

20 Youth Agency and Learning in Confirmation Work

HEIDI TOIVANEN, JARI PULKKINEN, ÁGNES PÁNGYÁNSZKY AND
LINN SÆBØ RYSTAD

20.1 Introduction

This chapter examines learning in confirmation work through the concept of agency. While the first and the second study focused on the planning, realisation, and experiences of learning, as well as the physical spaces in which learning takes place, this chapter aims to evaluate the involvement of the young people in their own learning process and the dimensions and dynamics of learning. Furthermore, we aim to explore elements that facilitate learning during confirmation time. This evaluation is conducted through the concept of agency, which we define here as the young people's capacity to actively engage in their learning process, express opinions, question, and build upon their previous knowledge and experiences by finding relevance and meaning in the contents of confirmation work. Examining youth agency in confirmation work highlights the power dynamics of learning and the extent to which the young people are active participants.

In European schools, the paradigm of learning has shifted toward a constructivist understanding, which highlights the active role of the learner in constructing their own knowledge. Similar developments have also unfolded in the areas of non-formal education, one example being confirmation work. Confirmation work has generally transitioned from traditional forms of catechesis and traditional classroom learning to approaches more closely aligned with general youth work (Schweitzer, 2017, p. 1). Some studies indicate that non-formal religious education, including confirmation work, has also incorporated student-centred conceptions of learning that view the confirmands as active participants in their learning by implementing participatory methods or collaborative knowledge-building (Holmqvist & Afdal, 2015; Innanen, 2009). Despite these developments in confirmation work, very little empirical research on pedagogy and didactics in non-formal education has been conducted. Most studies in religious education and practical theology have primarily focused on religious education as a formal school subject (Schweitzer, 2017, pp. 1–2).

A growing trend in confirmation work across various countries is the adoption of (socio-)constructivist learning theories, which becomes evident when examining their evolving curricula and objectives. The Norwegian and Finnish curricula, for example, clearly aim to build upon the confirmands' existing

structures of knowledge and meaning by fostering their active involvement and participation throughout the whole confirmation time. In addition to these youth-oriented teaching methods, the young people's own questions are treated as the foundation for learning (A Great miracle, 2017; God gives – We share, 2010). Similar objectives were also included in the 2023 aims for Confirmation and Commitment by the Hungarian church. These objectives include the employment of a wider range of catechetical teaching methods, transitioning towards an experiential and community-driven learning environment, and developing a curriculum that incorporates traditional teaching elements with contextual pedagogical methods (Tanuló közösségben, 2010).

How – and to what extent – these aims are achieved lacks comprehensive investigation, however. Despite aiming to enhance participation and strengthen young people's active role in their confirmation time, confirmation work also seems to internationally include elements that structure or restrict the confirmands' agency. This can be identified, for example, when analysing discourses within confirmation work curricula. The contents and objectives are often pre-determined by the church, leaving very little room for young people to exert influence over the curriculum, as noted for example by Ojala (2021). This is often built into the language, including phrases like »must study«, which imply a lack of choice for the learners. Furthermore, despite workers' perceptions of teaching as learner-centred, a study on Finnish confirmation camps revealed that most learning methods remained teacher-centred, leaving pupils in passive roles (Pruuki, 2009). Again, due to the lack of research in this area, estimating how far teaching is truly actualised remains impossible. This topic clearly requires further investigation to truly evaluate and further develop teaching in confirmation work.

The concept of agency has come under scrutiny in the past decade by scholars of educational research (e. g., Rajala, 2016; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013; Matusov, von Duyke & Kayumova, 2015). Often, the concept has been associated with freedom, autonomy, and purposiveness, as well as conceptualised as the individuals' capacity and effort to act upon, influence, and transform their everyday life practices and circumstances. However, agency is not enacted in a vacuum. The concept is closely tied to the relationship between individual autonomy, sociocultural structures and power relations that constrain everyday human practices and processes, including learning (Rajala, Martin & Lampulainen, 2016, p. 1; Rajala, 2016, p. 30; Jääskelä et al., 2017, p. 2063).

Focusing research on youth agency addresses contemporary societal issues that have arisen in contemporary education, such as the elements of education that alienate pupils from formal education (Rajala, 2016) and the struggles of schools to equip pupils with the means to confront contemporary issues, such

as climate change (Rajala et al., 2016, p. 1). In addition, the focus on agency explores the extent to which young people can make an impact on societal issues that concern them and which are relevant in their lives (Rajala et al., 2016, p. 1; Niemi et al., 2016). Previous research on agency and learning indicates that interactive, participatory, and collaborative learning promotes pupils' agency (Jääskelä et al., 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Toom, Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2017) along with learning that takes place in various learning environments, even outside school (Rajala, 2016). The pupil's sense of agency is clearly connected to learner-centred forms of teaching (Jääskelä et al., 2020, p. 11) and therefore aligns with constructivist conceptions of learning.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, we will delve deeper into the exploration of agency and its role in learning within confirmation work. Before we do so, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this study in truly capturing the different nuances of the wide concept of agency. Given the nature of our variables, we primarily focus on the participatory aspects of agency, which represent just a small facet of this multi-layered concept. Furthermore, it is worth noting that confirmation work essentially differs from formal education, which suggests that the investigated phenomena, agency and learning, may manifest differently in this educational context compared to formal schools.

20.2 Research Questions and Methods

Due to the limitations in data comparisons between the t_1 and t_2 surveys in some countries, we primarily focus on confirmands' experiences based on the results of the t_2 survey. Measuring the evolution of the investigated phenomena between the two surveys therefore remains impossible. Drawing from research that highlights the role of agency in enhancing learning processes, this chapter discusses the level of agency experienced by the confirmands, as well as the dynamics and factors facilitating learning in confirmation work, by addressing the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the young people experience agency in confirmation work?
2. What kind of learning does confirmation work promote?
3. Which pedagogical methods and didactic approaches support effective learning in confirmation work?

To assess the extent to which the young people experienced agency during their confirmation time, we focused on two aspects of agency: 1) *participation* and 2) *relevance*. These aspects are based on the variables measuring young people's

active involvement (KK11; KK71; KU02) and their personal meaning-making processes during their confirmation time (KK35; KU05). We illustrate these dimensions in Table 53. The analysis is based on the frequencies of responses rated as positive (5–7) on the Likert scale.

When examining the kind of learning promoted by confirmation work, we identified three dimensions of learning in the data. These dimensions of learning encompass cognitive, affective and attitudinal aspects, as well as personal and spiritual, as illustrated in Table 55. Firstly, *the cognitive dimension of learning* involves acquiring more knowledge and understanding the topics taught during confirmation time (KB01; KK73) as well as being intellectually challenged (KU05). Secondly, *the affective and attitudinal dimension of learning* refers to the emotions and attitudes towards others, the environment, and the church. This dimension includes developing a greater sense of responsibility and consciousness regarding ecological matters and other people (KK44; KK45) as well as maintaining interest in church activities (KG08). Thirdly, *the personal and spiritual dimension of learning* encompasses the young people's experiences of personal and spiritual maturation (KB03; KB04). The analysis is based on the frequencies of responses rated as positive (5–7) on the Likert scale. Due to the high reliability of these variables (Cronbach's alpha = 0.789), we also calculated the index iKU1 (including the variables: KB01; KK73; KU05; KK44; KK45; KG08; KB03; KB04) to measure the overall phenomenon: learning.

To gain a deeper insight into the factors that facilitate learning during confirmation time and to explore opportunities to further enhance the learning experience, we conducted regression analyses. These analyses aimed to investigate factors predicting the calculated learning index iKU1. The first analysis assessed the statistical relationship of a set of general dynamics within teaching with learning. The second analysis focused specifically on learning methods and dynamics, such as active participation, and their relation to the learning process.

20.3 Results

20.3.1 Experienced Agency in Confirmation Work

The results suggest that the participatory aspects of agency are quite well-realised: Confirmation work appears to enable the young people's agency by providing most of them with opportunities to communicate their opinions and have their questions heard. To some extent, they are also empowered to exert

some influence over their confirmation time. However, the aspects of agency related to relevance remain limited, as young people struggle to find sufficient intellectual challenge in the work, or relevant personal meaning connecting the contents of confirmation work to their everyday lives.

As illustrated in Table 53, confirmands in most countries experienced opportunities to express their opinions (82 %, KU02) and felt their questions concerning faith were addressed (69 %, KK11). Slightly over half of the confirmands were also included in the process of choosing the topics and activities for their confirmation time (58 %, KK71). Half of the confirmands felt that the contents of confirmation work have little to do with their everyday lives (51 %, KK35), with only 24 % considering them close to their daily life. Furthermore, only around one-third of the confirmands felt challenged in their thinking (39 %, KU05).

Table 53: Experienced Agency in Confirmation Work (t_2)

Dimensions of agency	Variables	M	SD	Yes (%)
Participation	KK11: My questions concerning faith were addressed.	5.20	1.56	69 %
	KK71: We were able to influence on topics and activities in confirmation time.	4.67	1.78	58 %
	KU02: We had enough opportunities to express our opinions.	5.75	1.37	82 %
Relevance	KK35: Confirmation training has little to do with my everyday life.	4.59	1.67	51 %
	KU05: I was challenged in my thinking.	4.00	1.76	39 %

N= 5960–6016.

Scale: 1= Not applicable at all, 7= Totally applicable; M= Mean; SD= Standard deviation; Yes (%) = Share of positive response (5, 6, 7).

The results vary slightly when comparing data from different countries, as presented in Table 54. The participatory aspects of agency appear to be realised quite well across all countries. Most confirmands in each country estimated that their questions were addressed, with Norway scoring the lowest (58 %, KK11) and Hungary the highest (85 %, KK11). In all countries, at least 74 % of the confirmands felt able to express their opinions (KU02). When it comes to the confirmands' influence, over 60 % of the Swiss, Finnish and Norwegian confirmands felt that they had influence over their confirmation time, while in other countries, this number remained slightly lower at around 50 % (KK71).

The results also demonstrate slight differences when examining the aspects

of relevance. In finding relevance between the contents of confirmation work and their daily lives (KK35), the Hungarian and Swedish confirmands seem to be the most successful, with only around 30 % reporting that they found confirmation work to have very little relevance. In other countries, around half of the confirmands considered the contents of their confirmation time irrelevant to their daily lives. Furthermore, the Finnish and Hungarian confirmands reported being the least challenged in their thinking, with only around 20 % stating that they were intellectually challenged (KU05). In comparison, around half of the confirmands in other countries reported feeling challenged.

Table 54: Experienced Agency in Confirmation Work (Yes %) (t₂)

	Total	Germany	Switzerland	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Hungary
KK11: my questions concerning faith were addressed.	69%	67%	66%	74%	58%	60%	85%
KK71: we were able to influence on topics and activities in confirmation time.	58%	51%	66%	64%	66%	57%	46%
KU02: we had enough opportunities to express our opinions.	82%	84%	83%	81%	78%	74%	83%
KK35: confirmation training has little to do with my everyday life	51%	51%	54%	56%	46%	32%	31%
KU05: I was challenged in my thinking.	39%	46%	45%	23%	53%	57%	21%

N= 5960–6016.

Scale: 1= Not applicable at all, 7= Totally applicable; Yes (%) = Share of positive response (5, 6, 7).

20.3.2 What do Confirmands Learn during Confirmation Time?

The results indicate that some aspects of learning are more emphasised in confirmation work than others. Confirmation work appears to mostly promote obtaining more information while acting as an important milestone in the process of individual maturation and faith decisions. To some extent, it also encourages the confirmands' commitment towards other people. However, as previously stated, confirmands remain intellectually unchallenged with a weak level of commitment towards the church. The percentage of confirmands who positively evaluate these areas of learning are illustrated in Table 55.

Table 55: Dimensions of Learning in Confirmation Work (t₂)

Dimensions of learning in confirmation work	Variables	M	SD	Yes (%)
Cognitive (knowledge and understanding)	KB01: I have learnt more about God and faith.	5.63	1.49	81 %
	KK73: During confirmation training I learned many things that were new for me.	4.97	1.67	65 %
	KU05: I was challenged in my thinking.	4.00	1.76	39 %
Affective and attitudinal (emotions and attitudes towards others, the environment, and the church)	KK44: I have experienced that my commitment to other people is important.	4.94	1.56	62 %
	KK45: I have become (more) conscious of my responsibility for ecological problems.	4.31	1.78	48 %
	KG08: I am interested in taking part in a Christian youth group after confirmation.	3.44	1.99	29 %
Personal and spiritual	KB04: I have made an important step in growing up.	4.83	1.70	61 %
	KB03: I have been enabled to come to my own decision about my faith.	5.50	1.52	76 %

N= 5960–6046.

Scale: 1= Not applicable at all, 7= Totally applicable; M= Mean; SD= Standard deviation; Yes (%) = Share of positive response (5, 6, 7).

When it comes to cognitive learning, the majority of confirmands rate the extent of their learning very positively (81 % for KB01; 65 % for KK73). Obtaining new knowledge about God and Christianity seems rather common during confirmation preparation. Despite gaining more knowledge, only 39 % of the confirmands across countries felt intellectually challenged (KU05), which could indicate that the contents of the curricula are not perceived as personally meaningful. The young people might also feel that their abilities to understand complex phenomena were being underestimated and that the contents were oversimplified.

The affective and attitudinal dimension of learning scored the lowest of all three dimensions. 62 % of the confirmands reported having become more committed to other people (KK44) and around half reported having become more conscious of their responsibility for ecological problems (48 %, KK45). However, it is important to note that the young people might already have been very conscious of these issues (cf. chapter 17). Additionally, their interest in church youth groups also remained low, with only 29 % willing to participate in youth work after their confirmation (KG08). In turn, the personal and spiritual di-

mension of learning scored quite high. 61 % of the confirmands estimated that they had taken an important step in growing up (KB04), and 76 % stated that they had been able to decide on their position on faith (KB03). It is noteworthy that these changes do not necessarily reflect purely positive decisions about faith.

20.3.3 Learning Methods and Conditions: What Facilitates Learning in Confirmation Work?

When examining the confirmands' satisfaction and experiences with the content, methods, and overall conditions of learning, the majority of the confirmands seemed to be quite satisfied with the content (66 %, KN03) and working methods (68 %, KN20). The great majority of the confirmands also felt that the contents and topics were well explained (83 %, KU01). Additionally, most confirmands reported experiencing a variety of learning methods, with Switzerland scoring the lowest (50 %, KU03) and Sweden the highest (77 %, KU03). The amount of unrest and disruption (which is always a challenge in groups of young people) was similar in all countries. Interestingly, the findings indicate that the Finnish, Hungarian and Swedish confirmands experienced the greatest variety of learning methods, yet the Finns and Hungarians also scored the lowest in feeling intellectually challenged (around 20 %, KU05). The Swedish confirmands, however, scored the highest on the same item (57 %, KU05). A greater variety of learning methods clearly does not always correlate with more challenging or meaningful contents of learning; however, it is clearly correlated with greater satisfaction ($r = 0.481$).

How do these experiences contribute to learning? A regression model (Table 57) offers deeper insights into this question. The model clearly demonstrates that positive experiences of confirmation time, such as satisfaction (index iKN3), the sense of community (KB02), the quality of relationships (KB31; KB31b), and fun (KK05) appear to be essential in influencing the computed learning index iKU1. In this model, the most prominent predictors of learning are satisfaction and the sense of community. The model clearly demonstrates that investing in good relationships, a positive atmosphere and fun experiences is required to facilitate learning.

Another regression model (Table 58) indicates that different learning methods and confirmands experiencing a sense of agency are significant predictors of effective learning. When young people experience feeling involved in the learning process by expressing their opinions (KU02), having their questions heard and addressed (KK11) and influencing topics and activities (KK71), their learning is clearly enhanced. This result indicates that a sense of agency, under-

Table 56: Confirmands' Experiences with Different Content, Methods and Conditions of Learning (Yes %) (t₂)

	Total	Germany	Switzerland	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Hungary
KN03: To what extent are you satisfied with the content / topics of lessons in confirmation work?	66%	68%	66%	56%	63%	85%	94%
KN20: To what extent are you satisfied with the working methods (for example, working with biblical texts, group work etc.)?	68%	70%	65%	66%	62%	63%	92%
KU01: The contents and topics were well explained.	83%	82%	79%	82%	82%	74%	89%
KU03: I experienced a variety of learning methods.	62%	58%	50%	72%	64%	77%	75%
KU04: There often was unrest and disruptions.	34%	35%	33%	35%	37%	24%	29%

N= 5940–6029.

Scale: 1= Not applicable at all, 7= Totally applicable; Yes (%) = Share of positive response (5, 6, 7).

Table 57: Regression Analysis of General Conditions Influencing Learning (index iKU1) in Confirmation Work

Factors influencing learning (index)	Standardised Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
INDEX iKN3: Satisfaction (t ₂)	.47	18.78	.00
KB02: I have experienced good community in the confirmation group.	.27	12.31	.00
KB31b: I experienced good relations with the young volunteers.	.06	2.67	.01
KB31: I experienced good relations with the workers.	.04	1.47	.14
KK05: I had a lot of fun.	.03	1.37	.17

N= 1728, R²= 0.55

stood here as experiencing forms of active participation in education, truly facilitates learning. It is therefore reasonable to ground the contents and working methods of confirmation work on the young people's own inquiries and inter-

ests. This type of agency also clearly correlates with satisfaction ($r = 0.55$ for KU02; $r = 0.55$ for KK11; $r = 0.40$ for KK71).

In this model, addressing the young people and their questions (KK11), investing in a variety of learning methods (KU03) and explaining the contents and topics insightfully (KU01) are the most prominent predictors of learning. Interestingly, this model also suggests that some forms of online learning (KT39) slightly enhance learning, if other predictors, such as active participation and a variety of learning methods, also remain constant. This result is supported by previous research (Tervo-Niemelä, Porkka & Pulkkinen, 2021).

Table 58: Regression Analysis of the Learning Methods Influencing Learning (index iKU1) in Confirmation Work

Factors influencing learning (index)	Standardised Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
KK11: My questions concerning faith were addressed.	.28	23.00	.00
KU03: I experienced a variety of learning methods.	.24	19.16	.00
KU01: The contents and topics were well explained.	.21	14.06	.00
KK71: We were able to influence on topics and activities in confirmation time.	.13	11.27	.00
KT39: I experienced forms of online teaching / learning.	.09	9.17	.00
KU02: We had enough opportunities to express our opinions.	.08	5.88	.00

N= 4859, $R^2 = 0.53$

20.4 Discussion

This chapter examined the extent to which young people experience agency in confirmation work and identified learning dynamics and factors which contribute to learning in this context. On the one hand, findings suggest that most confirmands experience agency in terms of expressing their opinions, asking questions, and influencing the contents and activities of their confirmation time. On the other hand, the confirmands' agency remains constrained as they lack a sense of real intellectual challenge or understanding of the relevance between the contents of confirmation time and their daily lives. Furthermore, the areas of learning promoted in confirmation work mostly relate to personal growth and obtaining more knowledge, with the affective and attitudinal dimensions of learning remaining scarce. At the same time, the confirmands have

quite positive experiences of learning dynamics during their confirmation time. These dynamics, which relate to satisfaction, fun, good relations and a strong sense of community, clearly facilitate learning. Other factors contributing to learning are related to the quality of learning methods and the confirmands' own sense of agency, understood and conceptualised here as forms of active participation.

These results suggest that, to some extent, confirmation work appears to have incorporated methods that allow for young people to engage in dialogue with the workers and to be active participants in their learning process. This aim is also explicitly included in the curricula of confirmation work in several countries. Even though confirmation work seems to encourage this type of agency, it is important to note that, within the present study, the ability of these variables to truly evaluate the depth of confirmands' active participation remains limited. True participation in learning does not necessarily consist of merely expressing opinions or asking questions. To investigate the extent to which the young people are truly able to play active roles in their own learning, further research is needed on the power dynamics that structure or enable participation.

The results also strongly suggest that the young people struggle to find the contents of their confirmation time relevant in their lives, which may be a result of their inability to assign meaning to the contents and experiences of their confirmation time. This inability to create meaning may restrict the confirmands' ability to actively construct knowledge by connecting new information to their former perceptions and may therefore constrain their agency in the learning process. As the results show, confirmation work seems to mostly promote gaining more information while the other dimensions of learning remain thin. This raises the question of whether the issue of gaining new knowledge hinders the ability to find meaning – and conversely, whether the inability to find meaning also hinders the ability to learn more comprehensively. To encourage more effective learning, the results illustrate the importance of not only investing in quality learning methods but also providing young people with opportunities to become even more active subjects in their own learning. If the young people were able to influence the topics and contents of confirmation work more extensively, they could be offered more opportunities to explore topics that they consider more meaningful and relevant to their lives, and thereby find confirmation more relevant. This conclusion is further supported by previous research that emphasises the importance of enabling young people to influence the topics and addressing their faith-related questions (Maaß & Simojoki, 2015).

How could churches provide the young people with more opportunities to find personal meaning in confirmation work? Addressing this gap between

confirmation work and the young people's lives evidently requires more research on its pedagogy and didactics. As previous research suggests, the concept of agency could be a useful tool for such an investigation, as it highlights both the power dynamics and the opportunities available to young people to affect change in contemporary issues which concern them (Rajala, 2016; Rajala et al., 2016). To enhance the confirmands' agency, one possibility could be to place even more emphasis on the wider world and interests of the young people than on the religious content of the church. This would require considering questions, such as what matters to the young people, what concerns them, and what hopes and dreams they have. The key here is a change in perspective: talking about God and asking the confirmands about their views on the matter is different from first addressing the issues that they consider meaningful and contemplating on how God might relate to them. Such a paradigm shift could strengthen the young people's sense of agency, resulting in the establishment of a stronger connection between confirmation and everyday life.

As confirmands scored relatively low on their willingness to participate in a youth group after confirmation, fostering further active involvement in church life remains a pressing issue. Integrating the lens of theological reflection more widely throughout confirmation work could strengthen confirmands' willingness and motivation for the possibility of lifelong Christian learning. Theological reflection is an approach that is based on active involvement and meaning making, which can connect the cognitive, affective and personal aspects of learning in confirmation. It offers the possibility of a new interpretative framework that brings human experience, biblical witness, tradition and culture into play. The practice of theological reflection nurtures growth in Christian life, the formation of Christian identity and lived experience of Christian faith (Graham, Walton & Ward, 2005). It is a process that aims at connecting Christian faith with everyday life experiences, thus establishing a closer connection between theory and practice, curriculum, personal and community experiences. This »activated faith practice« can become the bridge towards a more active, theologically-grounded way of life. According to Graham, »the core task of theological reflection is one of mediation – between the voices of theology and experience, or God and the world – and its problem-centred and practice-driven character« (Graham, 2022, p. 19.). Methods of theological reflection may vary from meditation, journaling, prayer, discussion, creative expression, or more, but at core these methods follow the pastoral cycle that starts with human experience and follows with an in-depth situational analysis and thorough faith reflection resulting in action, thus forming a spiral of theological reflection aiming at transformation.

Incorporating more profound theological reflection in confirmation work can propel confirmation ministry into a stronger, agency-based, relevance-or-

oriented and holistic learning process that can open up personal and community empowerment. The concepts of agency and theological reflection can contribute to making confirmation teaching more challenging in terms of cognitive learning while also providing space for a growing recognition of the relevance between confirmation time and confirmands' daily lives. Regarding confirmation from the perspective of empowerment is an opportunity to seriously consider the religious dynamics of confirmands on a personal level and to also rethink the possibilities of the church socialization paradigm into a more dialogue-based, experience-oriented, faith-exploring confirmation paradigm (Polster, 2021). The contextual challenge for confirmation ministry that remains to be solved is how churches – especially those with more traditional approaches to confirmation – can integrate methodological solutions and pedagogical approaches that embrace the individual's faith journey and lifelong commitment.