What are Finnish university students’ motives for participating in student activism?

Liisa Ansala*, Satu Uusiautti and Kaarina Määttä

Faculty of Education, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

(Received 25 February 2015; accepted 20 April 2015)

Active citizenship is a goal in which universities want to invest: student activism has shown to increase students’ skills and support positive study atmosphere. The purpose of this study was to analyse university students’ motives for participating in student activism in order to find out ways of enhancing the development of active citizenship in students. This was a narrative study in which 47 student activists of Finnish university student activist organisations wrote their personal narratives about their careers as student activists. According to the data, the students had many motives for participating in student activism, such as making friends, fixing deficits in the study environment and benefitting their future work careers. The study also showed that sometimes students participated in student activism only by a coincidence. Based on the findings, suggestions for practical means to develop active citizenship in university students are discussed from the point of view of students themselves, teachers and universities.

Keywords: student activism; citizenship; participation; universities; student organisations; university student

Introduction

Active citizenship and youth’s civic engagements are topical themes at the moment (Delanty, 2003). The question of whether active citizenship can be learned and taught has also become essential (e.g. Littleton, Miell, & Faulkner, 2004). Actually, this question is closely connected with the negative image of youth activity and participation in today’s societies (Wass, 2006). According to a recent longitudinal study (see Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010), today’s youths are also more cynical than the youth 30 years ago having an influence to their willingness to participate in common activities. Neither seem voluntary organisational activities interest the youth any longer (Burchell, 1995).

In sum, fewer young people exhibit the following citizenship features: belongs to a group of any kind, participates in monthly religious events, belongs to a union, reads a newspaper at least once a week, or votes (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; see also Mindich, 2005). University students’ prolonged transition from adolescence to adulthood can also mean slower transition toward active citizenship (see e.g. Andolina et al., 2003; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

Still, university education offers plenty of opportunities to take part in common activities. In the college world, students have hundreds of organizations about hobbies and influencing available. In addition, it has been shown that those students, who participate in activism during their bachelor’s degree education, will be more active as adults as well (Fendrich & Lovoy, 1988). We discuss active citizenship in detail in the Theoretical Background.

*Corresponding author. Email: liisa.ansala@lyy.fi

© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
For students themselves, organisational activity can be quite beneficial; international studies show that student activism provides many kinds of skills and networks for students (e.g. Andolina et al., 2003; Fendrich & Lovoy, 1988; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kerpelman, 1969). Still some students become student activists, but an increasing number does not (e.g. Syvertsen et al., 2011). Given this fact, it is interesting to study the motives for participation in student activism because this information can help to enhance the learning of active citizenship skills. The purpose of this study was to analyse university students’ paths into student activists. The research target was therefore those university students who have been student activists themselves. The assumption is that their experiences and perceptions, their motives, will reveal ways of enhancing the development of active citizenship during university studies.

Theoretical background

The concept of active citizenship

The concepts and contexts of citizenship are manifold. Its sub-concept ‘active citizenship’ is the main concept of this study. Traditionally, the citizenship means a membership of a community (Marshall, 1950) but also a sense of belonging referring to a group identity one adopts (Meglino & Korsgaard, 2004). Citizenship and national identity are stable but they do not necessarily correspond to a person’s own perception of his or her identity or social reality (Hall, 1996).

Active Citizenship is more than participating in political decision-making, voting or standing for elections:

Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society (Council of Europe, 2003).

It has been even claimed that active citizenship results directly from participation (Barber, 2009). Youths’ active participation is a necessary foundation for active citizenship. However, the definition of participation is, at least, contradictory and often done from adults’ perspective (Barber 2009).

The concept of citizenship has changed during the past few decades. The communal value basis molded the concept toward the idea of a citizen possessing certain rights (liberal concept). Likewise, the neo-liberal understanding referring to citizens as consumers and citizenship as a formal status has changed (Delanty, 2003). Earlier discussion has strongly emphasised citizens’ rights, whereas the modern thinking focuses on the themes of civil duties and engagement (see e.g. Somers, 1995; Syvertsen et al., 2011). According to Delanty (2003), citizenship is something learnable and the civil rights are obtained hand-in-hand with equivalent duties. Barber (2009) argues that we are moving away from passive to active citizenship.

Voluntary organisational activities, such as student activism, include joint efforts for the common good, development of communalism among students and learning of active citizenship skills (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005). Furthermore, active citizenship as a concept can be divided into public and private citizenship (Harju, 2004), while the later resembles consumerism, the former aims at participation and influence (see Benn, 2000; Lawson, 2001).

Becoming an active citizen is a life-long learning process. It aims at development in citizenship skills and participation, which is the opposite of negligence, ignorance and passivity (San Antonio, 2008). Life-long learning enables human beings to act in
a self-directed way in the changing life (Flynn & Vredevoogd, 2010; Knowles, 1975) where the concepts of active citizenship, engagement and civilisation intertwine (see Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005). Therefore, citizenship is a constructivist learning process. Learning can emerge not only in typical life situations but also when facing major crises and injustices. The discourse of active citizenship is turning from citizens’ rights toward moral and intellectual issues: in this sense, citizenship is also commitment to the society’s cultural citizenship highlighting citizens’ identification and sense of belonging (Delanty, 2003).

Active citizenship and university education as a phase of life

Human beings’ lives include various age-related life phases. The study years in adolescence (age of 17–22) consist of leaving the childhood home, choosing one’s field of study and building one’s own life style and family (e.g. Catalano et al., 2004; see also Aittola, 1986). University studies happen in a phase of rapid maturing because the aforementioned changes usually take place during the education. Students themselves perceive university studies as a phase that precedes the “actual life” as an adult (e.g. Molgat, 2007).

University studies as a life phase seem to have two parts: the starting phase and the final phase of studies. During the starting phase, students become independent, form their personal world views, and make their career-related choices. As the end of studies starts to loom, the core changes in students relate to the role of citizenship in their lives and starting a family (Chickering & Havinghurst, 1981; Lowe & Gayle, 2007).

Successful learning of active citizenship necessitates that students have enough choices and opportunities to influence their own lives and study processes. During the university education, students learn at least as much about informal learning in student life and student communities as about formal education. The significance of informal learning cannot be underestimated. In addition, students do have other goals to their university education than just the formal learning goals stated in curricula (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012).

University communities and studies possess certain special characteristics that also direct participation in student activism in a special manner (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). The atmosphere and outer circumstances of university studies (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996; Keller, 2001; Pascarella, 1980) as well as various student cultures (Renn & Arnold, 2003) reflect on students’ study motivation (Allen, 1999; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991), study success (Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006), study activity (Baldwin & Williams, 1988), and perceived meaningfulness of studies (Flethcher, 2005). They form the socio-constructivist basis for learning in university communities and related student activist organisations.

This study focused on student activism during university education and the skills and experience gathered from activism (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Theilheimer, 1991). The study is based on the idea of recognising non-formal and communal learning (Littleton, Miell, & Faulkner, 2004) as a part of university studies when related to the development of active citizenship (Benn, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Zellermayer & Ponte, 2005), adjustment to society (e.g. Helgesen & Nesset, 2007; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004), and increase in study motivation (Aiemmin hankitun . . . . , 2007). From an individual student’s point of view, the significance of non-formal learning can be greater than what is commonly recognised: the expertise and experience gathered can help in finding employment, and these skills can be employed at work (Brown, 2004; Fendrich, 1974; Hoge & Ankney, 1982; McAdam, 1989).
Method

This study focused on the start-up phase of university studies’ participation in student activism. The purpose was to analyse the reasons for participating in student activism. The following research question was set for this study: What are the motives for participating in student activism according to the university student activists’ own perceptions?

To answer this question, this study employed the narrative research approach that allows the research participants to construct their own narratives and stories, and to interpret their own experiences. Narrative research has a constructivist nature: narratives are not actual events but personal illustrations about them (Bruner, 1987; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The narrative approach formed the basic element of this research as the data would be based on research participants’ experiences and their own stories: the aim was to collect university students’ narratives about their paths into student activists. They could voluntarily write about those events, motives and choices they considered important, and this way, they would also be interpreting their own action.

This study took place in Finland that has 14 universities; thus, the student activists in these universities form the target group of the study. The Finnish universities have student organisations focusing on various themes, such as numerous study programme and department-specific organisations, hobby, culture and recreational organisations, campus organisations, international study organisations, sport and sport club organisations, political and societal organisations and religious organisations. In addition to these, each university has a students’ union that must be formed according to the Universities Act (46§). The task of students’ union is to promote students’ societal, social and mental aspirations, as well as their studies and position in society. The students’ unions must participate in the educational task of university by preparing students for active, aware and critical citizenship. The decision-making organ of a students’ union is the representatives elected by an election. The students’ unions also have boards of trustees and other organs. Finnish students’ unions are special when compared with unions internationally because each and every university student must be a member of a students’ union, and the membership has a yearly fee, charged by universities.

Due to the varied nature of student organisations in Finnish universities, this study focused on students who act actively in positions of trust in students’ unions, study programme-specific organisations, or political student organisations. This selection also made it possible to have representatives of various types of student organisations, which appeared justified when aiming at obtaining as rich data as possible about the phenomenon. In order to define who are active agents in these unions and organisations, their chairpersons were chosen and recruited in this study. The recruitment was based on random selection from all Finnish universities based on the number of organisations in each university. The logic was that from universities with over 40 organisations 10 chairpersons were recruited, while from universities with less than 40 organisations, five chairpersons were recruited. In addition, the email was sent to the board members and secretary generals of the Finnish student unions (N = 14, there is one union in each university) and boards of national political student organizations. First, we tried to collect data among the boards of student unions but managed to recruit only five members. After the turn of the year as the new board members had been selected, we expanded the study to the aforementioned organizations. Therefore, the target group of this study consisted 385 students from all Finnish universities.

The research participants were approached by an email including a request to send an essay about their thoughts and experiences of becoming a student activist. The title of the essay would be ‘My story as a student activist’. The email is a convenient way of contacting people and collecting data because most of university students use their emails
on daily basis. However, emails are challenging because they lack the direct, face-to-face communication between the researcher and research participants, and thus, for example it is impossible to interpret the participants’ nonverbal communication (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Even if the data collection by email can be time-consuming and there is the risk that material obtained is superficial and ambiguous, researchers have started to use more and more emails in qualitative studies where the data collection method is a qualitative, unstructured questionnaire (Fontana & Frey, 2008).

The data collection took place between November 2013 and March 2014. Only 48 students answered to the writing request that was sent to the 358 students via emails, and one of them was studying at a polytechnic and was thus excluded from the data. The total number of stories was therefore 47. Of them, 29 were women and 19 men. Their mean age was 23.5, representing well the age of university students in Finland (78.7% of respondents were 20–24 years old).

The response rate was 12.2%. The low number of participants can be partly explained with the busy schedules students activists use to have at the beginning of a year. For example, one chairperson answered that she does not have time to write an essay of this length. The student activists’ agendas included the preparation of the spring meeting and auditing after the end of the accounting period. In addition, the flood of emails can be huge, and some important emails can remain unnoticed. Despite the low response rate, the data appeared rich and of high quality. The narratives that were received provided a profound illustration of student activists’ paths and activities.

The data were analysed by using the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis (see Polkinghorne, 1995). The analysis of narratives aimed at categorising the narratives by themes or categories emerging from the contents (see also Mayring, 2000). The narrative analysis means that the narratives are used for constructing a new meta-narrative that combines the most essential themes brought up in the original narratives (Bruner, 1987). In this study, the narrative analysis did not use any predetermined categories but the categories found in the data were purely data-driven (see Mayring, 2000).

In all, when analysing autobiographies, it is evident that people have various ways of producing narratives. Their stories differ from each other when it comes, for example, how much one reveals about a certain phase in life or an event. The thematic density is shown in written essays or stories as well. Some themes can be described quite superficially while others may be discussed in a very detailed or profound manner (Goodson, 2013). Although every person is different, everyone’s stories tend to have somewhat similar plots that can be divided into various constructs (Goodson, 2013).

The head researcher of this study has participated for seven years, which covers the years of her university studies, in various organisations at the university. Her personal experiences influenced the selection of the study theme and her wish to be able to develop active citizenship. Her experience might have directed analysis of the data, but on the other hand, her profound familiarity with the practice has also made it possible to do correct interpretations from the data. However, to guarantee the objectivity of the study, the results and study processes have been reported as explicitly as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Profound understanding also creates a sense of familiarity with the theme (see Cetrez, 2005). Cetrez (2005) points out that there is no such thing as a neutral researcher. Instead, it is merely a question of finding the right dimensions between proximity and distance with the subject. Careful reflection on the researcher’s relationship with the theme is crucial (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011). In addition, collaboration with a research group that consists of the authors of the article was to increase the trustworthiness of the study.
Results

The motives for participating in student activism could be categorised into five categories: social motives, urge to participate and influence, appreciation of experience and benefits from student activism, activism as a life style and coincidence. The categories are partly overlapping, but have some distinctive features that will be introduced next.

Social motives

Three types of social motives could be distinguished from the data. The first one was to make friendships, which appeared as the most important social motive for participating in student activism. Friendships were given various meanings: students either wanted to create new social relationships or maintain the existing ones. Many students had moved to a new place to study, and participation in student activism had eased their settlement. In addition, student activism could serve as an opportunity to make friends among those students who did not find friends easily at the university, for example, because of their shyness.

I think that my first reason to participate in the student organization was to make friends. I have always been a little shy and reserved, and this seemed like an easy way of getting in touch with other people. (Student activist no. 5)

I had just moved to this new place and knew hardly anyone before the studies started. Student activism offered a good and easy environment to acquaint myself with new people and build a whole new social network." (Student activist no. 41)

The second social motive was recommendations by friends. Friends had a significant role in student activism when it came to the motives of participating in activities: many had joined the group after being invited by a friend or upon a friend’s recommendation. It was considered easier to become a member when already knowing one or two current activists or when one was invited to join. Many of the students in these data were, indeed, induced by their friends:

At the beginning, I took part to an event, and because many older student activists told that I would make a good hostess, so then I decided to stand in the election. (Student activist no. 17)

Initially, I was roped in the [student organization]. During my first study year, my friend started to induce me to apply for becoming a responsible event organizer with her. I bet around the bush with the suggestion until after an evening gathering I said yes. No one else stood in for the position of responsible event organizer, so we were chosen. (Student activist no. 30)

The third social motive was to participate in student activism together with friends and inspired by idols. Although activism was a personal decision, the data included situations in which the whole group of friends had made the decision together. As if they had found the courage to become activists together. This was more common in other than political student activists, while the decision of joining a political student organisation seemed to be more related to the influence of idols, people who had started their political careers as student activists.

Still, I am bold and persevering. This strength is based on a group of people having supported me; many of which have made their ways as activists to the top and strengthened my perception of me having the make of a political force despite the prejudices. In other words, I have lifted to important positions in organizations as well. (Student activist no. 26)
Urge to participate and influence

The students’ narratives revealed that motives for participating in student activism also included wish to gather experiences of participation. Many student activists mentioned their urge to influence general issues, which can be called as motive of influencing. It appeared as a general pursue to participate in decision-making and common activities, but not so much on fixing concrete flaws or evils.

I was dissatisfied with the level of communalism at my university, and I wanted to acquire another viewpoint to my study environment and an opportunity to influence the flaws. First, I applied for a trustee student at my department, and after that, a student from my department recommended me to the next board of the student’s union. (Student activist no. 38)

Urge to influence was described as willingness to have an influence on concrete issues, such as a sense of community among students or the number of events organised at the university. Political activists also highlighted their desire to promote goals representing their political values and ideologies.

At the beginning of my second study year, I also started to familiarize with political activity [within a party] after having analyzing for quite a while my political identity. However, I joined this activity more because of my interest in being able to influence the party’s inner guidelines later on if I had time and enough interest, but a strong political career per se did not tempt me. (Student activist no. 43)

According to the narratives, motives for influencing were strong in students who have been active already before coming to the university, for example at high school or in other organisation.

Participating in student activism at the university started quite naturally, because during my high school years I had been very actively involved in the operation of the The Union of Upper Secondary School Students in Finland. Student activism was my hobby, although the six-month military service did interrupt it for a while before the beginning of my university studies. (Student activist no. 43)

Appreciation of the experience and benefits from student activism

The students in this study described that they had participated in student activism also because they wanted to gain vocational skills or other beneficial skills. In this sense, student activism was reported to complement university studies in a very important way. Students could act in positions that could be mentioned in their curricula vitae. In addition, activities in student organisation could offer chances to use their special skills like the following data excerpt illustrates:

I thought that organizational activities would provide beneficial experience of acting in responsible positions and with a group that could be used at work, too. My hope is that I could influence societal matters in my future job, and I think that student activism will be very educative in this sense. (Student activist no. 8)

In addition to vocational experience, the students wrote about a more general category of experiences that were considered useful or desired. For example, student activism could provide something to remember afterward.

I had many reasons to participate in student organization activities. I wanted new experiences – if you have a chance to try and join something, you should seize it. (Student activist no. 8)

Student activism was considered beneficial to study progress as well. The students mentioned study points that could be gained by participating in student organisations; a feature that quite concretely benefits students. On the other hand, student activism could provide challenges that studies otherwise did not provide. One of the student activists
stated that a gap year spent in student organisational activities helped to find study motivation again. Furthermore, all contacts and networks created via student organizations could be considered useful, for example when looking for future employment.

**Activism as a life style**

It was relatively surprising to find out that the motives for participating in student activism were mainly related to formal benefits and other advantages. In Finland, the culture of student life (e.g. including the use of alcohol) was not mentioned as a motive but regarded merely as a consequence. The students did not consider amusement and partying as the reason for participating in student activism. However, for many students, activism has become a life style and giving up on student activism was seen difficult:

> Organizational activism was a dear hobby for me already before coming to the university. At the age of 13, I started as a member of youth board in my home town and acted as one as long as moved in [the current study place]. During these almost six years, I managed to learn this and that about activism, municipal influencing, event organization, performing, and team work. During my high school years, I was a member of a student board. My zeal for activism emerged long before university studies. Therefore, that day I knew I was accepted as a student in the field I had applied, I also decided, when the time comes, to seek my way to the board of the student organization in my study program. (Student activist no. 39)

In addition, the motives for continuing were similar with the motives for participating in student activities: that was what friends did as well.

> At this point, I did not yet think that activism could become a whirlpool that I did not know how to exit. At that phase, I had been involved in activism for so long that I could not retire. (Student activist no. 29)

**Coincidence**

The fifth category emerging from the students’ narratives was a very interesting one. Many of the students described that they had participated in activism without their own active initiation or plan. Instead, they described how they could have been participating in a meeting discussing a specific issue, and eventually, they were chosen to the board of the organisation. Likewise, several students wrote how ‘one thing led to another’, and soon they found themselves as student activists. This was not considered negatively, although their current formal task as a chairperson was not quite what they had wanted to apply. Positive experiences in activism had turned their perceptions into more positive ones.

> At any phase, I did not really plan my next move, and I could tell beforehand only a few positions that I had thought of applying for. For example, I ended up in the board of the faculty council after a student organization meeting that I attended only because I wanted to participate in outlining the directions in which we should develop the student organization and which activities should be ended. (Student activist no. 4)

Notwithstanding, the narratives included notions of not having many applicants to the positions available in student organisations. Especially, in small educational fields, students become induced to join just to get enough people to perform elections.

**Discussion**

These findings can be used for finding ways to increase and support active citizenship. It seems that, instead of students who have been activists already before starting university studies, an especial target would be students who have not participated
in student activism earlier. For the first group, ways of nurturing their activism motives are relevant. However, finding new student activist generations requires work from students themselves, student organisations and universities. This is the only way of securing the fulfilment of active citizenship during university studies and the opportunity to develop positive student culture.

When summing up the findings, participation in student activism meant the emergence of new relationships and strengthening of old ones. Organisational activities molded students’ lives even so considerably that they can find a totally new circle of friends. Indeed, the most important task of activism can be the prevention of loneliness and possibly even exclusion during university studies (e.g. Gilligan, 2000; Vaarala et al., 2013). According to research (Saari, 2013; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005), social integration takes place especially in student activists’ lives. Given these facts, student activism does not provide just new social relationships but also social support to cope with studies.

In addition, urge to participate and influence was mentioned as motives. For those students, who were activists already before university studies, student activism was a self-evident choice. Students’ motivation to participate in activism was increased by their wish to create networks and gain work experience, as well as to find motivation to perform university studies. Positive experiences and achievements supported students’ positive and initiative personal development in general (see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2015).

When evaluating the trustworthiness of this study, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability can be discussed separately (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Shenton, 2004). Because of the researcher’s student activist background, the research methods and results were described in detail. Credibility can be improved by using appropriate methods and solutions related to the research target or theme (Shenton, 2004).

Trustworthiness also covers the selection of research theme, research participants, and data collection methods. The data should be sufficient to answer the research questions. Likewise, the categorisation of data was paid critical attention to guarantee that all relevant themes will be taken into account when presenting the results. Data excerpts show how the participants described each theme found from the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

The transferability criterion tells if the research could be repeated in another situation or by another researcher. In a qualitative study, it is almost impossible to prove the transferability but it can be evaluated theoretically by providing sufficient details about the study procedures (Shenton, 2004). The eventual evaluation is up to the readers of the research report (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Likewise, dependability of the research can be difficult to estimate, but researchers’ reflection and explicit description of methods and solutions made during the research process can also improve the confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

**Conclusion**

A core conclusion of this study was that active citizenship can be enhanced at universities. First, friend students have an important role in student activism. Likewise, student activists themselves have to induce their friends to participate in activities. This conclusion was supported by the emphasis on social motives in the data. Indeed, university students should understand that getting their own friends to join and participate in student activism is the key for the continuation of activism, and even to the increase of activism. However, it is also worth seeing that student activism is not always just sunshine. Young university activists bear huge responsibility for common issues. Likewise, the student activists in this study considered themselves significant exercises of power. In all, the most important task
of universities, university administration and teaching personnel is to understand and recognize the importance of student activism widely as well as to support the work of student organisations.

Second, universities have many ways to encourage students to active citizenship. Students’ increasing mutual interaction correlates directly positively to academic development, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Astin, 1993). It is necessary to discuss about the balance between economic and educational goals, the basic values of university education. Due to their autonomy, universities have the change to foster the development of active citizenship (Astin, 1993). Concretely this can be done, for example, by giving study points from student activism – and this is already in use in some universities in Finland, such as in the authors’ home university.

Third, another way of enhancing active citizenship in university education is to encourage teachers and university lecturers to engage students in active reflection on common issues, for example, through collaborative learning through critical dialogue (FitzSimmons, 2014). Indeed, the ways of being active are manifold, and learning about social, political or other issues one can be active about can happen in university classrooms (see also Lim, 2011).

In today’s world, we cannot be just passive citizens, because many new phenomena mold our society (e.g. immigration, globalisation, exclusion and social inequality) and need our attention increasingly (e.g. Kämppi et al., 2012). Student activism during university studies is likely to develop into active citizenship later in life (Fendrich & Lovoy, 1988), and is therefore a fruitful phase to learn about activism. Indeed, we need new ways of viewing and approaching active citizenship because the rapidly changing society necessitates it (Syvertsen et al., 2011; see also Suoranta, 2008). For example, Isin (2009) points out that

The rights (civil, political, social, sexual, ecological, cultural), sites (bodies, courts, streets, media, networks, borders), scales (urban, regional, national, transnational, international) and acts (voting, volunteering, blogging, protesting, resisting and organizing) through which subjects enact themselves (and others) as citizens need to be interpreted anew. We need a new vocabulary of citizenship. (p. 368)

When reflected this statement on the study at hand, it can be concluded that activism is not only just beneficial to students in many ways in terms of increasing skills, experiences and social networks, but also necessary if we want to ensure that students, who are future agents in social, political and other areas will be aware of and understand the phenomena of the modern world and are able to take active action. Mindich (2005) requires that the current youth must be ‘tuned in’ from the increasing passiveness. The student activists in this study showed that there are many ways to activate students, and understanding about the motives for participation can contribute useful viewpoints to the discussion about the development of active citizenship.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors
MA Liisa Ansala is a PhD student at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her doctoral research focuses on participation, particularly in student activism, and active citizenship in today’s youth.

Adjunct Professor Satu Uusiautti (PhD) works as a researcher at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her personal research interests are in positive psychology, human strengths and positive development, and success and well-being. Her latest publications include “The Psychology of
Becoming a Successful Worker. Research on the changing nature of achievement at work” (by S. Uusiautti & K. Määttä, 2015, Routledge).

Professor Kaarina Määttä (PhD) is the professor of educational psychology and vice rector of the University of Lapland, Finland. Her personal research interests are love and human strengths, the pedagogy of the supervision of doctoral theses, as well as teacher training and teacherhood. Her latest publications include “Critical Eye on Education” (S. Uusiautti & K. Määttä Eds., 2015, Global Press United).

References

Aiemmin hankitun osaamisen tunnustaminen korkeakouluissa [Recognition of previously gained expertise at higher education institutions] (2007). Helsinki: Ministry of Education and Culture.
Aittola, T. (1986). Yliopisto-opiskelu elämänvaiheena. Esitutkimusraportti [University studies as a phase of life. Report of preliminary research]. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.
Allen, D. (1999). Desire to finish college: An empirical link between motivation and persistence. Research in Higher Education, 40, 461–485. doi:10.1023/A:1018740226006
Andolina, M. W., Jenkins, K., Zukin, C., & Keeter, S. (2003). Habits from home, lessons from school: Influences on youth civic engagement. Political Science And Politics, 36, 275–280. doi:10.1017/S104909650300221X
Astin, A. (1993). What matters in college? Liberal Education, 79, 74–75.
Astin, A. W., Sax, L. J., & Avalos, J. (1999). The long-term effects of volunteerism during the undergraduate years. The Review of Higher Education, 21, 187–202. doi:10.1353/rhe.1999.0002
Baldwin, J., & Williams, H. (1988). Active learning: A trainer’s guide. Oxford: Blackwell Education.
Barber, T. (2009). Participation, citizenship, and well-being. Engaging with young people, making a difference. Los Angeles, CA: Sage. doi:10.1177/11033088080801700103
Ben-Ari, A., & Enosh, G. (2011). Processes of reflectivity: knowledge construction in qualitative research. Qualitative Social Work, 10, 152–171. doi:10.1177/1473325010369024
Ben, R. (2000). The genesis of active citizenship in the learning society. Studies in the Education of Adults, 32, 241–256.
Brown, S. C. (2004). Where this path may lead: Understanding career decision-making for post-college life. Journal of College Student Development, 45, 375–390. doi:10.1353/csd.2004.0046
Brunner, J. (1987). Life as narrative. Social Research, 71, 691–710.
Burchell, D. (1995). The attributes of citizens: virtue, manners and the activity of citizenship. Economy and Society, 24, 540–558. 10.1080/03085149500000024
Catalano, R. F., Berglund, M. L., Ryan, J. A. M., Lonczak, H. S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). Positive youth development in the united states: research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs. The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591, 98–124. doi:10.1177/0002716203260102
Cetrez, Ô. (2005). An insider at the margins: My position when researching within a community I belong to. In H. Helve (Ed.), Mixed methods in youth research (pp. 232–251). Tampere: Juvenes Print.
Chickering, A., & Havinghurst, R. J. (1981). The life cycle. In A. Chickering (Ed.), The modern American college (pp. 16–50). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Council of Europe. (2003). Revised European charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life. Retrieved from: http://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/1017993/1380082/COE_charter_participation_en.pdf/520b9cb4-73a8-4556-913a-c77ee6596c7e
Cruce, T. M., Wolniak, G. C., Seifert, T. A., & Pascarella, E. T. (2006). Impacts of good practices on cognitive development, learning orientations, and graduate degree plans during the first year of college. Journal of College Student Development, 47, 365–383. 10.1353/csd.2006.0042
Degi, E. L., Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., & Ryan, R. M. (1991). Motivation and education: the self-determination perspective. Educational Psychologist, 26, 325–346. doi:10.1080/00461520.1991.9653137
Delanty, G. (2003). Citizenship as a learning process: Disciplinary citizenship versus cultural citizenship. International Journal of Lifelong Education, 22, 597–605. doi:10.1080/0260137032000138158
Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), The Sage handbook of qualitative research (pp. 1–41). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2008). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials (pp. 1–43). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fendrich, J. M. (1974). Activists ten years later: A test of generational unit continuity. Journal of Social Issues, 30, 95–118. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1974.tb00729.x

Fendrich, J. M., & Lovoy, K. L. (1988). Back to the future: Adult political behavior of former student activists. American Sociological Review, 53, 780–784. 10.2307/2095823

FitzSimmons, R. (2014). On the importance of collaborative peer learning as a collective learning experience in Finnish higher education classrooms. Critical Education, 5(16), 1–18.

Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood. The Future Of Children, 20, 159–179. 10.1353/foc.0.0043

Flethcer, A. (2005). Meaningful student involvement. Guide to students as partners in school change (2nd ed.). Olympia, WA: The FreeChild Project. Retrieved from http://www.soundout.org/MSIGuide.pdf

Flynn, W. J., & Vredevoogd, J. (2010). The future of learning: 12 views on emerging trends in higher education. Planning for Higher Education, 38, 5–10.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. (2008). The interview. From neutral stance to political involvement. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials (pp. 115–159). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gilligan, R. (2000). Adversity, resilience and young people: the protective value of positive school and spare time experiences. Children & Society, 14, 37–47. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2000.tb00149.x

Goodson, I. F. (2013). Developing narrative theory. Life histories and personal representation. Abingdon: Routledge.

Graneheim, U. H., & Lundman, B. (2004). Qualitative content analysis in nursing research: concepts, procedures and measures to achieve trustworthiness. Nurse Education Today, 24, 105–112. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2003.10.001

Greenwald, R., Hedges, L. V., & Laine, R. D. (1996). The effect of school resources on student achievement. Review of Educational Research, 66, 361–396. doi:10.3102/00346543066003361

Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs identity. In S. Hall & P. DuGay (Eds.), Questions of cultural identity (pp. 1–17). London: Sage.

Harju, A. (2004). Aktivisten kansalaisten Suomi. Keskustelunavaus ja rikostunto aikakoulutuksen kehittämisestä [The Finland of active citizens. An opening about the development of organizational education]. Helsinki: Edita Prima.

Helgesen, Ø., & Nesset, E. (2007). Images, satisfaction and antecedents: Drivers of student loyalty? A case study of a Norwegian University college. Corporate Reputation Review, 10, 38–59. doi:10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550037

Kerpelman, L. C. (1969). Student political activism and ideology: Comparative characteristics of activists and non-activists. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 16, 8–13. 10.1037/h0026682

Knowles, M. (1975). Self-directed learning, New York, NY: Association Press.

Kuh, G. D., Cruce, T. M., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., & Gonyea, R. M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. The Journal of Higher Education, 79, 540–563. doi:10.1353/jhe.0.0019

Kääppi, K., Välimaa, R., Ojala, K., Tyynälä, J., Haapasalo, I., Villberg, J., & Kunnas, L. (2012). Kouluokokemusten kansainvälistä vertailua 2010 sekä muutokset Suomessa ja Pohjoismaissa 1994–2010 – WHO-koululaistutkimus (HBSC-study) [International comparison of school experiences 2010 and changes in Finland and Nordic Countries in 1994–2010 – WHO student research (HBSC-study)]. Helsinki: National Board of Education of Finland.
Lawson, H. (2001). Active citizenship in schools and the community. *Curriculum Journal, 12*, 163–178. doi:10.1080/09585170122413

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research. Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lim, L. (2011). Beyond logic and argument analysis: Critical thinking, everyday problems and democratic deliberation in Cambridge International Examinations’ Thinking Skills curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 43*, 783–807. doi:10.1080/00220272.2011.590231

Littleton, K., Miell, D., & Faulkner, D. (2004). *Learning to collaborate, collaborating to learn*. New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

Lowe, J., & Gayle, V. (2007). Exploring the work/life/study balance: the experience of higher education students in a Scottish further education college. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 31*, 225–238. doi:10.1080/03098770701424942

Marshall, T. H. (1950). *Citizenship and social class and other Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative content analysis. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1*(2). Retrieved from: http://www.qualitativeresearch.net/fqs/fqs-e/2-00inhalt-e.htm

Meglino, B. M., & Korsgaard, A. (2004). Considering rational self-interest as a disposition: organizational implications of other orientation. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 89*, 946–959. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.89.6.946

McAdam, D. (1989). The biographical consequences of activism. *American Sociological Review, 54*, 744–760. 10.2307/2117751

Meech, D. T. Z. (2005). *Tuned out: Why Americans under 40 don’t follow the news*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Molgat, M. (2007). Do transitions and social structures matter? How ‘emerging adults’ define themselves as adults. *Journal of Youth Studies, 10*, 495–516. doi:10.1080/13676260701580769

Miäätä, K., & Usuiauitti, S. (2012). How to enhance the smoothness of university students’ study paths? *International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 1*, 47–60. doi:10.5861/ijrse.2012.v1i1.16

Park, N., Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). Strengths of character and well-being. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*, 603–619. 10.1521/jscp.23.5.603.50748

Pascarella, E. T. (1980). Student-faculty informal contact and college outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 50*, 545–595. 10.3102/00346543050004545

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal Of Qualitative Studies In Education, 8*, 5–23. 10.1080/0951839950080103

Renn, K. A., & Arnold, K. D. (2003). Reconceptualizing research on college student peer culture. *The Journal of Higher Education, 74*, 261–291. doi:10.1353/jhe.2003.0025

Ropers-Huilman, B., Carwile, L., & Barnett, K. (2005). Student activists’ characterizations of administrators in higher education: perceptions of power in ‘the system’. *The Review of Higher Education, 28*, 295–312. doi:10.1353/rhe.2005.0012

Saari, J. (2013). *Mitä järjestötoiminnasta seuraa? Aalto-yliopiston ja Helsingin yliopiston opiskelijoiden kokemuksia järjestötoiminnasta opiskelijabarometrin aineistossa. OTUS:n alustavia tutkimustuloksia 2.4.2013* [What are the effects of organizational activity? Students’ experiences of organizational activity in the barometer of Aalto University and University of Helsinki. Preliminary research results in April 2, 2013]. A presentation at the meeting of National Union of University Students in Finland.

San Antonio, D. M. (2008). Understanding students’ strengths and struggles. *Educational Leadership, 65*, 74–79.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*, 63–75.

Somers, M. R. (1995). Narrating and naturalizing civil society and citizenship theory: The place of political culture and the public sphere. *Sociological Theory, 13*, 229–274. 10.2307/223298

Suoranta, J. (2008). Teaching sociology: Toward collaborative social relations in educational situations. *Critical Sociology, 34*, 709–723. doi:10.1177/0896920508093364

Syvertsen, A. K., Wray-Lake, L., Flanagan, C. A., Wayne Osgood, M. D., & Briddell, L. (2011). Thirty-year trends in U.S. adolescents’ civic engagement: A story of changing participation and educational differences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 21*, 586–594. doi:10.1111/j.1522-7952.2010.00706.x

Theilheimer, R. (1991). Involving students in their own learning. *Clearing House, 65*, 123–126.
Trzesniewski, K. H., & Donnellan, M. B. (2010). Rethinking ‘generation me’: A study of cohort effects from 1976-2006. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 5, 58–75. doi:10.1177/1745691609356789

Uusiautti, S., & Määtä, K. (2015). The psychology of becoming a successful worker. Research on the changing nature of achievement at work. New York, NY: Routledge.

Vaarala, M., Määtä, K., & Uusiautti, S. (2013). College students’ experiences of and coping with loneliness – Possibilities of peer support. International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 2, 13–28. doi:10.5861/ijrse.2013.510

Wass, H. (2006). Sukupolviefekti äänestämisessä: mittaamiseen ja selittämiseen liittyviä kysymyksiä [The generation effect in voting: Questions about measurement and interpretation]. Politikka, 48, 32–47.

Wei, M., Russell, D. W., & Zakalik, R. A. (2005). Adult attachment, social self-efficacy, self-disclosure, loneliness, and subsequent depression for freshman college students: a longitudinal study. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52, 602–614. doi:10.1037/0022-0167.52.4.602

Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice. Learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Universities Act 558/2009. Retrieved from the FinLex data base: http://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/2009/20090558#Pidp3968208.

Zellermayer, M., & Ponte, P. (2005). Activist professionalism: an alternative ideological platform. Teaching and Teacher Education, 21, 585–591. doi:10.1016/j.tate.2005.03.008

Zhao, C.-M., & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. Research in Higher Education, 45, 115–138. doi:10.1023/B:RIHE.0000015692.88534.de

Zhao, C.-M., Kuh, G. D., & Carini, R. M. (2005). A comparison of international student and American student engagement in effective educational practices. The Journal of Higher Education, 76, 209–231. doi:10.1353/jhe.2005.0018