

**GESTUR GUÐMUNDSSON:  
EDUCATION IN THE  
NORDIC MODEL**

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**Connecting Policy and Practice**

Conference of the Poet Project



- ❑ Often conceptualisations of a „Nordic Model of Education“ focus too narrowly on educational systems and their patterns of practice
- ❑ Rather, these systems and patterns should be seen as a part of a larger picture
- ❑ Education is not an isolated area of practice
- ❑ It is not least a part of a broader transition of individuals and cohorts from one life phase to another
- ❑ Family – peers – work – youth culture – new family

- Esping-Andersen offers a useful conceptualisation of European „welfare regimes“ (later expanded by Gallie/Paugam)
  - The liberal regime (UK)
  - The subprotective regime (Italy, Spain)
  - The labour market regime (Germany)
  - The universalistic regime (The Nordic countries)
- Andreas Walther has shown that these are not least regimes of transition from one life stage to another

**Gestur Guðmundsson, University of Iceland**  
**Education in the Nordic Model**

- *Nordic universalistic regime of transition* is based on comprehensive education, late selection and extensive public support to students (and their families)
- *German employment-centred regime of transition* is based on early selection, support of family (whose social security is based on employment)
- *Italian and Spanish regime of transition* is largely based on family and informal ties. Limited openings in education and labour market make youth a long waiting phase for many
- *UK regime of transition* is competitive and gives limited public support, a combination that makes social inequalities decisive in selection

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### Education in the Nordic Model

- Transitions between life phases are structured by a complex interaction between socio-economic structures, institutional arrangements and cultural patterns.
- Transition structures are constantly influenced by globalization, policy reforms
- However, these influences have different effects in different regimes - change must reflect the existing conditions.
- And conditions of education involve a complex web across several spheres of society

- "The Nordic model" was introduced in scientific and political discussion in the 1930s
- As an alternative to the big narratives of liberalism, communism and fascism
- As a social contract of employers, employees and peasants. Peace on the labour market, measures against unemployment, social reforms etc.
- Resembled Roosevelt's New Deal **but** was built upon cooperation between unions and employers' organisations, as well as existing social policy – politically carried out by an alliance of social democrats and social liberals
- Deeper historical roots: independent peasants became a strong social and political factor the 18th century etc.

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- In the beginning (late 18th and early 19th century) schools for children of common people served the purpose of Christian upbringing and nationalism, but by the end of the 19th century they were largely merged with private schools, and changed.
- „The political struggle for comprehensive schooling was possible in Scandinavia in the late nineteenth century due to early peasant organisation and social-liberal values” (Susanne Wiborg, 2002)
- During the first decades of 20th century comprehensive schools became more unified. „Middle schools“ after compulsory education became a bridge to education for working-class kids
- Next step (ca 1970) was to merge public and middle schools into a compulsory comprehensive school for all 7-16 years old

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- *Social mobility* is primarily a question of opportunity structures (in economy) and education
- The Nordic countries have emphasised – through government policy and cooperation between labour market parties – economic growth that is highly based on skilled labour
- The Nordic regime of transition has reduced the obstacles in the educational career of working class kids
- Since WWII children of unskilled workers have become skilled workers, children of skilled workers have become academics – only 5-10% of children of unskilled workers jump to academia
- Since the 1960s gender equality has to a large extent been achieved – although division of labour is still largely gendered
- Social mobility has been growing since WWII, but lately it has stagnated



## **Why is social mobility stagnating?**

- New opportunities of highly skilled work are constantly being created, but unskilled work is increasingly becoming precarious, and the layer in between – skilled labour in the traditional sense – is becoming thinner
- This tendency is not contested by education, but reinforced. Skilled labour is becoming more academic, there are fewer options for the non-academic

## **The double-edged sword of Economics of Education**

- From the late 1950s Economics has argued for the economic return of education – for individual and society
- Gradually, economics has become preoccupied with costs of education and the efficiency of educational systems. These considerations are based on a narrow understanding of learning

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### Education in the Nordic Model

- Preschool education, developed as a part of welfare policies, became instrumental for the high labour market participation of Nordic women from the 1960s
- Professionals in the field gradually convinced the public of the education in preschools, at first focussing on general personal development
- There are at least two very different reasons for the growing interest in the educational function of preschools:
  - The belief that learning in preschool can make schooling more effective – reduce costs and help finishing education
  - There is growing evidence that social inequalities have crucial impact on early learning, which calls for early intervention

### ***Future of Nordic model of education***

- If the model is to survive, its emphasis on the reduction of social inequalities must employ a broader perspective
- That learning is not limited to school – all people should enjoy stimulation to learn, not only those who fit well into schools
- That good practices come out of cooperation. During a person's transition through childhood and youth the position and participation of „stakeholders“ – parents, peers, youth culture, popular culture, work mates etc. – varies with each life stage and between individuals