From Knowledge to Skills and Competence: Epistemic Reconfiguration in Nordic Basic Education, 1980–2020

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Epistemic Reconfiguration in Nordic Basic Education, 1980–2020

Magnus Hultén, Harald Jarning, & Jens Erik Kristensen

With a start well before the millennium, clusters of educational reforms have moved comprehensive schooling in the Nordic countries beyond earlier national settlements. After their success with a unified basic school without tracking in the 1960s and 1970s, further debate grew on issues of inner school reform. A range of issues targeting the inner workings of schools and teaching grew strong, among them a focus on epistemic reconfiguration. The epistemic deliberations acted as a gate to the coming generations of curriculum and school reforms. In this chapter, epistemic reconfiguration is presented with schooling in the cases of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The chapter explores how the reconfiguration of schooling in epistemic terms came to play a seminal role in forming a series of national reforms starting in the 1980s and in the transnational turn of educational policies during the most recent decades. Thus, this chapter follows how revised approaches to the knowledge axis of schooling have guided reforms of common and post-compulsory schooling and changed Nordic universalist educational traditions on a number of issues.

Common features of these clusters of school reforms have included shifts of knowledge visions, agendas, and settlements beyond political party blocks and new ways of setting standards by expanding national and local curriculum work. From the national trajectories of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, key differences are seen in the extent to which educational choice, and related mechanisms such as educational markets or quasi-markets, have been part of this reconfiguration. Sources used include school acts, national curriculum guidelines, and green papers, as well as examples from the growing amount of international tests, evaluations, public debates, and scholarly work. In the conclusion, we identify key concerns closely linked to small state challenges of the rising strategic knowledge agendas, as seen from the three country cases.

We argue that the epistemic reconfiguration perspective represents aspects that complement the understanding of the expansion of education

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over these years beyond the formalism of much earlier research, where changes in framing, decentralization, neoliberalism, individualism, and school choice were dominant perspectives in explanations (Dovemark et al., 2018; Lundahl, 2016; Dorf, 2018). We do not argue that the many shades of this interlinked expansion and educationalization are solely directed by the epistemic agendas. Instead, we argue that knowledge issues and more cross-sectoral reform issues clearly intertwine and accompany each other in the overall changes.

Epistemic Agendas During the Rise of the Long Schooling for All

Sweden

The great transformation of the Swedish school system in the postwar decades did not come without problems. Heated public debates were seen in the media already in the 1960s. These were mostly focusing on the lack of discipline and order in classrooms and the lack of appropriate pedagogical methods for tackling the new situation with the comprehensive schools. In the 1970s, a big state commission was launched in order to deal with the internal problems of the new common—primary and secondary—school. The final report from the commission, with its emphasis on the social and pedagogical issues, created heated debates. Some saw the focus of the report itself as a sign of a degrading school system, where all that was important was the social side of education, while issues concerning the academic content of schooling and learning were neglected. It was in this context that Sweden, at the end of the 1970s, saw a short and intense debate on knowledge (Hultén, 2021). The question of knowledge must be brought to the forefront of the educational agenda, debaters argued. Even though this debate was reflected in an increased rhetoric on knowledge in political discourse in the early 1980s, it did not immediately transform into new educational policy (Bergström, 1993).

However, during the late 1980s, as the efficiency of public government came into focus more broadly under the influence of new public management, educational policy became one of the targets. In a bill from 1988, the Social Democrat Minister of Education, Bengt Göransson, concluded that the system for governance applied so far has been successful in terms of organizationally changing the school system. However, this has not led to teaching being conducted to the desired extent in the way that the parliament and the government have stated in curricula and other legal documents.

(Prop. 1988/89:4, 1988, p. 8)
The reason for this, Göransson argued, was the static influence of tradition (wisdom of practice)—what elsewhere has been called the grammar of schooling. Finding more effective ways to govern education—to find more powerful ways to make educational policy more influential in practice—became a central theme in the 1990s’ reforms, and it is in this context in which knowledge surfaces as an important concept in formulating the new educational policies.

**Introducing Learning Outcomes**

The Swedish school reforms of the 1990s were part of a restructuring of the whole public sector, with overarching aims to introduce flexibility, alternatives, and choice. This change enabled decentralization and deregulation. The reforms of the 1990s opened up the school system for marketization, with private providers, school choice, and a voucher system. The school choice reform meant that children were no longer assigned to a school based on their residential address but, within certain limits, could freely choose a school. At the same time, the power of the state and national governing bodies were shifted to the local level, to municipalities, and to private providers. A new governing body, the National Agency for Education (Skolverket), was introduced to replace the old National Board of Education (Skolöverstyrelsen). Whereas the board had been the almighty authority on education, the new agency was to “stay at the municipal border” and only influence through soft governing, by providing information about the schools to the local providers (Magnusson, 2018, p. 105).

The educational reforms of the 1990s coincided with renewed interest in the concept of knowledge, politically as well as scholarly (Hultén, 2019, 2021; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015). In Sweden, what was specifically addressed among the debaters was a belief that education (utbildning) was first and foremost conceptualized through other concepts than knowledge, notably, as fostering (fostran). They blamed the comprehensive postwar school reforms for a shift away from knowledge, thus echoing the debates of the late 1970s.

The explicit use of the concept of knowledge in shaping the curriculum and assessment system in the 1990s marks a shift in how knowledge had been addressed in educational policy. As Wahlström and Sundberg (2015) argue, the “question of knowledge was at the centre of the preparatory work for the construction of the [1994] curriculum” (p. 8), and a whole chapter was devoted to “knowledge and learning” in the concluding committee report, *Skola för Bildning* (SOU 1992:94). Ingrid Carlgren, an educational scholar who worked for the committee, wrote the chapter. Deliberations on the conceptualization of knowledge had never been part of any previous curriculum reform in Sweden (Gustavsson, 2002). This was in stark contrast to committee work that had formed the previous
foundations for the school system, the 1946 School Commission, where education (fostran) and the role of the school in a democratic society served as central themes in the analysis (see SOU 1948:27).

An ambition with the conceptualizations of knowledge presented by Carlgren in Skola för Bildning was to bridge previous divides in national curricula between knowledge and skills (förmåga). The new conception was said to encompass four forms of knowledge: facts, understanding (förståelse), skills (förmåga), and familiarity (förtrogenhet), thus presenting a more comprehensive knowledge-concept than previous national curricula. The new conception formed the basis for a new national curricula where not only more elaborate objectives (mål) were presented but also learning outcomes (uppnäandemål) specifying the levels of knowledge standards in different school subjects that the pupils were to reach (as opposed to previous curricula that emphasized content standards and where objectives had only been formulated on a more comprehensive level). An accompanying accountability system was designed around the learning outcomes, as these were linked to a grading system where minimum grade levels for the students to achieve were specified (Hultén, 2019).

In public debate, the new outcome-oriented grading system quickly became seen as the true measure of the performance of the school system, with the big numbers of failing students causing fierce debate (Hultén, 2019; Wahlström, 2002). Even though the new curriculum also included other objectives than those captured by the new grading system formulated in a so-called value foundation, these more overarching aims of schooling slowly faded into the background of both political and public debate. Thus, to put it bluntly, the broad reconceptualization of the objectives of the school system in terms of knowledge together with the new accountability system led to a reduced understanding of the main tasks of the school system in terms of measurable learning outcomes.

A Second Wave of Outcome-Based Reforms

As in its neighboring countries, the Swedish school reforms of the early 1990s were followed by a second reform period during the first decades of the 2000s (ca. 2005–2014). When the international large-scale assessment systems were gaining attraction in the early 2000s, they fitted nicely into what was already an outcome- and performance-oriented understanding of the results of the school system. In 2007–2008, the PISA-crisis hit Sweden and gave further momentum to the already ongoing reforms. Sweden has attested to a declining performance on both TIMSS and PISA since 2000. Where the 1990s reforms have been described as giving much freedom to municipalities and private providers, the reforms of the 2000s successively introduced a stronger state, rule-based governing, and increased school inspection (Magnusson, 2018). In 2011, a new
national curriculum was introduced, further strengthening the emphasis on outcomes as compared to the previous curriculum and reintroducing content standards on top of this. Making pupils achieve the learning outcomes (in what the 2011 national curriculum referred to as “knowledge criteria”—kunskapskrav) specified in the curriculum and linked to the grading system has become a central part of teachers’ activities. But it seems to be an activity that pays little attention to what is important to learn, how to identify what is important to learn, and how to set up the teaching to get there (Florin Sädbom, 2015).

Alongside the second wave of outcome-based reforms, Sweden has seen a growing influence of EU-educational policy, with emphasis on competency-based curricula. However, even though there has been some alignment with the European knowledge discourse, several core concepts have been reconceptualized and given a different meaning in the Swedish context (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016). For example, competencies are being translated to skills (förmåga/färdighet), a concept with a long tradition in the Swedish curriculum, which might explain why a shift from a focus on knowledge in specific school subjects to more general competencies was not as significant in Swedish policy as in other EU countries, such as Denmark.

The second wave of reforms, leading up to the 2011 national curriculum, further contributed to the epistemic reconfiguration of the Swedish primary and secondary school system. A thorough analysis of the curriculum objectives and outcomes formed the basis of the revision of the national curriculum with the aim of developing a system with clearer objectives and outcomes (SOU 2007:28). As noted earlier, the notion of knowledge was seen as based on four different knowledge aspects (facts, understanding, skills, and familiarity). Analysis was made by the committee into what percent of each aspect was present in the current curriculum as well as which types of concepts and expressions were used to express different aspects (SOU 2007:28). The aim was to narrow down the totality of expressions used and to reevaluate the balance between different knowledge aspects in the curriculum. What we see in the committee work behind the 2011 national curriculum is a generic analysis of knowledge decoupled from subject specific knowledge and later turned into a new standards and objectives architecture in the curriculum of 2011. Scholarly analysis shows that what we see being introduced with the 2011 national curriculum is an instrumental notion of knowledge (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015).

In the years following the 2011 curriculum reform, Sweden saw a growing debate focusing on the view of knowledge (kunskapssyn) that the curriculum is based on and how this view has influenced PISA scores (Hultén, 2019). Arguments in favor of a narrow concept of knowledge, which is focusing on facts, are being raised and also heard. Facts are portrayed as the most important knowledge component (i.e., generating
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the highest scores in PISA). Thus, what started as a broad take on an epistemic reconfiguration of the Swedish school system in the 1990s has slowly transformed into a narrow and instrumentalized notion of schooling, aligning with an international (e.g., PISA) knowledge agenda (Pereyra et al., 2011).

Denmark

The question of epistemic reconfiguration has been part of recurrent tensions between postwar progressivism, neoliberalism, and national cultural conservatism that have been significant during the last 40 years of educational reforms in Denmark. As in Norway, political initiatives to strengthen the focus on knowledge acquisition were already taken in 1982 by the new Conservative–Liberal coalition government that remained in power until 1993. Since then, the Danish Folkeskole, the public basic school, has gone through three major school reforms, in 1993, 2006 and 2014. Although in rather different ways, all of these reforms focused on the status, dissemination, and acquisition of knowledge and skills in school education. As in Sweden, the first period of reforms during the 1990s was followed by a second and more profound reform period initiated by the Liberal–Conservative government in 2001 in the wake of the first PISA results that same year and the transnational turn in educational policies.

Modernization and Decentralization

The starting point for these reforms was a policy for the “modernization of the public sector” launched already in 1982. From the end of the 1980s, accountability policies were gradually introduced as strategies in the modernization program that was carried out by the new Social Democrat coalition government from 1993 to 2001. During the period from 1982 to 1993, Bertel Haarder from the Liberal Party was the agenda-setting minister of education, the first minister in the Conservative–Liberal coalition government, and later again from 2005 to 2010 in the Liberal coalition government. Haarder was a fierce critic of the earlier progressive educational policy, and his first action was to dissolve the former Central Education Council, which was founded in the 1970s and represented the progressivist social democratic tradition of the postwar period. Throughout his periods as minister of education, he was engaged in strengthening the national, cultural core subjects: Danish language, history, and Christianity (Telhaug, 2003, as cited in Slagstad, 2003, p. 283; Dorf, 2018). Simultaneously, as a liberal, he was in favor of decentralization, variety, and freedom of school choice, and he was enthusiastic in his support for the special Danish tradition of free independent schools. However, he also ensured that Danish schools participated in international programs for
measurement and comparison of student performance, and later, after the turn of the millennium, he strongly supported a centralized administration of subject matters as well as the establishment of a national curriculum and national tests.

During the early 1990s, the Conservative–Liberal government enacted a decentralization of the school system. In 1989, school boards were established to strengthen the influence of parents as customers and users, and parents were given a free choice between local municipal schools and a state-subsidized free school. Freedom of school choice, however, has never been a major political issue due to the firm Danish tradition, dating from the 19th century, of non-profit free schools based on state subsidized civil society initiatives. Although the numbers of free schools and private schools have been rising to the point where they cover nearly 20% of all school-attending children today, the public primary school still occupies the central role as the national institution for both value and educational formation.

The 1993 Reform of the Danish School—From Teaching to Learning and Competencies

A central ambition of the 1993 school reform was not to strengthen subject matters but to promote the development of the individual student as a person as well as a democratic citizen.

The school shall prepare pupils for active participation, joint responsibility, rights, and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy. The teaching of the school and its daily life must therefore build on intellectual freedom [andsfrihed], equal status [ligeværd], and democracy.

(Folketinget, 1993, § 1)

In a sense, this summarizes the values embodied in the Danish constitution and promotes the idea of democracy as a way of life.

However, the 1993 act was followed by a ministerial order, Central Areas of Knowledge and Skills (CFK), that was mandatory and marked the beginning of a stronger centralized management of subject matter in anticipation of the establishment of a national curriculum in 2004 (Dorf, 2018). The decisive catalyst for this turn towards centralized objectives of knowledge appeared in 1994 with the results of a Reading and Literacy Study from 1991 conducted by the IEA. The study showed that Danish third graders ranked surprisingly low in terms of both reading speed and reading confidence, and they joined the ranks of children from Togo and Trinidad and Tobago in these subjects. The IEA-study has since gone down in the annals of history as the “Togo shock.” Henning Fonsmark followed up Haarder’s earlier criticism two years later with his polemic book Kampen mod Kundskaber (The Struggle Against
Knowledge), which scathingly criticized the postwar reform pedagogy for systematically degrading the value of basic skills and general knowledge (Fonsmark, 1996).

The 1993 act also paved the way for a new understanding of knowledge and for the entry of the transnational concepts of learning and competence. However, the emergence of the learning concept in the 1990s did not break with the progressive or reform pedagogical tradition. It shifted the focus from teaching to learning and required teaching differentiation. The student as learner should be able to develop his or her personal potential in a learning environment in which the teacher stimulates, mentors, guides, and encourages the learning and development of each individual student (Hermann, 2007; Korsgaard et al., 2017). This learning concept was based on the learner being constructive, so students could be staged as producers of knowledge and the teacher was assigned the role of a midwife that corresponded to learning styles that were always based on the individual. The starting point and center of teaching and education was now the self-learning and competent individual, who in principle was self-managing and responsible for their own learning, thus marking a transition to a pedagogy of individualization.4

This already brings up another aspect associated with this innovation in the 1990s, namely, competence. Competencies are commonly defined as knowledge in action, and here, turning to competencies indicates an epistemic shift. A teaching subject, then, shall be designed by descriptors of what the subject is supposed to lead to in each individual student, and assessment of the learning results must be made a test of such competencies rather than a test of the knowledge associated with a syllabus. Competence has thus become the epitome of a performative knowledge concept, the crux being not what and how much you know but how you can use and translate what you know into practice (Undervisningsministeriet, 1997, p. 6; Korsgaard et al., 2017, pp. 393–398).

Postmillennial Reforms

Whereas the introduction of the concepts of learning and competence in the 1990s still had remnants of postwar progressivism, the transnational turn in post-millennial school policy has changed their status and strengthened the focus on the school subjects (faglighed) and learning outcomes. In Denmark, objectives were redefined paying special attention to common standards, performance indicators, and learning outcomes and resulting in government initiatives such as the Clear Objectives in 2001, the binding Common Objectives in 2003 and 2009, and the realization of ten mandatory national tests. As in Sweden and Norway, these initiatives to measure the performance and monitor the learning outcomes of the students in the school system can hardly be understood without reference to OECD’s PISA, IEA’s PIRLS, TIMSS, the EU’s Lisbon Declaration, or
the Bologna description of study programs in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies (Dorf, 2018; Korsgaard et al., 2017; Krejsler, 2021). Nevertheless, this process appeared as a national process that was highly identified with the liberal-conservative reform agenda of Bertel Haarder, linking transnational pressure to national identity and the establishment of national canons in literature, history, and democracy.

In the 2006 reform of the Danish School Act, the purpose clause was again amended, signaling a far more powerful emphasis on the knowledge side of schooling than on values, canons, and personal formation. Above all, the school now had to prepare pupils to acquit themselves along the further education pathway by giving them knowledge and skills, now understood to be part of the lifelong learning that prepares each individual to be available to the labor market through further education. For the first time in Danish school history, knowledge and skills have been moved right into pole position in the school, which is now understood to be part of the “the educational continuum 0–18” and the main purpose of which is to prepare the individual for further education. A new reform in 2014 did not reformulate the formal purpose but increased the number of hours and the introduction of “all-day school” (heldagsskole) with voluntary homework cafés. It also simplified the Common Objectives by turning them into a multitude of specified learning and competence objectives in order to measure and increase the learning outcomes for each individual student (Rasmussen et al., 2015).

Thus, since the 1990s, focus on learning and competencies as the objectives have formed the basis of a chain of reforms and initiatives although in different ways. However, from 1993 to 2014, the pivotal point of the Danish school has moved from the normative purpose containing remnants of postwar progressivism to national competency-based curricula focusing on potential knowledge in action as the desired individualized learning outcome. Since 2000, the emphasis in the national curriculum has been on precise objectives to be expected of students in order to create an efficient system of education by tightening up measurement and superintendence. However, the 2014 reform has in no way been a success. It has given rise to heavy criticism during the last decade, and has been partly pulled back by the political parties behind it. Instead, it has brought about a renewed debate on the questions of personal and cultural formation (dannelse) and the normative purpose of schooling among politicians as well as among teachers and parents (Kristensen, 2017; Dorf, 2018).

Norway

“The challenge for Norwegian knowledge policy is that the country is not getting enough competence out of the population’s talent,” a green paper on higher education in Norway stated in 1988 (NOU 1988:28, 1988, p. 9). The rise of a comprehensive knowledge policy from the cradle to the disputation around 1990 represented a reflex to the threat of falling
behind in a global knowledge race. However, responses to the global squeeze on small states and the fall of the Berlin Wall included, in the Nordic periphery, seeds of renewed visions of contributions of shared public knowledge and unified schooling. The knowledge-centered agenda has been well received in Norway since the beginning. The chair of the group behind the 1988 blue paper, Sociology Professor Gudmund Hernes, was appointed minister of education within two years of its release by the Social Democrat Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. Two new formative notions from the 1990s, knowledge solidarity and the knowledge commons, have echoed the quest for equality as parity of the reforms of the 1960s (Stenhouse, 1965); they have also marked a concern for knowledge as an inclusive resource and not solely as a pool of individual talent to be tapped. Under the leadership of Hernes, more structure, more standardization, more work discipline, and more concentration on subject matter content became major priority areas. The line of policy was to bridge the best from the 19th century’s popular enlightenment, the unified folk school from the first half of 20th century, and the welfare contributions of the comprehensive school.

In this early strategic turn to knowledge before 1990, the report from an OECD evaluation of Norwegian education policy by a group of international experts played a seminal role as a standard setting analysis. The report noted, among other things, that the expanded mandate of municipalities and other local bodies in the wake of decentralization reforms beginning in the 1970s highlighted the need to reformulate national roles. The report then pointed to a common national information system and quality assurance as possible supplementary functions. As in Denmark and Sweden, issues of distribution of the mandated assessments (Kvale, 1990) and mapping of the output side of schooling became one of the big issues in the generation of school reforms to come after 1990.

National curriculum reforms led by social democratic administrations during the 1990s gave first priority to a broad encyclopedic canon of common school subjects. In line with this, the new general introduction to the national curriculum framed the common school as a nationwide project to initiate new generations to a common core of knowledge and traditions to prepare them for life and work in a knowledge society (Jarning, 2020). The knowledge issue was represented by topoi (commonplaces) that marked key intellectual, practical, and social epistemic virtues. There were seven commonplaces: meaning-seeking, creative, working, generally educated, co-operative, environmentally concerned, and the integrated human being.

From Corporate Councils to Governance by Data

The democratic mandate of the common school was underscored in a new way. National knowledge priorities should be formulated by political leadership, not by professionals. In line with this, the social democratic
government closed all national sector councils for compulsory, secondary, and further education in the early 1990s (Helsvig, 2017, pp. 184–192). By early 1982, the conservative government at that time had started a retreat from corporate state progressivism by dissolving the National Council for Innovation in Education (Forsøksrådet for skoleverket; Helsvig, 2017), the body that had been a think tank and a major tool for the implementation of the unified basic school. Thus, over the course of a decade, these bipartisan organizational reforms ended a 50-year-old pattern of incremental corporate partnership in policymaking across the education sector.

However, from 2001 to 2005, a shift to governance based on market and quasi-market principles of accountability and keeping “arm’s length” distance between policy and management came into full operation (Helsvig, 2017). One of the interlinked reforms during these years was the introduction of a comprehensive national quality assessment system in 2003. That same year, the Independent School Act (friskoleloven) was introduced; it was based on a change in legal terms from being an act of purpose to an act of rights. A basic principle of this act was the possibility to establish a right to state support for independent schools on the condition that the high common norms relating to quality and competence had been satisfied. This program would satisfy national legal and curricular regulations. However, this act of rights only survived for two years, as the former act of purpose was reintroduced when the next national election in 2007 resulted in a left-center compromise. In 2015, a revised law on independent schools reintroduced a modified act of purpose, in combination with a provisional ban on profit to all owners of schools receiving public grants. The Conservative Minister of Education at the time, Torbjørn Røe Isaksen, highlighted the added quality of having broad support for new legislation and added that this “means that our most important task is to make the knowledge school, the public school better. This is task number one” (Jarning, 2020, p. 47).

Towards a National Curriculum Guideline 2.0

In the Norwegian case, there is also a clear shift between the curriculum design of the 1990s and the period after the turn of the millennium. In the first phase, general education was presented as an enkýchlios paideia, a circle of intellectual, practical, and social epistemic virtues. However, the next generation of national curriculum reforms is exemplary in its polite turn to the knowledge economy language on foundations of education. In practice, the national curriculum framework from 2006 had blacklisted the keyword for human education and self-formation, dannning. The recent national curriculum from 2020, however, reintroduced an explicit twin mission of common schooling, referred to as utdanning (qualification) and dannning (self-formation/Bildung), to mark the care for
knowledge and skills as well as for the virtuous side of common teaching and learning.

In 2004, the new central hub in educational administration and governance, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet) was set up; and over the next years, a national curriculum framework titled “The Knowledge Promotion” (Kunnskapsloftet) was introduced. With this broad reform, the curriculum genre approached the era of platform epistemologies: They were designed to be in tune with accountability-based lines of centralized control and with the local responsibility of results, and they introduced the first vertically integrated curriculum framework for the basic school as well as for post-compulsory, secondary general and vocational education and training. The new form of a national guideline for the digital age has incorporated a prelude and the whole range of subject curricula, in alphabetic order, which have all been formatted from a template of competence descriptors. All subjects have competence descriptions after Grades 4, 7, and 10 in the compulsory part and after each level for the post-compulsory, upper secondary part. With the recent reform from 2020, the digital framework has been furthered; however, the first introductory paragraphs were revised with standardized brief notes about each school subject. The introductions are then followed by long lists of learning outcomes of the parallel single subject syllabuses.

Bringing Knowledge Back in: Comparisons and Discussion

The discussions and reforms in this chapter represent a strive to move beyond major weak spots in the extension of comprehensive schooling. This epistemic revival is bringing back questions of what knowledge is of most worth in a school for all, and how can the realizations of educational outcomes in practice be improved. From 1980 onward, educational change in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway saw a turn to epistemic issues, triggered not least by the limitations of the postwar comprehensive school reforms and by the rise of subject didactics (Smestad & Opsal, in this volume). Educational professionals and researchers from all faculties and fields of school knowledge were on equal footing with the former dominant tribe rooted in the discipline of education. All in all, the changes and the accompanying expansion of schooling have realigned the role of education in today’s Nordic countries.

In research on the Nordic common school tradition since the 1980s, changes in organization and framing—decentralization, neoliberalism, individualism, and school choice—have shown the dominant perspectives on the explanations of changes to a universalist Nordic model of education (Dorf, 2018; Dovemark et al., 2018; Lundahl, 2016). As for the last decades of reform, research has pointed to the increased influence
of transnational policy flows on Nordic education, more specifically the growing influence of international agencies, most prominently OECD and its PISA (Krejsler, 2021; Pereyra et al., 2011). We argue that the epistemic reconfiguration, as described and exemplified with the three Nordic countries as cases in this chapter, links these two reform periods by showing how issues of epistemic nature addressed in the 1980s and 1990s paved the way for the postmillennial reforms.

This epistemic reconfiguration has been visible in the varied efforts to renew educational knowledge, and it has thus affected the overall Nordic grammar of schooling. In the Nordic region, a heritage of strong educational states (Englund et al., 2012; Slagstad et al., 2003) has historically secured a predominance of modern forms of general education, broad encyclopedic curriculum patterns, little or no specialization in common schooling, and broad upper secondary academic preparatory tracks, while vocational qualification has been based on an apprenticeship tradition in Denmark, a school-based approach in Sweden, and Norway in between. The rise of the epistemology of competence, learning, foresight, and accountability mechanisms that were examined in this chapter depicts the contours of the recent changes to the set menu of long schooling for all in the North.9

Already in the 1960s, Nordic patterns of curriculum reform had represented a generalist drift not least by the postponement of tracking and the choice between formerly mutually excluding curriculum paths. Here, the Swedish Urban Dahllöf highlighted the knowledge of most worth in the decades of growth of the unified, basic school for all. First, there is “general education [allmänbildning], then comes specialization. This is the overall foundation of our system of education” (Dahllöf, 1984, p. 44). Opportunities for concentration and depth have long been pointed to as a weak spot, not least because it confers the eager generalist postponement of specialization in common school programs.

At an early stage, epistemic reconfigurations are seen to cultivate and balance varied fields and forms of knowledge in basic and post-compulsory schooling, thus countering the former generalist narrowing. In the Swedish case, the reconsideration of schooling and education in epistemic terms played a seminal role from 1990 on as the gateway to a more focused settlement on schooling and public welfare responsibilities. The aforementioned poly-dimensional approach to seminal forms of knowledge was an attempt to bridge earlier divisive and incomprehensive approaches in which the development and upbringing of the child (fostran) had been seen as the central task of the school system. A weak aspect here was the coverage of values and moral dimensions, which was treated separately without the linkages to knowing that are a mark of virtues and of conceptions of self-formation, or in other words, Bildning.

In parallel, the Danish and Norwegian examples display similarities in how the sets of keywords change, with the concepts of learning and
competence as the nexus of schooling after the millennium. From the Danish case, the ways that teaching and pedagogy have become individualized and performance-centered by the dual focus on learning and competencies has become visible. Teaching could no longer be approached as the transfer of knowledge, and competencies here translate knowledge as knowledge in action. In the Norwegian case, general education was first presented as a circle of intellectual, practical, and social epistemic virtues, while the national reforms from 2006 had blacklisted the notion for human education and self-formation, dannning. The recent reforms in Denmark and Norway, however, have again to some degree marked a concern for the diverse missions of common schooling as the care for general knowledge as well as for the virtuous side of teaching and learning.

The epistemic reconfiguration is also reflected in how the international race for knowledge as a source of competitive advantages has reinforced a vertical integration and regulation of progression in the education sectors. The terms for formal education—uddannelse (D), utdanning (N), utbildning (S)—signal a strong vertical integration and have become the common denominators of formal education from nursery and basic school to university and adult education. In line with the emphasis on vertical integration, early childhood and care institutions in all three nations have been fully included in the portfolios of their ministries of education: in Sweden from 1998, in Norway from 2006, and in Denmark since 2011.

Finally, the epistemic reconfiguration is seen in the rising curriculum foresight that appears around the quest to match schooling with a society in which knowledge and abilities to apply it innovatively increasingly stamp curriculum visions of future generations of innovators. This systemic and personal epistemology to be among the top-ranked presupposes the almost omnipresent care for knowledge as a fragile strategic resource. In the wake of these political and transnational concerns, issues of control, assessment, and accountability have risen to historic heights (Krejsler, 2021). In this sense, the notion of knowledge and schooling as a race is a telling description. Data from systems of quality control, accountability, and international assessments have grown as a one-way collection of tools for the mix of educational control and foresight. In contrast to earlier narratives of civilization, enlightenment, or progress, the presence of the knowledge race marks one of the dominant commonplaces in contemporary education policy with a quest to bridge personal formation, knowledge, employability, and national competitive advantage. The changes include the introduction of a high focus on literacy genres, descriptors of competencies, and a transformation where national curriculum regulations have been given the status as programs of results (Bachmann & Sivesind, 2012) rather than as programs of conditions. However, by the elaboration of standard tools for curriculum design to meet the programs of results, like the newspeak of learning outcomes and competence goals, didactical formalism has paradoxically returned.
Conclusion

This epistemic reconfiguration has marked an attempt in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway to reformulate basic education, centered on what has become a new strategic concern for knowledge, and gradually interact with new forms of public management and later transnational policy flows. The heritage of schooling as a combined public and personal good has met with harder times with the educationalization of meeting notions of the knowledge age. Over the last half century, the vital concern for a solid common and democratic public education has faded with the almost automatic cultural embeddedness of educational institutions, and the general purpose of schooling has met a post-canonical era with an individualization of educational pathways regulated by choice and merit. An economic conception of education has grown from the seedbed of globalizing arenas such as the OECD, the EU, and the World Bank, and all have ambitions to formulate educational policy framed within a post-national culture of no culture. These organizations have increasingly set their agendas and parameters for national educational policies, reforms, and legislation, leaving their stamp on the Nordic grammar of schooling and pedagogical thinking in the process (Krejsler, 2021). However, the recently rising school strikes against global warming mark new examples of civic protest, and bottom-up green initiatives to renew popular education are seen at the fringe of current curriculum reforms. Also, scholars argue that many of the features of the unified school have been sustained during the millennial generation of reforms (Klette, 2018; Wiborg, 2009).

To conclude, a first phase of the epistemic reconfiguration before the millennium saw new and more nuanced ways of formulating knowledge and aligning with older conceptions of self-formation and cultivation, dannelse and bildning, a term with a broad educational, moral, and personal meaning, often related to notions of general education and virtues. In a second phase, under the vital influence of the 21st-century growth of rapid transnational policy flows, however, the nuances in the knowledge conceptions of the first phase disappear, resulting in a more restricted competitive standardization of schooling in epistemic terms in the three Nordic countries.

Notes

1. We are not the first to acknowledge the epistemic perspective in Nordic educational reform. However, changing discourses on knowledge and schooling in the Nordic region have been addressed mainly through country studies (e.g., Appel et al., 2015; Hultén, 2019; Jarning, 2010; Tröhler, 2011; Volckmar, 2008).
2. This was the SIA-Commission. SIA stood for Skolans inre arbete, the internal work of the school. Its final report came out in 1975 (see Larsson and Ringarp, 2021).
3. The grammar of schooling has become an organizing term for historical and contemporary research on modern schooling, curriculum, and pedagogies. It was coined by David Tyack and William Tobin (1994) and further developed by Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995).
4. Howard Gardner’s theory of “multiple intelligences” and the Norwegian Ivar Bjørgen’s idea of “responsibility for one’s own learning” (AFEL) both had great influence on Danish teachers starting in the 1990s.

5. Many of the experts involved in the formulation of the knowledge policy approach also had experience with research policy. In the Norwegian case, commonplace in a knowledge policy agenda including innovation, new technologies, and related fields as first priorities (Jarning, 2010). Academic qualities and standards as well as competencies for skilled practices and renewing efforts are parallel knowledge ideals. A new focus on the output side of knowledge institutions is seen from the establishment of quality assurance systems; more statistical indicators; and a focus on leadership, control, and accountability.

6. Knowledge solidarity, kunnskapssolidaritet, was coined by Gudmund Hernes and the knowledge commons, kunnskapsallmenningen, by the later Minister of Education Jon Lilletun from the Christian People’s Party.

7. This strong corporate pattern started from a bipartisan political and professional settlement on the folk school as a unified school in the early 1930s, and it expanded in the heyday of comprehensive school reforms (Jarning, 2010).

8. Hultén (2019) covers contributions by Broady, Carlgren, and Marton, among others. Jarning (2010) includes contributions by Korsgaard, Kvale, and Skjervheim. Key authors on knowledge issues discussed include Don Schön, Polanyi, and Dreyfus, along with scholars from classical and modern grand theory.

9. The grammar of schooling includes research on institutional patterns and keywords which have been furthered in Scandinavia by Bjørg Gundem, Urban Dahllöf, Ulf Lundgren, Tomas Englund, Karsten Schnack, and others.

References

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


