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Contrasting Nordic education policymakers' reflections on the future across time and space

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine how policymakers from three Nordic countries, Finland, Iceland and Sweden, reflect on the future at 2 different points in time: just before the first PISA study (1998–1999) and more than 15 years later (2015–2017). The empirical data consist of interviews ($N = 37$) with national policymakers, collected in two comparative Nordic education policy research projects. As a result of this study, we identified three common themes according to which Nordic policymakers discussed the future: (a) school, work, and social equality in a changing society; (b) policies and practices of education governance; and (c) the future of the teaching profession and teacher education. Whereas these themes constitute a shared semantic basis for envisioning the future of Nordic education, contrasting policymakers' future reflections across time and space also reveals differences, contradictions and changes in ways of thinking about the future.

KEYWORDS

Future reflections; policymakers; Nordic countries; semantic analysis; temporal comparison

Introduction

Besides their partly overlapping histories, the Nordic countries – consisting of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – have often been considered to share a mutual welfare-state model (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Nordic collaboration, especially after World War II, led to the emergence and convergence of similar welfare policies and institutions, including a similar comprehensive school model of basic comprehensive education for children aged 6–16, emphasising inclusion and delayed differentiation (Kettunen et al., 2016; Lie et al., 2003).

During the last two decades, there has been discussion on the key features and motives behind the so-called Nordic education model, and on how education in different Nordic countries has been affected by supranational policy agendas. While some studies seem to be optimistic about the resilience of the Nordic model (Blossing & Söderström, 2014; Frønes et al., 2020; Telhaug et al., 2006), there have also been concerns related to the recent past, present and future policy development (Antikainen, 2006; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Dovemark et al., 2018; Frímannsson, 2006; Jóhannesson et al., 2002; Lundahl, 2002; Tröhler et al., 2022).

In this article, we approach the recent policy development regarding Nordic education by contrasting the future reflections of education policymakers in three of the Nordic countries, Finland, Iceland and Sweden, at two different points in time: just before the first PISA study (1998–1999) and more than 15 years later (2015–2017).

Theoretical and methodological approaches to the future as communication

Despite the growing interest towards the future in recent education policy and research, futures in education are often “tacit, token and taken for granted” (Gough, 1990, p. 298; Säntti et al., 2021). From the everyday perspective, the future is often understood simply as something that we either aspire to, or as something that is going to happen sooner or later. However, our current understanding of the future is relatively recent. Koselleck (2004, pp. 268–270) depicts the emergence of the future as a horizon of expectations to modernity, which is characterised by a transition from the domination of tradition to orientation towards the future. Koselleck’s idea of futures moving in time and space has also inspired many social theorists to discuss future management in contemporary society (Beck et al., 2003; Luhmann, 1976).

Methodological concerns and solutions related to the future vary according to the theoretical path one chooses to follow. In this research, the future is approached as a question of communication. Following the idea of classic Greek rhetoric, the future can be understood as a *topos* for communication consisting of different themes, topics and arguments (Zagar, 2010). From a system theoretical perspective, the future as communication refers to potentiality in contrast to actuality (Luhmann, 1976). Even though “the future cannot begin” (Luhmann, 1976), every attempt to describe present futures has the potential to change future presents. It is thus the future as a contingency of things which makes us expect change and induces us to act accordingly. From the perspective of power relations, thinking and minding about the future also involves a discursive struggle about the expected origins, ownerships and rationalities behind the future projections (Adam, 2008; Forssell, 2015; Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2004; Rensfeldt & Player-Koro, 2020; Robertson, 2022; Saari, 2021; Säntti et al., 2021). In earlier research, ownerships and origins of the Nordic model have often been associated with state-building, social equality and economic interests (Blossing & Söderström, 2014; Prøitz & Aasen, 2017; Tröhler et al., 2022).

In order to examine both the contingency management and the discursive dimension of future communication, we have applied semantic analysis as a discursive analytical strategy (Andersen, 2003). From this perspective, it becomes possible to observe how communication about the future is legitimising, reproducing and challenging past and present expectations. As this research aims to contrast future reflections in different times and spaces, we also understand semantic analysis as a second-order observation, namely observation of first-order observations (Luhmann, 1993). From this vantage point, it becomes possible to contrast similarly and differently appearing futures between different contexts.

Research data, analysis and research questions

The interviews for this study were conducted in two comparative research projects, EGSIE and DYNO.¹ The two datasets, EGSIE and DYNO, included partly different actors. To unify the datasets, we ended up including only the national actors since they were the only actor groups represented in both research projects.² Table 1 illustrates the number of interviewees from different actor categories, different countries and different projects.

As researchers, we are aware that the actors involved in education policymaking have changed during the last twenty-five years. For example, global organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO, technology companies, and external consultants have more influence on national

¹Education Governance and Social Inclusion and Exclusion in Europe (EGSIE), conducted in 1998–2000, and Dynamics in Basic Education Politics in Nordic Countries (DYNO), conducted in 2015–2018. An overview of the Nordic part of EGSIE can be found in several articles in a special issue of *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* in 2002 (e.g., Jóhannesson et al., 2002).

²We omitted non-identical groups from the overall dataset, such as 54 school-level interviewees from the EGSIE data and 9 interviews with researchers from the DYNO data. Out of 37 interviews used, 4 did not include an explicit question about the future, but the future was discussed in terms of current and probable future problems, as well as possible solutions to current problems.

Table 1. Number of interviewees from different actor categories, different countries and different projects.

The positions of the interviewees in the Finnish, Icelandic, and Swedish policy organisations at the time of the interviews							
	Fin EGSIE	Ice EGSIE	Swe EGSIE	Fin DYNO	Ice DYNO	Swe DYNO	Total
Politicians	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
State officials	2	3	2	2	1	2	12
Stakeholders	2	2	2	2	3	2	13
Total	6	7	6	6	6	6	37

Politicians: Ministers of Education, state secretaries with a political mandate and members of parliament active in education committees
 State officials: People working regularly in the Ministry of Education, National Board of Education/school inspection
 Stakeholders: Employee and employer representatives (e.g., Union of municipalities, teacher and principal unions, private providers)

decision-making (Robertson, 2022; Williamson, 2016). However, the increasing influence of non-state actors does not exonerate national policymakers. As influential members of organisations representing the state and different interest groups, our interviewees have also been in a position to convert external influences and use them as a part of their own agenda-setting.

When approaching and contrasting policy futures from a semantic perspective, it is also important to understand the information status of interview data as a form of communication. In contrast to serious semantics such as curricula and other written guidelines determined by educational policy organisations, policymakers' reflections on the future represent everyday semantics which might or might not correspond with the official plans (Hansen et al., 2020; Stäheli, 1997). However, by using interviews with policymakers, it is possible to pay attention to tensions that are often silenced in official documents.

Regarding the original data, the interviews in the EGSIE project were conducted by national research teams in the interviewees' mother tongue. In the DYNO project, the interviews were largely carried out by a Finnish research team, with the exception of the data from Iceland, where some of the interviews were also conducted and translated by Icelandic researchers. All of the Finnish interviews were conducted in Finnish. Some of the Icelandic and Swedish interviews were in Icelandic or Swedish respectively, and some in English.³

We began the analysis by grouping and naming the selected interview documents on the basis of six different contexts (EGSIE Sweden = EGSIESWE1-6; EGSIE Iceland = EGSIEICE1-7; EGSIE Finland = EGSIEFIN1-6; DYNO Sweden = DYNOSWE1-6; DYNO Iceland = DYNOUNCE1-6; DYNO Finland = DYNOFIN1-6). After importing documents into the ATLAS.ti program, we marked and coded every sentence that discussed the future and then created code groups to identify topics. To contrast how policymakers' future reflections on different times and spaces referred to topics, actors and rationalities similarly or differently, we grouped our topics into themes. In contrast to a topic, a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

We sought to address two research questions:

- (1) Thematisation of futures: Which topics and themes are discussed in reference to the future in the two research projects, conducted at two different points in time and in three different Nordic countries?
- (2) Contrasting the futures: To what extent do reflections on the future appear to be similar or different in respect of the two research projects and in different countries?

³Author 1 participated in the research design of DYNO and conducted all interviews in Sweden (in both Swedish and English) and half of the interviews in Finland (in Finnish). Author 2 participated in the research design of EGSIE and conducted some of the Icelandic interviews.

Findings

In this section we present our findings on how Finnish, Icelandic and Swedish policymakers observed the futures in 1998–1999 and 2015–2017. The first theme discusses the relationship between schooling, work and social equality in a changing society. The second theme focuses on the policies and practices of education governance. The third theme reflects issues related to the future of the teaching profession and teacher education. We grouped several topics under each of the themes.

Schools, work, and social equality in a changing society

The role of education and schools in a changing society was a frequently discussed topic in both sets of interviews, EGSIE and DYNO. Many of the interviewees shared the view that the rapid and sometimes unpredictable changes in working life, internationalisation and the general individualisation of Western societies had caused a legitimacy crisis for state-controlled education. The policymakers felt unable to predict the kind of skills and knowledge that would be needed just 10–20 years ahead. What they did state was that the focus should be shifted to processes, qualifications and skills that would help students to stay up to speed on the unpredictable changes in working life and society.

Schools must develop children and activate processes in a completely different way today. The pace of change in society is so fast that the only thing you can be sure of is that you won't know what kind of knowledge children will need, other than that it will be completely different, and more qualified. (EGSIESWE3)

The idea of unpredictable changes regarding work and society was also presented in 2016 by an Icelandic policymaker, who argued that due to the rapid and extensive changes taking place in working life, “60 to 70% of the children that attend compulsory school today will do jobs that we can't even name”, and it is therefore “arrogant to think that we are preparing for the future”. Instead of future relevance, schools should be reformed to “keep up with the present” (DYNOICE1).

Even without precise knowledge of what the future of work would require, there were nonetheless certain subjects and skills that both EGSIE and DYNO interviewees saw as a self-evident basis for the future school, work and society. One of these topics was information technology, which in the EGSIE data was discussed as computerisation, and in the DYNO data as the digitalisation of work and society. In addition to the increasing role of information technology in working life, some informants – especially EGSIE interviewees – discussed computers and new opportunities for information technology in teaching. What the new technology was considered to enable was more individually tailored learning and the organisation of education in rural areas. Some of the EGSIE and DYNO interviewees argued that information technology would also support individual learning, liberating students from their age groups and “being subjected to a single teacher who is their only resource” (DYNOICE6).

Besides new technology, Nordic policymakers consistently shared hopes for what they referred to as “schools opening out to society”, meaning that the school day would be longer and classes would take place outside of school, including various types of activities. As an Icelandic interviewee argued:

I dream of school flowing out of its walls ... All outdoor activities, exercise, outdoor cooking, power walks, playing in general, lying on your back in the spring, and reading and doing maths up by the lake have a place. These are my hopes ... about school changing completely, just from what we know now. (DYNOICE1)

Moving from compressed school days towards a whole-day school model with more varied recreational and experiential activities can be seen as a solution to the problem of individually experienced loss of meaning with regard to schooling (EGSIESWE3). Further, moving from lesson-based

schoolwork towards a project-based workflow would also promote students' creativity and social skills, sorely needed in future working life. In the Icelandic context in particular, where the school day had been relatively short, an extended school day also seemed to relate to the growing needs of changing labour markets requiring parents to work longer days (EGSIEICE2). Opening out to society would also mean increasing collaboration with local actors, and the increasing influence of private actors. As one Icelandic interviewee put it:

What I foresee is more open schools, and more people being part of the school and also more involved in what the school does, and wanting to influence that. Groups from the business sector, for example, that will look at schools in a different way. This should also lead to more flexibility in all school work than we currently have, and also to more employee flexibility. (EGSIEICE5)

Despite the persistent optimism, and visions related to future working life and schools opening out to society, there were also many concerns about social equality in education and the potential polarisation of society. In both the EGSIE and DYNO data, social (in)equality was discussed in terms of differentiated learning outcomes. However, there was a difference in how the topic was observed at two different points in time. In EGSIE, the differentiation in learning outcomes and the corresponding rebirth of a class society in the future was largely seen as an unstoppable social development; more affluent municipalities and families would invest in education, while poorer ones would be subjected to greater pressure to cut back on their expenses. As one Finnish interviewee argued:

I'd say that there will be a new class society ... The first group will be those who have the qualifications and skills to work in the pan-European knowledge economy. The second group will be those who manage to survive by shuttling from one temporary job to another, and the third group will be the 10 to 15% who have been excluded from society. (EGSIEFIN2)

While in the EGSIE data the social differentiation of society and education was considered somewhat inevitable due to the different resources and capacities of local actors, in the DYNO data interviewees reflected on social differentiation as a risk that could be managed with better and more long-term planning, research and school development. In addition, some DYNO interviewees openly criticised the 1990s discourse in that "after 20 years of creating crisis, it really became a crisis [*laughter*]" (DYNOSWE2).

In the DYNO data, the need to promote social equality via education was also related to risks of social polarisation and recent world events such as the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit) and Donald Trump's presidency of the United States. Poorly educated people would also be easy targets for political populism and hybrid influencing:

If we don't teach children to control technology, then ... the technology will control them, you know, then we'll raise children who are just susceptible to people like Trump and such nonsense. (DYNOICE6)

Some of the Finnish DYNO interviewees were also concerned about an emerging polarised political atmosphere that might eventually lead to a crisis of democracy, a labour shortage, and a brain drain.

Policies and practices of education governance

As the EGSIE project focused specifically on governance and recent changes in education governance at national and local levels, it is no wonder that such topics were also often discussed in relation to the future. The question of who has control over schools also played an important role in the DYNO data, and in some DYNO interviews the question was explicitly posed by the interviewees.

As mentioned earlier, the 1990s are often regarded as a time of major change in the politics of the Nordic states. Decentralisation and deregulation, which began in Finland and Sweden as municipalism in the mid-1980s, and later in Iceland in the mid-1990s, marked a change of direction in

school governance. As a result of state deregulation, so-called charter schools (Swe: *friskola* or *fristående skola*) gained in popularity at the beginning of the 1990s in Sweden and paved the way for market-based school development. In the Swedish EGSIE and DYNO data, there were arguments both for and against privatisation. In contrast to Sweden, no Finnish and hardly any Icelandic interviewees argued for extensive privatisation. However, some Finnish and Icelandic policymakers of the 1990s regarded local flexibility, market-style freedom of choice and competition as important driving forces for the development of public education. Instead of the risks related to differences between students and schools, the biggest threat as far as policymakers in the 1990s were concerned was the return to the old choiceless system. As one Finnish interviewee reflected:

I would see the future as being quite similar to the way things are now, but ... we must have enough leeway within the public school system. Therefore, there must be an option for a small group of private schools to operate at the same time so that the problems and threats of a choiceless public system don't become a reality ... (EGSIEFIN1)

In Sweden in the late 1990s, concerns were already being expressed about the unintended impacts of decentralisation and local freedom. Retrospectively, some policymakers of the 1990s predicted that in the future the state would take a tighter grip on those municipalities and schools failing to meet public expectations. The idea of the state regaining control over schools was seen as an inevitable consequence of local actors cutting corners, but also as a response to insufficient coordination and knowledge of school development. As one interviewee predicted:

The state will take a clearer role in what is required of the municipalities in terms of supervision and inspection ... It will not be acceptable for municipalities to neglect state objectives. I think the negative economic development of schools will not continue. (EGSIESWE6)

An emerging topic in education governance in the late 1990s was assessing what was seen as a solution to another type of legitimacy crisis, namely growing public concern about national competitiveness, as well as regional, socio-economic and school-based differentiation of learning outcomes. In contrast to the local-knows-best policy of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the new assessment regime relied on (ex)portable best practices, new steering organisations such as national boards of education, and the accountability of local actors. In the minds of policymakers, there seemed to be no limit to building education governance around assessment. As one Finnish policymaker argued:

We can build many big things around assessment, and I think it will be a very interesting question because there are so many actors and dimensions involved. There is self-assessment in respect of schools, then there will be municipalities, the national board of education, the ministry of education, and then there's international assessment, which also utilises university services ... (EGSIEFIN4)

Interviewees from all three EGSIE countries reflected on the problems of education as stemming from insufficient self-evaluation, a lack of knowledge, and non-transparency. In turn, future hopes were related to the establishment of new assessment policies which, as a well-documented, verifiable and widespread practice, would be "hard to resist" (EGSIEICE1) at the local level. However, not all Icelandic interviewees regarded the culture of testing and evaluation as an emerging trend, but rather as a return to the industrial performance management that had already been introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of them argued that this might have a negative impact on the governance of education if "different schools are compared, and it is then stated that those schools with a higher score in comprehensive exams are doing a better job of teaching" (EGSIEICE2).

Moving from EGSIE to DYNO data, assessment as practice naturalised its role as a policy tool and a future indicator. Moreover, international assessments, and PISA tests in particular, became an important point of reference for DYNO interviewees when discussing possible and desirable futures. In DYNO data the PISA study was mentioned by every single interviewee and often more than twice. In addition to the rankings in the global PISA scoresheets, another aspect that Finnish, Icelandic and

Swedish policymakers alike saw as important for future development was social and regional equality in learning outcomes. Here, Finnish and Icelandic policymakers in particular were proud of how slight the differences in learning outcomes were in an international comparison.

In Sweden, where the PISA results were relatively good at the beginning of the 2000s, the diminishing and differentiating learning outcomes indicated by both PISA tests and national assessments divided policymakers into two different camps. On the one side were policymakers who were finger-pointing at individual municipalities, schools and teachers for not achieving their goals, and for not being able to have an impact on students with a lower socio-economic background, for example. On the other side were policymakers who tended to blame the deregulation and privatisation policy of the 1990s for an accumulation of social disadvantages, and for creating a market-based performance game in which there would always be winners and losers.

However, by the time of the interviews in 2016, Sweden's PISA results had stopped falling, which was also interpreted as an outcome of more regulatory policies. But regaining the previous good results of the Swedish school system was seen as requiring time and more professional development. Unlike in Sweden, the PISA results and PISA in general were not always reflected in a positive light by Finnish and Icelandic DYNO interviewees. One Icelandic policymaker argued that an over-emphasis on results would eventually destroy the versatility of schools and educational ideas.

Having basked in the international glory of PISA for over 15 years, all Finnish policymakers interviewed in 2016 talked somewhat critically about the assessment programme. Some of them were worried about the budget-cut policy that had followed the PISA results and the possible policy implementations that would follow declining results in the future. A Finnish DYNO interviewee argued:

I'm worried about quality and equality. The PISA results indicate that the overall results are declining. And this is shattering the whole idea of comprehensive school... We should invest in foundations and create solid structures for the future, but now we are just looking at the future from a one-year perspective and keep telling ourselves that we must make budget cuts... (DYNOFIN4)

There appear to be partly persistent and partly changing ideas of governance in the future between the studies. As a partly persistent trend, there was rather instrumental argumentation that with the right tools, methods and leadership every school could perform equally well. One Swedish DYNO interviewee presented the idea that private schools had an important role as pace-setters for public school development (DYNOSWE4). However, there was no reflection on how free school choice policy affects the pupil population.

The future of the teaching profession and teacher education

Despite being tightly connected to topics in previously mentioned themes such as social segregation, changing working life and assessment, we consider that the future of the teaching profession and teacher education should be treated as a third theme in our analysis. Starting again from the EGSIE data, many policymakers of the 1990s shared the idea of teachers having too much freedom and not enough accountability. On the other hand, there were also hopes that due to the new assessment practices, quality control, and better-informed parents, "teachers will have to significantly change their interaction with their own environment, for example with parents" (EGSIEICE3).

The idea of getting teachers and school more engaged with the surrounding community was also a distinct topic in the Icelandic and Finnish DYNO data, where a longer school day was considered to increase the social impact of schooling. As one Finnish interviewee pointed out:

I also think that in the future, in order for schools to open out more to society, teachers should start to work according to an annual number of teaching hours... This must be reflected in their salaries, but I also think that the younger generation of teachers would be receptive to these kinds of ideas. (DYNOFIN2)

In both the Icelandic and Swedish EGSIE and DYNO data, the problems related to the quality of teaching were treated as a matter of teacher recruitment. In the Swedish EGSIE data, some

interviewees argued that the problem of teacher recruitment in the future would be that schools with more developed quality management and high-performing students would attract the best teachers, while schools located in socially disadvantaged areas would struggle to find qualified teachers (EGSIESWE1). Similar reflections could also be found in the Swedish DYNO interviews, where teachers were accused of misunderstanding the goals of curriculum reform. As a Swedish interviewee contended:

The problem is that 10 to 15% of schools are segregated, and they don't work well ... [it's difficult] to get good teachers in those schools ... That's one thing. The second problem is that the quality of teaching is too uneven and too low, and here I mean that when we introduced this new goal-oriented curriculum, teachers didn't really understand the difference between achieving goals and setting goals, and teaching standards dropped. (DYNOSWE6)

Finding qualified teachers seemed to be a perennial issue according to the Icelandic EGSIE and DYNO interviewees as well. Teacher recruitment problems in Iceland also relate to exceptional labour markets, where tourism played a more important role in the mid- and late 2010s than in other Nordic countries. Even for qualified teachers, the tourism industry was considered to present an attractive career choice. As one Icelandic DYNO interviewee commented:

Five years ago, if I remember rightly, there were 180 uncertified teachers nationwide out of, say, 5,000 teachers ... What do you think the situation will be like in 10 years' time? And if tourism continues to thrive ... teachers will be going off to work in hotels and as tour guides. (DYNOICE3)

Similarly, the Swedish DYNO data revealed concerns about how to attract qualified teachers and support professionalism in the future. A pay increase was seen as one way of attracting more talented young people to become teachers. Better teacher candidates would cause the bar to be raised in teacher education, which would eventually lead to better learning outcomes. As one interviewee said:

In the long run, what is really important is attracting more talented young people to become teachers. That is the crucial issue long term. And I think that we must go on making the teaching profession more attractive by raising salaries even more than we have done ... (DYNOSWE1)

In Finland, teacher education reforms are introduced as a perpetual solution to challenges related to the teaching profession. One dilemma that was expressed both in EGSIE and DYNO interviews was the image of Finnish teacher education being the best in the world and thus making it very hard for policymakers to argue for reform (EGSIEFIN6; DYNOFIN3). Another dilemma over promoting teacher professionalism in Finland was the difficulty in discussing current problems and future aspirations related to teaching and teachers without expressing mistrust towards current teaching practice and teachers. For the past 20 years, the social prestige of Finnish teachers has largely been based on good PISA results. As one interviewee pointed out:

What will happen if the (PISA) results drop? We'll start to look for the culprits ... And who will be to blame? Teachers of course ... Maybe in ten years when the results are going down, we'll start to attack teachers ... Because the politicians can't find fault with themselves and the decisions that they've made. (DYNOFIN4)

The discussion on the future of the teaching profession and teacher education, and improving the professional prestige of teachers seemed to be the case in all countries in both time periods.

Other persistent topics related to the future included the constant need for teacher education reform in Finland, the lack of teachers in Iceland, and dissatisfaction with the professional development of teachers in Sweden.

Discussion

In this article, we have analysed and contrasted how education policymakers in three Nordic countries – Finland, Iceland, and Sweden – reflected on the future at two different points in

time, 1998–1999 and 2015–2017. To answer our first research question on the thematisation of futures, three themes appeared common to most interviews. The first theme, *schools, work and social equality in a changing society*, was about the changing relationship between society and education, with an emphasis on the skills required in future working life; the idea of schools opening out to society; and both reasons for and ways to prevent inequality from increasing in society. The second theme, *policies and practices of educational governance*, revolved around the role of the state, local autonomy and educational assessment. The third theme comprised the *future of the teaching profession and teacher education*, focusing on teacher professionalism and career attractiveness.

Our second research question focused on similarities and differences between reflections on the future at different times and in different places. While some of the future reflections were quite context-specific, there were also consistent and consistently changing ways of reflecting on the future over datasets and countries. To summarise our empirical findings, Table 2 gathers together the three themes in terms of similar and different reflections on the future.

Within the three themes were four topics which policymakers in all three countries linked with the future. One topic that policymakers in each country and both time periods often brought up concerned the unpredictable changes in work and society, which are paradoxically often accompanied by the predictable development of technology and the demand for schools to open out to society. This is partly related to what the researchers in the EGSIE project called the inevitability of progress (Jóhannesson et al., 2002), meaning that occurring changes signify progress in themselves or lead to further progress. This belief is paradoxical as it is based on a belief in the progress of something that is not predictable. The unpredictability of the future was also used for introducing ideas and practices that had not yet been tested in school practice. School doors should open inwards for technology companies and outwards for students so they could move more flexibly between school, free time hobbies and nature – or whatever awaits them outside of school. By embracing the unpredictability, the discourse actively falls silent about the responsibilities of schools and teachers to protect children from negative phenomena in society and to ensure equal learning opportunities for students.

Secondly, when discussing the future in relation to students' equal learning opportunities and social equality, the ideas of an unpredictable future and schools as test sites for new ideas and technology were replaced by the other consistent idea of the future, that is, possibilities of assessing and finding best practices. Whereas the possibilities and need for educational evaluation and assessment had already been identified in some EGSIE interviews, in the DYN0 data the PISA study was mentioned by every single interviewee, often more than twice. While our findings support earlier notions of the growing influence of international organisations (Gustafsson & Blömeke, 2018; Robertson, 2022), it is also worth pointing out that different actors use assessment data to justify quite different policies (Takayama, 2010). For example, in the Swedish EGSIE and DYN0 interviews, interviewees used assessment to both justify and resist privatisation.

Table 2. Similar and different reflections on the future.

Main themes →	Schooling, work and social equality in and for the future society	Policies and practices of education governance	Future of the teaching profession and teacher education
Similar reflections on the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technologicalisation, unpredictable change regarding work, and schools opening out to society (ALL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessing and finding best practices (ALL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of teachers (ICE) and lack of professionalism (SWE) • Teacher education reforms (FIN)
Different reflections on the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing concerns about social inequality (SWE, FIN) and political polarisation (ALL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From locally tailored solutions to globally tested evidence-based performance (FIN, SWE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From a lack of commitment to fear of not having qualified teachers in the future (ALL)

Note: ALL denotes all three countries; FIN = Finland; ICE = Iceland; SWE = Sweden.

The third topic, also closely related to assessment, concerned social equality and its development in the future society. There were also some consistent differences in how the policymakers in the EGSIE and DYNO datasets observed the future of social equality. When discussing the future in relation to social equality in Finland and Sweden, nearly all DYNO interviewees suggested that education politics and state organisations should take a more proactive role and prevent negative social developments in the future. This differed from the Finnish and Swedish EGSIE interviews, where the future of Nordic education was considered to be predetermined by the logic of markets and the negative social development of society (see also Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). Another difference between the datasets was that DYNO interviewees from all three countries reflected on recent world events, such as the election of Donald Trump and increased political polarisation, as possible social consequences of differentiating learning outcomes.

The fourth and last topic revolved around the hopes and fears concerning teacher professionalism in the future. These hopes and fears varied across the different datasets and countries. In the EGSIE interviews, some Finnish and Swedish policymakers shared the idea that teachers should be more committed to their surrounding community. In the DYNO interviews, these concerns switched to hopes of improving professional prestige and fears that there might not be enough qualified teachers for all schools in the future. In Iceland, this appeared to be a perennial issue (Jóhannsdóttir & Björnsdóttir, 2018) and has resulted in changes to the legislation on the qualifications of teachers for all school levels, which now allows candidates to graduate with a degree not including a master's thesis, as opposed to the master's thesis requirement implemented in 2011. It is likely that we will see, in forms varying from country to country, policy initiatives on teachers not leaving the profession and on teacher recruitment. It can also be speculated as to whether teachers' growing work dissatisfaction is related to two other future topics: simultaneous pressure to continuously embrace new ideas in schools while finding ways of improving learning outcomes and their predictability.

We conclude by acknowledging that there is no external position from which the futures could be observed. Even though we can recognise repeating patterns and consistent changes between policymakers' future reflections in 1999 and 2016, our ways of seeing the past and present futures are tied to the current present. However, re-observing past futures can make us more aware of the historicity of our current futures and possible gaps between intended and unintended consequences of school reform discourses. As Adam (2018) has pointed out, futures are also embedded in knowledge practices and hence educational researchers should also be aware of their role as future-makers. Currently, when both local and global policymakers are trying to define how education should be changed in the name of the future (see Hansen et al., 2021; OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2021), there might also be a need for research focusing on the historical interplay between local and global future-making in the Nordic context. For this purpose, previously collected datasets offer a fascinating world to re-explore.

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