Approaching Policies for Handling Social Inequality in Nordic Education

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Abstract

One of the main features of the Nordic Welfare Model is the strong emphasis on social equality with ambitious public welfare arrangements, including family policies, kindergarten, public health and the educational system. Despite of this, the educational system is still struggling to meet the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and youths. The Nordic countries are associated with a high degree of public trust in the state as educational and welfare provider, but under increased pressure internally and externally. The aim of the paper is to highlight tensions and contradictions in national policy to promote social inequality for children in Norway, Sweden and Finland. The analysis is based on policy documents and organizational analysis, and theoretically informed by neo institutional theory.

Introduction

A major concern for Nordic municipalities is whether they can utilize their resources to guarantee just distribution and organization to ensure a good childhood, in a knowledge-based economy (Blossing et. al. 2014; Nordahl et. al. 2018; Benner 2003). The project is part of a university-municipality collaboration between three Nordic cities in Norway, Sweden and Finland with a special focus on organization of childhood and education, and how to enhance a vision of no child left behind. The cities are similar in size and sociodemographic profile, yet different in how they choose to organize their school system as welfare agents. The notion of the educational system as a welfare provider is an integral part of the organization and institutional design of the welfare state related to children's upbringing in the public domain. How these policies are translated locally is often neglected in comparative research (Palme 2006), if we want to understand the complex interplay between the role and function of the school system in analysis of class and social stratification.

Based on the economic and organizational resources invested per-pupil in elementary and secondary education all the Nordic countries are above the OECD average in 2015. Norway´s investment per-pupil (full time equivalents) is substantially higher than in the US, whereas the other Nordic countries are on somewhat lower than in the US in this respect (OECD 2019a-b). These OECD data also show that whereas Norway spent 15.100 USD per FTE in 2015, the United States figure were 12.800, followed by Iceland 11.600, Sweden 11.400 and Finland 10.100 USD (ibid). The economic inequalities based on conventional measures such as the Gini-coefficient is at the lower end of the OECD nations, and substantially lower in all of the Nordic nations compared to the United States (OECD 2019c). Despite ambitious public welfare arrangements and a strong belief in a school system we continue to observe stable and durable inequalities associated with class and gender (Breen et. al. 2009), health (Mackenbach 2012), family economy (Huijts et. al. 2010) and parents' education (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes 2012; Bakken & Elstad 2012).

The aim of the paper is to highlight tensions and contradictions in national policy to promote social inequality for children in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Theory: Organizational perspectives on childhood and welfare

The difference of what the school systems are designed to do and what it does are in neo institutional organization theory described in terms of system integration (Luhman 1990; Schirmer & Michailakis 2019) and "loose and tight couplings" (Hasse & Krücken 2015). Even if organizations often tend to be rather hypocritical in their response to external missions that are not part of the organizational core (Brunsson 2006), it is an empirical question to what extent and how the welfare system is given a priority in the way the schools are organized and governed. A model where the school primarily focus on academic achievements with *loose coupling* to the welfare system or a model where the social welfare system is *at the core* of how the schools are organized and operates are contingent on the relative autonomy of the schools and the educational governance executed by the governments and the municipalities (Rapp 2018).

Method

This article is part of a more extensive project (NTNU 2020) including a wide variety of data sources using extended case study design and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; Burawoy 2009; Ragin 1987). The study includes 140 strategically chosen informants at both the municipal and school level adjusted to each actors' role, either as managers, facilitators or

in first-line contact with children in schools, children's group interviews, in addition to survey and registry data (See table 1 in Appendix). The interviews at the municipal level have informed our understanding of the school system as a welfare agent. The data material in this paper focus on selected documents on educational legislation and policies aimed to enhance social inclusion in the Nordic nations (see Table 2 in Appendix).

Analysis: National Legislation and Local Goals

In each of the three nations we find white papers and policy documents with an emphasis on "social risk projections", based on constructions of future uncertainty. There are high expectations to the role of the educational system as an inclusive arena in all three nations. These arguments also resonate well with the Nordic nation's strong ties to transnational organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Lie et. al. 2003). Arguments from the OECD, the EU, the UN and UNESCO and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are articulated in the policy documents, triggering organizational isomorphism (Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017) and used to improve and legitimize educational output. Recent educational policy is often driven by investments in developing a knowledge-based economy (Government 2017:95; Andersen & Tellman 2018; Olssen & Peters 2005).

The bureaucratic system in all three cases are rationalizing the educational organization to meet what is perceived as uncertainty in a global economy (Beck et al. 1992; Esping-Andersen 1996; Huber & Stephens 2010; Simola & Rinne 2011). In Finland the government program for social inclusion base its reasoning on ideas of a global change: "*In a world that is changing fast and becoming more complex, public authorities may need more effective methods of working.*" (Child's Time–Towards the National Strategy for Children 2040.) In the Swedish case, we find similar concerns stressing the need of international competence:

> "*A globalized Swedish economy describes globalization as an economic, cultural and political process that means that the countries of the world are tied closer together [...] The curricula emphasize the importance of Swedish society's internationalization and the growing mobility across national borders. The school should strengthen students' ability to understand and live into other people's conditions and values and learning about and approaches to international issues should be integrated into different subjects and be cross-disciplinary*" (Swedish Government 2017).

The same pattern is found in Norway where the educational system should be one step ahead to prepare children for a labor market that is unpredictable (Meld. St. 21 (2016–2017): 5). All three nations have imported policy from transnational organizations where we find the tensions between the idea of increased efficiency as a buffer against growing financial uncertainty versus the emphasis on children's rights and welfare. This is also a good illustration how the Nordic countries are adjusting to the international educational environments (Meyer & Scott 1983; Boxenbaum & Jonsson 2017).

While all three nations have developed a formal division with national state agencies in charge of monitoring education, it is not specified how national goals of social inclusion should be operationalized and implemented locally. This is of interest as implementations at the school level are paired with a system constantly exposed to renewed expectations from national and transnational organizations and policies.

On a policy level, we can outline a Nordic model (Antikainen 2006; Nordic co-operation 2019) for education as many of the same values are built into legislation. All three nations have also in recent years developed new national strategies in education with an emphasis on social equality, legal rights and citizenship (Meld. St. 21 (2016–2017); Swedish Government 2017; 2018; Fridolin 2018; Child's Time–Towards the National Strategy for Children 2040). The role and functions of the school as an arena for fostering democratic ideals, of school-family collaboration, and of cultural and social upbringing are also strikingly similar. The national education acts are all ambitious on behalf of the school system where the public school is expected to reflect the interests of the nation state:

"*Education within the school system aims to ensure that children and pupils acquire and develop knowledge and values. It should promote the development and learning of all children and pupils and a lifelong desire to learn. The education should also convey and anchor respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society rests.*" (Sweden's School Act).

One of the main differences in the respective countries is in terms of monitoring and accountability; whereas the municipality is regarded responsible for primary and secondary schooling in both the Swedish and Norwegian contexts, it is more openly defined, with larger

local autonomy, in the Finish system. The same holds true in how the welfare arrangements for the childhood population are arranged locally.

In Norway and Sweden, the average international results have been used as arguments to strengthen the teacher profession (Sjöberg 2019; Smeplass 2018). In Finland, teachers are somewhat shielded from the political critique as they now are considered one of the best ranked systems (Simola & Rinne 2011; Meyer & Benavot 2013).

Social inclusion is operationalized as one of the most important aspects of education in all three nations. While the Norwegian government focus on diversity and fighting discrimination, the Swedes highlights human rights and children's different needs. In Finland the system perspective is more predominant, as the educational system in total, is perceived to ensure social equality in all parts of the country (Finland Basic Education Act 628/1998).

The quest for social equality is more individualized and rights based in both the Norwegian and the Swedish documents, while a more abstract ideologically informed argument is visible in Finland.

Discussion

As in most highly developed economies the educational system is under increased pressure at the local level with several inbuilt tensions and transnational influences (Wiseman, 2017). Even though educational systems tend to be more equal and harmonized in the highly developed economies (Meyer et al. 1977; Meyer et al 1997; Powell et al. 2017; Wiseman, 2017), we find interesting deviations from the general trends of increased scientific, technology and market driven educational governance (Wiseman 2010). This is a question of political resistance against the idea of the school system as a "knowledge factory" with a high output in terms of test results. It may also, as in the Finnish case, be an outcome of path dependencies, and historical circumstances. After an economic recession in the 1990s, you find less testing, evaluation and market ideology in Finland, compared to that of Sweden and Norway (Varjo, Simula & Rinne 2013).

The comparative perspective on educational documents shows the welfare states' willingness to reform and govern education as both a means to integrate its population but reveals how they share a willingness to control citizenship to serve the states' needs for future production. Hence,

the Nordic educational regime seems to have built in tensions between a caring state that provides for all, and a market ideology, very much reflecting the mixed economic model they are based on. On one hand children and their learning are understood in terms of togetherness and community, on the other they represent human capital to be utilized by the State.

In the neo institutional tradition that our larger project trails, tensions between national goals and local organization is an empirical question that is of sociological interest to enlighten further. Whereas the national policy documents regarding social inclusions are well in line with what is commonly seen as a Nordic Model of Education, the case studies illustrate that policy implementation and organizations at the local level differs substantially. This is an interesting observation, but even more importantly essential for future research and policy measures dealing with social inequality in a welfare regime context.

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Appendix

Table 1: Data Sources Document Analysis

	Norway	Sweden	Finland
Educational legislation	Norway's Education Act (2019)	Sweden's School Act.	Finland Basic Education Act 628/1998
Current policy for inclusion	Meld. St. 21 (2016–2017) Lærelyst – tidlig innsats og kvalitet i skolen	Swedish Government (2017; 2018) & Fridolin (2018)	Child's Time – Towards the National Strategy for Children 2040

Table 2: Project Data overview

Country	Interview Objects Municipal Level	School code	Informants	Children's group interviews	
Norway	Educational Director				
	Leader Children's wellfare services	1	Principal School 1	Children's interview 1	
	Economist Education	1	Teacher A School 1	Children's interview 2	
	Chief for Education	1	Special Pedagogue School 1	Children's interview3	
	Counsellor Upbringing 1	1	Department Manager School 1	Children's interview 4	
	Counsellor School Psychiatric Pedagogical Services	1	Leader After School Leasure School 1	Children's interview 5	
	Counsellor Dept. Psychiatric Pedagogical Services	1	Teacher B School 1		
	Department Manager Psych. Services Area 2	1	Teacher C School 1		
	Counsellor Psych. Services Area 3	1	Employee After School Leasure School 1		
	Counsellor Upbringing 2	2	Special Pedagogue 1 School 2	Children's interview 6	
	Department Manager School Health Area 3	2	Teacher 5th grade School 2	Children's interview 7	

	School Health Services Area 2	2	Teacher 4th grade School 2		Children's interview 8	
	Leader School Team	2	Teacher 7th grade School 2		Children's interview 9	
	Department manager Leader Children's wellfare services Area 3	2	Teacher 6th grade School 2		Children's interview 10	
	Counsellor Department of Analysis	2	Social Worker After School Leasure		Children's interview 11	
	Department manager Family Services Area 1	2	Department Manager A School 2			
	Department manager School Health Area 1	2	Department Manager B School 2			
	Department manager Family Meassures Area 2	2	Principal School 2			
	Leader Children's wellfare services Area 1	2	Special Pedagogue 2 School 2			
	Research Coordinator	3	Teacher A School 3			
	Department manager Psychiatric Services Area 3	3	Teacher B School 3			
		3	Leadership/Manager School 3			
		3	Employee A After School Leasure School 3			
		3	Employee B After School Leasure School 3			
		3	Teacher C School 3			
		3	Principal School 3			
N	21		25		11	
Sweden	Children and Student Representatives	1	Assurance Team Member School 1		Children's interview 12	
	Leader Student's Health	1	Curator School 1		Children's interview 13	
	Leader Student's Health	1	Teacher A School 1		Children's interview 14	
	Research Chief	1	Teacher B School 1		Children's interview 15	
	Research Project Leader	1	Teacher C School 1			
	Principal School 1	1	Student's Health Workr			
	Principal School 4	1	Special Teacher School 1			
	Principal School 2	2	Work Team Leader School 2			
	Principal School 3	2	Special Pedagogue School 2			
	Director of Education	2	Curator School 2			
	Chairman of the Board of Education	3	Safety Leader Shool 3		Children's interview 16	
	Development Strategist Elementary School	3	Special Teacher Student's Health School 3		Children's interview 17	
	Head of Medical Student Health	3	Leasure Pedagogue School 3		Children's interview 18	
	Psychologists under the student health manager	3	Teacher A School 3		Children's interview 19	
	Head of Operations for Children and Youth in the Social Office	3	Teacher B School 3		Children's interview 20	
	Head of operations elementary school	3	Special Teacher School 3			
	Chief physician, operations manager	3	Student's Health Worker School 3			

		4	Leader for After School Leasure School 4	Children's interview 21	
		4	Curator School 4	Children's interview 22	
		4	Teacher A School 4	Children's interview 23	
		4	Special Teacher School 4	Children's interview 24	
N	17		21	13	
Finland	Customer service manager (day care)	1	Spec education teacher School 1	Children's interview 25	
	Service manager/Head of kindergartens	1	Teacher A Shool 1	Children's interview 26	
	Service manager /Deputy Head of Schools/Early Child	1	Teacher B School 1	Children's interview 27	
	Service Man (in charge of 1/2 schools 1-9)	1	Teacher C School 1	Childrens interview 28	
	Manager curriculum design schools/early edu	1	School Nurse School 1	Children's interview 29	
	Project manager/coordinator development	1	Principal School 1	Children's interview 30	
	Planning coordinator integration/language training	2	Teacher A School 2	Children's interview 31	
	Head of development projects/research	2	Special Education Teacher School 2	Children's interview 32	
		2	Teacher B School 2	Children's interview 33	
		2	Teacher C School 2	Children's interview 34	
		2	Teacher D School 2	Children's interview 35	
		2	School Nurse School 2		
		2	Assistand Principle School 2		
N	8		13	11	
					Total number of interviews in project
Total by Collumn	46	9	59	35	140