

Tensions as an entry point to politics in education

Maiju Paananen & Hannele Pitkänen

To cite this article: Maiju Paananen & Hannele Pitkänen (2021) Tensions as an entry point to politics in education, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 7:1, 1-2, DOI: [10.1080/20020317.2021.1911040](https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.1911040)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.1911040>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 08 Apr 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 108




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Tensions as an entry point to politics in education

Maiju Paananen  and Hannele Pitkänen 

Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

In this issue, tensions in educational policies are the focus. Tension can be seen as a metaphor that borrows from the field of physics, where tension means a pulling force that is transmitted axially by a continuous object, such as a string. We can identify an endless number of pulling forces aiming to direct teachers' work and children's and students' lives at all levels of education. Some of the pulling forces are similar across educational levels and contexts, whereas others vary. The articles in this issue touch upon tensions in teacher professionalism in science-based education policy in Sweden (Larsson & Sjöberg 2021), local adaptation of PISA exclusion criteria in Norway (Aursand & Rutkowski 2021), language policy as expressed in policy documents in early childhood education and care in Finland and Norway (Alstad & Söpanen 2021) and science curriculum enactment in early childhood education and care in Sweden (Liljestrand 2021).

Tensions are described in this issue's articles using the concepts of parallel or competing discourses (Alstad & Söpanen, 2021), contradictions (Alstad & Söpanen 2021; Larsson & Sjöberg 2021; Liljestrand 2021), conflicts (Alstad & Söpanen 2021), messiness and multilayeredness (Liljestrand 2021) and complexity related to interpretations (Aursand & Rutkowski 2012). Metaphors such as describing a phenomenon as 'Janus-faced' (Alstad & Söpanen 2021) are used to highlight the paradoxes and ambivalences these tensions produce. Tensions are an inherent aspect of politics. Where there are competing aims or interpretations of phenomena, politics is involved, as conflicting and competing aims open a space for political action. This issue thus examines politics in policy enactment.

In their article, Christer Larsson and Lena Sjöberg examine how the idea of 'education on a scientific foundation' that was incorporated into the Swedish Education Act in 2010 has been discursively enacted in policy texts by the Swedish National Agency of Education. They show how diverse, overlapping or even contradictory subjectivities for teachers as

professionals are mobilized and shaped in these enactments. Paradoxically, instead of constituting teachers as academic, independent and critically thinking professionals, in these enactments of science-based policies, teachers become shaped as objects of these policies. Simultaneously, they are constituted as uncritical subjects delivering prescribed educational theories and methodologies.

Leah Aursand and David Rutkowski analyse tensions in the local enactment of global policies by examining student exclusion from PISA in the Norwegian context. They examine how Norwegian school leaders interpret PISA exclusion guidelines and rationalize specific students' exclusion from or inclusion in PISA. Their study shows that school leaders justified student exclusion as exemptions. Thus, instead of straightforwardly stating that they comply with the PISA guidelines on exclusion, they justified the exclusion by discussing whether the participation would harm students, especially their self-esteem. This shows a tension between the exclusion criteria and the Norwegian inclusive education policy and demonstrates how school leaders manage the tension by discursive means.

In their study, Gunhild Tomter Alstad and Pauliina Söpanen analyse national policy documents for early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland and Norway to understand the ways in which language and especially multilingualism are represented. Leaning on Ruíz (1984), their study uncovers a tension between diverse ways of framing language in the context of educational institutions: *language as resource*, *language as right* and *language as problem*. They unravel potential points of tension created by how language becomes framed in ECEC policy texts. For example, they point out the tendency to see multilingualism (or multiculturalism) as a characteristic only of children who do not speak the national language of the country as their first language. This creates otherness when policies are enacted.

Johan Liljestrand's article explores the tension between a subject curriculum and a child-centred

curriculum in Swedish preschool policy. Early childhood education and care in Nordic countries has been characterized by a social pedagogic tradition, which means focusing on child-initiated activities and a child-centred approach. It has been observed that a neoliberal discourse that emphasizes preparation for school and a subject curriculum challenges the Nordic social pedagogic tradition. In his study, Liljestrand shows how this tension materializes in teachers' talk when they describe their pedagogical work: Teachers draw on two separate discourses: child-centred and subject-centred discourses. They remain separate and parallel rather than integrated.

Ambiguities and tensions in policy documents imply a political space for teachers and other individuals to act. This means that teachers need knowledge about navigating between different policies and discourses. This calls for research about the mechanisms through which competing aims materialize in the everyday practices of educational institutions and in teachers', children's, and students' lives. The evergreen question of how education policy paradoxes are enacted remains relevant.

ORCID

Maiju Paananen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1072-1923>

Hannele Pitkänen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0955-5216>