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Reshaping the Nordic education model in an era of efficiency. Changes in the comprehensive school project in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden since the millennium

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ABSTRACT

The Nordic Education Model was an important part of the social democratic welfare state for many years in the second half of the 20th century. Since the millennium, transnational agencies have drawn education from the realm of politics into a global market place by advocating strategies such as efficiency, competition, decentralisation, governing by detailed objectives, control, privatisation, and profile schools. This article gives brief accounts of major trends in current school development policies, discourses, and practices in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden since the millennium, and explores how the values of the Nordic model are affected by the new policies. It is argued that the Nordic model still exists as the predominant system for the large majority of Scandinavian children at a national level, but that a number of new technologies aiming to increase the efficiency of teaching and learning are gradually undermining the main values of the Nordic model.

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The Nordic model of education was developed in the Nordic countries in the decades after World War II. This model was part of the social democratic project to rebuild and modernise society by means of science, rationality, and democratic participation. Another key development was the establishment of a safe welfare state. Education for all children was also considered to be the main vehicle for reducing social differences and increasing social mobility in the population. The state was considered to be the legitimate authority to have responsibility for education as a common good. Structurally, the Nordic model consisted of a public, comprehensive school for all children with no streaming from the age of seven to sixteen years. The overarching values were social justice, equity, equal opportunities, inclusion, nation building, and democratic participation for all students, regardless of social and cultural background and abilities. The curriculum plans were mainly defined at state level, and schools and teachers were trusted and respected. The pedagogic ideas of progressivism were also closely connected to the model (Markussen, 2003). The Nordic countries, including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, implemented this model at various points in time between the 1950s and the 1970s, which was thoroughly documented in the 50 year anniversary issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* in 2006 (Antikainen, 2006; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack, & Simola, 2006; Frímannsson, 2006; Korsgaard & Wiborg, 2006; Lysne, 2006; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2006). Some of the authors conclude by addressing

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questions of how international impact may have informed recent reformulations of the Nordic education model. In this article, we pursue this issue a bit further and give an account of some key developments in the education systems in the Scandinavian countries Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in the 1990s and during the first 15 years of the new millennium.

Historically, the Nordic education model is founded on a balance between economic, social, and educational aims. Since the 1990s, most educational systems in the Western world have, to different extents, been exposed to neoliberal management reforms. Because of their ideological origin in a deregulated market economy, it is of special interest to look into what impact these reforms have had on the Nordic model. How have the social and educational values of the Nordic comprehensive model been affected by new, international trends? Is only the main structure left, along with empty rhetoric about equality and inclusion? The aim of this article is to describe these restructuring processes in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and to consider how they may have affected educational legislation, regulations, and tools for the structuring of school practices. The educational systems in the three countries have important structural and ideological similarities, but there have also been some differences due to historical conditions. Reform technologies since the millennium have also been somewhat different in the three countries. We will give a short account of the general similarities that have constituted the model historically, and will consider how new management technologies seem to have affected the basic normative assumptions in Scandinavian education systems since the millennium.

What is special about the Scandinavian countries?

Many other European countries followed a similar comprehensive pattern, but there are some features that distinguish the Nordic model from other countries (Antikainen, 2006; Wiborg, 2009). These features are historically linked to state formation, class structures, and various liberal policies that were displayed in the three countries in the 19th century, as well as the early establishment of short but compulsory public education for all children. Later on, in the interwar period and after World War II, social democratic parties carried through their liberal ideals about education, and gradually implemented a 9- or 10-year comprehensive unified education system for all children, an unusually radical type of comprehensive education different from similar attempts in other European countries, such as Germany and England. The proclamation of the comprehensive model as "dead," especially in the English-speaking countries, is exaggerated and can be countered by scrutinising the development of the Nordic model and its conditions, according to Wiborg (2009). While very strong tendencies in the UK and the USA have emphasised a scientific curriculum and focus on national aims and measurable outcomes, Nordic legislation has focused on a comprehensive school and an education for democratic *Bildung*, participation, and equality (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014a).

The Nordic model has been subject to many reforms and continuous development since the middle of the 20th century. According to Telhaug et al. (2006), three periods can be identified. The first is the golden years of social democracy, up to 1970. In this period the main structural elements were established, with a six-year elementary and a three-year lower-secondary level up to 16 years of age. The second period, from around 1970 onwards, is called the radical left period, or the golden age of progressivism. These were the decades when influences from progressive education, cross-disciplinary project work, open schools, and neo-Marxist emancipatory ideology were tried out in classroom practice. The third period, starting in the 1980s, is the era of globalisation and neoliberalism, when the "new right," new forms of management, and market-inspired technologies were embarked upon. Thus, the Nordic model is not a static entity, but a changing institution that is open to influences from the outside and, at the same time, clinging to its own roots.

In the Nordic countries, there is a development where the state, from being first and foremost a welfare state, becomes a competitive state (Pedersen, 2011), equipped to participate in the global competition for market shares in all areas of society. This development entails changes in the

view on the optimal relationship between state and individual; it brings changes in the dominant discourses around education and its purpose, and it brings changes to ideas about the best possible organisation of schools. The accounts given in the following of the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish development of the comprehensive school will show that the foundations for schooling that existed in the immediate past are still present in the discourses and practices of today, but that they have been heavily influenced by neo-liberal tendencies. This is also the case in the UK and the USA.

The main body of research on restructuration processes has been carried out in specific countries and on specific restructuring tools, such as competition, testing, and accountability. Many of the reports focus on indirect influences on the comprehensive model, such as decentralisation and centralisation, teachers' professionalism and working conditions, teaching and learning practices, and new forms of leadership (Apple et al., 2003; Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl, & Øhrn, 2014; Ball, 2013; Dale & Robertson, 2009; Gewirtz, 2002; Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Moos, 2013a, 2014; Nordin & Sundberg, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011). Research on the impact of global tendencies on the comprehensive project itself is unfortunately scarce (Aasen, 2003; Blossing et al., 2014a).

Analytical approach

We will apply a two-step approach to our questions. The first step is to give a separate account of the development of the comprehensive school in each of the three countries as national cases. Each account will consist of four parts: first, a brief historical sketch of the development of the comprehensive school at national level; second, the shifts in state policy when confronted by the global economic crisis before the millennium; third, the national educational policy since 2000, including the special governance principles implemented on the education field; and fourth, the adoption of social technologies such as various types of national curriculum plans and learning aims, and control mechanisms such as tests and evaluations systems. The empirical evidence available differs in the three countries, so the main emphasis is on social technologies and discourses. The second step in our analysis is a cross-country comparison where we pay attention to how the basic values of the Nordic model have been affected by recent educational reforms in the three countries. Our hypothesis is that the main structures are maintained at the surface, but that the implementation of new social technologies may have brought the basic values and visions upon which the model was originally based into a situation of contradictions and vulnerability.

The sustainability of the Nordic education model depends on some distinguishing characteristics of the regulations and social technologies that control schools and teaching practices. The essential aspects of the Nordic model are equal access to education, a common core of subjects, social community, democratic student cooperation, no segregation with regard to ability, gender, or social class (i.e., no organisational streaming), differentiation within mixed-ability classes, and individualisation adapted to students' prerequisites in order to provide a meaningful learning environment for all. Flexible national curriculum plans and open-ended learning objectives are important conditions needed to achieve this, along with trust in individual schools and professional teachers as the main resources in the construction of educational practice. These are the basic assumptions of our analysis.

Denmark: towards a competitive school

The historical background

"A school for all" has been a dominant vision in Denmark for about a century. Political majorities have gradually amended legislation to prescribe a comprehensive school for all, with no streaming. Essentially this was done in order to develop a school that was able to shape the next generation of Danes to acquire the desired knowledge, values, and norms. Based on a general idea of a welfare state founded on education, the vast majority of citizens and politicians developed a common

understanding of the purposes of schooling. The basic aim was the participatory democratic *Bildung*, and the comprehensive Nordic model of education.

An overview of the major legislation on education and schools shows that the 1993 Act (Ministry of Education, 1993) abolished streaming and reiterated the general, democratic, and comprehensive purpose of schools, while the 2006 Act (Ministry of Education, 2006) saw schooling as a preparation for further studies and for work and employability.

The economic and political situation at the end of the 20th century

Until 2006, education policies aimed at education for a welfare state, but from the mid-1990s, economic policies aimed at forming a competitive state (Pedersen, 2011). The values underpinning the two types of society are different: equality and participatory democracy for the welfare state, and competition and preparedness for the labour market for the competitive state.

A major shift in public sector modernisation policy occurred around 1990. Public institutions were to become not only internally effective; they were also to be externally competitive. To this end, regulatory forms inspired by the private sector were introduced. These initiatives included new organisational forms, funding principles, and forms of regulation that aimed to enhance competitiveness, user involvement in defining the outputs of public institutions, free choice of institution, result-oriented contracts, outsourcing, strategic competence development, and new wage forms.

Much of the thinking and legislation was inspired by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) vision of New Public Management. In a pivotal report on Governance (OECD, 1995), the OECD categorised and systematised the reports from member countries on their public governance. Some areas of governance, such as human resource management and operations, are being decentralised from state to local level, while at the same time other areas, such as curriculum, aims, and accountability, are being re-centralised to state level (Moos, 2013b).

Restructuring since the millenium

This development was explicit in school legislation with the Act on the Folkeschool of 2006 (Ministry of Education, 2006) – approved with support from most political parties – which turned the purpose of schooling away from education for all and participatory democracy, towards education for an excellent, talented workforce. Participation in international comparisons of surveys on the outcomes of schooling – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS), and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – has played an important role in this development.

In the wave of PISA surveys, which placed Danish students below average in comparison with students from other countries (Ministry of Education, 2004), there was a major reform of basic and secondary education in Denmark, based on a stronger focus on *learning outcomes* and *accountability*. Among other things, this included a policy of strengthening an evaluation culture by implementing national tests, introducing personal student plans, making final exams obligatory, and expanding the number of examined subjects, meaning generally that Danish students would have to undergo more testing and examinations during their school life.

Because it involves increased testing and more compulsory exams, the evaluation culture can be seen as equivalent to more centralisation and control: governing by *numbers* (Biesta, 2009; Nóvoa, 2013). It can also be seen as a central symptom of the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1985), which exposes changes in the relationships between external stakeholders and schools (Bernstein, 2000). On the one hand, stronger external control weakens the internal control of the individual school and teacher, as well as the possibilities for students to participate in decision-making. On the other hand, more explicit standards of learning, which might accompany the movement towards greater measurability, could be an advantage to students from non-academic

backgrounds unfamiliar with the more implicit codes of schooling. The national tests can be seen as social technologies (Dean, 1999), and as such as normative mechanisms.

There has been a gradual development from a predominantly welfare-based thinking and regulations towards predominantly competitive legislation and discourse. The social and economic politics of competitiveness were introduced by the right-wing government in 1982, while the vision of the comprehensive school had its roots at the beginning of the 20th century, and was still a major pillar of the 1993 School Act (Ministry of Education, 1993).

New curriculum procedures and technologies

The curriculum had for some decades been a task at both the national and local level in Denmark. The government issued guiding national curricula to be discussed and amended in the municipalities. Schools and teachers were often involved in this work. From 1990 through to 2006 we witnessed a sharpening and detailed spelling-out of obligatory national learning aims, following which there was an expansion of national testing. This development gained much momentum from international tests (PIRLS, TIMMS, and PISA). The comparison of results between countries influenced those policy makers who were interested in the re-centralisation of education.

A reform of the public sector, the Structural Reform of 2007, had a big impact on education and its institutions. The number of municipalities was reduced from 174 to 98. This caused a reduction in the number of schools. The reform also restructured the upper-secondary schools, *Gymnasia*. These schools were transferred from regional governance to self-governance, in line with universities and private primary schools.

The 2013 Government, led by the Social Democrats, the Socialist People's Party, and the Social Liberal Party, launched a plan for a major school reform (Ministry of Education, 2014). In parallel with political work on the reform there was an intense labour market struggle between the teachers' union and local government (i.e., the national association of municipalities and thus the legal party in the labour contract between teachers and municipalities as school "owners"). The Government wanted to reduce the Teaching Union's influence on teachers' working conditions.

The school reform was passed by Parliament, with support from almost all political parties, in December 2013, and was in effect from August 2014. The reform transforms the purpose of school from comprehensive democratic *Bildung* to an education for employability: fostering the motivation and competence needed to enter the labour market and thus encouraging lifelong learning. The basic logic of the act is to promote management by objectives: learning and teaching will be directed in more detail by national aims and standards, and learning will be assessed by more frequent national tests.

Consequences for the comprehensive school model

Contradictions between political initiatives and professional practices are growing with contemporary reforms. The comprehensive school is being attacked by neo-liberal and market-place interests, technologies of choice, and competition, all of which need the support of transparency, accountability, and numbers. The traditional basic trust between government, municipalities, and schools is being replaced by monitoring and control through testing and reporting technologies.

The school and grade class have traditionally been seen as communities that provide room, challenges, and care for every single student. Classroom practices are built on the close dialogue between teacher and students, as well as between students, as an integral part of teaching and learning. This model is being replaced by a focus on individual students' learning and accountability for their work, often in multiple-choice tests. Relationships between teachers and students are changing from asymmetrical collaboration and negotiations for membership in the communities towards a more hierarchical relationship between the teacher as the provider of state-approved, evidence-based knowledge and the student as the receiver and consumer of pre-prepared knowledge.

Norway: decentralisation and technocratic curriculum regimes

The historical background

The Norwegian comprehensive school was established as a seven-year public, compulsory folk school in the 1920s, when it succeeded a parallel system from the 19th century. It was extended to a nine-year programme for basic education in the 1960s, and to a ten-year programme in 1997. After World War II, a generation of strong Labour Party politicians developed a programme that put forward strong national values, social integration, and egalitarianism, as well as equal rights to free education for all, regardless of geographic location and social background (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). The national curriculum centred on a common subject-based core of contents defined by a liberal education ideology, and a pedagogy that combined the old German Herbartian whole-class approach to teaching with a progressive activity learning ideology. Special education was mainly provided in ordinary schools from the 1970s, and the challenge of non-streamed, mixed-ability classes was solved by individualisation and variation of the curriculum. Streaming at the organisational level was forbidden. However, a new Education Act in 1998 defined education as an individual right for the child, and not as a common good. As a consequence, parents may sue the school owner for deficiencies in the education provided. This was an important regulatory prerequisite for reforms carried out a few years later.

The economic and political situation at the end of the 20th century

The comprehensive school system in Norway was implemented at a time of economic stability and ideological radicalism in the 1970s. An emerging problem in the 1980s was concern about the steadily increasing costs of the welfare state and of a large public bureaucracy that was accused of inefficiency. To save the welfare state for the future, the government turned to societal models borrowed from the business sector. Key words were deregulation, management by objectives, privatization, and competition (Telhaug et al., 2006). These principles were formally established for the education sector in 1991 (St. meld. 1990–91–), but it took more than 10 years before they were implemented in educational institutions. The main reform for comprehensive schooling in this period was the extension of the period to 10 years, starting at the age of six instead of seven. The reform also mandated more compulsory cross-disciplinary project work. The whole system was based on strong national legislation and trust in teachers and school leaders, and the development of evaluation and control systems progressed very slowly. Students went to their local school, and there was no free choice of school. Fewer than 3% of students went to private schools.

Restructuring since the millennium

The restructuring of the comprehensive school in Norway began in 2001 under a Labour government, and escalated under a right-wing government between 2001 and 2005. This government passed a large number of amendments to the Educational Act of 1998, and introduced a new national curriculum reform called *The Knowledge Promotion Reform*. There was agreement across most parties about the main elements of the new policy. The results of the PISA test in 2001, in which Norway performed around average like the other Scandinavian countries, were given enormous media attention as a national failure (Fladmoe, 2012), thus creating legitimacy for educational reforms. The policies of this reform were implemented throughout eight years of left-wing coalition government from 2005 on, and were continued after a right-wing government was elected in 2013. The restructuring policy so far can be described as decentralisation, a strong emphasis on competence aims and students' learning outcomes, increased assessment and a vast national test system, increased national and local control, and a research-based and expert-based development strategy. As school owners,

municipalities were given the responsibility for quality control, local curriculum plans, the teachers' in-service training programmes, and wage negotiations with teachers' unions.

The new decentralisation policy implied a new agenda for the municipalities. Norway has a scattered local structure with 428 municipalities, many of them very small, and with minor competence on educational matters. The new consultants were mostly efficiency-oriented economists inspired by New Public Management. They provided advice on contracting systems, objectives, and measurable outcomes for every school. School leaders were made responsible for results at school level through new types of contracts that implied a system of *accountability*. Most municipalities use national tests and other national mapping tools to monitor the quality of schools and school leaders. Free school choice became an option for municipalities, but the individual child still has a legal right to attend its local school.

However, municipalities have to report to central authorities about their achievements. In this way, the whole decentralisation system is designed to strengthen state control in an indirect way that results in *recentralisation*. One consequence of this policy is a vast bureaucracy with written reports on all levels. This transfers much of teachers' time away from teaching to meaningless paper work, evoking conflicts between teachers and school owners. In addition to this, a national inspection system has been intensified since 2010.

At the same time, national policy discourse continues to promote the old values of the comprehensive school. In 2009, the Norwegian parliament passed a new preamble clause in the Education Act of 1998 that contained a broad statement about the aim and responsibility of education to promote national and cultural traditions, democracy, basic values, tolerance, human rights, cultural diversity, individual growth, and the pragmatic knowledge needed in order to participate as an independent citizen in society. These values disappear gradually downwards through the educational system, where quality is transformed into quantitative test results. Thus, the national hallmarks for quality are completely disconnected from national and local quality assurance systems (Biesta, 2009), and are dismissed in favour of measurable quantities of testing and measurable results.

New social technologies from 2006

New curriculum plans were launched in 2006, based on behavioural aims, whereby students' learning was expected to be visible, and the traditional concept of *knowledge* was substituted with the notion of *competence* (Imsen, 2012). The idea of competence was imported from international agents such as the OECD and the Asia-Europe Meeting and implied that learning outcomes should be *visible*. Basic skills (reading, writing, oral skills, numeracy, and digital skills) were introduced as a requirement in the teaching of all school subjects.

The principle of individualised teaching, a legacy from the progressive 1980s, was given more emphasis in the knowledge promotion reform. This is an important element in the comprehensive project that indicates some continuity in the education policy. Individualised teaching is legalised as a recommended teaching principle, and not an individual right like special education.

The 2006 curriculum system represents a breakaway from the preceding traditional subject-based and knowledge-oriented national curriculum plans. From the perspective of cultural sociology, the reduction of instructional content associated with social class may be welcomed. On the other hand, it is replaced by *a technocratic curriculum regime* based on management by objectives, planning, evidence-based practice, and assessment of visible goal attainment. The learning objectives are the same for all children, and this is not consistent with the progressive principle of individualisation of teaching in mixed-ability classes, which is a prerequisite for an inclusive, comprehensive, and compulsory school for all children.

Increasing assessment and testing also provide information about social differences in students' learning outcomes (Hægeland & Kirkebøen, 2007; Olsen, 2013), which gives rise to political concern about fulfilling the ideals of equality in the comprehensive school system. There have been initiatives aiming at reducing the effects of social background, for instance by introducing an optional

homework help service in addition to ordinary school hours. On the other hand, parents are increasingly encouraged to participate in their children's homework. This probably does not reduce social differences in learning outcomes.

The new social technologies have some serious pedagogical consequences. Research has indicated that by the end of the 20th century, progressive education ideology was making steady headway into classroom practice (Imsen, 2003; Klette, 2003; Rønning, 2002). The freedom of teaching and learning methods introduced by the Knowledge Promotion Reform seems to have arrested the advancement of this ideology. Parallel surveys to teachers in 2001 and 2012 show that teachers' pedagogic preferences are still relatively progressive, but that they have changed in favour of teacher-directed teaching over the period, with the exception of individualised teaching (Imsen & Ramberg, 2014; Rønning, 2013). The emphasis on student activity, student participation, and cross-disciplinary work seems to be in decline. This coincides with a major problem of student dropout from upper-secondary school, a problem that seems to originate in a lack of motivation at the lower-secondary level (Buland & Mathiesen, 2014). One explanation for the change in teachers' pedagogic preferences may be that there is an increased pressure on teachers to bring about prescribed learning outcomes, and that a more teacher-directed instruction would be more appropriate.

On the other hand, there has been greater attention to students' social learning environment and to anti-bullying programmes. These are important measures to support the policy of inclusion, not only as ideology, but also in practice. In addition, the Ministry of Education has made an initiative to modernise the curriculum content and competencies in accordance with the needs of tomorrow's society (NOU 2014:7; NOU 2015:8). Whether this will change the technocratic structures implemented during the preceding decade, remains to be seen.

Consequences for the comprehensive school model

There are many indications that the comprehensive school in Norway is drifting away from its normative programme in the 20th century. This can most clearly be understood by looking at the number of contradictions that have appeared since the millennium. First, the normative discourses about the basic values of education have been substituted with non-disputable efficiency technologies, aiming at the narrow, unspecified quantitative goal of *more* learning. Second, the intention of more democracy in terms of decentralisation has been modified by recentralisation systems, mainly through the intensification of upwards evaluation and reporting. Third is the contradiction between the broad substantive parts of the preamble clause and what is measured by more narrow numeric quality systems. The fourth contradiction is not new: the combination of the same learning objectives for all students, and differentiation in terms of individualisation and adapted teaching. The fifth is the persistence of social differences in student outcomes, compared to the ideals of equality across social groups. The last contradiction is also an old one: if progressive education is important for the comprehensive project to succeed, then the teacher-directed trend in teachers' practice is not the best way to go.

Sweden: segregation versus inclusion

The historic background

The Swedish school system consists of public, comprehensive, and compulsory primary and lower-secondary education for all children between the ages of 7 and 16. It dates back to a reform in 1962, which put an end to the so-called parallel school system where there was segregation of students based on class, gender, and learning disabilities. The 1962 reform gave every child a legal right to an education based on the same state-regulated national curriculum, so that education became equally valuable regardless of place of residence, social background, physical and mental abilities,

or other factors that may influence success in school. A new Education Act passed in 2011 has strengthened these rights.

School policies developed gradually towards the values of a democratic and inclusive school through the curriculum reforms of 1962, 1969, and 1980, emphasising student influence, student activity, individualization, and students' interests (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014b). Streaming was slowly abolished but lasted until the implementation of the 1980 curriculum. In order to promote improvement in local schools, the number of regulations in the national curriculum was reduced.

The economic and political situation at the end of the 20th century

The economic crisis in Sweden during the 1990s placed the efficiency of the public welfare system under scrutiny. The media and investigative journalists uncovered cases where public agencies used their resources ineffectively and were deceived by clients. An efficiency technology was steadily growing, replacing the values of the welfare state.

Eventually the education sector also came to be debated. Evaluation and research showed that teaching and learning in schools was still dominated by teachers lecturing and not using the experiences of the students, that only a small percentage of schools were collaborative, that special needs education was excluding students, and that schools could not account for what they were doing and how they were going to improve (for a compilation see Blossing, 2004). Demands for the public sector to account for its internal work paved the way for new regulations built on a technology of efficiency.

With the economic cutbacks in the 1990s, efficiency became the catchword, underpinned by a global movement of neoliberalism, New Public Management, and educational policy-setting by the OECD. In 1991, parents got the right to choose a school for their children other than the local school. This was a market adjustment supposed to improve school quality. Another important reform this year was that the responsibility for schools was devolved from the state to the municipality. The independent school reform was implemented in 1992, thus increasing the dynamics of competition in the educational market. The percentage of students in independent schools in 2014 was 14% for primary and lower-secondary school and 26% for upper-secondary school.

A major shift affecting the practical work of teachers was the curriculum of 1994. The curriculum was organised according to the logic of management by objectives. The grading system was changed to measure whether a student had reached goals for every subject or not. This absolute grading scale demanded more work from schools to get their students through. If they were unsuccessful, the student failed. Before, with the relative grading system, the student never failed, but passed at whatever grade he or she had reached.

Restructuring around the millennium

The Social Democrats governed from 1982 to 2006, except in the years1992–1994, when a coalition of liberal parties governed. This means that both the right and left wing were involved in educational policy decisions up to 2006. However, with a neoliberal coalition, the Alliance, taking over in 2006, the focus on efficiency rapidly increased through a number of central regulations building on the restructuring of the 1990s. A School Inspection system was established in 2008, aiming principally at inspecting school law compliance in schools. A new and compulsory principal programme was implemented in 2010, with an emphasis on legal concerns and the goal management responsibilities of the principal. The 2011 Education Act clarified the responsibilities of principals and also students' rights, such as disciplinary actions, for example, detention and exclusion of students, temporary custody of objects, and written cautions.

New social technologies from 2006

Since 2006, a lot of new regulations have been introduced aiming at steering teaching and instruction in schools. More national tests were introduced in 2009. A new national curriculum for primary, secondary, and upper-secondary schools was implemented in 2011, with a new 6-scaled grading system from school year 6 (previously school year 8). The National Agency introduced general advice in 2011 concerning planning and accomplishment of teaching to inform teachers about the core process of teaching in accordance with the curriculum (Skolverket, 2011).

The new national curriculum of 2011 has taken the logic of management by objectives a step further. The earlier curriculum from 1994 was *goal* and *result* oriented, while the new one is referred to as goal and *knowledge* oriented. The new curriculum and the new grading system have promoted intense work on formative assessment in schools and on so called local pedagogical planning. Local pedagogical planning is the planning teachers do for specific content in relation to the knowledge requirements and the formative assessment practice in their particular teaching and learning situation.

The formulations in the Educational Act describing every child's right to education on the basis of his or her needs, the requirement for schools to listen to and respect the voice of the students as well as to take action against discriminatory behaviour, has brought the inclusion of students in the everyday pedagogical situation in school into focus. This also applies to the new curriculum, with an added emphasis on formative assessment and communication as a knowledge requirement.

Consequences for the comprehensive school model

The consequences for the comprehensive school model may be observed on two separate levels: first, concerning the organisational differentiation at system level, and, second, the pedagogical differentiation inside classrooms at local school level. The standard state subsidy to the municipalities, free school choice, and the establishing of independent schools has remained the same throughout the period. Since 2006, segregation between schools has increased (Skolverket, 2012). The segregation of students, that is the organisational differentiation at system level, has created unequal conditions for schools (Bunar, 2010). Some schools, for instance, have 100% of students from immigrant backgrounds, and constitute a complex ground for ethnic inequality and social exclusion of youth (Beach, Dovemark, Schwartz, & Öhrn, 2013). Many municipalities have ineffective systems for dealing with inequalities and for distributing resources in a way that could improve conditions for inclusion (Skolinspektionen, 2014a). However, discussion concerning independent schools has been intense after revelations that some of these companies make immense profits on the basis of taxpayers' money. Thus it is suggested that the regulations around independent schools should be made clearer (SOU 2015:82).

Concerning pedagogical differentiation, the impression is that teachers and school leaders work rather intensively on inclusion and formative assessment, meaning that they are adapting education to the needs of the students. Pedagogical differentiation in the year 2015 is expressed in terms of formative assessment and forms of social and inclusive learning strategies that involve the students in responsive work with each other. In a survey (Skolinspektionen, 2014b) among teachers in comprehensive schools, special schools and upper-secondary schools, 44% agreed fully and 41% agreed partially to the statement "In this school special support is given as far as possible within the student group to which the student normally belongs."

In accordance with the introduction of the neoliberal policy in the 1990s, free choice of school still remained in 2015 for parents and students, as did management by objectives. However, a knowledge and inclusion orientation has been in development since 2011 with the introduction of a new Education Act and a new national curriculum. The marketisation of education and free school choice have created an obvious segregation between schools in Sweden. This neoliberal ideology stands in harsh contrast to the ideology of social learning and inclusion in classrooms. The neoliberal

agenda, putting the individual student and his or her competences and achievements at the forefront, is dominant. The realisation of inclusion in the classroom in a segregated and efficiency-orientated society seems to be hard to achieve for teachers.

Discussion

The three countries compared

The historical background of the comprehensive school system in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden is very similar. The Nordic education model originated in a parallel system from the 19th century that was gradually replaced by a comprehensive, public school for all children through a long process in the 20th century. In all three countries, education was part of a large social democratic welfare state project. A nine-year public and compulsory comprehensive school was established in the rebuilding period after World War II. It was characterised by open access for all children, no streaming, and, in Norway and Sweden, a strong national regulation of the schools. Denmark had for a long time had a more decentralised system and a stronger free school tradition, due to cultural folk movements in the 19th century (Korsgaard & Wiborg, 2006). The main common values in the three countries were equality, equity, democratic participation, inclusion, and nation building.

The similarities between the three countries have long historical roots in rule of law, democratic constitutions, similar cultures, related languages, and less social inequality than in many other European countries. After World War II, they were all governed by strong social democratic parties with clear visions of a welfare state promoting greater equality, justice, and democracy. At policy level, Scandinavian cooperation was also strong in education. The idea of a comprehensive school was probably imported from other countries, but its institutionalisation and implementation was certainly a Scandinavian social democratic project.

There were, of course, also differences between the educational systems in the three countries, but these were of minor importance compared to the main ideas and structures that underpinned the system. For instance, Sweden had a longer period of streaming than the other two countries. Denmark, being culturally closely connected to Germany, has had a stronger tradition of *Bildung* than Norway or Sweden. Norway has probably had the strongest nation building process within the education system, due to a history of unions with Denmark and later with Sweden. National independence has therefore been a stronger political motive in Norway than in the other two countries.

The economic crisis of the late-1980s and early-1990s became a severe challenge to the welfare state project in all Scandinavian countries, but the political response to the crisis varied. Models from the private sector, which were more output-oriented, demanding greater competition and efficiency, were most clearly noticeable in Denmark, while in Sweden distrust in the welfare state and a privatisation policy were more prominent. Norway was in a better economic situation because of the oil industry, but chose a strategy of management by objectives and decentralisation to reduce public expenses that had minor impact on education before the millennium. Right-wing governments in all three countries during the crisis initiated these developments, but their implementation was supported by social democrat parties as well. Although the Scandinavian cooperation continued at a general level, it was challenged by the fact that Norway decided to stay outside the EU in a referendum in 1994, while Denmark had been a member since 1972 and Sweden became a new member in 1995.

Nevertheless, the comprehensive school project continued to exist, but was continually revised with new educational acts, national curriculum plans, decentralisation efforts, and more emphasis on individually oriented legislation of schooling. Privatisation policy and the market inspired efficiency measures were first put in force as a right-wing policy in Sweden, and were not reversed when the Social Democrats returned to power. This indicated a shift in the international social democratic movement, when the "third way" policy tried to modernise the welfare state through a combination of democratic socialism and capitalist economy (Giddens, 1998). This compromise

paved the way for neoliberalism and market forces as a means to rescue egalitarian social democratic values. This trend was motivated by national and global economic concerns, not to mention competition and power struggle, and, likewise, the expert advice was based on an economic logic.

After the millennium, restructuring processes were expanded in all three countries, clearly inspired by market forces, management by objectives, decentralisation, and recentralisation processes, competition, and Principal Agent Theory, which prescribes a top down relation and a sharp division of powers between customer and provider. In all three countries, we find new legislations that regulate this development by laying more emphasis on efficiency and excellence, on a clear requirement for results, on more assessment and testing, on less trust in teachers, on more control, and on more competition. A competitive context is not conducive to an inclusive, comprehensive school for all children because it requires teachers who are trusted and who are given professional freedom to construct pedagogic differentiation in flexible learning environments, for instance through progressively inspired education. Time is also a controversial issue, as is most clearly expressed in Denmark and Norway. Teachers need enough time and resources to adapt to increasing student diversity and the challenges of multiculturalism. In all, there is reason to expect that a market- and efficiency-oriented education policy produces conditions that may jeopardise the entire comprehensive project.

This becomes even more apparent when we look at new social technologies and new "travelling ideas" that affect classroom practices more directly. All three countries have introduced national curriculum plans with learning objectives that are the same for all students. Sweden was the first to introduce behavioural objectives, as early as 1994. These new objectives require students to make their learning visible by showing their knowledge or competence through predefined performances or through a large number of tests inspired by international agencies, first and foremost the OECD. More emphasis on summative grading and national assessment systems, which are assumed to make students' learning more efficient, have also had a backlash effect by increasing the number of students who fail, and who later on drop out at upper-secondary level. At the same time, greater differences between schools are stimulated by free school choice and various kinds of talent schools and independent schools, resulting in more student segregation. The cultural programme of the old comprehensive school, bringing *Bildung* and cultural values to the people, is toned down and more emphasis is placed on instrumental skills to satisfy the needs of business and industry. This is, of course, an important responsibility for education, but it downplays the functions of bringing cultural heritage and broad subject knowledge to new generations that help young children shape their identities for their future lives.

The "third way" policy may bring important stimulation to market-based industry, which is of course important in maintaining high employment and in preventing poverty and increased class differences. The problem seems to be that economic market models have been transferred to education without the necessary precautions, and that the technologies adopted to make the logic of the market work may in fact undermine the main values of the comprehensive project. In this way, the means may counteract its own ends.

This is clearly demonstrated in our report on the educational policies in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden since the millennium. The situation for the comprehensive school is full of contradictions when we look at the level of social technologies. The broad vision of comprehensive education, providing a liberal education and *Bildung*, is affected by standards and testing, so that the culture is transformed into one of testable academic competencies and basic skills and thus narrowing the scope of education and learning. Community and democracy in schools are substituted by individualisation. There are indications that social technologies downplay student collaboration and active discovery learning, instead favouring direct teacher delivery of pre-prepared knowledge; that differentiation according to students' abilities is overruled by having the same learning objectives for all students; and that the comprehensive project's value of inclusion is contradicted by free school choice and the segregation of schools. Differences between schools are also reinforced by greater municipal responsibility, which potentially leads to a variety of local accountability systems and

quality assurance programmes, reflecting different conceptions of what good schooling actually means in practice. In this way, the national vision of an equal right to a good education goes astray as it is adapted by local politicians and organisational experts.

There is, of course, variation between the countries when it comes to each of these contradictions. In Denmark, competition and the decline of community are the most apparent symptoms, while in Norway the policies of decentralisation and management by objectives seem to be in the foreground. In Sweden, the neoliberal turn started 10 years earlier than in the other two countries, along with a privatisation process, but it seems that there are some moderating elements in the latest national regulations, which put more emphasis on students' learning processes, formative assessment, and inclusion. On the other hand, it is in Sweden that the segregation processes seem to have been the most extensive.

Reflections and explanations

The economic situation before the millennium initiated the neo-liberalist movement in education, and it seems that the reforms since the millennium have taken the efficiency policy even further. How, then, can we explain this development?

The demands for change have been strong from outside of the schools. The global initiatives, especially the PISA tests and the TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey) investigations from the OECD, and the TIMSS and the PIRLS from the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) , have instigated a massive public panic that has reduced people's trust in teachers and has legitimised the politicians to act in accordance with the market ideology. The mechanism in this is "the soft governance," modelled in the open method of coordination (OMC) strategy, which plays on competition, national pride and the borrowing of result-based curriculum ideas and testing, mainly from the USA (Alexiadou, 2014; Dale, 2009; Lawn, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). Interwoven into this test policy, we find big international publishing companies making the most of their economic profit as providers to the global education market. Supported by the OECD, they produce the illness, make the diagnosis through test, and sell the medicine (Moos, 2009; Sjøberg, 2014).

Elements from new institutional theory can help to explain this development. At policy level, *mimetic processes* are part of the discourse (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The comparison of countries through the OMC does not only produce competition and legitimacy for reforms, but also imitation. "Look to Finland" is a cry that echoes across the world. It is then an interesting question, why so many countries do not design a system like Finland, which has developed a successful combination of an academic culture and the Nordic model of education, and has resisted what Sahlberg calls the Global Education Reform Movement (Sahlberg, 2011). Instead, policy makers introduce systems with detailed management by objectives and control. This may suggest that there are mimetic processes going on at the political level, maintained by the superficial and contradictory discourses that motivate the reforms, and that the ideal of efficiency borrowed from economy is the true force behind the implementation of new social technologies.

The reform processes since the millennium can also be seen as a battle for *legitimacy* (March & Olsen, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 2006; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014). From new institutional theory we learn that legitimacy and trust among stakeholders (i.e., politicians, parents, etc.) are more important to an organisation than efficiency. This is still true, but reforms since the millennium are designed to make *efficiency the very criterion of legitimacy*. It is the production of students' learning outcomes that gives credibility to schools. Transparency, tests, and comparison are the main tools for this purpose. Thus, the basis for legitimacy is no longer the values of equality, inclusion, and participation, along with trust in teachers as professionals, but the extent to which the school is effectively producing results.

In all three countries, reforms have been implemented with strong regulative and social technology elements, such as detailed regulations, national competence aims, more assessment, tests, and

control of students learning, which are difficult for schools to avoid. The demand for transparency and visibility of learning outcomes, along with documentation of activities and results, directly affects the core activities in schools and how teachers teach. The regulative systems are associated with coercive technologies that make decoupling unlikely. Teachers cannot ignore imposed quality control and documentation. This depends partly on municipal contract arrangements with schools, but we also see that governmental interventions bypass the municipal education system, for instance by means of state inspection systems and new assessment regulations. These technologies, therefore, are initiated both at national and municipal levels, and this makes the pressure on the mistrusted schools and teachers even stronger.

Widespread teacher resistance to these control systems indicates normative conflicts for teachers. These social technologies are not in accordance with their professional understanding of the meaning of education. Teachers' traditional faith in good pedagogy for the good of the children is overruled by a number of technocratic tools that are empty of pedagogic ideologies and mainly require results. The values of the Nordic comprehensive school are therefore no longer at the forefront of the development of schools. They are overshadowed by the new technologies.

Conclusion

At the institutional level, the Nordic model still exists as the predominant education system for the large majority of Scandinavian students. Its purpose, main values, and structure are accepted in the preambles of the latest education acts in all three countries. However, the reforms since the millennium have introduced new contradictory social technologies for teaching and learning into the system, partly through national regulation and legislation and partly at local level. These technologies may support increasing student segregation, social differences, and upper-secondary school dropouts, as well as less inclusion and unequal opportunities. The link to progressive education has become weaker, there is less differentiation, and less democratic participation. The Nordic model of education in the Scandinavian countries has, therefore, been in a vulnerable position since the millennium.

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