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Letter from the Editor

Participation and agency in Swedish education: Contributions to a Nordic conversation

Dear Reader,

This issue brings together ten contributions which are all grounded in Swedish educational contexts. They collectively illuminate what it means for children, students, teachers and guardians to participate meaningfully in education today. The questions they raise about agency, interaction, identity, equality, and institutional conditions for learning are not uniquely Swedish. Read together, these articles speak to a wider Nordic conversation about how education systems can be made more inclusive, dialogic, and democratic at every level, from the youngest children in preschool to student teachers in higher education. Across preschool, school-age educare, teacher education, and home and consumer studies, the articles emphasise voice and interactional conditions rather than treating learners as passive recipients of policy and curriculum.

Children's influence in sustainability education

Hedefalk, Caiman, Gelinder and Ottander show how very young children can exercise real influence in education for sustainable development. This occurs when their proposals are treated as epistemically relevant and sustainability problems are kept genuinely open. Analysing video, documentation, and children's drawings from work on sustainable fruit transport, they identify a three-step progression of anticipation, exploration and fulfilment. These are shaped by teachers' generative, confirming, instructional, and reconstructive epistemic moves in a pluralistic, dialogic inquiry. This resonates with a broader Nordic commitment to children's

democratic participation and *bildning*, the tradition of humanistic formation and cultivation, as foundational educational values.

Care, value fostering, and the shifting purposes of preschool

Dessborn's longitudinal survey of newly enrolled preschool teacher students reveals striking shifts in how care, teaching, and value development or fostering (*fostran*) are prioritised across cohorts admitted in 2015, 2017 and 2024. Whereas earlier cohorts overwhelmingly ranked teaching as most important, the 2024 cohort placed care first and consistently rated value fostering lowest. Through theories of semantic change and the spontaneous reproduction of propaganda, Dessborn interprets this pattern as indicating that value education may be undergoing a discursive reframing rather than disappearing from professional concern. This study invites Nordic colleagues to examine how similar semantic and ideological pressures play out in their own curriculum landscapes. The questions raised here represent a shared challenge for policy and professional formation.

Literacy as social practice in school-age educare

Aminoff, Skoog and Forslund Frykedal conceptualise literacy in school-age educare as *skriftspråkande*, or literacy as lived social practice. Drawing on New Literacy Studies, they analyse how 6–7-year-olds encounter reading and writing in two school-age educare settings, namely after-school clubs (*fritidsbarn*). They document parallel practices: school-like, teacher-led activities such as read-alouds and phonics exercises, alongside more playful, child-initiated engagements with letters, words and texts in informal settings. They argue that activities in informal settings hold underused potential for functional, multimodal literacy development. The Swedish after-school club is distinctive institutionally, but its core challenge – how to bridge formal and informal learning in the margins of the school day – is shared across Nordic out-of-school care settings.

Visual and aesthetic practices as educational refuges

Thorsten and Ryberg's interview study with visual arts teachers surfaces tensions around *bildämnet* – the Swedish school subject of visual art – as both a practical-aesthetic refuge in the

school day and as a subject with its own forms of knowledge. Teachers frame visual arts as a creative, joyful breathing space in contrast to more theoretical subjects. Yet, they also grapple with the balance between hands-on creative work and analytical reflection, between creativity and assessment, and between strong and weak subject-specific expertise. This paper therefore raises questions about how the visual art subject can be valued as an educational practice in its own right, rather than being justified mainly through its contribution to other subjects or broader instrumental aims. This Swedish case exemplifies how aesthetic subjects are valued and legitimised, and how they create space for student participation within ongoing curriculum negotiations extendable across the region.

Scaffolding, communication, and inclusion in adapted education

Kahlin and Josefsson's sociocultural study of diary-making sessions in adapted compulsory school for pupils with intellectual disabilities and autism identifies a rich repertoire of interactional scaffolding practices. Combining interaction analysis with Wood, Bruner and Ross's classic scaffolding functions, they show how teachers use verbal and physical support, feedback and digital voice facilitation to engage pupils, maintain attention and support communicative participation. They argue that such finely tuned scaffolding is central to communicative participation in this context. Inclusion and special educational support are priority concerns across the Nordic region, and this study's analysis of what scaffolding actually looks like in practice makes a methodological contribution that extends beyond national borders.

Equality, home, and literary engagement in teacher education

Höijer, Bryntorp, Edvardsson and Scazzocchio use reading logs on a short story in home and consumer studies teacher education. They show how literary texts can help student teachers move from personal anecdotes about household division of labour to more structural understandings of gendered norms. Grounded in social constructionism and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, their thematic analysis indicates that structured logs and guided discussion can make often invisible gendered assumptions about care, work and family life available for critical reflection. Gender equality is a cornerstone value in all Nordic education

systems, and the persistent gap between policy ambition and classroom practice that this study documents is one that resonates well beyond Sweden.

Structural conditions and children's participation in preschool

Hellberg, Williams and Larsson bring Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to bear on the everyday organisation of children's groups and activities in four Swedish preschools. Their observations show how recurrent routines, tightly time-regulated activity sequences, and predetermined transitions limit children's opportunities for spontaneous choice. They also show how these structures position teachers in shifting roles – as leaders, overseers or co-players – shaping the relations and forms of participation available to children. These structural tensions between top-down governance and bottom-up agency are recognisable challenges in Nordic preschool systems more broadly.

Blackout poetry, language learning, and sociopolitical voice

Psarri's analytical review article positions blackout poetry as a distinct form of *found poetry* whose defining features – resisting, reflecting and learning – make it a promising resource for English language teaching. Synthesising a small but growing body of international scholarship, she argues that blackout poetry's interplay of erasure, visual design and selective reading can foster literary competence, playful language exploration, and engagement in sociopolitical discourse. It also opens space for learners to resist dominant narratives and articulate multilingual, intercultural identities. For Nordic contexts in which English is both a school subject and a pervasive presence in daily life, this argument highlights how creative, critically oriented pedagogy can support learner voice, participation, and sociopolitical agency.

Becoming preschool teachers: identity, dissonance, and discursive opportunities

Within teacher education, Ebbelind and Aringer follow one student, “Wilma”, to explore how her professional identity is shaped through participation and re-participation in preschool teacher education and other social practices. Using systemic functional linguistics and the Patterns of Participation framework, they show how Wilma remains deeply motivated to become a preschool teacher while becoming increasingly less motivated to participate in

university teaching. This highlights how limited discursive opportunities and mismatches in educational values can narrow the space for students to bring prior experiences into their formation as teachers. Questions about the relationship between university-based and practice-based knowledge, and about whose experiences count in teacher education, are central concerns in Nordic and international teacher education research alike.

Third spaces between preschools and guardians

This issue concludes with Warström's linguistic ethnographic study of encounters between preschool educators and children's guardians with foreign backgrounds. Bhabha's notion of the third space is applied to everyday drop-off and pick-up situations. Warström shows how expectations that guardians adapt to Swedish norms and implicit institutional codes can position them as the Other. At the same time, resistance, adaptation, and newness emerge when educators adopt flexible, welcoming stances, use multimodal and multilingual resources, and when multilingual staff act as cultural and linguistic bridges. As Nordic societies have become increasingly diverse, the challenge of building genuinely intercultural preschool communities has become urgent across the region. This raises important questions about participation and agency in home-institution settings.

Towards more dialogic, equitable, and multimodal educational futures

Taken together, the contributions in this issue emerge from the Swedish educational landscape while inviting reflection on questions that extend well beyond any single national system. How can early childhood and teacher education hold together care and learning, structure and agency, equality and difference, and theory and practice? How can multimodal and aesthetic practices – from diary-making and blackout poetry to visual arts and sustainability projects – be recognised as central arenas for identity formation, the making visible of norms? How can they contribute to imagining more equitable educational futures? This issue invites researchers, teacher educators, practitioners, and policymakers to carry these questions into their own contexts.

Happy reading from *Educare*!

Trevlig läsning här från Educare!

Shaun Nolan (Editor-in-chief)