The Limits of Education

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This double issue of Nordic Studies in Education contains many different perspectives on education. That way, the seven papers move in different directions. Still, one particular perspective seems to move in the same direction, as all papers point to the limits of education, while providing a number of suggestions on how to expand the field of education as a way of responding better to the challenges that our modern society faces.

In the first paper, ‘Reforms and risks – a Nordic foundation for school development?’, Jorunn H. Midtsundstad gives attention to some limits of reforms and assessments of Nordic schools. As a response, the author makes a case for renewing and uniting Nordic common values in a general didactic theory of school development, and concludes that reforms which overlook the context can pose a risk to nationally and regionally established school systems. Therefore, it is, according to Midtsundstad, important to clarify common values and the common Nordic heritage that are still important for teaching and learning in Nordic schools.

Another perspective is provided by Kajsa Kemi Gjerpe, who implies the following limit of education: that the Sámi curriculum is merely a symbolic commitment. To avoid this, Gjerpe suggests that the definition of Sámi pupils and the Sámi perspective ought to be broadened in the Norwegian schools. Thus, the Sámi curriculum could become an important contributor to the education of all pupils in Norwegian schools.
What about Muslim schools? Should there be Muslim schools, alongside other secular and religious schools? According to Paul Thomas, the political rejection of Muslim schools on the pretext of ‘integration’ is not only a limitation, but is indeed untenable. Thomas argues that the Scandinavian model ought to redouble its efforts to ameliorate the current challenges, caused by globalization and immigration.

Speaking of cultural and religious diversity in education, it may be, according to Tore Vincent Olsen, a limitation when it comes to the well-being and academic success of both majority and minority students. Olsen concludes that a decentralized Danish model for dealing with cultural and religious diversity may be fruitful, as it appears to break with the widespread ‘retreat from multiculturalism’ predicated on the defence of liberal values. Not the least, Olsen suggests to solve such challenges by way of addressing diversity in school through dialogue and compromise.

Examining traditional didactic models, one may find that they illustrate teaching with certain foreseen aims and objectives. However, Lena Dahl, Vegard Fusche Moe and Øyvind Forland Standal aim at broadening education by way of focusing on the challenge and dimension of the unforeseen. Further, they analyse how Norwegian educational outdoor activity teachers in Physical Education from upper secondary school reflect on safety. The authors identify different safety practices from the data with six focus group interviews, and conclude that educational outdoor activity teachers take seriously the teaching of safety in upper secondary school, which is also a goal in the Norwegian curriculum.

As for Jan Grannas and Anneli Frelin, they discuss the distinctions between the intended and actual functions of educational environments, and between environment and surroundings in different parts of the municipal administration, and the resulting limitations and shortcomings of using an atomistic rather than an ecological perspective in education. Based on the ideas Dewey and Hansen, they acknowledge that the educational environment is dynamic and connected to educational purposes, and that educational relationships can be both direct and indirect, whilst connected to norms, values and subject matter.

Finally, Toril Aagaard and Kenneth Silseth point to the limitation that teachers mainly focus on the verbal messages of digital stories. At the same time, teachers struggle to assess images, music and multimodal qualities, and tend not to use criteria lists as a tool for assessment. The authors therefore prepare the ground for further research on how assessment impacts the pedagogical potential of digital storytelling.

As stated, we have suggested that there is a thread through these seven papers, through the theme of the limits of education. Having said that, we hope the reader also appreciates the differences between, and all the small details that are to be found in, the various papers.