

The Evolution of Extended Universal Compulsory Schooling in Sweden, Norway and Denmark: Policy Borrowing and Path-dependent Processes

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ABSTRACT

After the Second World War, the Scandinavian countries grew closer, with improving their education systems a common ambition. There are striking similarities in the change processes that occurred in the design of schooling in these countries. Sweden led the way to an expanded comprehensive school system where differentiated instruction became undifferentiated, with Norway following after. Denmark underwent a similar but delayed evolution. Despite certain fundamental problems faced by lower secondary schools, this model shows path-dependent characteristics. The present study examines why this model, which has been referred to as the Nordic model of education, has enjoyed such an enduring influence.

Keywords: *Nordic model of education, school system, comparative education, policy borrowing, path-dependent processes*

Introduction

It is axiomatic that ‘history matters’. However, the phrase is an imprecise claim that reveals little to nothing about how and why history matters. The present study is about why history matters in connection with the breakthrough of extended universal

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compulsory school (also named the Nordic school model) in three Scandinavian countries: Sweden, Norway and Denmark.¹

The notion of the Nordic school model² grew out of major changes implemented after the Second World War. All European countries witnessed school system improvements in that period, but it was only in the Nordic region that extended undifferentiated schooling was implemented, with pupils only assigned to tracks at age fifteen or sixteen. However, during the same period, lower secondary schools have faced several challenges (Welle-Strand & Tjeldvoll, 2002; Dovemark et al., 2018): young people are experiencing psychological problems and stress in unprecedented numbers (e.g., Ozer & Schwartz, 2020), many pupils leave lower secondary school with poor results, and many pupils struggle mightily with school motivation (Reimer et al., 2018). This is an international trend (OECD, 2019), but it is particularly noticeable in the Scandinavian countries. Pupils' school motivation is low in the final phase of lower secondary school (Reimer et al., 2018). The digital upheaval that has affected both school- and leisure-time means that everyday life for today's young people is characterised by vast amounts of screen time. The issue of how to address these and other challenges in Nordic lower secondary schools is rarely mentioned in combination with the fundamental premise that school should be undifferentiated for fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds.

Comprehensive schooling for grade levels one–ten (ages six–sixteen) unfolded in the Nordic region, in contrast to the rest of Europe. In this article, I focus on Sweden, Norway and Denmark in the period after the Second World War and then emphasise how the Nordic model has been fortified. Developments since the turn of the millennium are so complex that I content myself with only a few considerations regarding this period.

The rise of the Nordic school model was inextricably linked to the efforts of social democratic politicians to realise values that are central to their parties (Blossing et al., 2014b). Along the way, political decisions have involved compromises made with other political blocs in parliamentary settings (Wiborg, 2004). Similarly, Scandinavian political history shows an alternation of political power between left, right and centre (Bergman & Strøm, 2011). The Nordic model of education has endured in spite of powerful countervailing influences from opposing political forces, who have historically expressed scepticism about the model, and neo-liberal trends promoting globalisation and knowledge promotion. The purpose of this article is to explore how the Nordic model of education has evolved in three Scandinavian countries and why it has continued to retain its fundamental characteristics.

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- 1 Denmark's autonomous areas (Greenland and the Faroe Islands) are not considered due to space limitations. The same can be said of school models in Finland and Iceland, though they have many similarities with the countries considered here.
 - 2 In this article, I also use of the concept of the Nordic model of education (Antikainen, 2006; Frimannsson, 2006; Telhaug et al., 2006; Blossing et al., 2014a, 2014b). However, linguistic limitations make it difficult to examine sources written in Icelandic and Finnish. Therefore, I have limited my focus to the evolution of extended universal compulsory schooling in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.

Context and theoretical framework

The Nordic model of education is a central component of social democratic welfare states based on a vision for and shared aims of the education systems (Blossing et al., 2014a). Here, I focus on the question of how the term has been institutionalised.

Political decisions can be characterised as a tug-of-war between different interests (Bergman & Strøm, 2011). The Scandinavian countries have political systems in which governments must have a parliamentary basis for their policies. If a government has a majority, the legislature's other parties do not in principle need to be involved. However, even in majority situations, governments have wanted decisions about school system reform to be rooted more widely, rather than relying solely on the support of the governing party. Often, decisions made are the result of a negotiation process that has involved a third non-political organisation.³ In political contexts, statesmanship is successful leadership at the policy level, where disagreements inherent to politics can be overcome in the decision-making process so that the outcomes are not exclusively the will of the majority (Mansfield, 2012).

The governance of education refers to how decision-making occurs in a school system; that is, the institutions and dynamics through which roles in education agencies and schools are defined, assigned and regulated (Harris, 2017). In education, governments often adopt top-down policy initiatives in an attempt to develop better systems and raise pupil learning and achievement levels. However, this is an incomplete or even naïve perception of political processes (Archer, 1979). A theoretical model must contain more complexity to better reflect the realities on the ground.

In the Nordic context, political initiatives can occur in a hierarchy, from the state level to municipalities and then to individual public schools or private agencies and private schools. In principle, each level controls the actors beneath it. However, education systems are highly complex, as they involve several actors and a diverse range of direct and indirect influencers of outcomes (Burdett & O'Donnell, 2016).

To understand why the Nordic model has been so durable, the notion of path dependence is useful. Widely used in economics and other social sciences, path dependence refers to how past decisions and events constrain later decisions and options (Page, 2006). The evolution of a country's school system is considered here to be affected by path dependence. This theoretical consideration provides a basis for discussing the evolutionary fitness of extended universal compulsory schooling with undifferentiated instruction and no streaming for children aged six–sixteen in a Scandinavian context.

So far, political processes within a country have been taken into account, but neither countries nor their institutions operate in isolation (Krejsler, 2021). The phenomenon of globalisation refers to a wide range of influences, exchanges and policy measures that are spread across countries. Although globalisation is imposed from above on traditional governing bodies in education policy, we also find interactions

3 For example, the Danish Union of Teachers has been a key third party in complex negotiations among political parties in Denmark since the 1950s.

between global and national influences. Following Arjun Appadurai (1996), this interaction can be characterised as ‘vernacular globalisation’ (Lingard, 2006, 2013). These transnational influences are translated (Røvik, 2016) and adapted to deal with specific challenges, and offer tailored solutions in each nation. The trajectory of any particular education policy has a property that makes it path-dependent (Page, 2006).

Thus, while each Nordic country’s education policy has unique features, the transnational influence should not be underplayed; policy ideas and instruments often spread and are adopted as references. Transnational education policy cooperation takes place under the auspices of the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Further, the EU is now heavily involved in the European Bologna process, which was originally outside the EU (Krejsler & Moos, 2021). There is no coercive imposition of the EU’s political practices on its member states’ authority over education (Grek, 2009; Grek & Lawn, 2012), and although there are any number of convergence mechanisms operating at the transnational level driven by the OECD, the organisation lacks any real authority in the countries that it advises. This network of globalisation, consisting of cognitive, instrumental and normative activities, influences national education policies (Krejsler & Moos, 2021). However, these actors and agencies can also mobilise from the bottom up (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). In this way, diffusion of practices can occur by means of cross-national emulation.

In these public spaces, public problems are defined and elaborated on, and education policy is intended to deal with and offer solutions to them (Grek & Lawn, 2012). National understandings of educational governance are susceptible to global influences, including education policy agendas, the imposition of targets and controls, evidence from measurements, benchmarking processes, standards and educational accountability (Lingard et al., 2013). It is difficult to precisely determine when this transnational dimension came to play in the Nordic countries, but the influence of this phenomenon on their education systems has emerged gradually, especially since the 1990s (Krejsler, 2021). To varying degrees, the introduction of greater school choice (a market-based accountability arrangement), devolution and incentive-based financial allocations for operating schools have taken root in the Nordic region (Krejsler & Moos, 2021). In sum, actual education reforms have been developed in the context of bargaining among actors that have some common interests but may also have conflicting agendas, at least in part. These are aspects that may have an impact on how the characteristics of a country’s school system change, but whether these aspects threaten the fundamental structures of that system is an empirical question.

Cross-national attraction can arise in educational contexts when key decision-makers take an interest in what is occurring in other countries (Phillips & Ochs, 2003). In the Nordic context, these types of decisions and systemic changes must be confirmed by political bodies. Sometimes, there can be a tug-of-war between different groups, in both the government (which in the Nordic context is often a coalition) and the full legislature. The road from attraction to political decision and implementation

of a measure can be long and often so complex that statesmanship is needed (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). Furthermore, many actors are involved in the implementation of a political decision. It can be easier to observe the results of decisions concerning the material resources of the education sector, exact and measurable units, than to assess situations in which hearts and minds are convinced. This contextual interaction might affect the potential for policy implementation.

In sum, the chosen theoretical framework does not give us a clear assumption about how school systems in the Scandinavian area have evolved and will evolve in the future, but adopting thoughtful retrospection can offer realistic suggestions of the pathways. One idea of the evolution of a school system in such a context centres on ideas that gain a hegemonic position as discourse and cognitive conventions in political and policy debates over how school policy should be designed (Fairclough, 2013). From such a perspective, whether or not school systems will follow path dependency – and if so, to what extent – is an empirical question.

Methodology

This article is based on comparative research (Lijphart, 1971) dealing with school systems in the Nordic region (Elstad, 2023). Differences in the fields under study have led to some variations in the empirical strategy chosen. Because the material is extensive, this presentation must be based on the main features of policies between the end of the Second World War and the present day that have had an impact on shaping school systems.

To draw valid inferences based on evidence, we must ensure that we understand what occurs at each step in the transfer of ideas from one context to another. However, it is very difficult to demonstrate causality convincingly in such contexts. Similarities between education systems could be due to borrowing, could be due to common descent, or could be due to evolutionary development (Ross & Homer, 1976). It is safe to assume that an earlier event was not caused by a subsequent event (the principle of temporal precedence; Moreno & Martínez, 2008). Here, we therefore settle for plausible interpretations of events and their causal relations. We can partly link the emergence of the so-called Nordic model of education to a chain of decisions on the personal and institutional levels (Phillips & Ochs, 2003), which I present in the next sections. In this process, it is useful to study whether policy development takes the form of policy borrowing or is subject to more subtle or hidden influences. To investigate a discourse's hegemonic status, I study how political parties that historically have shown the greatest scepticism towards the idea of undifferentiated instruction view it.

Analysis

The first phase of extended comprehensive schooling

Sweden

When peace came to Europe in May 1945, neutral Sweden was economically the strongest Nordic country; it had avoided the devastation of war while developing its

industrial production between 1939 and 1945. In the 19th century, Sweden had parallel school systems based largely on social status. Former Swedish Prime Minister Tage Erlander (in office from 1946–1969) explained this as follows:

This division [in schooling based on social status] ... meant that there were large differences in education for children at the same age level. Perhaps that in itself would not have been so worrying, as it can be an advantage that different schools can design their teaching quite freely. The serious thing was that this organisational division hid a common feature: the school system functioned largely as a miniature class society. (Erlander, 1973, p. 233)

The Swedish Social Democratic Party wanted to change the parallel system to reduce injustices. Improvements to the school system were high on the social democratic agenda, and Sweden's cabinet established a school commission in 1946. The head of the commission was Stellan Arvidsson (1902–1997). The commission presented its proposals in 1948 (SOU, 1948) and gained considerable traction. The commission suggested that the primary task of schooling should be to educate democratic people and thus aimed to transform schools in accordance with the structure and life of democratic society while offering compulsory nine-year schooling (Isling, 1980). This mandatory education was to be fully integrated for the first six grades and partly integrated in the seventh and eighth grades, with the exception of certain optional subjects. Per the commission's recommendations, grouping or streaming would begin in the ninth grade.

The Swedish parliament's decision (1950) to introduce a nine-year comprehensive school system was a political compromise made possible by a striking lack of clarity in the text of the agreement that made a majority decision possible. This is statesmanship at a high level, in which a strategic commitment is based on obscure premises. The compromise meant that measures would be taken to introduce compulsory nine-year schooling 'to the extent that the applied experimental activities reveal their suitability' to replace parallel schooling (Proposition to the Riksdag no. 70, 1950). A ten-year experimental period was established to create nationwide compulsory nine-year comprehensive schools. After many parliamentary debates, it was decided in 1956 that improved research activities were needed. Under the auspices of the Educational Authority (*Skolöverstyrelsen*), research activity was built up (Härnqvist, 1960; Svensson, 1962). In 1962, the government was able to put forward a bill that a parliamentary majority would adopt. In this first phase, grades seven and eight were the same for all children, while grade nine was streamed by ability.

Norway

Norwegian policy-making followed the Swedish lead. The Labour Party became the leading party in Norway after the Second World War, enjoying a majority in the legislature from 1945 to 1961. This allowed disagreements about school policy to be resolved within the party, in contrast to Swedish social democrats, who had to seek

compromises with other parties. In 1945, Norway's Labour Party adopted a school policy platform that involved a seven-grade mandatory public school that would be followed by two voluntary tracks: one a more theoretically oriented secondary school (*Realskole*), and the other a more practically-oriented one (*Framhaldskole*).

Helge Sivertsen (1913–1986) was one of the young men who fought for an advanced position in the Labour Party after the Second World War (Slagstad, 1998). In a 1946 book, he discussed how ideas from folk high schools could inspire the evolution of the Norwegian school system, but the book contains no hint of what would become Sivertsen's major task just a few years later: the elimination of tracks and the establishment of an expanded comprehensive school system inspired by the Swedish model. The germ of this idea can be dated to a meeting of the Socialist School Association in 1947 at which the Swedish politician Stellan Arvidsson gave a lecture to aspiring reformers of the Norwegian school system. Sivertsen attended the meeting. The idea of extending compulsory schooling along the lines of the Swedish model was soon fortified among a critical mass of followers.

Sivertsen, whom Slagstad (1998) described as a national strategist for education in Norway in the early post-war period, was appointed deputy minister of education in 1947. From a spectator seat in the Swedish parliament in 1950, he could observe how Swedish statesmanship created a space to develop extended comprehensive schooling. As a strategist who knew the art of exerting influence, he outmanoeuvred different ministers of education (Kaare Fostervoll and Lars Moen) and opponents within the Labour Party (for instance Anna Sethne and Bernhof Ribsskog) who wanted to preserve two tracks in the school system after the first seven years of school.

In the spring of 1951, the Labour Party's central board appointed a committee to investigate school issues, with Sivertsen as its chair. In 1952, the committee presented a draft of a long-term program for schools, which outlined the Labour Party's plans for the Norwegian school system from top to bottom; Norway should follow Swedish education policy by 'creating a unifying secondary school' (Gjermundsen, 1983, p. 90). The committee's reports reshaped Labour Party policy, which caused deep controversy at the party's national meeting in March 1953. The Swedish influence on school policy was obvious; Sivertsen (1955) referred later to Sweden as the Nordic area's 'most modern country ... which is currently carrying out a school reform' (p. 15). There is no doubt that policy borrowing is an appropriate term for what happened in Norway in the 1950s.

The new policy for expanded schooling in 1954 (Proposition to the Storting no. 9, 1954) was clearly borrowed from Swedish policy. The same year, again following the Swedish pattern, an experimental council for the development of schools was established (Act on Experiments in School, 1954) and became the main tool for the introduction of extended comprehensive schooling. In 1956 some preliminary experiments with nine-year schooling began (Sirevåg, 1979). The real policy-making took place in council bodies composed of loyal party sympathisers, but also involved ad hoc sympathisers (Helvig, 2017, p. 258).

Sivertsen was later a minister of education (1960–1963 and 1963–1965) and used personal friendships to exert considerable influence on education policies (Helsvig, 2017). Nationwide nine-year compulsory schooling became a reality in Norway in 1969. Ironically it was a liberal-conservative coalition government that implemented Norway's social democratic vision for its school system.

Norwegian and Swedish education policies had such powerful similarities that Norwegian Minister of Education Birger Bergersen proposed a joint Nordic school system in 1955, and Sivertsen floated the same notion in the Nordic Council in 1964. These examples illustrate overextended and unrealistic hopes for Scandinavian cooperation, although all of the relevant social democratic parties supported the idea, except Denmark's (Telhaug & Mediås, 2003, p. 165). This fact indicates that Danish policy would take a slightly different path.

Denmark

In post-war Denmark, several politicians raised the issue of improving the country's school system, but political negotiations between 1953 and 1957 regarding the expansion of compulsory universal schooling were beset by deadlock. In the absence of great statesmanship, the complex parliamentary situation was too difficult for legislators to agree on the extension of compulsory schooling (Kålund-Jørgensen, 1958). However, a majority government was able to implement a school act in 1958 with a voluntary two-track system following seven years of primary school: two to three years of schooling with an emphasis on practical subjects or an academically preparatory two- or three-year *Realklasse*. The 1958 act took a step in the direction of comprehensive schooling by ensuring greater uniformity between town and country. Although the mandatory length of schooling was limited to seven years until 1972, going to school for two or three additional years became increasingly popular. In 1965, for instance, 80% of pupils continued their education beyond the seventh grade (Coninck-Smith et al., 2014, p. 49). In 1965, a committee was set up to evaluate the possibility of extending compulsory education. The results emerged in 1969 in the form of a nine-point programme that recommended a gradual extension of compulsory education to nine years while offering certain areas of choice and grouping pupils by ability.

A proposal to extend Danish compulsory education to nine years emerged in 1972. This proposal included radical amendments which met with widespread opposition from both individuals and organisations. The proposal ended up being postponed until school reform was finalised with the Folkeskole Act in 1975 (Coninck-Smith et al., 2015), which finally established mandatory eighth, ninth and tenth grades as an integral part of the Danish comprehensive school system. In a situation where the country was experiencing an economic crisis, politicians managed to come to an agreement through statesmanship and compromise measures, such as reducing the number of minutes per lesson (Coninck-Smith et al., 2015, p. 30). The Danish case of policy-making cannot be described as a clear borrowing of policy, but certain ideas in the Danish political process were consistent with earlier developments in Sweden and

Norway. An investigation from 1965 into the importance of how socio-economic background affected pupils' educational choices received some attention (Hansen, 1972). Hansen referred to the experiences of the Swedish school model of undifferentiated instruction, downplaying challenging academic subjects and allowing a certain amount of autonomy. These factors, he believed, had reduced the importance of pupils' social background; Danish social democratic politicians were particularly interested in his findings.

When the realisation of school reform was delayed, Danish social democrats referred to the evolution of earlier extended schooling in Sweden and Norway as an argument for speeding up the final parliamentary decision (Coninck-Smith, 2015, p. 29). Nevertheless, the Danish case must be said to differ somewhat from the Norwegian and Swedish cases because it can be characterised as balancing Grundtvigian, culturally radical and social democratic ideas (Markussen, 2003). At the same time, changes in Swedish school policy were followed with great interest in Denmark, sometimes with admiration and sometimes with disgust, as evidenced in a number of articles in the magazine *Folkeskolen* (Coninck-Smith et al., 2014).

The second phase of extended comprehensive schooling with the introduction of mixed-ability classes

The second phase of the evolution of schooling was the removal of differentiated instruction in lower secondary school. This division into ability grouping and tiering was completely eliminated in Sweden in 1970, in Norway in 1975 and in Denmark in 1993. Again, there was an explicit transfer of political ideas between countries. During this period, a number of measures that can be linked to progressive pedagogy were implemented (Blossing et al., 2014a), including a changed view of the teacher's role from the sage on the stage who was the centre of attention, to more of a guide who facilitated pupils' processes of discovery. Pupil participation became an important consideration in everyday school life, and even democratic processes were held up as the ideal for decisions made in schools. This progressive philosophy was to some extent manifested in curricula and public documents and could act as guiding signals for the individual teacher's work. To what extent such thoughts influenced actual classroom interactions in the 1970s and later is an unsettled empirical question.

The third phase of extended comprehensive schooling

In the early 1990s, the pathways of school policy in Sweden and Norway diverged, but after 2001 Norwegian school politicians once again fixed their gaze on Swedish school policies (Bergersen, 2006; Sejersted, 2005, p. 443). However, school policies in the Scandinavian countries became more in line with international trends regarding the use of national tests, the introduction of a national quality assurance system and management by means of targets and controls. Despite this global influence, the three school systems retained their distinctive nine- or ten-year comprehensive undifferentiated schooling. Even when conservative or liberal parties took power in later years,

there were relatively minor differences in education policy views across the political spectrum.

The proposed solutions of social democracy in the 1990s lay in merging the ideal of the extended comprehensive school with the goal of knowledge promotion. Towards the end of that decade, social democratic parties would find a solution in knowledge promotion when they came to power (Volckmar & Wiborg, 2014). An example from Norway is that the Curriculum guidelines from 1974 (p. 35) state that “The demand for the acquisition of knowledge and skills will easily come to feel like pressure for pupils and teachers”. In 2003 the conservative Norwegian government said that “it is ... important that the school and the teachers provide sufficient external pressure in the training” (Proposition to the Storting no. 30, p. 55). The changed emphasis is obvious.

Education policies shifted gradually in a more neo-liberal direction (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Free schools would be anchored in freedom of choice for both parents and pupils. Competition, the market and diversity were emphasised (Krejsler & Moos, 2021). This was supposed to promote competition between free schools and public schools and among pupils. However, comprehensive nine- or ten-year schooling was retained, which indicates the presence of path dependence.

While the management of education systems in the first decades after the Second World War was centralised, Sweden implemented significant changes in the 1990s that led to a decentralisation of decision-making power and responsibility; this was referred to as the municipalisation of education. Norwegian and Danish authorities adopted some of the same measures after the turn of the millennium. Decentralisation of responsibility and authority can be interpreted as a blame avoidance manoeuvre from the superior level (Hood, 2010). Specifically, those who have decided on a venture can shift accountability to subordinate units, running the risk of turning education policy and practice into a blame game.

The progressive foundational philosophies faced setbacks after the turn of the millennium (Coninck-Smith et al., 2014; Imsen & Ramberg, 2014; Linderoth, 2017), when the results of the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) caused a shock in the Nordic countries (except Finland, which scored very well in the first measures but has subsequently experienced a decline, Saarinen, 2020). Measures that could conceivably raise a nation's position in the various international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) were implemented: national tests, target management with control of results and hierarchical accountability (Krejsler, 2021).

Conclusions

Over the years, there have been a number of reports on challenges related to lower secondary schooling in the Scandinavian countries: school performance that is around or slightly above the international average in ILSAs, social inequality and pupils with low school motivation who are to some extent restless and unfocused (Reimer et al., 2018). The achievement gap between rich and poor is widening (e.g., Sandsør et al., 2023).

Today's young people manifest much more stress and spend vast amounts of time in front of screens of one kind or another (e.g., Ozer & Schwartz, 2020), and too many leave lower secondary school with poor results (Reimer et al., 2018). Despite certain fundamental problems with lower secondary school, the Nordic model of education shows path-dependent characteristics: the assignment of pupils to different tracks still does not occur until age fifteen or sixteen, with almost no differentiation of educational courses and content before then. Even conservative parties that historically showed resistance to undifferentiated and expanded comprehensive schooling do not seem keen today to propose policies that would threaten the fundamental structures of the Nordic model (The Conservative Party, 2023; The Conservative People's Party, 2022; The Moderate Party, 2022). One possible interpretation is that the idea of extended schooling – with its origin in social-democratic parties – has achieved hegemonic status in any debate about education. If so, this hegemony represents a normative idea that 'wins' in the discursive marketplace (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2013).

This commitment to long-term compulsory undifferentiated education has long distinguished the Nordic school model from those employed in the rest of Europe. As streaming is not permitted beyond short periods, this is also unique in the Nordics. When comparing the Nordic education systems with those elsewhere on the continent, the most striking difference is that tracking begins far later than in Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium or France. For example, in the Netherlands, streaming begins at age 12 (Eurydice, 2021).

The school debate has been more polarised in Sweden than in Norway and Denmark, and the dynamics in Sweden might ultimately erode undifferentiated education. One possible interpretation is that Swedish schools have moved considerably away from the Nordic school model (Lundahl, 2016, p. 9). The Swedish authorities have announced further experiments involving nationwide advanced classes in theoretical subjects in both primary and secondary education (Tidö Agreement, 2022).

The Conservative Party in Norway (2023) has appeared to embrace progressive ideas about a project based on interdisciplinary themes and soft values in lower secondary education. The measure is meant to increase the mastery and enjoyment of learning. Lower secondary schools must become 'more practical and varied', but the party also wants to introduce an obligation for schools to provide intensive training to pupils with weaknesses in basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic at the beginning of eighth grade. This ambiguity shows an ad hoc thinking based on the fundamental model. Further, there are some signs of the erosion of the undifferentiated school system; 'pupils in the ninth and tenth grades can be given the opportunity to choose between a more theoretical or practical approach to mathematics for parts of the teaching time'; schools may 'use time-limited ability-grouping in the academic subjects in lower secondary school so that pupils face academic challenges that reflect their academic level'; and schools are to 'ensure better adapted education for pupils with high learning potential' (The Conservative Party in Norway, 2023, p. 5).

The Danish Conservative Party is a shadow of its former self and offers only weak opposition to the current Danish government, in which the Social Democratic Party has a dominant position. The Danish Conservative Party wants more ‘focus on professionalism and self-formation (*Bildung*)’ and ‘more peace and order in the classroom, so that there will be better space for learning’; there is nothing in the party’s program that threatens the established school model (The Conservative People’s Party, 2022).

Many of the challenges facing lower secondary school are linked to the fact that the school systems in Sweden, Norway and Denmark have scarcely changed the fundamental nature of undifferentiated education. Since it became a reality, only ad hoc reforms have been carried out, such as electives and more practical and varied arrangements, with the fundamental characteristics generally taken for granted. The central issue facing Nordic school systems is thus the evolutionary fitness of social democratic ideas that began to be implemented seven decades ago. The fact that the system’s core structure has remained largely unchanged indicates that its ability to survive is formidable; in this context, I argue that the Nordic school model is now essentially path-dependent.

Limitations and avenues for further research

Like any research, the present study has certain limitations. Its central claim is that undifferentiated lower secondary school has a hegemonic status that both results from and contributes to path dependency in education debates in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. We know too little about what creates such a status, and my central assumption must of course be tested. One possible research strategy is to interview conservative politicians to get their say on what they perceive as limitations in political debate. There are differences of opinion among political parties on school policies, but they appear to be quite small. The question is whether certain approaches to alternative views can contribute to eroding the hegemonic status of the Nordic school model. Scholars like Blossing, Imsen, Moos (2014a) and Wiborg (2009) have pointed out very clearly that they are staunch supporters of the undifferentiated comprehensive school model based on social-democratic values. To some extent several scholars seem to glorify social-democratic politicians in the Scandinavian countries. This kind of glorification has nurtured a hegemonic discourse about the Nordic model of education. However, research shows problematic aspects of undifferentiated instruction in lower secondary education (e.g., Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019).

So far, what some refer to as a neo-liberal turn in education policy does not appear to have threatened the hegemonic perceptions of school in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. We need more research on how the interaction between transnational influence and the Nordic model of education will develop in the years to come. Space limitations prevent this point from being examined in detail here. Likewise, I have not discussed the evolution of school systems in Finland, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland Islands, all of which merit investigation.

There is also a more fundamental question: Is the Nordic model of education myth or reality? The answer depends on one's perspective on the concept of the Nordic model of education (Klette, 2018). On the one hand, studying the situation from a big-picture perspective reveals only a few contours on what otherwise appears to be a uniform landscape, thus confirming the existence of the Nordic model. On the other, someone who scrutinises the details of this landscape will recognise the need for more nuanced conclusions. 'The vision of a School for All' and 'the implementation of the Nordic vision' suggest a basic agreement and coherent government approaches that may not exist in reality.

For those examining Nordic school systems from the outside, the Nordic model of comprehensive schooling offers an ideal type that emerged first in Sweden, then in Norway and later in Denmark. The Weberian term *Idealtypus* ('ideal type') characterises a social phenomenon, but we cannot expect to find it in its pure form in social reality (Swedberg, 2018; Weber, 1949). One possible interpretation is that the Nordic model of education and a school for all should be considered ideal types. If so, they are meaningful for analytical purposes, as Weber himself demonstrated (1949). Ideal types simplify reality for us and make it more manageable in our analyses. They are also useful for understanding policy borrowing processes, from cross-national attraction to political decision to concrete implementation. The characteristics of the Nordic model of education can appear as a number of refined characteristics that together provide a picture of how this ideal type differs from other educational models. It is significant that some foreign education researchers (e.g., Hopmann, 2006; Mortimore, 2014) emphasise certain idealised aspects of education models in the Nordic countries. From this perspective, the education systems in the Nordic region share some similarities, implying that it makes sense to talk about these similarities as genuinely comprising an ideal type or a model for others to emulate.

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The Evolution of Extended Universal Compulsory Schooling in Sweden

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