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Welfare, social justice, and equality in educational settings in the Nordic countries

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Editorial

This *Special Issue* consists of articles by researchers involved in *Nordic research network, NordCrit: Critical Perspectives on Children, Young People, Welfare and Education*. The NordForsk funded network has promoted collaboration between scholars associated with critical educational research in the Nordic Countries (see e.g. Arnesen et al 2010). From the perspectives of welfare and social justice, the network aims for an intersectional methodology, where the focus is on the multiple ways in which social divisions, such as gender, class, ethnicity, and disability are entangled and constructed by way of each other, but also how they form politically and subjectively constructed identities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The scope of the articles covers educational settings from pre-primary education to upper secondary education. They include ethnographic and interview studies with young people and educators, as well as policy analysis. The articles draw on different methodological frameworks; however, they all share critical perspectives that aim at challenging the normative understandings of knowledge, practises, and subjects of education in terms of equality and social justice.

More specifically, this *Special Issue* provides a critical view on children and young people's lives and environments in three Nordic countries: Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic countries have long been regarded as archetypes of strong welfare states, where individuals and families are assumed to receive support in order to secure their well-being as well as to benefit from the common good (Bloch, Holmlund, Moqvist and Popkewitz 2003; Esping-Andersen, 1996). The assurance of citizens' social rights and the minimisation of social differences, have counted among the Nordic welfare states' central tenets (Antikainen, 2006; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). The welfare State is in fact an idea through which Nordic countries imagine themselves as nations (see Andersson, 1991). However, the Nordic model of the welfare state has been challenged by the spread of neoliberalism, which emphasises

economic reasoning and market orientation (Gordon, Lahelma & Beach, 2003; Karlsen, 2006; Telhaug, Mediås & Aasen, 2006).

The articles in this *Special Issue* embrace themes and discourses related to the macro and micro levels. They deal with political and normative aspects apparent in policy documents, government plans, and educational reforms. Further, the articles discuss how marketisation affects values, social welfare, justice, and equality at the societal as well as at the individual levels. The articles probe the politics and practises related to ethnicity, gender, equality, and values in terms of discursive power. Summarised, the articles deal with issues of social stratification within three spheres of action: politics, economics, and values.

In the Nordic context, ethnography has functioned as an essential methodological orientation, especially when educational research is focused on the questions of social justice and equality (Arnesen et al., forthcoming). The Nordic tradition of ethnography is characterised by its agility in developing multiple perspectives and identifying the unexplored dimensions of education (Beach, 2010). In their meta-ethnographic analysis Dennis Beach, Marianne Dovemark, Anneli Schwartz, and Elisabet Öhrn contribute to the questions of social inclusion and exclusion by asking what it means for young people to grow up within a multicultural urban context. Their analysis reveals how the subordinated position of these young people is formed in the intersection of material conditions, media representations, the history of the global and local production, as well as the politics of difference, where racialized and ethnised class identities are produced. Whereas Beach et al. explores a social positioning of young people in a multicultural urban context. Tove Steen-Olsen analyses how children with immigrant background build their sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011) in a predominantly white Norwegian suburb. Her study, which is based on focus group interviews, shows how children actively negotiate their sense of belonging - both in relation to the cultural practises of their parents' native country and to the country in which they live.

Besides the idea of 'the respectable citizen', neoliberal reasoning transforms the structures of welfare states. Many welfare agencies, previously controlled by the state, have met an intensified process of privatisation and de-regulation (e.g. Larner, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011). How and to what extent this happens, varies among Nordic countries however. For example, while education from pre-primary education to the upper secondary school has mainly remained public in Finland and Norway, privatisation has been relatively intensive in Sweden

and created a competitive school market - especially in the field of upper secondary education (Loeb & Wass, 2011; Lundström & Holm, 2011). It has been argued that the current educational system in Sweden is one of the most market-oriented in the world (e.g. Hudson, 2011). The educational reform from the beginning of the 1990s, with its emphasis on freedom of choice, broke with some of the previous tenets of the Swedish welfare state and the so called edu-business reached a larger scale than in any of the other Nordic countries (Erixon, Arreman & Holm, 2011). However, micro-level analysis, where the consequences of this radical turn are explored, is still relatively rare. Student perspectives on policy changes in education are explored in Ann-Sofie Holm's contribution. Her article provides an analysis how students make sense of school markets, revealing how market forces remould young people's mind-sets and their social positions in the context of upper-secondary-school choice.

When focusing on equality and social justice in the educational contexts, educator perspectives cannot be ignored. Educator views - in terms of the discourse of inclusion - are explored in Kari Berg's article. Furthermore, she discusses how teachers continuously negotiate their professional identities in relation to the discourse of inclusion. Inclusion has been considered a fundamental value and aim in constructing the policies and practises of education since the 1990s, (Arnesen, Mietola & Lahelma, 2007). Although inclusion, as an organising principle, is meant to be provided for all students' belonging to the learning community, approximately seven per cent of the students in compulsory schooling have been excluded from the conventional learning environment in Norway (Dobson, Eggen & Smith, 2009). Berg argues that although most of the students in Norway are physically inside the school gate, teacher language as well as school culture drives the expectation that student diversity needs to be addressed by specialised professionals.

The Nordic countries have held a reputation of being 'model countries' in terms of gender equality (Lahelma & Öhrn, 2003). This idea is problematized in two articles however, where educational policies and practises in Sweden and Finland are analysed. Kristiina Brunila and Charlotta Edström's article provides a meta-level analysis on equality work from the 1970s to the 2010s, in Finland and Sweden. Drawing on a Foucauldian idea of *discursive power* (e.g. Foucault, 1975/1995), they show how 'Nordic' gender equality is shaped by the alliance between hetero-normativity and marketization. This has meant, for example, that gender equality work in both countries has focused on the labour market, emphasising mainly quantitative aspects such as gender distribution. In the educational field, most equality work

has been directed towards girls and women, specifically in order to challenge traditional male areas such as science and technology. Brunila and Edström argue that the alliance between hetero-normativity and marketization tends to reproduce a zero-sum-game, where genders are seen as dichotomous competing categories.

The myth of gender equality in the Nordic countries is under critical scrutiny in Ylva Odenbring and Sirpa Lappalainen's article as well. Drawing on ethnographic data from Finnish and Swedish pre-primary educational contexts, Odenbring and Lappalainen explore educational practises in the transition from pre-primary education to compulsory schooling. Drawing on feminist theories they investigate how children's actions - in terms of becoming the 'ideal pupil' - are embodied and evaluated by preschool teachers. The results indicate that traditional gendered expectations of 'the ideal pupil' frame daily practices in pre-primary education in Finland as well as in Sweden. Although the Nordic countries are considered 'models' in terms of gender equality in education, these results show that dichotomous thinking still has a great impact in pre-primary education. Moreover, although the Swedish curriculum is relatively progressive compared with the Finnish one, gender still frames the ways that children are evaluated.

The process of marketization has made the possession of knowledge an essential premise for active citizenship (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Robertson, 2009). The market orientation relates to power mechanisms, knowledge regimes, and social inclusion or exclusion. There are no rights of equality or welfare for the poor in the market; those who do not dispose of requisite knowledge might have few opportunities. Those who lack marketable knowledge, qualifications or skills will easily get marginalised. The emphasis on personal qualifications in terms of competences, flexibility, efficiency, and market adaptability are outlined in the temporary educational discourse (Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl & Öhrn, 2010; Ball, 2010; Yates & Young, 2010). Individualisation implies a new freedom, but at the same time it makes the individual dependent on new, subtler orientations and market mechanisms. Market liberalism has promoted new values like individualisation, competitiveness, and efficiency at the expense of democratic values like solidarity, equality and social justice.

Those with advanced degrees, who are able to dispose of and sell their knowledge, will make it into the new elite. However, huge sections of society are at risk of becoming marginalised (Robertson, 2005). In order to disrupt inequalities and promote social justice, Deborah

Youdell (2011) calls for counter-politics in education, which challenges normative understandings of knowledge, practices, and subjects of education. Authors of this *Special Issue* have taken up the gauntlet. Their analyses go beyond league tables, revealing discriminatory processes and practises in various educational arenas, thus deconstructing the myth of the equal Nordic welfare state.

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