

EDITORIAL

'Nordic values' and schooling during COVID-19: how to balance comprehensive education and sustainable pandemic regulations

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‘Nordic values’ and schooling during COVID-19: how to balance comprehensive education and sustainable pandemic regulations

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A school for all – based on a non-track, non-streamed inclusive model of education is a key characteristic of the Nordic comprehensive ideal of schooling, and access to a well-funded and open school model is a key asset of the Nordic welfare policies. During the lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020-21, children and young people around the world were offered different models of home schooling and/or a combination of partly open schools and home schooling. This special issue reports from experiences of home schooling be it teachers’ perspectives, parents’ perspectives and the voices of students and school leaders during this first year of the pandemic. The articles differ in methodological approaches spanning surveys, interviews and narrative approaches. While most of the articles reporting from the parents’ perspective draw on survey data, most of the articles capturing teachers’ perspectives report from interviews and/or narrative approaches. The papers from across Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the UK, discuss the issue of shock-digitalization or Emergency Remote Schooling (ERS), as several of the authors frame it, from a Nordic perspective.

The Nordic countries are interesting here as they are seen as world leading when it comes to digital infrastructure, and most students have access to the internet and equipment that enables digital remote schooling. Still, making the home of each student the place where all schooling happens over long stretches of time, greatly challenges many of the key ideals of inclusive education regardless of, for example, academic achievement and socioeconomic background. In this special issue, we discuss the impacts COVID-19 and home schooling has on the different countries from primary level to upper secondary level. The special issue will examine how teachers, students and parents across the Nordic countries and UK responded to a global pandemic and adapted to enable schools to keep providing education. The volume is organized in three sections, parents’ perspective, teachers’ perspective, and other key voices.

Teachers: Seven of the papers in this volume report from teachers’ experiences from this first round of school closure. **Aarnos, Sundqvist and Ström** reporting from interviews with special needs education teachers (n=12) in Finland, highlight how home schooling created severe challenges to the teachers’ daily work life including increased stress, challenges in communicating with students and parents, and

new structural and organisational demands for how to organize their teaching. Interviewing Icelandic primary and lower secondary teachers (n=13), **Gunnþórsdóttir, Gísladóttir and Sigurðardóttir**, point to teachers' tendency to concentrate on the "core subjects" at the cost of the other subjects during this first period of home schooling. They further show how the academic requirements were lowered, and also how the teachers perceived powerlessness and fear. Drawing on interviews across Nordic teachers (n=17) **Nilsberth et al.**, show how the situation of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) put new requirements on the teachers' ability to act independently in finding professional solutions. They show the teachers had to be creative and find suitable professional solutions regarding how to organize the teaching, how to assess students' learning as well as how to organize classroom dialogues. **Slotte, Rejman and Wallinheimo**, discuss how home schooling affects equality issues, drawing on interviews with Finnish teachers (n=12). Their results, as identified by teachers during lockdown, were related to changes in interaction, an increased amount of texts and lack of structures. The teachers noticed challenges in the new online school – and how they took action in order to promote equality in teaching. **Olofsson, Lindberg and Fransson**, also drawing on interviews (n=16), show how ERT increases the complexity of Swedish upper secondary teachers' work while at the same time serves as a positive catalyst and boost for developing their digital competence. Contrary to their colleagues at primary and lower secondary level, these upper secondary teachers report on decreased workload during the pandemic. The interviewees also underscore how ERT has created more personal relationships with their students and created new forms of collaboration and collegiality. Drawing on Swedish secondary teachers written reflections (n=93), **Alerby, Ekberg and Johansson** discuss how the situations of ERT accelerated already ongoing changes towards digitalisation in Swedish classrooms. They show how this new situation - or disruption – as they call it - make visible the use of existing pedagogical repertoires and assessment practices but also how they could be different. **Holmgren**, drawing on written narratives from Swedish vocational teachers (n=12) shows how the ERT situation has increased the complexity of vocational teachers work while at the same time, similar to the arguments put forward by Olofsson et al., also increased their pedagogical repertoires regarding digital teaching.

As can be seen from the teachers' perspectives they all report on how the situation of home schooling required a great deal of flexibility from them as professionals including 'creative problem solving' and increased stress. Several of them, in addition, point to how remote teaching has created new spaces for professional collaboration as well as new ways of communication with their students. There seems to be a tendency that those who teach at secondary level (and especially upper secondary level) find this new situation more rewarding and positive, reporting on how this has created new forms of professional collaboration and communication as well as extended their digital competences and repertoires. One might argue that differences between primary and middle school teachers (grade 1-7) and secondary level teachers here reflect differences in digital competence among their students including a greater familiarity with digital learning among the adolescent students.

Parents: Five papers focus on parent's experience of educating their children at home during the first months of COVID-19. In a small scale survey (n=60) analysed through a qualitative content approach, **Alanko and Juutinen** looked for positive experiences of home schooling from Finnish guardians. They

acknowledged more modern teaching methods with increased flexibility in family life and student responsibility for their own learning. These benefits were also recognized by the UK parents (n=152) in the **Rehman, Smith and Poobalan** study where the aim was to learn about how parents coped with challenges such as stress during this period. They found the perceived stress level among parents moderate, but higher among single parents and those who had to educate their children at home as a result of the pandemic rather than electively home educating. They highlight the importance of social support. **Wallenius, Koivuhovi and Vainikainen** surveyed both parents (n=30572) and teachers (n=5792) nationwide in Finland to investigate their experience and views on distance learning in relation to parental trust in the education system. The results confirmed a high level of trust in the Finnish education system as the parents were, in general, satisfied with how the school staff handled this exceptional situation. **Dalland, White, Blikstad-Balas and Roe** also did a nationwide survey among parents (n=4642), but in Norway. They found different experiences among Norwegian parents based on their level of education, work situation and access to equipment. They suggest that in order to ensure equity among students it would be best to provide children with suitable equipment. **Böhler** interviewed parents (n=8) of disabled children in Norway. His results confirm the vulnerability of parents with weaker social-economic background which was even more prominent among parents of disabled children than among other groups of parents.

These five papers make an important contribution to our understanding of schooling during the first months of the pandemic when most students throughout the world were educated from home. The results provide valuable insight into the perspectives of parents who took on a new role in their children's education as well as suggestions on how they might best be supported in this new role. Even though parents in general acknowledged many positive sides of this strange situation many challenges appeared. Equity and conditions for parents in vulnerable situations were of concern for many of the authors that stresses the importance of developing appropriate support for this group, both social, emotional, and economical.

Other Key Voices

Students: **Qvortrup's** study is the only paper in this issue that focuses directly on students by asking Danish primary and lower secondary students about their wellbeing in a nationwide survey used four times during the first year of COVID-19 (n=1182 – 5953). It is interesting that students reported their emotional, social and academic well-being most often good or very good. However, with some decline in both emotional and academic well-being over time, only social well-being had improved from the first to later data collections. Some students in her sample did though express worries related to health issues and hopelessness. Qvortrup emphasises that she draws a general picture of students' wellbeing and that the strange situation during this period most likely had significant negative consequences on students in vulnerable conditions as many other studies have revealed.

School leaders: **Jones, Dehlin, Skoglund and Dons** investigated Norwegian school leaders' experiences through an online survey (n=62) and focus group interviews. They revealed that during the pandemic the leaders spent more time on supportive activities with teachers than on school

development and student matters. They conclude that the leaders were context-sensitive, risk-involving, reflexive and fundamentally empathetic during this period. Based on that, they suggest that the pandemic should be seen as an opportunity for leaders to explore and develop their pre-existing skills rather than as an isolated incident that necessitated extraordinary leadership.

Taken together, these 14 papers present insightful, updated and nuanced knowledge on the many and diverse implications of home schooling spanning increased stress, insufficient structures and organization to new spaces for communication and collaboration. Several of the papers highlight, however, how this new form of schooling reinforced issues of social inequality linked to the students' socioeconomic background such as parents' education, access to equipment and technology as well as parents' working conditions at home.

This special issue then concludes with a feature where **Frostholm** explores the practicing pedagogies and implicit philosophies of volunteers working within a Danish Folk high school. This is followed by a review of '**A Kist o Skinklan Things: An anthology of Scots poetry from the first and second waves of the Scottish Renaissance**' where McClure uses a selection of poetry to support the re-establishment of Scots as a rich language that can exemplify changing social and political thinking over time. The second review of '**The Turning Point for the Teaching Profession - growing expertise and evaluative thinking**' brings us back to where we started with 'Nordic values' and echoes the focus of this issue on equitable education and how we all critically consider how we educate every student no matter where they come from and where they are in academic achievement.