in encounters between newly arrived migrants, professionals and NGO activists. How do these events help or hinder migrants' sense of belonging and their skills and desires for participation?

4 Episodes of institutional learning

The following two stories show the juxtaposition between less and more formal sites of learning. Our observations took place within a couple of years in the mid-2000s in the same city. Since then, literacy course provision has improved remarkably throughout Finland. However, literacy is still a central concern in migrant integration work.

4.1 No special arrangements

I was conducting participant observation in a Finnish class in an NGO space. The class is funded by employment authorities and organised by a local adult education institution. It had been promised that students with approximately the same level of education would be directed onto the course. The organisers' previous experience had been that students were very heterogeneous and their abilities to commit themselves to a year's study varied widely according to their family situations.

Therefore it came as a surprise to the teacher that two students she classified as 'illiterate' came to class. Annoyed, she told me that she could not teach the others properly if she was going to have to pay attention to them. She said, 'I'm not making any special arrangements for them. I'll skip them if they don't understand.'

In the next lesson she did as she had promised, skipping their turn to answer. The students clearly understood that they did not belong on the course like the others. I sat between them during a couple of lessons and tried to help as much as I could. They were very silent; they had no Finnish words to use.

However, I noticed that at least one of them could write very well, both in the Western alphabet and in that of her own language, because she made notes actively. She also tried to follow in the book when the teacher was reading aloud. It might be that the other student did not read or write fluently, or that

she was in practice 'illiterate', although she also tried to follow the reading aloud with her finger.

To my knowledge the teacher did not talk to them, and the second student soon stopped coming to classes, perhaps because of her pregnancy. The only direct verbal communication in the class was mediated by a third party: a well-educated student with fluent Finnish who had migrated from the same country sometimes explained things to the young women.

The teacher spoke of the two women to me as 'girls'.

The situation was unjust, not only to the class, but to the teacher as well. Yet her reaction annoys me even several years later. She seemed to have no option but to cut these students out so to be able to help the others to progress. The group was big, and it was not possible to reorganise the classroom to suit the two students. Still, the problem was not addressed in other terms than 'the illiterate migrant women'. The students were blamed, rather than the officials who had directed them onto the course.

Was no other class available at the time? Apparently not. But these two women became victims of at least two kinds of structural discrimination: they did not get the help they obviously needed, and they were directed to the wrong place in order to hide this obvious failure. I do not know whether the various professionals ever discussed the situation.

Another observation from this episode is that even a Finnish-language teacher might interpret a lack of basic Finnish skills, as well as limited schooling as 'illiteracy'. Problems with basic skills in both Finnish and one's own language merge into a single problem.

I also wonder whether the shared ethnic background led the teacher to lump these students together in the same problem category. Their dress and behaviour spoke of their attachment to Islam. They were both newly arrived wives. Although we know that problems in everyday literacy do not concern only women, people from the Muslim world or people of a certain age, these students were forced to represent our imaginary of illiterate, poor housewives from third-world traditional communities.

'No special arrangements' can be read at two levels, both troublesome. At the interpersonal level, it is a story of unlistening, dismissal and pedagogical failure. It was a women-only course, and the teacher could have employed her gender identity as a tool for cross-cultural identification, but the best she could think of was to call these adult women 'girls'. In the Finnish language, 'girling' is not always intended as patronising but unfortunately often becomes so.

Even more troublesome is the structural level. The story tells of hastily planned education, for which no party was willing to take responsibility. In Finland, such atomisation of adult education happens frequently: a course is financed by the employment office and put out to tender. The winning educational body organises it, but not necessarily on its own premises. Too much responsibility is placed on a single teacher. She is left alone to make crucial decisions which in more stable institutional settings would be made with colleagues.

The widespread view has recently been that those classified as 'illiterate' can only attend special education, and cannot be integrated into a so-called normal classroom where texts are used. In 2006 the Ministry of Education made a nationwide recommendation for a curriculum for 'adult illiterates of migrant origin' (Opetushallitus 2006). Like the social worker quoted earlier, the document offers a nuanced understanding of different student groups' life situations, but still uses the notion of 'illiteracy' prescriptively.

Faced with even a single student diagnosed as 'illiterate', many teachers feel helpless. Fortunately, as a later example will show, some teachers practise another kind of pedagogy in which reading and writing skills do not automatically compartmentalise people into castes.

In the next story, a group has been selected for an 'alphabet workshop', or 'zero-level Finnish', in a large adult education centre. 'Zero-level' means basic skills education, including basic Finnish language and/or the Western alphabet. In the common European framework, migrants' language skills are assessed on a scale of 0 to 5. Currently, migrants resident in Finland have to pass Level 3 in the Finnish or Swedish language test in order to be considered eligible for formal citizenship.

The resources for organising such education are more generous than in NGOs; the teachers often have a stronger professional identity and receive a monthly salary instead of hourly wages.

Not all students are struggling primarily with literacy – some are just newcomers, or in a demanding life situation that does not allow them to take a vocational course. Some move on to the next level within weeks; others bounce back to the alphabet workshop from other courses. It is not possible to diagnose anyone's literacy in a single interview. Misdiagnoses are common.

In the alphabet workshop, everyday skills are emphasised. Hands-on methods are used, and the need for individual tailoring is recognised. On this course, no one is considered to be lower in skills than the others; everyone is allowed to proceed at their own pace. However, the slow pace and repetitiveness may cause some students, and occasional visiting scholars, moments of doubt and discomfort.

4.2 Does anyone know what day it is?

This autumn I have become a schoolgirl again. In whose class shall I sit today? What tasks will they assign me? I go wherever necessary, and everywhere I sense that more is needed from me than I can offer. 'I spell with you, therefore I exist.' During the day, a promotion: the students call me 'teacher'. Schoolgirlishness wears off. I start paying closer attention to my movements, to pronunciation, asking whether my habitus transmits teacherly authority.

The day usually begins with updating the calendar. We look at days, months, years. We try to remind ourselves whether we need to be somewhere else in the afternoon. There are visits to museums, exhibitions and multicultural events somewhere far away.

We look out of the window. If the Finnish flag is flying, the teacher asks: Does anyone know what day it is today?

It is usually a minor celebration, as there's no school on big national holidays. But who really cares about Aleksis Kivi Day, or UN Day? Once a progressive substitute teacher even introduced World AIDS Day. Not all days are nationalist.

Often the question is asked on an ordinary Thursday, as we need to practise numbers. 'No, Hamid, not 28, but 28th. A little difference in pronunciation. Try it. Now, that's better.'

I've been to day-care centres and old people's homes; I know this pedagogical strategy by heart. It's for those who cannot yet remember, and for those who have forgotten. Adulthood should be located between these stages; an adult is considered to be a person literate enough to consult their own calendar for important days.

Keep it simple. Activate the memory. Repetition is the key pedagogical notion: if it was Aleksis Kivi Day today, the following day the teacher will ask whether anyone remembers what day it was the day before.

Our days roll on. I'm torn between acceptance and vocal intervention.

Frustration has been brewing, but it has not yet boiled over. I'm waiting for a student to intervene. The intervention never materialises.

Sometimes, when asked the all-important question, the students introduce their own important days. If someone has an appointment at the welfare office in the afternoon, this is a suitable point to ask for permission to leave. Sometimes we hear something personal, like: 'Today's my missing son's birthday. I haven't seen him for a decade and there's no knowledge of his whereabouts.' There must be some level of trust between the students and teachers for such announcements to be made. She wouldn't tell this to every passer-by. In general, the class expresses solidarity by remaining silent.

There was not enough time or space to discuss notions of adulthood with the staff or students, although this seemed like a question 'bubbling under' that people were trying to ask. Sometimes the question about days was asked in an infantilising manner, sometimes it was an intelligible question, inviting students to think about their orientation in a new culture. It was not so much the question itself, but the tone of voice with which it was asked, and the context in which it was placed, that mattered. Secretly I called the place the adult day-care centre, but could not express my concerns on the spot.

After all, the teachers were generous about including me in their classes. At breaks they engaged in storytelling about their careers and the problems they had tried to solve over the years. As a visitor, ethnographer and apprentice teacher, I had not yet gained a position to criticise a module the teachers had been developing for years. They seemed to have well-grounded justifications for all activities; a level of self-reflection was present, although the time and space for it were limited. The job of adult literacy educator seemed to me one of the most demanding I had ever encountered.

Despite occasional moments of frustration, clearly something positive was happening to most students in the alphabet workshop. Most showed up daily. Attending the course gave them a sense of purpose, a pace, a social life that allowed them to get to know people from other cultures. They liked to narrate their Finnish lives according to course-related milestones. Being unemployed was usually felt to be more demanding than studying.

5 Beyond classrooms: stories of independent learning

Next we move from classrooms to places of informal and self-organised learning. Beyond classrooms, most adult migrants are faced with situations in which other professionals are literacy tutors. We are interested in events beyond the courses proper, in the students' own assessments of their literacy skills, and in their negotiations towards more autonomy as managers of everyday life and future citizens.

5.1 Don't ask me why

I'm sitting in the corner of an office, observing. The benefit assessor (a lower-status social worker dealing with the routine tasks of welfare benefits) is a middle-aged woman. I'm observing the meeting between her, a younger and a somewhat less experienced female social worker, and a young adult man from a Middle Eastern country who has recently acquired his residence permit. An interpreter is also there. Although he is almost invisible in this story, he's an important person because he's mediating not only the client's words but also the tone of his speech. The social worker is there because the client has had trouble dealing with his matters. The workers are expecting a difficult meeting.

After the greetings the social worker goes straight to the problem, pointing out that the client has not paid his rent in three months. 'Why?' she asks. The client replies with some irritation, 'Don't know,' and starts to tell about his finances and how he did not understand his bank balance. The benefit assessor clarifies the background and tries to change the atmosphere by talking about the complicatedness of things, and by suggesting that professionals also have some responsibility to solve problems with the client. She remembers that a Finnish language teacher had helped the client to fill in the housing allowance form, and that it took a while for her and others in the welfare office to notice that there was one tick missing. The client takes the point and says that he has spent the money because he did not know: 'I cannot read and write, I did not understand the markings.'

The benefit assessor says that in future the client should fill in all the necessary papers 'here with me', and she repeats the offer several times so that the client definitely understands, and so that she'll have enough time and opportunities to help the client before things get messy again. This is a regular way of working in this office, where all the clients are rather newly arrived migrant residents.

In this conflict-ridden meeting, the client tries several times to use the remark that he 'cannot read and write' as a shortcut to avoid responsibility for his own finances. He also repeatedly says that it is others who have made the mistakes, the various people (e.g. employer, tutor) who helped with his papers. The benefit assessor does not take this at face value; instead, she repeats the different opportunities provided for the client to understand his responsibilities and make appropriate use of the help of professionals. She usually makes her attitude clear subtly. Sometimes she uses tougher words: 'They are your things, you have to look at the papers yourself.'

In the end, the social worker, the benefit assessor and the client make a payment arrangement over the phone with a clerk at a collection office. They also agree to proceed with the client's other acute problems. For the time being, the solution is to keep actively in contact with the welfare office. The real challenge for the benefit assessor and her colleagues is to push him to take charge of his own life.

The benefit assessor tells her younger colleague afterwards that it was a mistake to directly ask 'Why?', because it provoked a need to explain things away. The question prompted the client to repeated expressions of anger: 'Don't ask me why such and such but tell me how much I'm in debt so I'll pay it'. The benefit assessor and social worker didn't only want to tell him the sum, but they wanted to get a wider picture of his situation.

In light of interviews, unofficial discussions and observations in the welfare office, I find that the work of the lower-status professionals – the benefit assessors and tutors – strongly involves promoting their clients' everyday citizenship by guiding them in basic everyday skills. This dimension often remains unnoticed because the assumption is that they deal with the easier sides of social work, routine bureaucratic tasks and everyday problems that anybody could give advice on.

The benefit assessor tells me afterwards that she is content that the client has told her about his literacy problems, which is not so easy, especially for young males. But the core of the problem is not exclusively the client's literacy and educational gaps, but also his attitude as a nearly settled migrant and a young man. As middle-aged women, the benefit assessors consciously take the position of (professional) mother-figures for younger males. For the social workers, most of whom are women, such a standpoint is more complicated, because they have the formal role of making official decisions, and therefore they have to keep up a professional persona more strictly than their lower-level counterparts.

The benefit assessor finds that her key task is not only to tutor the clients in the bureaucratic twists of an advanced welfare system, nor only to prevent major social problems, but also to guide their attitudes as citizens. To manage this task, she takes into account the client's masculinity, and tries not to challenge it too directly. That is why she cautiously advises her younger colleague not to ask too straightforward whys.

The young man in the story is skilful in using his institutionally acknowledged status as 'illiterate' to shift responsibility for his affairs onto the professionals. The role of Finnish-language teachers becomes evident here: they often end up filling in forms and writing letters for their students after hours. This kindness may have negative effects in their students' lives. The benefit assessor tries to convince the young man to turn to her for paperwork, instead of to the teacher who may not know all the details of the welfare system.

The pedagogical scene here is more robust than in classroom situations: the pressing financial situation forces the benefit assessor to take the lead and make the young man come to terms with his own agency. He cannot be allowed too much time to learn to pay his rent, an issue clearly not beyond his comprehension. In such situations, it is possible to deconstruct the easy assumptions about 'illiteracy' internalised by clients and students, and to make them aware of how much they already know and understand.

Next, we move to situations of self-organised learning. We are interested in the students' own assessments of their literacy skills, and in their negotiations towards more autonomy as students, managers of their everyday lives and future citizens.

5.2 Handwriting

At the premises of an inner-city NGO, some 100 women students attend weekly Finnish classes. Some are students waiting to be admitted to a full-time government-run course; others cannot study full-time, or are new arrivals whose paperwork is not ready yet. Everyone is welcome to join the classes anytime. There are no course fees.

Here the policy on literacy skills is clear. There is no separate group for students with low literacy skills, but their needs are met on an individual basis. Although some women have learnt to read and write here, they still need the support of the teacher for longer written assignments. When they practise vocabulary, pictures are used so that everyone can join in the oral exercises. There are exercises at two levels: at the first level, it is enough to recognise a word, at the second level one can elaborate sentences. The students can choose how far to go with writing. Students collaborate during lessons, especially when spelling new words.

'We don't want a separate class in which the alphabet is just being copied into exercise books. We find it unsuitable for adults' needs. All newcomers have some shared basic needs. All have to understand how this system works. It's better not to make literacy, or the lack of it, an issue dividing people,' says one of the teachers.

The teachers feel literacy is something the students can address themselves – a matter of trust. They interrupt when they don't understand, when the lessons proceed too quickly or are too difficult.

Last year a group of 'regular women' who could not study full-time because of childcare duties voluntarily stayed after class to practise handwriting. They felt a need to improve their handwriting, so that when they signed papers in offices it would look like an adult's signature. It's important for them to be treated as sensible adults in public places. And when helping their kids with homework, they wanted to know what kind of handwriting was appropriate. 'So we had a self-organised signature group, and we thought it was just great,' said the teacher.

In 'Handwriting' and the next story something important has happened to the students. They have realised that they can become experts on their own learning, no matter how modest the goals. Their own initiatives and persistence have transformed their role as passive receivers of knowledge into that of managers of their own everyday lives.

5.3 Dictionary

Mariama is a middle-aged mother of six from a war zone. She's lived in Finland for six years. I first meet her in the adult education centre, where she's studying Finnish in the basic skills workshop for the third time. Throughout her course career she's suffered from severe headaches. Tests have been made, but there's still no name for her illness. She's been absent for a long time from each course. This is why she starts the same course at the same basic level every year.

Her health problem affects her reading and writing. She speaks basic Finnish comprehensibly but, when faced with text, she freezes. She's able to read words mechanically and transcribe them into her notebook, but it's difficult for her to connect the written words with the spoken language. She constantly requires someone, usually the teacher or her assistant, to confirm that the words she reads aloud correspond to what she sees. It's a self-confidence problem, somehow connected to her eyesight. When faced with text, she feels dizzy. Many pairs of glasses have been tested, specialists consulted, but nothing helps.

So how does Mariama learn best? Curiously, she's quite relaxed at the computer. It is easier for her to use the mouse than the pen. And she likes to read an illustrated dictionary, Aamu, which many students find too childish. On the computer, there is a simple vocabulary game connecting pictures and words. During breaks, she finds her way to the computer. There she takes a piece of paper and faithfully writes down the words she has identified so far.

A year and a half has passed. I meet Mariama again on the premises of an NGO where she has come to do work experience for two months. In other words, she has moved on to employment-oriented courses, where the students only spend half of their time 'at school' in the adult education centre. She remembers me happily, calling me teacher, although I was just assisting on her course twice a week.

At the NGO she attends all the meetings and is given the same tasks as others, mainly cleaning and cooking. Mariama is supposed to report on her activities in a workbook prepared by her teacher. When she is done with the pots and pans, she withdraws with her paperwork to the back of the living room. The papers are important to her, a part of her daily routine. Her children often sit with her, and they read the questions together. 'How did you participate in the meetings?' 'Did you

have an opportunity to speak Finnish with your workmates?' 'How would you describe the workplace atmosphere?'

Mariama still needs assistance to form sentences, but she seems more confident about her status as a 'proper' student rather than someone permanently stuck in the basic skills workshop. She knows her opportunities for employment outside the NGO-supported cycle of work experience are weak, but the courses give her a sense of importance.

Every day she writes down new Finnish words with the help of others in a thick notebook, which is almost full by now. She also writes down their mother tongue meanings in the Latin alphabet. It is her own transcription, as she has never learnt to read and write in her own language.

The notebook is her 'own dictionary'. She started filling it in last year and likes to show it to others. It has already followed her from one course to another and through two work experience placements. It is her document of alphabetisation. She is able to assess her own progress: 'Look how bad my handwriting was, now I'm much better.'

She has prepared the dictionary voluntarily, it's not a formal assignment given by a teacher. Working out her own method gives her a feeling of strength, a feeling of making it her own way. She can write down words anywhere. Her studies are no longer tied to the teacher or the portfolio provided by the course centre.

The handwriting group's wish to be treated as adults in public places is an everyday concern, an issue of being recognised as a prospective citizen. They have repeatedly seen other adults behaving confidently at service points; they wish to reach the same level of street-smarts. The social stigma of 'illiteracy' bothers them, even when their literacy skills have already been acknowledged as good enough for everyday survival.

Both narratives show tiny indicators of integration which are often missed in studies of multicultural policies. Mariama's long-term 'course citizenship' may sound depressing from a mainstream, northern European, work-oriented understanding of the good life, but as a narrative of everyday citizenship, it demonstrates her agency, expressed with confidence and determination.

The women in both stories have acquired an ability to assess their own learning. Giving words to one's own learning process resembles the Freirean idea of conscientisation, in which students achieve a critical awareness of the conditions of their learning through an appreciation of their own keywords (Freire 1971). The handwriting group organised itself after formal lessons; Mariama began to write her dictionary as a side project when she could not understand the materials provided by the course centre.

These are the empowering moments upon which literacy classrooms depend. Without such glimpses of hope, there would not be an emerging profession of literacy education or basic skills teaching in Finland.

6 Politics of gender in migrant classrooms

In Nordic multicultural work, cultural sensitivity around gender questions often contradicts the surrounding rhetoric of gender equality (Keskinen *et al*. 2009). In bigger cities, many projects cater for migrant women and girls. Sometimes government-sponsored education is also organised for women in gender-segregated spaces. Tuori (2009) has pointed out the peculiar nationalist twist of such efforts: migrant women are often portrayed as exotic 'colour' added to an otherwise fixed gender-equality matrix. They become the multicultural nation's new cooks, expected to adjust the recipes for gender equality to their own specific cultural circumstances.

Men are often left out of such invitations. There are very few specially tailored educational or social projects for migrant boys or men in Finland. It is assumed that men and boys from certain cultures automatically inhabit a public role as family spokesmen and therefore do not require any further support to become citizens (Kianto 2009; Honkasalo 2011). Our story 'Don't ask me why' also reveals this gap: this was a young man who could only rely on his teacher and employer for everyday problems, whereas the women we encountered had more support from one another and the local multicultural women's centre.

The logic of women-only space rests on the idea of security: it has been thought that to reach women from 'conservative cultures', one has to provide a space where they can slowly adjust to a mainstream culture where men and women mix socially.

We have found no dramatic differences in the ways men and women learn to read and write or to manage their everyday paperwork. Neither did we observe major problems in the organisation of co-educational literacy classes: the teachers dealt skilfully with emerging gender conflicts, and gender was used as an analytical tool. However, it is problematic if women from certain cultures are automatically sent to gender-segregated courses, or that they are classified as 'illiterate' because of their visible symbols of culture.

The Nordic welfare state is celebrated as 'woman-friendly' (Hernes 1987). In the case of migrant integration, woman-friendliness is often ambivalent: special gendered services may sometimes undermine their own good intentions. There are no guarantees for better learning of literacy or language in women-only spaces. As we found in our stories, education provided by NGOs can provide more space for improvisation, but it can also work as a site for exclusion. In current circumstances, NGO-run education is a necessity for some groups who cannot attend government-sponsored courses, and is a conscious choice for others. The fact that there are alternatives to the government-run courses is already a message about multicultural

diversity, an acknowledgment that one model of education does not suit all.

In Finland, it is easier to conceptualise gendered citizenship as such than multicultural citizenship in which gender is only one dimension of analysis. It is easier to offer certain groups of people privileges according to gender than to rethink the whole kaleidoscope of intersecting differences. Gender equality is often the first message that migrants receive about Finnish society, and adult educators seem more confident in discussing simple gender issues (e.g. the division of housework between spouses, parental leave or equal pay) than ethnocultural differences with which gender is intertwined. The long tradition of seeing gender as a 'women's issue' can be found everywhere in Finnish migrant policies and everyday practices. It is also looked at as an issue especially concerning women in 'vulnerable positions' such as long-term stay-at-home mothers, wives married to Finnish men, or sex workers (e.g. Sisäasiainministeriö 2010). There is an increase in more nuanced research on gendered migration in Finland, but these analyses do not seem to inform popular discussions of migrant women's and men's situations (e.g. Tiilikainen 2003; Hautaniemi 2004; Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2007; Tuori 2009; Keskinen, Vuori & Hirsiaho 2012).

Our stories, however, suggest that at the level of everyday practice, Finnish institutions are more flexible towards intersecting differences than is documented on paper, for instance, in integration policy or the curriculum for adult literacy education. Individual teachers and other professionals are relatively free to develop practices that depart from normative behaviour or ethnolinguistic nationalism.

7 Everyday citizenship as negotiation

We call our stories 'stories of alphabetisation', instead of stories of arrival at literacy. Most people we encountered were already literate in their own way before their first language class. If Finnish adult educators and social workers were to see the Western alphabet as anthropologically particular and historically situated, it would be more difficult to categorise people who use different scripts as 'illiterate'. Alphabetisation is a more precise name than literacy education for events in the zero-level Finnish language classroom. Literacy education, on the other hand, is a broader umbrella concept which starts where alphabetisation ends: it widens our understanding of literacy, from the functional and technical towards social and political meaning-making.

Few newcomers to Finland are completely unschooled; rather, there are people with an interrupted education, a background of trauma or common learning disabilities. In a cross-cultural context, relying on interpreters, it is difficult to diagnose the causes of someone's 'illiteracy'. In this article we question the need for such institutional diagnoses by suggesting ways to rid ourselves of too much textual determination. A pedagogy that takes students seriously as adults capable of giving words to their own ways of knowing would not begin with an institutional categorisation from above.

Linda Brodkey (1996: 3) calls literacy 'a trope of desire for political equity', not because literacy can be liberating as such, but as a historical reminder of possible inclusion. Literacy does not automatically protect people from social exclusion, but it can be presented as desirable. When it is presented as a set of everyday practices rather than as a set of competencies, there is an opportunity to dispense with the idea that it is something that 'we' have and 'they' need to learn.

Before gaining citizenship proper, migrants inhabit a zone of liminal belonging. Many migrants, however, actively engage in everyday events that may increase their feeling of inclusion.

In Finland one must be sufficiently literate to pass a written language exam before applying for formal citizenship. What happens before acquiring a passport is often thicker in meaning, and more formative in terms of people's futures, than the passport itself. We are on the lookout for local variations on the notion of 'thick citizenship' (Ohmann 1999; Williams & Graham 2003; Sadiq 2008) in the interaction between those who already hold a passport and those who do not. Understood as community membership, 'thick citizenship' may mean simple, mundane things.

The fieldwork opened our eyes to the complexity of negotiations around the concepts of literacy, adulthood, subjectivity, skills, rights, responsibilities and duties that take place in adult education and social-work settings for newly arrived migrants. This article mainly focused on the sociocultural aspects of such negotiations, but we believe they have more political leverage than might first appear. The key notion here is recognition: being taken seriously as an adult member of society with one's own personal and cultural identity, being respected as someone able to contribute to society.

Both literacy and citizenship can be seen as a series of everyday events whose nature keeps changing during the life course, from one political system to another, from war zones to relative stability, from countries of origin to countries of living.

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Notes

1. By 'alphabetisation', we refer to the Francophone meaning of 'bringing people to literacy' rather than the English dictionary definition of 'putting things in an alphabetical order'. As second language speakers, we take liberties to play with the English language, and the creative use of the term 'alphabetisation' seems here most fitting to describe the phenomenon studied.
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