

Chapter 1

Nordic School Policy Approaches to Evidence, Social Technologies and Transnational Collaboration



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Abstract This volume gives an overview of how national school policies in the five different Nordic countries have produced, interpreted and practiced different – yet similar – approaches to evidence, social technologies and collaborations in transnational forums like the OECD, EU, and IEA. The national policy developments and situations are seen in the context of transnational and global influences and as producers of and simultaneously consumers of, Nordic influences. We investigate social technologies, like evidence and what works, as major carriers of influence.

The analyses and discussions in the chapters of this volume are built on reports from the school systems of the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The country reports are constructed on the basis of a shared format for analyzing the particular contexts that each national school policy and practice emerges from in terms of society, politics, governance, professions and education. The comparisons of country reports and thematic chapters unveil similarities and differences that are central to understanding the ways that the different Nordic countries cope with transnational policy advice and policy formats.

Keywords Comparison · Nordic-ness · Governance · School reform · Evidence

Introduction

We explore the phenomenon of *the Nordic* in its complex apparitions between the discursive myth of a coherent bloc of progressive and egalitarian welfare states and the cumbersome realities of political alliances that operate in more modest and conflictual realities. In international conversations this ambiguous entity called the Nordic appears in monikers like ‘the Nordic education model’, ‘the Nordic way of

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regulating labor market and parliamentary democracy’, ‘Nordic ways of thinking and behaving’, and so forth (Andersen et al., 2007; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006). On the other hand, we know from a number of studies of our own and of colleagues, that it is difficult to point at Nordic uniformity, when coming closer to actual policy, research and practices. This introduction and the chapters of this book aim at clarifying this ambiguity of the Nordic with a focus on school policy, research and practice.

We have chosen to focus upon comprehensive school, i.e. primary and lower secondary school: It allows us to delimit our task and get sufficiently into detail to appreciate the similarities and differences among the different Nordic countries. Furthermore, school comes across as exemplary in the sense that it deals with basic socialization, democratic Bildung, is closely related to building national narratives, and hereby becomes particularly sensitive as an issue for public and policy debate.

Mapping what counts as evidence in school and education in five mutually different countries with each their educational systems is an arduous task that includes identifying the particularities of different societal and historical contexts and their configurations of dominant players in relation to education. In this introductory chapter we shall, furthermore, introduce theory of global and national educational policies, theory of governance at diverse levels (transnational, national and local), and theory of education in order to place the Nordic case in a broader global perspective.

Debate about ‘evidence’ and ‘best practice’ in education often deals with the binary between commonalities and differences. The crucial question here is, whether you can identify causal relations or at least correlations in education that demonstrate what works, or maybe what does not work, *irrespective of context* (Eryaman & Schneider, 2017; Krejsler, 2017). On the other hand, it is often claimed, that context matters so much that talking about ‘evidence’ or ‘what works’ without reference to national and local contexts and their particularities makes no sense. And, to put the argument a little on the edge, one could argue that within policy and associated research paradigms (often school effectiveness) the Nordic countries have often tilted more towards the ‘context matters’ approaches as opposed to mainstream Anglo-American approaches that have more often tilted towards looking for commonalities. The former often privilege more qualitative approaches whereas the latter more often give preference to more quantitative approaches, although this divide should not be overemphasized, as both approaches apply in both traditions. Nonetheless, one could mention the OECD, 2004 Washington meeting on ‘evidence’. Here an evidence-based faith in global evidence and the priority of Randomized Controlled Trials on the part of the United States was met with a largely Nordic voice that emphasized the importance of context as well as the importance of recognizing many sources of ‘evidence’ (Hansen & Rieper, 2008, pp. 7–8; OECD, 2004).

Next we shall discuss the need for proper context analyses when comparing education and governance. We shall do that by providing a short analysis of the Nordic societies and policies in a historic perspective with a view to transnational collaborations. Hereafter, we shall give an account of general and Nordic governance concepts, models, social technologies and theories, followed by a short overview of

general and Nordic educational theories and structures. In the final section, we shall introduce theory and practice of social technologies like evidence and best practice and their relations to Nordic school policy, research and practice.

Comparison

Comparisons (Moos, 2013) are employed as tools for research on policy and education and by policymakers (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010). Comparative researchers use comparisons to sharpen their view in order to get a clearer picture of practices and politics, while policy makers use comparisons, when setting policy agendas based on international evidence, best practice, or international standards. It is thus very important to gain a better understanding of the institutional contexts (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) and the historical and societal backgrounds that education is embedded in, since educational thinking and practices and their associated individual and community social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) are formed by the society, culture, and context of which they are a part. They are shaped by policies, discourses, and literature, but also by national/local values, traditions, structures, and practices. Comparative education has acquired particular traits as school and education policy have turned transnational on a global scale where Anglo-American networks have been particularly influential (Krejsler, 2020; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). These developments have acquired widespread and profound influence in Europe where the so-called transnational turn in school and education policy have since the 1990's been agenda-setting for national school and education policy. These policy processes have been institutionalized in particular in the four transnational giants in European education policy: the OECD, EU, IEA and the Bologna Process (Brøgger, 2018; Elfert, 2013; Krejsler, 2018; Lawn & Grek, 2012b; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Nóvoa & Lawn, 2002).

Methods of comparison in research have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (Carney, 2008; Steiner-Khamsi, 2006, 2009, 2010; Walker & Dimmock, 2002), as has the political work on transferring policies from one context to other contexts. However, as Gita Steiner-Khamsi (2010, p. 332) argues, policy transfer is not a passive process. It is mediated, shaped, and given form by local policymakers. Traveling reform undergoes many modifications depending on the political situation, while some of the core logics within interpretations of evidence and best practice are still prevailing.

Buzzwords such as accountability, equity, and standards are global “fluid signifiers” or “floating signifiers” that are given content and meaning in context according to Moos (2013). This suggests that a cultural struggle is raging about the rights to define what counts as evidence about What Works within different fields, which amounts to what Ernesto Laclau (1993) called a floating signifier, i.e. an open concept that may be employed to generate a variety of different meanings (Krejsler, 2017). The current political climate abounds with dominant floating signifiers such as ‘quality’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘excellence’. These signifiers travel as keywords across countries and disciplinary boundaries. Being instrumental to carrying dominant

external stakeholders' interests, they set new agendas and dislocate established truths. A particular feature of the floating signifier, however, is that you cannot disagree until it is made specific. This means that unless comparisons in international research projects include the national and local contexts, structures, cultures, and values that make up school and education in participating countries, results from such comparisons will end up being at such general levels that they become meaningless: "Without contextual comparison it is impossible to understand the political and economic reasons why traveling reforms are borrowed" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010, p. 339).

Stephen Ball (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012) argues that educational institutions are mostly loosely coupled to the political system, which means that policies need to be enacted by the institutions: they interpret and negotiate policies, they 'do' policy, in order to make it fit to existing practices. This underscores the need to explicate and investigate the contexts at multiple levels of governance. Kjell Arne Røvik, the Scandinavian neo-institutional theorist (2011), gives more details. He invokes the metaphor of a virus infection when identifying the ways in which the generic structures of political ideas – viruses – are translated, changed or mutate in the interactions with local culture and values. Translation may occur through rules of copying, subtraction (neglecting or omitting aspects), adding (elements of local culture), or alteration (completely reshaping). A special variant of translation is renaming, meaning that a well-known (global) concept is given a local name. This may fool the internal "immune system" or defense system, and it may also fool external observers. This notion highlights the observation that policies and ideas are social constructions that are subject to transforming into "fluid or floating signifiers," i.e., empty concepts that are formed only when used, and which, when formed, signify diverse meanings.

Nordicness: Reality or Myth?

The Nordic countries consist of five nations (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2013b; Hilson, 2008; Nordstrom, 2000) Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden and the self-governing areas the Åland Islands (a predominantly Swedish-speaking area belonging to Finland), the Faroe Islands, and Greenland (with partial autonomy in the Home Rule arrangement with Denmark).

Middle Ages to 1900

The Nordic countries have a long history together, which has put its stamp on their political institutions, societies and cultures (Nordstrom, 2000). In practice and historically speaking Danish, Norwegian and Swedish are very similar languages of Germanic origin. While Norway and Iceland shared the same old Norse language

until around 1450, at that time Danish and Swedish started the transformation to modern languages. Finnish is different from the other Nordic languages and belongs to the Finno-Ugric language tree together with Estonian and Hungarian. Finland has, however, had a sizeable Swedish-speaking minority since the Middle Ages.

The Scandinavian language community reflects the close political relations between the Nordic states. For most of the period from 1300 to the 1800s the kingdoms of Sweden, Denmark and Norway formed political unions, in pairs or all three of them. From 1397–1523 Denmark, Norway and Sweden formed a personal union, the Kalmar Union. They shared kings and queens, who ruled over 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 continued together until 1814. Then Sweden took over the rule of Norway until 1905 in a personal union with common foreign and defense policy but otherwise large autonomy for each country. During the first centuries Iceland was part of Norway, but in 1814 it was included in Denmark for a good hundred years.

Our modern Nordic national states are a product of the political upheavals that followed in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Finland, which had been part of Sweden since the Middle Ages was made a grand duchy under the Russian tsar in 1809. Finland obtained full sovereignty and independence in 1917.

The Nordic countries retained their common features, which were strengthened as a result of Scandinavian national romantic movements in the nineteenth century and a strong sense of common historical and cultural heritage. All the Nordic national states abolished absolutism and introduced democratic constitutions. Moreover, they could count on a long tradition of rule by law. And finally, social inequality was never as pronounced as on the Continent. Strong and self-ruling rural communities characterize the Nordic model, which is well documented, especially in Sweden and Norway, from the late Middle Ages onwards.

The periods of personal unions illustrate the relations between Nordic countries well: I.e., there is a sovereign, ruling all of the populations, but they formed loose couplings to the populations, leaving them to decide for themselves, how they wanted to live. Joint and binding decisions were rarely made. One feature of this kind of relations was the open society. There were no strictly controlled borders between Nordic countries except during emergencies of war or due to fears of immigration.

The myth of Nordic/Scandinavian brotherhood had its heyday during national romanticism in the mid nineteenth century, which hit most of Europe and refers to key German philosophers like Herder and Fichte. During this age of nation building and celebration of the People, its land and its spirit Denmark got into a conflict-ridden relationship with Germany during its process of national formation under the leadership of Prussia, as about a third of the population of the Danish state was German speaking. There were a lot of meetings and loud statements about Scandinavian solidarity based on perceptions of a common history, common languages, and common destiny and spirit and so forth. When it came to war of 1864 between Prussian and Austrian led German coalitions, however, this solidarity never materialized in military support and Denmark lost sizeable land and a third of its population.

Twentieth Century

An important political force during the twentieth century has been the working-class movement, the unions as well as the political organizations. Large social democratic parties have been dominating in politics, especially in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Together with liberals they pursued the democratization of society and humanizing of the labor market. In Finland the antagonism between right and left led to a civil war in 1918 where the right wing won.

Between World War I and II the democratization in many of the European nations was threatened by Communist, Fascist and Nazi dictatorships, which, however, did not extend much into the Nordic countries. Here democratization proceeded in coalitions between parties to create a more stable parliamentary situation, which included collaboration between the employers' associations and unions concerning the labor market. Gradually the idea of the welfare state was born; and from around the middle of the 1900s, important foundations were laid with state financed pensions, sickness pension, unemployment insurance, maternity leave and additional welfare issues etc.

Post World War II: Welfare – and Competition States

The Nordic countries established welfare societies with many similarities in the 1950s and 1960s according to social democratically led social-engineering and planning models (Hilson, 2008). Those were models that found a middle ground between an Anglo-Saxon market model and continental models where the state plays a bigger role. The Nordic countries were thus orienting themselves towards a more collaborative and symbiotic model where state and market collaborate in a combination of free market, welfare state, and collective bargaining. In Denmark a flexicurity model has developed that makes it easy for employers to sack employees, while the unemployed got economic assistance from the state, so industry gets flexibility and workers security. In Sweden, on the other hand, they have put larger emphasis on job security, although this is currently challenged as pressure for a flexicurity model is on the rise. The period was characterized by social democratic governments that were very pragmatic and consensus-oriented, where economists and social scientists played a big role in long-term and large-scale planning of society and its infrastructure according to Keynesian models for handling a capitalist market economy. It is different from other types of welfare states by its emphasis on maximizing labor force participation, promoting gender equality, and extensive benefit levels. Large levels of income redistribution, and extensive use of expansionary fiscal policy characterize these Nordic models.

Despite their differences all Nordic countries share a broad commitment to social cohesion and the universal nature of welfare provision. This safeguards individualism by providing protection for vulnerable individuals and groups in society and it

maximizes public participation in social decision-making. It is characterized by flexibility and openness to innovation in the provision of welfare.

Economically the five small nations were strongly dependent on foreign trade. After World War II a number of trans-national agencies were established, often with American leadership, of which the most important are the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank (WB), and later on the European Union (EU). To begin with the Nordic nations acted similarly by engaging in EFTA (the European Free Trade Association), but when Great Britain joined the EEC (the European Economic Community (later EU)) in 1973, the Nordic countries were divided. Denmark joined in 1973, Sweden and Finland two decades later in 1995. Norway and Iceland are still not members of the union in 2020. As a region the Nordic countries have both strengthened and weakened their position in the new Europe. The collaboration in the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers has taken on a weaker and more cultural than political profile, as the nations have chosen different solutions in relation to the European Union.

Parallel to the establishment of the transnational agencies, and along the same fundamental market-place logics, new ways of governing public sectors and institutions were produced: the neo-liberal economic model. It had its origin in the late 1970'ies in Thatcher's England and Reagan's America and would exert great influence on how Nordic states chose to structure their public sectors. Core features are inspiration from private enterprises, hard top-down principal-agent steering, efficiency and outcomes focus related to global competition and steering through contracts (see governance section below).

Globalization has also resulted in large immigration. During the 1960s there was an extensive influx of foreign labor. After 1970 the influx of refugees has been large. In the wake of the refugee crisis in 2015, however, it became clear that Sweden has taken by far the highest percentage of immigrants in relation to its population with Norway in a second position (see <https://pub.norden.org/nord2020-001/nord2020-001.pdf>, p. 41). All Nordic countries, nonetheless, have become more or less multi-cultural. Especially the immigration and influx of refugees from Islamic nations has caused debate. In all of the Nordic countries there is a lively debate on the more or less successful integration of new citizens, where some talk about a threat to the national identity, and others about the risk of nationalism and hostility towards foreigners. In 2015, the refugee crisis led Sweden to establish border control of travelers from Denmark, for the first time in Nordic history. And in the wake of Covid-19 crisis in 2020, Denmark, Norway and Finland established border control of travelers from Sweden, which Sweden eventually reciprocated as well.

In the early twenty-first century unifying bonds still exist between the Nordic countries. They are all welfare states and are characterized by stable parliamentary democracies, low levels of violence in society, extensive equality between men and women and a well-organized labor market. As a region in Europe their unifying characteristics are visible in such everyday phenomena as wide-spread early childhood education and care provision and high levels of women in the labor market.

Summing up (Telhaug et al., 2006), the Nordic education model exists, at least as an ideal and as a difficultly defined reality. It consists of manifold effects of close

collaborations for centuries, which become visible in Nordic welfare states, a common labor market model and a sustained economic growth model with a focus on equality. That model, however, is contested by the neo-liberal trend, challenging traditional educational values like social inclusion of all students, comprehensiveness of education, democratic values, social equality and a focus on community (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014; Imsen, Blossing, & Moos, 2016).

Global Education Policy

Moving our focus from the Nordic countries to a global level, we see that a common set of neoliberal education discourses and technologies are applied in many contexts. These tendencies are analyzed in many research projects, however, often without giving accounts of how and why policies are constructed and how they are taken from global, transnational over national to local agendas and practices. A national perspective on educational development is often obscuring the understanding of the interconnectedness, influences and relations between these different policy levels and policy agents (Verger, Novelli, & Altinyelken, 2018).

Analyses of social technologies relating to evidence-based education and What Works are often made on a national level but often omit how those technologies are linked to and dependent on larger political forces. If analyses of a What Works-technology like ‘Visible Learning’ based on John Hattie’s research (Hattie & Larsen, 2020) are restricted to focusing on its impact on national teaching and education it may risk losing view of how closely this technology is related, aims- and logics-wise, to many other contemporary policy technologies and discourses like international standards, measurements and digitalization. These kinds of analyses within the education sphere and institutions and in educational philosophy are often not sufficiently aware of the fundamental influences of economy, sociological facts and general politics: Often times one will find that school development initiatives are not initiated on the basis of educational ideas, but on economy and governance needs and logics.

School development analyses often make themselves blind to the groundbreaking shifts from state-governance towards private-management that take place across the world supported and subsidized by transnational agencies, like the OECD (Ball, 2012, 2015).

Global Governance

Theory on governance (Foucault, 1983; Pereyra & Franklin, 2014; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998) helps us to understand how power relations and interplays between agencies and agents work at many policy levels, be they transnational, national,

regional, local or institutional. That is relevant for our investigations here, because the core concepts of evidence and best practices are social technologies of governance, they are used by policy makers and administrators to influence agents and agencies to think and act according to certain values and logics.

To get an overview of the governance trends, we need to start by introducing ideas of globalization (Hultqvist, Lindblad, & Popkewitz, 2018; Krejsler, 2020; Moos & Wubbels, 2018; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Tröhler, 2013). There have been interactions and collaborations between countries and continents for centuries, but after World War II a particular kind of collaboration accelerated. The nation-state status was supplemented by transnational agencies like the OECD¹ the World Bank, the WTO and the EU. Core logics underpinning each agency are being disseminated rapidly and efficiently. Secondly the military world order changed, so that few individual nations go to war, but leave it to one of the alliances like NATO and, until the fall of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact. This necessitates close collaboration and development of material, personnel and structures along similar lines. Thirdly the international division of labor is changing so that transnational companies have branches in many countries, with consequences for social structures and education. And fourthly, and maybe most important: The capitalist economy is developing towards a world economy in the form of huge marketplaces with increasingly free access and tax and customs exemption for members.

The marketplace develops into a global way of thinking. Marketplace logics talk about producers, commodities, competition and costumers, which extends to all aspects of societies. In this global context Nordic countries usually see themselves as small countries that are, individually as well as collectively, highly dependent upon open liberal markets that are regulated by multilateral agreements that protect small countries from assertive larger players like the United States, China or Russia. Therefore, Nordic countries are very active in transnational forums like the United Nations, the European Union and the OECD, often with agendas that aim at promoting global equality, social and human rights whilst simultaneously embedding economic self-interest.

OECD surveys and country reports exemplify this new trend in global and national governance (Henry, Lingard, Rizvi, & Taylor, 2001; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; OECD, 1995). In nine statements, the OECD claims that governments need to devolve authority and, simultaneously, strengthen steering functions from the center. In line with Principal-Agent top-down theories (Hood, 1991), they propose that the top level issues goals and aims, and leave it to the next levels to implement them. Therefore, aims need to be written in great detail as do the technologies of measuring results and distributing rewards. As mentioned, this trend gained momentum during the 1990s. Currently, it works at many levels: from the ministry's policy units over administrative agencies to municipal authorities and to school leadership.

¹ OECD (the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) – WB (The World Bank) – WTO (The World Trade Organisation) – EU and EC (European Union and European Commission) – NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) – ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

Due to the increasing influence of globalization on societies and education, relations between nation states and systems become increasingly interconnected. It could be argued that comparisons gain influence for similar reasons with Nordic countries as active players. Globalization is furthered by transnational agencies that use “soft governance” to advise or encourage reflection on “peer pressure” (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]) or “open method of coordination” (EU and Bologna Process) (Antunes, 2006; Krejsler, Olsson, & Petersson, 2014; Lange & Alexiadou, 2007; Lawn & Grek, 2012a; Lawn & Lingard, 2002). As these agencies are not allowed to issue government regulations, “hard governance”,² they set the agenda for policymaking. They do so by funding research or dissemination projects, such as the European Commission Framework Programs, and by comparing educational results. Prominent examples in school policy are the use of international test-based comparisons such as IEA’s Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Hopmann, 2008; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Pereyra, Kotthoff, & Cowen, 2011), all of which have impacted school as well as teacher education policy and discourse profoundly in Nordic countries (Krejsler, Olsson, & Petersson, 2014, 2018). If national politicians in any country find it difficult to reach an agreement on educational politics, they can build momentum by pointing to a third policy option – a best practice – borrowed from elsewhere (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010, p. 324). Therefore, borrowing a reform from elsewhere does not occur because the reform is better but because it has a pacifying effect on domestic conflicts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). International comparisons act as mirrors – just like educational outcomes or best practice. They allow policymakers to reflect upon the level of educational outcomes in their own systems as a precursor to launching their own reforms. More often than previously, we see policymakers legitimize reform with the need to comply with global or international standards or best practices, such as PISA.

New Public Management: Management by Objectives and Outcomes

The neo-liberal model of governance and New Public Management is characterized by diverse combinations of three themes (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2005): *disintegration* of public sectors into semi-autonomous units at several levels – national, regional, local, and institutional – and at each level there are initiatives that involve private companies and consultancies that enter the broad

²Since the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 there has been some leeway for the European Commission to take initiatives to and coordinate education initiatives between the member states, but always with respect to the principle of subsidiarity, meaning that decisions should be made on the national level, if nations decide so.

competition for contracts; relations between areas are guided by competition between providers, and by contracts between levels, followed by *incentivization*, with pecuniary rewards based on performance (Bovbjerg, Krause-Jensen, Wright, Brorholt, & Moos, 2011). Those features are taken in by Nordic governments at different times, speed and form, and the country reports will show how each system is acting on this type of governance.

Disintegration is seen between levels such as the national government, the municipality, and the institution. Ministries are fragmented into departments and agencies. The ministry sees itself as a single co-operative (group) with one department and a number of contracted agencies. Contracts are negotiated and managed on the basis of an MBO/MBR (management by objectives and management by results) model. That is also the model they recommend and disseminate to other ministries and their agencies, including relations between agencies, and municipalities and institutions. This is a reason that education is increasingly focused on national and international standards (e.g. the OECD competences) and outcomes, such as results from national and international surveys and comparisons, and demand for evidence-based practice and best practice.

The *competition for contracts* is another aspect of the disintegration of the public sector. It has been broadened over the past decade, as more private consultancies have been invited to submit tenders for contracts. In line with English experiences (Gunter & Mills, 2017), we see that ministries and agencies make use of private consultancies. But the contract also makes it necessary to be very clear and detailed in setting the standards for the services provided and at the same time have rigorous and unified means of measuring the results and outcomes. That is part of the explanation of the fast-growing need for metrics and statistic (Moos, 2019).

The *incentivization*, linking performance to pecuniary rewards, is linked closely to the contracts as they can stipulate special rewards for fulfilling the contract goals. This feature seems not to be very widespread in Nordic systems. One of the forms, being used in Nordic education governance, is the ‘by-passing’ of municipal agencies in national governance. This occurs, when national agencies decide on detailed national aims and ways to measure the outcomes, leaving only implementation to municipalities (Paulsen & Moos, 2014).

Social Technologies

The competition- and outcomes-oriented discourse and associated practices, contain more social technologies than previously seen in the history of education and educational theory e.g. (Krejsler, 2006; Moos, Krejsler, & Kofod, 2009). Social technologies may be seen as silent carriers of power. They are made for a purpose – often hidden from the practitioners – and they specify ways of acting. Therefore, such social technologies overwhelmingly represent a non-deliberative practice, steered and managed top-down (Dean, 1999, page 31). The contracts are, as discussed in the Danish Country Report, also technologies (Rose, 1999) for

constructing premises based on value decisions made at the superior level drawing on dominant discourses. One subcategory of the technology of agency is relational technology that includes specialized ways of conducting meetings, interviews, school–parent communication, and the leadership of teacher teams and classrooms. Standards for such meetings, interviews and management, have often developed over time in practice, as authorities prescribe/advise practitioners to establish more effective, appreciative communication.

The vision of education for competition is built on a core logic set: management by objectives and outcomes-based accountability. Proponents of this discourse often refer to scientific management and the scientific curriculum as core theoretical basis (Blossing et al., 2013b; Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2013a; Moos, Nihlfors, & Paulsen, 2016a, 2016b). It is fundamentally concerned with centralizing power at the political level, i.e. to parliament and government, as is demonstrated in the Swedish and Norwegian country reports. Similarly, the scientific curriculum hides the power to decide on purpose, content, relations and methods of education behind the pretexts of expertise and judgement-free decisions.

Education Systems and Discourses, and the Particularly Nordic Features

The Nordic countries used to have an international reputation for progressive and well-functioning school systems (Telhaug et al., 2006). Here it makes sense to focus on the post-WW2 reshaping of Nordic school systems in line with the social democrat led reforms of society (Hilson, 2008). In Nordic social democratic strategies of planning society the pursuit of increasing equity is closely linked to taking advantage of a capitalist market. So when, with the rise of human resource and human capital theory education was increasingly associated with economic growth, school was simultaneously seen as a key provider of opportunity and equality to all members of society, based on universal access to an egalitarian oriented public school for all. Therefore, the basic struggle in Nordic schools became the struggle to abolish streaming in secondary school, i.e. the creation of a truly comprehensive and unified school up till the end of lower secondary school (Imsen et al., 2016). School would be an instrument to socializing pupils to become democratic citizens in a broader sense. School would be a place to ensure social cohesion as children and families of all social classes would meet here. The ideal would be meritocratic in the sense that everyone should have the opportunity to develop their potential.

Private or free schools have been treated very differently in the Nordic countries.

In terms of pedagogy Nordic countries have gained international reputation for sponsoring a child-centered and reform pedagogy inspired approach to organizing school life. Up till the 1980s, educational research and policy discourse thus opposed rote learning pedagogy of the so-called ‘Rote Learning school’ and encouraged a progressive pedagogy that would foster democratic, happy and capable citizens,

albeit this was always done on the backdrop of conservative resistance to relinquishing disciplinary learning. Many would say that in practice school retained most of the vestiges of traditional schooling in the form of traditional teacher-governed classroom teaching. It was, nonetheless, a school that sought to minimize testing and homework, allowing school to be a room for socializing to life in a democratic society in a broader sense.

School Reforms

The educational reform movement in Nordic countries at the beginning of the twentieth century was an amalgam of both continental and American influences that was brought about by educationally pioneering schools that broke with “tradition” and developed new programs. Well-known European contributions included Georg Kerschensteiner’s “Arbeitsschule” (labor schools) in Germany, Makarenko’s experimental democratic school in the Soviet Union and Ellen Key’s child-centered ideas about the “The Century of the Child” in Sweden (Blossing et al., 2013a). From the US, John Dewey’s progressivism has been the main inspiration for the school reform movement, as well as the project method developed by his student William H. Kilpatrick. John Dewey’s philosophy has undoubtedly had long-lasting impact, in particular his belief in activity-based pedagogy and the slogan of “Learning by doing”. This became an important ideological foundation for a comprehensive school system embracing all children throughout most of the twentieth century.

Nordic schools have been developed and reformed simultaneously during the post WW2 period. Telhaug et al. (2006) identifies three stages within that period. The first is the golden years of social democracy up to 1970. A main structure was established with 6 years elementary and 3 years lower secondary levels. The second period, from around 1970 onwards, is called the radical left period or the golden age of progressivism with inspiration from progressive education, cross-disciplinary project work, open schools and neo-Marxist emancipatory ideology, enacted in classroom practice. The third period from the 1980’ies, is the era of globalization and neoliberalism, when the new right, new forms of management and marked-inspired technologies were introduced.

At present we see two prevailing discourses that frame how we can legitimately verbalize or talk about social phenomena like education (Moos & Wubbels, 2018). One of the two emerged from the welfare state model and may be called the “Democratic Bildung Discourse.” Based on Wolfgang Klafki’ work (2001) we name this understanding of general and comprehensive education Democratic Bildung, because the intention is to position children in the world, in democratic communities and societies in ways that make them competent in understanding and deliberating with other people. Klafki sums up the discussion in three points: General education should mean education for everyone to qualify their abilities for self-determination, participation and solidarity; a critical rethinking of the general

education; and an understanding of education as developing all human capabilities (Klafki, 1983/2001).

The other is associated with the competition state (a vision with roots in the 1980s), and we call it the “Outcomes Discourse” (Moos, 2017). In this discourse the fundamental outcomes of education are understood in terms of measurable students’ learning outcomes. In this vision there is a tendency to homogenize educational practices in terms of a more discipline-oriented standard-based education. Consequently, focus on testing and basic skills has returned since the millennium shift with the aid of widespread PISA shocks in national education debates, albeit in the cloak of knowledge economy demands for a better qualified and more flexible work force in terms life-long and life-wide learners (Telhaug et al., 2006). This vision of education thus intends first and foremost to provide to a nation a good position in the global race among knowledge economies as constructed by international comparative surveys such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

In order for an educational system to be competitive, education needs to “produce” students with high levels of attainment. Therefore, in the outcomes discourse, education is being constructed along ‘management-by-objective’ and ‘management-by-result’ lines: The government draws up the aims and measures the outcomes, while schools, teachers and students need to learn to correctly answer test questions. The curriculum that is developed for this situation has a scientific structure: experts know how to attain their (often political) ends, and they describe every step for schools, teachers and students to be followed in detail. In this orientation, there is a focus on ‘back to basics’ and ‘back to skills’ as these are easily measured.

The vision of education for the competition state is built on a set of core theories (Cerny & Evans, 1999; Pedersen, 2011): management by objectives and outcomes-based accountability. Proponents of this discourse often refer to parallel theories like scientific management and the scientific curriculum as core theoretical bases (Blossing et al., 2013a), and they point to a variety of social technologies, they find useful for this purpose, like evidence and best practice. Proponents of these theories are fundamentally concerned with centralizing power. Furthermore, the scientific curriculum hides the power to decide on the purpose, content, relations and methods of education behind the pretexts of expertise and value-free decisions.

School reforms and, by implication, teacher education reforms have increasingly been marked by the intensive participation of Nordic countries in transnational collaborations within an increasingly active European framework of collaboration. This mostly takes place within the OECD (e.g. PISA, country reports, Education at a Glance), the EU (e.g. the European Qualification Framework, the European Education and Training Monitor, the European Education Area), IEA (e.g. PIRLS, TIMSS and ICCS) and in relation higher education (including teacher education) the Bologna Process (Klette, Carlgren, Rasmussen, & Simola, 2002; Krejsler, Olsson, & Petersson, 2014, 2018; Skagen, 2006).

Digital Education and eduBusiness

Social technologies are important factors in the global homogenization of education (Moos, 2018). This tendency has reached a stage where big multinational corporations are interested in the education market. Consultancies, like Pearson, Price Waterhouse Cooper, LEGO Foundation and McKinsey, and philanthropically oriented foundations as well like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation, have become very active in developing and spreading educational and governance packages worldwide (Ball, 2012, 2015; Gunter & Mills, 2017; Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016) as is demonstrated in the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish country reports. These corporations are pivotal actors and agents of a global homogenization, streamlining education as standardized commodities with the aid of digitalizing programs. They harvest and manage “big data” through algorithms in huge databases from global tests and learning programs (Williamson, 2016) and hence support downgrading the importance of national and local cultures.

In the Nordic educational systems we see to differing degrees how policy makers aim at replacing face-to-face or written relations between professionals, students and parents with digital educational/learning platforms or environments.

Evidence and What Works

In stark contrast to its genesis within the medical field, the evidence discourse has been launched into the field of education by external stakeholders in mostly top-down moves that have largely bypassed professionals within the field (Hammersley, 2007; Krejsler, 2017). This has taken place in many countries and in different shapes also across the Nordic countries (e.g. Bergmark & Lundström, 2006; Oscarsson, 2006; Telhaug et al., 2006; Utdanningsforbundet, 2008) and beyond, globally (Furlong, Cochran-Smith, & Brennan, 2009; Furlong, McNamara, Campbell, Howson, & Lewis, 2009; Henry et al., 2001; Hopmann, 2008; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; OECD, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Wells, 2007).

The evidence discourse mirrors a cultural struggle that currently rages about how key areas within modern societies are to be defined (G. Biesta, 2007, 2010; Eryaman & Schneider, 2017; Gibbons et al. 1994; Hammersley, 2013). How we perceive evidence for what works has significant implications regarding how a hospital or a school may conceive of their visions, targets and practices, and what kinds of research and research paradigms are considered legitimate in the production of knowledge. A too strict focus on Randomized Controlled Trials (RCT tests) in the health services and education will tend to marginalize other and ‘softer’ professional practices of validation. In other words, discourses about the population’s health and education proliferate in close reciprocity with the criteria for verification that such knowledge is subjected to. Health and educational issues must be

conceived of in ways that somehow satisfy the criteria for producing evidence that mandate powers funding those activities demand.

School policy has been particularly influenced by the evidence and what works discourse in the forms of comparative surveys, in the forms of public policy being increasingly subjected to evidence and what works formats, and in the forms of particular evidence concept packages sweeping over the schools of Nordic countries like ‘Visible Learning’, ‘The LP-model’ and a number of more specific evidence-packages (often with Anglo American origins, like e.g. ‘the Incredible Years’ or ‘Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports’).

In order to qualify debate about what criteria should be applied to identify ‘what works’ and ‘what does not work’ in education, we suggest that you could draw inspiration from the following distinctions (Krejsler, 2017): (1) the distinction between evidence-based vs evidence-informed knowledge, i.e. distinguishing between issues that merit so-called ‘hard’ and others that merit ‘soft’ evidence approaches to evaluating what works. (2) the distinction between global vs local forms of evidence highlighting that some issues merit knowledge that is valid regardless of context, whereas intervention in other contexts requires forms of knowledge that are highly responsive to the particular context of intervention. (3) the distinction between external vs internal evidence problematizing the question about who has the right – or more precisely the executive powers – to make decisions about which forms of evidence count as knowledge that works. This points to the tensions between externally mandated evidence and the considerable production of knowledge and documentation for what works by professionals and educational researchers, which function as supplements or contesting knowledge to the forms of evidence that powerful external stakeholders currently impose on education.

Overview of the Volume

This volume is organized in two main sections: Firstly, country reports from all five countries and, secondly, thematic chapters from the same countries. We asked the authors of the country reports to include analyses and discussions of the issues that are introduced below. We wanted – as mentioned in the comparison section in this chapter, – to have a robust foundation for comparisons of developments, contexts and social technologies. We focus on comparison of issues of power-relations and reciprocity between networks of national, Nordic and transnational societies, agencies and education (Ball & Junemann, 2012). We also wanted to have authors analyze and discuss tendencies and phenomena they found of special interest and urgency in their national educational systems and their relations to the Nordic dimension and transnational agencies. Therefore, they were asked to write thematic chapters where they elaborate more profoundly on particularly salient issues in relation to this publication and its themes. In the final chapter, *The Nordic Dimension in National School Policies and Transnational Social Technologies?*, the editors discuss findings and tendencies from the chapters and conclude upon the Nordic dimension.

Country Reports

The background and context of school and education policies and cultures are important factors for understanding and discussing contemporary influences and relations that impact national education. Therefore, the history of Nordic national social and cultural traditions and thinking need to be described. National and transnational government and governance relations need to be analyzed together with analyses of educational systems and discourses. Going into more detail about school policy and its effects means that we need to supplement those analyses with analyses of the social technologies, used to ensure implementation of discourses. Here the impact of comparative surveys, digitalization, evidence and what works technologies emerge as particularly interesting.

Following up on the issues problematized in the first section of this introduction we asked all authors to include the following issues in their country reports in terms of describing and discussing:

1. *similarities and differences elaborated in this chapter's general description in relation to your nation's particular history, pointing to phenomena that seem to produce Nordicness (like the social-democratic welfare state and its influence on relations). Until 1980 and post 1980.*
2. *development in school and educational structures over the past 40 years.*
3. *global and transnational agency influences on your school policy situation (like soft governance)*
4. *the transnational influences on the national structures and policies*
5. *the development of school governance-relations between national agencies (parliament, ministry, agencies) and local agencies (regional/municipal agencies) and institutions*
6. *which social technologies are made to work in your educational system?*
7. *developments in the balances between educational discourses.*
8. *the stage, your school and educational system has reached in digitalization and its influences on education.*
9. *the background (history) of the particular forms that 'evidence' and 'what works' developments have taken in your country in relation to school,*
10. *the policy networks that made it possible;*
11. *how 'evidence' and 'what works' has resonated with the educational traditions in your country;*
12. *how 'evidence' and 'what works' were received in schools and among professionals (accept >< contestations).*

The Danish country report, '*Denmark: Contracts and Evidence-Based Best Practice*' by Lejf Moos and John Benedicto Krejsler, analyses Danish cultural history, formation of the welfare state and a school and education discourse of general non-affirmative education/Democratic Bildung. That resonates well with the core of Danish society, governance and education. Another line of analysis looks into how globalization, transnational agencies and formation of the competition state

transformed Danish school policy and practice. New conceptions of government in individual nation states thus change into particular conceptions of governance on the basis of transnational policy networks. The country report exemplifies this transformation with the contract, management by objectives and management by outcomes, understood as powerful social technologies that are very commonly used in Denmark.

In the Finnish country report '*Finland – the Late-Comer that Became the Envy of Its Nordic School Competitors*', Risto Rinne elaborates on how Finland has experienced a long history of foreign rules from Sweden and Russia. The chapter demonstrates how Finland has several uniting political, economic cultural and educational features rather similar with the other four Nordic countries: the Nordic welfare model as well as the principle of equality of education to everyone independently of her or his social, ethnic, gender and regional origin. In recent years Finland has become one of the best educational achievers among OECD countries as well as among Nordic countries. The chapter argues that a reason for this may be the fact that during the past two decades Finnish educational politics became closely aligned with the OECD and neoliberal ideas while simultaneously retaining considerable political autonomy.

The Icelandic country report '*The Intricacies of Educational Development in Iceland. Stability or Disruption?*' is written by Jón Torfi Jónasson, Guðrún Ragnarsdóttir, and Valgerður S. Bjarnadóttir. The chapter explores the Icelandic education system using a twofold historical perspective: the very long-term development and then the period 1990–2020. Characteristics of educational development are described within the following key points: the recurrence of ideas like evidence; development is often driven outside legal regulations; importance of the long-term perspective in terms of the inertia of change; the academic drift and the institutionalization of practices. The chapter claims that Icelandic school and educational practice have certainly developed and is being governed. It is not clear, however, whether the latter has had much influence on the former. We see few signs of hard governance and perhaps minor signs of both soft governance and the influence from outside, in particular from OECD through the mechanisms of social technologies like PISA.

The Norwegian country report '*Production, Transforming and Practicing 'What Works' in Education – the case of Norway*' is written by Ann Elisabeth Gunnulfson and Jorunn Møller. They analyze and discuss key changes in the Norwegian school and educational system during the last 60 years. This period gave rise to a comprehensive education system as well as to a public welfare system. Since the end of the 1980s, the education system went through major reforms, influenced largely by new managerialist ideas. New public management began to gather momentum in the 1990s, followed by an emphasis on 'what works' in schools. Both individuals and organizations have strongly influenced this change in educational policymaking. Although the basic values about equal opportunities and access for all seem to persist, we might see a process of re-imagination of these values through, not least, the digitization in local schools.

The Swedish country report *'Evidence in the History of School Reforms in Sweden'* is written by Daniel Sundberg. This chapter addresses the question of what counts as evidence in Swedish education from a historical perspective, with a focus on how different knowledge traditions have informed policy-making and educational reforms in Sweden in four phases: (1) welfare expansion and rational planning of education; (2) the role of research was called into question when the sociology of education brought democracy and equity dimensions into the policy exchange; (3) the practice turns with demands of professionally relevant knowledge, and (4) currently, the contemporary phase is characterized by a downward shift toward instrumentalization as research is becoming a means for "what works" interest as accountability reforms proliferate.

Thematic Chapters

A number of main concepts run across the five thematic chapters: First, internationalization in Chaps. 7 (Anglo American influences) and 8 (Social Democratic History). Second, accountability in Chap. 9 (evidence in Icelandic education) and digitalization in Chaps. 10 (Governance) and 11 (Policy developments). A number of other related concepts are analyzed with clear links to discussions in the country reports.

The Danish thematic Chap. 7 *'Danish – and Nordic – School Policy: its Anglo-American Connections and Influences'* is written by John Benedicto Krejsler & Leif Moos. It discusses the general trend in pointing to the EU, the OECD, the Bologna Process and the IEA as the main sources for transnational influences on school and educational policy. The chapter demonstrates how this influence draws mostly on Anglo-American sources and then spreads through interplays between European nation-states and these transnational agencies. The more direct uptakes of Anglo-American influences in Danish – and Nordic – school policy have originated from England, New Zealand and Ontario. The chapter, however, elaborates on how these influences are often deeply imbued by the influence of the big and most dominant player in the Anglo-American networks, the United States. The analyses explore a number of particularly influential themes of Anglo-American influence: (1) Human capital and rational choice theory as well as 'knowledge economy' and 'competition state' discourse. (2) The school effectiveness and improvement movement and its association with development and dissemination of ideas of 'knowledge that works' and school reform. (3) The 'evidence' movement that transformed policy conceptions of what works.

Risto Rinne takes another point of departure on international influences, when he writes the Finnish thematic Chap. 8: *'Finland – The Nordic Social Democratic Regime Colliding with the Global Neo-Liberal Regime'*. In order to grasp the implications of the increasing complexity of the emerging multi-scalar/multilevel governance arrangements in each Nordic state, we need to devise, he argues, a new set of lenses, which include the effects and institutionalizations of a pervasive global

neo-liberal regime. Consequently, the traditional notion of the nation state and its national education needs to be supplemented with new players and new ways of thinking about knowledge production and distribution. In Nordic countries, a social democratic welfare model with an associated Nordic or social democratic educational model was constructed. This chapter explores how the global neo-liberal turn transforms national governance and education in terms of new frames of thinking reform, comparisons and associated new standards for research.

The theme of accountability is carried forward in the Icelandic Chap. 9 *'The Status of Evidence in Icelandic Education – and the Nordic Connection?'* written by Jón Torfi Jónasson, Valgerður S. Bjarnadóttir and Guðrún Ragnarsdóttir. Accountability and evidence play prominent roles in modern educational discourse. In a fast-changing culture during the formation of the Icelandic education system the question arises if this might be a modern trend, possibly influenced by neo-liberal rhetoric and new public management. The chapter takes a look at three points in the history of education in Iceland (including the present), and find that some of the current emphasis did exist before but in a different guise. The authors make a scrutiny of attempts throughout Icelandic school history that demonstrate how attempts to inspect education and gather/disseminate evidence for what works were undertaken, albeit in different guises. This puts in perspective current ambitions to improve teaching and literacy performance of young people driven by a national desire to provide good education.

The theme digitalization is analyzed and discussed in bits in the country reports as well as more thoroughly in the final two thematic chapters. In Chap. 10 *'Governance through Digital Formations – the Case of 'What Works' in a Norwegian Education Context'* Ida Lunde and Ann E. Gunnulfsen describe the turn from an educational thinking and practice strongly rooted in social democracy, equity and the welfare state, to an increasing focus on a digitized data-driven school where the 'what works' agenda has become a pivotal matter. Digital technologies are now providers of evidence, and important in identifying what best practice is and what it should be. An assemblage of heterogeneous actors is taking part in digital practices in schools. Relations between them provoke a particular governance agenda of quality assessment.

The Swedish thematic Chap. 11 *'Understanding Swedish Educational Policy Developments in the Field of Digital Education'* is written by Limin Gu and Ola J. Lindberg with a focus on digitalization. The chapter describes and analyzes educational policy with a focus on how the relation between learning and information technology, as well as digitalization and its impact on other aspects of school development and management have been debated over time, and how it has linked to proposals for reforming school practice. During its early years, digital education adopted a clearly centralized and top-down strategy with extensive government investments without taking into account the local needs and conditions. Later, in line with decentralization and marketization of education, the performance turn, more demands have been placed on local responsibility and self-regulating regarding digitalization in school.

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