PREFACE

Public discussion in Finland has been concerned about the digital skills of the youth. Even though the mantra, “digital natives,” has celebrated the youth as a generation that has grown up with the Internet, social media, and mobile digital devices, teachers have noted that some students lack basic digital skills. For example, some students are not able to attach a document to their e-mail, if the students use e-mail at all. It seems that the digital culture has divided generationally: young people have different needs and uses of digital devices than older generations. A school is a place where these needs, uses, and practices meet. Young people bring their own practices to the school, and the learning environments of teachers and schools offer their own. In this book, I explore these “meetings,” what kinds of practices young people bring to the school, and how the school is structured to meet these practices. I review different media literacies and education that enhance students’ digital skills in school. As an ethnographical study, this research concentrates on one secondary basic education school in Finland.

The Finnish school system has been celebrated as one of the world’s best. Year after year, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results for Finnish 15-year-old students have been excellent (OECD, 2006, 2010). Finnish students are at a high level internationally, especially in scientific, mathematical, and reading literacy. Perhaps the most important reasons for these positive results are a purposeful educational policy and the high standards of teachers. Teachers from primary basic education to upper secondary schools have master’s degrees and are highly motivated and appreciated by parents and students (Niemi, 2012). Education in Finland is a public service, free of charge. Basic education starts at the age of 7 and lasts 9 years. Class teachers teach in the comprehensive schools in Grades 1 through 6 and subject teachers take the responsibility of teaching school subjects in secondary school in Grades 7 through 9.
Finland is also known as one of the leading countries in digital technology. Digital devices and the Internet are part of everyday life and embedded in daily practices, from communication to entertainment and content creation. Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman (2002) wrote that the Internet is starting to be taken for granted, but this “routineness” is not a reason to ignore it. On the contrary, the Internet as social phenomenon needs more differentiated analysis that takes into account its meaning in our everyday life. The Internet is not exactly THE Internet, a media rather than an environment and a space, which includes different kinds of media literacies in relation to other spaces, like a school. This study focuses on these literacies that are an inseparable part of the everyday life of Finnish youngsters, and spaces, especially the school, where the students practice their literacies.

Media and digital literacies are part of Finnish core curriculum, not as an independent school subject but as a cross-curricular theme. As a cross-curricular theme, media skills and communication put media education practice in all school levels. One main goal of the theme is to enhance 21st-century skills that citizens need in order to use digital services and be responsible and critical consumers and creative content creators. If we think of some changes in the field of media education, especially in recent years, concepts like production and creativity have come to supplement the terms critical perspective, analysis, and practice (Christensen & Tufte, 2010). Young people’s own creative media production has challenged the traditional perspective of media education, where the focus has been on mass media and media consumption. A traditional school can also be seen as parallel to mass media, as an industrial-era institution with one-directional learning and teaching settings. When entering school, young people may think they have harkened back to the old days and will not be able to use their own strengths and skills in learning that they have been practising outside of the school, in their everyday life.

Several studies have indicated that young people have learned their digital skills, or media and digital literacies, in informal learning contexts, outside of school with their peers. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in schools seldom supports students in achieving 21st-century skills. However, informal learning settings do not seem to be sufficient either. For example, some studies have found that most upper secondary school students do not have the necessary skills for evaluating the credibility of information (Kiili, Laurinen, & Marttunen, 2008). The Internet is used infrequently and we still do not have good evidence of the so-called digital natives generation that works collaboratively by using the Internet in a creative way. On the contrary, young people still seem to be more customers than producers and are working more alone than with others (Ilomäki, Taalas, & Lakkala, 2012, p. 67).
In this study, my interest is in creative media production of young people in its own right. At least some young people have started to create and publish content on the Internet and find new ways of learning. They also bring their creative practices to the school community in one way or another by making short films, writing fan fiction, taking photographs, or writing blog entries at school. These practices create new learning spaces to the school but not necessarily to the formal learning settings.

My study indicates that the school space is duplicated. It includes two learning environments, formal and informal, at the same time, and these collide and tangle up in special media practices and literacies. In this book, I explore these practices and their relations to the schooling and school spaces that I call unofficial and official school spaces. These exist side by side at the school, making school boundaries more permeable and offering students possibilities to resist traditional one-sided schooling while finding new ways to learn. But teachers are still necessary as “colleagues” who set new learning settings and help students enhance their critical skills and literacy practices. A new culture of learning is a diverse set of student-teacher and student-student relations that arranges school spaces in a new way and makes a bridge out of school to everyday practices of the youth. Today, learning is omnipresent, happening all around us (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

As it is argued, especially in the realm of critical pedagogy, education is a cultural pedagogical practice that takes place everywhere, including in the mass media, popular culture, and other public spheres. Media education in school spaces and outside has had a goal to enhance young people’s critical skills and literacy practices, which are necessary to operate in an everyday media environment. I am interested in cultural media education, where the focus is on everyday meaning making where people, especially children and young people, use media and communicate in different sociocultural contexts. I understand media education, like David Buckingham (2003b, p. 4), as “the process of teaching and learning about the media,” where “media literacy is the outcome.” Here, media literacy is a key term, which refers to broad-based skills and competencies that people must have when they try to communicate, understand, and create media texts and meanings in the modern media age.

Media literacy, as an objective, has often been seen as quite an abstract set of skills. There are two basic problems: (a) Literacy is characterized merely as an individual and cognitive skill, and (b) research is oriented from the administration perspective. In these approaches, the basic question is what kinds of literacies and skills are needed in the information society. The starting point is not in children and young people and their own practices, or what kinds of skills they have and use in their everyday life, but in the question of what kinds of skills are needed
by governments and economic sectors. In addition, from this perspective, media literacy is normative.

I am more interested in young people’s own media practices, what they bring to the school, how these practices change school spaces and teaching and learning, how they are utilized in schooling, and finally how media education with its own goals helps children and young people enhance their media literacy practices. In this book, media literacy is seen as a sociocultural practice, as multiple and situated within social and cultural everyday practices. From this point of view, literacies are more than individual and cognitive skills. Literacies are situated in particular spaces in different ways and therefore studying these spaces and embodied literacy practices helps us understand meaning-making processes of the youth and what challenges these bring to the school education.