

Liberal Arts Courses and Social Relations in Highly Heterogenic Groups of Adults in Finland

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This paper combines two ethnographic case studies on highly heterogenic liberal arts pilot course groups (intercultural theatre and music groups) in order to better understand, how liberal arts could facilitate two-way integration in Finland. Our focus is on the social relations and learning outcomes recognised by the participants. The data was collected using social maps, interviews, participant diaries, and feedback surveys. Positioning theory is applied in the analysis. In the preliminary results both native and migrant participants report aspects of two-way integration and co-learning.

Key words: Two-way Integration; Liberal Arts; Social Relations; Positioning Theory

Introduction

Adult education for migrants is mainly based on educating “full citizens” by teaching the language and how to live and behave in the new country (Fejes, 2019), and migrant learners are kept in their own groups without possibilities to socialise with the natives. In Finland the Liberal Adult Education (LAE, translated occasionally as Popular Adult Education, Manninen 2017), especially Adult Education Centres and Folk High Schools, is recently also recognised as a course provider of “integration training”. However, the courses follow the same logic of “teaching language & citizenship skills in separate groups”. Other types of LAE courses in shared groups for native and migrant adults are still scarce (see Käyhkö & Manninen 2019, 44-46). Therefore, the full potential of LAE and especially liberal arts courses (handicrafts, music etc.) is not yet utilised. Wider benefit studies show that non-formal, non-vocational courses generate new friendships, networks, trust and other building blocks of social capital (Field 2005; Pearce, Launay, Machin & Dunbar 2016). Informal interaction with native speakers also enhances language learning. LAE could be an effective low threshold facilitator of two-way integration.

Inspired by the work of Outreach, Empowerment and Diversity (OED 2019) network the Learning Spaces project (www.uef.fi/opinsauna) of the University of Eastern Finland has been promoting and piloting a more inclusive way of organising LAE courses. This paper studies two recent intercultural liberal arts pilot courses for adults, namely a music group (duration 4 months, organised by a small music school) and a theatre group (duration 7 months, organised by a regional adult education centre).

Both groups were highly heterogenic. They consisted of native Finns and migrant adults who were studying, working, unemployed, pensioned or seeking asylum. Those with migrant background had lived in Finland from 2.5 years to over 10 years, and some had already obtained Finnish nationality. Altogether, these two pilot courses had 28 participants representing 15 countries of origin. The participants’ competence and experience on the subject matter also differed notably from beginners to semi-professionals. Both courses used collaborative planning, were multilingual, and culminated in public performances.

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During the implementation of the pilot courses, a multifaceted set of data was collected to thoroughly evaluate the pilots. We also wanted to a) learn as much as possible about organising this type of courses, and b) to be able to give more specific suggestions to other actors planning on implementing similar courses. This paper drafts first tentative results based on the combined data. We look at the impact of both the in-group and outside-of-it social relations to the participation and map the learning outcomes recognised by the participants, providing a window to the two-way integration and co-learning of adults in the context of Finnish LAE.

International Organization for Migration (IOM 2019, 2–3) defines integration as “the two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and host societies in which migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural and political life of the receiving community.” It also describes integration as a “cross-cutting and multi-sectoral issue” and “not a one-size-fits-all endeavour” pertaining to several policy areas and includes related concepts of social inclusion and social cohesion to the broad understanding of the term.

We focus on integration in the grassroots level of liberal arts courses. European Commission's (2005) Communication on a Common Agenda for Integration defines integration as “a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States”. The pilot courses studied here also reflect the following principles outlined in the same Communication:

5. Efforts in education are critical to preparing immigrants... to be more successful and more active participants in society”
6. Access for immigrants to institutions (...) on a basis equal to national citizens and in a non-discriminatory way is a critical foundation for better integration
7. Frequent interaction between immigrants and Member State citizens is a fundamental mechanism for integration. Shared forums, intercultural dialogue (...) enhance the interactions between immigrants and Member State citizens.

We use the term ‘two-way integration’ since it is a widely used concept in Finland (see e.g. Uudenmaan liitto 2015) and supported by the European Commission (2005). We also use the term ‘migrant’ to include all those who due whichever reason have moved to Finland at some point of their lives. We do this fully aware of the multiple categories, variety of life situations, and legal statuses this term can include (see e.g. Mügge & van der Haar, 2016), and to avoid using the term immigrant, applied in the EU for the so called third-country nationals.

The writers of this paper have all been involved with the pilot courses reported here; Manninen as the project manager, Käyhkö as the project researcher and coordinator, and Valtonen and Vainikka as participants of the pilot courses in question. The first two made it possible for the courses to take place. The latter two have lived through the courses from the collaborative planning phases to the performances, writing their own participant diaries, and analysing either their own data or the pseudonymised data of others to secure ethicality of the process.

We first take a brief look at the theme of adult education and two-way integration of adults in Finland. After outlining the theoretical background, we present the research questions and the data collected. Tentative results are presented and discussed before reaching the conclusions.

Adult Education and two-way integration of adults in Finland

Carrera and Faure Atger (2011, 51–64) provide a summary of the development of EU policy definitions on migration as a two-way process and provide examples of good practices around Europe. In the Finnish context the two-way integration is defined as a continuous interaction process between the migrant and the society in which the migrant integrates and the receiving society becomes more multicultural (e.g. Uudenmaan liitto 2015, 27). The role of the third sector (including LAE) as a facilitator of good ethnic relations is also well acknowledged (Ibid, 21–24).

According to MacGilleon (2017) there were roughly 53000 migrants participating in LAE in Finland in 2014, and 74% of them studied on language courses. Mac Gilleon reports of some individual migrant adults having found their ways to other liberal adult education courses such as yoga or photography, but also acknowledges that migrants are not aware of the wide selection of other courses offered in the Adult Education Centres. The lack of marketing is obvious.

Pastuhov (in Wiktorin 2017, 12) suggests, that there seems be two different kinds of citizenship within LAE in Finland: one voluntary and hobby-centred for the native Finns, and another, almost obligatory, language-learning and vocation-oriented one for “the outsiders”. Since these activities often happen in the same buildings but with different staff and schedules, the situation somewhat resembles the “two schools under one roof” practices described by Maslic (2019, 61).

During the years, efforts have been made. The webpages of Adult Education Centres (KoL) offer basic information in 17 languages (KoL 2019), and a simple Finnish video inviting migrants to study in the Adult Education Centres (KoL 2016) exists. At least one Adult Education Centre reported offering access to normal sport courses for the recently arrived refugees (KoL 2014, 3).

We mapped the institutional websites of nearly 80 LAE providers in June 2018 and rechecked them in April 2019. Finnish or Swedish language courses dominate, and “migrants only” basic education courses for adults and preparatory studies for vocational education are organised. Exceptions to this pattern were e.g. joint cooking courses (Hiiden Opisto 2019) and intercultural music, handicraft and dance courses (Vanajaveden Opisto 2019).

Theoretical background

The main theory used to analyse the data is positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), later referred as PT. It has already been used in studies of ethnic relations and integration. For example, Slocum and van Langenhove (2003) use PT to analyse “integration speak”. More recently Maslic (2019) and Debray and Spencer-Oatey (2019) have used PT to analyse the inner relationships of diverse groups of adults.

The key concepts of PT to analyse are the positionings, acts and storylines used by the interacting individuals or entities (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999).

Research Questions and the Data Collected

The research questions are

- 1) What kind of interpersonal connections inside and outside of the pilot groups are apparent, and how do the participants position themselves within the groups? ‘
- 2) What kind of personal learning outcomes can be found in the data?

The data from the two pilots consists of a) 22 social maps of the people impacting individuals’ participation in the middle of their courses, b) 11 transcribed interviews (In) related to these maps c) 4 other transcribed interviews, including three members of the organisers and one participant who dropped out, d) 10 participant diaries (PD) written during the pilots, e) organiser reflections of the music pilot (8), f) the 19 feedback survey responses (SR) given by the participants at the end of the courses, and the g) feedback of the theatre course’s audiences.

In this paper we focus on data-sources a, b, d and f. All data-giving was voluntary. We received 8 social maps from the music pilot participants and 14 from the theatre group participants. Two of the music group participants and 9 of the theatre group participants volunteered for a short individual interview based on their social maps.

Preliminary Results

Since the second pilot ended very recently, we can provide only tentative analysis and results. This paper is only a draft towards a more complete study. We roughly divide the results between the two research questions. Due to lack of time the 11 interviews related to the social maps were not fully analysed for this paper. They will provide more specific information than the maps and the proper analysis of them will give more depth to this study in the future.

Research question 1: Impacting social relations and personal positionings

The aspect of social relations and personal positionings was analysed using the social maps of the native (N) and migrant (M) participants done in the mid-way of their pilot courses. We combined the maps of the two pilots into one (Figure 1), where the codes in red represent the music group (MG) and the codes in grey the theatre group (TG). Other codes are participant (P), project coordinator (PC), project manager (PM), assistant writer (AW), assistant teacher (AT) and multicultural project worker (MC pr.w.). This data is also reinforced by the semi-structured interviews related to the social maps, with two key questions: 1) “Who have you marked to your map and why?” and 2) “How is it to be you in this particular group?”. Some of the feedback survey responses also serve as support.

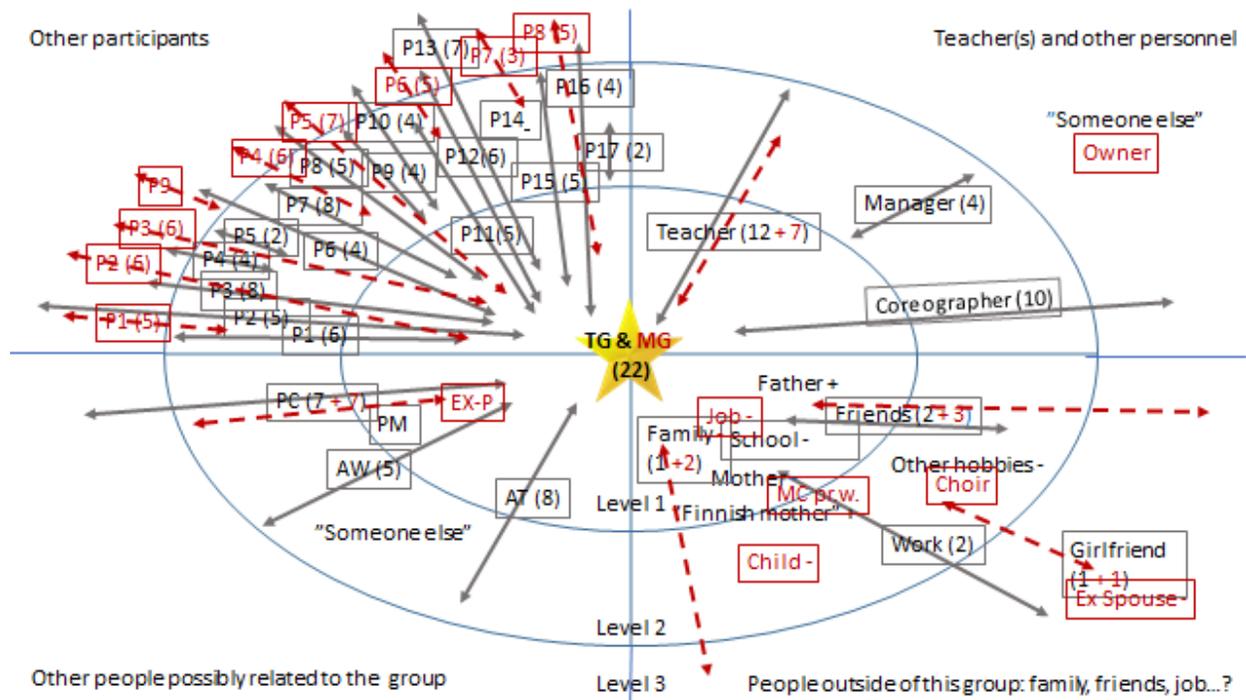


Figure 1: Social maps of the two pilots combined. (Käyhkö 2019)

The participants were asked to fill in a social atom (Moreno 1947) inspired social map. They positioned themselves in the middle of it, and then marked people or matters impacting their current participation into three possible levels: Level 1 (a lot of impact), Level 2 (some impact) and Level 3 (only a small impact) and four tentative sectors: participants, teachers and personnel, other people related to the group, and people outside the group. They could also mark if the impact was particularly positive (+), negative (-) or ambivalent (+/-).

The social maps gave an idea how the individual participants positioned themselves in the group. There were notable differences, the extremes being a map where only one person (“the Finnish mother”, an outside-of-the-group influencer) was marked and a map with 25 markings in it. The average amount of markings per map was 7,1 in the music group and 10,4 in the theatre group.

The most impacting yet somewhat ambivalent person in both groups was the teacher, (T) with a total of 19 mentions out of the 22 possible ones. This data requires a paper of its own, but it is safe to say that teachers’ impact is crucial. The project coordinator (PC) also got several mentions on the maps (14/22), due to the networking done in the recruitment phases. Friends, family and work were impacted in both groups, but friends were felt as supporting the participation while work and family challenged it. Several migrant participants mentioned native Finns as positively impacting “outsiders”. Surprisingly, also own parents impacted the participation of their adult offspring.

Due to space limitations we now focus in the social relations between the participants. Roughly half of participants in both groups got mentioned on Level 1, i.e. with “a lot of impact”. In the altogether 5 cases where all the other participants were referred as a whole group, they were placed either on level 2 or level 3. So, the whole of the group did have some impact, but the most

significant impact (when present) happened between individuals. Not everybody felt as much part of the group, and more could have been done to “form the family”, as one of the theatre group participants put it.

In the interviews there are comments of “Finns sticking with the Finns” or sub-groups being formed. Some individuals were left or stayed at the outskirts of the group. Those who acted or sang the most together seemingly got closer to each other regardless their nationality. Recently arrived refugees had trouble finding their place in the groups, though their presence was appreciated:

I think he has probably arrived as a refugee to Finland. (...) It's a very strong for me to be sharing with someone who has been in that situation. He is an older man, I am just curious about him. He... is an, a little inspiration for me. (MG In1M)

For me (Name) was the only real reception center type of person there, it was a pity he left. (TG, In 8N)

Both groups were highly heterogenic in many ways. Migrant participants seemed to be a lot more at ease with this kind of groups:

I think this is the best thing. Like... These colors, and different cultures (...). It makes really nice atmosphere. You don't feel different, you feel somehow (...) “I am me, and this person is him” and everyone is showing their own kind of color so proudly and so brightly, you know. Because it's good to have different colors. It is nice to be different, too. (...) I think for me if... a different person is with a group of Finnish people for example, he will try his best to become what this group are, like he will not become himself. But in our group, it is nice to be the person you are (...) because everybody is different here, so you can't be this and this and this, so you be yourself and that is comfortable. (TG, In 3M)

(The pilot) was already becoming a family to me. I am sad leaving this group. (MG, PD1M)

At the same time for several native participants the pilot group facilitated the first ever proper contacts with migrants. Their comments varied from polite statements to major personal development stories.

It was nice to get to know people from different countries. (MG, SR)

In the beginning I was really tense, since I had never before participated in a group with foreigners (...) I was really distressed, because the manners and the habits were not familiar at all (...) but now I feel it is really nice, I have really enjoyed myself (...) I've taken the people as people and not as foreigners. (...) I am actually surprised how my own attitude has changed, too. (TG, In2N)

The participants differed also by their skills and commitment, and this affected how people positioned themselves and others. Both groups also suffered from tardiness and absenteeism. This is linked with the concepts of moral order, rights and duties used in PT (van Langenhove & Harré

1999a). The moral order or duty-oriented story line of “You must commit yourself and be punctually present” is clear.

Some participants had no experience playing any instrument or in music at all. I sensed lack of commitment from some. The group didn't bound. I couldn't see individual effort. (MG, SR)

...my work it ends at 4PM (...). So, I feel that I am always late. I already told the teacher, that I will not inform you every time, I am generally always late. (TG, In5M)

...not so many participants today at the training. People are ill. (MG, PD5N)

In PT (Davies & Harré, 1990) people position themselves (reflexive positioning) and are positioned by others (interactive positioning). Occasionally the different cultures or regions were connected to these positionings. Some participants positioned themselves as being somewhat “lost”. This had to do with not understanding what was expected of them or due to missing out some trainings. Others were mainly positioned by their names, but sometimes also by their culture, life situation, or roles:

I have had a two week break (...) I was a bit “out”, I guess. New stuff has been introduced. (MG, PD5N)

Yes, we (people of Continent 1) are different, very different with the people of (Country 1), (Continent 2)... (...) To be me in this group is to be a bit lost (laughter). To be lost, because everything is in Finnish. (...) I try to find out what I must do and say. (...) So, to be me in this group is to be a bit lost, yet present and gradually finding own place. (TG, In7M)

...as a native Finn I dare not comment this at anyway. (TG, In10N)

...one of our group members has taken a certain “role” (...) sometimes this person has even acted as the teacher of our teacher, teaching and giving her ideas regarding how to play the songs. (MG, PD3N)

He has a clear role in the group, (...) many for sure consider him as some kind of a joker. (TG, PD1)

A bonus impactor: the audiences

An aspect that is not present in the social maps but is evident in some of the participant diaries and in survey responses is the impact of the live audiences faced by both groups.

One encouraging feedback I received from one of the audience is paraphrased as “You play the Bongos so very well, (...) I would prefer you play the Bongos rather than the piano”. I guess I have some other hidden skills to develop. (MG, PD4M)

The performance was once again sold out, and this brought energy to the whole workgroup. Many were amazed, have they really come to see us? Pride in one's own work shows in people. (TG, PDIN)

Research question 2: What kind of learning outcomes can be found in the data?

The data referring to learning outcomes is twofold. First, there are the related mentions in the learning diaries and the interviews of the participants. Second, in the feedback surveys the participants were asked an open “What did you get for yourself” question, and later on a more structured question “Did you gain some of the following?” with a selection of options a) Something to do / a hobby, b) New acquaintances / friends, c) Knowledge, d) Skills, e) Experiences of success and f) Self-confidence (this option was unfortunately not included in the music pilot’s survey).

There was a difference on the survey forms between the two pilots: the music pilot respondents could only choose “yes or no” the theatre pilot participants had a 5 step Likert-scale to choose, so the data is not fully comparable. Table 1 summarises the 19 answers received:

“What did you gain for yourself from this group?”	Theatre (n=13, 1-5, mean)	Music (n=6, frequency)
a) Something to do / a hobby	2,38	4/6
b) New acquaintances / friends	2,77	6/6
c) Knowledge (specify)	2,46	4/6
d) Skills (specify)	2,23	5/6
e) Experiences of success	2,69	4/6
f) Self-confidence	2,77	-

Table 1: Feedback survey responses on learning outcomes (Käyhkö & Pitkänen 2019)

In both pilot groups new acquaintances/friends was ranked the highest. Self-confidence shared the highest score in the theatre group. When combining the data of the learning diaries and the open answers of the feedback surveys a more detailed picture of the skills gained can be reached (Table 2). This very tentative analysis will be further developed when the interview data is fully analysed.

Skill categories	Music group	Theater group
A) Art form related skills	New songs, knowledge of music (8 mentions)	Choreography, dance and bodywork (15 mentions)
	Singing (4)	Acting skills, role, lines (12)
	Playing an instrument (4)	Stage and backstage work (7)
	Other musical skills (4)	Specific techniques (3)
B) Cultural skills	Cultural understanding (4)	Cultural understanding (12)
	Language skills (1)	Language/communication (21)
	Cultures & music (3)	Cultures & theatre (3)
C) People skills	Getting to know people (6)	Getting to know people (11)
	Collaboration skills (1)	Interpersonal skills (2)
	Dealing with poor group (1)	Patience (1)
D) Personal development	Self-development / self-image (8)	Self-development / self-image (12)
		Surpassing oneself (12)
E) Other skills	Warm-up exercises (1)	Warm-up exercises (4)
	Performing experience (1)	Performing experience (9)
	Pedagogical skills/ideas (1)	Pedagogical skills/ideas (5)
		Time-management (2)
		“Love, education and joy” (1)

Table 2: Skills in the participant diaries and in the open survey responses (Käyhkö & Valtonen 2019)

The main categories of the skills mentioned were defined as a) art form related skills, b) cultural skills, c) people skills, d) personal development and e) other skills. These were learned by doing, from the teacher and from other participants and often accompanied by some specific benefits. In the following some examples of the mentions by categories, supported with some directly related interview excerpts:

A) Art form related skills

I learnt about singing and tried to play some instruments. (MG, SR)

...we learnt about how to fight in movies or on stage without actually touching one another. The techniques we learnt are awesome. (TG, PD3M)

B) Cultural skills

The (pilot group) has really provided a whole new outlook about different people from different parts of the world with various experiences to share in and learn from. (MG, SR)

I got better understanding of different cultures and better networks to theatre people. I already have a new project going on with one person from the group. (TG, SR)

C) People skills

Dealing with a poor group, frustration. (MG, SR)

...enhanced sense of patience. (TG, SR)

D) Personal development

I am discovering some other side of me thanks to this programme. (MG SR)

I learned to use my imagination and forget myself (...) and also better body-control, that kind of small things that you did not think at first. (TG In5M)

E) Other skills

I learnt warm up and singing exercises from the teacher (MG, SR)

Practical stuff, such as time management, group dynamics etc. (TG, SR)

Not all learning was so clearly defined or structured, yet it was considered positive:

It is nice to sing and learn new languages even when not understanding them (MG, SR)

Discussion

The positive social aspect is strong in our data, but also difficulties appear repeatedly. Regarding our first research question this study suggests that for a migrant to fully engage in a liberal arts course it helps to have a strong interest in the art form in question or to be already quite integrated with supporting native contacts. The role of the teacher is important, and people need to feel invited. For many native participants the pilot groups facilitated getting to know migrant people and brushing up their English. Both migrant and native participants felt the impact of people and responsibilities outside the group: friends, family, work and even own parents influenced them.

The data provides both interactive and reflexive positionings, visual and verbal. Mirroring to Slocum and van Langenhove (2003), “explaining” national, cultural or religious identities were sometimes used in speaking of “others” but generally people were positioned by their names or by their commitment. People were referred to as individuals instead of representatives of a stereotypic group *x* (c.f. Maslic 2019, van Langenhove & Harré 1999b) or “them”, which is considered as one of the root-causes of polarisation in the Bart Brandsma’s polarisation management method (Lenos & Keltjens 2017). Self-positionings varied from the outskirts of the group to being a bit “lost” or at the heart of the action.

Regarding our second research question on the learning outcomes, the art form related skills dominate, but also personal development and other skills were recognised. Cultural understanding, language learning and enhanced communication skills were frequently mentioned. The “problem” or the “fluency” of the language was also used as a reason of positioning. This is echoed by Debray and Spencer-Oatley (2019), who name several other research results pointing to the same direction.

The two pilot courses can be seen as try-outs of the sustainable, impacting and reforming liberal adult education proposed by Teräsahde and Manninen (2019) or as examples of Wildemeersch’s (2017) version of Gert Biesta’s ‘pedagogy of the publicness’, ‘dissensus’ and ‘interruption’.

Conclusions

This study has several limitations. The data was collected to facilitate evaluation, not as a part of a well-structured research project. The representativeness and sample size of our partially incomparable data can be questioned. We all have been involved in the process and the analysis of the data is not complete. Nevertheless, we have rich, multivocal and triangulated data that point to certain results. In the context of two-way integration these two far-from-perfect pilots provide three different types of social and societal benefits, which all open paths for further research.

First, the participants of these courses got to know people they would not have normally met, widened their networks, gained better understanding of themselves and “others”, learned languages, developed patience, and honed their art-form-related skills. Also big attitude steps were taken. Getting glimpses of each other’s ways of seeing the world widened the perspectives of many – and especially of the Finns with few prior contacts with migrants. In sum: two-way integration did happen. Our study also suggests that shared groups may serve migrant and native participants differently: for migrants they seem to offer a way of deepening their integration and for natives a starting point for meeting diverse people.

Secondly, the piloting offered an “on-the-job training course” for the organisers. For example, the use of co-teachers with migrant background helped balancing the theatre pilot, and in the music pilot one participant spontaneously took the role of an assistant teacher. Using a diverse team of teachers seems to even the playground.

Thirdly, both pilots produced well-received public performances. Together these two pilots gathered an audience of approximately 500 people. Following up the audiences of similar performances with research could give insight to the wider impact of this kind of activities.

The development needs were also clear. Both groups suffered from absenteeism and time-management issues. More ice-breaking activities and cultural interpreters to discuss the misunderstandings with were suggested. It was hard for asylum-seeking adults to participate, mainly due to a) the geographic distance of the reception centres and b) having difficulties in committing oneself into a lengthy process in such an uncertain situation of life. Better personal support was needed. However, the music pilot played in an event co-organised by a reception centre and a village association, and asylum-seeking women’s group made props for the theatre pilot. Despite the challenges we encourage LAE providers with reception centres near-by to keep offering options of participation also for the adults seeking asylum.

This study suggests that when people share a hobby and a common goal, they also find connections. Singing the same song or sharing scenes together can even make people change their prior positionings. A native middle-aged male journalist confirmed this by writing how significant it was for him to prepare a scene of the play with a young Middle-East-origin mother: “I realised that also my own roots were somewhere else than just in the pure Finnish cultural area. Though, is there such a thing as “pure” Finnishness?” (Salonen, 2019).

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