

## The *Nordic Dimension* in Education – Between Myth and Reality

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This special double issue of *Nordic Studies in Education* poses and elaborates upon the question of *whether there is such a thing as a Nordic dimension in education*. And, if so, what then are the defining similarities and differences in educational terms between the five small countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (Andersen et al., 2007; Buchardt, Markkola, & Valtonen, 2013; Hilson, 2008; Tröhler, Hörmann, Tveit, & Bostad, 2022)? This special issue follows up on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Nordic Educational Conversation held on 23 September 2021, where the Nordic Educational Research Association invited participants to a discussion on the theme of the Nordic dimension in education and whether it is a myth or a living reality.

Glossing over educational research and educational collaboration one observes that each of the small Nordic countries gains access to a richness of critical mass by joining forces with countries with similar – but not identical – school and education systems and values (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2016; Elstad, 2023; Krejsler, 2020; Krejsler & Moos, 2021b; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006). Many Nordic educational researchers express that qualifying ideas and research in a Nordic forum facilitates access on a stronger basis to an international educational world dominated by Anglo-American standards, procedures and values, where certain prejudices and conditions apply, like: (1) You have to appeal to ‘myths’ about the Nordic welfare states, progressive pedagogy, gender and social equity; or (2) your research is not easily translatable to an Anglophone audience with central terms like ‘pedagogik’, ‘dannelse’, ‘didaktik’ and so forth (Krejsler & Moos, 2021a; 2023).

## The Nordic dimension – a floating signifier?

So, if we assume that the Nordic dimension is a living reality in some sense, this requires us to elaborate upon what such a dimension consists of and how it can be delimited as a meaningful notion.

One could start by asking: When did the Nordic dimension in education start? What are its historical roots or relevant genealogies? Do they go back to the times of the Kalmar Union of 1397, or even further back? Is it an imagined community of a national-romantic kind that took off with the movement of Scandinavism in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century? Or, is it the result of pragmatic political, economic and cultural collaborations on many fronts in the Post-WW2 era connected to the similar visions and programs of the Nordic Social-Democratic Welfare State (Hilson, 2008; Rinne & Kivinen, 2003; Telhaug et al., 2006; Tjeldvoll, 1998)?

A follow-up question immediately follows: Is the Nordic dimension exclusive to the existing five Nordic countries, including the Åland Islands, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Sápmi? From one point of view, yes, it does make sense to talk of the Nordic dimension as being limited to this area, based on centuries of shared cultural and historic experiences. However, increasingly, discourse about the Nordic dimension is being expanded in the field of education and beyond. NERA is currently working on Nordic-framed partnerships with the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) and the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI). Here historical links and perceived common ground on the vision of welfare societies has pulled other small countries into the Nordic orbit in order to share their experiences and visions for development. As Paul Adams develops in his article in this special issue, Brexit has further accelerated Scottish interest in finding new partners in the Nordic region. The Nordic dimension has also become a conceptual vector in reaching out to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The Baltic countries are in a vulnerable position as small countries that have recently left the Russian orbit to become members of EU and NATO. The processes of assisting the Baltic countries have taken place with considerable assistance from the Nordic countries with reference to historical links, and in the case of Estonia linguistic links to Finland. In 2003 NERA's annual congress took place in Tallinn, Estonia.

A key policy-sensitive issue, which is a key concern for the Nordic dimension, is the issue of language. In NERA we have thus agreed on English as the official language of the annual congress, in order to include all of our Nordic colleagues. On the other hand, Scandinavian languages do occupy an important place, as they are mutually intelligible and include experience that has been historically amassed. Excluding the use of Scandinavian languages would make it difficult to gather the critical mass to explore and translate educational terms (like 'pedagogik', 'bildning', 'didaktik' and so forth) and the contexts that they represent into English for a larger international context. Here, the Nordic dimension appears to settle the issue by deeming it a floating signifier in the sense that we continue to 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.

To summarize, the Nordic dimension is alive and kicking. It resists, however, being defined once and for all. As will be clear after reading the articles in this double special issue, the Nordic dimension is, most probably, best defined as a floating signifier; i.e. a concept that corresponds to the notion of the Nordic dimension in that it is sufficiently vague to be made operational in numerous ways whilst being simultaneously sufficiently specific to hint at what is meant by that notion (Laclau, 1993). This floating character of the Nordic dimension does not mean, however, that the term can be applied in whichever way that suits one's explanatory needs. Engaging in the Nordic dimension, like other policy-sensitive floating signifiers like 'quality', 'evidence' and 'efficiency', thus requires knowledge and skills about what can be legitimately said by whom in what contexts in order to be counted as worthwhile in current struggles between relevant stakeholders (Foucault, 1978).

### **Why dedicate a special double issue to 'resolving' the Nordic dimension?**

This special double issue is dedicated to exploring the diversity of what the Nordic dimension may mean and evaluate whether and how the term may be useful or not for educational research. We have thus asked the contributors to reflect upon this complex of discourse and practice that we call the Nordic dimension – or at times even the Nordic Model – in relation to how it affects, frames and guides school, education and educational research. This involves issues like:

- Is there a particular Nordic understanding of education in terms of pedagogik, didactics, Bildung and so forth?
- In comparative terms, how are school and teacher education programs similar or different in Nordic countries?
- Are social welfare, gender equality and social equity issues that have a particular flavor in Nordic countries, and how does this affect ways of thinking, organizing and practicing education?
- Are there particularly Nordic ways of dealing with the transnational collaborations and inspirations that have since the 1990s increasingly affected education?
- Does Nordic educational research in its diverse forms offer particular contributions that advance educational research in a European or global perspective?

This explorative endeavor is split up in this special double issue of *Nordic Studies in Education* in two separate but closely interlinked issues. The first issue has a focus on exploring and questioning the meaning of the Nordic dimension in education, whereas the second issues dives more into manifestations of the Nordic dimension in education in terms of different comparative studies of school and education issues. This division does not reflect a difference in essence between the contributions, but rather a difference in focus.

## ISSUE 1: The Nordic dimension in education – questioning its meaning

The six contributions to this first section of the special double issue question from different angles the meanings of the Nordic dimension in education.

The first contribution “The Nordic Dimension as a Metaspace for Educational Research” by *John Benedicto Krejsler* explores how the Nordic dimension in education can be conceptualized in methodological terms as a metaspace for questioning the Nordic. The metaspace gathers critical mass through aggregating in the Nordic the potential of smaller national spaces in terms of historical, linguistic, and societal similarities that produce similar societal and educational values, albeit along different trajectories. Understood as a floating signifier in scalar and topological terms, the Nordic dimension draws on the rich diversity that this metaspace represents as a tool for rethinking national solutions.

In the second article “The Nordic interactive and comparative spaces within the arena of education”, *Jón Torfi Jónasson* and *Valgerður S. Bjarnadóttir* attempt to map the scope of manifestations of the Nordic dimension. By means of an operational space, an interactive space and a comparative space the article sheds light on various modes of Nordic educational cooperation; it demonstrates how the Nordic dimension exists as loosely coupled institutionalizations like the Nordic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, NordForsk as well as in collaborations like the Nordic Educational Research Association. It also exists in large numbers of less formal or informal collaborations like friendship towns, exchange of students, networks among teachers, researchers, administrators, political parties and so forth. Moreover, it exists in what might be called the Nordic gaze, i.e., when the PISA (OECD), TIMSS, PIRLS and ICCS (IEA) surveys are published, the Nordic public and policy-makers are mainly interested in how their students and countries perform in relation to the other Nordic countries (Jónasson, Bjarnadóttir, & Ragnarsdóttir, 2021).

*Paul Adams* follows up in the third contribution “Scottish education: between the UK and the Nordic” to explore from the outside whether and how Scottish educational policy and experience can contribute to expanding what the Nordic dimension may mean. The (re)opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 cemented calls for small state self-management, particularly along Nordic lines, both to reflect the desire for independence and belief that small states prosper when aligned with similar jurisdictions. The article concludes that rather than presenting Scottish education as aligning with the Nordic, it is better to identify pushes and pulls between northern countries and internal/UK factors. In positioning Scotland between the UK and the Nordic, the article demonstrates how the Nordic dimension manifests as a vision about equity and social justice that appeals to like-minded small nations in the North.

In contribution four “Quasi-Market Regulation in Early Childhood Education and Care: Does a Nordic welfare dimension prevail?” *Håkon Solbu Trætteberg*, *Karl Henrik Sivesind*, *Maiju Paananen* and *Steinunn Hrafnadóttir* pose the question: what is left of Nordic early childhood education and care? Until the late 1990’s, all Nordic countries

appeared to exercise a Nordic dimension by using bureaucratic-professional governance models to reach similar welfare goals in ECEC. Since then, post-bureaucratic governance models have been introduced, such as evaluation and quasi-markets in varying degrees. By employing analyses on existing research, statistics and policy papers, the authors identify variations in the use of quasi-market instruments and divergence in the composition of public, for-profit and non-profit providers. Common welfare goals, such as inclusion and language learning, do, however still prevail.

In contribution five “Educational Action Research for Being” *Petri Salo* and *Karin Rönnerman* attempt to identify Nordic educational action research as a paradigm between a German-inspired didactics/Bildung tradition and Anglo-American curriculum tradition. The article describes action research within education on the basis of its developments in Sweden, Norway and Finland. This is done in comparative reflections upon and contextualization in relation to influential Anglo-Saxon variants of action research. Here the Nordic dimension appears to follow a democratic and participatory conceptualisation of action research. Nordic action research in education perceptions are traced back and interpreted in terms of *bildning*, collective pedagogical practices within *folkbildning* and in relation to *pedagogik* as a basis for teachers’ professional knowledge base.

The first issue concludes with *Eyvind Elstad*’s examination of the Nordic model of education post-WW2, a period when the Nordic countries came closer together, also in terms of improving their education systems. In “The evolution of extended universal compulsory schooling in Sweden, Norway and Denmark: policy borrowing and path-dependent processes” the author demonstrates striking similarities in relation to schooling, with Sweden becoming the frontrunner for an extended and undifferentiated school, followed by Norway, while Denmark went through a similar but delayed evolution. Identifying path-dependent characteristics, the author examines why this ‘Nordic model of education’ has enjoyed such an enduring influence.

## **ISSUE 2: The Nordic dimension in education – studying its manifestations**

The second section of the special double issue consists of a number of comparative studies that aim to identify manifestations of the Nordic dimension.

The first and second contributions explore Nordic approaches to dealing with the majority vs minority dimensions in education in policy and practice. In “Positions of newly arrived students in Nordic education policies and practices” *Jenni Helakorpi*, *Marianne Dovemark*, *Gunilla Holm* and *Annette Rasmussen* report from comparative studies of how the education and inclusion of newly arrived students differ in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. In a comparative scrutiny of national policy documents, legislation, and evaluation reports on the education of newly arrived students, the authors conclude that newly arrived students become subject to underachievement, bullying, discrimination, and are at risk of not continuing their education. Across national differences, the article problematizes the extent to which it makes sense to talk about

common Nordic traits. One key take-away is that Nordic policies are similar in the sense that despite all good intentions they do not seem to include all students.

In “Second language and mother tongue education for immigrant children in Nordic educational policies: Search for a common Nordic dimension” *Renata Emilsson Peskova, Eva Thue Vold, Maria Ahlholm, Anna Lindholm, Hermína Gunnþórsdóttir, Kirsi Wallinheimo, Anna Slotte and Maria Pia Pettersson* make a thorough comparative review of policy approaches to mother tongue education in all Nordic countries. Taking as their point of departure the Nordic common language policy (2006), the article investigates whether and how a common Nordic dimension underlies existing policies on second language and immigrant mother tongue education. In document analyses of policy documents, the article concludes that there is a common Nordic dimension regarding second language and immigrant mother tongue education in the explicit ambition to provide opportunities for the education of immigrant students. There are, however, considerable differences between the Nordic countries in their commitment to principles of social justice and the degree to which policies are implemented.

The third contribution has a focus upon the consequences of commercializing the Nordic dimension in the post-1990s era. In “When Nordic Education Myths Meet Economic Realities: The “Nordic model” in Education Export in Finland and Sweden” *Linda Rönnberg and Helena Hinke Dobrochinski Candido* analyse policy rhetoric on education export in Finland and Sweden as a lens to explore the multifaceted Nordic model in education. The authors’ findings highlight that, while education export approaches differ considerably, both countries provide opportunities for private edu-business actors to thrive, thereby sustaining the global education industry. Education exports are rhetorically positioned in relation to both the national and the Nordic contexts in specific ways, with implications for how Nordic education is framed in the globalised economy.

The fourth contribution looks for Nordic aspects of decision-making and documentation in ECEC by comparing different Finnish and Norwegian experiences. In “Paradox of documentation in early childhood special education in Finland and Norway: Exploring discursive tensions in public debates” *Noora Heiskanen and Karianne Franck* focus on how children’s rights to special educational support are ensured through documentation as a policy solution in Finnish and Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC). By investigating discursive tensions in public debate and approaches to documentation, the authors identify three key issues regarding tensions in Finnish and Norwegian documentation practices: 1) a way of safeguarding a child’s right vs. a barrier to support; 2) assessments requiring distance from vs. closeness to the child, and 3) decisions requiring pedagogical vs. administrative positions.

In the fifth and final contribution “Making rural areas attractive for teachers and principals: Putting rural educational settings on the agenda” *Sandra Lund and Gunilla Karlberg-Granlund* look for Nordic solutions to making remote areas attractive by comparing Swedish and Finnish experiences. The authors refer to equal opportunities in education as a cornerstone in the ‘Nordic model of education’ (Frønes, Pettersen, Radišić, & Buchholtz, 2020), whilst simultaneously pointing to the fact that curricula



in the Nordic countries are adapted to urban environments. Regional-spatial aspects of education thus need to be identified. In a re-analysis of two research projects in Sweden and Finland, the authors propose establishing supportive structures in the education of teachers and principals and in their continuing professional development in order to bring about equal education.

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