

How to achieve a successful implementation of the reform in schools by teacher involvement: The Finnish experience

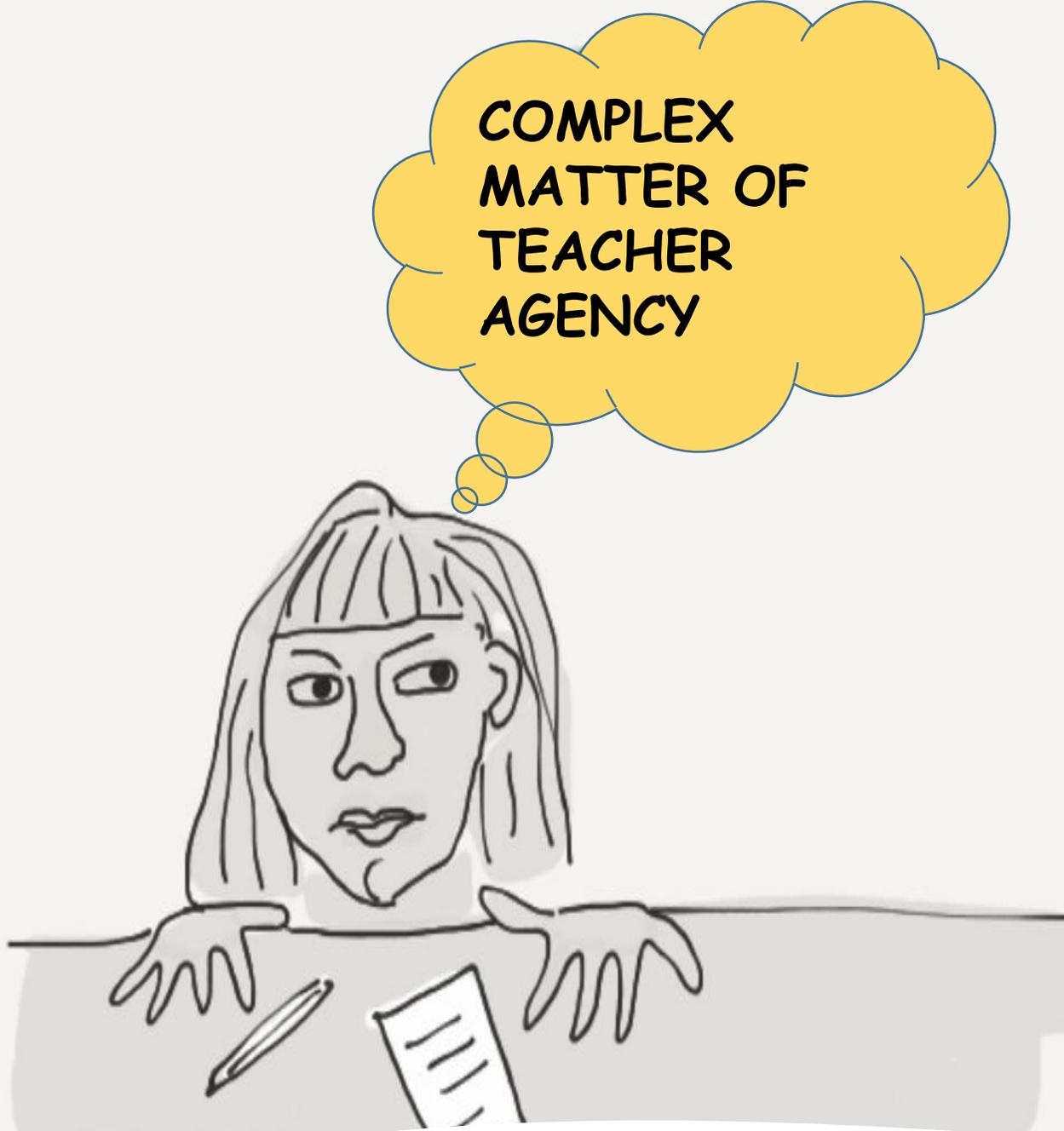
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Teacher agency as a precondition for reform

- Supporting teacher agency at the individual, community, cultural and structural levels is the only sustainable way to maintain what we consider valuable in education, as well as to make improvements and develop education (Leijen, Pedaste & Lepp, 2020).
- Teacher agency is shown to affect e.g.
 - **student agency and learning** (Edwards, 2007; Lipponen & Kumpulainen 2011).
 - **teacher well-being** (Heikonen et al., 2017; Pyhältö et al., 2015; 2014; Soini et al., 2015)
 - **teachers as makers of sustainable change** (Bakkenes, Vermunt & Wubbels, 2010; Kwakman, 2003; Linnenbrink-Garcia, et al., 2011)



**COMPLEX
MATTER OF
TEACHER
AGENCY**

In diverse working environment teachers:

- **interpret and enact** the curriculum and policy messages, and negotiate with colleagues, pupils, and parents.
- **make independent choices** every day, **balancing** personal pedagogical visions and principles and shared collegial agreements.
- Teachers' professional agency is therefore **highly relational and context dependent** and cannot be properly understood in terms of either individual, or structural or cultural factors -> **ecological approach**.
- **Agency does not mean freedom from constraints**; rather, it is the intentional use of capacity under certain ecological conditions.
- It also means that **autonomy should not be confused with agency**. Both need **supportive community and leadership to flourish**.

Lipponen & Kumpulainen 2011; Priestley et al. 2015; 2021; Toom et al. 2015.

Relational and developing agency

- Teacher agency is always **emerging and developing in everyday life of school community**, embedded in larger social and organisational systems.
- Agency is something **that people do in interaction** with their surrounding context.
- The **social resources of a teacher community**, realized in the quality of interactions, have been suggested to be crucial for cultivating teacher agency.
- In turn, professional agency is **capacity that prepares the way for intentional and responsible management of new learning**, both at an individual and community level.

Archer, Biesta and Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al. 2015. Edwards, 2005; Hökkä et al., 2017; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011.



Professional agency in terms of learning

- Consist of the interrelated elements of teachers'
 - **motivation to learn** continuously about teaching (*I want*),
 - **efficacy beliefs about their learning** as teachers (*I am able*), and
 - **intentional strategies for facilitating and managing** new learning (*I can and do*)in everyday pedagogical practices.

Sustainable change requires building this capacity.

Kumpulainen, Toom & Saalasti, 2011; Pyhältö et al., 2014, 2015; Van Eekelen, Vermunt, & Boshuizen, 2006; Sachs, 2000; Turnbull, 2002; 2005; Edwards, 2005; Hakkarainen, Paavola & Lipponen, 2004; Soini et al., 2015.

Finnish teacher agency

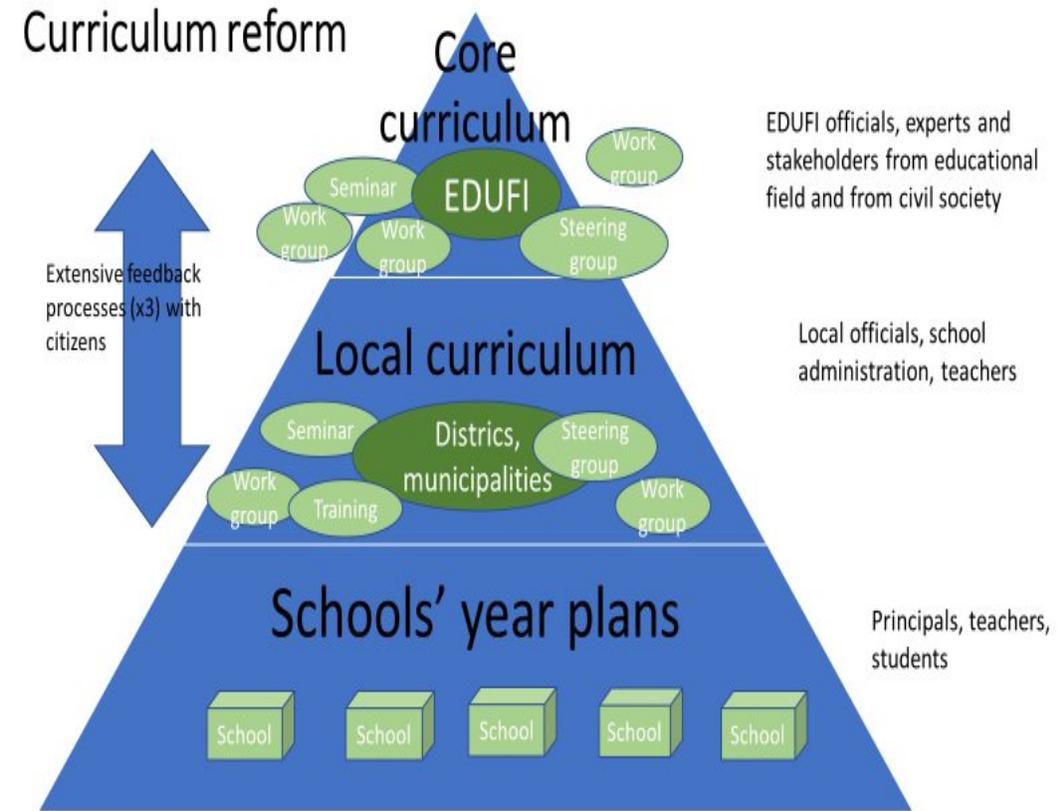
- **Agentic relationship** with the changing working environment e.g.
 - Using others as a resource for learning and, equally, acting as a support for their learning
 - Act in new and creative ways, including resisting external norms and regulations when they are understood to contrast or conflict with professionally justifiable action.
- **Strong professional agency** in general.
 - Teachers' agency in the class with students is very strong but agency in professional **community and in school reforms significantly lower.**
 - Weak sense of agency increases experienced stress **despite the autonomy**

Finnish school curriculum

- Strongly influenced by two traditions:
 - German didactics (“Lehrplan”, 1930’s) focusing on contents and subjects as the center of teaching and learning
 - Anglo-Saxon curriculum tradition, including Dewey and progressive ideas of education organized around learning experiences.
- **As a result; hybrid model combining features from both traditions**
 - The first general part of the curriculum and second part concerning subjects based on didactics.
- **Finnish education reflects the global policy trends** and the discussions such as the 21st century skills.
 - Finland has made original interpretation and adapted them to fit the context; no accountability through testing and persistent to equality and ideal of “school for all”.
- Finnish comprehensive school system **balances rather centralized general guidance while simultaneously relying heavily on school autonomy** and empowerment of districts, schools and teachers.
- The prevailing conception of learning has been **explicitly based on the ideas of constructivism** and socio-constructivism since the comprehensive school curriculum reform in 1994.
 - In the past twenty years the students’ agency in learning has been strongly emphasized.

Finnish school curriculum making

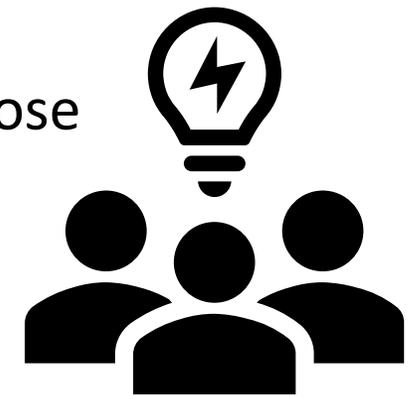
- Distribution of lesson hours for basic education and the minimum number of lessons for core subjects are decided by the Government.
- Three level system: **core curriculum** provides the central steering document, **local curriculum** translates, supports and coordinates implementation at districts and municipalities and, **school level year plans** guide the enactment and development work in schools.
- System relies heavily on autonomy of districts, schools and teachers. No inspections in school or standardized testing in comprehensive school.
- The national curriculum is reformed approximately in every ten years. The reforms are planned and led by officials of Finnish National Agency for Education.
- The process is very participatory involving stakeholders from different levels of the system. <https://www.oph.fi/en>



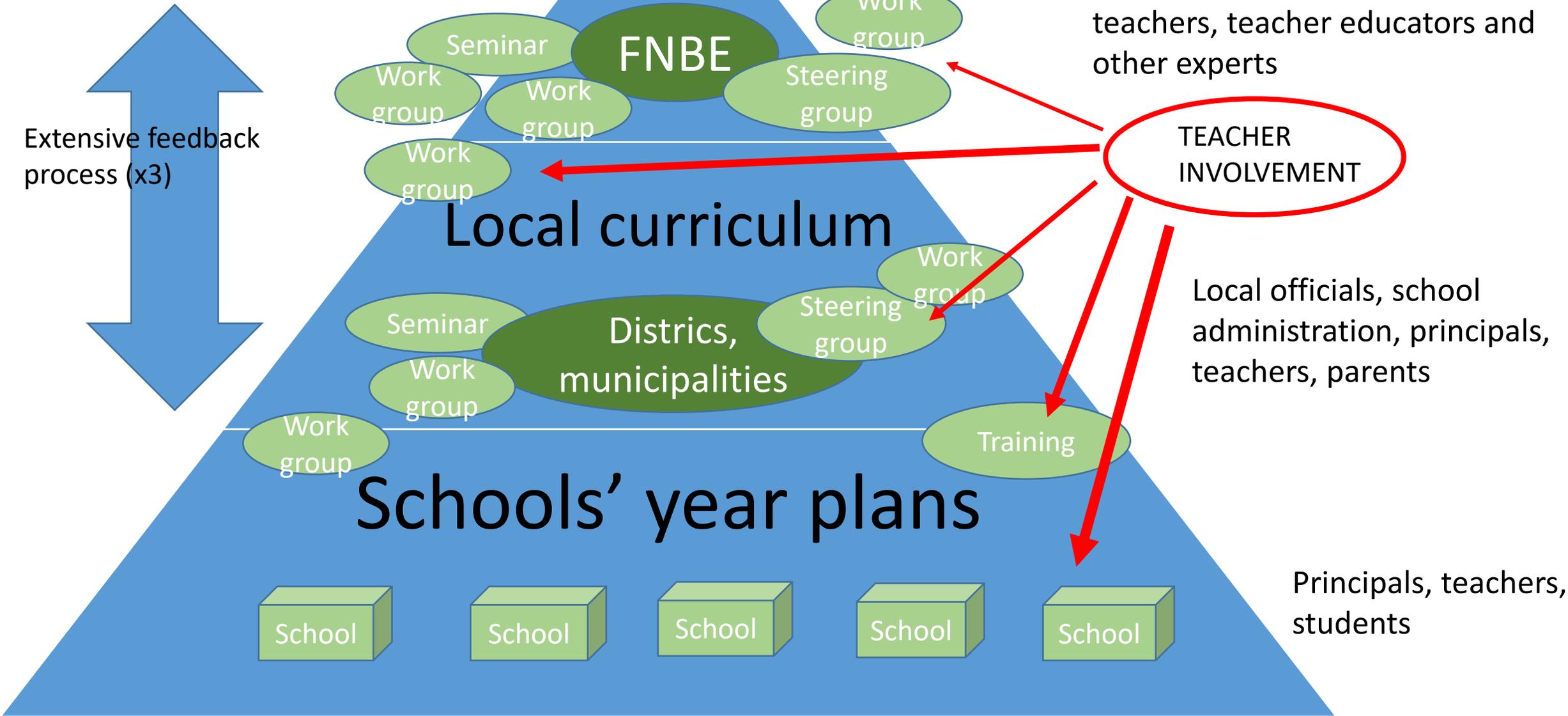
Coburn, 2003; Fullan, 2006; Hargreaves, 2007; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2001; van den Akker, 2003

Shared sense-making in participatory reforms

- Socio-cognitive approach to policy implementation (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002)
 - **Constructing a collective understanding** in dialogue and negotiation
 - Processing and framing new information together, interpreting, adapting or **transforming** policy messages in a process that is influenced by participants' cognitive effort as well as the social and structural conditions.
- > Two-way interaction: reform aims are both shaping and shaped by the actors and actions (Dale, Engelsen & Karseth 2011; Mølsted, 2015)
- Turning **reform goals into development work** that is meaningful for those involved -> facilitate agency



Curriculum reform 2016



Contents and aims in the current curriculum

- Finnish core curriculum introduces challenging general aims plus quite extensive subject contents.
- The subject contents have not changed a lot in recent reforms, there are some additions but not much has been removed.
- Phenomenon-based orientation that is Integrating subjects into 'multidisciplinary learning modules' is one attempt to change the perspective on contents.
- These modules also aim to facilitate both pupil and teacher collaboration.



Current core curriculum (document) in Finland

- Collaborative school culture
- Varying, adaptive and safe learning environment
- Active and participating learner
- Transversal competences
- Integrated learning themes

TARGETS OF INTENSIVE
SENSE-MAKING AT
MESO-SITES



Sense-making of aims at meso-sites

Comparison Reflecting the content against the previous reforms, ongoing school developments and school legislation.

Standardisation Analysing, identifying and reflecting the kinds of obligation and consequences, i.e. the challenges, possibilities and changes.

Transformation Creating new knowledge and understanding about the aims, questioning existing pedagogical practices and approaches.



Sense-making of mens at meso-sites

Prioritising and focusing Analyses of the key objects and phasing of the curriculum work as a means of maintaining the focus.

Integrating the curriculum work into the other contemporary school development.

Capacity building Utilising the social resources and expertise available.

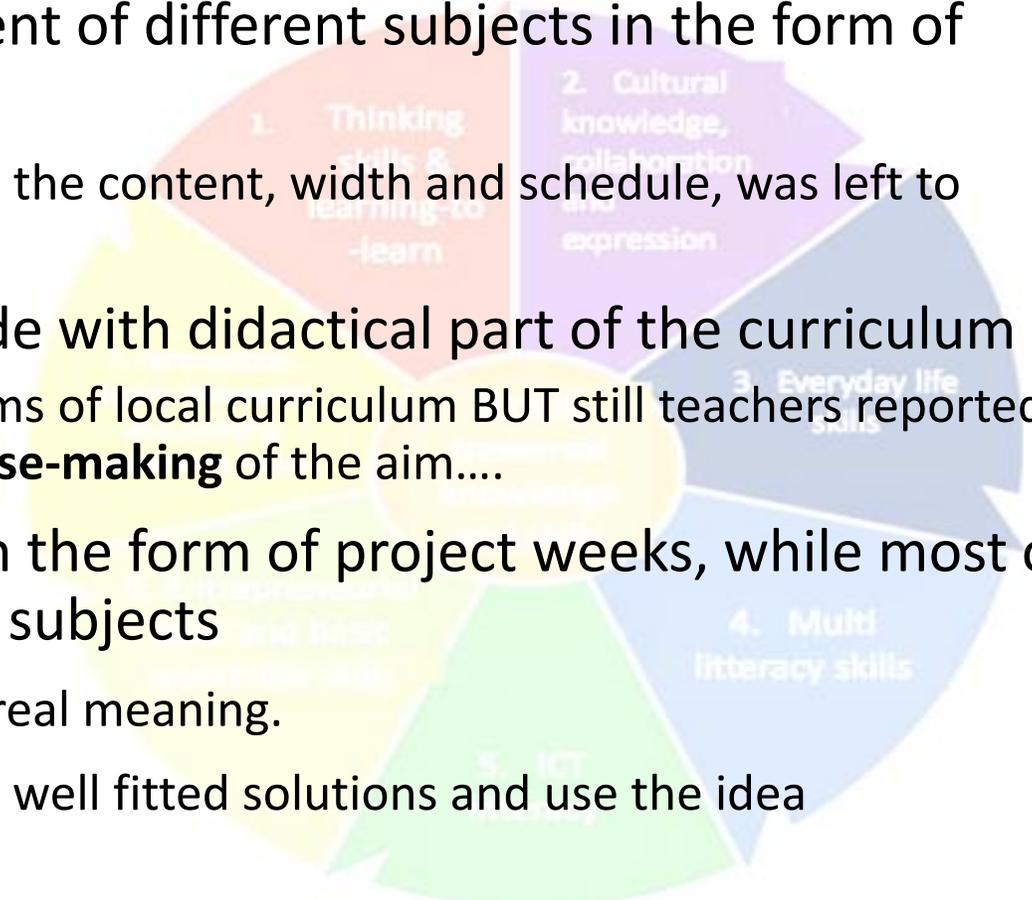
Engagement Designing forums and forms of collaboration for educational practitioners.

Bidirectional resilience Proactive anticipation of the crucial phases of curriculum work to keep it on track and monitoring reasonable grounds for reversals.



Case: Subject integration

- Macro layer: complex world requires transversal skills and that creates a need to develop **coherence of content and phenomenon-based pedagogy; subject integration**
- Translated into a principle of integrating the content of different subjects in the form of **multidisciplinary learning units.**
 - **School and teacher autonomy;** the implementation, i.e., the content, width and schedule, was left to districts and schools to decide.
- Direct consequences on teachers work - and collide with didactical part of the curriculum
 - Intensive sense-making happened in district level, in terms of local curriculum BUT still teachers reported confusion, lack of time and resources **in school level sense-making** of the aim....
- ... **many schools** ended up solving the challenge in the form of project weeks, while most of the teaching still followed division into traditional subjects
 - Teachers view subject integration as extra work with no real meaning.
 - **Some schools, however, did succeed** to find original and well fitted solutions and use the idea meaningfully (e.g. to increase teacher collaboration).



Why did some schools make it and some did not?

- Maybe shared sense-making happened **just in some meso-sites** or **actors are not moving between sites and layers?**
- Maybe engaging teachers in district is **not enough/should be different for strong teacher agency in school.**
- Maybe capacity building and engagement was too focused **on individual teachers.**
- Maybe **teacher communities never reached the ‘transformation phase’** with subject integration and, therefore...
- teachers did not have opportunity to **create holistic views and agency as professional community of school.**



Problematic features?

- Core curriculum is rich document -> a lot of possibilities. Combined with high autonomy it requires sense-making about the aims of curriculum in every level of the system -> takes a lot of time and resources which are not allocated in teachers work.
- Teachers mostly agree with the reform aims; however, they are somewhat burdened by development work. Some of them view the aims too challenging when simultaneously implementing inclusion - there are changes in families and society that also challenge teaching.
- International (supra level) influence on the national level is a concern in Finland. For example, some consider that transversal competences (competence discourse) is a trendy addition coming from outside and possibly creating inequality.
- There is wide understanding that we want to maintain the idea of “accountability by trust” and “comprehensive school as school for all” and most importantly high-quality teachers.

Conclusion and consequences

- Autonomy and agency are not the same – agency must be achieved and supported to create involvement.
- Loosing teachers in sense-making
 - Weakens teacher agency
 - Results to incoherent curriculum
 - Create differences between schools and may lead to increasing differences in student outcomes
- Sense-making must be done, and teacher agency constructed in every level and multiple sites of interaction.
- Facilitating teacher agency needs bottom-up strategies, such as engaging but also top-down strategies such as prioritising and focusing to facilitate shared sense-making.



Thank you!

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