



# Finland's educational policy environment: The role of strategic ambiguity in policy communication.

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# Why Finland?

- Finnish students' admirable achievement on international comparative assessments has brought international attention to Finnish education.
  - Consistently score at or near top of international comparative assessments (PISA & TIMSS)
  - Scores have been consistent throughout Finland (little variation between regions and schools)





# Finnish education full of contradictions

- Some often cited contradictions between conventional thinking and what observers experience:
  - Public spending on education is less than elsewhere
  - Teachers spend less time teaching
  - Students spend less time in school than peers in other countries
  - Students spend less time on homework





# Contradictions regarding ICT in education

- Finland is rightly perceived to be a high-tech information society.
- However:
  - Specific ICT curriculum is scant
  - Little specific ICT instruction
  - Technology often not very visible in Finnish schools
    - There has been considerable variation between regions/schools in this regard, but overall Finnish teachers have tended to use technology less than their counterparts in other Nordic countries (Ramboll Management, 2006).





# The reality for educational policy?

- Finnish MOE policy regarding ICT in education (Nivala, 2009)
  - Vague and incoherent
  - Technologically deterministic





# Document analysis

- Educational policy 1994-2004
  - Gov't communications
  - National Curricula
- Social policy 1994-2004
  - Gov't communications





# Document analysis

- Data sources:

<i>*Ministry of Education Strategy 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2003)</i>	<i>*Education, Training and Research in the Information Society: National Strategy 2000–2004 (Ministry of Education, 1999)</i>
<i>*Education and Research 1999–2004: Development Plan (Ministry of Education, 2000)</i>	<i>*Information Society Programme for Education, Training and Research 2004–2006 (Ministry of Education, 2004b)</i>
<i>*Education and Research 2003–2008: Development Plan (Ministry of the Education, 2004a)</i>	<i>Finland Towards an Information Society Programme (Ministry of Education, 1995)</i>
<i>Education, Training and Research in the Information Society: a national strategy (Ministry of Education, 1995)</i>	<i>Finland's Road to the Information Society – National Guidelines (Ministry of Finance, 1995)</i>
<i>Finland as an Information Society (Information Society Advisory Board, 2000)</i>	<i>National Core Curricula (Finnish National Board of Education)</i>

*\*Included in Nivala, 2009 data sources*





# Theoretical framework: Strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984)

- Relativist approach to meaning in policy communication
- Use of metaphors
- Deliberate use of ambiguity to promote flexibility and adaptability





# Strategic ambiguity (cont.)

- Focus on ambiguity in policy communications
- Four functions:
  - Promote unified diversity
  - Facilitate transformative change
  - Foster deniability
    - Certain interpretations can be denied
  - Preserve privilege
    - Credibility varies between people





# Strategic ambiguity (cont.)

- Two organizational criteria:
  - Capacity to promote unified diversity
  - Capacity to facilitate organizational change
- Two communication criteria:
  - Deniability
  - Preserve privilege





# Findings

- Unified vision: Finland's future as an innovative information society
  - Very well articulated definition of what this means for the Finnish context
- Change: Promote “4 C’s” – Creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration
  - All four C’s embedded in pedagogical approaches
- Flexible interpretations: ICT defined as critical component of vision but with no specific ties in terms of pedagogy or subject matter





# ICT in educational context

- Discourse on innovation and information society shapes education policy

*(Rooted in well-known theories, Lundvall, 1992; Castells, 2000; Schienstock, 2007)*

- Information society as a “learning society”
  - Networked
  - Collaborative
  - Creative
- ICT broadly defined as a “learning tool”
  - In a general societal context rather than a purely educational context





# What happened?

- Early 2000s: Finns realized that technology was widely under-utilized in education (Niemi, 2003)
  - Finnish teachers among least likely to use technology
  - Finnish teachers have little faith in technology
  - Students use technology very little in schools

*(Ramboll, 2006; Law, Pelgrum & Plomp, 2008)*





# Response

- Deniability:
  - Authorities made it known that the prevalent interpretation of the policy was not in accordance with its intent, i.e. technology use needed to increase.
- Privilege:
  - The policy has not significantly changed. However, various programs implemented to address the issue.





# Conclusions

- Clear evidence of ambiguity in Finnish ICT for education policy
  - ICT use not precisely defined
  - ICT relevant in a broad social context
  - Information society adaptable to a wide range of social and educational needs





# Important Factors

- Finnish teachers (Simola, 2005)
  - High professional standards
  - Pedagogy & classroom practice
  - Trust
- Policy development (Sahlberg, 2007)
  - Leadership
  - Long-term planning
  - Shared vision





# Benefits and Pitfalls

- Pros
  - Ambiguity gives educators considerable flexibility to address diverse needs
  - Educators and administrators can adapt to rapidly changing technology
- Cons
  - Ambiguity allows educators to avoid technology





# Future Study

- Is there evidence of strategic ambiguity in other policy areas?
- How does strategic ambiguity figure in policy at the regional, local, and institutional levels?
- Need for comparative studies on the use of strategic ambiguity in education policy.





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