

The Nordic Education Model

Historical emergence, comparative perspectives, and current renegotiations

Abstract

The primary aim of the *NordEd* research project is to examine the Nordic Education Model. An array of methods and approaches will serve the common aim to scrutinize the historical emergence of and past and present negotiations of the Nordic education model from late nineteenth into the 21st century. The analysis of the Nordic historical trajectories and current renegotiations will build on comparisons with international and global educational developments.

The object of the project is to create a research environment that brings together scholars with a common interest in the study of the Nordic model of education, its history, present challenges, and future sustainability.

The four central research areas are:

1. Knowledge (pillar 1)
2. Curriculum (pillar 2)
3. Teachers (pillar 3)
4. Policy (pillar 4)

An initial common question is to what extent such a shared Nordic model exists within the field of education. This question spurs both intra-Nordic as well as international comparisons focusing on these central aspects of education.

Research questions are: How has the social distribution of knowledge been politically, socially, philosophically, and pedagogically negotiated in the development of a comprehensive schooling? How have the structural changes in common primary and secondary schooling changed the premises of curriculum contents? How have Nordic teacher cultures evolved through the long 20th century compared to German and American examples? How do Nordic policy experts refer to international knowledge in education reforms? In addition, to what extent do they refer to a Nordic model of education?

Our aim is to contribute to a sharper and more critical diagnosis of the present state of Nordic education. Our work can thus contribute to the evaluation of the sustainability of a Nordic model of education and highlight the normative implications of holding on to a specific value-based Nordic educational tradition in a globalised era.

Introduction

The Nordic countries are often viewed as a homogenous group of nations with parallel 20th-century developments leading in the direction of universal welfare states. The research by Gøsta Esping-Andersen on regional variations of modern welfare states has become a main reference in the literature on a shared Nordic societal model, i.e. the universal welfare states as opposed to the liberal and the conservative ones. This study by Esping-Andersen, however, did not focus much on the importance of education in the construction of these welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990).

An initial shared question for us is thus to what extent such a shared *Nordic model* also exists within the field of education. We wish to approach this question partly with a view from abroad and partly by means of comparisons. Firstly, how is the Nordic model of education when seen from a perspective that is radically different from a Nordic or European point of view? This will include an investigation into the Chinese construction of and reference to a Nordic educational model that can provide insight into what an ‘outsider’ regards as specifically ‘Nordic’ (Ongoing project by participating expert Barbara Schulte, see also Schulte 2018). Secondly, we wish to compare historical trajectories of all five Nordic countries through the long 20th century with central continental European as well as American counter-examples. Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the USA shall serve as select cases for comparison. Both of these exercises aim at providing us with a clearer answer to whether a specifically Nordic model of education exists (Telhaug et al. 2006).

Politically the emergence of the Nordic model of education through the long 20th century has been characterized by a unique combination of, and alliance between, liberal democratic as well as social democratic movements (Wiborg 2009). From the late nineteenth century onwards, there was universal political support for education as a public good. During the twentieth century, a socially inclusive primary and lower secondary comprehensive school has arguably been the basis of social and societal integration in the universal welfare state model (Wiborg 2009; Sejersted 2013). The Nordic countries thus have a strong tradition of utilizing education as a deliberate means to support egalitarian values and social justice. Moreover, the overall educational trajectory of the Nordic countries has since the early 20th century been characterized as: 1) state friendly, centralized, and based predominantly on public forms of ownership; 2) inspired by child centred pedagogy with mixed-ability classes; 3) supportive to delay of curricular differentiation; and 4) without forms of high-stakes competitive assessment and tracking (Wiborg 2009, Telhaug et al. 2006, Sejersted 2013).

Developments that are more recent, however, are at odds with at least some of the listed characteristic historical traits of the Nordic model (Wiborg 2013; Ringarp & Rothland 2010). A new political agenda seems to have emerged on the basis of premises like free school choice, a broader range of alternative institutions, local communal governance, a strive for more individual excellence through peer competition as well as testing, and strengthened collective economic competitiveness through enhanced focus on employability.

The network and shared approaches

We form a diverse group of scholars within the broad fields of education, gender studies, philosophy, mathematics, music, theology, history and social science. This will of course point to quite diverging methods including policy network analysis, quantitative as well as qualitative comparative methods, historical document analysis, conceptual history, institutional history, history of ideas and philosophical/social-epistemological analysis.

The framing of the NordEd project, however, is inspired primarily from the combination of historical and comparative approaches. The field of comparative education has developed a range of methods to analyse the historical emergence of national systems of education (Archer 1979; Green 1990; Wiborg 2009) as well as the complex global dynamics of policy-learning and stronger international coordination (Schriewer 2009; Steiner-Khamsi 2009). Theories of a converging “world culture” of education following a “world system” of functionally differentiated societies emulating and imitating each other has had a large impact on the field (Boli, Ramirez & Meyer 1985). These convergence theories have, however, been contested by other scholars who speak of the surprising persistence of diverging regional, national and local interpretations and variations even in a time of globalisation. Following the line of the divergence theory, the educational comparatist Jürgen Schriewer argues for a new methodological “marriage” of history and comparison as the only way to understand educational developments in our time (Schriewer 2009).

Our object of study is thus defined to be general enough as to establish comparisons, but also specific enough to allow for detailed historical inquiries into Nordic specificities. In this project, we choose to define an *education model* as characterized by: 1) shared or conflicting approaches to the social distribution of knowledge, 2) choices of curriculum aim and contents, 3) an army of professionals, i.e. teachers, experts on education and pedagogy, school leaders, administrators etc., and 4) political deliberations on educational policies, structures and reform.

Practical implications and political relevance

Reform initiatives as well as professional lives are often shaped by collective and personal conceptions of and formulations of problems to be solved. An implicit triad of “past – present – future” shapes how actors think and act. Most often reforms and initiatives are consciously based on evaluations and diagnosis of past and present shortcomings and problems and how they might be overcome. By aiming at scrutinizing Nordic education trajectories seen in an international comparative perspective, we wish to contribute to a sharper and more critical diagnosis of the present state of Nordic education. Our work can thus contribute to the evaluation of the sustainability of a Nordic model of education and highlight the normative implications of holding on to a specific value-based Nordic educational tradition in a globalised era.

Areas of investigation

The NordEd project will focus on four aspects of the Nordic education model:

- 1) Conflicting traditions, ideals, and concepts of knowledge in the Nordic countries' educational policies, pedagogies, and practices
- 2) Curricular struggles and developments in Nordic schooling
- 3) The emergence of Nordic teacher cultures and teacher education
- 4) Nordic schooling and beyond: Transnational policy agendas and the renegotiation of the Nordic model of education

The first area addresses conflicting traditions, ideals, and concepts of *knowledge* in the Nordic countries' educational policies, pedagogies and practices, and draws on philosophical and epistemological approaches cross-fertilized with social and political perspectives. We choose to approach the Nordic model as a specific blend of a *horizontal* and a *vertical* knowledge model. The model of horizontally distributed knowledge entails arguments for what knowledge all individuals should share. This idea historically connects to ideas of a common knowledge for all citizens (almen dannelse/ allgemeine Bildung) and is more recently related to a republican idea of democracy. The vertically distributed knowledge model points to knowledge that is hierarchically distributed, in the sense that some groups are for some reason designated to learn more in a specific subject than other groups. Historically the parallel systems of middle-class and lower class education through the 19th century had separated curriculum contents by societal estate, whereas modern functionally differentiated systems separate curricular contents after a selection of career, often meritocratically decided. In the analysis of this aspect of a Nordic educational trajectory a central research question is: How have these two models of social knowledge distribution been politically, socially, philosophically, and pedagogically negotiated in the specific Nordic development of a comprehensive or unified schooling?

As regards the second area of interest, *curriculum* in obligatory education has changed during the long twentieth century, i.e. from the 1880s into the twenty-first century. The hierarchical separation was between a learned curriculum, with classical languages and academic preparation for the middle class learned schools, and a basic, "three R's" curriculum for the common people (i.e. Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) combined with a strong element of religious contents. The advent of a unified school for all, of 5, 7 and eventually 9 years of duration in all of the Nordic systems of education, changed the premises for curricular developments fundamentally during the first half of the twentieth century (Jarning 2010). A national focus replaced the classical content, and the prolonged non-differentiated system included a relatively stable, quite bookish curriculum for all. Finally, in recent reforms, curricular content is being renegotiated. Firstly, based on performative premises with a focus on output skills and competency for employability, and secondly inspired by the current strong debate on sustainable development. In the analysis of this aspect of a Nordic educational trajectory a central research question is: How have the specifically Nordic structural changes in common primary and secondary schooling during the long twentieth century changed the premises for choice of curriculum contents?

Thirdly, we turn to the historical emergence of Nordic *teacher cultures* and specificities of Nordic teacher education. The parallel systems of schooling in the nineteenth century build on two highly separated cultures of knowledge and educational institutions with different social status.

Universities and the learned schools formed an internationally oriented, academic system aiming at professional or bureaucratic careers, along with teacher preparation for the learned schools. These learned schools were socially exclusive, albeit with a growing bourgeois constituency during the nineteenth century that turned the attention in the direction of national as well as modern languages and natural sciences (Larsen 2002; Thue 1996). Primary teachers were educated in separate seminars that initially had a lower social status but evolved in the Nordic countries into important sites of more “folk”-oriented counter cultures. The impact of these teacher groups has been very decisive in Nordic political and cultural developments. During the long twentieth century, Nordic primary teacher roles have evolved from the “folke” teacher via the comprehensive “folkeskole” teacher, and to the specialised professional teacher of the 21st century. A central research question in the analysis of this aspect of a Nordic educational trajectory is how Nordic teacher cultures have evolved through the long 20th century. In addition, how do these trajectories compare to German and American examples?

Fourthly, one explanation of the above-mentioned new *political* trajectories of the Nordic model of education may be a stronger international convergence in a new age of increased international and intra-Nordic policy learning. International organizations such as the OECD and new political layers of governance like the EU have introduced strong mechanisms of governance and coordination. National policies seem less and less dependent on institutional traditions and more and more dependent on transnational agendas. This differs from field to field – education being an area where policy-learning and cross-national agendas seem to constitute mayor game changers in most countries in the 21st century. It is therefore of interest as a fourth area of interest to analyse processes of convergence or divergence between the Nordic countries in recent educational policies, and also to understand these developments in a global policy context. This question can be approached by focusing on whether Nordic policy makers make concrete references to a certain “Nordicness” and Nordic expertise in agenda setting, policy formulation, and white papers on school reforms within their countries, or whether the global reform policy references are more frequent (Steiner-Khamsi 2009; Tröhler 2011). In the analysis of this aspect of the more recent Nordic educational trajectories central research questions are: Do the stated characteristic traits of the Nordic path in education still make a difference? How do the international trends unfold in these settings? How do Nordic policy experts refer to and include regional and international policy knowledge in reforms within the Nordic countries? In addition, to what extent do they refer to a Nordic model of education?

Contribution to methodological, historiographical and epistemological debates

In this project, we have three aims related to present methodological, historiographical and epistemological debates. Firstly, we aim to challenge a dominant *methodological nationalism* through comparative analysis and secondly, we wish to counter the apparent “*whiggishness*” of Nordic educational historiography. As a third, shared epistemological concern, we try to balance more evidence-based comparative work with holistic hermeneutical approaches.

Taking existing national historiographies as a point of departure, we wish initially to assess to what extent methodological nationalism has dominated Nordic educational historiography. Briefly stated methodological nationalism under-communicates the influence of international networks and trends and finds causal arguments within the national boundaries.

Secondly, we wish to compare these possible tendencies with international discussions of the common “whiggish” tendency of much of educational historiography (Herbst 1980; Larsen 2012), i.e. the tendency to view one’s own national educational history as the linear and triumphant path to the best of all educational systems. An initial observation points to a Nordic variation of whiggishness. In many Western countries, whiggishness was a trait of urban, liberal, modernist and less nationalistic historiographers, whereas in some Nordic countries whiggish historiography may be described as rural, romantic and in a sense more nationalistic (Larsen & Larsen 2012).

We find that these two, related, but seemingly exclusively academic questions, are intimately connected to central political and cultural aspects of the Nordic trajectories of educational development.

The historical emergence of a Nordic model of education builds on specific political alliances and discourses that differ from German and American trajectories. We see a need to inquire into how nationalism and “folk”-ideology influenced educational reform processes in the Nordic countries during the long twentieth century and analyse how these trajectories compare to European and American cases. Following existing comparative work on the divergent paths of the “Volk/folk”-discourses in Germany and Scandinavia, it seems as though the concept of a “folk” has left a very important mark on Nordic liberal as well as social democratic party politics and by extension on the Nordic educational self-understanding (Lauglo 1995; Trägårdh 1990). What are for example, the political and historical ramifications of the strong continuity of a “folk” discourse in education? This may be seen in the light of the emergence of more heterogenic populations through immigration. A concept like the “folkeskole” is still widely used in Denmark. As a historical example, a central Danish educator Georg J. Arvin stated it thus to an international audience of the New Education Fellowship in Helsingør, Denmark in 1929:

What characterizes northern pedagogy is the desire to create firmness and freedom. Above all we want a democratic school. Our national pride lies in the fact that we live in countries where ‘few have too much and fewer too little’ [a Grundtvig quote; our remark]. In conformity with this we want to develop our school as a school for the whole people, with equal rights for all. But, besides this, we want to create a school in vital contact with the life of the nation. We have a word in Danish which cannot be translated into other languages: it is the word ‘folkelig’. What we want is a ‘folkelig’ school.

(Boyd 1930, p.10-11)

Finally, as a third aim, we share an epistemological concern to balance the more evidence-based historical and comparative approaches with a more hermeneutical and holistic approach to the understanding of contexts, and we stress the relevance of this understanding for practice (Bondevik & Bostad 2017).

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