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A School Facing a Network of Other Schools

INTRODUCTION

Several recent changes in the Finnish school system have significantly affected schooling in Finland. Our main interest in this article is to look into some of them while focusing on distance education in inter-institutional electronic networks. Our special emphasis is on a mutual electronic consortium between two small rural schools, one in the North-West of Lapland, the other near the metropolitan area of Helsinki, and two urban schools, both of them teacher training schools belonging to the University of Helsinki. We will analyse how one of these schools, the Kilpisjärvi school in Lapland, faces the other schools of this network. A more general perspective will then be adopted regarding latest developments in networking of schools and changes in the educational policy including decentralisation of power, a new curricular policy, and the position of small schools threatened by a structural change.

THE CASE STUDY

Our case study concerns a pilot project originating from the educational needs of people in Kilpisjärvi, a small geographically isolated village in Finnish Lapland about 1,100 kilometres north of Helsinki. The parents wanted their children to continue their education at the secondary level in a local school. For their obligatory secondary level education, before our experiment, the 13-15-year-old children of the village had had to move to a boarding school almost 200 kilometres away. The parents found this a severe problem for the children, for themselves, and for the whole village. However, organising secondary education was a problem for the small school which up to that point had only offered primary school education. To ensure the quality of education, in 1994 a video conference link and an audioconference link were established between the Kilpisjärvi school and the

Teacher Training School of Helsinki University. (Some early results of this project were presented in the ODLAA Forum 1995 [Kynäslahti & Salminen 1995].) Lately, other schools have started to collaborate, which has led to an electronic network of schools. With the help of this inter-institutional network, the Kilpisjärvi school has managed to organise the education requested. At the same time, distance education has created a new tie between the community and the outside world.

DECENTRALISATION

For a number of years now, decentralising the decision making bodies has been an important social feature in Finland. This trend has been very thorough in education. As an example, a strictly centralised curricular system has been replaced by a more decentralised municipality-centred curricula. Decentralisation involves delegation of power and responsibility from nation-wide governing bodies to a host of smaller units, including territorial and specialised functional bodies (Crook & al., 1992, 97). Two aspects can be distinguished in this process:

Vertical decentralisation concerns the redistribution of power downwards, while horizontal decentralisation concerns a shift towards more pluralistic, fragmented and polycentric corporatist configuration. 'New corporatism' is a label often applied to this new pattern based on partnership and loose co-ordination rather than centralistic domination. (Crook & al., 1992, 98).

The downfall of centralised control in government and the shift to more peripheral decision making in Finnish society indicate a vertical decentralisation. Tendencies of decentralisation also concern the Finnish curricular policy. A new National Framework Curriculum, outlining the main goals and encouraging municipalities and schools to develop school-based curricula, was adopted in 1994. In fact, this development started as early as 1985, after which all municipalities have been expected to design their own municipality-based curricula. In bigger municipalities, part of this curricular work was delegated to individual schools. Some of the first steps in this process were discussions between teachers and parents about common values in education. As a result, Finnish homes are more deeply involved in developing school education than ever before. In this sense boundaries between school and home, i.e. between public and domestic, have been done away with, to some extent at least.

As to school nets, the question of horizontal decentralisation is crucial. Networking gives the schools some powerful media to organise education. It also makes it possible to take advantage of the resources that networks provide. Thus, resources that have been unattainable or difficult to reach have come nearer to the school or, putting it another way, the distance between a school and extra resources has decreased. A network gives an individual school an option to create its own educational policy by specialising to certain areas and by making choices from the supply offered by other counterparts. Undoubtedly these features increase the power of a school. Thanks to increased resources, an individual school is more independent and more capable to carry out its own policy. However, this new kind of power is 'negotiated power' arising from network co-operation. Decision making does not involve only the inner processes of a single school but in a net there are external counterparts in decision making. In our case, the Kilpisjärvi school is fairly independent in decision making although it has to follow the policy determined by the local educational authorities, but on the other hand it has some external decision making at its disposal as a result of the negotiations with its network partners.

INTEGRATION AND FRAGMENTATION IN SCHOOL NETWORKS

Traditionally, a school has been a relatively fixed physical entity with its buildings and the school yard, often separated from the neighbouring society by fences. In addition, schools usually work in a rather coherent way with common goals, rules, and customs. We could almost speak of a specific school culture that is likely to characterise most of the schools. Schools are also places for social interaction that increase the feeling of unity. Students get to know, or at least recognise, each other in the school yard. Teachers also make up a corps, professionally but often also through friendship and collegiality. All in all, one could argue that in a school everybody is involved in everybody else's business in one way or another and within a restricted physical area.

Networking of schools creates complexities in which collaboration leads to organisational integration where it is difficult to distinguish any geographical, educational or administrative boundaries between schools (Kynäslähti & Stevens, 1996). In addition, in networks students and teachers become members of several schools. It is not any more simple to define the staff of a school or to determine the number of students of a school. Administrative boundaries also become complicated. For instance, a small school is no longer a small school as such; rather, it utilises local educational activities, situated in a

physical building but simultaneously taking advantage of collaborative educational services brought to it through the network. Similarly, our perceptions of the nature of periphery and centre are changing. The location and the size of a school does not necessarily determine its capabilities and resources to deliver qualified education.

In the Kilpisjärvi school the network has become a very essential element of everyday life. Collaboration within a network also calls for co-operation in the curricular policy. In the Kilpisjärvi case this means that some of the students, the ninth-graders, follow the curriculum of the Secondary Teacher Training School of Helsinki. Kilpisjärvi's own pedagogical solutions as a small village school have had to face different kinds of pedagogical views brought to it through the network. This has clearly affected the school's own pedagogy. Some of the most obvious indications of pedagogical integration come from collaboration between the Kilpisjärvi teachers and the teachers in other schools of the net. In addition to the practical questions about how to organise the education in the network, a lot of pedagogical issues have been discussed between the teachers in different schools of the net. The teachers have taken this point as very important and positive. In addition to the fact that the network has broken down the pedagogical isolation of the two small schools involved, a networked teacher community has appeared as well (Kronlund & al., 1997).

The development towards integrated entities in school networks includes, however, certain aspects of fragmentation. A school can be a partner in several networks depending on the needs and interests of the school. These needs, however, do not necessarily concern the whole school but only parts of it. On the other hand, different parts of the school, mostly different class levels, might have diverging needs. Due to these varying interests, classes in a school might network with different counterparts. In addition to the actual physical school environment common to all members of the school community, the students share distinct networked educational environments with students and teachers in other schools, or perhaps with experts from other institutions such as universities. They have various educational *habitats*, if we put it in the Baumanian way. These students operate during their school days in networked environments which they share with people from different environments and different realms of life. Students have their own classmates and teachers in nets. Teachers, on the other hand, find new colleagues through networking, with whom collaboration might be quite intensive and

useful. These networked classrooms and teachers' communities develop their own culture, their own history, their own world. A school which belongs to the network (or networks) of schools become fragmented between ,physical personnel' and ,physical students' and ,networked personnel' and ,networked classes of students'. These counterparts, perhaps, never meet each other as one group of people. As individual persons tend to develop flexible identities in the post-modern world, the character of schools become more hybrid thanks to networking. Cutler (1995) speaks about ,networked selves'. Instead of a monolithic school there is a fragmented composition where the parts are connected to the outside world in various ways. To sum up, a school is present in different ways on different occasions. In addition to education located in the physical school settings, part of the schools' performance resides in the interaction between participants in networks of schools. Networked selves of distributed schools, so to say.

The pedagogical changes in the Kilpisjärvi school mostly affect the ninth-graders who follow the curriculum of the Teacher Training School of Helsinki. The school's own traditional ways of teaching, as well as those of the principal of the school, had developed towards autonomous work and different projects before the school started to network with others. The pedagogical solutions of the Teacher Training School, on the other hand, are based on a long tradition of teacher education practices, recently, however, starting to emphasise the constructivist concept of learning (cf. Tella, 1996). The differences between pedagogies in these two schools have brought about a number of problems and the most sceptical ones have wondered whether the advanced pedagogy of the Kilpisjärvi school was taken backwards because of the collaboration with the Teacher Training School. It is interesting, however, to see how the teachers and parents in Kilpisjärvi have reacted to some pedagogical solutions of the Teacher Training School. Some parents regard that this pedagogy is better than the local one. Those parents who had a critical attitude towards the education of the Kilpisjärvi school even before the distance education link was established have had a lot of discussions with the local teachers. It is certainly true that the parents' pedagogical views have widened thanks to the opportunity to compare two different systems made possible through a distance education link. Therefore it is fair to argue that the educational profile of the Kilpisjärvi school has been fragmented partly because one third of the school follows the curriculum of another school, partly because the differences in pedagogy between the two schools have led to

different pedagogical practices and enhanced criticism towards the pedagogical style of the Kilpisjärvi school by those who have opposite pedagogical views, both teachers and parents. Here the outside impact of the network has sharpened differences in pedagogical views inside the school.

It is difficult to tell the exact number of teachers in the Kilpisjärvi school. Should we only count those found physically in the school building or also those who regularly teach through the video conference link? The same question concerns students (and parents). Admittedly, the physical presence has not lost its significance. Teachers and students meet each other face-to-face, even if this might not be any longer the best way to express a physical nearness in our present era of video conferencing. Yet those teachers and students who attend the network share another kind of school with their net colleagues and classmates. These colleague teachers do not chatter in a coffee room with other teachers, neither do these net classmates play with other students of the school in the school yard. However, the ties through a video conference link between participants can be intensive and even electrifying. The case of the Kilpisjärvi school has demonstrated that relationships between students and teachers can be very close in a school network (Salonen & Kynäslähti, 1996). This also concerns the teacher, professionally and personally. A teacher in the Kilpisjärvi school commented on having more intensive relationships with teachers from the Helsinki Teacher Training School than with some of the teachers in her own school in Kilpisjärvi. This is partly due to the fact that as a subject teacher she does not have colleagues of her own discipline in the Kilpisjärvi school. Shared expertise also means shared virtual colleagues.

In Kilpisjärvi, organisational fragmentation was reflected in everyday school work, e.g., when the ninth-graders did something specific to the joint curriculum with the Helsinki Teacher Training School. Obviously, a school network lives a life of its own. In these special cases, this life cuts a slice, the ninth grade, from the salami of the Kilpisjärvi school fragment. On the other hand, we believe that organisational aspects are in their infancy in the emergence of school networks. What has been done so far in Finland concerning the networks of schools, is closely related to founding and resources from outside partners, like business enterprises. Problems will probably abound once negotiations are started with a view to sharing costs between network partners and when reconsidering the new role and new tasks (and salary) of teachers involved in networks.

A CONSUMER-LED APPROACH

Many western countries have recently witnessed a shift to commodification education, in which educational services have started to resemble commercial products. This reflects Featherstone's comment (1995, 75) on consumer culture which points to the way in which the majority of cultural activities and significant practices become mediated through consumption. These ideas have also increased interest in the educational field (e.g. Field, 1994, Edwards, 1995). In Finland, emerging features of this development include specialisation of schools and students' or parents' option to choose between them. Specialisation brings about distinctive functional and structural changes between schools. Traditionally schools in Finland have resembled each other to a great extent but there seems to be a tendency now towards more dissimilar characters of schools than before. Students and their parents make choices in the 'educational market' according to their life styles, values, religion, or other preferences. Schools appear to catalyse this process. When competing with each other upon recruiting students, schools underline their special character. However, in rural settings there are few alternatives as there is usually only one local school to choose. The only alternative means leaving that municipality.

McMillan and Cheney (1996) have investigated the consumer metaphor in education. They approach their task from an etymological perspective where they define the origin of the word market 'as a gathering place for people to buy and to sell their wares' (McMillan & Cheney 1996, 23). In fact, a net of schools is an electronic gathering place of institutions to buy and sell their educational delivery. John Field debates about the question how adult education and training can be regarded as consumption. The first dimension he mentions is the ability for choice. It is typical of the way of life in Western societies that people are able to make choices on what they spend their money and how they use their time. This also concerns the demand of educational activities (Field 1994, 4). Earlier we referred to the parental choices regarding their children's school. *Choice* is also a keyword in the consumer aspect of school networks. Electronic networks enable schools to make choices in the networked educational delivery. The question is who decides upon these choices and on what grounds they are made.

Edwards (1995), referring to Lyotard (1984), points out the usefulness of knowledge. '[E]ducative' processes are displaced and reconstituted as relationships between producers and consumers in which knowledge is exchanged on the basis of the usefulness it has to

the consumer' (Edwards 1995, 251). In the context of school networks we can notice diverging consumer-producer relationships. A school is certainly a producer of educational services to students, parents and to the local community, while in the performance of networks a school can be both a consumer and a producer. The producer aspect mostly concerns a school's expertise areas or other elements which the other counterparts find useful for them. The consumer aspect, on the other hand, deals with a school's needs and interests. As a consumer in a network a school can both compensate its lack of resources as well as create an educational profile by specialising to certain areas. An example of the latter aspect are the schools that collaborate with university departments in order to prepare the students for academic studies in the respective university departments. It is interesting to see how schools will act in inter-institutional networks when the number of networks increases and the delivery of education becomes wider, and what will be the significance of local needs and interests in a school's decision making in the delivery provided by a net.

A small rural school might easily 'disappear' in a network whose electronic hegemony might still lie in the hands of powerful big schools. However, in our case the Kilpisjärvi school has clearly profited from the education delivered in the net. The school has found it useful and it has also satisfied the needs of the Kilpisjärvi village. The school has acted as a consumer making choices based on its own interests. We believe that this kind of consumer-led approach concerning the position of an individual school in the performance of school networks is an encouraging perspective in the future development of school networks. In the Kilpisjärvi case, the situation has not been optimal. As was stated before, collaboration with other schools may cause difficulties and conflicts and part of the school's independence and integrity might be lost due to participating in a net. However, the results of our case study are fairly encouraging as they show how an individual school can benefit from the network-based shared expertise and enhance the quality of local education while promoting local educational services.

Interactive sharing of resources and expertise naturally requires that schools are not only consumers but also producers of educational services for the net. The Kilpisjärvi school's role as a producer of expertise knowledge has been rather marginal, although it could provide knowledge of high standard for example in the Sami language and subarctic biology. Some activities of this kind have come true. On the other hand, the Kilpisjärvi

school has provided resources for the Teacher Training Schools of Helsinki by organising practice in the use of communication and information for student teachers as well as by introducing a small rural school as an educational environment for them.

We end this chapter by reconsidering the relationship between the school and the parents in the changed situation the networking has caused. During the three years of networking (1994-1997), it has been obvious that the parents have thought highly of the technology used in the network between Kilpisjärvi and the other schools. To them what had been happening in the Kilpisjärvi school had been something special and highly advanced. The parents are of the opinion that their children get valuable knowledge and practice of communication and information technologies which they will need in the future society and which will give them a certain advantage over other students as becoming citizens in an information and communication society. Even if this is certainly true, it is good to remember what Bromley said about 'computer-based curriculum [serving] as a *symbol* of the quality of the education children are receiving' (Bromley, 1997, 52; emphasis in the original). Arnold reports on changes in the Australian schooling system where schools attempt to move closer to what they perceive to be relevant in a new situation of changing work practices of a new economic ethos and new technologies. There are trends which suggest that school's task is to educate students for the workplace of next century the world's best practice (Arnold, 1996).

The anxiety of rural people to be able to follow the developments of an information and communication society is understandable. A new wave of structural changes is taking place in the Finnish society and people from rural areas keep moving to the big cities in the southern part of the country. Those who remain are concerned with what is their slice of the cake of the Finnish information and communication society and what kind of possibilities their children will have in the future compared to children in more privileged areas. Thus, a school with a cachet of forerunner in communication and information technologies inspire parents with confidence. In this sense technology is a symbol of good education for the future society.

A POST-FORDIST CONCLUDING STATEMENT

In this article, we have analysed how the Kilpisjärvi school face the other partners in an electronic network of schools mainly carried out through video and audio conferencing

and audiographics. The issues we have raised include decentralisation, specialisation, interactive sharing of expertise, integration, fragmentation, a consumer-led approach and an extensive use of communication and information technologies. We understand that these developments of school networks relate to post-Fordist discussions about educational restructuring and change. As Carter (1997) points out flexible specialisation, regarded as one of the chief features of post-Fordism (Kumar, 1995, 47; Jencks, 1996, 53), is also a main stream in the educational post-Fordist research. Specialisation is linked with extensive use of communication and information technologies and, in a network environment, with interactive sharing of resources and expertise. Carlson (1995) combines the decentralisation of power in post-Fordist organisations with 'a new computer technology' to meet customer needs at the local level. He argues that the shift towards site-based management is one of the post-Fordist organisational styles, which is now beginning to influence school. Carlson also finds networked school as a post-Fordist phenomenon (Carlson, 1995, 346). The importance of technology in the developments of post-Fordist school is emphasised by Arnold (1996). He speaks, in a critical way, about *high-tech, post-Fordist school*. Here the intensive employment of high technology in schools points to work-school correspondence in the purpose to educate students for the workplace of next century (Arnold 1996).

Knight combines the introduction of post-Fordist forms of schooling (in Australia) with commodification of knowledge. He argues that 'Education' is replaced by the (re) production of flexible human units of production/consumption.' (Knight, 1995, 24). It is interesting to see how educational services which circulate in the school networks will develop. It is probable that private sector will take more interest in this market and provide schools with courses in special topics, such as how to use video conferencing together with the World Wide Web. This kind of business will probably be initiated by teachers as well. On the other hand, it is possible that the border between private and public sectors will be blurred. When a school sells its expertise to other schools (or to whoever who is interested in its delivery) the traditional picture of a public school will shift towards teaching business. We foresee that schools and teachers will not neglect these opportunities.

Networks of schools might become a constitutive element, especially for small schools, in the developments of schooling in the Finnish information and communication society. We

are convinced that this is one of the ways that help facilitate the uneasy alliance between technology, culture, and communication.

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