

Application for NERA-slot at AERA 2025 :  
Network 21: Politics of Education and Education Policy Studies

## Title: Scrutinizing the Nordic Dimension in Education: Myths, Realities, and Integration Efforts

### Participants:

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Chair: *John Benedicto Krejsler*

Discussant: *Thomas S. Popkewitz, University of Wisconsin-Madison*

### Session abstract (119 words)/120max):

This symposium explores *the Nordic dimension in education* and what unites and divides the five small Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden)(Andersen et al., 2007; Krejsler, 2024).

Each of the Nordic countries appreciates the critical mass that similar – but not identical – school and education systems and values offer; that ideas can be developed in a Nordic forum before going ‘international’ in an educational world where Anglo-American standards, procedures and norms prevail (Krejsler & Moos, 2021).

The symposium explores the myths and realities in education of a Nordic dimension that range from an imagined national-romantic community of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century kind to the Post-WW2 pragmatic collaborations connected to developing Nordic Social-Democratic Welfare States (Hilson, 2008; Telhaug et al., 2006; Tjeldvoll, 1998)

**Objectives:** The objective of the symposium is to clarify from different angles what a Nordic dimension in education may mean. It is exclusive to the five Nordic countries? Does it make sense to extend this dimension to Scotland, Ireland and the Baltic neighbors?

The contributors present different and mutually supplementary accounts of this complex of discourse and practice that frames and sets direction for school and education in policy, practice and educational research.

**Overview:** Krejsler demonstrates the Nordic dimension as a dynamic methodological device – a metaspaces - for gathering critical mass among researchers from small like-minded Nordic countries; as a strategy to mine the riches of the five Nordic countries and beyond.

Bjarnadóttir and Jónasson attempt at mapping Nordic arenas of education as a complex of interactive and comparative spaces.

Candido and Rönnerberg explore how the 'Nordic model' of education becomes an object of commercialization in diverging ways in Finland and Sweden; and the benefits and costs of increasingly mixing educational values and business by exploiting the world-wide reputation of 'the Nordic'.

Rasmussen, Dovemark, Holm and Helakorpi explore the similarities and differences in education policies and practices in the five different Nordic countries to dealing with the heated political issue of immigration by identifying the positions for newly arrived immigrant students.

Pondering upon the largely constructive complexity of the issue of the Nordic dimension, the symposium invites the audience to join in reflections upon Nordic integration experiences as well as significance for a wider European, transatlantic and global education community.

**Scholarly or scientific significance:** Drawing on the rapidly evolving body of work on the Nordic dimension in education, this symposium contributes to the field by exploring, at a crosscutting level, whether and to what extent it still makes sense to speak of a Nordic dimension in education. To what extent is this phenomenon a reality, rather than a myth of bygone days? And if we assume that a Nordic dimension is a living reality, as clearly suggested by the growing literature on the topic, then this requires us to elaborate upon what such a dimension consists in, and how it can be delimited as a meaningful notion (e.g. Blossing et al., 2016; Elstad, 2023; Krejsler & Moos, 2021; Tröhler et al., 2022) .

#### **Structure of the session:**

- Short overview by chair.
- "The Nordic Dimension as a Metaspace for Educational Research" by John Benedicto Krejsler
- "The Nordic interactive and comparative spaces within the arena of education", Jón Torfi Jónasson and Valgerður S. Bjarnadóttir (presenter)
- "Commercialising the 'Nordic Model': Education export rhetoric in Finland and Sweden"; Linda Rönnerberg and Helena Hinke Dobrochinski Candido (presenter)
- "Positions of newly arrived students in Nordic education policies and practices", Annette Rasmussen (presenter), Marianne Dovemark, Gunilla Holm and Jenni Helakorpi
- Reflections upon presentations by discussant leads to discussion with audience.

#### **References:**

- Andersen, T. M. et al. (2007). *The Nordic Model*. Helsinki: ETLA.
- Blossing, U. et al.(Eds.). (2016). *The Nordic Education Model*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Elstad, E. (Ed.)(2023). *Teacher Education in the Nordic Region*. Cham: Springer.
- Hilson, M. (2008). *The Nordic Model: Scandinavia since 1945*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Krejsler, J.B. (Ed.)(2024). *Scrutinising the Nordic Dimension in Education*. London: Routledge.
- Krejsler, J. B., & Moos, L. (Eds.). (2021a). *What Works in Nordic School Policies?* Cham (CH): Springer.
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## Metaspace – A Conceptual Tool to Explore the Nordic

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### *Objectives:*

This paper argues that observing ‘the Nordic dimension’ as a metaspace in methodological terms harbors potentials to qualifying educational research, policy and debate (Krejsler, 2023).

### *Theoretical framework:*

The concept of the metaspace designates a space that gathers critical mass by scaling up smaller national spaces to a Nordic metaspace. In relation to a Danish, Swedish or Finnish case, a meta-space could be in scalar terms the Nordic dimension, a European or, ultimately, a Global dimension. The driving argument for construing ‘the Nordic dimension’ as a metaspace is that it may qualify education policy research as the five Nordic countries represent historical, linguistic, and societal links that have produced similar societal and educational values, albeit according to different trajectories (Hilson, 2008; Krejsler & Moos, 2021). The Nordic dimension thus represents a comparative dimension that enables a particular nation-state to put its societal and educational conditions and choices in perspective. As a floating signifier the Nordic dimension allows the opportunity to draw on the wealth of diversity that this metaspace represents to problematize and potentially rethink national solutions.

### *Methodological approaches:*

In terms of method, the project of delimiting a useful conceptualization of a Nordic metaspace is conducted by using scalar, topological and floating signifier approaches (e.g. Allen, 2016; Amin, 2002; Krejsler, 2023; Savage et al, 2021).

### *Data sources and materials:*

In addition to literature on scalar, topological and floating signifier methodological approaches, the paper draws on considerable Nordic educational research and adjacent literature on the issue of similarities and differences between the five Nordic countries.

### *Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view*

The study concludes that rethinking national school and education models in small countries can benefit from employing approaches that allow to pool up with similar-minded countries to gather more critical mass. The methodological approach of the metaspace here represents a potentially sophisticated methodological comparative approach to better understanding educationally relevant issues like coming to terms with increasing inequalities and challenges to social cohesion, raising internal tensions in terms of polarization, opposition to non-western immigration, transnational solutions and so forth. Here the Nordic dimension as a metaspace could serve an important methodological role of producing more differentiated – and less nationally limited – perspectives on issues like national school reform, national values and priorities.

In a similar way, one could argue, that the Nordic dimension collectively represents only 26 million people wherefore it makes sense to continue this quest of

qualifying metaspaces by consulting a European dimension of common history of politics, societal transformations and cultural ideas in a Europe of 750 million people and a European Union of 447 million people.

*Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work*

The Nordic dimension as a metaspace is useful for education policy research in times of globalization and neo-liberal reforms where transnational collaborations have made their imprints on all Nordic countries, and in current times of geopolitical instability.

**References:**

- Allen, J. (2016). *Topologies of power: Beyond territory and networks*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Amin, A. (2002). Spatialities of Globalization. *Environment and Planning A*, 34(3), 385-399.
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- Savage, G. C., Gregorio, E. D., & Lingard, B. (2021, on-line). Practices of scalecraft and the reassembling of political boundaries: the contested nature of national schooling reform in the Australian federation,. *Policy Studies*. doi:10.1080/01442872.2021.1885640

## The Nordic interactive and comparative spaces within the arena of education

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**Objectives:** This paper emphasizes the manifold Nordic interaction within the field of education by proposing three educational spaces, an operational space, an interactive space and a comparative space. The interactions between, but mainly within, different interactive spaces are explored to shed further light on varieties of Nordic educational cooperation, some of which are related to policy discourse but rarely directly. Our main aim is to map out some of the arenas and interconnections within the Nordic educational spaces, and thus to grasp their extent and develop a basis for understanding the rationale of the interactions taking place.

### **Theoretical framework:**

We draw on the work of Christmann, Knoblauch and Löw (2022) who focus on the *communicative construction of spaces*. The spaces we direct our attention to are socially constructed and characterized by various types of interaction, which are essentially various ways of communication. Thus, drawing on Christmann (2022), the term space (rather than dimension or arena) is used to refer to a socially constructed space, which is defined, for example, by operations, values, culture, and different types and categories of interaction and actions. It is therefore considered fluid and dynamic, and not limited to physical places.

### **Methodological approaches:**

The study is mainly exploratory in nature and has some methodological challenges, as the documentation is often either lacking or meagre and therefore difficult to access.

### **Data sources and materials:**

The mapping of different educational spaces is based on a literature and documentary search and analysis, consultation with ministerial experts on specific aspects of the various types of interactions, including interviews in cases where documentation was lacking.

### **Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view:**

In the context of a Nordic model of education with presumed common roots and potentially a synergic moulding development of such a phenomenon, we present quite a different aspect of the common Nordic within the arena of education. We also note that some aspects of Nordic commonality are paradoxically both explicitly public and thus clearly visible but simultaneously strangely hidden. The study suggests that within the interactive space, practical, scientific, administrative and policy sub-spaces connect across the Nordic countries. The interactive space is seen as socially constructed, multidimensional, and centering on communication. The intense interactive activity sustained for well over a century still leaves open the question about its influence on a Nordic operational mode or the traces of a Nordic model.

### **Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work**

The signifier of Nordic cooperation floats towards documented arenas. However, it is clear that there is much more to the Nordic interactive spaces than what is officially or scientifically documented and some documents that presumably exist are even difficult to

find. This lack of available documentation was one of the conclusions of Volmari et al., (2022). By using various sources and materials, we have identified different layers and dimensions of cooperation within the field of education and policy making, which has value for similar studies on educational spaces in and between different international contexts.

#### References:

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## Commercialising the 'Nordic Model': Education export rhetoric in Finland and Sweden

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### 1. Objectives or purposes

Despite diverging education policy and approaches to education export, Finland and Sweden have actively exported education to diverse countries (Rönnberg & Candido, 2023). In this paper, we aim to critically discuss motivations and interests for exporting education from Finland and Sweden to the world, as well as the interplay of stakeholders engaged in those processes, to identify the emerging governance patterns domestically, in the Nordic space, and globally. We employ comparative lenses to enhance knowledge about the developments in commercialization of education in the two countries, how “Nordic” as a social-political construction is utilized in both cases, and in the wide global education industry (GEI).

### 2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

Education export, i.e. the international trade of education goods and services, such as teacher training and teaching materials, education technology, etc., requires some form of commodification of education. These processes are far from neutral and entail subjectification as well as associated power relations in the GEI (Parreira do Amaral et al., 2019; Verger et al., 2016). Education governance, thus, both affects and is affected by such processes.

### 3. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

We investigate discursive practices among Finnish and Swedish stakeholders when they refer to education export and whether such discursive practices contrast and/or present contradictions in education governance in both countries. We understand that discursive practices ‘systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). They combine materiality, intentional purposes, and language in a set of practices that simultaneously describe and conceptualize a given phenomenon (i.e., education export, in this study). The discursive practices allow us to identify different forms of power, interactions, and political processes connected to education export that affect education governance.

### 4. Data sources, evidence, objects

Our analysis draws on data from interviews conducted in Finland (n=14) and Sweden (n=14) comprising government representatives, experts, advocacy groups, and education export entrepreneurs. Relying on discourse analysis, we challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of the GEI, which are embedded in Finnish and Swedish education export, critically discussing the implicit power within the political processes associated with education export, and examining the interplay between the multiple stakeholders.

### 5. Results and conclusions or warrants for arguments/point of view

Managerial and economic discourses co-exist with the remaining premises of the Nordic welfare systems in Finland and Sweden. International influences, such as the PISA rankings,



in the case of Finland, and Nordic exceptionalism, in both cases, play important roles in setting the ground for education export to flourish. However, discursive practices are embedded in the idea of otherness: the other(importer) is portrayed as in need of certain knowledge and skills that are provided by the exporter. This may reveal neo-managerialism aligned with a neo-colonial approach to education manifested through education export.

#### **6. Scientific or scholarly significance of the study or work**

This research contributes to current discussions in education governance, as the motivations, interests, policies, and practices of education export affect the nature of education itself and the direction(s) and agenda(s) of education governance.

#### **References**

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- Parreira do Amaral, M., Steiner-Khamisi, G. & C. Thompson (Eds.) (2019). *Researching the Global Education Industry*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
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## **Positions of newly arrived students in Nordic education policies and practices**

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### *Objectives or purposes:*

This paper investigates how Nordic countries – exemplified by Denmark, Finland, and Sweden – govern the education and inclusion of newly arrived students. Despite the Nordic dimension of equality as an important educational vision, the problem of discrimination remains a major political challenge (Beach & Dovemark, 2019; Horst, 2017; Hummelstedt et al., 2021). To understand why and how discrimination takes place, we take a closer look at the students who are included in the category of ‘students with migrant background’ (Brännström, 2021).

### *Theoretical framework:*

We approach policy as text and practice, asking what subject positions the newly arrived students face. Through their representations, the texts discursively create possible and impossible positions for the students (Fairclough, 1995). The ideological basis and the subject position the text producer has produced remain in the resulting relationship with the interpreter of the text.

### *Methodological approach:*

We compare policies and identify discourses and subject positions in which the newly arrived student is presented as the problem. Viewing the Nordic countries as a regional amalgam of countries that have something in common, we focus on the Nordic dimension by comparing how identical phenomena are dealt with in and across this regional context and the varieties this results in. In our comparison, we move along a horizontal axis, which not only contrasts the three cases with one with another, but also traces documents and other influences across the cases, and to some extent also includes vertical and transversal comparisons (Bartlett & Vaurus, 2017).

### *Data sources:*

Our research data consist of national policy documents, legislation, and evaluation reports on the education of newly arrived students.

### *Results and substantiated conclusions:*

We conclude that the newly arrived students become subject to underachievement, bullying, discrimination, and in risk of not continuing their education. Policies concerning newly arrived students construct the students as ‘in lack of’ which is a typical way of depicting for instance ethnic minority students. However, the Finnish and Swedish policies also to some extent challenge this through their emphasis on students’ first language teaching and learning. In this respect, Denmark stands out by not no longer having mother

tongue instruction as a central right. While a monolingual norm is emphasised in Denmark and Sweden, Finland, at the policy level, is more supportive of multilingualism.

*Scientific or scholarly significance of the study:*

Our study also points to the partial invisibility of newly arrived students in policies, resulting in lumping together all students with migrant backgrounds as one homogenous group and with little knowledge about the diverse situations of diverse students. Further research is needed on the diversity in these student groups and to what extent they are visible in educational practice.

## References

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