

The Nordic Educational Research Association, the Nordic Dimension and Challenges of Open Access: President's Opening Speech at NERA's 48th Congress in Turku¹

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Dear NERA members, organising committee and distinguished guests. It is wonderful to see so many of you here again at NERA's second Congress in the historic city of Turku/Åbo. This time the University of Turku is hosting the Congress; in 2007 Åbo Akademi University acted as host. We will be more than 600 attendees. I want to thank, in particular, the organizing committee and the Department of Education at Turku University, who have done an extraordinary job.² I also want to thank all of you participants, who constitute the NERA community, for meeting up to discuss, debate and

1 This is a revised version of the opening and Congress dinner speeches I delivered as President of NERA on March 4 and 5, 2020.

2 I would like to thank the organizing committee, headed by doctoral student Mervi Lahtomaa and Professor Arto Jauhiainen from the Department of Education at Turku University, as well as the NERA Board for their work to maintain and develop the association. Thanks are also due to Jukka Husu, Dean of the Faculty of Education, for hosting the NERA Congress 2020, and to Jukka Kola, Rector of the University of Turku, and Li Andersson, Minister of Education, for opening the congress with inspiring speeches on current challenges in schools and higher education. Thanks are also given to Fazal Rizvi, University of Melbourne, Kirsti Klette, University of Oslo, and Risto Rinne, University of Turku, for contributing with their expertise as keynote speakers at the congress.

get up-to-date on current issues in the field of Nordic educational research... with due consideration of precautions necessary to limit the spread of the corona virus.

NERA's core activities

Since its humble beginnings in 1972, the Nordic Educational Research Association (NERA) or Nordisk Förening för Pedagogisk Forskning (NFPF) has established itself as the largest meeting place for educational researchers in the Nordic countries. An evaluation of the last Congress, which took place at Uppsala University in March 2019, showed that participants perceive the NERA Congress as an attractive congress and an opportunity to build connections between the Nordic countries, expand professional networks and obtain feedback from peers. The feedback also highlighted the importance of disseminating knowledge about Nordic educational practices and policies.

Since its early years, NERA has had three core activities: Besides holding the annual, peer-reviewed Congress, organized by local organizing committees, NERA has also produced and published the journal *Nordic Studies in Education* (previously *Nordisk Pedagogik*) since 1980. As its third main activity NERA supports the ongoing work of its twenty-five constituent networks, ranging from educational philosophy, policy and politics of education, early childhood, youth and adult education, teacher and higher education, curriculum, didactics, educational measurement and assessment, to many other fields that collectively contribute to advancing Nordic educational research. The Association's budget is organized around these three activities, in a well-functioning way. Thanks to well-established routines, developed over the years, and good collaboration with many partners, the work of the NERA Board has, in my opinion, been inspirational, and has been carried out efficiently and smoothly most of the time I have served on the Board.

NERA strives to provide a platform for Nordic researchers as well as enable collaboration with the international community. Most of this collaboration takes place through networks, both during the congresses and in between. The twenty-five networks play a key role for NERA in realizing the academic work that we are all engaged in, and in ensuring that it contributes to making the Nordic dimension of educational research a lived reality. I hope that as many of you as possible will attend the network meetings and engage in the many network activities, on the NERA website and elsewhere. The whole NERA Board greatly appreciates the work that network convenors do in carrying out the review processes for the sessions and in keeping the networks alive throughout the year. I extend a special thanks to Gry Paulgaard, NERA's network coordinator.

Each year one NERA-network has the honour of representing NERA at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). In April this year, NERA's network 15, the Literacy Research Network, will fill the NERA slot at the Annual Meeting of AERA in San Francisco, California, with a symposium on 'Research on teaching quality with different conceptual approaches and instruments – taking a

Nordic perspective'.³ Information on how to apply for the NERA-slot at AERA can be found on our website.

NERA's existential crisis: Open Access and a new economic model

Since 2018, NERA has faced an existential crisis, as our journal *Nordic Studies in Education* is now required to go Open Access. Open Access means that all articles published in our journal must be openly accessible to anyone via the web. This is great from a democratic point of view, in that more potentially relevant research will inform public as well as professional debate. It creates, nonetheless, a fundamental funding problem for associations such as NERA, which are based on voluntary non-profit work for the greater public good. Due, not least, to rising – and legitimate – demands from national research funding agencies that publications resulting from state-funded research should be freely available to a larger public, we must now fundamentally change the way we are structured as an academic association. Going Open Access with our journal means that we no longer receive combined subscription and membership fees, which have made up the cornerstone of NERA's budget, in addition to Nordic publication support from the Joint Committee for Nordic Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS), which is now limited to open access journals only.

As the economic burden of lost revenue resulting from the requirement to go Open Access has been placed solely on NERA, the NERA Board has been forced to rethink the Association and its economic model. Consequently, we have had to make some difficult decisions. The NERA Board has dealt non-stop with these issues starting in 2018 and into this year. We have worked intensely on finalizing, what has ended up being a surprisingly satisfactory deal with Cappelen Damm Akademisk in Norway, our new publisher of *Nordic Studies in Education*. Simultaneously, we have succeeded in developing and are ready to launch a new economic model for NERA. We should be able to just barely survive 2020! As for 2021, we hope to consolidate an economically sustainable platform with the new model, which includes mandatory membership for participation in the annual Congress.

Since we are a member association, our constituent members decided at last year's Annual General Assembly at the 47th NERA Congress in Uppsala, Sweden, to make membership mandatory, i.e. when you sign up for the congress you also sign up for membership. This decision requires confirmation at this year's General Assembly in order to be written into NERA's bylaws. As concluded at last year's General Assembly by our constituent members, this solution is a pre-condition for NERA's survival. In total, however, it should not make Congress participation more expensive for you. We would like to ask all of you who are not yet members to join us in order to help us

3 Due to the rapid spreading of the Covid-19 virus the AERA leadership had to convert this year's annual meeting to a virtual conference.

survive 2020. You can enlist as a NERA member via the website and the electronic payment link there.

I want to express my gratitude to our treasurer Maike Luimes, our vice-president Michael Dal and our journal editor Herner Sæverot for their considerable contributions in the process of resolving these complicated issues. I would also like to thank our new publisher, Cappelen Damm Akademisk and Marte Ericsson Ryste for their kind and generous assistance in helping us make it through 2020, a precursor for what we believe will become a prosperous and fruitful collaboration for many years to come.

Is there such a thing as a *Nordic dimension* in education?

All of the current administrative, economic and organizational challenges related to upholding a viable Nordic Educational Research Association raise the fundamental question: Why do we have and need a Nordic Educational Research Association at all? Some people might ask: Is there even such a thing as a Nordic dimension? These legitimate questions merit critical reflection on what this ongoing practice among five small countries on the northern edge of the European continent actually does? What is it that unites us? Is it a myth or a reality?

When you ask NERA members and Congress participants whether there is a Nordic dimension, an overwhelming majority answer in the affirmative. When you then ask them to define or delimit that Nordic dimension, most find it difficult to give anything but vague answers or invitations to exploratory conversations.

Joining these exploratory conversations, there seems to be widespread consensus that the Nordic dimension and congresses like NERA offer a critical mass to develop and qualify a wide variety of educational issues pertinent to each of the Nordic countries. It is evident that each of the small Nordic countries is highly appreciative of the critical mass that the other countries, with similar – but far from identical – school and education systems and values, offer.

Many researchers express that it is often difficult to go ‘international’ in an educational world dominated largely by Anglo-American standards, procedures and values. Here Nordic educational researchers often face dilemmas like the following: (1) You have to make your articles a little exotic by appealing to what you sense will make your writing attractive to a larger mainly Anglo-American audience, i.e. appeal to ‘myths’ about the Nordic welfare states, progressive pedagogy, gender and social equity, film and literature noir and the like; or (2) you run into the problem that your research is more or less untranslatable to an Anglophone audience: How do you translate central terms like ‘pedagogik’, ‘dannelse/danning/bildning/Bildung’, ‘Geisteswissenschaften’, ‘didaktik’ and so forth?

Here a critical mass of a larger Nordic community of educational researchers makes the region more visible and comes in handy for many of us when engaging in the work of qualifying the experiences and thinking that we bring from each of our different Nordic contexts.

Is the Nordic dimension exclusive to the existing five Nordic countries, including the Åland Islands, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Sápmi? In one sense, yes, based on centuries of shared cultural and historic experiences; in another sense, no. On Finland's initiative, the 2001 NERA Congress was held in Tallinn, Estonia, as a way of reaching out to our Baltic neighbors. Similar partnerships have arisen with the Scottish and, to a certain extent, the Irish educational research associations, who are increasingly looking to the Nordic countries for inspiration and meeting mutual responses from us. We are thus currently in the process of building mutually binding collaborations with these countries.

So, is there such a thing as a Nordic dimension in educational research? Well, there certainly is an ongoing sense of purpose among many of us that has sustained the NERA Congress for forty-eight years and the *Nordic Studies in Education* journal for the past forty, initiatives without which most of us would feel a great deal poorer. However, the Nordic dimension seems to resist being defined within a specific framework once and for all. The language issue is a case in point. In NERA we have agreed on English as the official language of the Congress, in order to include all of our Nordic colleagues. This decision recognizes, simultaneously, that English is the lingua franca of our times in spite of it being a foreign or second language for almost all of us. On the other hand, Scandinavian languages do occupy an important place, as they are sufficiently similar to be – largely – mutually intelligible; they include so much experience that has been historically amassed, that it would amount to historical amnesia to exclude the use of Scandinavian languages in communication among us. Excluding the use of Scandinavian languages would make it difficult to gather the critical mass to explore how to interpret and translate untranslatable educational terms (like 'bildning', 'didaktik' or 'pedagogik') and the contexts that they represent into English for a larger international context.

Perhaps it is a trait of Nordic pragmatism that we continue to discuss and debate the language issue with intense passion whilst agreeing, implicitly, that it remains at best an issue that can never – and should never – be resolved. Our experience tells us that keeping this issue in suspense, i.e. looking for solutions without ever reaching a solution, actually expresses a beautiful aspect that maintains and strengthens the ephemeral essence of the Nordic dimension.

I hope that the Congress and the next three days will be filled with inspiring and challenging meetings and discussions for all of you. On behalf of the NERA Board, I welcome all of you to the 48th annual Congress here at the University of Turku.