



Legalisation Issues and Reconfiguration of Education? Challenges for Nordic Teacher Education in the Digital Age

Eyvind Elstad^(✉)

University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway
eyvind.elstad@ils.uio.no

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to discuss new challenges and growing demands on teacher education in Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and Finland, which have a history of close links). These challenges are linked to increased legalisation and digital adaptations promoted by several discourses. The questions are thus: What does this legalization trend entail? When will the digital revolution occur in the Nordic countries' teacher education programmes? What will this mean for the content and the structural character of the teacher education programmes today? The developmental features of today's Nordic teacher education programmes are very complex and partly characterised by inherent tensions between contradictory considerations, but one vital question is: will increased legalisation and digital adaptations promote more instrumentalism in teacher education programmes? These questions are discussed.

Keywords: Legalisation · Digitisation · Instrumentalism

1 Introduction

This study focusses on teacher education in the North. The five current Nordic countries – Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland and Finland – have a history of close links. As independent states, the Nordic countries have educational systems with not only clear similarities but also some differences. Nordic countries rely on a comprehensive school model that values equity, no streaming, and easy passage between levels. Some of these educational systems have attributes of the so-called Nordic model of education [1]. The similarities among Nordic educational systems may be partly due to similar social developments, equivalent cultures and so on and also because of the mutually inspired politics and social debates of these independent states; indeed, the Nordic countries borrow ideas about policy development from one another [2]. However, the focus among politicians is often quality measured by international large-scale surveys: Pupils' learning is measured, inter alia, by international large-scale surveys, to which each Nordic country's politicians attach great importance. The league table of student performance has become central in both the political sphere and the public conversation about school and teacher education in the North. To succeed better, the focus is also often on successful solutions

for teacher education (“the world’s best”); [3] that can serve as inspirations and hence the bases for policy funding. In this context, transnational organisations are important in promoting development towards their desired direction. The five-year Finnish teacher education programme, with its school-oriented research thesis, has received substantial attention and inspired policymaking in other Nordic countries (notably Norway and Iceland). Experts have described Finnish teacher education as “outstanding” and “excellent” [4–6].

On the hand, teacher education ought to be adapted to the kind of school for which the aspiring teacher wants to qualify, which may (and likely will) involve different national characteristic [7]. On the other hand, global trends are driving forces towards greater convergence regarding the structure and the mechanisms of European higher education, including teacher education. Thus, teacher education reforms are influenced by both global and national forces, creating instances of “vernacular globalisation” [8], which describes the processes by which international and national educational systems coalesce to create distinctive versions of teacher education within different nation states [9]. Thus, teacher education in each Nordic country can be carried out differently even though the basic structure is almost the same. The purpose of this paper is to discuss new challenges and growing demands on teacher education in Nordic countries. These challenges are linked to increased legalisation and digital adaptations promoted by several discourses. The questions are thus: What does this legalization trend entail? When will the digital revolution occur in the Nordic countries’ teacher education programmes? What will this mean for the content and the structural character of the teacher education programmes today? The developmental features of today’s Nordic teacher education programmes are very complex and partly characterised by inherent tensions between contradictory considerations, but one vital question is: will increased legalisation and digital adaptations promote more instrumentalism in teacher education programmes?

2 Increased Legalisation of Matters Related to School Activities

One trend in especially Scandinavian countries is the increased legalisation of matters related to school activities [10]. For example, legalisation can be manifested through strengthened student rights. Strengthened student rights affect the balance of power between teachers and students, where the teachers’ transactional position is weakened. Several examples are found in [11]. Enhanced student rights have been and appear to be further institutionalised. This new legalisation trend schools has implications for the teacher role and content of teacher education; teachers of the future must be extremely cautious about exhibiting behaviours that can provide a subjective experience of student discomfort. This offers guidance in the direction of a more facilitating teacher behaviour. Is this facilitating role also promoted by teacher education programmes?

Another premise for discussing the future of teacher education is the Nordic countries’ emphasis on equality values. The school should provide students with equal learning opportunities [1]. One implication is that the shortage of qualified teachers will make it difficult to achieve such a goal. The shortage of teachers with adequate qualifications poses a challenge in the Nordic countries, to varying degrees, with the greatest challenges in Sweden, but this trend is emergent in this decade also in Norway and Iceland [11]. In

the worst-case scenario, teacher shortages can weaken the work of providing students with equal learning opportunities in school. One question is: Is Sweden a frontrunner or an outlier?

3 From Nation Building Towards Transnational Governance

The school as an institution has historically been important in particular countries, such as Norway, Iceland and Finland, in their efforts to create national identities, that is, nation building under the auspices of the school. It is an open question whether nation building will be replaced by supranational visions of a future where each country's situation heavily depends on those of other countries. Thus, contributing to the formation of a national identity under the auspices of the school can be replaced by forming world citizens [12] or possibly European citizens [13]? In that case, we move away from the nation and devalues national citizenship in favour of globalism and minority and human rights based on the ideas of universal altruism. If this happens, a distinctive change in the Nordic countries' school systems will occur – the enrichment of the national welfare for the benefit of the global welfare. One possible inference is that the world citizen vision has increasingly been raised as an idea, but it is too early to tell whether this kind of thinking will be consolidated further. One possible scenario is that a balance will be sought between maintaining some national features and widely opening the door for globalised influence. Continued liberalisation of the labour market in European countries can be expected, which can contribute to market mechanisms in the labour market for teachers. There is a rapid increase in international mobility [14]. It seems likely that the labour market for teachers and teacher educators and study situation for preservice teachers will also be Europeanised more strongly than is the case today. Further harmonisation of requirement specifications seems inevitable. The globalisation trend may create additional needs for tailored solutions for complementary teacher education.

Practices might nourish a wider process of reconfiguration of school education and teacher education into an instrumental commodity state, which strongly contrasts with the notion of Nordic education as a collective public good. The latest examples of instrumentalism in Norway are linked to actors outside the teacher education community who call for a system for sharing quality-assured and research-based teaching and learning programs for student teachers [11]. This example is part of a pervasive international trend. For example, the OECD is in the process of building Global Teaching InSights, which is a global video library of teaching [12]. Learners gain access to a bank of educational content that they can use in a flexible way. This can free up time for more individual or group-based guidance in teaching situations. Thus, instrumentalism can go hand in hand with the digitisation trend in schools [15]. The teacher role might become more and more seen as the executive technician who implements ready-made arrangements. This is not the main trend yet, but an instrumentalist trend might affect schooling as well as teacher education, but the range and the depth of such a change impulse are uncertain.

4 Two Extreme Cases

There are multiple tendencies. Here, I discuss two extreme cases as illustrations: the new Kvibergsskolan and Michaela Community School.

The intentions behind the new Kvibergsskolan in Sweden can serve as an anchor for discussing the changes required in response to teacher education's need to qualify future teachers to work in this type of school. The Municipality of Gothenburg describes the school as 'a school of the future'. The traditional 'grammar of schooling' [16] is based on the idea of teaching different subjects in relatively short blocks (typically 45 min) in classrooms for age-appropriate classes. At Kvibergsskolan, however, this scholastic 'grammar' is broken down for more individualized solutions. Classrooms are considered outdated; instead, students instead work with iPads in open work areas. A 'maker-space' (a kind of information and communications technology [ICT] workshop) is arranged in which students learn how to work with 3D printers and use their own iPads to communicate with teachers and other students. Each student should have a personal work schedule, and students work in age-matched groups. The school's idea is based on the four C's: 'communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking' [17]. Content knowledge is not among these C's. At the intention level, this type of school development can be thought of as extremely individualized facilitation of learning, where students primarily work with their own iPads in a kind of network model that changes both the roles of both teachers and students. In principle, it is conceivable that a student could sit at home and carry out all the learning activities and associated communications on purely virtual channels. There are many analogous cases of school development in the Scandinavian countries.

In contrast to the modernization of the school exemplified by the Kvibergsskolan, Michaela Community School in London [18] was launched as a protest against school development trends amidst riots and social problems in one of London's poorest areas. Here, the 'grammar' of the traditional school is restored as a counter-reaction to disciplinary slippages; there should be calm during school hours. The learners – unless told otherwise – sit at their desks. Teaching takes place in clearly separated time blocks in classrooms for learners divided into age cohorts. Michaela Community School seeks solutions based on teacher authority and control. The timetable has fixed weekly lessons for teaching the various subjects, with teaching carried out in classrooms where the desks are arranged in rows. The school focuses on academic knowledge and discipline throughout the school day. Its 'no excuses' strategy means that even minor misconduct has consequences [18]. All teachers at Michaela are committed to this strategy. The school year starts with practicing common rules. An example of a goal is for students to remain in their seats for 30 s after the bell rings.

Every day, lunch is served to both students and teachers. All students are assigned places to prevent cliques from accumulating around the lunch tables. Students also have duties; one serves the food to everyone around the table, another pours water for everyone, a third clears the table after the meal and so on. The lunch is led by a teacher at each table. The topic of conversation may be current events, literature or natural phenomena. The purpose of conversation during lunch is to cultivate a repertoire with stimulation of factual arguments, learning to take responsibility for common tasks and so on. The school has received a lot of positive attention for its outstanding results and

student performance [19]. It is mentioned here because some schools in the Nordic countries are following similar ideas of strict regulations, such as students shaking the teacher's hand when entering the classroom. How strongly the conservative restoration of an old-fashioned school model will spread in Nordic countries remains to be seen, but the restoration of teacher authority may be reinforced, given the number of discipline problems and incidents of violence against teachers in Nordic schools.

Between these two extreme cases, other examples show a continuum of approaches. The question is whether the emphasis in school development will be towards a progressive modernization of the type represented by Kvibergsskolan or towards a conservative restoration where traditional subjects, knowledge acquisition and discipline are emphasized. If the development moves towards dissolving what we know as fixed structures in the school (subject-specific schedules, teaching in classrooms with the teacher leading the session, exams, etc.), we may witness the beginning of the end of the institution that we have long known as school. If that happens, there will be profound implications for teacher education. The former headmaster of Kvibergsskolan has stated that teachers recruited for the new school would have to be urged to become pioneers. This signals that the school administration wants to appoint a specific type of teacher. Can teacher shortages be alleviated by individualizing and digitizing teaching? Every student receives a work plan with his or her expected progress laid out. Students are given digital learning opportunities, with teaching sequences available in an online portal. Virtual (but still somewhat 'intelligent') feedback and guidance can be provided through digital platforms. Such solutions may also include feedback from real mentors. Anyone who envisages a forced development of the school in this direction will have to recognize that such a school will be a long way from what we have hitherto understood as school.

It is part of the story of Kvibergsskolan and other pioneering schools that new ideas elicit counterarguments from parents and politicians and incite community debates. How radical school development will be is an open question. [20] analyses a case of school development (through a focus on computers for all students) that went in reverse, while [21] explains a case of school development that has been a continual process of in-depth digitization. On one hand, several types of mechanisms can occur through modernization that combines ICT with the new working methods. On the other hand, new trends have also been replaced by the restoration of established school practices. In other words, the implications of modernization for teacher education are uncertain. Either way, the digitization of school activities is something for which teacher education must prepare to an even greater extent. Political rhetoric expresses the expectation that teachers should develop their own professional digital literacy skills, and teacher education programmes in all Nordic countries are concerned about this issue. It is difficult to have an overview of how the idea of a computer for each student will break down in Nordic countries, although further forms of digitization seem plausible.

5 Discussion

In this study, I have mentioned complex and dynamic relationships and tensions, transnational trends, national policy practice and teaching practice. The impact through globalisation processes has prevailed in education in general, including teacher education,

but certain national characteristics still exist at a time when the globalisation pressure is exerted to its fullest extent. The pace of change is rapid, but it is uncertain whether the development trajectory will behave as a linear process. A complete eradication of national peculiarities is difficult to imagine.

It is worth recalling a digital revolution has not yet been fully implemented in teacher education in the Nordic countries. The question is: when will the digital revolution occur in the Nordic countries' teacher education programmes? What will this mean for the content and the structural character of the teacher education programmes today? Today we do not have the answers to these questions, but an economic recession can force rationalisations. A promotion of instrumentalism in schools might also depend on how this digitisation of teacher education unfolds.

Despite the criticism against the university-based teacher education models, university-based teacher education appears to be victorious on virtually all fronts in the Nordic countries, except Denmark. This trend means that the campus component of teacher education is becoming increasingly academic. While the previous recruitment of teacher educators often came from the training schools, a new cadre of teacher educators with academic merits has entered the teacher education institutions. Many of these new teacher educators have never practised as teachers themselves, but they often have their doctorate degrees to refer to. The teacher education offered by the universities thus stands with one leg on each camp.

On one hand, the university units must adapt to the virtues, expectations and norms of the university domain. These expectations are related, among other things, to target figures for production of publication points, citation indices and the international orientation of research. On the other hand, in the long term, university teacher education cannot succeed without the people of the school, and those who are educated as teachers perceive the content of the education as relevant to a reasonable degree. Success in being relevant to the school world, that is, to students who judge the quality of education from their perspective, while being successful in the increased scope of relevant research in international channels, is a balance between contradictory desires. One potential danger that cannot be overlooked is that it is possible to bridge the gap between the campus teaching theory base and the field of practice theory to a limited degree. However, the two-part career paths for teacher educators can mitigate the challenges when calling for more methodology in teacher education's campus teaching.

Partnership solutions can also alleviate the internal tensions between teacher education academics and the consideration of pragmatic closeness to the school's core business [22]. However, a retreat back to teacher seminars does not seem very likely (but similar solutions for school-based teacher education introduced in England cannot be completely excluded). The English government has yet [23] decided that there are issues of quality with initial teacher education programmes, and a new market review arrangement arises in 2024. The term university obviously has prestige in the Nordic countries. The Finnish teacher education model for research-based practice appears to be a strong source of inspiration for other Nordic countries. An exception is Iceland, where problems with the dropout rate of student teachers lead to a policy shift that helps to avoid the research-based master's thesis with school issues.

Despite globalisation processes, the decision-making framework for policy-making remains national. The Nordic countries' teacher education programmes have distinct national features. Moreover, considerable variations exist within each Nordic country. Nevertheless, it is possible to envisage a convergence in the direction of increasingly university-based teacher education institutions. Teacher seminaries have been turned into colleges, which have been incorporated into universities. Among politicians and key decision makers in the university domain, there is a strong belief that large entities are favourable, and synergy processes are expected to create large, powerful entities through mergers. Furthermore, there is an increase in profiled institutional initiatives as a consequence of institutional leadership. Such profiled initiatives may build up during an institution's branding, but this tendency does not appear to be strong for teacher education.

6 Limitations of the Study

The current study has limitations from a methodological approach because of the small sample of cases obviously limits the generalizability of the results. At a methodological level, the presentation of only two representative cases of the school realities of the North could be reductive. The cases presented are from a methodological point of view the sample is not representative and the examples described risk to be reductive. The two cases are extreme cases. Extreme cases can be useful for us to be able to better understand some key mechanisms in school development. The weakness is of course the lack of generalizability. I must also acknowledge that the chosen concepts in the analysis may be a possible shortcoming. Nevertheless, the terms used are a contribution to the professional discussion. I acknowledge these shortcomings and argue that they can serve as a point of departure for future research.

References

1. Imsen, G., Blossing, U., Moos, L.: Reshaping the nordic education model in an era of efficiency: changes in the comprehensive school project in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden since the millennium. *Scand. J. Educ. Res.* **61**(5), 568–583 (2016)
2. Hadzialic, A., Skarheim, P., Wilhelmsson, T.: *Framtida Nordiskt Utbildningssamarbete: Svar på dagens och morgondagens utmaningar*. Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen (2017)
3. Barber, M., Mourshed, M.: *How the World's Best-Performing Schools Systems Come Out on Top*. McKinsey & Company, London (2007)
4. Darling-Hammond, L.: Teacher education around the world: what can we learn from international practice? *Eur. J. Teach. Educ.* **40**(3), 291–309 (2017)
5. Mourshed, M., Chijioke, C., Barber, M.: *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*. McKinsey and Company, London (2010)
6. The British educational research association: the role of research in teacher education: reviewing the evidence. Interim report of the of BERA-RSA Inquiry, London (2014)
7. Menter, I., Flores, M.A.: Teacher education, teacher professionalism and research: international trends, future directions. *Eur. J. Teach. Educ.* **44**(1), 1–4 (2021)
8. Rizvi, F., Lingard, B.: *Globalizing Education Policy*. Routledge, London (2009)

9. Menter, I.: The Interaction of Global and National Influences. In: Tatto, M.T., Menter, I. (eds.) *Knowledge, policy and practice in learning to teach: A cross-national study*, pp. 268–279. Bloomsbury, London (2019)
10. Karseth, B., Møller, J.: Legal regulation and professional discretion in schools. *Scand. J. Educ. Res.* **64**(2), 195–210 (2020)
11. Elstad, E.: *Lærerutdanning i nordiske land*. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo (2020)
12. Organisation for economic co-operation and development: *teaching for global competence in a rapidly changing world*. Organisation for economic co-operation and development, Paris (2018)
13. Ritzen, J., Haas, J., Neeleman, A., Teixeira, P.: *European Identity and the Learning Union*. IZA Policy Paper No. 121. IZA Institute of Labor Economics, Bonn (2016)
14. Porte, C.D.L., Heins, E.: A new era of European integration? Governance of labour market and social policy since the sovereign debt crisis. In: Porte, C.D.L., Heins, E. (eds.) *The sovereign debt crisis, the EU and welfare state reform*, pp. 15–41. Palgrave Macmillan, London (2016)
15. Selwyn, N.: Teachers vs technology: Rethinking the digitisation of teachers' work. *Ethos* **25**(3), 10–13 (2017)
16. Tyack, D.B., Cuban, L.: *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA (1995)
17. Municipality of Gothenbourg (homepage): *Kvibergsskolenan F-9*. <https://goteborg.se/wps/portal/enhetsida/kvibergsskolan>. Accessed 22 Jul 2022
18. Birbalsingh, K.: *Michaela: The power of culture*. John Catt Educational, Woodbridge (2020)
19. The office for standards in education, children's services and skills. *School report: Michaela community school*. The office for standards in education, children's services and skills, London (2017)
20. Elstad, E.: Why is There a Wedge Between the Promise of Educational Technology and the Experiences of a Technology-rich Pioneer School? In: Elstad, E. (ed.) *Digital expectations and experiences in education*, pp. 77–96. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam (2016)
21. Hauge, T.E.: On the Life of ICT and School Leadership in a Large-Scale Reform Movement: A Case Study. In: Elstad, E. (ed.) *Digital expectations and experiences in education*, pp. 97–116. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam (2016)
22. Mutton, T., Burn, K., Hagger, H., Thirlwall, K.: *Teacher Education Partnerships: Policy and Practice*. Critical Publishing, St. Albans (2018)
23. Department of education: *Initial teacher training (ITT) market review report*. Department of education, London (2021)