

Convergence and Divergence: A Comparison between the Nordic School Curricula

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to compare ethics and morality in the school systems in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. What similarities and differences on ethical issues and values are to be found in the five countries? With a background knowledge in the Swedish curriculum, we want to study democracy, multiculturalism and human rights based on other countries' curricula. Traditional theories and frameworks from literature on ethics and morality, for instance Begley's frame of theory, and educational policy documents have been studied to understand the concepts in the school system. By using document analysis we have put this together to reach the aim of the study, which has a Nordic perspective, not only a Scandinavian one, which is the most usual ones. The main results are that there are both similarities and differences between the countries, but the Nordic countries regarding ethics and morality have especially to consider the main concepts democracy, multiculturalism and human rights in the school systems. Even if there are many similarities between the Nordic countries when it comes to democracy, multiculturalism and human rights there are differences between the Nordic countries how related concepts have been expressed.

Keywords: Democracy, human rights, multiculturalism, Nordic school systems

1. Introduction

During the latest 50 years, about, the Nordic countries have changed from mostly homogenous countries to multicultural countries (Widell & Mlekov, 2013). Changes in the countries' citizenship have meant an overwhelming mixture in languages spoken, religions, living styles, communication patterns, appearance, psychological and physical achievements (ibid). These changes have had drastic effects on the Nordic countries and have sincerely addressed its peoples, especially in the education sector. Here we, the authors of this article, have seen a renewed interest in immigrant children's school achievement and behaviour, and a demand to encounter the new citizens' global and legitimate claims to be treated decently.

It is important to increase our knowledge to cope in an ethic way with colleagues, parents and children having another appearance, who have another accent or behave differently. We must also learn to understand their way of understanding us and our behaviour which to them might be seen both as strange and sometimes also threatening. Based on background knowledge regarding the Swedish curriculum, we want to study related concepts to ethics and morality based on other countries' curricula.

2. Purposes

The aim is to compare ethics and morality in the school systems in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

3. Research Questions

What similarities and differences can be found in compulsory schools in the five Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden regarding

- democracy
- multiculturalism
- human rights?

4. Methodological Aspects

In this paper we have used a method of both comparing and evaluating one component of an educational system, the compulsory school curriculum, to determine the relationship between moral values and democracy within the goals outlined. Comparative research can thus be approached from several perspectives. The authors of this article have earlier studied school principals understanding of basic values regarding compulsory school curriculum in different perspectives (cf. Drakenberg & Vincenti Malmgren, 2012; Drakenberg & Vincenti Malmgren, 2013).

In the analysis, we search for underlying themes/categories in the material being analyzed considering a social perspective in terms of similarities and differences (cf. Bryman, 2008). We define categories as main categories if the concept is mentioned in three or more of the five Nordic countries. If the concept is mentioned in one or two of the countries we define it as a subcategory. The social perspective in this article is according to social relationships between students/children, students-teachers and also in spite of power of leadership from teachers and principals and between countries. We also have an intellectual perspective when we compare between our literature study and official documents.

4.1 Data

The focus in this paper is specifically on the national core curriculum within the context of compulsory schooling. The internet showed its value as a research tool as we were able to retrieve all five countries' curricula in English as well as other key documents and information, e. g. the search process has been according to the Nordic countries national core curriculum in English and related official documents. While these official documents, from the states respectively, provided substantial data for our study we also reviewed additional primary and secondary sources such as books and journal articles.

The primary method we have used to compare our data is document analysis. We selected only documents which were written in English or translated into English. Thus, working with translated texts means that someone else has already been busy with discerning the literal meaning of the documents. Interpreting material is however a method to present the data in a well-rounded manner. Within the content of a text are beliefs, ideas and intentions, which all are essential in analyzing concepts such as moral values, citizenship and democracy. The documents used in our study are considered official documents, created by the states, respectively, therefore we have assumed them to hold a high level of legitimacy. While the authors of these documents cannot always be specified, it is assumed that the documents were objectively formulated from the beginning. The documents are typical in that Ministries in other states produce similar documents to inform and evaluate policy, and detail goals.

Huntington (1991) writes that the 1990s was the start of the Third Wave, which referenced the global events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ending of Apartheid in South Africa, the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the start of democratization in former communist states in Eastern Europe. These events and more pointed at a growing pluralism which encouraged and implemented a number of civic education programs to promote a shared values system. It became more and more clear that moral values education was important and that school children as well as adults were prepared to become active participants in a modern society where they needed guided responsibility in for instance, democratic and moral issues.

The Fourth Wave will continue to evolve in coming years, evidenced by the Internet. By technology it is possible to collect, distribute and use information in many ways that were not possible a few years ago (www.fifthwaveleadership.com/fifth_wave.htm, 2015-05-15). The Fifth Wave is about self-discovery and is about critical elements of relationships, but also about commitment and accountability. Organizations are about to act on core values serving to create a unified culture (ibid).

We first present our literature study and thereafter each school section from the five countries. In the school sections we begin with a short summary of each countries school system.

5. Theoretical Aspects

Here a number of qualitative research theories have been studied, among others Polkinghorne (1988) and Glaser (1983), but found not to fit adequately to our purpose. Instead we have focused on Begley's theory (2004).

5.1 Morality in School

Begley (2004) writes that administrators must develop a values-informed sophistication in their practices. A new reality of school leadership responds to value conflicts. What can it mean for leaders who want to develop a multicultural organisation? (cf. Widell & Mlekov, 2013). Nowhere the pupils have the formal responsibility for the organisation. They are dependent of an openness from leaders to cooperate (ibid). Begley (2004) concludes that the new reality has become a defining characteristic of all school leadership and compares it with instructional leadership which was the

dominant metaphor in the 1980's. What has made demands of school leadership role profoundly more challenging of responding ethically? (ibid)

The quote below provides an insight into the subject of context

“ethical behaviour, while always involving interpersonal relationships, is shaped by the circumstances and status of the persons involved. Acting ethically requires one to be sensitive and responsive to the other person within the circumstances as well as the context. So it is not simply a question of one person in relation to another person, the relationship is supported as well as limited by the culture in which the two parties live their lives” (Starratt, 1994, p. 34 & 35).

Begley (2004) discusses social value postures or conditions to share the same shape from country to country but actually structured of quite different elements. Democracy in general is taken as an example.

Another author, Tholander (2002), is putting both a historical and a social perspective in the concept morality. Tholander (ibid) points out there has been an ambition throughout the history of moral philosophy to find the essence of morality. Kohlberg, the most well-known modern advocate of moral cognitivism, has a conversational approach to morality. He has a narrow conception of what constitutes the moral domain. For example general cultural standards and social conventions do not belong to the moral domain (in Tholander, 2002). Tholander (ibid) writes that from a conversational, social constructivist perspective it is absurd to think that morality is independent of human actions. He argues we should study moral practices of everyday life. That means the analysts have to consider morally relevance for the participants. In other words we should use cultural competence to identify moral practices in talk:

“Morality is constructed in and through social interaction, and the analysis of morality has to focus, accordingly, on the intricacies of everyday discourse. Through a thorough analysis of descriptive practices and the mechanisms of everyday interaction the working of morality can be revealed” (Bergmann, 1998, p. 286).

We have in other words to describe how morality is put into practice. For Kohlberg just as for Kant moral actions are highly conscious and rational decisions. In contrast to a monological and rational picture of morality is the conversational approach. It emphasizes the dialogical nature of social actions (Tholander, 2002). Tholander (ibid) means also that morality largely becomes a matter of rhetoric a tuned fight with words.

“Thus, by participating in dialogues with other peers, and by being exposed to morality in talk, children get the chance to become more sensitive to social situations...” (ibid, p. 44).

5.2 Democracy

Tholander (ibid) suggests that teachers are only partly aware of how pupils contribute to each other's upbringing. Moos and Møller (2003) discuss the context of democratic leadership in Scandinavian countries in a dual perspective. The perspectives are about governing the schools towards a 'rigorous' form with models of leadership/management from the world of business. On the other hand there is a need for sustaining trust and loyalty in the school. The authors discuss how Scandinavian school leaders cope with this dual pressure. School leadership in Scandinavian countries has a more complex and uncertain role than before. Moos and Møller (ibid) conclude that both Danish and Norwegian school principals are about to transform external control to internal professional support. The findings demonstrate that business appear to continue as usual. Leaders are not coming to terms in creative ways. The context of neo-liberalism as a low risk approach may in the long run be a high-risk strategy for school principals (ibid).

The concept democracy can be discussed from multiculturalism related to education system and human rights. Biseth (2009) investigates how legislation in Scandinavia define democracy. This is investigated with a complex society including diverse linguistic, religious and culture practices. Nieto (2004) points out that all decisions in the education sector carry ideological and philosophical weight. This are communicated to the students, either directly or indirectly (ibid). The Scandinavian countries have education legislation strongly promoting issues of democracy but even multiculturalism to a large extent (Biseth, 2009). There are signs of 'mainstream-centric curriculum'. Human rights are mentioned as core values in Scandinavian legislation and gender equality is emphasized (ibid). However the Scandinavian democratic ideal as part of the mandate does not reflect the diversity of the population. There are still a number of issues to discuss to improve the democratic character of education systems. Biseth (ibid) concludes that further investigation needs on how the mandate is practised by the Scandinavian educators.

Löf (2011) has chosen a specific democracy discourse. The school subject Life Competence Education has been developed in Swedish schools over the last decade. Life Competence Education is the author's own translation of the Swedish term 'Livskunskap'. She writes that Life Competence Education is interpreted from a discourse about school's mission to convey democracy and promote health. School authorities join the discussion about Life Competence Education but interpretations of the subject appear vague and ambivalent.

Moore and Young (2001) mean if all standards and criteria in curricula can be reduced to certain perspectives and points of views, it is not certain to teach in one before another or to teach in anything at all.

Research in education can be based on different disciplines such as sociology, economics, psychology, and political theory (Hansen, 2003). However, characterized in the Danish book "Uddannelsessystemerne i sociologisk perspektiv", training sociological research sometimes is as educational research (ibid). There are differences among other conceptual levels. In educational research, we come across terms such as didactics, project work and interdisciplinarity. The cohesion between educational research and educational sociological research is more directed towards teaching and education through interaction between the individual and those who teach in the classroom. This involves interaction at macro level between social structure and education (ibid).

When it comes to official documents in the school system Hansen (2003) asks how education sociological thinking is related to curriculum in the early 2000s. There are different views between knowledge and curriculum, however, lack a theory of the phenomenon of consciousness. Hansen (2003) discusses the basic values of society and notes that it is not the same values, which means "something good" for all people. However there are fundamental values, but the use of the concept of value includes uncertainty about its contents (ibid). Until the confused pedagogical value of debate stalled proposed to omit in teaching verbal value formulations and instead focus on the teachers act in accordance with fundamental values (ibid).

6. Results

We present the five Nordic school systems.

6.1 Schools in Sweden

Swedish elementary school and related school forms such as basic special school, special school and Sami school consists of grades 1-9 (norden.org, 2014-07-01). In practice, Sweden has ten years of education because almost all children also attend non-compulsory primary school when they are at the age of six (sweden.se/society/education-in-sweden/, 2014-07-04). In compulsory school there are three levels: elementary school for years 1-3, middle school for years 4-6 and lower secondary school for years 7-9 (ibid).

The Swedish new curricula from 2011 for compulsory school for all students but also Sami schools, special schools and upper secondary schools came in force 1 July 2011 (ibid). Schools can be communal but also independent schools. The primary schools follow the same curriculum, but in the independent schools there may be a different focus, for example, regarding creed or pedagogy. Children who speak another language in the home has the right to mother tongue education (norden.org, 2014-07-01).

The working of the Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the recreation centre 2011 called Lgr 11 is announced in SKOLFVS 2010:37 and SKOLFVS 2011:19. The overall curriculum is containing three parts which is about

1. "Fundamental values and tasks of the school
2. Overall goals and guidelines for education
3. Syllabuses which are supplemented by knowledge requirements"

(skolverket.se, 2014-07-01)

Goals and guidelines are under headings - norms and values, knowledge, pupil's responsibility and influence, the school and the surrounding world, and assessment and grading. There are even guidelines for the school at home and responsibility of the head teacher. The syllabus contains both the aim of the subject as well as its core content. For fundamental values, the school system is based on democratic foundations. The curriculum (Lgr11) is based on four perspectives: an historical perspective, an environmental perspective, an international perspective and an ethical perspective.

When it comes to an ethical perspective The Education Act (2010:800) stipulates the aims that pupils in the school system acquire and develop knowledge and values. It should promote a lifelong desire to learn. It is important to impart and establish not only respect for human rights but also fundamental democratic values. Values that the Swedish school should represent and pass on

"The inviolability of human life individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable" (skolverket.se, 2014-07-01)

To achieve ethics related to Christian tradition and Western humanism it is important to foster an individual sense of justice, generosity of spirit but also tolerance and responsibility. The internationalization of Swedish society places high demands to appreciate values in cultural diversity.

Because pupils have different circumstances and needs, the teaching shall be based on pupils' background, but also on their earlier experience, language and knowledge.

In according with rights and obligations it is not enough to teach knowledge about fundamental democratic values. Democratic work forms should be applied in practice. This shall prepare pupils to participate in an active way in the life of society and to take personal responsibility. The school shall also contribute to develop attitudes in promoting entrepreneurship.

Self-development and personal growth are important for the school to stimulate. Health and lifestyle are important to give attention.

When it really comes to knowledge the school shall offer both structured teaching under the teacher's supervision in two ways, both as a whole class but also on an individual basis. The head teacher is responsible for activities to be focused on in the national goals but is also responsible to follow up and evaluate school results (ibid).

6.2 Schools in Denmark

In Denmark the state school is the municipal Folkeskole. For the Folkeskole Act of 1993 the present system was according to both primary and lower secondary education implemented in 1994. In first of August 2009 compulsory education was extended to 10 years. Only a few children are taught at home but education is not compulsory (en.iu.dk/education-in-denmark/detailed-information/primary-and-lower-secondary-education, 2012-09-04).

Historically Acts in 1937, 1958 and 1975 reflect demands for equality in access to all forms of education. The Act from 1990 (nr 348 of 24/05/1989) introduced new provisions for instance setting up school boards with parental representation. An Act from 1994 had the central idea

“that the Folkeskole was to give the individual pupil the opportunity to develop as many of his/hers talents as possible. One of the watchwords of this act is differentiated teaching, e.g. the teaching is as much as possible to be adapted to the individual pupil” (www.adapt.it/.../Organisation_of_the_education_system_in_Denmark.pdf, 2014-02-17).

The Act from 2003 has as its main goal to strengthen knowledge and skill for each pupil. Now is the Danish Folkeskole regulated by the Act on the Folkeskole of 2007 (LBK nr 1049 of 28/08/2007 with later amendments) (ibid). It is the Danish Parliament that lays down the aims of the teaching. Targets are set by the Ministry of Education and then it is up to the local school to decide how to attain these targets (ibid).

It is The Ministry of Education that lays down general curricular aims and even optional guidelines, but no prescribed textbooks exist. Also a written student plan is prepared for all students. The plans contain information about results in subjects and course of action decided based on this results (en.iu.dk/education-in-denmark/detailed-information/primary-and-lower-secondary-education, 2012-09-04).

Schools design hereby their own curricula.

“Schools are permitted to draw up their own curricula as long as they are in accordance with aims and proficiency areas laid down by the Minister of Education. However nearly all schools choose to conform to the centrally prepared guidelines as their binding curricula” (ibid).

Words as cultures, nature, participation, joint responsibility, freedom and democracy are mentioned in section 1 of the Act on the Folkeskole from 2007.

“The Folkeskole shall familiarise the pupils with Danish culture and contribute to their understanding of other cultures and of man's interaction with nature. The school shall prepare the pupils for 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, equality and democracy.”

The subjects of the Folkeskole are divided within three subject areas

1. Subjects in the humanities
2. Practical/Creative subjects
3. Science subjects

“but also the topics Road safety, Health and sexual education and family studies and educational, vocational and labour market orientation is part of education in the primary schools. Also Information Technology (IT) is integrated into the teaching of all subjects at all form levels” (www.adapt.it/.../Organisation_of_the_education_system_in_Denmark.pdf, 2014-02-17).

6.3 Schools in Iceland

Compulsory education (*grunnskóli*) in Iceland comprises primary and lower secondary education. The legislation concerning this form of education was passed 2007, but 1996 municipalities took over the running of *grunnskóli*. Education is by the law mandatory for children and adolescents between the ages 6 and 16. Also the law states the responsibility of the municipality to give teaching, substitute teaching, administration and specialist services. The municipality must also provide special education if required (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Iceland, 2013-12-13).

In Iceland the compulsory education for pupils is divided into ten years. Many schools have all ten years (*ibid*). Schools must work in line with the National Curriculum Guideline unless the school have special characteristics. Also the school is required to create both an annual calendar and a school working plan (*ibid*).

In 1907 the first national education law took place. The first national curriculum came in the year 1926. It was in 1974 the education system was significantly modernized. The Compulsory Education Act of 1974 mandated special education services for all students that had some kind of disabilities (Bjarnason, 2003).

The guiding policy for the national education system in Iceland is inclusive education or Education for All. This means that pupils have equal opportunity attending inclusive education. Pupils' needs are addressed on a case by case basis. This is often at a local level (www.euroblind.org, 2014-07-02). Instruction in the fields of information and technology is emphasised in the new National Curriculum Guidelines for compulsory schools. This conclude a special course in computer use. The National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools in Iceland includes working methods, content and learning environment. The six fundamental pillars are literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity (brunnur.stjr.is/.../adskr_grsk_ens_2012.pdf, 2014-07-02).

The National Curriculum Guide is issued by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture. It serves diverse purposes as to control and execute provisions of law, instructions on school policy and a compilation of common objectives for school activities in the whole country. It is important to meet different individual needs and to encourage pupils' active participation in democratic society. Working methods shall be based on tolerance, equality, democracy and responsibility (*ibid*).

Teacher professionalism is based on work ethic. There are radical changes as economy, industrial affairs, social issues of immigration, technology or communication that will influence cultural life and knowledge, education and upbringing.

The fundamental pillars mentioned above are interrelated and interdependent in education and school activities. Democracy and human rights, and health and welfare are seen as an integral part of sustainability. All the six fundamental pillars are based on for instance democratic values. From a social perspective education towards sustainability concerns equality, both intragenerational and transgenerational.

What is important about creating a society of collective responsibility? Individuals have to develop as active citizens. They have to be conscious of their own values and attitudes. The importance is for instance about democracy, human rights and justice, equality and multiculturalism.

“Respect for the human value and health of children and youth involves both respect for their human rights and acceptance of their talents and possibilities for development. Attitudes, values and ethics are essential factors in education for democracy and are at the same time an intrinsic part of other fundamental pillars of education” (*ibid*, p. 19).

Equality is seen as an umbrella concept involving a number of factors. Some of these factors are: age, class, culture, descent, gender, disability, language, nationality, outlook on life, race, religion, residence and sexual orientation. “At every school level, education for equality should address how these factors can establish discrimination and privileges for people” (*ibid*, p. 20).

It is important that schools create a positive atmosphere and health – promoting environment. Competence is more than knowledge and skills. It encompasses for instance even attitudes and moral strength (brunnur.stjr.is/.../adskr_grsk_ens_2012.pdf, 2014-07-02).

Educational and social requirements of each pupil are met in inclusive school

“Respect is shown for the diversity and different needs, abilities and characteristics of the pupils and an effort is made to eliminate all forms of discrimination and disintegration at school” (*ibid*, p. 41).

According to teaching methods examples are given on encouragement of moral and social development but also on democratic participation. Also common for all subject areas in compulsory school is competence using various media to seek, process and communicate knowledge and use information in responsible but also in a creative and critical manner.

Also pupils are responsible for their own studies. It is important that they adapt good work methods. Of course pupils' age and level of maturity should be considered.

6.4 Schools in Norway

Norway introduced the people's school (*folkeskole*) in 1827. This school became mandatory for 7 years in 1889. In 1969 it became mandatory for 9 years. In the 1970s and 1980s the foundation school (*grunnskole*) was introduced and the *folkeskole* was abolished.

Today the Norwegian school system is divided in three parts. The parts are Elementary or Primary School (age 6-13), Lower Secondary School (age 13-16) and Upper Secondary School (age 16-19) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Norway, 2014-04-22).

Universal schooling for children was in Norway in 1969 increased to nine years and in 1997 to ten years. Children of different ages are often taught in the same classroom and there is also a combination of primary and lower secondary levels in the same school. This is because that forty per cent of primary and lower secondary schools are small (www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/kd/Selected-topics/compulsory-education.html?id=1408, 2014-03-07).

The Education Act also applies to private schools and private tuition at home. The primary levels are grades 1-7 and the lower secondary levels are grades 8-10. There are two forms of the Norwegian language called *Prose Language* and *New Norwegian*. From grade 8 pupils themselves have to choose which primary written form they would like to use (the Education Act, Section 2-5). Primary and lower secondary education shall include for instance Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics. When it comes to religious and philosophical beliefs pupils can be exempted from activities.

“The school shall respect the religious and philosophical beliefs of pupils and parents and ensure their right to equal education” (the Education Act, Section 2-3a)

and

“Following written notification by parents, pupils shall be exempted from attending those parts of the teaching at the individual school that they, on the basis of their own religion or own philosophy of life, perceive as being the practice of another religion of adherence to another philosophy of life, or that they on the same basis find objectionable or offensive” (ibid).

In the curriculum for primary and lower secondary education there are different parts as core curriculum, principles and guidelines but also curricula for individual subjects (www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/kd/Selected-topics/compulsory-education.html?id=1408, 2014-03-07).

Some areas are defined as Sami districts and here the teaching must be in accordance with the special Sami curriculum (ibid). There are special arrangements in the curriculum for deaf people. Norwegian sign language is in such cases set up as a first language (ibid).

“Act of 17 July 1998 no. 61 relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training (the Education Act)” (www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Grunnskole/dokumenter/EducationAct_with_amendments_enter, 2014-04-22) contains in chapter one objectives, scope and adapted education. In chapter two there are different sections regarding only the primary and secondary school. Chapter five is about special education. In the section of objectives of education and training the Education Act points out a historical and cultural insight for the pupils. Fundamental values in Christian and humanist traditions are important. It is different values rooted in human rights. Values mentioned are respect for human dignity and nature, intellectual freedom, charity, forgiveness, equality and solidarity.

“Education and training shall provide insight into cultural diversity and show respect for individual's convictions. They are (in order) to promote democracy, equality and scientific thinking” (the Education Act, Section 1-1).

The Education Act also states that the pupils shall learn to act ethically and shall have joint responsibility and also the right to participate. All forms of discrimination are combated.

Pupils at primary and lower secondary school with other mother tongue than Norwegian or Sami have the right to adapted language education in Norwegian. For recently arrived pupils education may take place in a specially organized facility up to two years, but decisions are made for one year at a time. Pupils have the right to be absent from school for days their religious community celebrates as holy.

If a pupil receives special education he or she shall have an individual subject curriculum. This curriculum specifies educational objectives and content but also indicates how the teaching is to be realized. Pupils with a specific need for special education assistance have such a right. Teaching aids such as textbooks prepared for special education shall be

ensured by the Ministry.

In school the environment, both the physical and psychosocial, must be good:

“All pupils attending primary and secondary schools are entitled to a good physical and psychosocial environment conducive to health, well-being and learning” (the Education Act, Section 9a-1).

The school environment work on health, environment and safety should involve the pupils not only in planning but also in performance of the systematic work. There is a pupil’s council with representatives to safeguard interests in relation to the school. The representatives are elected in the autumn.

“At each primary and lower secondary school there shall be one pupils’ council for grades 5-7 and one for grades 8-10 with pupil representatives. The municipality shall determine the number of pupils’ representatives. The representatives shall be elected at the latest three weeks after the beginning of the autumn semester” (the Education Act, Section 11-2).

There are a free, voluntary homework help for pupils in year 1-4. It is up to the municipality to provide this help.

6.5 Schools in Finland

In Finland there are four thousand schools. Almost all are public but less than one percent of the schools are private. The national curriculum plays a key role in the educational process. Compulsory subjects and their contents are defined on national level, but on a local level it is possible to add extra subjects. In this country there is no compulsory school attendance because the children can either participate in basic education or acquire a corresponding education through some other means. Compulsory education starts the year when the child is seven years old and is ended when the basic education syllabus is completed. Primary school is when the child is from 7-16 years old (years 1-9) but the minimum entrance age is when the child is 6 years old (www.edufile.info/?view=school_systems&topic=topic_general_infos&country=16, 2014-04-30).

Objectives of education and staff is referring to Basic Education Act 628/1998 with amendments up to 1136/2010. The purpose of education is to support pupils’ growth into both humanity and ethically responsible membership of society, that is about to provide pupils with both knowledge and skills needed in life, as well as equality in society. Each school referred to in the Basic Education Act 628/1998 shall have a headteacher. This person is responsible to operations.

The duration of the basic education syllabus shall be nine years, but education in foreign language shall be two years. The extent of instruction that prepare immigrants for basic education is corresponding to a one-year syllabus. The languages are in Finnish, Swedish, Sami, Roma or sign language, but other possibilities may also occur.

“The language of instruction and the language used in extracurricular teaching shall be either Finnish or Swedish. The language of instruction may also be Sami, Roma or sign language. In addition, part of teaching may be given in a language other than the pupils’ native language referred to above, provided that this does not risk the pupils’ ability to follow teaching” (Basic Education Act 628/1998, Amendment 1288/1999).

Due to religion and ethics in basic education in Finland, religious education is provided in accordance with the religion of the majority of pupils. It is possible for a pupil who does not belong to this religious community to attend the said religious education by the parent or carer. The pupils not belonging to any religious community and who do not take part in such education shall be taught ethics when requested by the pupils’ parent or carer. The provider of basic education must organize such education if at least three pupils are entitled to it.

When it comes to special-needs education both pupils who have temporary or frequently difficulties in learning in school are entitled to special-needs education. If a pupil have needs of regular support, learning shall be provided in accordance to a learning plan specially devised for her or him. The pupil shall have a plan on individual teaching arrangements.

In Finland there is a Curriculum reform called OPS 2016 by the Finnish National Board of Education. The general education system is due for reform on objectives, lesson-hour distribution, the National Core Curricula and local curricula. The work is to be realized between 2012 and 2016/2017 (www.opf.fi, 2014-04-30). Specially findings utilized in designing the national core curriculum are: Intensified support and special support called KELPO, supporting Romani children called ROKU, multiculturalism skills (MOKU) and language teaching (KIELITIVOLI).

There are legislative changes and new development tasks such as: to promote equality, especially between men and women, entrepreneurship, to facilitate democracy, empowerment and influence. But also social skills and good manners are to be considered (www.opf.fi, 2014-04-30).

The national core curriculum is to be designed by end of 2014, but local curricula are to be introduced first in the

autumn semester in 2016 for all grades. Key objectives of the reform are educational work at schools, meaningful learning and a sustainable future (www.opf.fi, 2014-04-30).

7. Analysis and Discussion

According to our research questions we start to analyse by comparing school themes/categories in regard to democracy, multiculturalism and human rights in the Nordic countries from the results of documents in this study. To get an overview of the themes/categories we show them in three tables (Table 1-3). In Table 1 we study themes/categories regarding democracy. Table 2 is about multiculturalism and Table 3 shows school themes/categories in regard to human rights. After each table we analyse similarities and differences in the Nordic countries. Finally we compare between the analysis hereby and our literature study.

Table 1. An overview of school themes/categories according to democracy in Nordic countries

What is our data saying about democracy?				
Sweden	Denmark	Iceland	Norway	Finland
Equality all people, equality women and men	Equality	Equality – umbrella concept – age, outlook of life, sexual orientation	Equality	Equality in society
Solidarity	Joint responsibility	Working methods based on tolerance and responsibility	Solidarity	To facilitate democracy, empowerment and influence (reform OPS 2016)
Justice	Participation	Participation in democratic society	Joint responsibility	
Tolerance	Health and sexual orientation	Collective responsibility	Right to equal education	
Responsibility and influence		Intragenerational equality	Right to participate	
Democratic working forms		Transgenerational equality	Pupils' council	
Health and lifestyle		Health and welfare	Good social environment conducive to health and well-being	

7.1 Similarities and Differences According to Democracy in a Social Perspective

When it comes to democracy in the Nordic countries the empirical data from the five countries show that the concept **equality** is mentioned in all of the countries. In some of the countries the concept is more explicitly stated. For instance in Finland the reader only finds the expression of equality in society but in Sweden it is pronounced between women and men. This is a difference between the countries.

The concept **responsibility** is mentioned in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden but it is expressed in different ways. In Sweden the concept is “responsibility and influence” but in Denmark and Norway it is called “joint responsibility”. When it comes to Iceland the concept is mentioned according to work methods. It is stated that work methods should be based on responsibility.

Solidarity is only mentioned in Norway and Sweden. The concept **justice** is only mentioned in Sweden. **Tolerance** is mentioned in Sweden and when it comes to work methods in Iceland. In the other countries the concept is not mentioned.

In all countries except Finland **health** is mentioned in several ways. In Sweden it is together with lifestyle, in Denmark it is together with sexual orientation, in Iceland sexual orientation is mentioned according to equality but health is put together with welfare and finally in Norway health is in regard to good social environment and is put together with wellbeing.

7.2 A comparison According to Democracy in an Intellectual Perspective

The concept democracy has shown categories as equality, responsibility, solidarity, justice and tolerance. But even the health aspect is shown as a category in this article. Solidarity, justice and tolerance are seen as subcategories. The others are seen as main categories. Aspects above can be compared to Starrat (1994) who points out “ethical behaviour” which is about acting ethically and requires sensitivity and responsibility. Tholander (2002) argues that moral practices should be studied of everyday life and consider morally relevance for all participants. In other words it is about how morality is put into practice (ibid). When we talk about the health aspect Ljöf (2011) has chosen a specific democracy discourse. The school concept Life Competence Education is a mission to both convey democracy and promote health. This school concept has developed in Sweden over the last decades.

Table 2. An overview of school themes/categories according to multiculturalism in the Nordic countries

What is our data saying about multiculturalism?					
Sweden	Denmark	Iceland	Norway	Finland	
Curriculum (Lgr11) is also for Sami schools	Contribute to understand other cultures	Meet different individual needs	Respect religious and philosophical beliefs of pupils and parents	Education in foreign languages	
Curriculum heading – the school and the surrounding world	(Schools design their own curricula)	Individuals have to be conscious of their own values and attitudes about multiculturalism	Ensure right to equal education	The foreign languages are first in Swedish, Sami and Rooma	
Curriculum based on an international perspective		Equality – umbrella concept – class, culture, descent, language, nationality, race, religion	Provide insight into cultural diversity	Immigrant preparation for basic education	
High demands to appreciate values in cultural diversity			Other mother tongue language than Norwegian or Sami right to adapted language education	Possible for pupil who does not belong to the religious community to attend religious or ethics education by parents or carer	
Teaching based on pupils' language			Right to be absent from school for days their religious community celebrates as holy		
Right to mother tongue education			Sami districts-teaching is in accordance with the special Sami curriculum		

7.3 Similarities and Differences According to Multiculturalism in a Social Perspective

The broad **culture** concept is mentioned in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. In Sweden it is mentioned in schools as the surrounding world, international perspective and appreciate values in cultural diversity. In Denmark the concept is according to understand other cultures. The concept culture is in Iceland in the umbrella concept equality, but to be conscious of own values and attitudes is mentioned regarding multiculturalism. In Norway insight into cultural diversity is mentioned. In Finland, Norway and Sweden the Sami culture is specially mentioned in the school system. Norway and Sweden has it in regard to Curriculum. The Swedish Curriculum (Lgr 11) is also for Sami schools but in Norway there is a special Sami curriculum. In Finland the Sami language is mentioned as a foreign language in school. One of the first foreign languages in Finland is Sami.

The **language** concept is mentioned in Sweden as teaching that is based on pupils' language but also as right to mother tongue language. In Iceland the language concept is mentioned in the umbrella concept equality. Pupils in Norway have right to adapted language education and in Finland the concept language is mentioned as education in foreign languages.

Only in Finland, Iceland and Norway the concept **religion** is mentioned. In Iceland the concept is mentioned in the umbrella concept equality, but in Norway the concept is more explicitly stated. Religion is here expressed in two ways. It is in the first place about to respect religious beliefs of pupils and parents and secondly the right for the pupil to be absent from school those days their religious community celebrates as holy. In Finland the concept religion is mentioned as the possibility for pupil not belonging to the religious community to attend religious education by parents or carer.

7.4 A comparison According to Multiculturalism in an Intellectual Perspective

When it comes to the concept multiculturalism we have found in this article the main categories culture, language and religion. Tholander (2002) points out that morality becomes a matter of rhetoric. When children participate in dialogues with other peers and when they are exposed to morality in talk children can be more sensitive to social situations (ibid). Biseth (2009) investigates how to define democracy in Scandinavia. This investigation is related to a complex society which includes things such as diverse linguistic, religious and culture practices.

Table 3. An overview of school themes/categories according to human rights in the Nordic countries

What is our data saying about human rights?				
Sweden	Denmark	Iceland	Norway	Finland
Curriculum (Lgr11) is based on an ethical perspective	To strengthen knowledge and skill for each pupil	Equal opportunity attending education	School shall ensure right to equal education	Support pupils' growth into both humanity and ethically responsible membership of society
Respect for human rights	Freedom	Case by case basis	Special arrangements in the curricula for deaf people	Equality in society
Individual freedom and integrity	Equality	Respect is shown for diversity and meet different individual needs	Respect for human dignity and nature	Temporarily or frequently difficulties – entitled to special-needs education
Equal value of all people Equality between women and men	Interaction with nature	Work ethic Justice	Intellectual freedom Charity	
Solidarity with the weak and vulnerable Justice		Equality – umbrella concept Effort to eliminate discrimination and disintegration at school	Forgiveness Equality and solidarity	
Tolerance			Show respect for individual's convictions Act ethically Right to participate Discrimination are combated Special education assistance Free, voluntary homework help	

7.5 Similarities and Differences According to Human Rights in a Social Perspective

Much about human rights is according to the concept **equality**. In Sweden they talk about equal value of people but also about equality between women and men. In Denmark the concept equality is only mentioned implicitly but not explicitly stated. It is seen as an umbrella concept in Iceland but also expressed as equal opportunity in regard to attend inclusive education. In Norway it is explicitly stated that schools shall ensure right to equal education and in Finland it is explicitly stated that equality is expressed as equality in society. Also when it comes to human rights in Iceland, Norway and Sweden those rights are expressed in regard to the concept **respect**. In Sweden they have respect regarding human rights, but in Iceland regarding diversity and different individual needs. In Norway it is expressed as respect for both human dignity as for nature. The concept respect is not mentioned in Denmark but interaction with nature is mentioned.

The concept **solidarity** is only mentioned in Norway and Sweden. In Sweden the concept is expressed in regard to the weak and vulnerable. Other concepts are freedom and justice. **Freedom** is only mentioned in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The concept is in Sweden about individual freedom but also integrity. In Norway it is about intellectual freedom. The concept **Justice** is only mentioned in Iceland and Sweden.

An **ethical perspective** is mentioned in Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. It is expressed in different ways. In Sweden the whole Curriculum (Lgr 11) is based on this perspective. In Iceland it is expressed as to work ethic. The concept in Norway is about to act ethically and in Finland the school has to support pupils' growth into ethically responsible membership of society. Regarding the other country this concept is not mentioned.

7.6 A comparison According to Human Rights in an Intellectual Perspective

The three categories equality, solidarity and justice occur even in the subject human rights as in the subject democracy in this study. Other categories in regard to human rights in this article are respect, freedom and an ethical perspective. Solidarity and justice are seen as subcategories.

The ethical perspective has challenging demands of school leadership (Begley, 2004). Human rights are seen as core values in the Scandinavian countries and gender equality is emphasized (Biseth, 2009).

8. Conclusion

There are many similarities between the Nordic countries when it comes to democracy, multiculturalism and human rights. The concept equality is mentioned in all of the countries according to **democracy**. Also the concepts responsibility and health are mentioned in all of the Nordic countries except Finland regarding democracy. A difference is that the concepts are expressed in different ways in the four countries Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Solidarity, justice and tolerance regarding democracy are only mentioned in one or two countries.

The concept culture according to **multiculturalism** is mentioned in all of the Nordic countries except Finland. In three countries the Sami culture is mentioned. When it comes to the concept language in the Nordic countries regarding multiculturalism it is mentioned in all countries except Denmark but the concept is expressed differently. The concept religion regarding multiculturalism is mentioned in three of the Nordic countries but is expressed in different ways.

Equality according to **human rights** is mentioned in all of the Nordic countries but in different ways. In Denmark the concept is not expressed at all. The concept respect in regard to human rights is not mentioned in Denmark and Finland. Solidarity according to human rights is only mentioned in Sweden. Freedom regarding human rights is not mentioned in Finland and Iceland. The concept justice in regard to human rights is only mentioned in Iceland and Sweden. An ethical perspective in regard to human rights is mentioned in all Nordic countries except in Denmark, but expressed in different ways.

According to our definitions of categories in this study we have as **main categories**:

In concept **democracy**: Equality, responsibility and health,

in concept **multiculturalism**: Culture, language and religion,

in concept **human rights**: Equality, respect, freedom and an ethical perspective.

As **subcategories** we have:

In concept **democracy**: Solidarity, justice and tolerance,

in concept **human rights**: Solidarity and justice.

In this study we have seen that the concepts democracy and human rights are closely related to each other especially according to the categories equality, solidarity and justice.

We think our results are reliable because we have studied a great number of documents and the two authors of this article have been cooperate advisers to each other. Of course we see limitations in the study regarding literature and also we do not have an empirical study which could have given voices from different individuals in schools such as pupils, teachers and school leaders.

When democracy and human rights are taken into account in a society we have to be aware of the complexity of the society. We must consider different cultures, languages and religious beliefs. Relationships between pupils are complex. We have to act ethically and we also have to consider morally relevance in everyday life also when children participate in dialogues with other peers (cf. Tholander, 2002).

Just as Begley (2004) points out we mean that today there are special demands for teachers and school leaders to manage implementing an ethical view for all children in the Nordic schools. We find it very important for school teachers and leaders to continue this work.

In the future we hope for cooperation between the Nordic countries when it comes to implementing an ethical view in the schools. This study has shown a special need to increase the cooperation between the Nordic countries when it comes to democracy, multiculturalism and human rights in the school system.

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