Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research
Vol. 50, No. 3, July 2006, pp. 223–228

Introduction: Is there a Nordic model in education?

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Theoretical journals enjoy a precarious existence at the best of times, never being certain what next year will bring. But the best security they can have for their relevance and their longevity is that they manage to carve out a niche in the theoretical world that they serve. As Åsmund Strømnes, the editor, says in his editorial, it is the intention of this journal to serve educationalists in the Nordic countries by providing a platform in English for their research and to present to the rest of the world theoretical work dealing with the Nordic countries. The international world of learning can turn to this journal for the latest research on education in the Nordic countries expressed in the *lingua franca* of the present times, the English language. It has a broad sweep and attempts to let the quality of the research guide decisions about publication.

The idea behind this jubilee celebration issue is simple. We asked a number of leading researchers in Scandinavia to approach the Nordic systems of education from a number of viewpoints. The intention was to see which characteristics of the Nordic systems are common and which ones are different. It was up to the experts themselves how they conducted their work but each one was asked to concentrate on one area. The five selected areas were: (1) the ideology and structure of the Nordic school system; (2) education as a part of the welfare system past and present; (3) education as a part of the political system; (4) traditions in teaching and future challenges; and (5) problems of assessment and learning outcome. In addition to these themes we asked one contributor to assess Grundtvig's influence on the school systems and on the Danish system in particular. The results of the work of these authors are to be found in this Jubilee Issue.

Background

In 1956 the world looked different from how it looks now. Europe was starting to recover from the Second World War, gradually the restrictions of wartime rationing had been lifted, and daily life had returned to normal or what could be considered normal after the catastrophe of war. The wartime economy had more or less

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ISSN 0031-3831 (print)/ISSN 1430-1170 (online)/06/030223-6

DOI: 10.1080/00313830600743233

disappeared, and the worries about the economy at the end of the war, e.g. about mass unemployment, had not materialised. The 25 years after the war were a time of low unemployment and steady economic growth. But in the 1970s the western countries endured an oil crisis when the Arab countries embargoed the western countries and the price of oil rose steeply. This caused a rise in unemployment from 2–3% up to 5% in Denmark, for example, and since the 1970s unemployment has remained high in the Scandinavian countries—with Norway as an exception where the rise came in the 1990s—fluctuating between 5% and 15% depending on the circumstances in the economy, in some countries even going higher at times.

The economy since the 1970s has become more volatile and difficult to control for the nation states. Globalisation has become more prominent, meaning that the world of finance is international, capital floats freely and quickly and information travels the world in a split second. A problem in one part of the system can easily affect the financial system in distant parts and there is very little that the national governments can do about it. Serious doubts about economic growth and concern about the environment have become prominent in politics and discussions about the economy. Nevertheless in 2006 citizens in the Nordic countries are wealthier than they were in 1956, they enjoy the benefits of stable societies and it seems to be safe to say that these 50 years have been characterised by steady economic growth (Gustafsson, 1997).

At the end of the Second World War the Nordic societies started to build extensive welfare states. They built on foundations that had been laid before the war and in 1956 they were well on their way. The welfare systems they built consist of many parts. Three are most prominent: a free hospital service, an extensive system of benefits, and a school system that is free from the beginning of the primary school at six years of age until the end of university education. The hospital and the education systems are free at entry but they are funded by taxpayers' money. As a whole the welfare system has the aim of increasing security in the lives of ordinary people and offers them opportunities to develop, plan and live their lives reasonably well. As a consequence, the unemployed in the last 30 years have been able to survive and live a reasonable life on the benefits supplied, not falling into destitution or extreme poverty. So, even unemployment of 10–15% has not meant social unrest. The welfare system seems also to have been a major factor in the official ideology of a national home that some of the successful political parties in these last 50 years have presented to the electorate.

The rise of the welfare state was a major factor in changing the economies of the Nordic countries into service economies. By the turn of the century a large majority in all these countries worked in the service industries and some had managed to develop further into a knowledge economy (Antikainen, this issue). A social change that was a part of this development was the increased participation of women in the economy. In both the World Wars the economic contribution of women increased. After the Second World War they did not retreat from the labour market. The steady economic growth of the last 50 years has made it possible for women to enter the

labour market. The welfare services and other parts of the service sector have attracted them in large numbers. The role and the status of women has been one of the major issues in the last 40 years at least or for most of the time that this journal has been published. This is especially true of the Nordic societies.

Issue Content

In these last 50 years the Nordic societies have proved to be very successful in economic terms, combining general welfare and economic success. This is worth pointing out because in many accounts of modern societies, especially those termed 'neo-liberal', general welfare is considered to be a burden on economic success.

The very notion of a Nordic or Scandinavian model of education may arouse suspicion in the minds of some readers thinking that we are assuming from the outset that there is such a model. This is not our assumption but before we say anything definitive about it we had better look at some of the relevant facts. In the issue's first contribution Ari Antikainen analyses the notion of a Nordic or Scandinavian model of education. He argues that education as a social institution has two sides, a local and a global one. Here it is sufficient just to comment on the local side, which covers its relation to other local agents, the specific local values and practices and the state. The local side is shaped by three major goals: equity, participation and welfare. The means to achieve these goals is the comprehensive primary school common to all the Nordic school systems funded from the public purse. The school system is not necessarily the best means to achieve the ends that the national governments aim for because the school system is directly influenced by its social context, in general reproducing the social stratification surrounding it. This seems to be the case in the Nordic countries but because they seem to suffer less from class divisions than other societies in the developed world, the school system has more of a chance to affect the social stratification of the pupils. But it seems not to be the social equaliser that some politicians and social activists dreamed of. One of the problems influencing discussions about this objective is that there does not seem to be any common understanding of what equality in education really means.

Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, Odd Asbjørn Mediås and Petter Aasen analyse the education system in terms of the political developments in the last 50 years. The latent motive in their thoroughly documented essay seems to me to be a move from equality towards liberty for the school system. They divide the period into three parts: the golden years of social democracy, 1945–1970; the intermediate phase, the radical left of the 1970s; and finally the era of globalisation and neo-liberalism. The first phase is characterised by a strong state that is willing to form and argue for wide-ranging policies in education and put them into practice. In the second phase the radical left influenced both public thinking and theoretical thinking. It emphasised equality just like the social democrats earlier but the radical left was sceptical of the ideas of progress and development. In the final phase the ideology changes again and is described as neo-liberal and neo-conservative. The magic word is choice and the

individual is considered primarily to be a consumer rather than a citizen. One question that one might ask about this development is if it really is a move away from equality rather than to a different conception of equality, i.e. equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcome or equality of resources. However that may be, one of the striking things about the Nordic social model has been its success in combining free markets with social policies that create a context for the individuals to control and plan their lives.

Anne-Lise Arnesen and Lisbeth Lundahl discuss one central aspect in education policies in the Nordic welfare states, namely inclusive education. Inclusion seems to be one variation of the idea of equality. It refers to the educational policy of aiming to have all children, irrespective of background or disabilities, in mainstream schools. The authors approach their subject from the point of view of welfare, assuming that education is part of the welfare state. One of the accepted assumptions in the first decades after the Second World War was that special groups needed special treatment and pupils with severe disabilities should be kept in special schools. It has always been accepted that they were entitled to more resources than other students but now they should be part of the mainstream in regular schools. This is official policy in the Nordic countries and is an indication of a wider understanding of the notion of equality than had been assumed. This model has been put under pressure recently but the authors argue that welfare and education still have the features of equality that they started out with.

Individuality and individualism are part and parcel of liberalism, old and new, and so is equality. In the last two decades the emphasis has been more on liberty than equality. I guess it should not come as a surprise that teaching has become individualised. Ingrid Carlgren, Kirsti Klette, Sigurjón Mýrdal, Karsten Schnack and Hannu Simola examine the change that has taken place in the classrooms of the Nordic countries from classroom-based teaching to individualised teaching and the teaching of individuals. It has often been argued that one of the weaknesses of the old model of teaching was insufficient attention to individual differences. The welfare system in general has often been criticised for not attending to individual needs but rather emphasising general rules and provisions. Similar considerations applied to the classrooms. The new policy wants to give suitable support to each and every individual student. Even though this policy is most often justified in terms of individualism, it is easy to see how it can be coupled with the notion of equality. The basic idea seems to be that each and every individual is entitled to support and provisions that suit her/his needs and wants.

The idea of equality has even been an important consideration in deciding the policy on assessment in education. Anders Lysne reviews the practice of assessing outcomes of learning, evaluating student work in the Nordic countries. This is a subject that is contentious in the Nordic countries and within the context of the comprehensive compulsory school it is to be expected that assessment elicits widely different views. It lies in the nature of assessment that it differentiates between students, it tells us who is doing well and who is not doing so well. If the official

policy of the comprehensive compulsory school is to equalise the opportunities of students, it is reasonable to ask if assessment along traditional lines serves this purpose as well. When streaming was abandoned and the system developed along more individual lines than before assessment became even more problematic. If learning is individualised then the assessment of the learning outcomes should serve the student so a comparison with other students is not necessarily of any relevance to him/her. Lysne discusses these and other issues surrounding assessment, one of which is the distinction between criterion-referenced tests and norm-referenced tests. This issue is not resolved here but it is explored extensively and should make us see how these two ways of assessing serve their purpose in different contexts.

The Danish priest and politician in the nineteenth century, N. F. S. Grundtvig was a liberal, deeply interested in the liberalism of his times, and the views he advocated seem to have been both typical for the liberal viewpoint and informed by the context in Denmark. Ove Korsgaard and Susanne Wiborg explore his unique contribution to Danish school history and to Scandinavian history of education as well. But like most liberals Grundtvig was also interested in equality. These two values form the core of any serious conception of modern society. Grundtvig established folk high schools; schools that were intended to educate ordinary people, not by pushing them into studying classical languages or classical history but by studying national history and poetry and the mother tongue. In accordance with his liberal principles, Grundtvig was opposed to the state controlling all education. Hence, his folk high schools were independent of the state, run by individuals for the benefit of ordinary people who otherwise might have missed further education. Grundtvig prepared the way for an education that was both liberal and equal, should serve all or almost all and at the same time reinforce nationalism. One consequence of his liberalism is the fact that compulsory schools in Denmark have long been accepted as being the responsibility of the parents and the local authorities, and secondly that private schools have a long tradition in the Danish system.

It has been claimed on behalf of Grundtvig that he is the author of the modern comprehensive school system in Denmark. The authors question this claim. Grundtvig and his ideas were not the main reason the state had for establishing a comprehensive Danish school system. But Grundtvig's deep influence on Danish thinking on education has made the Danish system special in a Nordic context. The Danish mixture of liberty and equality in education seems to be markedly different from the other Nordic countries and the historical reason for that is apparently Grundtvig. His presence is still being felt.

Is there then a Nordic model of education? I think the answer to this question is positive: there does seem to be a Nordic model of education. This model consists in common aims for the school system and a common method or means. The system has a number of aims. It ought to equalise opportunities, provide pupils with skills benefiting them in the economy and skills for interacting with other people. The means towards these aims is a comprehensive system for primary and lower secondary schools that is common to all these countries. But all the Nordic systems

have features that distinguish them from the others. All the systems incorporate the basic values of equality and liberty even though these notions are differently interpreted in the Nordic countries.

I want to thank Professor Åsmund L. Strømnes for his generous help while I was preparing this issue. Without him it would not have come about. He has been ready with advice and suggestions whenever I have asked, and I have had to ask more often than I can remember. I also want to thank the other national editors for their support and ideas about this project. Last but not least I want to express my gratitude to the authors of the articles. Their contributions are valuable indeed. I have profited from reading their essays and enjoyed their learning and I hope the readers of this journal will experience the same pleasure as I did.

Reference

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