Fostering political participation through the organisation of party education in Sweden

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ABSTRACT
Political parties are often construed as playing an imperative role in democratic systems. However, what happens inside a party once people have joined as members and during their continued engagement is underexplored in research. This paper investigates the organisation of party education within political parties in Sweden and how political participation may be fostered. The vantage point is the institutional level in the party organisation when designing education and providing learning opportunities for party members. The empirical material consists of interviews with central representatives from all eight parties represented in the national parliament following the elections in 2018. This collected material has been analysed using concepts from the community of practice framework. The results indicate attempts by the parties to affect both individual members and local party branches through the organisation of party education.

KEYWORDS
Political parties; political participation; party education; community of practice

Introduction
People who take the step to become active members of a political party in Sweden will do so on a voluntary basis. Once they have joined, most of them will at some point be offered education by their party. Taking part in party education is one expression of political participation. How political participation is being fostered through party education may later come to affect how people act externally, for example as elected representatives in parliamentary assemblies.

However, what actually happens inside a party once people join and during their continued political engagement is underexplored in research (Allern and Pedersen 2007, Dahl 2011, Van Haute 2011). Van Haute (2011, p. 21) states that ‘the role and influence of members in the party organisation, as well as the way they live and perceive their membership, are vast and rather unexplored fields of research’. It is also more common for research on political participation to focus on various modes of participation outside of political parties, such as civic engagement or political
consumerism (Van Deth 2014). Efforts have however been carried out to survey and explain the decline in party membership witnessed in different countries (Whiteley 2011, Van Biezen et al. 2012). How this change affects the overall work of political parties has also been investigated (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010, Kölln 2015, Kölln 2016).

The quantitative aspect of political participation is important, as it relates to both social representation and the legitimacy of the democratic system (Dal Bó et al. 2017, Lindgren et al. 2017). However, a more qualitative dimension concerns different aspects of how political subjects come to interpret their political role and agency. This may relate to which knowledge, ideas, and skills they are equipped with through their engagement with the party. Wenger (2000, p. 238) stresses that ‘if knowing is an act of belonging, then our identities are a key structuring element of how we know’. Much earlier, Almond and Powell (1966, p. 124) asserted that participation in party activities may affect both cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions. The shaping of these dimensions may relate to processes of political socialisation and the consolidation or modification of occurring political-cultural patterns, attitudes, and beliefs. So, belonging to a party may affect how people come to understand something. How people come to know something may also affect how they come to act.

The organising of education within political parties means that specific conditions for learning are provided. Different conditions for learning may imply that political participation and agency are fostered in different ways. One possible face of this variation is how political work is organised and carried out internally within the party, on both individual and collective levels. It may, however, also be embodied and reified externally if and when members of political parties become elected representatives. To a certain extent, this paper connects to the approach suggested by Lave (2019, p. 2) to ‘work towards an encompassing, dialectical understanding of learning as an integral part of the condition of possibility for social life in all its political-economic, historical, and processual particularities’. These particularities may vary between contexts and transform over time.

In Sweden, the political landscape has changed dramatically over time (Elgenius and Wennerhag 2018). The Swedish party system which once was widely known for its stability has become much more unstable, fragmented, and confrontational (Möller 2020). These tendencies were noticeable also in the parliamentary elections of 2018, which resulted in political turmoil and months of negotiation before an (unstable) government eventually was formed (Aylott and Bolin 2019). One crucial dimension behind the turmoil was the continued increased electoral support for the far-right party the Sweden Democrats and the positions of the seven other parties (the Left Party, the Green Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Moderate Party) on how to relate to them. The turmoil has continued throughout the term of office with parliamentary votes of no confidence, the government crisis of 2021, and the rapprochement of various parties towards the Sweden Democrats. The political situation has also become more complicated with the traditional focus surrounding socio-economic issues and the political right-left scale increasingly being challenged by socio-cultural dimensions (Elgenius and Wennerhag 2018).

It is within these changed political and social circumstances that the parties need to learn to navigate and work for political change, while also caring for the people that
have joined as members and preparing them for coming elections and endeavours. The aim of this paper is to explore what the central levels of political parties in Sweden attempt to accomplish with the internal education they organise and provide to their members. The research questions are: What kind of education is being designed? Is political participation fostered by the organisation of party education? Does party education constitute a central resource that affects how collective political work is conducted in local party branches?

The empirical material consists of interviews with central representatives from all eight national political parties in Sweden and relevant documents in relation to education in the parties. This material has been processed and analysed using a socio-cultural perspective and concepts from the community of practice framework. The unit of analysis is the institutional level, which—as described by Wenger (2000)—can be understood as the central level of the party as an organisation. The results indicate that dimensions relating to political participation and how collective work in local party branches should be conducted may be affected by the design and organisation of party education. Party education may also constitute a context where participants are integrated into the party community while ensuring the commitment of members to work for the party competently.

**Party education in Sweden**

An early study by Gidlund and Möller (1999) addressed the inner organisation and work of political parties in Sweden. It notes that although the numbers of members and internal meetings have declined over time, different educational activities remain an important element of local political work. The roles that internal meetings are conceived to play are related to the functions of mobilising members and voters, providing legitimacy for decisions taken, and the social dimension. The organisation of party education also relates to the recruitment of new members. Soinien and Etzler (2006) note that party education can be used as a means to introduce newcomers to the parties. This may be especially important for the group of people who are already underrepresented in politics. These people might otherwise join a local party branch that is homogenous or excluding, which would not offer conditions for continued commitment. However, once people have joined, another question concerns why members remain as party activists. According to Dahl (2011), parties offer both collective and selective goods to their members to keep them continuously involved. Collective goods concern advantages that are open to all members, which could be exemplified by people feeling connected to the ideological and political community of the party or being invited to partake in general party work. Selective goods, on the other hand, are not available to all but restricted to some members. This may concern the distribution of political positions internally or externally, power or material advantages. Over time, members are seen to become increasingly interested in selective goods compared to collective goods. The combination of collective and selective goods and how they are valued can, however, differ between the parties.

According to the study conducted by Nordvall *et al.* (2020), the parties also differ in terms of how they organise internal education for members and politicians. This
includes which type of educational activity dominates within a certain party. The balance varies between predominately study circles, internal courses, conferences, seminars, or digital platforms. Another difference that was noted in the study concerns the structure in which education is being offered. Some parties have a more centralised structure, where the national level governs the educational offering and implementation. Others work in a more decentralised way, where regional or local branches play a more decisive role, especially in the practical implementation of education. The educational structure can also differ in terms of how courses are packaged.

Party education can infer different roles within the parties. When looking at the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party specifically, Nordvall and Pastuhov (2020) identify knowledge-oriented and relationship-oriented roles related to education within these parties. The first category concerns ideological training and training skilled members and leaders. The other category which is more relational in nature consists of training for social infrastructure and training for internal positioning. The roles concerning training for a social infrastructure related to the creation of social community and strategic networking within the party organisation. The role concerning internal positioning on the other hand relates to the role of education as a forum and setting for establishing informal hierarchies and for power struggles within the organisation. Arriaza Hult (2020) has also studied these two parties, looking specifically at the creation of study materials for intra-party education. One of her conclusions (Arriaza Hult 2020, p. 15) is that the ‘parties make use of the educational situation to create emotional ties to the party movement’.

The roles of the party organisation

Political parties are complex organisations that have evolved over time. One way to understand the role they may play is to highlight different functions that are ascribed to them. These functions or roles have been conceived differently by various scholars, although they often overlap (cf. Almond and Powell 1966, Bartolini and Mair 2001, Diamond and Gunther 2001, Norris 2004). These functions commonly refer to themes, such as mobilising, articulating, aggregating interests, recruiting, etc.

Another function concerns socialisation, which can be understood both externally, for example through campaign work to influence public opinion, and internally through various processes and contexts that provide conditions for the socialisation of members. Although socialisation has been described as the main function of these organisations, socialisation research has more extensively tended to focus on other subjects, levels, or contexts in the society, such as, for example, media or social movements, than political parties themselves (Dekker et al. 2020).

According to Sjöblom (1968), political parties are strategic actors that try to maximise their influence in three arenas: the parliamentary arena, the electoral arena, and the internal arena. As actions in one arena may affect another, different dilemmas may arise when political parties try to reach different goals. In relation to the internal arena, Sjöblom (1968, p. 52) specifies two aspects of the party organisation. It may be construed as an arena to enhance internal party cohesion or as an instrument to improve the effectiveness of the organisation.
As contextual preconditions change, also the capacity of parties to respond changes. Mair (1997, p. 13) asserts that ‘the parties are now even better placed to adapt and to control. It is in this sense that their general capacity to constrain choice and change has been enhanced, and it is in this way that the “old” parties manage to survive’. The continued development of the role and function of party organisations has been addressed by research portraying more complex dimensions (e.g. Katz and Mair 1994, Mair and Katz 2002, Carty 2004). It has also been specified that party organisations have tended to become more professionalised (Blyth and Katz 2005, Strömbäck 2009, Dahl 2011).

Heidar (1994) elucidates the polymorphic nature of party membership which may vary in degree, type, and quality as well between contexts. Heidar and Kosiara-Pedersen (2020, p. 163) identify four dimensions of party activism in Sweden: the party worker, the online ambassador, the veteran, and the election activist. According to Demker et al. (2020, p. 250), the main incentive for people to join a party in Sweden is ideology. How members are shaped by their participation in political parties may not only affect people on an individual level but may also play a role in the collective capacity of their organisation to evolve and act strategically in their political context.

**A socio-cultural perspective**

One prevalent strand in the socio-cultural tradition is the community of practice (CoP) perspective, which has evolved from the situated learning theory introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). People learn, act, and connect ‘in a social world, dialectically constituted in social practices that are in the process of reproduction, transformation, and change’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 123).

The CoP perspective features a communal dimension linking learning with social participation, interactions, and identity transformation. Participation means learning, and learning relates to how we perceive ourselves, i.e. our identities. These processes are contextually rooted and connect ‘personal transformation with the evolution of social structures’ (Wenger 2000, p. 227). On a microlevel, the situational dimension may be expressed by the process of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (Lave and Wenger 1991). During this process, newcomers of a community learn about the practice through participation and observation of more experienced participants moving from a peripheral to full participation being socially recognised as legitimate and competent members.

A CoP can be described as ‘a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 98). These CoPs are additionally described by Wenger (1998) as consisting of the three interrelated dimensions of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. The communities are thus bound together through mutual interactions and relations among various participants in a joint enterprise that may constitute a common work or project in formal or more informal settings. When pursuing the enterprise, the participants are equipped with a shared repertoire to support their endeavour. This repertoire may encompass communal resources, such as artefacts, language, and stories.
Participation is an essential component of a community of practice. It can be distinguished through three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement concerns actual or expected work through participation in a community and is thus imperative to pursue a joint enterprise. This work may be fostered by joint images or orientations (imagination) as well as by processes promoting enhanced coordination and cooperation of both interpretations and actions (alignment). Closely related to participation is the concept of reification, which can be materialised in, for example, a shared repertoire. Wenger (1998, p. 58) claims that ‘the process of reification so construed is central to every practice. Any community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in the congealed form’.

Other concepts and terms which have been elaborated by Wenger (1998, 2000, 2010) relate to various aspects of the socio-cultural processes. Boundaries and boundary bridges also play an important role for CoPs. As communities may be delineated by both the practice and the participants, boundaries between different communities may be established. Although these boundaries may be rather fluid, they can generate both opportunities and obstacles for learning. To enhance learning between different communities and to overcome obstacles, bridges may be constructed. Connections between communities may be increased through interacting with people, objects, or projects. Another concept relates to a regime of competence. This refers to the standards of knowing what it takes to be acknowledged as a competent participant in a certain community. These standards may thus differ between different communities and settings.

When discussing institutional contexts, Wenger (2010) makes a distinction between vertical and horizontal accountability. Vertical accountability relates to institutional structures and hierarchies, while horizontal accountability refers to mutual commitment and joint work in local communities. Wenger (2010, p. 196) states: ‘Vertical accountability can help structure and simplify local engagement’. With reference to political parties, the local branches of the parties are one distinct expression of communities of practice with horizontal accountability. However, as Wenger (1998, p. 244) points out, many communities ‘may even owe their existence to the institutional context in which they arise’. Wenger (2000, p. 243) also clarifies that, from a vertical perspective, organisations can impact local CoPs and horizontal accountability in different ways: ‘they can foster them; they can leverage them; but they cannot fully own or control them’.

The conceptual framework of the community of practice orientation has been helpful in guiding us to a deeper understanding of the interconnections and interactions within the party organisation. This concerns both the vertical and horizontal levels as well as the importance of party education relating to individual and communal dimensions. Different aspects cannot however be understood in isolation but relate to each other in a dialectical and dynamic way. This involves an ongoing transformation of individual identities, social relations, and contexts.

**Data collection and empirical material**

This article is based on data that was collected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews were all prepared in a careful manner considering theoretical, practical, and ethical aspects (Brinkmann 2014, Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).
Eight interviews were conducted with central representatives of all national parties represented in the Swedish parliament. Interviewees were party officials at the central level who are directly involved in and responsible for organising internal education within their party. The selection of interviewees was based on information on their party’s website or by contacting the party’s headquarters in an attempt to identify suitable interviewees. The aim was to identify those with a central vantage point within the party who could provide an appropriate general overview of intraparty processes and activities.

One interview was conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams, but the remaining interviews took place at an office or a location chosen by the interviewees. The interviews were held between March and November 2019, i.e. during the year after the last parliamentary elections were held in 2018. In total, eleven people took part in the interviews (six males and five females). Two-party representatives took part in three of the interview sessions.

Information about the research was provided in advance, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. It was clarified that the research focus concerned the perspective of the party organisation and not personal convictions or opinions. As working for or in a party organisation, the interviewees are also representatives of their parties, and may as such be expected to be accustomed to public scrutiny and discussion. Around 20 interview questions that could be described as both descriptive and speculative were asked during the session. The questions related to how educational activities are organised, how they are planned, and the importance of education for the party and participants. The questions thus concerned more organisational aspects and dimensions and not issues that are perceived as being sensitive political topics. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 min and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were coded in the NVivo program. Shortly after the interviews were conducted, academic memos were written by the interviewer. This was done to capture immediate impressions and observations from the interviews. Writing memos was perceived as a means to portray more dimensions and nuances from the interviews.

One potential challenge which was anticipated in advance of the interviews was that the interviewees might be considered elite individuals. As such, they are considered by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) to be in a position of power and prestige within an organisation. In working for a political party, the interviewees were potentially expected to display a certain bias or inclination to sugarcoat the image given of their parties.

This challenge was counteracted by gathering relevant documents and creating an overview of internal education in each party in advance of the interviews. Follow-up questions were also asked if there was a need for additional precision or clarity during the interviews. The overarching impression was that accurate and relevant description were provided. The overview of documents that had been created also supported a triangulation of empirical materials in relation to statements made during the interviews. In several cases, interviewees also readily discussed and highlighted weaknesses, gaps, and problematic areas in relation to their organisation of internal education.

On starting to process the empirical material through coding, re-coding, and clustering, certain patterns started to emerge. Both qualitative aspects that were more prevalent and responses that were more divergent were attended to. Initial codes tended to address
organisational aspects of how the political parties structure and implement their internal education. When focussing on these patterns in greater depth, it was possible to discern different aspects relating to socio-cultural processes. During the re-coding phase, codes were elaborated that more specifically relate to these themes, such as identity construction, the expression of party values in education, and the importance of party community.

These different aspects were later analysed using concepts from the community of practice framework. This was perceived to be appropriate in providing a theoretical perspective that could illustrate different qualitative aspects relating to participation, learning, and identity in party education. The observations and conclusions drawn from the analysis were later contrasted by re-reading all transcribed interviews. There was thus a mutual interaction between analytical concepts and tools offered by the socio-cultural perspective and close re-reading of the empirical material and academic memos. Not all aspects that have emerged from the findings in this paper are applicable to all parties, but together they provide a general understanding of how the meaning of party education can be construed by the parties.

Findings

The following sections will discuss various socio-cultural aspects of party education, as construed by the central level within the parties. They will thematically address the design of education and providing learning opportunities, becoming integrated into the community, and remaining committed as a party member.

Designing education and providing learning opportunities

Political parties design and enable educational contexts, settings, and processes in which conditions and opportunities for learning are provided. The parties try to ensure that their own political values and ideological stances are reflected in the education they design and organise for members. The Social Democratic Party emphasises the importance of its national study plan which is adopted by its national party board. This plan which has been designed in a normative manner regulates both educational activities and the party’s internal governance structures. This position contrasts with efforts from other stakeholders to influence the content of the party’s educational materials. This concern is raised by a party official in the quotation below:

But I am not naive, we need to be conscious that there are organisations that systematically want to affect the content of our education. […] This is why I am so unambiguous about the normative aspects and so clear that it is we who should speak in our education. It is very important to make sure that it is not the Confederation of Swedish Business that formalises or takes care of educational content.

When defining educational content in a normative way, the party’s ideology and political platform constitutes a fundamental point of departure. Educational materials that are developed and designed among the parties encompass different kinds of knowledge or skills which are construed as tools that can be employed for either internal or external work within or for the party. One part of this relates to knowledge about the party, such as its ideology, values, history, and internal organisation. Another
component relates to knowledge about the formal democratic system and parliamentary processes. Practical skills, such as leading a meeting or interacting with the media may also be integrated into the education. Participants are provided with adequate tools to feel comfortable working for, acting for, and representing the party in a competent manner. The Green Party states that providing education about its ideology is fundamental, but once this has been done, the focus should then be on conducting political work in a more resourceful way.

Members are thus supposed to not only get knowledge about the tools available for political work but also learn how to use them effectively. Organising internal education is seen as a way to increase competency among members. This aspect is expressed by the Green Party as follows:

Because the more competency they have, the more knowledge they have, and the better politicians they become and the better they can act in the democratic system. [...] It makes them better politicians.

Providing more knowledge is construed as making people better politicians. Becoming better politician means becoming more competent to act within the democratic system. One concrete illustration of this is the education that different parties organise for candidates in advance of elections. To ensure—or at least, enhance—the competence of potential future elected representatives, providing preparatory education is perceived as a type of quality assurance by the party.

Providing opportunities for learning through party education may be especially important when the parties welcome new members. This was something several parties witnessed following the Swedish parliamentary elections in 2018. The parties perceived this inflow of new members as a pleasing but potentially delicate challenge. This situation may be particularly demanding if the party managed to attract new groups of members who traditionally did not support or belong to the party. The Centre Party mentions young females being highly interested in green issues and gender equality as an example. Tensions may arise if these newcomers join a local branch that did not previously work much with these issues. The Centre Party representative illustrated this situation as the following:

... it is clear that they challenge us, yes they challenge old structures and so on, but in a positive way. My experience is that the movement has a positive approach to newcomers.

The organisation of party education is one way to accommodate newcomers. They get to know more about the history and characteristics of the organisation they have joined, and they are provided with tools to carry on with political work. This may also include knowledge concerning how political work in a local party branch is structured and current issues in the local, regional or national context. The Green Party also received many new members following the last elections and emphasised accommodating newcomers as a learning process, comparing it to when people start a new job. This point is expressed in the quotation below:

But when many people arrive [to the party], new people, then they need to be trained. Just like other people when starting a new job or ... Because as a newcomer, there is much to learn.
Another party that has attracted many new members in a short space of time is the Sweden Democrats. They also perceive this development as a challenge. Although the party wants to continue to grow, it is also keen to enhance political unity internally. Providing party education is a way to train members to better understand the party and the role members can play within and for the organisation.

The ideology and values of a party can also be reflected in the kinds of activities being organised. For example, the Social Democratic Party believes that its educational activities employ methods and experiences from popular adult education, a tradition that the party is close to historically. When developing its national work to organise internal education, the party also specifically handpicked people with extensive prior experience of popular adult education to take part in these efforts. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Moderate Party also gave an example of organising a seminar about its taxation policies as an expression of its political ideology.

Hence, political parties design, organise and offer education to members to provide values, knowledge, and skills that are seen as tools in the political toolbox. Members will however be trained not only to know about the tools that are available to them but also learn to use them competently. The parties’ statements could be interpreted as a regime of competence. Wenger (1998, p. 137) states that such a regime ‘can be defined as what would be recognised as competent participation in the practice’. For the party functionaries and members that design and offer education, the standards of the regime of competency encapsulate a meaningful way of conducting political work.

For members wanting to become internal leaders or elected representatives of the party, the standards and expectations of the regime will be advanced. This regime relates to the joint enterprise of the party and how members should learn to engage when conducting political work. Reference to a regime of competence is also made in relation to welcoming new members. The statement from the Green Party includes the simile of starting a new job. This aspect may be understood in relation to the process of legitimate peripheral participation as introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). The organisation of party education helps newcomers understand the political project and organisational setting of the party while aligning the provision of knowledge, skills, and tools with the standards of the regime of competence as construed by the central level of the party. It helps to guide and advance the learning trajectory of newcomers to reach a core understanding of the community of practice or local party branch in which they participate.

**Becoming part of the community**

When participants take part in party education, they may also feel that they are participating in something greater than the party is working for collectively. This may be especially important for new members. Through organising party education, the party may want to connect the individual member to the organisation. This dimension is expressed by the Left Party:

> It should be noticeable in all education [that we organise], to foster building an identity for the movement in the party, it should allow for exchanges and the feeling that one is part of the collective. [...] But it is of course very, very important when dealing with many new members that have not been active in another party or some other movement before, that [they] get the feeling of partaking in something in common.
Organising party education thus also concerns integrating members, and in particular newcomers, into the community of the party. The community can, however, refer to numerous aspects (e.g. Wenger 1998). This could encompass cultural patterns and values, traditions, communication, or symbols. Different communal aspects may or may not have been reified in different artefacts. One central component of integration into the party is the construction or modulation of the identity of newcomers, which is related to or aligned with the identity of the community.

The Moderate Party stresses the importance of internal education for strengthening the moderate identity as part of community building. However, the party also points out that there are other factors affecting identity construction and consolidation among members. The Liberal Party has worked specifically on issues concerning identity when conducting internal education, training members to ‘go from we think, to I think’. The importance of allowing different identities within the party to distill is also highlighted. Some members are more interested in social issues than educational policies. What the party should do is accommodate different versions of a liberal identity while fostering a stronger commitment for the party in general.

Welcoming new members into the community of the party will not, however, mean that everyone feels at home. Participation in internal education also provides opportunities for newcomers to consider and reflect on their choice of party affiliation more fully. This point was highlighted by the Christian Democrats:

It is reasonable to consider that these new members, some may later realise ‘No, this was not really my party’.

So, the learning outcome for some new members will be the realisation that they do not align with the party they have joined. Coming to this realisation is important not only for the individual but also for the party.

The integration of members may however be fostered by the provision of different learning opportunities for alignment through party education. Providing streamlined education throughout the party organisation on topics, such as organisational skills or the political project is a concrete way to foster joint frames of reference internally. By allowing people to align their understanding and actions, a common ground is generated for smoother collective work within, for example, a local party branch.

The Green Party stressed the importance of fostering a practical approach when conducting political work reflecting their ideology. This is seen as enabling a sustainable commitment among members and sustainable party leadership. There is thus a relationship between the ideological preference of sustainability within the party and how individual members are trained to act. This idea was expressed by a Green Party representative as:

So people think about things and ask what, what are my values and how do I lead from my values.

During educational activities, individual participants will thus be provided with opportunities to reflect on their own values and approaches. If someone is not following the values associated with the party, this may constitute a reason for individual behaviours to change. This may be especially important for people who are aspiring to become internal
leaders or parliamentarians. As leaders or elected representatives, they will be expected to represent the values of the party, which ought to be embodied in their concrete actions.

The idea of individuals embodying the values of the party was also expressed by the Social Democratic Party, as below:

When you represent our party, then you should be your values. You cannot talk about all people being equal or gender equality or social equality and then act like a bastard. It is not a private issue, you need to uphold this, it is a fundamental principle for us.

Someone representing the party is thus supposed to behave in such a way that the values of the party are mirrored. This is not perceived as an issue for the individual but for the party. Party education is seen as a forum for discussing the values of the party and how these are best represented in external actions.

Hence, integrating members into the community of the party also relates to the provision of learning opportunities for alignment. Wenger (2000, p. 228) states that the concept of alignment relates to ‘the mutual process of coordinating perspectives, interpretations, and actions so they realise higher goals’. This may concern the political profile or the organisational context of the party. Participants may be given learning opportunities to negotiate, deliberate, and transform the meaning of these dimensions to the community or practice which are most relevant to them. However, opportunities for alignment can also be understood on a much deeper level, in relation to the fundamental values and behaviours of individual members. This may be referred to as a value-based alignment process connecting people and parties. During this process, the values of a person may be challenged by the values of the party. If there is a clash of values or at least potential tensions, this may be a reason for individual values, beliefs, and attitudes to adjust to better align with the values of the party. This may require an identity modulation through the participation and learning that occur in party education. In order not to ‘act like a rascal, people may have to change.

However, party education also concerns other dimensions of how members consider, consolidate, and develop their identity as a member of the party. This may be especially important for newcomers who have recently joined the party. Participation in party education may involve an identity reconstruction which will be further consolidated by engaging in a local community of practice. The feeling of belonging to a community or feeling at home plays an imperative role in this process of identity reconstruction.

**Remaining committed**

Party education may also be organised to keep current members involved in political work. The Social Democratic Party stated that it had lost many former members by failing to acknowledge their commitment to the party. The party is now using internal education in a strategic way to keep people active in the movement:

I have said somewhat disrespectfully that studies are like flypaper, if you partake in studies you will remain in the movement. It means you will form relationships, get a sense of meaning, and this is important because it confirms your membership; you get a sense of meaningfulness and a context to work with.

Internal party education is thus perceived as something that recognises members’ commitment, providing relationships, meaningfulness, and a context in which to
exercise one’s party affiliation. Accommodating people through internal education is a way to keep them involved in the party.

The social component when organising education is construed as important by several parties. When planning a future course, the Liberal Party emphasised the most important aspect of education as: ‘Well, to enable the feeling, to get more energy, to make people feel happy and motivated. And then to arrange a proper basic education’.

The Left Party also stressed the importance of education as something that can stimulate continued and expanded commitment to the party and political work. This was contrasted with an example of academic studies, which were seen as tending to make people more passive. Organising party education should according to the party official facilitate both learning and active participation, as well as constituting a natural part of members’ ‘career’ within the organisation.

Becoming and remaining committed to the party also relates to the enablement and emergence of personal relationships and networks within the organisation. It is a way for members to become connected to other people who share similar political interests. The importance of networking is expressed by the Centre Party:

We notice when we have organised education that… education is one part, but we gather when we organise our education, we gather people from different parts of the country and then… it is as important to enable networks and to create new contacts. And this is something that we enable through this, and it also becomes a side effect.

Personal connections that are enabled through party education can come to constitute a supporting network of fellow party members. This network can subsequently be an important resource when trying to resolve political difficulties and challenges which may arise. The Social Democratic Party mentioned female politicians as an example:

It is evident that we have elected representatives who have the energy to handle the media situation we are facing today, that they feel supported, not least female politicians and how they are treated. I am fully convinced that the networks we have enabled through our leadership training have helped many to cope and feel energised, and then it has a democratic significance.

This aspect relates to recent research that suggests that there is a gender bias in political violence towards female politicians in Sweden (Håkansson 2021). The networks that are enabled through the participation in party education, may however be described as lifebuoys that can help politicians to handle tough demands that come from political work. Another important aspect relating to the enablement of personal networks is the potential of experience-sharing among peers. This is seen by the parties as an integrated part of developing and conducting political work.

It may be interpreted that party education should be inspiring and motivating, leading to continued and enhanced commitment among members. It is thus one way for the parties to strengthen and deepen the mutual engagement (Wenger 1998) of the members participating in party education. Political parties have also a functional interest in enabling expanded relationships and the formation of networks through party education. This is a way for parties to add value that will remain after the completion of a specific educational activity. It refers to developing a supporting network that may be beneficial for dealing with the challenges and complications of political work. It can,
however, also relate to sharing ideas and experiences, and encouraging peer learning on an informal level.

**Concluding discussion**

Political parties play an essential role in a democracy, such as Sweden. The aim of this paper has been to investigate the organisation of education within political parties in Sweden and the meaning conferred on this by the central level of the party organisation. The organisation of internal education acts as a mediating factor between individual members and the party. It connects the person with the party and the perspectives of old-timers with the fresh eyes of newcomers. Given the institutional advantage of constituting the central level of the party organisation, it is mainly the perspective and understandings of more experienced members that come to frame, design, and influence the organisation of party education and how political participation is fostered.

The overview presented in this paper presents one possible explication of the party functions relating to the socialisation and mobilisation of members (cf. Almond and Powell 1966, Bartolini and Mair 2001, Diamond and Gunther 2001, Norris 2004). The observations made in this paper help to illustrate how and why these functions are carried out within the framework of party education. How party education is designed and organised may also relate to the flexibility addressed by Mair (1997, p. 16) as part of the adaptation process that parties instigate when societal preconditions change. Nordvall and Pastuhov (2020, p. 12) also argue that research in this area is important, as ‘we can better understand the learning processes that form the political representatives through whom representative democracy is governed’.

A political party as an organisation could be described as a ‘complex social landscape of shared practices, boundaries, peripheries, overlaps, connections, and encounters’ (Wenger 2010, p. 130). Within this landscape, it is possible to discern the importance of the institutional context and the relationship between vertical and horizontal levels of accountability. A local party branch is conceived as a community of practice, and the participants therein are structured and carried out within the framework of the mother party. The organisation of internal education within the parties constitutes a central resource that facilitates and coordinates the alignment between vertical and horizontal accountability. Although the concrete local challenges may differ between the cities of Uppsala, Gothenburg, or Malmö, for example, local branches in all cities belong to the same party based on a shared political understanding, organisational statutes, and inner culture.

If local party branches are expressed as communities of practice, then the three elements that define a CoP according to Wenger (1998) can help to illustrate this potential influence of organising party education. These elements are a joint enterprise, mutuality, and a shared repertoire. The joint enterprise of a local party branch is affected by the joint enterprise of the mother party, as it relates to the overarching political project and goals of the organisation. This can involve the party’s programme, national election manifesto, short-term policy objects, or organisational statutes. The education that is organised relates to these materials and issues in different ways, and
opportunities for learning are provided for interpreting, transforming, and fighting for them at a local level.

Mutuality understood as interactions and relationships may also be affected by the organisation of party education. This can, to some extent, be expressed by the importance mentioned by different interviewees of newcomers being integrated into the community of the party. By becoming familiar with the community, people will come to better understand the informal rules, cultural patterns, and norms within the organisation they have joined. However, mutuality can also be more directly affected by the leadership courses or training that parties offer centrally. This is a way for the parties to define how political leadership should be carried out within different levels of the party.

The organisation of party education is also related to the third element of a CoP, the shared repertoire. A certain part of the education addresses the shared repertoire provided within the framework of the national organisation, for example, the statutes, annual reports, or established internal channels of communication. This shared repertoire also constitutes a resource when designing education, as it provides a foundation of what the party stands for or has accomplished so far. The cultural dimension of socio-cultural processes may thus be mirrored to some extent in a shared repertoire. In contrast to the shared repertoire of the national organisation, a locally fine-tuned shared repertoire that reflects the specific needs and configurations of a local party branch will be established and evolve.

To illustrate the meaning of party education at the member level as construed by the central level of the party, the modes of belonging proposed by Wenger (2000) may be employed. These modes are engagement, imagination, and alignment, constituting different elements of participation, and relate to how political participation is fostered. The first mode—engagement—is often conceived in relation to actual doing in a CoP. This focal point of doing undoubtedly remains in a local party branch. However, as observed by the parties, a significant amount of education relates to skills training and enhancing competency among members. Tools for conducting political work are provided by party education that will affect the actual doing in a CoP. It is one thing to write a press release, but another to write a press release that will actually attract media attention. This mode can also be understood in relation to other concrete work, such as preparing local political manifestos, running digital campaigns, or attracting new members.

The second mode is imagination. Party education provides stories, narratives, and a framing of the party, its current tasks, and its future challenges. These stories help to create emotional bonds and connections between members and the party. They can also contribute to a feeling of belonging to the community. Thus, members become integrated into the greater work of the party as important participants. These results concur with Arriaza Hult (2020) observation that parties use education as a way to emotionally connect members with the party movement.

The third mode is alignment. This can be conceived as processes facilitating cooperation, coordinating activities, and coming to a mutual understanding of what the joint enterprise is about and how the shared resources should be best employed to this end. Party education provides different opportunities for alignment. These opportunities can be understood on different levels: between participants, between the individual and
the party, or in the mutual interaction between the vertical and horizontal levels. At the central level, providing learning opportunities for alignment is one way to enhance internal unity and strengthen the agency of the party in relation to both vertical and horizontal accountability.

Hence, political parties in Sweden provide different learning opportunities through the organisation of party education. This education attempts to affect both various dimensions of political participation as well as how collective work in local party branches is to be interpreted and conducted. Considering the increased focus on organising party education expressed by several Swedish political parties, the importance of this mediating factor has likely grown. Some parties even stressed the importance of members becoming an embodiment of what the party stands for. The values and ideas of a political party may thus become reified through the actions of its members in political work.

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