



## Peering into the kaleidoscope of equality: comparative perspectives on Nordic education policy

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## Peering into the kaleidoscope of equality: comparative perspectives on Nordic education policy

This special issue aims to highlight the comparative and international perspectives on education policy and practice in the Nordic region and other parts of the world. As an interdisciplinary and multifaceted research domain, comparative and international studies have a variety of thematic areas, themselves entailing a variety of theoretical premises, such as the construction of time and space (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003) and the social origins of knowledge (Manzon, 2011). In addition, different approaches take different standpoints concerning what are considered the main driving forces and mechanisms behind cross-national attraction (Phillips & Ochs, 2003), the different interests of knowledge in researching policy borrowing and learning (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), or the different epistemologies used when trying to make sense of change and *contingency* (Kauko & Wermke, 2018). Exercising and defining comparative research might thus be described as peering into a kaleidoscope in which patterns of objects become visible and alive through the epistemological lenses the researcher has chosen to use. As in a kaleidoscope, the fascination of comparison is not in a static understanding of things per se, but in the dynamic relations and rotation of different thematic, methodological and theoretical perspectives. Nordic education affords an interesting object of research for this purpose.

The Nordic education model is often related to the unique type of welfare capitalism (Esping-Andersen, 1990) associated with the five Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. In general, the Nordic education model is often linked with various positive images such as pedagogical progressivism, high learning outcomes and social inclusion, all of which can also be used to legitimate different education policies elsewhere (Takayama, 2010; Waldow, 2017). When asked, Nordic education specialists describe the Nordic model as standing for social values, trans-Nordic cooperation, and a parallel social progression stretching from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the present. Although the idea of the Nordic model is in many ways intertwined with the narrative of the progressive welfare state, it is also rooted in non-national social movements and institutions (Hansen, Wallenius, Juvonen, & Varjo, 2018). Furthermore, when the pursuit of the common good is emphasized, the narrative of the

progressive state often falls silent in the face of the blind spots of state education, such as the mistreatment of northern minorities in education affairs (Anttonen, 2010).

There are different approaches to the construction of time-space and explanations of change in education and society within Nordic comparative education. While some studies present ‘Nordic’ merely as a loose cultural and regional frame for understanding temporal events (Ahonen & Rantala, 2002; Buchardt, Markkola, & Valtonen, 2013) and contingent trajectories (Simola, Rinne, Varjo, & Kauko, 2013), most Nordic comparative research emphasizes the idea of a shared Nordic model born after World War II and developing steadily until the late 1980s, after which it was challenged by the individualization and economization of education (Aasen, 2003; Ahonen, 2014; Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl, & Øhrn, 2014; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014a; Telhaug, Medias, & Aasen, 2006). The challenge of individualization for the Nordic education model lies both in the realization of pupils’ pedagogical needs (see Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack, & Simola, 2006) and especially in how the policies of education as a public good are challenged by consumerist ideas and economic policies of markets and choice that cause social segregation and differentiation between schools (Dovemark et al., 2018). The economization of education is also related to a new governance by numbers which has emerged to serve both the needs of an output-orientated knowledge economy but also as a response to scientific and political concerns of a growing social and regional inequality of learning and teaching (Prøitz, Mausethagen, & Skedsmo, 2017).

The articles for this special issue were gathered through an open call, but each emerged with a different perspective on equality. It may be that the Nordic image we discussed above is somehow connected with this focus, but we cannot be certain of this. What we do know is that when we peer into the comparative kaleidoscope, we see different views on equality in education. This special issue includes five papers approaching these timely questions.

The first two focus on the possibilities and limits of assessment-based policy in the Nordic countries, a question strongly linked to equality (Simola et al.,

2013). The opening article, *Justice and marketization of education in three Nordic countries: Can existing large-scale datasets support comparisons?*, is written by Lisbeth Lundahl, Anne-Lise Arnesen, and Jón Torfi Jónasson. Using Iceland, Norway, and Sweden as examples, the article explores the potential for strengthening the comparisons of education regimes in the Nordic countries generally. By mapping out existing databases and interviewing officials at the national agencies, the authors conclude that while the existing databases and datasets would allow a more advanced Nordic comparison on social justice, data collection-related marketization is more modest, and Nordic research collaboration might benefit from more systematic and commensurate education statistics. The second paper, *Schools, accountability and transparency: approaching Nordic school evaluation practices through discursive institutionalism*, written by Tommi Wallenius, Saara Juvonen, Janne Varjo and Petteri Hansen, adopts another stance on the use of statistical knowledge in the Nordic countries. Based on extensive interview material collected from Nordic education specialists between 2015 and 2017, the study explores the differences between Nordic evaluation and publication policies and how the rationales of education governance is constructed in specialist discourse. The authors conclude that all Nordic countries balance their options between egalitarian Nordic education and accountability and market emphases.

The next three papers elaborate well-acknowledged Nordic discourses, but within a frame of wider international and temporal comparison. In their article, *Individualized teaching practices in the Swedish comprehensive school from 1980 to 2014 in relation to education reforms and curricula goals*, Joanna Giota and Ingemar Emanuelsson discuss how teaching practices and classroom processes have changed in the Swedish comprehensive school. A comparison across time is done by utilizing Swedish students' answers to identical statements in questionnaires collected as part of a longitudinal study at different times. While the study indicates a significant increase in the amount of individual work during the last 40 years, the authors also stress that changes in students' learning outcomes cannot be directly linked to changes in pedagogical ideas. Instead, the changes in teaching practices and learning outcomes are subject to changes in teachers' and schools' working conditions.

The fourth paper, *Looking for the ordinary? Parental choice and elite school avoidance in Finland and Germany*, written by Isabel Ramos Lobato, Venla Bernelius and Sonja Kosunen, elaborates parents' school choice in Germany and Finland. The authors take an interesting view on personal education (moral) choices: In contrast with the well-known

mechanism between parents' school choice strategies, social reproduction, and school segregation, the authors base their approach to this phenomenon on middle-class parents' elite school avoidance. In contrasting and highlighting these less evident motives and reasons, the study seeks to contribute to the development of effective equality strategies that parents might also see as justified. As a key finding, the authors point out that in situations where choice is not constrained by the risk of being left behind, some families with high education resources do prefer 'ordinary' schools to highly selective elite schools.

The fifth paper, *Shifting discourses of equality and equity of basic education: an analysis of national policy documents in China*, by Zhou Xingguo, Risto Rinne and Johanna Kallio, examines emerging and evolving state discourses on education equality and equity China. By analysing 12 key policy documents, the authors identify three equality-equity stages, all affected by changes in the country's national politics, international relations, and economic conditions. These stages are the discursive departure from the egalitarian in the 1980s, the continuity and rupture of the 1990s, and the equality and equity prioritization since the discourse of the 2000s.

Despite their different thematic, theoretical, and methodological frameworks, all the papers presented in this special issue share the element of surprise and offer alternative perspectives on the politics of education. These analyses vary in their theories, foci, methods, and data, but they are all concerned with the question of equality. While they do not produce a coherent view on what equality in education is, they give an enjoyable and academically helpful view of the comparative kaleidoscope.

Indeed, while the comparative study of education politics plays an important role in highlighting the potential and actual friction points in the Nordic education model, it is equally important that the discussion of Nordic education does not fall into nostalgia or determinism. Despite the current trends and state of affairs, the possibility of change – or things being different – is always present. As the articles in this special issue show, the power of comparative research lies in its ability to elaborate the oscillation of immediate and possible worlds, thus providing a better self-understanding of the complex phenomena of education politics and increasing the awareness of policies and practices promoting sustainable progress and social justice, both locally and globally.

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