

The Nordic Dimension as a Metaspace for Educational Research

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that observing ‘the Nordic dimension’ as a metaspace in methodological terms harbors rich potential for qualifying educational research, policy, and debate. The metaspace gathers critical mass through aggregating the potential of smaller spaces. The five Nordic countries thus represent historical, linguistic, and societal similarities that produced similar societal and educational values, albeit along different trajectories. Understood as a floating signifier in scalar and topological terms, the Nordic dimension allows researchers and others to draw on the diversity that this metaspace represents as a tool for rethinking national solutions. The article draws on educational research and literature with a Nordic focus.

Keywords: *Nordic dimension, metaspace, comparative education, education reform*

Introduction: An argument for the metaspace as a methodological conceptual approach

This article is an attempt to frame ‘the Nordic dimension’ as a metaspace. A metaspace constitutes a methodological conceptual approach that can produce critical mass by gathering smaller national spaces in both a scalar and a topological sense (Amin, 2002; Laclau, 1993). The argument is that such an approach could supply a valuable methodological resource for making meaningful comparisons across educational research in the Nordic area and beyond. The article elaborates on this argument of the metaspace through four sections exploring (1) how a metaspace could be delimited in a Nordic

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context; (2) what the Nordic dimension may mean in a broader historical, societal and cultural perspective; (3) what the Nordic dimension means in an educational context, and (4) how the Nordic dimension morphs as it is transformed by engaging with European transnational collaborations.

The metaspace constitutes a *floating signifier* in the sense that in the field of educational research and policy, the Nordic dimension is an emerging and continually changing entity that is capable of meaning many things (Krejsler, 2017; Laclau, 1993). As for other floating signifiers like ‘quality’ or ‘evidence,’ this openness does not mean that anything goes. At any given time the Nordic dimension is captured by particular agendas regarding what counts as knowledge and practices of the Nordic, agendas that depend on the balance of power between various individual and collective subject positions; at the present time, discourses in the educational field that are based on human capital, evidence, and sustainability carry more weight than other discourses. This means that the educational researcher’s use of the metaspace must be measured and reflected upon in relation to his/her relations to other stakeholders’ positions, be they policy or market stakeholders or teachers and students. As Foucault expressed, the specificity governing the production of discourse clearly limits what a subject can say within a particular discursive context, and the right to speak is clearly regulated by what counts as legitimate subject positions within the discursive regime, i.e. ‘the Nordic dimension’ in our case (Foucault, 1978).

Furthermore, this metaspace is constituted by a *scalar perspective*. This means that the nation-states of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are scalar geographic entities in an ontological sense, interacting in collaborations within the metaspace of the Nordic dimension (Fraser, 2010; Savage, Gregorio, & Lingard, 2021). This also means that Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish national descriptors interact in flexible ways as epistemological vectors that sediment as aspects of ‘the Nordic dimension’. This scaling up from the national to the Nordic is applied to issues and policies with meanings that are both agreed upon as well as contested within and between the Nordic countries and at the level of the Nordic. In addition, the scaling up involves other metaspaces, such as the European, at the transnational and global levels (Lewis, 2020; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

Lastly, the metaspace also operates as a *topological vector* in the sense that scalar spaces and places, which are assigned to specifically national and scaled-up Nordic and European levels, can also be observed as relations between points in more flexible ways. This allows for more flexible concepts to detect or construe emerging relations, processes and movements across more well-defined scalar geographical descriptors (Allen, 2016). This becomes increasingly important as digital and physical interactions intermix as at present, with space and time becoming increasingly compressed. Now the global can be enacted in the local by means of Zoom meetings, and the national becomes increasingly hard to fix as people and ideas increasingly interact and mix in emerging international and transnational contexts and identities that are hard to label with fixed scalar national descriptors (Decuyper & Lewis, 2021; Lury, Parisi, &

Terranova, 2012). This means that what may appear to be a Danish case may merge with Swedish, Finnish, Nordic, European, global, transnational, or other elements in physical or digital variations to the extent that characterizing its emerging identity as national may actually be misleading. An expatriate Danish-born educational researcher living in Sweden, married to an African doing research on what the Nordic means in an American school context in an area where many Scandinavian immigrants have settled over time in an increasingly global context thus defies any simplistic reduction to a fixed national identity in a more scalar sense.

This article argues that the metaspace offers a way of conceptualizing complex multi-level educational issues at a time when nation-states increasingly are reacting to the effects of increased geopolitical instability after decades of globalization and transnational neoliberal reforms (Arnové & Torres, 2013; Rizvi, Lingard & Rinne, 2022; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). These multi-level issues include increasing challenges to social cohesion in the form of increasing poverty and precarious living conditions, spurring internal tensions, polarization, opposition to non-Western immigration and so forth (Judis, 2016; Standing, 2011; World Bank, 2016). Transnational solutions are increasingly being questioned, and we see a turn toward national(ist) solutions and ‘national values’. Here, school and education reflect identity- and nation-building in the pivotal space in which qualification, socialization and subjectification take place for citizens (Biesta, 2011, 2019). For this reason, school debates and school policies often express what we want for our societies, how we conceive of ‘the good life’ and ‘common welfare’. School discourse thus involves reflecting upon potentials in national culture and confronting the risks of bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and other dangerous turns when ‘national values’ are remade (Bergmann, 2017). In this precarious societal situation, the metaspace may serve the important role of questioning, within a larger Nordic or European horizon, the framing of educational research, policy, and practice in relation to evaluations of national school reforms, national values, and priorities.

Because the Nordic populations are small – Denmark 5.8 million, Sweden 10.5 million, in Norway 5.5 million, Finland 5.4 million, and Iceland 350,000 – it makes sense to discuss national educational research, policy, and practice within a Nordic metaspace, understood as a regional space of societies with historical, linguistic, and societal links that have produced similar, but not identical societal and educational values. This is a way of avoiding the dangers of provincializing into national(ist) answers too quickly. Further, it then makes sense for a Nordic population of only 28 million people to continue to engage in other metaspaces by consulting a shared history of politics, societal transformations, and cultural ideas in a Europe of 750 million people and a European Union of 447 million people. In order to combat eurocentrism and its legacy of colonialism and imperialism as well as prepare for a changing geopolitical world order in which Europe now accounts for only 9 percent of the world population (as opposed to almost 25 per cent in 1950), it probably makes sense to consult the global metaspace of eight billion people in order to qualify societal and educational ideas and research.

In summary, the metaspace could become a versatile methodological conceptual approach, allowing us to apply scalar as well as topological perspectives to educational issues – issues which increasingly operate in multi-level spaces, from the subnational through the national and regional to the transnational and global. The metaspace would allow us to specify and clarify our ongoing scrutiny of increasingly interconnected spaces with a view to expanding and nuancing what educational research, policy, and debate could become. This article therefore aims to apply the metaspace as a methodological device in the form of a Nordic dimension that simultaneously engages with other European, transnational, and global metaspaces (Arnove & Torres, 2013; Krejsler & Moos, 2023). The floating signifier dimension of this simultaneously scalar and topological approach allows us to envisage the Nordic by unleashing the wealth of diversity captured in the metaspace in order to problematize and rethink educational issues by remixing national solutions (Laclau, 1993). To apply the Nordic dimension according to such an ambition requires, however, that we make visible the similarities, the differences, and the potential for borrowing and remixing between the trajectories of the Nordic countries in relation to specific educational themes (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2016; Elstad, 2020, 2023; Krejsler & Moos, 2021b; Larsen, Schulte, & Thue, 2022; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006; Tjeldvoll, 1998; Tröhler, Hörmann, Tveit, & Bostad, 2022).

The Nordic dimension: an opaque yet a pervasive reality

This brings us first to the question of whether it makes sense to talk of a Nordic dimension, as elaborated in the editorial of this special double issue. If it does, what would constitute such a dimension? What unites and divides, in an ontological scalar sense, the five small countries on the northern edge of the European continent, and how can this be expressed in an epistemological scalar sense in educational terms (Andersen et al., 2007; Buchardt, Markkola, & Valtonen, 2013; Krejsler & Moos, 2021b). Is the Nordic dimension exclusive to the existing five Nordic countries (understood as including the Åland Islands, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Sápmi)? Or is the Nordic dimension broader, and should it include our Baltic neighbors, or even Scotland, regions currently looking to the Nordic countries for inspiration?

As with any productive floating signifier, it is hard to pinpoint exactly what makes up the Nordic dimension. For a start, one could mention the visible fact that Nordic policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have a tradition of collaborating on education and other policy fields in manifold ways. The Nordic dimension is, furthermore, visible in loosely coupled institutionalizations such as the Nordic Council, the Nordic Council of Ministers, and NordForsk as well as collaborations such as the Nordic Educational Research Association. But it also exists in many informal collaborations – the twinned towns, student exchanges, networks among teachers, researchers, administrators, political parties. It also exists within what might be called the *Nordic gaze*, so that when the PISA (OECD) and TIMSS, PIRLS and ICCS (IEA) surveys are published, the general public and policymakers are most interested in the performance of

their own students and countries in relation to the other Nordic countries (Jónasson, Bjarnadóttir, & Ragnarsdóttir, 2021; Lieberkind, 2015).

The Nordic dimension probably cannot be defined once and for all. It is evident that the educational communities of these small countries are highly appreciative of the critical mass in a scalar sense provided by the other countries with their similar (if far from identical) school and education systems and values (Blossing et al., 2016; Elstad, 2020, 2023; Krejsler & Moos, 2021b; Telhaug et al., 2006; Tröhler et al., 2022). Nordic educational researchers often say that it is hard to go ‘international’ in an educational world dominated by Anglo-American standards, procedures, and values. As such, the critical mass of the Nordic dimension could be helpful in a topological sense, in connecting ideas and practices among educational researchers and milieus across the five Nordic countries in broader and more diverse structures than the smaller national base will allow (Krejsler & Moos, 2021a). Another ambiguous aspect of the Nordic dimension is the language issue. If the Scandinavian languages are overemphasized, we risk creating a split between a Nordic and a Scandinavian dimension. To avoid this, in the Nordic Educational Research Association we agreed on English as the official language, so as to include all of our Nordic colleagues. On the other hand, Scandinavian languages do occupy an important place: not just because they are mutually intelligible, but because they are the carriers of historical experience. Excluding the use of Scandinavian languages would make it difficult to gather the critical mass to explore and develop sufficiently context-sensitive ways to translate into English educational terms like ‘bildning,’ ‘didaktik’ or ‘pedagogik’ and the contexts that they represent for a larger international context. Perhaps it is a trait of Nordic pragmatism that we continue to debate the language issue with intense passion while implicitly agreeing that it can never – and should never – be resolved.

The Nordic dimension: How did it originate?

One way to outline the potential for what the Nordic dimension could become as a metaspaces is to place the many narratives of the Nordic alongside each other. So let us start by asking in a heuristic spirit where the Nordic dimension in education comes from. Does it draw on an imagined national romantic community that arose with the Scandinavism movement in the mid-nineteenth century? Or is it the result of pragmatic collaboration on political, economic, and cultural fronts in the post-Second World War era, connected to similar visions and programs of the Nordic social-democratic welfare state? Or does it go way further back, to the Kalmar Union of 1389, or to Viking communities of the late first millennium AD? Or are all of these genealogies, these ambiguous mixtures of myth and reality, active in ways not always mutually compatible in diverse versions of educational research (Hilson, 2008; Rinne & Kivinen, 2003; Telhaug et al., 2006; Tjeldvoll, 1998)?

The Nordic countries do have a long history together which has stamped their political institutions, society, and culture (Nordstrom, 2000). Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish are mutually intelligible languages of Germanic origin. Norway and Iceland

shared the same Old Norse language, which still defines Icelandic, until around 1450. Finnish is different, and belongs to the Finno-Ugric group together with Estonian and Hungarian. But Finland was part of Sweden from 1150 to 1809, and thus has a sizable Swedish-speaking minority.

The Scandinavian language community reflects the close political relations between the Nordic states. From 1397 to 1523, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden scaled up their collaboration to counter among other challenges the influence of the German Hanseatic league. They shared kings and queens within the Kalmar Union, which was a union of largely independent kingdoms that also included Finland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, parts of Northern Germany, and the Baltic states. When Sweden broke out of the Danish-dominated union in 1523, Norway and Denmark remained in a union until 1814; Sweden then took over Norway until 1905 in a more loosely defined personal union. Iceland was part of Norway until 1814, when it was included in Denmark for another century. The modern Nordic national states are a product of the political upheaval that followed the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Finland, part of Sweden since the Middle Ages, was made a grand duchy under the Russian tsar in 1809, but obtained full national sovereignty in 1917.

All the Nordic national states have a long tradition of rule by law, and social inequality was never as pronounced as elsewhere in Europe. In the mid-nineteenth century, all of these states abolished absolutism and introduced democratic constitutions. The myth of Nordic or Scandinavian brotherhood flourished under national romanticism in the mid-nineteenth century, based on perceptions of a common spirit and destiny, common languages and a long history together. National romanticism was nonetheless part of a larger pan-European metaspace in a topological sense; it drew in particular on the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte and their celebration of *das Volk* and its embedded culture, spirit, and lived experience in a particular geographical location. It was a consequence of this increasing emphasis on the national that the multinational Danish state was pushed into conflict with Prussian-led, nation-building Germany, as about a third of Danes were German-speaking. During the war of 1864, when a German coalition led by Prussia and Austria-Hungary attacked Denmark, Scandinavian solidarity never materialized in military support and Denmark lost land and a third of its population (Korsgaard, 2004).

During most of the twentieth century, large social-democratic parties have dominated politics and society construction in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The Nordic countries steered relatively clear of the European interwar polarizations between communist, fascist, and Nazi forces. In scalar terms, the post-Second World War period saw Denmark, Norway, and Iceland joining NATO from the start. Sweden remained emphatically neutral, and Finland maneuvered with diplomatic sensitivity in relation to the neighboring Soviet Union – something that is now changing in the altered geopolitical circumstances of 2022. In the 1950s the Nordic countries attempted to scale up collaboration in the form of a Nordic defense union, but failed. Denmark joined the EU in 1973, then Finland and Sweden in 1995, but Norway and Iceland made a point of

staying outside. Conversely, however, the Nordic Council was established in 1952, and in 1971 the more ambitious Nordic Council of Ministers as bodies for mutual consultation and collaboration with annual meetings of prime ministers and other top officials. They were and are, however, 'only' voluntary and consensus-oriented bodies with no supranational powers. A growing number of further collaborations have developed in the wake of the work done in these Councils – in research, in environmental care, and in coordinating mutual stances in relation to important international matters. Within the EU, the Nordic member states often coordinate with, inform, and advocate for Nordic non-member states (Hilson, 2008).

Gaining impetus from around the 1930s, the Nordic countries gradually developed democratic, inclusive welfare societies with state-financed pensions, sick leave, unemployment insurance, maternity leave, and other welfare benefits. This took place within relatively stable parliamentary systems where unions and employer associations were involved in negotiating labor-market conditions; as a result, stability was maintained in the labor market with the so-called 'Danish model', 'Swedish model' and so forth. These developments in the welfare states were made more systematic during the 1950s and 1960s, mostly by pragmatic, consensus-oriented social-democratic governments in which economists and social scientists played a large role in the long-term and large-scale planning of society and its infrastructure on Keynesian social-engineering models for handling a capitalist market economy (Hilson, 2008; Tjeldvoll, 1998). In similar (though not identical) ways, these models emphasize maximizing labor-force participation, promoting gender equality, and establishing extensive benefit levels – policy goals that entail considerable income redistribution and extensive use of expansionary fiscal policy. This took place more profoundly in Sweden than in Denmark and Iceland, with Norway as a case in between and Finland as a rural latecomer (Andersen et al., 2007; Telhaug et al., 2006). Here the 'Nordic models' represent a collaborative and symbiotic model in which the state and market collaborate in a combination of free market, welfare state, and collective bargaining.

In summary, this multitude of narratives opens up a rich repertoire on which to draw when operationalizing the Nordic dimension as a methodological conceptual approach to enrich educational research, policy, and practice. The narratives tell us that Nordic countries developed common cultural, societal, and linguistic features by sharing similar but differentiated historical lineages. In scalar as well as in topological terms, there is such pervasive and wide-ranging interconnectedness here that it would be counterfactual to say that there is no Nordic dimension, even if it is admittedly pragmatic and at times elusive.

The Nordic dimension: in education

The next question is therefore how this pragmatic dimension of Nordic similarities and differences manifests when it comes to education policy, practice, and research. Here, as well, we see explicit scalar and opaque topological manifestations.

Tracing the Nordic dimension in education requires meticulous appreciation of the national trajectories of each of the five Nordic countries (Krejsler & Moos, 2021b; Telhaug et al., 2006; Tjeldvoll, 1998; Tröhler et al., 2022). On the one hand, a welfare state vision based on equity underlies education policy in all the Nordic states. On the other hand, considerable differences in societal contexts modify how such visions have been conceptualized and developed. Historically, Denmark is a country of small and medium-sized enterprises and farms, which has contributed to developing a society of relatively decentralized organization and governance. The opposite goes for Sweden, where large enterprises and a belief in large-scale rational planning has led to relatively centralized models of governance. Norway is, like Denmark, a society of small and medium-sized enterprises, but, like Sweden, located in a large and sparsely populated country. Unlike Sweden and Denmark, however, Norway has developed a regional policy focus that balances a strong municipal voice with more centralized governance; educational institutions have played an important role in supporting sustainable and geographically dispersed communities. Finland's geographical location between Sweden and Russia has determined its historical development, with independence first gained in 1917; in addition, it was a largely agrarian country until the late mid-twentieth century, and therefore has only recently developed its internationally envied school and education system in accordance with its own particular trajectory. Similarly (but differently), Iceland depended mainly upon fishing and agriculture until the mid-twentieth century and therefore also developed its school and education system rather late; but today, like Finland, it is highly digitalized and integrated into international networks and agencies.

In this landscape of national contextual variations, pedagogy, educational ideas, and practice have obviously developed along different trajectories. When we apply a topological view, however, it is important to emphasize that Nordic school and teacher education traditions always drew in various ways on continental and particularly German inspiration, ideas, and environments, including a strong didactics tradition and a strong tradition of thinking about the larger purpose of education in a German-inspired *Bildung* tradition (Hopmann, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). One should not forget, however, that American progressivism at one end and Tyler-inspired Anglo-American curricular thinking at the other end have also contributed greatly to developing approaches to school thinking and policy (Moos, 2013; Popkewitz, 2005; Tyler, 1949). Adding to the complexity of the Nordic metaspace, this varies from country to country, with Denmark probably being most inspired by German influences and Sweden less so.

Because societal and educational contexts and traditions in the various Nordic countries often differ from the dominant Anglo-American contexts and traditions that frame the standards, surveys, and comparability conditions that govern transnational collaborations, Nordic school professionals and educational researchers tend to run into shared problems, despite being proficient in the English language, and in translating and mediating their educational research to an Anglophone audience.

How do you translate the central terms that often developed in interaction with German-inspired traditions – ‘pedagogik,’ ‘dannelse/danning/bildning/Bildung,’ ‘Geisteswissenschaften,’ ‘didaktik’? And how do you avoid over-simplifying your research by conceding too much ground to the export-friendly ‘myths’ about the Nordic welfare states – progressive pedagogy and gender and social equity – that have an exotic appeal for many in the Anglo-American audience?

In recent decades, as the German-inspired discipline of ‘pedagogik’ has come under challenge from the Anglo-American-inspired notion of educational science (utbildningsvetenskap), Nordic educational researchers have found it necessary to come up with new understandings and strategies in education. Educational science has thus contributed to reframing education as an academic discipline, making a considerable impact on school policy and teacher education, and often upsetting delicate balances between education, civil society, the market, and the state (see next section). This latter debate about educational science and its Anglo-American borrowings is ongoing in all the Nordic countries, albeit along distinct trajectories (Sundberg, 2007; Säfström & Saeverot, 2015; see also special issue of *Nordic Studies in Education*, 2022/1).

In this area the metaspaces of the Nordic dimension could be helpful as a methodological approach to ensure a larger Nordic critical mass, a community of educational researchers as well as three largely mutually comprehensible Scandinavian languages, Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish. These are backgrounds that appeared to privilege similar (yet different) ways of engaging not only with German and Anglo-American educational ideas and traditions, but also inspirations from France and the Soviet Union, and elsewhere. In a scalar sense, the Nordic dimension as a metaspaces thus comes in handy when we try to trace the experiences and thinking from each of the five different national Nordic contexts. In a topological sense, it provides a space in which to chart relations within and between national ideas and to blend ideas and experiences across national contexts. Such a reservoir could serve as a rich resource when interpreting and translating educational issues into English, enabling a more qualified counter-perspective to dominant Anglo-American norms on more equal terms (Krejsler & Moos, 2021a). It could strengthen education policy, research, and practice within the region – and make the region more visible to the outside.

The Nordic dimension, the neoliberal challenge, and up-scaling to transnational collaborations

From the 1980s, simultaneous with the neoliberal trend, education policy was significantly up-scaled from the national to the transnational level in collaborations at European and global levels (Amin, 2002; Lewis, 2020; Krejsler & Moos, 2021, 2023; Savage, Gregorio, & Lingard, 2021). This scalar reconfiguration challenged what were perceived of as Nordic educational values – social inclusion for all students, the comprehensiveness of education, democratic values, social equality, and the focus on school and education in terms of democratic communities (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2016; Tröhler et al., 2022). The transnational neoliberal turn

and its associated ‘new public management’ technologies significantly challenged Nordic school and education policy because they set the agenda for policymakers, administrators, and educational researchers. As mentioned, the transnational collaborations are strongly dominated by Anglo-American networks and educational thinking, as developed in the ‘school effectiveness’ and ‘improvement’ collaborations and the ‘evidence’ and ‘what works’ collaborations (Eryaman & Schneider, 2017; Krejsler, 2017, 2020, 2021). The importance of this turn was exacerbated by the fact that the Nordic countries are highly active in transnational collaborations in most policy areas, including school and education. This includes formal collaborations in the OECD, the EU, the IEA, and the Bologna Process as well as collaborations in international educational development and research projects (Hultqvist, Lindblad, & Popkewitz, 2018; Krejsler, Olsson, & Petersson, 2018; Moos, 2013).

Paradoxically, however, up-scaling from the national to transnational level seems in one respect to have benefited Nordic collaboration. Scale-crafting on the level of the OECD, the EU, or the IEA requires finding a level of commonality that can bring different national points of view together (Lewis, 2020; Papanastasiou, 2017; Savage et al., 2021). This in turn requires that all parties initially agree to a process of de-contextualization from their national contexts so as to make consensus-producing negotiations possible. The consensus produced by these means then gives direction to what the member-state participants in these agencies or networks take home to their national contexts, where it must then be re-contextualized to make sense in the particular Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, or Swedish context. Thus re-contextualization is shaped by transnational knowledge production, comparative surveys, and social technologies as national debates and policymaking advance.

Having made themselves comparable at the transnational level (e.g. in PISA), when subsequently de-scaling the Nordic countries have tended to orient themselves by comparing themselves to the other Nordic countries. This re-contextualization via the Nordic dimension is seen in the extensive use of PISA data about other Nordic countries, as well as in the significant participation in the Northern Lights conferences and Nordic publications, where transnational data and framing of issues often sets the agenda. In this respect, interpretations of transnational policy advice have contributed to reinventing Nordicness, as similarities in contexts and cultures and a continuing commitment to Nordic collaboration have sustained the momentum for finding similar solutions. Paradoxically, therefore, transnational collaboration in school and education policy has tended to make national policies more Nordic; the adoption of transnational discourses, technologies, and models has stirred a mutual need among the Nordic countries to make sense of transnational rationales. In other words, Nordic collaboration has come through the offices of an external interlocutor (Jónasson et al., 2021).

Thus the re-scaling and de-scaling of educational collaboration following the PISA and IEA surveys has had the effect of reframing, and even energizing the Nordic countries’ predilection for comparing themselves to one another (Hopmann, 2008).

Before 2000 and PISA, Sweden and Denmark were traditionally seen as the international champions of a Nordic model of progressive and child- and equity-oriented pedagogy that attracted considerable international attention. However, after the onset of the OECD's PISA surveys and the IEA's PIRLS and TIMSS surveys around the year 2000, the balance between the Nordic school and teacher education systems flipped over. Finland is now the enviable, high-achieving school system that is the focus of high-level international attention and visits. In this narrative, Finland demonstrates that Nordic strategies can match East Asian achievements in literacy, numeracy, and science. Simultaneously, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland have fallen behind, achieving for the most part average scores.

Even before the advent of PISA, Denmark suffered its first shock following the comparative IEA literacy survey of 1991. But when Danish policymakers and the Danish public at large reacted to the revelations about mediocre literacy skills among Danish fourth-grade pupils, they noticed in particular that Danish pupils were performing considerably worse than the Nordic neighbors with whom the Danes usually compare themselves, as it was phrased. In Sweden, the disappointing PISA results of 2007 led to new strategies for reforming schooling: the previous 'silent importation' of transnational policy ideas was replaced by explicit references to the OECD and other transnational interlocutors (Sundberg, 2021). Sweden had a further highly publicized PISA shock in 2012 – whereas Finland surprised everyone by becoming the enviable high-scoring model pupil of PISA as well as the IEA surveys from the start (Krejsler et al., 2018; Pereyra, Kotthoff, & Cowen, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011). The transnational collaborations and surveys have thus supplied Nordic policymakers, educational researchers, and public debates with a set of narratives that allow them to compare their results with the other Nordic countries – and Finland in particular.

Teacher education is another area where the Nordic dimension is useful as a metaspaces in scalar and topological terms for tracing how transnational standards and policy recommendations have intersected with and transformed Nordic collaboration in the process of reform. All the Nordic countries are increasingly adapting to Bologna Process standards in this area, albeit following different models. This means in most instances that seminary-style teacher education programs have been discarded, and that teacher education has been incorporated into the more comprehensive university system, complying more or less with the three-year bachelor's plus two-year master's degree cycle, the ECTS system (European credit transfer and accumulation system), and common standards for quality assurance, collaboration, and lifelong learning (Krejsler et al., 2018).

Finland made teacher education into a master's degree as early as 1979. Decades later this model – with the additional pressure to adapt to the Bologna process – became an inspiration for Iceland and Norway. In 2008 Iceland made its teacher education program a master's degree, but has since then backtracked to some extent by introducing fast-track variants to remedy a resulting shortfall in students writing and passing the master's thesis. In Norway, teacher education programs for primary and

lower secondary school were also transformed into five-year master's programs from 2017, offered at regional colleges and universities. Time will tell whether this reform will run into similar difficulties as in Iceland. In Denmark, which adhered for longer to a less academic, more Grundtvigian-inspired seminary tradition, teacher education for primary and lower secondary education is now a professional bachelor's degree. If they wish to teach in upper secondary school, student teachers in Denmark and Norway must take a master's degree at a university and a subsequent postgraduate in-service course in education, which in Norway also qualifies student teachers to teach at lower secondary school level. There has been deliberation in Denmark for several years over whether to establish a five-year teacher education program at the master's level, though with little success so far. Sweden lies somewhat in between these two approaches. Preschool and primary school teacher degrees qualify as bachelor's degrees, and advanced lower secondary teacher degrees usually qualify as master's degrees – which degrees for teaching in upper secondary level education usually do as well (Elstad, 2020, 2023; Klette, Carlgren, Rasmussen, & Simola, 2002; Krejsler et al., 2018; Rasmussen & Bayer, 2014; Skagen, 2006).

In summary, to get full advantage of employing the floating signifier 'the Nordic dimension' as a metaspace for engaging with educational research on policy and practice requires differentiated evaluations of how the five different Nordic nations have engaged with transnational collaborations and the challenges of neoliberal policy reforms as well as evaluations of how this reframes Nordic collaboration itself.

Conclusion: What are the methodological implications of framing the Nordic dimension as a metaspace?

Reflecting upon the Nordic dimension as a metaspace evokes a floating signifier in scalar as well as topological terms. The scalar perspective illustrates how cycles of re-scaling and de-scaling from subnational to national, Nordic, and European transnational levels make a difference (Amin, 2002; Fraser, 2010; Krejsler & Moos, 2021b, 2023; Lewis, 2020). The topological perspective shows how educational ideas can emerge at more complex levels between and across the different scalar levels, modified further by the space-time compression of digital processes and the rise of increasingly diasporic, expatriate, cosmopolitan identities within and beyond the Nordic countries (Allen, 2016; Decuyper & Lewis, 2021; Gulson & Sellar, 2019). As a methodological approach, the metaspace thus encourages the educational researcher, policymaker, and practitioner to bring to life the rich patchwork of similarities and differences among the Nordic countries and their educational strategies, with a view to producing new ideas, strategies, and scenarios for dealing with educational challenges. This wealth of strategies would be hard to match within a single Nordic country without the added value of the critical mass supplied by the contextual richness and empirical experiences of the other countries.

Getting to work with the Nordic dimension as a productive metaspace requires, however, ongoing engagement with policy, practice, and research developments in

at least two and preferably more Nordic countries. This is a prerequisite for getting sufficiently familiar with the wealth of knowledge and the specific national contextual backgrounds to be able to evaluate and interpret concrete issues in a Nordic perspective. The reward, however, is great – as has been hinted at with examples of the richness of differing perspectives and scenarios emerging from the re-scaling and de-scaling experiences in PISA and of differing approaches to teacher education in light of the Bologna Process (Elstad, 2020, 2023; Krejsler & Moos, 2021b).

Among the issues that call for investigation and documentation in terms of a Nordic dimension are differing policies on immigration and refugees (see Helakorpi et al. in this special issue). The Nordic countries' differing trajectories here have major implications for school policies and practices, for instance in policies on school support for mother-tongue education in relation to acquisition of the new national language (see Peskova et al. in this special issue). This variation was visible in the highly different responses of the Nordic countries to the refugee crisis of 2015.

Another important area is the differentiated Nordic approaches to handling the Covid-19 pandemic. These differences implied different understandings of the consequences for school and for education.

A further important area concerns differing approaches to the balance between public and private (or 'free') schools. Here one sees very different trajectories in Denmark, where private and free schools developed slowly from the Free School Act of 1855 gradually encompassing a plethora of schools based on different religious, educational, political and other ideas (Appel & Coninck-Smith, 2015); and Sweden, where private and free schools were traditionally anathema according to the argument of equal supply of school opportunities for all supplied by the state – although this tradition was suddenly disrupted by the extensive Swedish school reforms of the 1990s, in effect a 180-degree turn (Richardson, 2004). There followed an expansion of private schooling, leading to a large proportion of private and free schools being run by capital investment venture corporations (Lundahl, 2016). In Finland, Iceland and Norway, on the other hand, private and free schools have never really taken hold.

Expanding on the private and free school issue, one could also explore differences in approach between the Nordic countries in the handling of each state's interest in, engagement with and openness to commercial interests entering the school and education fields (e.g. Lundahl, 2016 and Rönnerberg & Candido in this special issue). Here again, different trajectories are discernible.

In spite of the rich resources offered by engaging with the Nordic dimension as a metaspaces, there are also risks – including the risk of Nordic self-glorification. This actualizes the need to distance oneself from one's own region in order to qualify critiques of Nordic approaches to society and education. I suggested at the beginning of this article that the metaspaces of the Nordic dimension can and should be supplemented by a European dimension, which would give access to the differentiated wealth of European experiences (e.g. Krejsler & Moos, 2023). To avoid Eurocentrism, one could then appeal to the global dimension, giving access to the wealth of knowledge

and experience produced by other regions about what the good life and the good society can be. If we can see the Nordic metaspace as a region interlocked in scalar as well as topological terms with other regions like Europe, and challenged by the wisdom of metaspaces yet further afield, then strengthening Nordic collaboration could lead to developing a more self-confident Nordic region, with access to a wider wealth of diversity.

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