The Finnish School in Cross-Pressures of Change

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Abstract
The paper presents a research project of the Finnish school in an educational inclusive reform process. The study focuses on asking how the comprehensive schools cope with the reform in a time of economic instability and contradictory goals. The first phase of the research program took place during a continuing education program about inclusive education and school development. The participants comprised 530 in-service teachers and 14 school principals in fourteen primary and secondary schools. The two and half year long continuing education program offered spaces for reflections in the school community and in tailored seminars for the schools involved. The participants were engaged in discussions of gaining understanding of inclusive education and of how to respond to students’ diversity.

In the study inclusion education is seen as a complex transitional process and a multifaceted question, which involves different levels from educational policy on a national level to the local school community level and the single teacher as an agency for change. According to the preliminary results the transformation process demands a cultural shift of the traditional teacher work culture; from tend to work alone to collaboration and cross sectional cooperation. The school leaders are in a key position in fostering requisites for a professional learning community with spaces for reflections, sharing experiences and knowledge in order to get enough unanimity in the school community for promoting inclusive learning settings. A single teacher’s attitude is affected by these collective meaning making processes. During the professional development program different kind of collaboration was encouraged and changes in a more collaborative direction could be recognized. In the article we discuss the results in terms of the raised contextual factors at different levels in the transformation processes.

Keywords: Inclusion, education policy, curriculum.

Introduction
This article presents an ongoing research project called The Finnish School in cross-pressures of change: School as an inclusive learning community (SILC). The project is anchored in the transformative educational reform based on the renewed legislation (Basic Education Act, 2010) and changes in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2010) in Finland. The first phase of the research took place during a continuing education and school development program called School Community, Pedagogical development and Wellbeing - project (2010-13). The ongoing reform is consistent with the recent UNESCO (2009) policy guidelines that focus on inclusion by suggesting that the ultimate goal for equity in education is to promote participation and equal opportunities for
all students (e.g. Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Ferguson, 2008). It is, on the one hand, quite corollary to agree inclusion ideology in Finland because education has traditionally been perceived primarily as a mechanism for enhancing social justice, equity and equality (Sahlberg, 2011).

On the other hand, the current education policy has become controversial and complex. The excellent PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) achievement (e.g. OECD, 2010), for example, has created tensions in schools to reproduce the success by raising the effectiveness of practices, by extending the requirements of knowledge content and academic achievement in the National Core Curriculum, facing pressure moving towards standardization and test-based accountability. The Finnish education seems to be in a turning point in choosing the future way. Still Finland has not chosen a high-stakes testing policy as most countries have but is looking for a new way (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011). The question is heard, the comprehensive school is moving in a more sustainable and creative direction or is it to an increasing extent in the instrumental stranglehold of neoliberal education policy in Finland.

In addition, while considering the student diversity as a primary pedagogical challenge since the 1990’s, the rate of students with special needs status has continually increased. It has been suggested that, for instance, growing societal segregation and marginalization; the entry of new ethnic groups; changes in the situation of families; diagnostic culture with a stress on the medical and physiological aspects in defining special needs, and changes in the administration guidelines of special education have influenced this explosion of enrollments into special student status. There is a big variation among municipalities in special education practices. The renewed legislation and changes in national core curriculum affirmed the basic principles – early identification of risks and a three-step-support system for inclusive education.

The reform process is illuminated as a multi-level phenomenon amidst the dynamics of the transnational and national educational policies. The Finnish educational policy as metapRACTICE of governance on a national level reframes the policy at the municipal level in the field of education. But the municipalities are fairly autonomous in practising e.g. the educational policy within the national core curriculum framework. The municipal service transition process has caused contradictory pressures on municipals. Because of the economic recession less money is allocated to the municipalities, but they have got more responsibilities for different services. A process of segregation is going on due to various economic and social structures in municipalities. Because of financial straits some municipalities have had to cut their resources, which can be seen, for example, in the temporary dismissals of teachers which have gnawed at the trust between teachers and administration. As a result of the divergence among municipalities the inclusion process appears and affects everyday life at local school level in a variety of different ways.

School reforms and changes in teacher’s work are complex social processes that teachers interpret based on their personal understanding and experiences. Accordingly, there is no coherent conceptualization of “inclusion”, which is a rather blurred concept and is therefore interpreted in various ways. On one hand, inclusion is seen as a value in itself and inclusion is always preferred. On the other hand inclusion is a value but not always the best solution because it
can lead to disrupting others learning (Sabel et al., 2011). The issue of developing inclusive forms of education has led to increased challenges at school level in curriculum development and everyday practices, and teachers struggle to respond to the actual needs of a diverse student population. Nevertheless, we see the school as the key agency for change and the reform process developing from inside out (Tyack & Cuban, 1998).

1. The focus of the research project

The present research project explores how the comprehensive schools cope with the new reform and what kind of innovative inclusive practices they develop. It’s experienced by the teachers as a challenging task in a hectic time of economic instability and contradictory goals. The aim of the project is to gain relational understanding of the complexity of the transformation process, and of the inclusive education as a complicated multilayered societal phenomenon by scrutinizing the inclusive education reform between contextual factors at different levels in the transformation processes. The project focuses on three questions as follows:

- How is the reform interpreted, modified and carried out?
- What are the consequences for the school as a learning community?
- How do the Basic Education Act (2010) and the renewed National Core Curriculum (2010) guidelines appear at the local school policy level in municipalities, at school level, in teachers’ work and in pupils’ situation?

In the following sections we will first discuss the reform as a part of transnational educational strategy, and then as a part of national school policy and curriculum development work.

2. Inclusive reform as a transnational educational strategy and as a national school policy

The Finnish perspective serves a suitable example for a discussion on the contradictory issue of the global inclusive transformation. The Finnish schools are expected to maintain the international vanguard position while keeping up with society's constant challenges of change and pressures to innovate.

The amended legislation (Basic Education Act, 2010), and the changes in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2010) have removed the previous twin-track system of labeling ‘exceptional’ students before they are entitled to receive individualized support within special schools. According to the principles of neighborhood school, every student has the right to a place in the school which is located closest to home. The purpose of the reform is to focus attention on mainstream student-centered education and reinforce the learning support mechanisms for all students. Schools are obliged to implement inclusive practices. The current education policy aims at promoting the full inclusion by emphasizing the recognition of diversity and differences and by entailing educational strategies that incorporate multicultural and gender approaches into the curriculum (Special Education Strategy, 2007).

Consequently, there are attempts to idealistically decontextualize the school institution from its larger economic, political, and social circulations of power and knowledge. Thus, although the current national education policy in
Finland is promoting ideology of inclusion, at the same time, the policy is stemming from a transnational neoliberalism, a technocratic and client-oriented educational policy agenda with pressures towards increasing uniformity, standardization and effectiveness that stresses on measureable learning outcomes. This trend can be identified in the Finnish National Core Curriculum from 2004 in which academic skills and learning outcomes are promoted compared to the earlier curriculum from 1994 (Mäkinen, 2012; Vitikka, 2009).

Curriculum theory and practice in Finland is a kind of a unique intellectual and organizational curriculum cocktail between the German Bildung/Didaktik and the Angloworld curriculum traditions. As a consequence, during the last decades the Anglo-American influences have strengthened in Finland (Autio, 2006, 2013). The self-governing municipalities have different regimes of governance and some municipalities have adopted managerial models, e.g. the client-oriented provider and contract-model, which originate in the business world and New Public Management. These different management and leadership practices, for their part, shape the way in which the work is governed and organized at schools. (Rajakaltio, 2011). The transnational neoliberal performative education policy is moving towards market individualism. Thus, education is seen more as an individual right to collect educational assets to compete with others than promoting equality between individuals (Ahonen, 2007). One may ask how these changes correlate with the inclusive reform: Is there a risk to be more a bureaucratic reform (“a pie in the sky”) than anchored in innovative pedagogical ideas or in school reality?

3. The school practitioners experience on inclusive reform

In this project we look upon the school as a specific societal institution with a plurality of ethical purposes and embedded in values as democracy, social justice and equity (Dewey, 1966; Hunter, 1994). In the reality the school is a hybrid organization with cross-pressures of ongoing changes facing contradictive requirements and expectations as a part of the project-society (Rajakaltio, 2011). Educational development is linked to different state mandated programmed projects for which funding is allocated. This “project-society” development trend has also implied that municipalities have changed the way in which they organize school development work. It implies that development takes place through short term projects rather than long-span strategies and policies.

The inclusive education reform challenges the school as a learning environment, and as a professional learning community as well within its educational practices, teaching traditions, curriculum ideas; organization and leadership culture (Mäkinen, 2013; Rajakaltio, 2008; 2011; Stoll & Louis, 2008). On one side, the school can be seen as a site for each unique student individual’s subjectivity and identity formation. On the other side, the school is a (neo) bureaucratic institution, a site for control logic, and disciplinary knowledge, “regime of truth” (Foucault, 1979). There are contradictory and contested processes of exclusion and inclusion going on in the school (Popkewitz, 2009).
3.1. Participants

The participants in the research-project are 530 teachers (418 women, 112 men) and 14 school principals (7 women, 7 men) in 14 primary and secondary schools in four municipalities. All participants attended a two and half year long continuing education program and interactive development process, called School community, pedagogical development and wellbeing 2010-13, led by the research project and funded by the National Board of Education. The first phase of the research project was conducted during the program.

3.2. Data and methodology

Data was collected by a questionnaire in 2011/2012 and a follow up questionnaire of inclusive learning arrangements in spring 2013. In this paper we present the preliminary results from the first phase of the study in which we examined a) what kind of discourses could be identified at school level due to the reform, b) what kind of challenges do the teachers experience?, 3) what are the prerequisites for the reform to be successfully realized at school level and 4) what kind of inclusive practices and settings have the teachers created at school. More data will be collected during the year 2013/14 by questionnaires, follow-up interviews (focus group and individual interviews) and observations in classrooms. The methodological approach is based on communicative action research combined with an ethnographic approach and documentary analysis.

The first data were collected through the participants’ written reflections, which allowed them to express their experiences, basic assumptions and opinions about the ongoing reform. The means to the content analysis was insightful meaning making. While the participants wrote their reflections about their subjective and unique experiences, we analyzed the expressions by searching their entire meanings they became apparent. The meaning unit of organizing the data was determined as a complete description of an individual’s statement or lived experience. The analysis consisted of four iterative analysis cycles. The analysis process raised preliminary findings interpreting the multifaceted attitudes and views on inclusive reform.

4. Preliminary findings and discussion

The working culture in the Finnish schools has traditionally been very individual-oriented. In the continuing education program which served communicative spaces it became apparent that learning at school is rather a social than an individual process. The meaning making is a collective process and a successful change process demands a professional learning community as Louis Stoll et al. (2008) have stated. This professional development program encouraged teachers to re-examine their practices and taken for granted assumptions, and to transform practices at school level, e.g. provoke more collaboration between class teachers, subject teachers, special needs teachers and student welfare staff for creating new modes of working and learning practices in classrooms.

There was also networking between schools involved in the program sharing ideas and expertise. Network learning is enhancing sustainable development. The projects come and go, but networking continues. Finding
collective time for joint actions at school and between schools is usually restricted. Teachers’ work practice is nested in the collective labour agreement, which determines the boundaries of teachers’ work culture and the salary is teaching hour based. The lack of shared time was one obstacle in finding time for joint actions and creating new practices.

According to almost half of the participants, the feeling of teacher’s heavy workload has increased because of new bureaucracy; the paper work, feeling of lack of skills and competencies for inclusive education. Especially subject teachers in secondary school felt heavy workload and pressure. The teacher education programs were criticized not to prepare new teachers for the reality in school and not to give the basis for developing qualities to meet the demands of inclusive education. Newly qualified teachers will be interviewed as a target group during the next stage in the research.

The comprehensive school seems still to be rather a teachers’ domain than a multi-professional institution. The reform demands multi-professional knowledge and cross-sectorial problem solving, which could be seen in the student welfare teams in the schools. But still there is a lack of cross-sectorial cooperation and in some of the schools the collaborative work culture was affecting just some of the teachers. Inclusive education seems to be individual oriented – it’s a question of a single student’s ability, talent and problems.

There is a need of a more structure-orientated pedagogy and collaborative practices. The principal has got the formal institutional power and the key role in the transformation process in arranging the organizational conditions for a more participative work culture and for promoting inclusive learning settings. The principal may enable a dialogue about the reform issues from the specific school’s point of view. The different school cultures seem to affect how the teachers look upon the inclusive reform and their work upon it. In some of the schools joint actions for developing inclusive practices were notified. The change process was identified as a process from inside out. In the next phase of the project we will look upon different municipalities and ponder the question whether there is a strategic and systematic leadership on municipal level and how are they supporting the individual schools?

**Conclusion**

As an effect of the reform process there is an ongoing cultural shift in teacher’s work – a difficult detachment from an individualistic culture to a collaborative one. Teachers cannot manage to face the demands of inclusive education working alone. A crucial question is to what extent teachers feel that they are subjects for change (agency) rather than objects for implementation efforts. There seem to be differences among the school cultures. The continuing education program served as a "bottom-up" strategy with a dialogic approach at school level, which reached teachers’ voices. In the space of dialogue, different communication boundaries were crossed and polyphony recognized, shared meanings and new understanding could be constructed. The significance of collaborative reflection for teachers is to learn to identify the contextual factors affecting the school world, such as the prevailing socio-political trends and educational policies, as well as the local strategies deduced thereof.
The interpretation of the transitional situation, reflecting on it, and the sharing of experiences, reduce the pressures falling on individual teacher’s work, and promote coping at work. Wellbeing at work contributes to the sense of empowerment. There is a need of educational leadership to create spaces for reflections to gain understanding of the change process and of inclusive education. The crucial question one may ask is the reform really promoting child-centered thinking or is it an administrative reform with more paperwork which doesn’t in reality affect the work in the class with students. The forthcoming new National Core Curriculum for Basic education has a great influence on creating the school culture and its pedagogy in the Finnish school in the years to come.

References
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