

Member education in three Finnish parliamentary parties: Analysing the purposes and preconditions through the lens of practice architectures

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Abstract

This study investigates the purposes and corresponding preconditions of member education practices in three Finnish political parties using the theory of practice architectures. To accomplish this, it examines the educational endeavours of three Finnish parliamentary parties—namely, the Centre Party of Finland (Suomen Keskusta), the National Coalition Party (Kansallinen Kokoomus) and the Social Democratic Party of Finland (Suomen sosiaalidemokraattinen puolue). The study draws on the theory of practice architectures, which provides a framework for examining the arrangements comprising the preconditions underlying practices—that is, purposeful endeavours based on established human courses of action. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows. What are the main purposes of education within the studied political parties? What preconditions enable or constrain the educational practices related to those purposes? The findings reveal that the Centre Party of Finland aims to foster expertise among its entire membership in a consistent and impactful manner, emphasising educational planning and supporting political ambition. Moreover, the National Coalition Party’s political education aims to foster members’ expertise and success, as supported by individualisation, while the Social Democratic Party of Finland’s party-political education focuses on engaging members and renewing the party, which are pursued through offering open educational opportunities and considering both local preconditions and historical knowledge. In conclusion, the identified purposes seek a balance between ensuring equality and supporting hierarchy among the party membership, while the identified preconditions indicate understandings of the political party as either a collective actor or an arena in which individual political actors operate.

Keywords: political parties, party-political education, theory of practice architectures

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Introduction

Political parties play a key role in the political systems of many countries, particularly in representative democracies, providing citizens with possibilities to influence political agendas and decision-making (Bladh, 2022, 2023; Sartori, 2005). To fulfil this role, political parties offer various forms of learning and education, ranging from the orientation of new members to training for party leadership. Considering the multiple challenges related to distrust and polarisation that liberal democracies have been facing (Wildemeersch & Fejes, 2018), including anti-democratic tendencies (Garcia & Philip, 2018; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020), it is important to elucidate the educational aspects of party-political activities. This contributes to comprehension of the prerequisites for democratic processes, where citizens' informed decision-making and understanding of political processes are key. Previous research on adult education has largely focused on political and democratic issues (Fejes et al., 2018; Heikkinen, 2019; Laginder et al., 2013; Schugurensky, 2006; Zeuner, 2013). In particular, in the research on learning within social movements, the link between societal processes and learning is notable (Atta & Holst, 2023). However, there has been limited research on political parties from the education perspective.

The Nordic societal context provides an interesting setting for investigating the educational endeavours of political parties. In the Nordic countries, it is notable that the educational backgrounds of political decision-makers are heterogeneous. Unlike the situation in certain other countries (e.g. Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom or *École Nationale d'Administration* in France), there are no elite universities favoured by future politicians in the Nordic countries (Godmer & Gaxie, 2007; Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019). Rather, it appears that future decision-makers in the Nordic countries acquire their skills and influence in other settings (Huttunen, 2012). Historically, Nordic popular education played a significant role as a provider of political education for citizens seeking to hold positions of trust and influence, and this tradition might still influence how political parties view their role as educational actors (Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019; Nordvall & Malmström, 2015; Pastuhov, 2021).

Thus, the present study draws on an interest in party-political education, as organised by the political parties themselves, possibly informed by the Nordic tradition of popular education. Consequently, the aim of the study is to investigate the purposes of the member education practices of three Finnish political parties, as well as the underlying prerequisites, using the theory of practice architectures. This theory allows for an examination of party-political education as comprised of social practices and of the underlying prerequisites for it (Heikkinen et al., 2018; Kemmis, 2019). More specifically, this study focuses on the educational projects—that is, the main educational purposes (justifications and goals)—that can be discerned in the views of party representatives with educational responsibilities. As such, the study addresses the following research questions. What are the main purposes of education within the studied parties? What preconditions enable or constrain the education practices related to those purposes?

To answer these questions, this study examines the educational endeavours of three Finnish parliamentary parties—namely, the agrarian Centre Party of Finland (Centre Party), the moderate right-wing National Coalition Party (NCP) and the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP). These parties primarily organise their educational activities in cooperation with their affiliated study associations (i.e. the Association for Rural Culture and Education [MSL], the National Education Association [Kansio] and the Workers' Educational Association [TSL], respectively). The Centre Party (founded in 1906), the SDP (founded in 1899) and the NCP (founded in 1918) are traditionally

referred to as the largest political parties in Finland (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016; Saarinen et al., 2018), and they are considered established because they (or their predecessors in the case of the NCP) have held seats in the contemporary Finnish Parliament since its establishment in 1906. Today, the NCP and the SDP remain among the largest parties, considering both member numbers and voter turnout in elections, while the Centre Party, despite having the highest number of party members of all the Finnish parties, has secured only between 11% and 15% of the voter turnout in the most recent elections (Mickelsson, 2021). Still, all three parties have established party organisations based on local chapters and a party hierarchy (Mickelsson, 2021), which develop and provide educational activities for party members, among other roles. The selected parties and their affiliated study associations represent three different political positions: the Centre Party has agrarian roots, while the NCP and the SDP represent the political right and left, respectively. This enables an examination of education practices based on various ideological perspectives, thereby allowing for reflection on possible contingencies of an ideological character.

In this study, the terms ‘party-political educational practices’ and ‘party-political educational endeavours’, as well as ‘member education’, are used synonymously to refer to the activities of interest—that is, to the forms of party activities that political parties organise and provide for their members for developmental and educational purposes. Thus, the term ‘education’ should be understood broadly in this context, albeit with the caveat that it does not specifically refer to non-formal learning, which takes place alongside other activities (Heikkinen et al., 2018). This delimitation aligns with how the interviewees respond to the interview questions, as will be illuminated further in later sections.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. In the next section, Finnish party-political conditions are introduced, which is followed by a review of the previous literature. Next, the theoretical framework employed in this study—namely, the theory of practice architectures—is elaborated. Then, the empirical data are presented, along with an elaboration of the study’s analytical considerations. The presentation of the research findings first focuses on each party individually, after which the results are jointly summarised. Finally, in the subsequent section, the research findings are discussed in relation to previous research and a few concluding remarks and suggestions for future research are offered.

The Finnish (party-)political setting

Since 1906, Finland has had a unicameral parliament and universal suffrage, reforms implemented when the country was a Grand Duchy under Russian rule, although legislation implemented during Swedish rule, which ended in 1809, was still in effect. Finland declared its independence in 1917 (Eduskunta, 2023; Jääskeläinen, 2020). In recent decades, Finnish parliamentarism has grown stronger, strengthening the role of political parties in governance, as the president’s leadership of domestic affairs has been replaced by stable majority governments (Raunio, 2004). Moreover, since the 1990s, these coalition governments have been formed on the basis of established practices, resulting in stable and ideologically broad cabinets (Raunio, 2021).

Today, Finland is a multi-party Nordic welfare state characterised by a culture of political consensus (Huttunen, 2022; Rainio-Niemi, 2019), with Finnish people displaying high levels of trust in political institutions (Kestilä-Kekkonen & Söderlund, 2016). This era of political consensus is considered to have begun in the 1960s and 1970s, when a corporatist system of broad income policy agreements was established (Kiander

et al., 2011; Mickelsson, 2021). However, the corporatist system has been weakened since then, with global economic competition increasingly affecting Finnish society, including the country's political parties (Mickelsson, 2021).

When compared with other Nordic countries, political parties in Finland are juridically regulated to a higher degree because national legislation interferes in both party finances and party rules, including choosing candidates, regulating campaign work, ensuring intra-party democracy and governing member influence (Sundberg, 1997). Still, the role of political parties in contemporary Finnish society has been said to show tendencies towards increased professionalisation and individualisation. Regarding views on political parties' societal roles, tendencies towards the increasing individualisation of party members have been noted, marking a shift from understanding parties as collective societal actors to perceiving parties as arenas for individuals to engage in politics (Mickelsson, 2021). Political parties' roles among the electorate have also been weakened due to lower voter turnouts and declining numbers of party members (Raunio, 2004). As in other Nordic countries, the elected party-political representatives in Finland make up a notably heterogeneous group when compared with other multi-party democracies, although the tendency of party members to have higher social positions than the general population has increased in Finland in recent years (Koivula et al., 2020).

During the previous parliamentary mandate period of 2019–2023, 10 parliamentary parties were represented in the Finnish Parliament, which consists of 200 seats (Eduskunta, 2023). As seated in Parliament from left to right (number of seats in brackets), there parties were as follows: Left Alliance (16), SDP (40), Green League (20), Centre Party (31), Liike Nyt Movement (1), Swedish People's Party (10), Christian Democrats (5), NCP (38), Power Belongs to the People (1) and Finns Party (38). All registered parties with seats in Parliament receive financial support based on the number of seats gained during the latest general election (Jääskeläinen, 2020; Prime Minister's Office, 2023). Seven of these registered parliamentary parties (not the Liike Nyt Movement, Christian Democrats and Power Belongs to the People) cooperate with a specific study association, maintaining close ties in terms of both steering and realising the study content. The study associations can apply annually for state funding (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

Previous research

Previous studies on the relationship between political parties and education have largely approached the issue from sociological or political science perspectives. In such studies, education has mainly been used as an explanatory variable when investigating, for example, the educational backgrounds of political officials or the impact of educational background on party membership (Godmer & Gaxie, 2007; Huttunen, 2012; Koironen et al., 2017).

Research on the educational endeavours of political parties in contemporary times is scarce, especially in the Finnish context. Previous research exploring party-political education has primarily focused on left-leaning political parties, wherein party-political education seems to occupy a central position. For example, a study on the education provided by Swedish left-wing parties suggested that, in educating new members, the focus is on creating a sense of belonging without any explicit political persuasion, as it is assumed that members have already internalised the party's ideological premises (Arriaza Hult, 2022). Moreover, a study on labour union education in Sweden revealed both ideological and practical roles, including ideological training and the development of members' skills (e.g. organisational skills), as well as roles in networking and

advancement within the party hierarchy (reference removed for anonymity). Such research indicated that decreasing membership numbers and members' diverse backgrounds render party-political education increasingly important from the parties' perspective.

Research on the education provided by the Chinese Communist Party has also shown that party-political education serves both ideological and practical purposes. Indeed, the education delivered by the Chinese Communist Party reaches not only the entire party membership but also government officials, military leaders and individuals in the business sector (Pieke, 2009; Shambaugh, 2008). In addition, some studies have explored the education offered by parties with different ideological backgrounds. For example, research in the Singaporean context showed that organised learning within local communities is linked to the social control exercised by the ruling party, the People's Action Party (Flowers, 2005).

The previous research on contemporary political education also includes studies conducted in parliamentary contexts. For instance, parliamentary representatives' education has been examined from the perspective of professional development (Lewis & Coghill, 2016), while studies performed among women serving as local parliamentary representatives in Canada and India revealed that these women seek practical skills, communication skills and factual knowledge to enhance their political influence (Clover & McGregor, 2011). However, the latter study also found that the training provided to representatives of all the investigated parties did not effectively challenge the structures favouring men, as identified by the women representatives. A doctoral thesis examining the recruitment of female parliamentarians in North Karelia, Finland, as well as their educational history throughout the 20th century, indicated that women developed the necessary skills for parliamentary roles, especially through political women's organisations at the beginning of the 20th century and, after the Second World War, when in elected municipal positions (Huttunen, 2012). In this research, party-political education did not play a significant role, and references to it were mainly related to early 20th century parliamentarians.

There is some historical research of the Finnish context on party-political education and the connection between educational practices and party activities. Historical links, especially between organised political education and the labour movement (Hakoniemi, 2021; Heikkinen, 2019; Koskinen, 2018; Suoranta, 2007), as well as agrarian movements (Heikkinen, 2019), are evident. Educational endeavours within the labour movement aimed to foster social awareness and raise class consciousness. Moreover, connections between the trade unions and party-political education can be seen throughout the history of the labour movement (Jansson, 2012). In Finland, the ideological background of organised popular education in general has been blurred under the guise of societal unity (Heikkinen, 2019), which may explain why the educational practices of political parties have been scarcely addressed in Finnish research on adult education. Furthermore, in contemporary times, popular education in Finland has been seen as maintaining an increasingly close relationship with the state, primarily through state funding and legislation. This development has somewhat eroded the ideological basis of Finnish popular education and shifted its activities towards more customer-oriented and performance-based approaches (Pätäri et al., 2019).

In summary, research specifically focused on the contemporary educational endeavours of political parties is scarce. Drawing on historical research, it can be observed that political parties' educational practices have played significant roles in promoting democratic societal change and consolidating democracy. Based on prior research, the contemporary educational practices of political parties have both practical

and ideological purposes, and they may even be directed towards social control (Clover et al., 2011; Flowers, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008).

Practice architectures in the study of party-political education

In this study, the theoretical and methodological framework is based on the theory of practice architectures, which provides a lens to examine the preconditions that underlie educational practices (Heikkinen et al., 2018). More specifically, practice architectures offer a perspective on the multidimensionality of educational endeavours, wherein different ways of acting are intertwined with each other (Kemmis, 2019). From the perspective of the theory of practice architectures, the purpose of education is to support and promote a good life rather than solely to impart knowledge. From this stance, education is seen as an ‘initiation into practice’, with an ‘initiation into knowledge’ serving as an intermediate step in the process (Heikkinen et al., 2018; Kemmis, 2019). For research endeavours, this means shifting the focus from knowing to being and becoming, and also directing research interests towards the societal dimensions of both education and knowledge.

Here, practice is understood according to the definition suggested by Heikkinen et al. (2018, p. 369): ‘Practice [...] is a collective entity of procedures in use’ (the present author’s own translation). Practices are thus seen as collective human activities, consisting of commonly established ways of doing things or performing shared projects, thereby representing collective and intentional actions. Practices, viewed through the lens of practice architectures, consist of sayings (interactions and understandings), doings (various actions) and relatings (people’s relationships with one another and the surrounding world) (Mahon et al., 2017). As a result, practices are multidimensional and intertwined with their historical contexts. While practices are stable, they are situationally shaped and continuously changed by the influence of participating individuals and surrounding preconditions (Kemmis, 2019).

Practice architectures, in turn, make up the preconditions that influence practices. More specifically, practice architectures consist of three types of arrangements or preconditions: 1) material-economic, 2) cultural-discursive, and 3) social-political. Thus, educational practices are founded on specific prerequisites that allow education to take place with specific, limited resources. For example, the physical environment, economic resources and available tools create preconditions for the implementation of educational practices. Additionally, diverse linguistic prerequisites are related to and influence the unfolding of educational practices, including vocabulary, speech patterns and ways of thinking influence practices. Moreover, social relationships, both vertical and horizontal, should also be considered, while people’s relationships in terms of both solidarity and power struggles further shape practices.

The foundational assumption of the theory of practice architectures regarding the basis of educational activities is well suited to the context of political parties, which is assumed to be ideologically informed and value-based. Indeed, the educational practices inherent in party work can generally be considered value-based. For instance, it is assumed that values play a central role in the justifications for education choices made by party-political education officials. Aside from being value-based, the theory of practice architectures views one purpose of education as changing people’s actions and ways of doing things, which can also be expected to align with the objectives of political parties.

Research material and analytical procedures

The primary empirical material analysed in this study consists of interviews with representatives of the Centre Party, the NCP, and the SDP. The interviewed representatives were party officials responsible for party-political education and education coordinators from the parties' respective study associations (a total of six individuals). The interviews were all conducted in the spring of 2019. They were semi-structured interviews, focusing on outlining the parties' member education practices—that is, how party members are educated, what educational aims the parties have and how the parties' member education can provide pathways to influence for members. To deepen the understanding of this interview material, three types of documents were also gathered from the three studied parties (the document search took place in April 2022): the main statutes of the party organisation and the most recent programme of political principles (28 pages for the Centre Party, 23 pages for the NCP and 140 pages for SDP; 191 pages in total). These documents were chosen to provide background insights into the practices at play regarding member education in the three parties. The analysis, however, mainly drew on the interviews, as they were deemed to provide sufficiently rich data.

The interviewees were approached because, given their positions, they were assumed to be able to elucidate the official considerations of their party-political education. Thus, the interview material provides a specific, limited perspective on the justifications for party-political education within the Finnish parliamentary parties that have traditionally been the three largest parties in Parliament (Saarinen et al., 2018). Each interview involved two interviewees, one from the party office and one from a study association closely associated with the party. In this regard, the representatives of the Centre Party and the Finnish Rural Education Association (*Maaseudun sivistysliitto* [MSL]) were interviewed together, as were the representatives of the NCP and the National Education Association (Kansio). Similarly, the representatives of the SDP and the Workers' Educational Association (*Työväen sivistysliitto* [TSL]) were interviewed together. The interviews ranged between 50 minutes and 1 hour 15 minutes in length, and they were transcribed into a total of 65 pages. The interviewees were provided with the interview questions and information about the study in advance. They were assured that their responses would be reported anonymously and that they could contact the researcher at any time to withdraw their consent to participate. The interviewees also had the opportunity to ask questions about the research during and after the interviews. The interviewees gave their consent for the interviews to be recorded, and the interview material was transcribed verbatim to facilitate the analysis.

The analysis, which employed the theory of practice architectures, delved into the practices described by the interviewees as well as the structures that enable certain practices and hinder others. In this study, the analysis using the theory of practice architectures focused on the interview material, which means that it primarily provided insights into how the practices were discussed and, therefore, what cultural-discursive arrangements could be discerned from the discussion. Through the comments of the interviewed experts on party-political education, the interview material also offered the opportunity to examine, albeit indirectly, other arrangements—namely, material-economic and socio-political prerequisites—that shape party-political educational practices.

During the analysis, the interview recordings were listened to thoroughly to ensure that the researcher kept the intonation, hesitations and other nonverbal communication in mind. The analysis relied on the theory of practice architectures, whereby in the first stage of the analytical work, the central purposes of member education within each party were

identified, as expressed in the interviews. In the second stage of the analysis, each party's interview data were examined to identify all the statements that conveyed different ways of talking about party-political education (sayings), implementing it (doings) and the (power) relations that it is involved in creating or through which it is possible to realise certain outcomes (relatings) (cf. Kemmis, 2019). This allowed the examination of the practice arrangements that enable or constrain the party-political education offered and practiced by the three parties.

In the following sections, the research results will be presented and considered through the lens of the theory of practice architectures, addressing the two research questions previously established. First, the main *purposes* of education within the studied parties will be identified. Then, the different qualities of the three types of preconditions that enable or constrain the education practices related to those purposes will be distinguished. Initially, the results will be presented individually for each party in alphabetical order, which will be followed by a section that summarises and deepens the results before the concluding remarks are offered. The direct quotes used when presenting the results derived from the interview material were translated by the author. As the material consists mostly of interview data, which are comprised of spoken language, the presentation of the prerequisites for the practices will first focus on cultural-discursive arrangements, which will then be used to provide insights into the material-economic and socio-political arrangements. The accounts given below draw closely on the interviewees' accounts. In the original analytical work, which was performed in Finnish, direct quotes were used to a large extent. The quotes used here were taken from the interviews and included to show the relation between the empirical material and the results. For the sake of ensuring confidentiality, the study will not explicate which interviewee uttered which quote.

The Centre Party: uniform and impactful expertise for all members

The central *purpose* of the education organised by the Centre Party is to offer 'uniform and impactful' party-political education to its large, diverse and geographically scattered membership, who are spread throughout the country. Content-wise, the education provided focuses on 'basic organisational skills' (such as rules and practical ways of working), the 'framework' of political decision-making (such as democratic procedures and legislation) and 'communication skills'. The goal of the education is to provide members with opportunities to exercise influence by fostering 'political ambition' and supporting internal cohesion within the party.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* that shape the Centre Party's education are coloured by expressions familiar from the business world, which can be noticed in the interviewees' vocabulary. For instance, educational materials are 'produced', while education is referred to as a 'service'. The recently developed education campaign material is treated as a 'trade secret', and its confidentiality is maintained to prevent other parties from 'plagiarising' it. Systematic and well-ordered educational planning aims to ensure comprehensive availability, so that the 'information is quickly accessible to members'. Thus, professional and well-organised planning by someone well versed in the subject matter is seen as essential. Additionally, the interviewees emphasise their own experiences serving in positions of trust as representatives of the Centre Party. Professionalism in this context is interpreted as being knowledgeable about both the party and political activities more broadly.

The cultural-discursive arrangements underlying the educational purposes are mostly expressed as three ‘challenges’. One of these challenges is the unclear party organisation and the need to educate members about it:

For many members, when they join the Centre Party, our organisational structure seems very unclear, probably largely because our members are in local associations at the grassroots level. We don’t have individual members in the party at all [...]. Where is our own membership? What is local influence?

The second challenge for the Centre Party is a form of ‘bureaucratisation’, which the interviewees perceive as a difficulty in effectively communicating the party’s policies and political decision-making to the public:

The bureaucratisation of politics can be seen as a challenge for the Centre Party throughout this decade. We need to bring this feeling to the surface more at the Centre Party, and we can see that our competitors, the other parties, have been much more successful in how they operate in a clear and understandable manner and how they present their core message

Partially related to ‘bureaucratisation,’ the third identified challenge is the need for ‘communication skills’, which includes tasks such as writing letters to the editors of publications, using social media and interacting with citizens. This challenge is expressed, for example, as follows:

Many members think that they shouldn’t write a letter to the editor unless they have verified every single source and reference down to the smallest detail. This [finishing and submitting opinion pieces] is also a skill that we need to train

The *material-economic arrangements* that influence the Centre Party’s education are affected by the change in the party’s financial situation that occurred following the election defeat in 2011. Due to the reduced party funding, party-political education ‘suffered a big setback’. A significant portion of the Centre Party’s member education is organised at the regional level and by the regional organisations, making it challenging for the party office to achieve a comprehensive overview of all the education provided within the party. However, since 2016, efforts have been made to develop educational functions through seeking ‘cohesion’ in terms of education planning and considering education planning a separate area of expertise. The reinvigorated relationship with the MSL study association plays a key role in this, with an ‘education agreement’ enabling the payment of a salary to one MSL official and providing financial support for party-political education at the regional and local levels.

The party’s candidate education has been reformed in recent years and, as a result, study materials such as a ‘candidate’s guide’ have been developed, in this case in the form of a ‘workbook, like an exercise book for elementary school’. In addition, an ‘idea map-type sheet’ has been developed to ‘improve the candidate’s own profile development and creation’, which is especially useful for new candidates. The parliamentary candidate education also focuses on social media skills and interactivity ‘from the perspective of public speaking and meeting people’.

The *social-political arrangements* of the Centre Party’s party-political education are constructed and shaped in relation to the dual goals of that education. On the one hand, such education aims to foster a sense of community among its geographically dispersed ‘huge membership’, while on the other hand, it aims to foster individual members’ political ambitions. This dichotomy is outlined as follows:

Member experience is very important [...]. You get to talk to like-minded people, experience that sense of community'. Thus, while influence is built on a sense of community, the goal of party-political education is also to 'nourish political ambition in a positive sense [...]. Things need to be done together, but individuals are the ones who push these matters forward.

Hence, while Centre Party membership can and should provide a sense of community, the role of education is also to accommodate and allow for differences among individual members to support their selection for positions of trust.

The previously mentioned tendencies towards fragmentation on the part of the Centre Party, both among its members and geographically, mean that regional districts have significant educational responsibility when it comes to helping individual members understand their place in the party organisation and facilitating their (local) efforts to achieve influence. In terms of parliamentary candidate education, however, centralised coordination by the party office aims to provide 'equal opportunities to succeed' to all candidates: '[...] each educational activity is, of course, unique, but the basic educational content is the same, and that is the idea as well'. Therefore, the party's 'fragmentation' is addressed through two different organisational approaches to education. In the case of candidate education, the arrangements are coordinated by the party office, whereas other educational practices take place at the regional level and are 'largely organised and implemented by the regional organisations'.

The NCP: Educational paths to expertise and success

The primary *purpose* of the NCP's member education is to support party members' political expertise and opportunities for influence. The starting point for educational planning is to offer members 'various paths' by which they can find their place within the party and genuinely 'succeed'. The education provided covers the party's activities, administration and opportunities for influence 'through the lens of the party's programme'.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* of the NCP's member education revolve around implementing and following the party's official policies. In the language used by the interviewees, the education is based on the 'ideology' of the NCP and its 'values'. The collaborating study association is referred to as the NCP's 'own' study association, which, unlike the other politically affiliated study associations involved in this study, strictly adheres to the 'pure' political line of the NCP, 'fully adhering to the party's values and ideology and content'. The party-political education provided 'involves coaching, mentoring, development, collaboration and interaction'.

The educational path is individualised according to members' interests, with the aim of supporting members' development, including 'how you can make an impactful contribution in the next few years'. For example, for parliamentary candidates who are not elected, this means that 'we want them to continue to be involved in our activities [...]. We analyse together with them how it went and what they did during this campaign, and then we try to find ways to do even better'. The ideas of efficiency and easy access inform how the organisation of education is perceived: 'We are competing for people's time, so we have to be very efficient'.

The *material-economic arrangements* of the NCP's member education principally rely on the stable resources provided by the study association. The NCP's party-political education supply appears comprehensive. The members' educational 'path' first involves the '*Politiikan sininen lanka*' (Blue Thread of Politics) introduction course (named after the party's colour), which is an 'all-encompassing course where we talk about the party

organisation, its administration and the opportunity to participate'. This is followed by the '*Vaikutujan akatemia*' (Influencer Academy), which delves deeper into various opportunities for exerting influence:

Do you want to be an organisation operator, do you want to join the board of a local association, [...] or do you want to run as a candidate in the municipal elections and serve in a position of trust.

In addition, party members are offered access to many other courses, such as 'presentation skills', 'a course about the European Union', organisation training and campaign education.

At the time of the interviews, in addition to there being regional education coordinators who maintain contact with the study association, Kansio employed six people. Moreover, close discussions are held with the party's district levels, with the study association providing support for the party's district employees, 'who know their own members, performing marketing and the assessment of educational needs'. The study association also regularly provides course support to the districts.

The *social-political arrangements* of the NCP's member education primarily revolve around deepening the roles of individual members and thereby supporting their 'success'. In this regard, Members of Parliament and Ministers giving speeches at, for example, seminars provide reminders of the possibility of climbing the party hierarchy. Through party-political education, members develop their commitment to success within the party: 'people who have attended our party-political education become active party members. When they feel that their knowledge and capabilities grow and develop, it correlates with the courage to seek more diverse tasks'.

In other words, the importance of community is emphasised alongside individual success, as networking is seen as an important means of developing expertise. 'We have noticed that education cannot be just a bombardment of content. [...] Yet, you cannot start from purely enjoyable socialising either. Education has to be very carefully planned'. The goal is to achieve a dialogue that has certain characteristics: 'We want people who work with us to act in a certain way according to certain rules, which form part of educated citizen engagement'. Furthermore, this represents an educational challenge that is considered timely in society as a whole:

Party activities in general probably need some renewal for all the parties. But we don't want to come up with it ourselves; rather, we somehow need to receive signals about the kind of party activities they would find meaningful.

Thus, a community built for political and educational purposes must also include wider society and its citizens.

The SDP: Member empowerment and party renewal through education

The main *purpose* of the education organised by the SDP is to 'empower' party members and 'renew' the party. In this context, 'empowerment' or 'involvement' aims to prompt members to 'influence, communicate and share ideas'. Additionally, the notion of 'empowerment' actually extends beyond the party membership, as many of the educational events are also open to non-members. Moreover, 'renewal' refers to the continuous development of the party. For example, seminars are arranged specifically to invite speakers to 'challenge [the SDP's] current work'.

The *cultural-discursive arrangements* of the SDP's party-political education are defined by the emphasis on the concepts of 'empowerment' and 'renewal'. According to the interviewees, 'empowerment' is evident when, for example, the TSL study association 'encourages' district organisations to organise education. From a member perspective, education is empowering and involving, as it is 'comprehensively educating new influencers [members] and transferring the skills and knowledge of more experienced actors'. The education provided is said to convey messages to new members such as 'Welcome to the team, here are the tools. We want to support you in your influencing'. 'Empowerment' is linked to the goal of equality. Thus, separate introductory education is not organised for new members because doing so is considered discriminatory. This way of thinking is explained and justified in the following way: 'There is a saying that a comrade is a comrade to another comrade, and that means that even if you [...] have been the chairman of ten different associations, you do not rise above the new member [...]'. The discourse on 'renewal' is strongly connected to the public image of the SDP as a conservative party and to the need to dispel such an image. 'The SDP is seen as a bit conservative [...]. We can also renew ourselves [...]. We are constantly renewing'. Here, 'renewal' is thought to rely on knowing the party's history and the 'great achievements' through which it can 'orient towards the future'. Education is used to create this understanding. At the same time, education is considered a tool with which people can be 'challenged', both in terms of challenging the party and challenging their own thinking. It is believed that in this way, the SDP can evolve and respond to contemporary challenges.

Regarding the *material-economic arrangements* of the SDP's party-political education, these are built on close cooperation between the TSL and the SDP, which is formalised through an annual 'education agreement'. Educational practices are also organised at the district level. The TSL provides 'educational assistance to organise events in their own area'. This support comes in the form of an 'education plan' and 'materials', and suggestions are made concerning 'experts' who can be invited as speakers. The TSL also provides financial support to districts to cover the costs of organising educational activities.

This cooperation between the party and the TSL, which manifests at both the party office and district levels, enables extensive educational practices. Among the examples of such activities are the 'Organisational Days', an annual event 'open to the entire membership'. In connection with the SDP's educational policy document titled *Osaamispolku 2030 (Competence Path 2030)*, there are open events held on various vision themes, such as 'Early Childhood Education in the Future' and 'Mastering the Changing World of Work'. At the time of the interviews, the party was seeking participants in a programme called 'Future Influencers'. Moreover, a mentoring programme was about to start. During election campaigns, there are webinars provided for candidates. Additionally, there are online environments available for party-political education where educational materials can be found.

The *social-political arrangements* of the SDP's party-political education are based on the pursuit of emancipation through openness as well as the pursuit of renewal through historical and local knowledge. The party-political education is not solely for members: 'The SDP is not a closed movement, and we are interested in many other views than just those of our own members'. In contrast to this aspiration regarding openness, closed events are also organised. For example, the youth leadership programme 'Future Influencers' includes a selection process. Although the lectures within this programme are open, some parts of the programme are only available to selected participants. Similarly, there is a targeted educational programme for the party's 'workgroup

organisation'. This organisation consists of about 450 members and is described as the party's 'crown jewel'. It is clear that education also contributes to building the party hierarchy, although openness is regarded as a key principle in organising educational events.

The SDP's mentoring programme serves as an example of the emphasis placed on historical and local knowledge. Historical knowledge should be localised because 'regions are different', and it is good for party actors to know 'who to contact, what kinds of personal relationships have existed there [...], strategic knowledge'. The mentoring programme is based on the idea that mentors and mentees 'investigate their own area' and also jointly consider how to activate other people in the area. Thus, the relationships among party actors are perceived to be built locally and as part of a historical continuum.

The purposes of equality and hierarchy: Arrangements mediating between the collective and the individual

Table 1 summarises the interview results, outlining the educational purposes and the preconditions underlying those purposes. Despite the differences between the parties, when scrutinised together, the results point to questions related to hierarchy and equality as well as to collectivity and individuality. This aspect will be elaborated on next.

Table 1. Summary of the Results.

	<i>Purpose of Education</i>	<i>Cultural-Discursive Arrangements</i>	<i>Material-Economic Arrangements</i>	<i>Social-Political Arrangements</i>
Centre Party	Provide expertise and 'similar and impactful' education	Education as a product; challenges of 'ambiguous' party organisation, 'bureaucratisation' and communication	Scarce resources, investment in educational planning, development of candidate education and study materials	Supporting community and 'political ambition' both centrally and locally
NCP	Support expertise and success	Education as adhering to the party's principles through efficient, individual 'paths'	Stable resources of the study association, coordinated educational planning on different organisational levels	Emphasising individual members' success through community-based education
SDP	Empowerment and renewal	Education used for 'empowerment' and 'challenges'; debunking the false perception of the party's 'conservatism'	Close collaboration between the TSL and the party office, variety of educational practices at different levels	Emphasising open 'involvement'; historically informed knowledge of local relations

The identified educational *purposes* can be jointly summarised to consider whether party-political education is intended to support equality among members or hierarchical relationships between members. The purpose of education to support an individual's opportunities to exert influence is central, with issues of communication becoming important in all three parties. For the Centre Party, equality and the search for likeminded company are taken as prerequisites, in relation to which education aims to support

individual aspirations. In the NCP, individuals' opportunities are most prevalent and at the fore; however, their education also aims to bring individuals together to share and learn from each other. In terms of the SDP, the purpose of education draws on the idea of treating all individuals as equals, while also empowering individual actors to take on different roles.

The party-political educational *arrangements* or preconditions also raise the question of whether the political party should be approached as a collective actor or as an arena for individual political actors. In all three parties examined, collectivity and communality are central, which may not be surprising when dealing with political parties. The issue is thus whether unity or collaboration between individuals is stressed. In the case of the Centre Party, the purpose of party-political education is formulated so as to draw on a strong tradition of communality and viewing the party as a form of unity. This sense of collectivity is complemented by fostering individual ambition. Within the NCP, communality is referred to as 'networking', making this the clearest case of educational arrangements enabling individuals to act and collaborate. For the SDP, the language in use points to the creation of a collective community that members can become part of. Individual members are welcome to become part of a shared collective; however, they are also encouraged to question the ideas and approaches of the collective.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The aim of this study was to investigate the purposes of the member education practices within three Finnish political parties, as well as the prerequisites underlying those practices, using the theory of practice architectures. The research questions to be addressed were as follows: What are the main purposes of education within the examined parties? What preconditions enable or constrain the education practices related to those purposes? The results reveal how party-political education in the three studied Finnish political parties is arranged with purposes intended to strike a balance between equality and hierarchy among members, as embedded in arrangements providing a party-political collective to join as well as an arena for individual pursuits. While each party emphasises different aspects, such as expertise, success or empowerment, they all grapple with fostering both collective cohesion and individual advancement. These findings underscore the complex interplay between educational purposes and the preconditions informing educational practices, resulting in a balancing act between different, sometimes contradictory, purposes and preconditions.

It can be considered paradoxical that, in a democratic society where an increasing number of people have increasingly high educational attainment, functioning political parties see the ongoing education of their members as important. However, new members are not perceived to have all the information and skills necessary to function as party members. Of course, in all three parties, community support is linked to education, meaning that education is not seen as solely involving the transmission of knowledge and skills. Thus, based on the results of this study, the parties seem to have a need for internal education that focuses on organisational knowledge, communication skills and profiling. The organised educational practices appear to be systematic and established in all three parties, and they are carried out in close cooperation with the study associations. Prior studies have shown that parties offer both knowledge-based, practical and ideological education (Flowers, 2005; Shambaugh, 2008). The present study partly reflects this picture. The purposes of education are especially linked to conveying practical knowledge, but they also relate to electoral success or party development more broadly.

Specific ideological education, however, does not seem to be organised to a greater extent, which has also been found in previous research (Arriaza Hult, 2022).

The fairly pragmatic approaches to party-political education that can be discerned from the results of this study thus contribute to understanding how Finnish political consensus can unfold through party-political activities (cf. Rainio-Niemi, 2019). The results also point to a previously noted tendency towards a scarcity of ideologically informed education in the Finnish popular educational landscape due to efforts to forge societal unity (Heikkinen, 2019). This tendency might be further strengthened by increased tendencies towards individualisation and professionalisation within political parties, placing emphasis on electoral success (cf. Mickelsson, 2021).

Regarding the methodological considerations, it was observed that the analytical work was influenced by the process of translation in quite a fascinating way. As the researcher was working with the empirical material in Finnish, seeking to develop the findings to be comprehensible in English, it was noticeable how many of the quotes initially considered illuminating did not translate well. It is concluded this can be interpreted as pointing towards the usage of specific political jargon but also more broadly towards the intricate situational embeddedness of the educational practices studied, which is not simple to convey outside of the research setting.

For this study, education coordinators from three party offices and party-political education coordinators from educational centres close to the parties were interviewed, which allowed for an in-depth examination of the purposes of party-political education and the preconditions underlying educational practices. For an underexplored research area, it was deemed beneficial to thoroughly work through a limited amount of data. However, the limitations in relation to this approach should be recognised, and further research is required to both complement and contest the results of this study.

More specifically, further research is needed on other political parties. Future studies could also, drawing on similar theoretical approaches to the present study, employ different forms of empirical material to delve into how the different practice preconditions interconnect and whether they integrate or conflict (cf. Kemmis, 2019, p. 90). As the educational responsibility of the party districts appears to be significant for all three parties, further research should also be conducted at the district level. Participatory research would make it possible to delve deeper into, for example, the hierarchies intertwined with party-political education and the practices that renew or challenge related power relationships.

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