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
• Data sources:

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<td>Finland as an Information Society (Information Society Advisory Board, 2000)</td>
<td>National Core Curricula (Finnish National Board of Education)</td>
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*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.
References


