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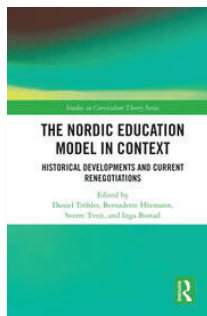
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The Shadowy Existence of the Nordic Dimension in Education

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The Nordic Education Model in Context: Historical Developments and Current Renegotiations

D. Tröhler, B. Hörmann, S. Tveit & I. Bostad, Eds.

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Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group

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International interest in the Nordic dimension in general, and the Nordic education model in particular, from policymakers, scholars, and practitioners has long been considerable (Tröhler, 2022), and has in no way diminished. In fact, over the last few decades interest has been significantly boosted by Finland's performance in OECD's PISA tests. Enveloped in an aura of Nordic exceptionalism, it has even become commercialised as an export brand, promoted to the rest of the world by various Nordic ministers and private edu-business actors (Rönnerberg & Candido, 2023).

In 2023, *Nordic Studies in Education* published a special double issue on the topic. In the same year Routledge published an open-access version of the 2022 edited volume *The Nordic Education Model in Context: Historical Developments and Current Renegotiations*, with an impressive array of early career and senior authors. This essay review focuses on the latter, but will also refer to the special double issue as a way of gaining

perspective on the Nordic dimension in education, and forming a picture of the wider potential of doing research on the Nordic dimension in education.

It is a recurring point in both publications that the Nordic dimension and the Nordic education model are hard to pin down. For instance, Krejsler (2023) finds that ‘the Nordic dimension is an emerging and continually changing entity that is capable of meaning many things’ (p. 9). While Tröhler (2022) convincingly argues that the Nordic model, has hardly, ‘... ever assumed a true “model” character’ (p. 6). So, although the Nordic dimension appears – and is even the unifying purpose – in a plethora of fora, journals, and organisations (Jónasson & Bjarnadóttir, 2023; Tröhler, 2022), the Nordic dimension in general, and the Nordic education model in particular, seem to lead a somewhat shadowy existence.

Zooming in on the edited volume, we see that the book engages its subject through a tripartite structure featuring *trajectories* (5 chapters), *configurations* (6 chapters), and *challenges* (6 chapters). In others words, the book contains a diachronic analytical structure with: a historical-cultural section focusing on historical antecedents of the concept of a Nordic education model; a post-WWII section investigating the shaping and figurations of the Nordic model; and a section devoted to current challenges and stabilities/instabilities of the Nordic model.

One of the key takeaways from the first section is the close interweaving of nation building and the Nordic dimension – i.e. interconnected trajectories between the Nordic states in terms of nation building (Gotling, 2022). However, although ‘new lessons of history mapped the nation within a Nordic community, [they] did not result in patriotism being replaced by any form of Nordicism’ (Hovland, 2022, p. 32). While this argument in itself appears convincing, Bibi (2022), in her contribution, draws our attention to 19th century Scandinavism, which adds an important layer to the understanding of the ‘nationalism – nordicism – patriotism’ triangle. The Scandinavism movement – in all its diversity – rested on imaginaries of a common nationality and culture, a geopolitical security need, and a wish for Scandinavian integration, thus warranting the existence of Scandinavian patriotism in the mid 19th century (Glenthøj & Ottosen, 2021). Although the Scandinavism movement declined after Denmark lost the 1864 war with Prussia and Austria, Bibi makes a connection between the traces left by the Scandinavism movement and the series of Nordic school meetings held between 1870 and 1935 (Jónasson & Bjarnadóttir, 2023).

Moljord and Bondevik (2022) explore, historically and comparatively, the handling of children with intellectual disabilities in Norway and Sweden. This topic is closely connected with issues of differentiation and inclusion, which are particularly relevant in a Nordic education system celebrating the idea of a ‘School for All’. They suggest that the Nordic education model has a long history of producing marginalisation based on its definition of some needs as ‘special’, and that the dilemma of unity versus diversity persists in a comprehensive system like the Nordic. This find is echoed by Kortekangas (2022), who critically analyses Sami education across Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and argues that ‘comprehensive and cross-national perspectives are imperative to

understanding Sami history in all its complexity and diversity' (p. 103). In this sense, the chapter offers a powerful critique of methodological nationalism.

The second section contains an assemblage of chapters conducting targeted and methodologically innovative excavations in, between, and across the sediments of the Nordic model in education. Using a historical autoethnographic approach, Lindseth (2022) revisits and contextualises his own experiences in the Norwegian school system with a focus on the Nordic model as lived experience. Melander (2022) adds a contextualised analysis of the role of actors and their motives in the formation of the new comprehensive school in Sweden in the 1950s and 1960s, including the changes in the 1980s. In her contextual analysis of late 19th and early 20th century Swedish education reforms, Buchardt (2022) delves into the 'exceptionality of the exceptional Nordic welfare state model of education' (p. 107), by exploring how education served as the arena for 'renegotiating the relation between state and religion and how this connected to and was part of broader questions about social cohesion in society' (p. 107). Interestingly, Buchardt concludes that a key dimension of the Nordic model is an educational component stretching well beyond the education system into the broader field of social policy, and that this occurred on the background of a religious dimension that had been converted 'into a social glue by transforming it into a cultural matter' (p. 119).

In their chapter, Bostad and Solberg (2022) argue that, 'There is a need to investigate the more complex context of values and attitudes related to equality and dignity as a culture and as ways of being together – seeing these as overlooked prerequisites for a Nordic education model' (p. 125). While offering some problematisations and identifying paradoxes, they conclude that, 'The questions of why and how to educate the younger generations have been deeply connected to the ideas of why and how to live a good life and the ideas of why and how to build a good society' (p. 139) in the Nordic model. Tracking and analysing the implementation and recontextualisation of a specific policy instrument, Smestad and Opsal (2022) explore how new math was received and implemented in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Finally, Baek (2022) moves beyond Nordic space in his meticulous comparative analysis of the use of expertise in educational policymaking in advisory commissions in Norway, and congressional hearings in the United States.

In the third section, the chapters focus explicitly on the challenges of and for the Nordic model of education. Shedding light on the history of formal grading and the associated examination and testing instruments in Norwegian and Swedish basic education, Tveit and Lundahl (2022) demonstrate how tensions and dilemmas regarding grading policies have been tackled quite differently in the Nordic countries. While dilemmas of educational assessment are shared by other education systems, the Nordic countries seem to have developed a *Sonderweg*, in which grades traditionally did not serve as a selection function in the comprehensive school system. Today, educational assessment balance remains at the core of educational policy reform in the Nordic region.

Looking at Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, Hultén, Jarning, and Kristensen (2022) explore ‘how the reconfiguration of schooling in epistemic terms came to play a seminal role in forming a series of national reforms starting in the 1980s and in the transnational turn of educational policies during the most recent decades’ (p. 236). A key challenge for the Nordic model, identified in this chapter, is the rise of ‘an economic conception of education’, which ‘has grown from the seedbed of globalizing arenas such as the OECD, the EU, and the World Bank, and all have ambitions to formulate educational policy framed within a postnational culture of no culture’ (p. 250).

A perspective on gender appears in Lie’s (2022) contribution. The chapter contains a conceptual history of gender equality as a dimension in the Nordic education model, as well as a critical analysis of another key element of this model, namely, the ambition from the 1970s that school should promote gender equality (*likestilling*) as an educational ideal. The chapter offers interesting insights into the consequences for gender equality associated with an increased focus on students’ learning outcomes. In the 15th chapter, Hörmann and Karseth (2022) offer an interesting analysis of how students have been conceptualised in three different Norwegian core curricula (1987, 1993 and 2017), as a way to cast light on ‘students’ embeddedness within the individual and social dimensions of schooling, and what kinds of pictures of the students are underlying different curricula’ (p. 275). The chapter points to a challenge for the Nordic model of education posed by increasing demand for individual qualifications in a cultural context, which has focused on the cultivation and socialisation of students.

In the following chapter Nordin (2022) explores ‘the use and effects of international points of reference as sources of legitimation in Swedish educational policy-making, with special attention given to the 2015/2018 Swedish school reform, and the expanding role of the OECD in setting the political agenda in Sweden’ (p. 292). In this sense, the chapter offers empirical evidence connected to arguments in other chapters. Nordin concludes that there is a ‘risk of narrowing down the educational imagination to what can be expressed in a decontextualized and statistical language’ (p. 303) to the detriment of the Nordic education model. The final chapter is written by Sivesind, Tiplic and Johnsen (2022). Focusing on changes in narratives of the Nordic in the reception and translation of international education by school authorities in Norway, the chapter offers well-founded insights into how international agendas influence national politics, and concludes that the Nordic dimension seems to change from a national orientation towards international expert knowledge.

Overall, the edited volume is the reflection of solid historical craftsmanship, and it is very successful in peeling the onion of the Nordic dimension and the Nordic model of education. It offers acknowledging and problematising insights into its many dimensions, including historical antecedents and interweaving with broader societal developments – not least the renowned Nordic welfare state model. It also offers critical reflections on the challenges and possible future of the Nordic education model. In that way, it complements the special issue of Nordic Studies in Education. Nevertheless,

it would benefit from a concluding chapter offering cross-chapter reflections, and identification of themes and ambiguities in the preceding chapters.

Historiographically, the edited volume stands on the shoulders of the research done on the role and significance of nationalisms in education, as reflected in the World Yearbook 2022 entitled *Education, Schooling and the Global Universalization of Nationalism*, edited by Daniel Tröhler, Nelli Piattoeva and William F. Pinar. The edited volume takes this agenda and perspective to the next level, by exploring transnational and regional cooperation among the Nordic states in education. A next step for the research agenda on the Nordic dimension would be to explore its presence and extrapolations in international contexts (Ydesen, 2021). Such an exploration is only embryonically present in the edited volume, most clearly in the introduction and in Sivesind, Tiplic and Johnsen's chapter.

The edited volume is a major contribution to international educational policy research in general, and an indispensable contribution to research on the Nordic dimension, and the Nordic education model in particular.

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