

School Choice in Finnish Comprehensive Schooling – A Case Study of Educational Strategies in the School Political “Playground” of Vantaa Ulla Gratt

In meiner Masterarbeit (2010) untersuchte ich die Schulwahlstrategien von Eltern in der Stadt Vantaa, Finnland. Im Jahr 1998 wurde die Schulwahl zu einem wichtigen bildungspolitischen Thema in Finnland. Neue Regelungen ermöglichten den Gemeinden, eigenständig über die Organisation der Pflichtschulen zu entscheiden. In Vantaa zielt die lokale Schulpolitik auf Gleichheit und die Verringerung von Unterschieden ab. Vor dem Hintergrund der unterschiedlichen Ansätze kommt dem Verhalten der Eltern bei der Schulwahl besondere Bedeutung zu. Besonders das Verhältnis zwischen lokaler Schulpolitik, den Bildungsstrategien der Eltern und der Schulwahl der Eltern ist von Interesse. Im Rahmen dieses Artikels wird vor allem das Thema der sozialen Gerechtigkeit in finnischen Gesamtschulen beschrieben.

In my master’s thesis (2010) I studied the school choice strategies of parents in Vantaa, Finland. In 1998 school choice became a central theme in school policy in Finland, as the new School Act enabled communities to take over the main organization of comprehensive schooling. Local school policy in Vantaa is directed towards equality and the reduction of disparities. Taking into account these aspects, the behavior of parents in school choice plays a big role. Especially the relationship between local school policy, parents’ educational strategies and school choice is interesting. This article discusses the theme of social justice in Finnish comprehensive schooling.

Finland – “wonderland” of education?

Everybody, who has something to do with education, has probably heard of the “wonderland” of education – Finland. The otherwise not that well-known northern country situated between Sweden and Russia must have made something right in the 1970s. According to Pekkarinen, Kerr and Uusitalo (2009) the founding of the nine-year-long compulsory comprehensive school “for all” did indeed improve the social justice in education. More and more individuals could reach a higher educational level than the earlier generation had reached. As well according to PISA, everything seems to be just perfect in Finnish educational system.

In this article I will present some insights into social justice in Finnish comprehensive schooling. I might disappoint you a little. The Finnish comprehensive schooling is not organized in a way that there would be no worries about social justice in education.

The biggest reasons for these worries are neo-liberal school policies, like for example the free school choice policy. Nevertheless, the Finnish school system still creates a great image of social justice in education and many school authorities have the will to keep up the scene.

In this article I will discuss issues of social justice and school choice in relation to neo-liberal politics in education. I will bring the idea of the



free market principle in education from international level to national and down to local level.

As an example of school choice I will use my own case study of Vantaa, which I completed in spring 2010 at the University of Helsinki. The city of Vantaa has chosen an “anti-school market” school choice policy, which differs a lot from the school choice policies of the neighbour cities. I will first give a brief introduction into the Finnish school system in general and school choice policies in Finland. Then I will discuss marketization in education and point out some ideas about the relationship between marketization, neo-liberal ideology and globalization. Before presenting my own study, I will discuss school choice and social justice issues. In the discussion I will try to construct some idea about how social justice in education can be sustained in the framework of neo-liberal school policies.

Finnish school system in a nut shell and Finnish school choice policies

In Finland, like in many other countries, was the development of institutional schooling based on the idea to educate “the vulgar” and to create a tight national identity (Lampinen 1998). Before the big school reform in the 1970s, the Finnish school system looked pretty similar to the Austrian one. Everybody started their school career in folk school (kansakoulu) which took four years. After that there were two options: 5-year-long grammar school (oppikoulu) or additional two years in folk school plus two years in a civic school (kansalaiskoulu). The only way to higher education at universities would go through grammar school. A pupil could visit an upper secondary school (lukio) only after finishing the grammar school. Successful studies in an upper secondary school would lead to a place at university. School choice was very simple in that time and had a very tight relation to social class and resources of the family – sometimes already the place of living was determining the school choice. According to Osmo Lampinen (1998) the two leading ideologies behind the big school reform in 1970s were equality and economical de-

velopment. The state, who was clearly the main provider of education, saw the development of the compulsory nine-year-long comprehensive schooling as an important investment. Jaana Poikolainen (2011, 133) writes in her article how one main aim of the school reform was to “get rid of the dualistic schooling system, which was seen as unequal”. Lampinen claims that since the 1980s the Finnish education policy has been lacking the ideology of social justice while economical issues in education have been becoming more and more important. (Lampinen 1998, 27-30)

After the big school reform in the 1970s, an important turning point in Finnish school policy has been the change in the state’s support of individual schools in 1993. Since 1993 schools could receive financial support according to the number of their pupils. The communities could themselves decide how they would distribute the support between different social sectors. Some schools were privileged, others received only few resources. This shift in the Finnish educational policy was the starting point for the competition between schools (Ahonen 2003, 180-181). In small communities, small schools needed to be shut down and in bigger cities schools started to look for ways of recruiting more pupils. At this point, in 1993, school choice wasn’t free. Pupils would enter the school to which school authorities allocated them. The closest school principle was determining the school choice.

Later, in the year 1998 the new Basic Education Act made school choice possible – a community could open the school catchment areas, which have been in place since 1898. The old principle of the closest school was challenged. When speaking about school choice in Finland, there are two main points in the school career to take into account. School choice is actual when attending the first grade (the year the child turns seven) and between the sixth and seventh grade. Even if the school type stays the same for nine years, many school institutions are built like this that pupils have to change the school building between their sixth and seventh grade. Also the teacher system is a little

different on the upper level of comprehensive schooling than on the lower level because the class teacher system ends with the sixth grade. The upper grades are taught by subject teachers. There are often several schools for the first six grades, but only one school for grades seven to nine in rural areas. Lampinen (1998, 78) sees the education act reform in 1998 as a climax point of decentralization. To most Finnish towns and cities this meant nothing, because there is only one school to choose – especially on the upper level of comprehensive school. However, in bigger cities with several schools also in upper level of comprehensive school, the Basic Education Act allowed to open the school catchment areas into one big school market.

In the following part I will discuss school choice more widely. What is the ideology behind it? What has globalization and neo-liberalism to do with school choice?

A wider perspective of school choice and marketization in comprehensive schooling: Globalization in education and neo-liberal principles

Jenny Ozga and Bob Lingard (1997, 65) argue that the effects of globalisation in education are almost always described in the form of neo-liberalism. Fazal Rizvi and Laura Engel (2009) write that globalisation can be interpreted differently, but the neo-liberal conception has become hegemonic in the discussions about globalisation. Rizvi and Engel point out that the concept of globalisation is connected with educational change (529-530). Also Sanna Niukko (2006, 3) has focused on the connection between globalisation and neo-liberalism. Niukko sees the spread of neo-liberal ideology and economics combined with the Anglo-American welfare model being the most essential catalysator of globalisation. Michael Apple (2001) discusses globalisation in education exactly by concentrating on neo-liberal discourses and policies. He sums up those policies to four ideas by naming them privatisation, marketization, performativity and

the enterprising individual (p. 409). Globalisation, whether it is cultural, economical or political, doesn't follow the same lines in every country. Ozga and Lingard (1997) use the concept of vernacular globalisation, when describing different countries implementing best practices. To add here, not only countries implement new policies differently, but also communities might make their own local decisions. Of the many conceptualizations of globalisation, the one from Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997) seems to be the most useful one. According to Taylor et al. globalisation is all those processes, which build supranational connections in various ways – for example economically, culturally or politically. Education has become more and more globalised. For example universities follow same degree systems and there is a lot of mobility between countries in education, like the study exchange program Erasmus.

I will now try to conceptualize neo-liberalism. In neo-liberalism, it is assumed that a human being naturally behaves out of self-interest (Apple 2001, 414). To put it very simple, according to Therese Quinn (2009) neo-liberal ideology is about privatizing everything, free markets, individualism, competition, intellectual property, choice, innovation and flexibility. What does neo-liberalism then mean on the national or local level? Marketization of schools can clearly be seen as an attempt to implement economic frames and neo-liberal ideology to the educational field. When schools are seen as educational services and pupils and their parents as consumers, we have a market setting. The economic development, for what also human capital development is necessary, is considered to be achieved through policies that encourage people to participate more actively in education (Rizvi & Engel 2009, 529). For neo-liberal school policies, enterprising individuals are needed. When schools are accessible like other services on free markets, the customers are supposed to participate by picking out the best educational service.

The marketization of schools, is one very widely spread type of neo-liberal movement in com-

prehensive schooling. It is a strongly globalised phenomenon in education. Finland is definitely not the first country using free school choice policies in some areas of the country. School choice doesn't directly mean free choice. The "freeness" of school choice varies between rather limited school choice to open enrolment. The more open the enrolment conditions are, the more schools are forced to act like enterprises on the school markets. Countries like New Zealand, England and the United States of America use so called free school choice policies (Whitty & Power 2002, Apple 2001). The Swedish and Danish school choice policies follow similar principles of competitiveness, school markets and decentralisation of power (Johannesson et al. 2002).

So, what happens when a community or a country performs according to neo-liberal principles? Apple (2001) describes in an article the results of studies published by Stephen Ball in 1994, how the neo-liberal shift, in the form of marketized reforms, effects on schooling. Markets have lead in England to a situation where schools are looking for "motivated" parents and "able" children. In England the league tables force schools to enhance their position in the local markets. Apple argues that the marketization in schooling has been changing the emphasis from student needs to student performance. One does not only think what the school could do for a pupil, but what a "good" pupil could do for the reputation and success of the school (p. 413-414). Pupils and their families are judged by their "market value".

Marketization of schools can lead to a situation where families have different market values and in this way, different opportunities on the educational field. School choice makes schools accessible for everybody, but it indirectly opens the doors mainly for middle class families. As Fazal Rizvi and Laura Engel (2009) conclude, the formal access to schools does not ensure effective equity results. Within the neo-liberal conceptualisation of globalisation also the notion of access and equity has been reshaped. However, Rizvi and Engel interestingly write

that neo-liberalism as an ideology is not really against social justice goals, but the conception of justice is seen only as a formal access to education. The authors see this approach as too weak and narrow for enhancing social justice in education (p. 529-535). In the next chapter I want to take a closer look to issues of social justice in school choice.

Social justice and school choice

Choice, equality, social justice and specially the relationship between all these three concepts have been very popular themes to study as school choice policies have been implemented almost all over the modern world. School choice can indeed lead to inequality, as not all the parents are equipped with effective school choice strategies and resources (economical, social and educational) but choice itself can be seen also as liberating. Sharon Gewirtz, Stephen J. Ball and Richard Bowe (1995) write in their extensive study about markets, choice and equity, that school choice policies and choice have been getting new discursive dimensions. Basically, choice is seen automatically as fair and "class free". Choice as a concept refers to the freedom to choose (p. 20-21). Choice itself is not creating inequality. However, several studies have been published, which claim that school choice segregates some certain groups/classes even more than other systems of organising school enrolment. Gewirtz et al. (1995) add that also in systems, in which the school choice is very limited, the role of class background is strong (p. 55-56). According to Stephen Gorard, Chris Taylor and John Fitz (2003), school markets lead to a situation where one should really be worried about equality. They argue that education should be distributed like health care services in a society. On the other hand they see choice as liberating. If families are able to choose better services, the quality of educational services might improve (p. 15).

When discussing the Finnish comprehensive schooling, the social justice in education seems to be reached – or isn't it? As Geoff Whitty

(2010) writes in his article: "Finland is viewed as an example of a well-funded system where equity and social cohesion seem to be compatible with high quality" (p. 37). From an international perspective, the Finnish school system stands for minimal segregation. Studies like PISA reinforce this picture. Some recent Finnish studies and articles written for example by Risto Rinne (2000) suggest, that Finland indeed stands in the middle of the "third wave" rhetoric, where parental choice and marketization is emphasized. Whitty (2010, 37) continues that Finnish school policies follow "the English road" although "the Finnish school system still seems quite homogenous in terms of educational outcomes". Lampinen (1998, 79) discusses the relationship between social justice and school choice. He claims that the weakness in the new education policy is the issue of social justice. Lampinen suggests that school policy, which emphasizes free choice, can lead to even bigger educational and social differences.

The Finnish school system is - similar to the Austrian one - highly centralized. From Helsinki until up to the Norwegian border, every child attends the same kind of school between the age of 7 and 16 with a centralized curriculum, although schools can emphasize certain subjects within the curriculum now. Depending on the local school policies, schools are in some cities in Finland encouraged to give themselves a certain profile or provide next to ordinary classes also specialized classes. Jarkko Hautamäki (2010, 53) claims that there are some differences between the schools, but the differences between the classes are even bigger. He refers to school classes specialized for example in music or sports. Hannu Rätty, Kati Kasanen and Noora Laine (2009, 290) write that the Finnish school markets are very strongly polarized in urban areas. Ahonen (2003) writes that for example in Helsinki the parents of almost every third child chose another than the closest school as the child attended the first grade in the year 1994. Hautamäki (2010, 53) makes a careful assumption that the differences between schools in Helsinki are bigger than in Vantaa or in Espoo.

Choice as the occupation of middle class mothers

Piia Seppänen (2006), who has made an extensive quantitative study of school choice in Finland in the area of Turku, shows that children of highly educated mothers often applied for a school outside the own school catchment area. The education of the father did not seem to have the same impact in her study. According to Diane Reay (1998) and her research findings, the middle class mothers behaved on school markets very strongly out of self-interest. In her studies the middle class mothers were able to use the school markets more effectively for their own advantage than working class mothers. All the mothers were more actively involved in their child's schooling than fathers (p. 197). According to Gewirtz et al. (1995) it seems that middle class families manage to take an advantage of free school choice in comparison to working class families. Apple (2001, 415) discusses in his article how middle class parents are the most advantaged on the school markets. School markets function in two directions: parents choose the school and schools choose the parents. Middle class parents are the most "wanted" customers for schools and they also have the skills to choose the best school for their children. Lynn Bosetti (2004, 403) concludes her article by saying that school choice doesn't improve the educational achievement of all the children - the children with middle and higher social class background are privileged. The Finnish researchers Risto Rinne and Anna-Kaisa Nuutero (2001) discuss in their article the changes in the school policy in relation to parentocracy (a system where a child's educational success is strongly connected to the resources and wishes of parents). They claim that in the Finnish context the ideology of parentocracy means choice. The needs of parents and their children are more and more emphasized (p.94). In relation to meritocracy, in parentocracy the power of parents in determining a child's success is seen stronger as the power of merits themselves. For example in Britain "a good education" is seen as inadequate - the child has to get the best possible education as early as



possible (Seppänen 2003, 339). For acquiring the best possible education the role of parents is emphasized. Generally, it is often said that school choice is the choice of the middle class parents. Mothers' profession and educational level seem to be both in Finnish and international studies correlating strongly with a child's educational opportunities.

In the next section I will discuss the school choice on a local level. I will introduce one city in Finland and its school markets. As Gewirtz et al. (1995, 3) claim in their study, schools markets must be studied locally. In research literature the concept of lived school markets is also used. According to Seppänen (2006, 27-28) this concepts includes the organizational frames of school choice, the history of the schools, the social geography of the area and the actions of different actors. In Finland one could additionally to these concepts speak about public school markets as Finland has in relation to many

other countries only few private schools. School choice is often made between two or more public schools. When looking at school choice in Finland, it is important to point out that Finnish public comprehensive schooling is completely free of charge. Schools provide a free warm meal daily, note books, pencils, all the materials for hand crafts and arts, and so on. Economical resources don't play such a big role because of these arrangements, but social connections, the "insider" knowledge about the school markets and of course educational resources are important factors in the school choice in Finnish urban areas.

Vantaa's school political "playground"

In my master thesis I concentrated on the city of Vantaa in the greater Helsinki region in southern Finland. I was interested in the school choice made by parents, when the child is

finishing the sixth grade. This is the point when pupils often need to move from one school building to another and sometimes it means a longer travel to school.

Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa form together a metropolitan area of one million inhabitants, which is a fifth of the Finnish population. Vantaa is an especially interesting case from the viewpoint of school policy. The two neighbour's cities encourage the free school choice and the marketization of schools. For example Helsinki provides a variety of schools specialized in sports, arts, natural sciences, etc.

Vantaa has four attendance zones (west, middle, north-east and east). There are several schools with grade seven to nine in these areas. School choice is in the first place performed by school authorities (in Vantaa it is the principal of the attendance zone). As Seppänen (2006, 10) puts it, school choice can be seen as schools selecting the pupils, as it is the case in Vantaa rather than mainly parental choice, where the role of parents is emphasized. In Vantaa, pupils are allocated to different schools inside these four areas in relation to the territorial situation. Usually, school authorities tend to choose the geographically closest school, where the school way is safe. If the parents want to apply for another school place than the local school authorities have allocated to the child, this can take place in the secondary search. The primary search is made automatically - without any filling of forms.

What kind of schooling possibilities does the city of Vantaa offer in the upper level of comprehensive schooling? There is one international school in Vantaa, which offers teaching in English from grade one to nine. Pupils are selected through the secondary search. The applicants need to attend an entrance exam. Two schools provide language immersion teaching, one in Swedish and one in German. Language immersion teaching can only be attended when the child already has basic skills in that language. Musically specialized teaching is offered in each school area. Transition to a music class happens

already on the lower level of a comprehensive school. The city of Vantaa offers Montessori from grade one to six. There is also one Steiner-School in Vantaa, which is private. Pupils are attending this school from the first grade on. (Yläkoululaisen opas 2009, Alakoululaisen opas 2009)

In general, one could say that Vantaa's school markets offer a good continuum for studies starting on the lower level of comprehensive school. Vantaa doesn't have any comprehensive school specialized in mathematics, sports or arts. Vantaa's pupils can also apply for a school place outside Vantaa. For example several schools in Helsinki organize entrance exams, where everybody can take part.

Research questions, target group and methodology

The data for my Master's thesis was conducted in the framework of a research project called "Parents and School Choice - Family Strategies, Segregation and Local School Policies in Finnish Comprehensive Schooling", supported by the Academy of Finland, responsible was Professor Hannu Simola.

In my study, I wanted to construct a discursive picture of the strategies and the logic Finnish sixth graders' mothers use when speaking about their children's school career and about education and schooling in general. I defined the term "logic" (Lahdelma 2010, 34) to be a mindset, reasoning or attitude behind the school choice strategy the parents use. A very important theoretical framework for defining the school strategies and logics were the studies of Agnes van Zanten (2003). In her studies she grouped middle class parents into two groups based on their values in the school choice. The parents using expressive values saw school rather traditional. They didn't support competition in schools or between the schools. These parents connected the values of health and happiness to schooling. They were not necessarily choosing the closest school, but

they chose a school, which was situated still close enough and which was experienced as “good enough” for their child. These parents were often working in the public sector. The second group defined by van Zanten was the group of parents seeing schooling and education instrumentally. These parents worked more likely on the private sector. They waited that the school would prepare their children for the “real life” – to the hard competition for good work places. The good reputation of the school was highly appreciated in this group of middle class parents. (Van Zanten 2003, 115-119)

I had two research questions in my study (Lahdelma 2010, 38-40). The first one concentrated more on the school political framework of Vantaa and the second on educational strategies:

1. How is the organization of Vantaa’s comprehensive schooling constructed in the educational talk of highly educated mothers and how does the educational talk relate to the school political frameworks of Vantaa?

2. What kind of educational logic are mothers bringing out in their talk? What kinds of discourses are constructed about schooling and its importance?

An initial questionnaire was sent to 1990 parents in Vantaa whose children were about to transfer to the seventh grade in the following school year. The questionnaire was provided in six languages: Russian, Estonian, Somali, Arabic, English and Finnish. Parents received the questionnaire in January 2009 in the same envelope where the decision of the school placement made by the Local School Authorities was received. 374 questionnaires were returned and 76 parents were interviewed. As a student, I could choose my ten interviewees out of these 76.

Based on international and national studies, women tend to be more active in making decisions regarding their children’s school career. While school choice is gendered, it is also classed

and connected to the educational level of the mother. As 67 of the interviewees were female and the respondents were in general belonging to middle class based on their educational level, profession and living conditions (see Poikolainen 2011, 136) it was not very difficult to pick highly educated mothers for my interviews. All the mothers I interviewed had at least a lower higher education (like Bachelor studies). Additionally I limited my search to mothers, whose child had been automatically allocated to the closest school. I wanted interviewees from at least two attendance zones, which were in my study north-east and west. I chose this target group because I was interested to know why these highly educated mothers, who would probably have enough educational and social capital to choose another school, have been choosing the school which was automatically allocated to their child.

The interviews took place in a time phase of about two months in spring 2009. I contacted my interviewees by phone. The interviews took place face to face at the university, at the interviewees’ workplace or at home (Lahdelma 2010, 51). I used thematic interviews as an interview-ing method. The approach lies somewhere between structured and completely informal interviews. For example Sirkka Hirsjärvi and Helena Hurme (2001, 44) call it semi-structured interview method. As I conducted my research data not only for my study, but for the whole research project of the University of Helsinki, I was privileged to use the general interview schema. The interview schema was built on four themes: 1) background information, 2) choices, wishes and plans, 3) resources and 4) values. Under these themes there were some ready formed questions, but basically the interview intertwined around these themes and the interview guideline was only there to help the interviewer to take all the insights into account. The idea was to let the interviewee speak as free as possible. Most interviews lasted for about an hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed literally. All together there were 228 pages of transcribed text. (Lahdelma 2010, 42, 46)

Because I was interested in attitudes, values and the meaning of education in the educational talk of my interviewees, I saw a discursive approach as a useful analysis tool. I didn't want to know only what the interviewees have to say, but also how they construct and reason their thoughts. Based on the theory behind the ideology of school choice, the studies of van Zanten and others studies, I had some hypotheses. However, I wanted to read my data open minded. In the first reading I was constructing a general picture about the interview data. I needed to ask myself, if my initial research questions were actually answered in the interview data. The second round of reading was far more concrete and it really nailed down the final research questions. My viewpoint was moving away from seeing mothers as "enterprising individuals" on the school markets to a more general perspective of school choice in the Finnish society. The whole interview data was read several times to make sure that all the sentences and sentence-structures which were essential to the research questions were picked out. After having all the useful data picked out for analysis, the data was categorized.

The initial categorization of the research data was the base for the discursive reading. The discursive approach is not a clearly defined methodology. Arja Jokinen, Kirsi Juhila and Eero Suoninen (1993, 17) summarize in their book that a discursive framework is about socially constructed language. What we say is always connected to its context. Everybody is bonded to an own system of meanings. However, these systems are overlapping and the borders are not very clearly defined between them. I read my research data by looking for discrepancy and overlapping systems of meanings.

In figure 1 there is a practical example of the analysis. On the left side you can see "raw" data, which is unchanged interview data. In the middle column the idea of the raw data is briefly summarized. In the third column the discourse is named

and the logic behind the talk is traced. (Lahdelma 2010, 46) The translation into English was made by the researcher.

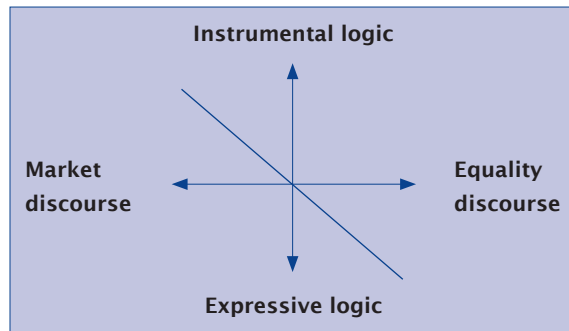
Logics and discourses intertwined in Vantaa's school political framework

Half of the interviewed mothers of sixth graders mentioned, that the place of living is strongly related to school choice possibilities in Vantaa. However, mothers were still clearly content with the situation and with their closest situated school. The ideology of communal based compulsory comprehensive schooling for all and the closest school principle was strongly supported. Finnish comprehensive school was seen almost patriotic as the best in the world, even though some interviewees were not that convinced about the homogeneity and good quality of all the schools nationwide or even within one city. The idea of open enrolment didn't get much support – it didn't seem practical or necessary, as the closest school was good enough anyway. Some of the interviewees could see the effects of open enrolment on more general and societal level. Without limited choice some schools could get rejected while others would be too popular on the school markets. The trust of the interviewees in the quality of Finnish comprehensive schooling could be interpreted in two ways. The schools which the

Figure 1: An example of the data-analysis

"Raw" data	Summarized data	Discourse and logic
Theme: Transition to upper level of Comprehensive Schooling		
Interviewee 5: I would have applied elsewhere. I would have looked for that kind of school which is safe. And having so called "good reputation", if one can say so.	Would apply elsewhere, if the school would have not been safe. The reputation of the school is meaningful.	safety – "care"-discourse into a school with a good reputation – instrumental logic

Figure 2: The instrumental and the expressive logic in relation to equality and market discourse



sixth graders of these mothers would visit in the next autumn were already good enough, so the mothers didn't see any need to choose another school. As these mothers were highly educated, they had not only trust in the system but also in themselves and their children. Their child could have success in life also when she or he attended a mediocre school. As the local school policy of Vantaa supports the closest school principle, limited choice and homogeneity of schools it was not that surprising that the equality discourse was strongly constructed in these mothers school choice talk. (Lahdelma 2010, 55-59)

Even that the homogeneity of schools was in general much supported, the interviewees saw the profiling of communal schools as a positive development – they didn't want to have more private schools, as the world of private schools was seen as "strange" for the Finnish society. The equality discourse, emphasizing homogeneity, was contested by the market discourse. Profiled schools would enhance the image of the whole city of Vantaa. (Lahdelma 2010, 55, 60-61)

As limited choice was in general supported, parental choice was seen as important in the case, when the place of living was between two schools. However, choice should be reasoned in that kind of situation. An interesting point for me as a researcher was to notice, that these mothers didn't know much about the secondary search and the admission reasons for applying the school place elsewhere than the local school authorities have been allocating in the primary search. The interviewed parents knew very poorly the existing school choice possibilities and procedures for secondary search in Vantaa or in neighbour cities. (Lahdelma 2010, 62)

The interviewees used two main logics when speaking about the educational career of their child. The bigger part of these ten interviewed mothers was using an expressive logic in relation to school choice, schooling and all kind of forms of education (like hobbies and other free time occupations). The mothers, who were mainly using expressive logic, were working more likely on public services like social and educational branch.

School and hobbies were seen as only one part of life, not as the most important. The values of happiness and health were highly respected in this logic. Some of the interviewees saw schooling as instrumental – school was for them an instrument to be successful in later life. These mothers supported the idea of free school markets. Also in their working life these mothers were more likely facing competition, because they worked on the private sector. Competition and hard work was seen as something important already in earlier school career. (Lahdelma 2010, 65-66)

Among the discourses of equality and discourse of school markets there were also some other discourses constructed in the educational talk of the interviewed mothers. Overlapping with the expressive logic, mothers used the so called easiness discourse when speaking about their school choice. As the allocated school was situated close to home, the school way would be short and social surroundings would stay unchangeable for the child. (Lahdelma 2010, 69-70) Values of familiarity, consistency and safeness were also often mentioned in several interviews. The discourse of protection was constructed through these values. The expressive logic was overlapping with this discourse (p. 72).

The last constructed discourse was the discourse of meritocracy. Education and schooling was highly valued in all families of the interviewed mothers. Education and educating oneself were seen self-evidential. Mothers didn't seem to be very worried about the future, but at least some educational level was seen vital for the future as the child would face the needs of the labour market. And education and degrees were seen as instruments for success. Mothers were answering very carefully when they were asked about the career wishes for their offspring. Even that the availability of education was seen as self-evident, the mothers didn't want to push their child, or at least they didn't want to construct that kind of picture in their educational talk, to get a certain education. Language abilities and good choices already in comprehensive schooling were seen as

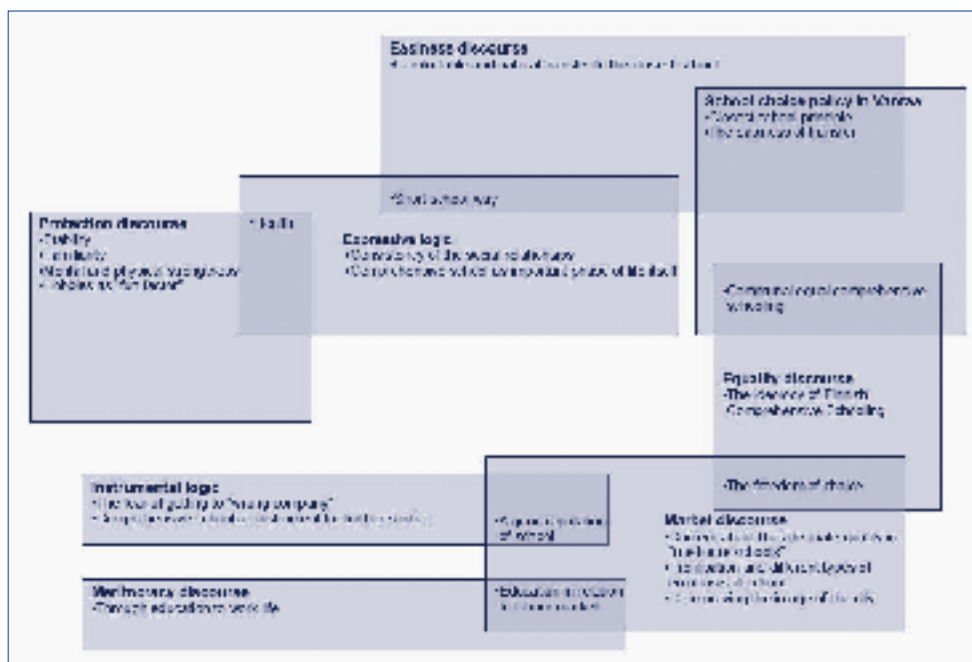


Figure 3: Logics and discourses intertwined in Vantaa's school choice political framework

Social justice in education might never be reached, but local school authorities seem to have some power to support social justice in schooling at least on the local level. When we move to

important only in the group of mothers, whose educational talk leaned towards the market discourse. (Lahdelma 2010, 75-78)

In figure 3 the research findings are summarized and all the discourses and logics are named and shortly defined.

Discussion - Is school choice challenging the illusion of equality in Finnish comprehensive schooling?

Based on my interview data and on the research findings of the whole research project the answer is no, as long as the local school policies don't support the school choice in the form of open enrolment and free school markets. Poikolainen (2011) presents the results of the whole research project by grouping the interviewees into traditional, contemplating and determined choosers. The traditional chooser (n=30) drifts to the closely situated school because it is just a practical and not a bad choice. The contemplating chooser (n=31) is using more his/her existing economical and social resources in the school choice. This group of choosers is using the parentocracy discourse. Determined choosers (n=15) actually see themselves as consumers of education services on the school markets. According to Poikolainen they see that they have the right to choose the services and the community is obliged to provide those services. Poikolainen (2011, 131, 137-139) writes that based on the interview data it looks like the parents are not shaking the school markets in Vantaa. However, we can't know how long the city of Vantaa will lead such restricted school choice policies.

national level, the illusion of equality gets blurry. Local school policies vary a lot and as the decentralization of schooling continues moving away from the state steered system one cannot speak anymore about "the same school for all". The illusion of equality lives still strong and probably also long in Finnish comprehensive schooling, but it already now leaves space for some determined choosers with very considered acts on school markets. |||||

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