Language education policy as ”wobbly-wobbly, timey-wimey”: conceptualisation of policies as temporally and spatially fluctuating

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Contemporary policy making is increasingly networked, ”soft” (based on dialogue and consultation), and conducted by experts, as opposed to hierarchical, ”hard” (based on regulation and directives) and conducted by politicians and civil servants. The research on higher education policy (the empirical context of this study), in turn, has until recently been dominated by structural approaches; i.e. approaches focusing on hierarchical policy structures and hard regulation at local, national, regional and international level. (Saarinen & Ursin 2012.)

This apparent discrepancy between how policies are construed and how policies are conceptualized is the founding motivation of this presentation. The changes in policy making have challenged our theoretical and methodological understanding of how policy is enacted. As a consequence, policies often appear contradictory, unsuccessful and haphazard, as the new kinds of policy mechanisms hide the actual policy making process, creating the appearance that policies often ”just happen”.

Then why do we study policies structurally when policies are, in fact, temporally and spatially fluctuating, networked, and highly discursive in nature? Can linear, rational, clearly bound approaches help us understand phenomena that are non-linear and fuzzy and appear irrational? Do we have methodologies for the study of networked and fluid policy construction? By the analysis of multisited policy discourses, I mean the carefully contextualized ethnographic analyses that focus on a particular setting and the various policies that influence and interact in that particular setting.

This presentation takes language education policy in higher education as the empirical context to discuss theoretical and methodological approaches in order to better understand and analyse our changing understanding of (language education) policy making. The presentation is based on a project on the position of language in Finnish and Danish higher education. (Saarinen 2012.)

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