Perspectives on Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice in Education in Four Nordic Countries

Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, School of Education, University of Iceland, Reykjavik, Iceland

ABSTRACT

The article addresses some fundamental values in education and their implications in the Nordic countries, such as equity, democracy, social justice and inclusion, while its main aim is to introduce and discuss main findings from case studies in pre-, compulsory and upper secondary schools that are part of the Nordic research project; Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries. The aims of the research were to 1) to understand and learn from the experiences of immigrant students and children who have succeeded academically and socially; and 2) explore and understand how social justice is implemented in equitable and successful diverse Nordic school contexts and other learning spaces. The research is grounded within theories of critical multicultural education and culturally responsive pedagogy. Findings reveal a variety of successful educational practices on all three school levels while some challenges also exist.

KEYWORDS

Compulsory Schools, Democracy, Diversity, Education, Equity, Immigrant Students, Inclusion, Nordic Countries, Preschools, Social Justice, Upper Secondary Schools, Values

INTRODUCTION

As mobility within and between societies and diversity within societies in terms of their cultures, languages, and religions is increasing, educational institutions face the challenge of providing high-quality education for all children, who bring myriad experiences and knowledge to their educational settings (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004; Süßmuth, 2007). The Nordic countries have in recent years been facing similar developments (Norden, e. d.; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2014).

The aims of this article are, firstly to explore some examples of how the fundamental values in education in the Nordic countries, such as equity, democracy, social justice and inclusion are addressed in educational policy documents. Recent changes in policy developments in these countries and political aspects of the changes reveal the vulnerability of educational systems and policies in relation to political developments. A second aim is to address inequity and marginalization of immigrant students in many schools in the Nordic countries which continue to exist in spite of increased knowledge deriving from research on diversity and school reform. Examples from a study on municipal educational policies related to immigrant children and students in four municipalities in Iceland will be provided, which highlight some challenges in policy implementation. Thirdly, the article presents some main findings from the NordForsk funded project Learning Spaces for Inclusion and Social Justice: Success Stories from Immigrant Students and School Communities in Four Nordic Countries (LSP) (Ragnarsdóttir, 2015) and implications. Two main aims of the LSP project were to 1)
understand and learn from the experiences of immigrant students who have succeeded academically and socially and 2) explore and understand how social justice is implemented in equitable and successful diverse Nordic school contexts and other learning spaces. 27 researchers and doctoral students in five universities in Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden participated in the research. Sampling was purposive and schools chosen for data collection were ethnically diverse and had a history of multicultural and inclusive practices. The Learning Spaces project provides 27 cases of diverse and successful practices for inclusion and social justice in schools in four Nordic countries. Based on these cases guidelines for policy makers and practitioners can be developed.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: FUNDAMENTAL VALUES IN EDUCATION IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

The concept “Nordic model” and its implications have been discussed widely and often related to Nordic welfare systems and economics (Andersen et al, 2007; Einarsdóttir & Wagner, 2006). The idea of a Nordic model in education has also been addressed (Blossing, Imsen & Moos, 2014a; Horst & Pihl, 2010; Telhaug, Medias & Aasen, 2006). Blossing, Imsen and Moos (2014b, p. 1) argue that, “historically, the Nordic model of education has been based on a vision that schools should be inclusive, comprehensive, with no streaming, and with easy passages between the levels.” They claim that in general the Nordic model is based on an egalitarian philosophy and it has been considered the state’s duty to “provide equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of social background, abilities, gender and place of living” (p. 1). They also note that the development of the comprehensive educational system for all children has had both economic and social motives; “more and better education for all has been considered a prerequisite for economic growth, and bringing children with different backgrounds together physically was seen as a way to reduce social class differences in society at large”. The aims of schooling were thus “to develop social justice, equity, equal opportunities, participative democracy and inclusion, as those were pivotal values in Nordic state thinking” (p. 1).

The main factors and values in education in the Nordic countries which appear in acts and curricula are equality, democracy and inclusion (Mennta- og menningarnálarðuneyti, 2011a, 2011b; Wagner & Einarsdóttir, 2006). Two examples of how these appear in policy documents include, first from Iceland:

The role of the compulsory school is to, in cooperation with the homes, contribute to the general development of all students and their participation in a democratic society that is evolving. (Lög um grunnskóla, 91/2008)

And an example from Norway states that:

The Norwegian school system is based on the principles of equality and adapted learning for everyone within an inclusive environment. (Ministry of Education and Research, Norway)

However, in recent years it has been questioned whether and how educational practices in the Nordic countries reflect these main values as inequalities and discrimination have been discovered in research in these countries (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Bjarnason, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir, 2008). It has also been discussed that these broad concepts may be defined and understood in a variety of ways and that a common understanding of these concepts may be lacking within and between the Nordic countries. Although educational systems in these countries are in many ways similar and build on similar factors and values, they approach the education of immigrants in diverse ways (Kulbrandstad, Dervin, Hellman, Lunneblad & Ragnarsdóttir, 2014; Kulbrandstad, Ragnarsdóttir, Dervin, Hellman & Lunneblad, 2015).
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