

# Changes in Nordic Teaching Practices: From individualised teaching to the teaching of individuals

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In this article the theme of individualisation of teaching is described and analysed. In the light of a fairly long tradition of a comprehensive school system embracing the idea of individualisation, we expected this to be an important aspect of ongoing changes in Nordic schools. Individualisation can be seen as continuity in the pedagogical ideas—at the same time the meaning of individualisation changes along with other changes in school and society. While in Sweden and Norway the appearance of self-regulatory individualised ways of working in the end of the twentieth century is quite strong, it is not so obvious in the other countries. In the article the theme of individualisation is treated from the perspective of each country. Based on these case descriptions, similarities and differences are discussed.

*Keywords:* Individualised teaching; Changes in teaching practices; Self-regulated “own work”; Late modern hidden curriculum

## Nordic Schooling and Teaching Traditions

During the twentieth century, connected comprehensive school systems were developed and expanded in all Nordic countries. A comprehensive school system in Nordic terms refers to a unified, unstreamed school system where all pupils, despite academic and economic backgrounds and resources, are enrolled in the same age-based school. The Nordic comprehensive model further implies both theoretical and practical training and should, in principle, provide the students with the same structural possibilities for learning in terms of teacher competence, class size, text materials and other sources for structural support. The comprehensive school system includes primary and lower secondary levels (1–6/7 and 7–9/10) in all five countries.

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Is it possible to talk about a Nordic dimension in education apart from the 9 or 10 years of comprehensive schooling? One possible expression of such a Nordic tradition or school culture can be found in the so-called “Nordic School Meetings” from 1870 to the middle of the next century (actually, they lasted until 1972) (Stafseng, 1996, 2005). These meetings were quite successful and popular. At the meetings in 1905 and 1910, there were more than 6900 participants for a week’s professional exchange and discussions. The agenda was influenced by European pedagogical ideas at that time as well as by specific Nordic themes. As can be seen in the protocols from the Nordic meetings, a will to form a Nordic alternative was shown, and the meetings created an arena for a Nordic pedagogical discussion. The first decades of the twentieth century seemed to have been something like a golden age in terms of teachers involved in pedagogical discussions and activities. Many prominent educationalists could be found in each country, such as Sigurd Næsgaard, Vilhelm Rasmussen and Sofie Rifbjerg in Denmark, Aukusti Salo in Finland, Halldóra Bjarnadóttir and Guðmundur Finnbogason in Iceland, Anna Sethne and Helga Eng in Norway, and Ellen Key and Otto Salomon in Sweden. Their educational ideas, which are both inspired by European naturalistic educational thinking and at the same time strongly emphasising ideas of all-round education, designed schools for both theoretical and aesthetic/practical training and the notion of *Heimstaddir* (giving space for local knowledge areas in the school curricula). Ideas of informal youth and adult liberal education (*folkbildning*) were also strong in all Nordic countries.

After the Second World War, several changes can be noted. The pedagogical discussions among teachers and the growing research interest decreased. In a way one can say that the progressive groups (including many active and engaged teachers) had “won” the educational battle and the efforts were now put into the constructions of 9-year comprehensive school systems. The middle of the twentieth century was then characterised by large school reforms and more or less centralised school systems. Through the reforms the teachers had to teach more mixed ability classes than before. To handle that, individualised teaching methods were advocated, that is, individualisation was seen as the way to accomplish differentiation within the unstreamed school. Besides, educational progressivism in terms of pedagogical practices that pay attention to students’ engagement and activities has played an important role within the Nordic comprehensive school model. Progressivistic thinking was thus very influential with an emphasis on activity pedagogy. It was a progressivism based on psychological thinking rather than the European *Bildung* tradition. The “child in the centre” was advocated together with a plea for individualisation. Yet the main organisation of teaching continued to be “plenary” teaching combined with individual seatwork.

The 1950s and 1960s were characterised by a strong position for psychological thinking as well as positivistic research traditions. During the 1950s research projects were carried out—in the Nordic countries as well as in many other countries—regarding the effect of different teaching methods. Although these research efforts

failed in that they could not demonstrate the superiority of certain methods (Kallós, 1971), they paved the way for analyses of classroom practices (e.g. Flanders, 1970). Other researchers could show the persistence of the initiation-response-evaluation/follow up (IRE/F) pattern for classroom communication (Cazden, 1988; Hoetker & Ahlbrand, 1969; Mehan, 1979) and that the teacher was talking two-thirds of the time (Goodlad, 1984; Leiwo, Kuusinen, Nykänen, & Pöyhönen, 1987; Lundgren, 1979).

The progressivistic and individualistic educational ideology was not weakened, however. On the contrary, ideas of “the child in the centre” and “the active child” were strengthened along with the appearance and growth of constructivist learning theories. The progressivistic discourse was becoming even more “psychological”—and at the same time standing in sharper contrast to existing classroom practices.

For a long time, it seemed as if the traditional ways of teaching (plenary class teaching in relation to a textbook and following the IRE/F pattern) would stay for ever. At the same time the individualistic progressivistic educational discourse became even stronger. In probably one of the most widely read articles in the Nordic countries, Donald Broady (1980) forecast that progressivistic ideas could never be released since they were economically impossible.

However, over the last two decades new ways of working based on the single individual rather than the class have appeared. It seems as if traditional class teaching now is challenged by new ways of organising school work such as work plans and project work. The changes are not just about new ways of working and methods—they are also framed within a new language of schooling. The impregnation of educational thinking with economical theories, including themes such as market mechanisms and accountability in terms of results, is part and parcel of a change of schooling into a private and individualistic project rather than a public (societal) project (Englund, 1993). The restructuring of the educational systems that has been going on from the 1990s is not only changing the structure of the system. It is also reframing the meaning and content of schooling. The idea of the educated citizen seemed to have been replaced by the separated individual responsible for his/her own life (see, e.g., Klette, Carlgren, Rasmussen, & Simola, 2002; Klette, Carlgren, Rasmussen, Simola, & Sundqvist, 2000).

In the following, we will focus on these changes based on case descriptions from each Nordic country. We will thereby have a double focus: on the one hand on actual changes in classroom practices and how they are discussed, and on the other hand on changes in the educational discourses at a policy level. The case descriptions will differ from each other depending on what kind of data is available in each country. Our ambition is to illustrate the theme of individualisation of teaching in different ways and get a basis for a more nuanced description of what is outlined above.

## **Sweden**

In 1962 the first National Curriculum (*Läroplan för grundskolan*, 1962) for the 9-year comprehensive school was launched. The proportion of pupils in lower secondary

school increased from 30% of the population in the 1950s (in grammar schools) to almost 100% after the comprehensive school reform in the 1960s. There was a lack of teachers for the lower secondary school and the new kind of heterogeneous classes were a challenge. In the National Curriculum of 1962 the students' activities were emphasised as well as individualisation of teaching. It was stated that the needs of the individual, together with the demands of society, should determine the content of the school curriculum. Teaching should be adapted to the individual student: "the student as a separate individual should be in the centre" (*Läroplan för grundskolan*, 1962, p. 31). In the next National Curriculum (*Läroplan för grundskolan*, 1969), "The pupil in the centre" is one of the headings under which individualisation is advocated in order for the student to acquire a certain "body of knowledge". The individualisation is further expected to strengthen the students' belonging to different communities and to be able to be actively involved in civic activities. Also the students' free choices of optional subjects are motivated in the same way.

However, in the next National Curriculum for the comprehensive school (*Läroplan för grundskolan*, 1980), a change can be seen. Now "pupils with special problems" are pointed out as a group or category in need of special attention and care. It is also pointed out that the students acquire knowledge outside school and that teaching should connect to that. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on student participation in planning and evaluation of school activities and also a plea for other activities in school. The students are not referred to as individuals, but rather as belonging to groups, that is, student participation is not seen foremost as an individual activity.

Individualisation is much more prominent in the National Curriculum of 1962 and 1969 as compared to the National Curriculum of 1980. In the National Curriculum of 1962 and 1969, the students are to be treated and instructed or taught as individuals in relation to an existing body of knowledge (in its broad meaning). The individual is pointed out in relation to the idea of a common collective knowledge body as well as social belonging. In the National Curriculum of 1980 it is rather the other way around; now the knowledge is to be developed in relation to the interests and experiences of the pupils. The knowledge as constructed is based on individual activities, interests and efforts.

In the National Curriculum of 1994 (*Läroplan för det obligatoriska skolväsendet*, 1994) a new form and structure for the curriculum text is introduced. It is written in the form of goals for the individual student and one of the goals is: "The school must let each individual find his/her unique distinctive character and thereby be able to participate in social life to give his/her best in responsible freedom [*ansvarig frihet*]". The idea that the pupils shall be responsible not only for their own lives but also for their own learning seems to have replaced the idea that pupils construct their own knowledge as one of the most common catchwords during the last decade.

Leaving the policy level for the classroom, what can be said about changes in classroom practices? If we compare the percentage of class teaching, group and individual work in the comprehensive school, a change from class teaching to

individual work has been observed (Carlgren, 1994; Granström 2003; Granström & Einarsson, 1995; Lindblad & Sahlström, 2001). Granström (2003) compares the percentage of different teaching forms in lessons from 1960, 1980 and 2000 (Table 1). The most obvious changes are from the middle of the 1990s. Not only class teaching but group work as well is diminishing. It seems as if group methods are weak in Sweden, which in a way is a bit surprising considering the growth of teamwork in working life, for example.

The National Agency for Education has collected information about the Swedish school system (in so-called “national evaluations”) since 1992. The students were asked to estimate the share of individual work of the total amount of school work (Table 2).

Based on tape recordings and observations, Lindblad and Sahlström (2001) discern three types of lessons and the share of each type, here presented in Table 3. The mixed lessons are by far the most common. The percentage of individual work in these can, however, vary.

Granström and Einarsson (1995) have also analysed differences between the different school stages. The figures (see Table 4) are from 1990 and show the occurrence of the different teaching forms in the different stages. They confirm the common view that the changes have mainly been in the lower grades, although they have now also reached the higher grades.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Stukát and Engström (1966), Callewaert and Nilsson (1980), and Lundgren (1979) demonstrated the dominance of the teachers’

Table 1. The extent of the use of three teaching forms in Swedish schools at three points of time

Year	Class teaching	Group work	Individual work
1960	60%	18%	22%
1980	50%	24%	26%
2000	44%	12%	41%

Table 2. National evaluations from the Swedish National Agency for Education

Year	Individual work
1992	ca. 25%
1995	ca. 25%
2003	ca. 50%

Table 3. The frequency of different types of lessons in Swedish schools 1993–1995

Plenary lessons	25% (the teacher talks almost all the time during the lesson)
Work lessons	10% (the pupils work almost all the time during the lesson)
Mixed lessons	65% (a mixture of the two above)

Table 4. Occurrence of three different teaching forms in the different stages of Swedish primary school

Stage	The pupil listens to the teacher	Group work	Individual work
<u>Low</u>	28%	19%	52%
<u>Middle</u>	55%	10%	35%
<u>High</u>	55%	17%	27%

talk in the classroom (two-thirds of the time). In later classroom research (Granström & Einarsson, 1995; Lindblad & Sahlström, 2001), however, new patterns were visualised. The teachers still talk—but so do the pupils (almost all the time) (Lindblad & Sahlström, 2001). As the figures show, the most obvious change is that whole-class teaching decreased while the pupils' individual work increased. But it is not only that class teaching diminished—it was also changing from lecturing and IRE/F-teaching to instructions for individual work.

Individual work has changed as well. In the 1960s it was in the form of seatwork in the classroom, following a lecture and mostly in relation to the textbook. A lesson usually consisted of lecturing (following the IRE/F pattern) and seatwork. Sometimes the tasks for individual work could be given for several days or a week, so that the fastest students were kept busy while the slowest students finished their tasks. Out of this a new mode of individualised, self-regulated work—called “own work”—has emerged. The individual students plan, carry through and evaluate their own work. In contrast to the teachers deciding on the same assignment for all, students now plan their own individual assignments. Mostly they consist of tasks that are decided by the teachers, although the students are responsible for when and how to do them. To a lesser or greater extent, “own work” can be found in some form in most primary schools today.

“Own work” as a way of working was developed in the 1980s as a solution to two problems in the traditional class teaching model: (1) how to find methods of working in heterogeneous classes so that the pupils could progress at their own pace; and (2) to find ways to release the teacher from having to monitor the work all the time and instead help those in need of help. During “own work” the pupils work according to their own individual plans, not the teachers' decisions about what and when things have to be done. In traditional classroom teaching, the teachers tried to find a level where as many pupils as possible could keep up well with the work of the class. They were therefore looking for ways to individualise teaching as well as finding ways to make the pupils work on their own and be responsible for carrying through their own work. The solution was to let the pupils plan for their own work and be responsible for carrying it through. In “own work” the pupils have individual timetables where they plan for each subject one or two weeks ahead. After that, they evaluate their own work and make up new plans. They are, so to say, monitoring themselves (Carlgren, 1997, 2005; Österlind, 2005).

Although “own work” was developed during the 1980s, it was not until the middle of the 1990s that the explosive spread of this model seemed to happen. It occurred after the introduction of the new national curriculum and a new system for giving marks. The reforms made the teachers responsible for each individual’s learning, which created a stronger pressure to develop tools for keeping track of every pupil. “Own work” was a handy tool for these new demands—it fits like a glove with goal steering and standardisation. The correspondence between such self-regulative methods of working and the directions in the latest national curriculum that “the pupils develop a growing responsibility for their studies” and that they “develop the ability to evaluate their own results” is obvious. It was, however, a tool that had evolved within the schools and before the reforms.

### Norway

Although the comprehensive school system in Norway dates back to the early 1920s, it was during the late 1960s that the system expanded extensively. The expansion was related to state-driven policy reforms such as including lower secondary within a compulsory framework (Government of Norway, 1969), establishing national standards for class size and timetables as well as specifying standards for required specialised rooms and resources at the school level. In 1945/46 compulsory schooling included 287,309 pupils while in 1970/71 the amount of cohorts was extended to include 535,882 pupils (Telhaug, 1986). The comprehensive school model was revised and adjusted throughout the following three decades such as including new groups of pupils within a comprehensive school model (Government of Norway, 1975), setting national standards for timetables (1974), knowledge areas (1987) as well as ways of working at the classroom level. In 1997 compulsory education was extended to 10 years and today Norwegian pupils start their compulsory training at the age of 6. The general part of the National Curriculum Plan is further postponed to provide a ground floor for all undergraduate training, including upper secondary education as well as adult education.

Although change efforts were to a large extent linked to structural and fiscal elements concerning comprehensive schooling, educational progressivism played an influential part in all reform efforts during this post-war period. All curriculum plans during these decades put a strong emphasis on the individual learner as well as advocating progressivistic ideas such as subject integration and active ways of student working (*Mønsterplanen for grunnskolen*, 1974, 1987; *Lærerplanverket for den tiårige grunnskolen*, 1996; *Kunskapsløfte lærerplan for grunnskolen*, 2005). Individualisation understood as pedagogic differentiation was a strong theme in all these curriculum plans. Despite the ambition of making Norwegian compulsory training impregnated by progressivism, scholars kept on reporting how Norwegian schools and classrooms continued to reproduce a very well-known pattern of schooling based on plenary teaching, teacher-centred talk and interaction, where the teacher for the most part decided what to do, when and how to do it (*Forsøksrådet for*

Table 5. Reported frequency or estimated time from three research projects conducted 1960–1976 of instructional patterns used in Norwegian compulsory schools (percentages)

Year	Type of measure	Plenary work	Group work	Individual work	Not recorded
1960 <sup>1</sup>	Observed frequent	52.2	—	10.6	—
	Observed regular	32.2	—	38.7	—
	Observed infrequent	14.6	75.2	40.2	—
1971 <sup>2</sup>	Estimated time	52–72	7–27	4–16	—
1976 <sup>3</sup>	Frequency	78.0	9.8	9.8	2.4

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Hove (1960).

<sup>2</sup>Forsøksrådet (1971).

<sup>3</sup>Telhaug (1976).

*skoleverket*, 1971; Klette, 1998; Strømnes, 1967; Telhaug, 1986). The development is demonstrated in Table 5 with research data from this period.

Along with the curriculum reforms of the 1990s, a huge reform evaluation programme was launched and for the first time extensive data for describing activities and interaction in Norwegian classrooms could be obtained (Haug & Schwandt, 2003; Klette, 2004). Besides mapping out how Norwegian schools and teachers reacted and interacted with the new curriculum reform, the evaluation projects also provided data about instructional format and patterns of interactions across classes, levels and school subjects in Norway by the end of the century.

If we look at instructional formats and patterns of interaction, relevant data is presented in Table 6. Taken together these figures indicate a change towards a more active and working student role (Klette, 2003). Although the teacher still orchestrates classroom activities, the students are put in more executive and actively performing student roles. If we compare this with earlier studies, the amount of individual work has increased and the amount of plenary teaching has been reduced. These changes are more prominent at the primary level (Bjørnstad & Vatne, 2005).

Alongside these changes in instructional format, we also recognise changes in interaction patterns. On a structural level, IRF patterns of communication still dominate Norwegian classrooms. These patterns of IRF interactions are, however, more dialogic and interactive and less monologic and hierarchical than indicated in earlier studies (Aukrust, 2003; Klette, 2003).

Table 6. Estimation of instructional patterns across Norwegian primary and lower secondary levels 2003

	3rd grade	6th grade	9th grade
Plenary work	43.02%	42.77%	45.63%
Group work	17.52%	10.61%	
Individual work	23.29%	24.80%	16.44%

Source: Klette (2003).

Plenary instruction defined within a monologic and hierarchical IRF pattern is no longer adequate to characterise dominant practices in Norwegian classrooms. If we distinguish between the different activities across the instructional formats, individual seatwork is the single most frequent activity in almost all of the observed classrooms at the end of the century (Klette, 2003). Teachers at the lower secondary level spend, for example, almost equal amounts of their time between orchestrating plenary instructions and supervising and monitoring the pupils when they are occupied with individual seatwork (Klette, 2003). More recent empirical evidence supports these tendencies even further (Klette & Lie, in press).

The amount of individual work varies across classrooms. In some classrooms individual and group-related seatwork dominate the school day. These classrooms are ruled by what might be described as work plans or schedules. Work plans or schedules imply that the teachers designate a plan for all types of activities and tasks required within the different school subjects for a certain period. A plan could go for a week or signify requested work for a period of 3 or 4 weeks. In some schools the plan indicates mostly homework, while in others the work plan indicates all work required including schoolwork. Almost all the Norwegian classes use in more or less elaborated ways work plans or schedules as primary planning tools (Klette, Aukrust, Hagtvet, & Hertzberg, 2006). Classrooms with extensive use of individual work are often organised within a work plan framework. Here the school day is divided into plenary sections (around 30 minutes) and working sections (around 90 minutes). Within the working sections the pupils are free to choose whatever topic or activity they would like to engage in. This means that within a certain class or group different pupils are engaged in different tasks, topics and subjects. The teachers provide support in terms of available supervision and surveillance. In addition, to be competent to choose, plan and evaluate their own work for a certain period, the pupils are also free to choose difficulty levels. Mostly the plans are divided into three levels of aspirations. Work plans or schedules can be identified as one of the strongest forces for individualising pupils' schoolwork.

Classes with a high degree of individual seatwork tend to be more literate than traditional classes. Teachers use literate documentation as tools of monitoring and checking out pupils' work. This also means that the classroom as an oral and public communicative space is reduced. Since the amount of time for plenary activities is reduced along with multiple activities going on at the same time, classrooms as collective spaces for knowledge formation are further diminished and changed. Knowledge formation is, to a higher degree, turned into an individual and privatised activity and is regulated as a relation between the teacher, required texts and each child.

The professional role of the teachers is further changed dramatically in these classrooms. First we can see a change towards a monitoring teacher role where the common instruction is concentrated on task monitoring and management. The teachers' active engagement within substantial subject matter is reduced to a minimum and as a consequence the learning process is becoming privatised (Klette & Lie, in press).

## Denmark

The recent development in teaching practice in Denmark seems in principle to follow the Swedish and Norwegian cases, even if it is difficult to support this statement by direct empirical evidence. The reports from Denmark have mostly focused on a great amount of different pedagogical experimental work and school development endeavours, as well as evaluations of teaching and learning related to specific subjects or special needs (among many others: Danish Evaluation Institute, 2006; Harrit, Jansen, & Kristensen, 1993; Jensen, Nielsen, & Steenstrup, 1992; Mehlbye, 2001; Projekt Skolesprog, 1979).

Indirectly, of course, these reports tell quite a lot about “the normal situation” and they give important hints to the direction in which changes are going. The following will draw on impressions from these reports, together with more personal knowledge gained from interviewing research fellows and talking to many teachers involved in different kinds of in-service teacher training.

The 1993 Act relating to the Danish *Folkeskole* (primary and lower secondary school), which is still in effect with only minor amendments may be seen as the culmination of a long journey through the twentieth century towards an increasingly comprehensive school system.

Danish school Acts are relatively open and abstract. They set the aims and framework for the *Folkeskole*, which is financed and steered by the local municipalities. In the same way, the Ministry of Education lays down an overall national curriculum, while the more specific curriculum and the syllabi are the responsibility of the individual schools and municipalities. This way of governing the school system goes hand in hand with a long tradition of agreement among most of the political parties in the Danish parliament (the *Folketing*) across “the middle ground”. New laws have to a great extent legalised and normalised what had been emerging during the previous period.

Of course, the development of the unstreamed comprehensive primary and lower secondary school has been an ongoing issue. There is a great deal of pedagogical, political and ideological controversy involved in questions around ability grouping. That which made it possible once again to achieve a broad political consensus around the School Act in 1993, with all parties involved except the Conservative Party, was to an important degree the idea of “teaching differentiation”. To compensate for the lack of structural stratification, the teachers have had to differentiate the teaching in the classroom.

This idea, of course, was not a new one, but it had become more and more important and now it became an official expectation and an “open sesame” that could create an opportunity for political compromises. Already in the explanatory memorandum to the so-called “9-point programme” from 1969 it was stated that “in the long term such a pedagogical differentiation (individualisation) of the teaching inside the classroom should be aimed at in order to restrict ability grouping”.

In the early 1970s it was stated that research had not supported the general opinion that the strongest and the weakest pupils gained from being divided into

ability groups (Florander, 1972), and it was argued from the Social Democratic side that the segregation of the pupils was socially unfair and even undemocratic.

“Differentiation of the teaching” or simply “teaching differentiation”, in contrast to “pupil differentiation”, became the key concept. In opposition to pupil differentiation, it was first and foremost understood as an idea about integration. For this reason, among others, there has been a continuous debate about the balance between individualisation and community and solidarity learning (Nielsen, 1995). Certainly, much more individualised work has been seen in the schools. However, in the beginning, individualisation was regarded as an extreme interpretation, or as one end of a continuum of interpretations, of teaching differentiation. In the classrooms it showed itself more as a variation in the teaching and learning process than as a principle. This is probably changing now due to heavily political pressure, followed by national tests and demands for continuous assessment and revision of learning objectives for each individual pupil.

Another variation of the teaching and learning process that contributed to the development of teaching differentiation was project work. Introduced into higher education and adult education in the second half of the 1970s (Berthelsen, Illieris, & Poulsen, 1977; Holten-Andersen, Schnack, & Wahlgren, 1980; Illeris, 1974), it soon became part of the progressive experiments in the *Folkeskole* too (Daniel, Krogstrup, & Pollas, 1985). In the 1993 School Act it officially entered the classroom, a bit ironically as a paragraph about assessment: §13, 5 “At the 9th and 10th form levels, the pupils shall carry out an obligatory project assignment, for which the assessment shall be given in the form of a written statement and by a mark, if the pupil so wishes”. This helped to legitimise different versions of project work, and it also made it much more widespread even in lower grades, as exams and assessment forms always influence the teaching.

This again may be seen as part of the tendency towards “going from teaching to learning” and the trend of individualisation. On the other hand, project work has always been defined as group work, which makes it as much an activity satisfying the demand for competency related to collaboration and teamwork.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a relatively strong movement towards student participation was seen, not only as an ingredient in active learning, experiential learning, and constructivism, but also in the stronger sense of co-determination. In the 1975 School Act it was even explicitly stated that the choice of teaching methods, organisation and content should be made in close co-operation between the teacher and the students.

Probably it would not be correct to say that this became a predominant trait in the classrooms in the Danish *Folkeskole*, though many reports show that the students really feel that they can influence the teaching, that they have a say.

The background for introducing and stressing this idea of co-determination was two-sided. It was seen as an answer to the widespread problems with motivation. Talking about a crisis was not unusual, and the word “school fatigue” became part of the common language. At the same time co-determination as genuine student

participation was understood as democratisation; it was a necessary element in the ideal of “education for democracy with democracy”.

From this perspective it might be called individualisation as far as democratic processes concern engagement of individual persons. However, in the classrooms a strong focus on the collective aspect has been prevalent: the individuals have had to talk, listen, argue, and compromise to reach joint agreements. This is sometimes, by the Danish (neo-liberal) Prime Minister, for example, ironically called “circle-pedagogy”, as something childish and not sufficiently knowledge- and subject-oriented.

In a way the statement about co-operation between teachers and students is still valid. In the 1993 Act it is put in section 4 of paragraph 18, which characteristically opens with a section saying that “the organisation of the teaching, including the choice of teaching and working methods, teaching materials and the selection of subject-matter, shall in each subject live up to the aims of the Folkeskole and shall be varied so that it corresponds to the needs and prerequisites of the individual pupil”.

This might be read as teaching differentiation as individualisation in the strong sense. The parents often react that way. Still, however, the inertia of the school, together with some reasonable awareness of the need for a balance and the practical difficulties of the time-consuming task, seems to delay the development of individualisation in the classrooms. Nevertheless, “the student(s) in the centre” has been, and is, a trend in Denmark too, and in recent decades the plural tends to move towards the singular—or towards additive plural—as an accumulation of individuals in contrast to collective plural as a community of socially interacting individuals.

## **Finland**

Pedagogical individualism reached Finnish educational discourse quite late, compared to the Nordic neighbours. In fact, the principle of individualising teaching did not belong to the Finnish pedagogical vocabulary before the 1960s. Linked with the moral and civic curriculum codes, keywords even in the Finnish progressive “new school” movement in the 1930s were *Die Arbeitsschule*, workbooks and social education rather than child-centred individualism. The strong Herbartian tradition in Finnish teacher training was phased out only in the late 1940s through the introduction of a new textbook of didactics for teacher training. It was written by Matti Koskenniemi, a leading academic figure in Finnish education throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and strongly influenced by a social education mission (Simola, 1998).

The Finnish curriculum code (Lundgren, 1991; Rinne, 1984) did not turn from a civic to an individualist one until the 1970 curriculum for the new comprehensive school. Since then the individual pupil had been the main reason and legitimation for the existence of the school. In education discourse, especially related to individualism, one can see three shifts in the last three decades. The period from

the 1970s until the late 1980s may be characterised as a time of an egalitarian or social democratic interpretation of individualism (Simola, 1995). From the late 1980s until the late 1990s, we may speak about a kind of contending or market-liberalist interpretation of individualism (Koski & Nummenmaa, 1995; Sulkunen, 1991). The latter phase (from 1996 on) could be seen as a comeback of egalitarianism but now in a kind of social-liberal version. Emphasis on individual responsibilities and profitability replaced individual freedom (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000; Rinne, Kivirauma, Hirvenoja, & Simola, 2000).

Individualist rhetoric in education policy documents of the late 1980s and early 1990s was strong. In 1990 an MP from the Coalition Party gave a new interpretation to the concept of educational equality, stating that “the equality does not mean any more to offer the same dose to everybody but everybody’s right to receive tuition corresponding to his or her talents” (Ahonen, 2003, p. 106). These general pursuits materialised as enthusiasm for so-called “nongraded tuition” (*vuosiluokkien sitomaton opetus*—VSOP) for the whole education system from pre-school to vocational education. VSOP was officially seen as “one stage of development in moving towards nongraded comprehensive schooling” (Merimaa, 1996; Apajalahti & Kartovaara, 1995). In 1994 extensive experiments organised by the National Board of Education (NBE), were launched for developing VSOP. The experiments consisted of a wide range of individualising practices, from teaching ability groups to extremely individualised “own work” practices. The network included, at its best, projects from nearly 100 lower and upper stages of comprehensive school (Hellström, 2004; Merimaa, 1996). Finally 26 schools were selected to participate in the development project (Mehtäläinen, 1997).

During the late 1990s, however, one may see a clear move from “free choice” to “prevent exclusion” rhetoric in education policy. The background is easily to be found in Finnish reality. In 1991, the nation sank into an economic crash comparable only with the Great Depression of the 1930s and increasing social problems were apparent to everybody. The social reality ran over the enthusiasm of individualised and flexible tuition. The focus did move to dangers of exclusion and to the pupils having problems in school. A developmental project under way does capture well the recent emphasis in its title: “Different Learners—Common School” (2004). The social had its comeback as communitarian formulations of learning in the 2004 Curriculum Framework (2004) but now, stronger than ever, flavoured with ideas of entrepreneurship.

What happened to individualised teaching practices during these years? Interestingly enough, there is very limited research evidence on what really happened in the Finnish comprehensive school classrooms. The little there is, however, offers no support to broad prevalence of individualising practices. From the late 1980s, empirical research (Leiwo et al., 1987) based on videotaped lessons concluded that the model of verbal interaction in classrooms seems to have remained the same during the last 50 years: the teacher talks more than two-thirds of the time, and the pupils give short responses. The final characterisation of the Finnish comprehensive

school classroom was crushing: a “wasteland not only of intelligence but also of emotions”.

Ten years later, a foreign evaluation team reported another empirical excursion to the Finnish classrooms. The NBE had commissioned an experienced research team from East Anglia University in the UK to find out how the great comprehensive school curriculum reform had been implemented in Finland. The team visited, observed and interviewed principals, teachers and students in 50 lower- and upper-level comprehensive schools that were selected as being pilot schools or otherwise interested in curriculum reform. What is essential here is that these establishments clearly represented so-called good and innovative schools in Finland.

The report was a scandal and a disappointment to its subscribers while it showed how poorly the curriculum reform was being realised at the school level. It could be said, however, that the most interesting notions and observations concerned the pedagogical practices of Finnish comprehensive schools. The British group reported:

Whole classes following line by line what is written in the textbook, at a pace determined by the teacher. Rows and rows of children all doing the same thing in the same way whether it be art, mathematics or geography. We have moved from school to school and seen almost identical lessons, you could have swapped the teachers over and the children would never have noticed the difference. (Norris, Asplund, Macdonald, Schostak, & Zamorski, 1996, p. 29)

In both the lower and upper comprehensive school, we did not see much evidence of, for example, student-centred learning or independent learning. (Norris et al., 1996, p. 85)

In the eyes of the British researchers, Finnish school teaching and learning seemed to be very traditional, mainly involving teaching of the whole group of students from the front. Observations of individualised and student-centred forms of instruction were scarce. Given the enormous similarity between the schools, the observers were convinced of the high level of pedagogical discipline and order.

Since the mid-1990s, one can only make indirect observations but they tell us with one voice, however, that individualising practices in Finnish classrooms cannot be prevalent but rather rare. One could guess that the reality might be near to what was described above in the Norwegian case but there is no empirical evidence for this. The public discussion on pros and cons of non-graded tuition has been scarce. No heavy comments on its problems have appeared in public discussion. Through an Internet search in January 2006, 23 comprehensive schools and three cities were found which referred to VSOP in their web pages. Through the same search, it was found that among the political parties, only the right-wing National Coalition Party referred positively to the non-gradedness. Also the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities (*Kuntaliitto*), headed by the Central Party, made a positive reference to non-gradedness in its education policy programme (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, 2002).

In a study (Simola & Hakala, 2001; see also Simola, 2002a, b), the principals of two eminent non-graded schools were interviewed in 1999. One of those schools, the Ilola School, is widely known for its application of individual work. The principal described its practices as follows (Simola, 2002b, pp. 3–4):

We teach and train the kids from the very beginning to set objectives for themselves. Half of all the lessons are these classes of own work where they are allowed to work at their own pace and in their own sequence. Of course there are these things from the curriculum that everybody must study, but the pace and the sequence are rather free. So they build a pace for themselves and learn first, as young children, to take a small amount of pages of the textbook—unfortunately pages because the material is of such a kind that it is difficult, for the small children especially, to find content areas. We are struggling, little by little, with moving from pages of the text book to content areas and with creating our control system on those instead of pages. From the point of view of the child’s learning, of his or her individual progress, there is, however, no big difference if she or he takes content areas or just pages. They do their own work individually anyway. If a kid takes very tiny objectives, she or he will have a reasonable time before we react to that, saying that she or he does not learn enough. There are pupils who learn with those tiny bites and then show their learning in the test. And that’s OK then. The teacher is available, actively present there in the classroom. The teacher may go to a pupil asking “why you are still on that issue only, do you have problems?” because the teacher knows his or her own pupils. Or a pupil may ask if the teacher would help him or her in the task. Therefore in practice, the major part of our teachers’ working time is individual advising.

The Ilola School has struggled for more than a decade for individual work but it has not had success, according to the principal. After 12 years of fighting, he seems to be pessimistic, even concerning the capacity of teachers in his own school, to internalise and develop the idea. He concluded that the Finnish teachers would not give up their traditional “teaching from cathedra” unless they have to. Although there are more and more parents and children who do not accept behaviouristic teaching and want individual treatment, the great majority still believes in it and buckles under it. It is contradictory enough that, at the same time, the principal sees the approach very simply: “For me this [individual work] is a very simple thing, actually. It’s not even a question of resources but just turning the things around, starting to see the things from a different point of view” (Simola, 2002b, pp. 3–4).

A principal from the Roihuvuori School, also with a decade’s experience, sees the reason for applying individualising pedagogy from the pragmatic point of view:

We do have so many challenging pupils here that the need to individualise teaching comes straight from the fact that if you try to teach a group of 32 pupils with the same goals, they will climb the walls and you can’t help it. (Simola, 2002b, pp. 3–4)

It might be taken symptomatically, too, that among few schools that have applied non-gradedness for a decade, Ilola School has recently returned to basics and Roihuvuori School is in danger of closing down. Thus it is fair to say that

non-gradedness is still alive but definitely not at the forefront of school discussion in Finland.

There will be more and more “challenging pupils” and more and more teachers feeling they are no more able to teach “from cathedra”. The share of pupils diagnosed as needing special education (i.e., having the status of special pupil) doubled during the last decade (in 1995, 2.9%; in 2003, 6.2% of the cohorts) (Tilastokeskus, 2004). The latest news tells that the share last year was more than 7% of the cohorts (Opettaja, 2006). Up until very recently, teachers have seen these pupils moved to the special classes. But this traditional way to individualise tuition is going to be closed. It is only in the last 5 years or so that the policy has gradually begun to shift towards full inclusion where the pupils with special status are, as far as possible, integrated into “normal” classrooms. There have recently been public statements, especially from municipalities, stating that there are no financial possibilities and pedagogical reasons to increase full-time special education (Opettaja, 2006). Therefore, classroom teachers must find ways to manage with more and more different pupils and then the idea of non-graded tuition, “own work” and other individualised pedagogical practices may have a real “professional call” among Finnish teachers (see Simola, 2005).

## Iceland

Although the professional role of teachers and classroom practice has changed dramatically in Icelandic schools in recent years, unfortunately there is modest empirical evidence to demonstrate it. There are close to 250 compulsory and upper secondary schools in Iceland, and they vary considerably in terms of location, size and educational philosophy. Since the beginning of modern schooling in Iceland, individuality has been a prominent idea in formal education.

At the outset of the twenty-first century a new discursive theme on individualised education has increasingly become visible in the Icelandic educational discourse. The new theme coined “*einstaklingsmiðað nám*” (“individualised learning”) refers to new organising of schooling and instructional methods, emphasising diversity of students’ interests and needs and freedom and responsibility of the individual. This new movement is clearly rooted in local educational policy of the Reykjavík commune where the local educational officer, Gerður Óskarsdóttir, has been a distinctive spokesperson for the new ideology (Óskarsdóttir, 2003).

The emphasis on individualism has run through public educational legislation in Iceland, from the first Public Education Act in 1907, to a General Education Act in 1946 when the modern school system was erected in the spirit of the Scandinavian welfare model (Edelstein, 1971; Jóhannesson, 1987; Magnúss, 1939).

The Second World War brought paradigmatic changes to economy, politics and culture—and to education in Iceland (Mýrdal, 1989; OECD, 1987). A comprehensive school was formally established by the Comprehensive Education Act 1974, which gives clear emphasis to individuality.

Compulsory schools shall make an effort to carry out their activities to correspond as fully as possible with the nature and needs of their pupils and encourage the overall development, well-being and education of each individual. (Government of Iceland, 1995, article 2)

In this period, individualism in education was characterised by the expansion of the educational system and emphasis on educational equality. This encouraged wide participation of marginal groups of the population in schooling in order to enhance economic advancement (Edelstein, 1987; Pálsson, 1983; Proppé, Mýrdal, & Danielsson, 1993).

Various cases of individualised education were of course reported in Icelandic schools in the post-war era, open school, flexible instruction, collaborative learning, and theme teaching, but overall results were limited in scope and time (see Einarsdóttir & Helgadóttir, 2002; Helgadóttir, 1980; Kjartansson, 1982).

Unfortunately, empirical research on teaching methods and class activities in Icelandic schools is incomplete. A few cases, however, can be found. Ingvar Sigurgeirsson analysed extensive data in 20 primary school classrooms from the school years 1987–1988 and found overwhelmingly traditional didactics, “dominated by passive individual seatwork, rote-learning, recitation, drill and various forms of textbook teaching” (Sigurgeirsson, 1998, no page). Only a few instances could be detected of the application of the teaching methods especially proposed by the recent reform. A follow-up survey with teachers in 80 additional schools gave similar results (Sigurgeirsson, 1992).

In 1994 the same author mapped out developmental work in Icelandic compulsory schools. Head teachers in 200 Icelandic schools (96.6% of all compulsory schools) were interviewed. Respondents in 28 schools (14%) claimed that alternatives to the traditional teaching methods were frequently applied (thematic studies, topic work, work with various resources) in their classrooms. Other respondents acknowledged the domination of the traditional form of teaching (Sigurgeirsson, 1998).

As mentioned above, a strong movement on individualised teaching has been spreading in recent years. The educational officer in Reykjavík and her collaborators have developed a concise educational philosophy based on student-centred pedagogy and theme teaching. They also make references to activity theory, self-directed learning methods and collaborative learning, extensive use of information technology, and individualised curriculum. These ideas are being applied in several primary schools in Reykjavík, but they are currently spreading rapidly through in-service education in other communities (Guðjónsson, 2005; Óskarsdóttir, 2004; Sigurgeirsson, 2005). The 2004 Educational Plan for Reykjavík defined “individualised learning” as:

Organization of learning that is based on the position of each individual, but not groups of pupils or whole classes. Pupils are not learning the same topics at the same time, but can be dealing with different issues and subject matter individually or in groups. The

pupils are responsible for their learning, which is based on individualised curriculums. (Óskarsdóttir, 2004, no page)

We are still waiting to see how this current reform will last into the new century. It relates to a former individualised teaching movement and suggests many features of the multi-grade small school didactics (now in large urban schools), but it has its distinct characteristics. It must also be noted that the 1995 Educational Act proclaimed decentralisation of compulsory schools, transferring administration to the municipalities. This gave tailwind to local educational reforms and restructuring of schooling. The rise of “individualised learning” in certain municipalities must be perceived in this context. The proponents of “individualised learning” claim that they are fulfilling the educational philosophy of the 1995 Compulsory School Act (Government of Iceland, 1995), which still contains the rhetoric of the 1974 Comprehensive Education Act and the 1999 National Curriculum, which says: “It is the responsibility of each school to adapt their own instruction as best suits the needs of their pupils. Pupils are entitled to work on tasks suited to their academic ability and capacity” (National curriculum guide for the compulsory school, 2004, p. 22).

This movement, although noisy in the local educational discourse, must yet be seen as a minority cult within the current context of educational discourse and schooling practice in Iceland. How it will mature in practice still remains to be seen.

We have seen that individualism and individual education have been prevailing parts of modern educational discourse in Iceland. At each period they are shaped by the dominant political ideology. At the turn of the twentieth century, the public school took advantage of the ideology of nationalism in its tribute to individualism in education. The issue was: How can the individual contribute to society? The post-war school emphasised the social democratic project: How can society make the best use of every individual? The current school builds on the neo-liberal dogma: How can the individual make the most out of social competition? Today students are expected to make their own destiny through a self-directed curriculum that seems to be the individualised educational project aligned to the *Zeitgeist* at the turn of the twenty-first century.

### **From Individualised Teaching to the Teaching of Individuals**

Our ability to make comparisons between the countries is restricted because of the different kinds of data available in the different countries. However, we think that the cases can—from different perspectives—illuminate the theme of individualisation within the comprehensive school model.

The case of Finland shows the complex and contradictory relations between societal changes, changes in policy discourses and changes at the school level. While Finland at the beginning of the 1990s developed the most neo-liberal individualism at the policy level among the Nordic countries, the change towards a more socio-liberal common school orientation is interesting, as well as the connection in Finland between the success in PISA and the strong position of traditional teaching. The

other four countries have experienced something of a PISA shock and now look to Finland for answers. Ironically enough, Simola (2005) concludes that some culturally and historically based explanations for the Finnish miracle of PISA are as follows:

To put it simply, it is still possible to teach in the traditional way in Finland because teachers believe in their traditional role and pupils accept their traditional position. Teachers' beliefs are supported by social trust and their professional academic status, while pupils' approval is supported by the authoritarian culture and mentality of obedience. The Finnish "secret" of top-ranking may therefore be seen as the curious contingency of traditional and post-traditional tendencies in the context of the modern welfare state and its comprehensive schooling. (Simola, 2005, pp. 465–466)

It is obvious from the case descriptions that individualisation has been a theme for a long time in all Nordic countries. As indicated in the introduction, the theme of individualisation draws upon naturalistic romanticism, educational progressivism and child-centred psychology. Neo-liberal educational policy—with the individual self-reliant learner at the centre—together with social constructivist learning theories, seem, however, to be the main forces for individualised teaching and learning today. The language of teaching has been replaced by a language of learning, together with an emphasis on individuals as responsible for themselves and their own learning. This change of meaning regarding the purpose of school and the relation between society and the individual constitutes the reframing of the meaning of individualisation. As is pointed out in the Icelandic case description, the question at the beginning of the twentieth century was "how can the individual contribute to the nation?" that is, individualisation was framed within a thinking of educating the individual *for* society. Through individualisation the common cultural heritage was to be acquired. This meaning was later replaced by an idea of individualisation as connected to individually constructed knowledge in the education of citizens actively participating in society. And, finally, there is the emergence of the neo-liberal individuality where the meaning of individualisation is framed by an idea of individual competition and choices in a "society for the individual". Both these dimensions are clearly present, for example, in Finnish education policy discourse since the late 1990s.

While individualisation in the first interpretation makes sense in a school with traditional class teaching, neo-liberal individualism does not. There is a correspondence between the new language of the individual and the changes of teaching practices described in the Norwegian and Swedish cases. These self-regulating ways of working (like "own work") are also in accordance with the global discourse on flexible learning (OECD, 2001). In this way it is possible to talk about a hidden curriculum of late modern schooling symbolised by the development of new teaching practices such as "own work".

In studies of the hidden curriculum, Jackson (1968), Bauer and Borg (1976), and Broady (1980) have shown how the traditional school fostered dutifulness, subordination, patience and punctuality, although it was not explicit in the official

documents of schools. Rather it was a side-effect of the modes of working. In the late modern society it is no longer dutifulness and punctuality which are the desired virtues. Requested capacities are instead self-mobilising and flexible learners able to put themselves to work and evaluate their results. It is against this backdrop that the rise of “own work” and other new modes of work become interesting. “Own work” contributes to the capacity for planning one’s own work within a certain time schedule.

The late modern school evolves during a time when the so-called “organised modernity” (Wagner, 1994) is in a process of erosion (Nowotny, Scott, & Gibson, 2001). The established institutional structures are broken up and replaced by smaller, more flexible and “liquid” entities (Bauman, 2000). Society requires people to actively shape their lives in a fast-changing social world. The symbol of the so-called “human stereotype” is the entrepreneur who is distinctive in self-reliance, purposefulness, action and profit orientation (Rose, 1992; Wagner, 1994).

“Own work” can be seen as a mechanism in the change of regime (Foucault, 1977) and as a further step in transforming the regulation of people’s actions from external to internal. The capacity to plan is a part of the new normality. The planning log becomes a hub in the new order (Carlgren, 2004, 2005). The new hidden curriculum is about subordinating oneself to the planning log. One has to make individual choices about what to do, in what order and how much, etc. These dispositions can be understood in the context of post-modern virtues where the pupils are treated as entrepreneurs.

Even if there are many similarities between the countries in how individualisation is reframed, there are also interesting differences which raise some questions. The transformation of school practices moves at different paces as well as in different directions in the different countries. Depending on national contexts and histories, including the national school traditions, the solutions to the late-modern conditions will differ. The question is not whether there will be individualisation or not in pedagogical practices, but what kind of individualisation.

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