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Regional Policy Spaces, Knowledge Networks, and the “Nordic Other”

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Two core beliefs that have helped promote evidence-based policymaking in education are that school knowledge is abstract and universal and that “empirical evidence is an efficient indicator of knowledge and learning” (Wiseman, 2010, p. 1). In fact, these beliefs have popularized the *what-went-right* or *best practices* approach in education policy planning. The what-went-right approach implies that it is possible to empirically measure students’ learning in ways that produce generalized knowledge and that these transferrable features enable policymakers and others to apply findings across a variety of contexts. This view on the transfer of

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knowledge partly explains why, for example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has developed into a global project, supported by a large number of stakeholders (Addey et al., 2017).

However, previous research has questioned the smooth transition of empirical evidence across countries and continents as well as the universal character of the findings and recommendations produced by international organizations (Bieber, 2016). First, the receptiveness to international comparisons and the uptake of global scripts and schemes in policymaking depends on national and local traditions and cultures. Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2020) demonstrated that policymakers under the jurisdiction of the state are selective in their application of evidence from international large-scale studies. Second, for the type of transfer associated with PISA and similar studies, it is a common belief that policy transfer occurs and works best when educational systems are similar in terms of the challenges they are facing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013, pp. 20–21). Moreover, it is assumed to be more likely that neighboring countries will be more receptive to the same solutions on common problems, than countries in other regions or continents. Based on these arguments, neighboring countries select the same policy solutions since they are committed to the same culture or have established similar systems and models to warrant legal rights on behalf of the citizens. For this reason, neighboring states may reflect similar temporal and geographic patterns of policy spread (Dolowitz, 2018).

However, to date, researchers have reached no consensus about the role that regional contexts play in transnational policy transfer and the way this context shapes the receptiveness to evidence of what counts as relevant knowledge in school reform policy. In fact, Dolowitz (2018) reported on the criticism that diffusion studies do not capture the cultural and social complexity of policy transfers within the global–local policy nexus. Also Steiner-Khamsi (2013) refers to policy borrowing and lending that takes place despite cultural differences, simply because policy transfer does not necessarily adhere to a rational logic or pattern. Therefore it is important to apply various models and analytical lenses to study policy transfer in a regional context. Thus, this chapter employs various data sources and methods to examine how policymakers and experts in three Nordic countries locate themselves in a larger political reference space

when they develop ideas and collect facts and evidence to justify school reforms in their respective countries. The following questions drive this study:

- How and why do the experts and policymakers communicate with Nordic colleagues about the significance of various issues and ideas?
- Do government-appointed expert panels and policymakers within state administrations consider knowledge sources from other Nordic countries relevant?
- Moreover, do they share a specific interest in authorizing such sources by referencing them? Why? Why not?

By examining the latest (curriculum) reforms in three Nordic countries (Finland, Iceland, and Norway) in more detail, this chapter attempts to identify the actual role and influence of regional cooperation in relation to education reform and the status and use of regional references. The chapter also aims to contribute to the discussion on the role of regional context in transferring and translating transnational policy knowledge within the national context of policymaking processes.

Policy Borrowing Within and Beyond Regional Contexts

Nordic countries are regularly seen, from the outside but also within these countries, as one cultural and political territory. They are believed to share the same value base of the Nordic welfare state related to democracy, equality, and social justice along with a commitment to welfare policies that strive for societal well-being for the whole population (Arnesen et al., 2014; Delhey & Newton, 2005; Jacobsson et al., 2004). These countries also share a common history, as they have at times had the same head of state and even formed one union or state with varied compositions (Berntzen, 2017). These political traditions are also evident today. The Nordic countries have all developed political systems in which the nation-state provides welfare services and largely regulates the public

sector. Due to the central role of state authority in public governing, they have developed systems to take public interests into account. Hearings and public inquiries symbolize this kind of system.

In the field of education, the public school systems likewise share considerable similarities, often referred to as “the Nordic model in education” (Telhaug et al., 2006). The comprehensive basic education in all five countries consists of 9–10 years of compulsory education. There is an uncontested unanimity in the region that comprehensive basic education should be free of charge. Education policies across the Nordic countries have all been strongly influenced by social-inclusive aspects. Despite recent tendencies to introduce more market-driven policy solutions, education in the Nordic region is still seen as a crucial instrument for increasing social justice in all Nordic countries. (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Lundahl et al., 2018; Lundahl, 2016)

Considering these presumable common denominators of the Nordic countries, one may expect that there exists a Nordic space for policy cooperation and thereby a considerable policy transfer of knowledge within the region. However, three particular aspects must be taken into consideration in attempts to identify this space. First, as the political scientist Paul Cairney (2016) has suggested, to understand the use of evidence in policymaking processes, one needs to understand both how the policymaking process works (p. 10) and how policymakers fit into it (p. 6). Despite their common history and similar political traditions, the decision-making procedures and the role of different policymakers in them may well vary. Hence, it is crucial to take both similarities and differences into account and not to assume that these countries are necessarily uniform in terms of political decision-making processes. Second, since the 1990s, the traditional Nordic values of universal well-being and education have been increasingly influenced by political interests in neoliberal values, individualization, marketization, and technologies of new public management. However, differences exist in the extent to which this interest has turned into a dominating feature and influenced education policy and reforms in various Nordic countries (Arnesen et al., 2014, p. 1). Third, national reforms, policies, and policy discourses have become globally framed and are partly influenced by international and supranational organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). These organizations have become active in producing large-scale comparative data and thus involved in advocating education reform agendas in the Nordic region. There are good reasons to consider the influence of these organizations and their programs in national reform making and national policies as contingent (Sivesind & Wahlström, 2016).

For instance, references to the OECD are partly related to how the data match central topics and issues in national reform processes. Moreover, although the OECD is a politically influential organization, the use of its data is mostly detached from its ideological views. In particular, numeric and comparative data from such organizations are used as evidence. Numbers are convenient tools in the current culture of evidence-based policymaking, as they appear to be neutral, apolitical, and objective (Stone, 2016). They represent what Gil Eyal (2019) called “mechanical objectivity” (p. 115) in policymaking, that is, a legitimization strategy pursued by referencing, rankings, and quantified comparisons (see discussion in Chap. 2).

Previous research has discussed the regional education space particularly from the point of view of the European Union influence and established the term “European education space” (see, for instance, Lawn et al., 2011; Grek & Rinne, 2011). Researchers have demonstrated that this policy space has been extensively shaped and sustained by “governing by numbers” (Ozga, 2009; Rose, 1991) as a technology of governing. Grek and Rinne (2011, pp. 29–30) and Martin Lawn et al. (2011) claimed that this policy space has been constructed through harmonization attempts, soft governance, benchmarking, and comparison, which evolved after governments agreed upon the Lisbon treaty (Grek & Rinne, 2011). In addition to law and regulations, transnational expert networks play a significant role in how this process is evolving (Lawn et al., 2011). In a recent article, Grek et al. (2020) characterized this form of regional space as resulting from how experts “make meaning and attempt coherence in networked forms” (p. 4). One concern in these contexts is to achieve consensus about what to measure in terms of large-scale assessment.

However, comparisons and numeric data produced by the OECD and similar organizations are not by themselves a sufficient explanation for

how regional spaces evolve. As Espeland (2015) has underscored, the objectiveness of numbers and their generic character are appealing since nearly any political narrative can easily be attached to them. In other words, the generic character of numbers supports the creation of political narratives. Thus, the narratives of the regional practices and mindsets can serve as a lens through which to understand cooperation and shared interests that shape Nordic education policy space in particular ways.

Our hypothesis is that this regional Nordic policy space, although partly gaining its significance from international networks, operates differently than for instance the European policy space. One reason is that the Nordic region by itself does not produce numbers for assessing education, like the OECD does. Thus, the Nordic community of policymakers and experts relies on something other than agreements upon benchmarks and standards, and we set out to explore this Nordic “other.” This chapter will examine how this “other” is constructed by relating to a shared policy space that is developed and sustained in various ways.

To analyze Nordic cooperation as a regional space, we will draw on Massey’s (1994, p. 2) conceptualization of spatial as “the social stretched out” and her idea of space as not fixed and static but rather “a product of interrelations and constituted through interactions” (p. 7). Following this idea, we look at the Nordic policy space not as a separate layer between the national and transnational, but as a space where national actors interact and form connections to make sense of and give meanings to the international. Thereby, they construct a regional mindset, which we refer to as the *Nordic “other.”* As such, the Nordic policy space is in a state of constant becoming and fluidity, created and re-created through the interactions of the involved policymakers, experts, and stakeholders and their narratives of relating to each other.

Country Cases

As we have seen in the previous country chapters, the number of references to other Nordic countries (i.e., regional references) identified through bibliometric network analysis was surprisingly low. We also found that the country distribution of regional references varied to some

degree. Norway used 66 regional references, significantly more than Iceland, where only 4 references were regional. Among those regional references used in Iceland source documents were a World Health Organization (WHO) document published in Denmark and documents produced by the European Agency of Special Education, placed in Denmark. In Finland, we identified 11 references as regional. The rare use of regional references and the frequent use of national references prompted us to wonder why this pattern had become so biased.

In order to illustrate the regional network pattern of references, we conducted a bibliometric network analysis, which we present in more detail later in this chapter. We also decided to combine this network analysis with complementary data sources to examine the three country cases—Finland, Iceland, and Norway—in more detail. These three countries are similar in terms of their legacies as young nation-states compared to Sweden and Denmark (Elgenius, 2011), but they differ in their decision-making procedures and in the role that policy documents play in these processes. Thus, we decided to conduct interviews with experts with knowledge and information about these features of the system. All experts interviewed were involved in the national reform processes that are examined in this book.

We should also mention that the reforms we examined were partly different in terms of their timing, focus, and scope. In the case of Finland, we examined the latest reform of the National Core Curriculum (2014). As explained in Chap. 5 in this volume (Volmari, Kauko, Anturaniemi, & Santos), in the case of Finnish curriculum reform, the research team made the decision to focus on the reform of the objectives of the National Core Curriculum and the distribution of lesson hours from 2012 (Government Decree 422/2012). The government decree is based on a white paper and it delegates the power to decide on the content of the core curriculum to the National Agency for Education, within the framework the government decree sets for this work. The most prominent policy documents in this process were the white paper *Future Basic Education* from 2012 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2012) and the green paper *Basic Education 2020: Common National Aims and Division of Teaching Hours* from 2010 (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2010). This green paper was originally designed as a white paper, but it was discarded

at the last minute due to political disagreements and a change in political power. Nevertheless, the 2012 white paper was mainly based on the green paper preceding it, as demonstrated in Chap. 5. Both working groups utilized expert hearings and statements and extensively involved different stakeholder groups, particularly in the process of the green paper. For example, the working group of the green paper 2010 received commentary from over 200 municipalities in Finland and utilized a survey of over 60,000 students on their experiences in school and their vision of an ideal school.

In the case of Iceland, we base our analysis in this chapter on three documents used to govern Icelandic compulsory education, together with the law, regulations, and formal curriculum (see Chap. 6). Two of these are classified as white papers and one as a green paper. As discussed previously in Chap. 2, white papers are political by default and therefore influenced by the government and the minister in charge of the policy processes. However, the political influence by the administration of the same government varies depending on the continuation of policies over time across various governments. If the background work initiated by one minister leads to the continuation of policy by the previous minister, then the background work sets the agenda and may not even reach the status of being enquired by a green paper. This is often the case in Iceland, where recent decades have offered many examples of extensive background work being conducted and used to underpin reform bills and resolutions in the form of extensive discussion and consultation rather than in the form of public enquiring and formal written documents, which we refer to as green papers. Thus, although the working mode of Icelandic policymaking relies, sometimes extensively, on internal and external documentation, this evidence does not necessarily reach the stage of reference lists or other formal acknowledgment.

This situation varies starkly from the Norwegian case. As already presented (see Chaps. 7, 9, and 10), Norway has expended a huge amount of resources on public commissions with a mandate to evaluate and make recommendations to decision-makers regarding how to reform and renew the public sector. The government appoints members to sit in these commissions. In this chapter, we refer to eight such reports and two white papers. We include references in these documents in our bibliometric

network analysis, while two particular inquiries (Bostad and Ludvigsen commissions) and one white paper (Subjects—In-depth Learning—Understanding, see: Appendix 1) serve as the main data source for our qualitative study. While the Bostad commission made inquiries and advised the ministry and parliament on how to revise the education clause formulated within the School Act, the main work task of the Ludvigsen commission was to recommend overall goals, aims, and structures for renewing the national curriculum. A group of officials with educational-scientific backgrounds and experience from the Directorate of Education assisted the experts during the writing process, and civil servants within the Ministry of Education were the main actors in the process of formulating the white paper. They worked closely with the political leadership to finalize the paper. Throughout the process, various groups of stakeholders were invited to provide comments.

Altogether, the three cases selected for this study vary in terms of organizational arrangements for preparing political decision-making processes. For instance, in contrast to Norway, academic participation in Finnish preparatory working groups has declined during the last decade. In the national core curriculum reform of 2010–2016, the working groups we examine in this chapter contained no scientists, although scientific experts offered their insights. The members of the working group of the white paper from 2012 (Source Document 66 in the Finnish sample, see Chap. 5) consisted only of the civil servants of the Ministry of Education and Culture. In the working group of the green paper, members came from the main political parties and stakeholder organizations in addition to civil servants. There were no representatives from other countries. Norway chose a rather opposite approach. A scientist led Ludvigsen's committee, which included other scientist members as well. Two of the members represented other Nordic countries, namely Denmark and Sweden. Conversely, Iceland has adopted no formal procedures to produce white papers based on inquiry bodies, although the government plans to move in this direction. It is up to each minister to determine how the work is approached, the amount of party political involvement, and the influence of stakeholders or various professional groups. Parliament is not involved until a very late stage in the formulation of laws within education. To conclude, the three case studies varied

in their timing, focus, and scope, as well as in terms of organizational arrangements. But they also varied in what was valued as expertise and how and in which stage of the reform process expertise was utilized.

Data and Methods

Our research design originally stemmed from the five national country cases. Across the five Nordic countries, there was one finding that particularly puzzled the research teams. In spite of what might be expected and what previous research on education transfer has predicted, we found no solid evidence of regional policy transfer or learning. In fact, the number of regional references in each country was incredibly low, and a shared knowledge base was almost absent. This sparked our research question and design, and we decided to combine methods to see if we could find any evidence of Nordic policy learning and sharing that were not necessarily authorized within bibliographies and footnotes.

To begin, we conducted a bibliometric network analysis of the regional/Nordic references to identify any evidence of a common Nordic knowledge base. In the bibliometric network analysis, we used the software program UCINET to generate statistics on Nordic references and draw illustrations of the Nordic knowledge network. The method of bibliometric analysis and how it was applied in this research project is explained in more detail in Chaps. 1 and 2. However, this method did not appear to offer a complete picture of Nordic policy cooperation and of the possible knowledge exchange within the Nordic region.

Inspired by Törnberg and Törnberg (2019), we perceive networks as cultural products in which “discursive and cultural elements play out and shape the networks in which they exist” (pp. 61–62) and adopt their suggestion to complement network analysis with other methods, namely with expert interviews. We conducted interviews with members of the key working groups and committees in Finland and Norway and some key ministerial administrators in Iceland. We used the interviews both to obtain new insights into regional knowledge sources and to acquire knowledge about Nordic cooperation and knowledge-sharing, which cannot be disentangled by bibliometric network or document

analysis. We used thematic expert interviews with the same list of topics in all three countries. We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews in total, 8 in Norway, 5 in Finland, and 5 in Iceland. We recorded some interviews using Zoom and others with single recorders in physical settings, and all interviews were transcribed to ensure the validity of our approach.

We analyzed the interview data while keeping the following points in mind. First, informants were experts in their field and had been members of the preparatory committees or working groups in the reforms we examined. Hence, the information they provided can be seen as reliable firsthand information. However, we acknowledge that the informants shared with us their accounts and recollections, sometimes of the work they were involved in almost ten years ago. Attentive to these two vantage points, we decided to categorize our interview findings into clusters of main narratives.

Results

In our study, we set out to identify the actual role and influence of the regional, Nordic cooperation in relation to our three country examples (Finland, Iceland, and Norway) of an education reform, and the status and use of regional, Nordic references in these reforms. Our main methods were bibliometric network analysis and thematic expert interviews. We present our findings below, divided into two subsections according to our two main methods.

Bibliometric, Regional References, and the Absent Nordic Other

The bibliometric analysis reveals, in part, where different countries have looked for inspiration and influence. The whole database, including the references of all five countries, had a total of 225 regional references, meaning references where a country referred to a publication published in another Nordic country. There are numerous reasons to expect that

one could detect notable policy referencing of information sources between the Nordic countries in our data. However, this does not seem to be the case. The number of Nordic references used in these reforms was surprisingly low compared to the use of domestic and international references (see Baek, Tiplic, and Santos, Chap. 9, Table 9.3). References from other Nordic countries amounted to approximately 2–7% in all of the countries among the five cases, which we consider as a key finding.

In Finland the regional Nordic references amounted only to 1.63% and in Iceland 2.08%. In Norway, 7.09% of all the references were from Nordic sources, but compared to the amount of domestic (66.83%) and international references (26.08%), this percentage was low as well.

In Table 12.1, we can see how references to sources published in another Nordic country were distributed between the five countries. Altogether 44% of the time, the referenced documents were published in Sweden, while 31% of the time, a country referred to a publication from Denmark. Sources published in Finland or Norway were referenced less than 10% of the time and Icelandic sources only 1% of the time. Based on Table 12.1, one can conclude that the regional evidence base consists predominantly of evidence published in Denmark or Sweden.

Table 12.1 also shows how the regional references were distributed in each country. Documents published in Sweden were the most referenced in Denmark, Finland, and Norway. For example, five out of eight Nordic references made in the Danish source documents were published in Sweden. In the Finnish source documents, 7 out of 11 cited Nordic references were of Swedish origin. In Norway, the 180 regional references cited in the source documents were distributed slightly more evenly between Denmark (70) and Sweden (77). Iceland served as an exception to this pattern, as in the Icelandic documents only four regional documents were cited, all of which were published in Denmark. However, one was produced by an international agency and three were by a European agency. In the case of the Swedish reform, 44% (8 out of 18) of the regional references cited in the source documents were published in Denmark, with 4 from Finland and 5 from Norway.

Although Danish and Swedish documents were used more than the Finnish ones, the most prominent documents in the Nordic knowledge network would appear to be those used more than once and in more than

Table 12.1 Nordic reference distribution per country (references in all source documents)

Source	Denmark		Finland		Iceland		Norway		Sweden		Unclear Nordic		Total	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Denmark	9.09%	1	12.50%	1	0.00%	0	25.00%	2	62.50%	5	0.00%	0	100%	8
Finland	100.00%	4	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	18.18%	2	63.64%	7	9.09%	1	100%	11
Iceland	38.89%	70	8.89%	16	1.11%	2	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	100%	4
Norway	44.44%	8	22.22%	4	0.00%	0	27.78%	5	42.78%	77	8.33%	15	100%	180
Sweden											5.56%	1	100%	18

one Nordic reform. When we look at co-citations, or those sources referenced by more than one document, the pattern tells a slightly different story. Out of the seven most co-cited sources, three were published in Denmark, two in Finland, and two in Sweden. The Danish and Swedish publications were cited in only the Norwegian policy documents. Both of the Finnish publications were cited by two different Nordic countries. Specifically, the Finnish National Core Curriculum of 2014 was cited two times by different Norwegian sources and one time by a Swedish source. Likewise, the Finnish National Core Curriculum of 2004 was cited two times by different Norwegian sources and once by a Danish source.

Moreover, the two most cited Finnish documents were actual national core curricula for comprehensive education (2004 and 2014), of which we examine the 2014 curriculum as an example of a Finnish education reform. These documents, the 2004 and 2014 National Core Curricula of Finland, were also the only ones among the most-cited regional documents that were actual national core curricula referenced by more than one country. They were part of the knowledge base of the reforms in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which indicates that other countries have looked upon Finnish curricula as prominent regional references.

Figure 12.1 illustrates the whole network, further confirming the findings explained above. Norway, in white, clearly co-cited a cluster of regional knowledge most, as indicated by the arrows pointing outward, indicating policy borrowing. The network consists of predominantly Danish (red quadrants) and Swedish (yellow quadrants) references, which were used in the majority of Norwegian source documents (white dots). The two Finnish (blue quadrants) documents are medium-sized, as they were referenced less by other Nordic countries than the most co-cited documents of Denmark and Sweden, which appeared in the Norwegian data.

As these results demonstrate, the regional Nordic references were mostly absent in these five reforms since there were relatively few co-citations. National chapters have explained this as a matter of self-referencing (Chaps. 5 and 8). However, Norway was a small exception among these countries, with its regional references amounting to almost 7% (see Table 12.1) and with a cluster of references that were co-cited

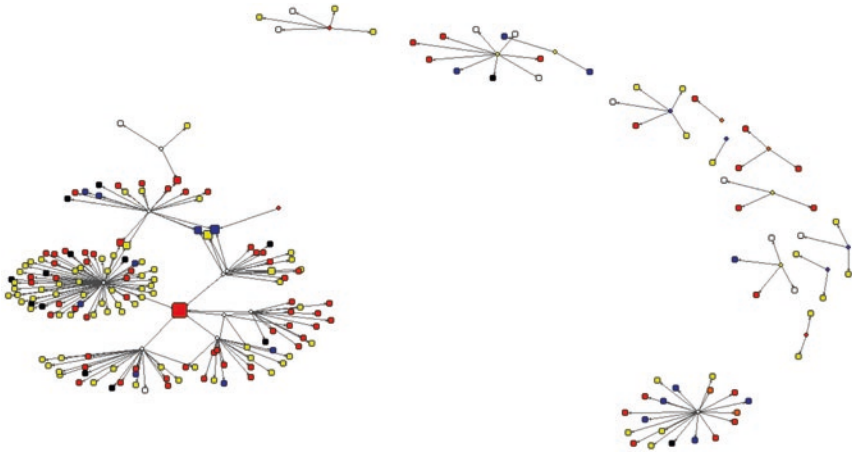


Fig. 12.1 Network of the Nordic references. (Note: This figure includes only references for which the publication location differed from the publication location of the source documents. Denmark = red; Finland = blue; Iceland = orange; Norway = white; Sweden = yellow; unclear Nordic = black)

(see Table 12.2). By looking into these co-cited references, we find that the reform made use of some reports published in other Nordic countries more actively than the level observed in other Nordic countries' documents. Yet, even in Norway, the number of regional references was lower than originally expected on the basis of previous theories of policy transfer within a region and between similar cultural contexts.

Cooperation and Communication Within the Nordic Policy Space

The Nordic countries maintain close political and policymaking connections to each other, and their governments have formal connections at multiple levels, for example, through the work of the Nordic Council (founded in 1952) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (founded in 1971). From 1967 national ministries in education initiated Nordic research collaboration to stimulate more advanced use of teaching

Table 12.2 Most co-cited Nordic references

ID	Title	Location of publication	Type	In-degree
5781967	<i>Lærerkompetanse og elevers læring i barnehage og skole. Et systematisk review utført for Kunnskapsdepartementet, Oslo. København: Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitetsforlag og Dansk Clearinghouse for Uddannelsesforskning</i> [Teacher Competence and Students' Learning in Preschool and Primary Schooling. A Systematic Review Conducted for the Ministry of Education and Research, Oslo]	Denmark	1	7 (cited by 7 different Norwegian sources)
5781631	<i>Utmärkt undervisning: Framgångsfaktorer i svensk och internationell belysning. Stockholm: Natur och kultur</i> [Excellent Teaching: Factors in Making Progress Within Swedish and International Perspectives]	Sweden	2	4 (cited by 4 different Norwegian sources)
5782251	<i>Betydelsen av icke-kognitiva förmågor. Forskning m.m. om individuella faktorer bakom framgång. Sverige: Skolverket</i> [The Significance of Non-cognitive Skills. Research About Individual Factors That Explain Improvement]	Sweden	4	4 (cited by 4 different Norwegian sources)
5782322	<i>Grunderna för läroplanen för den grundläggande utbildningen 2014</i> [The Curriculum for Basic Education 2014]	Finland	4	3 (cited by 2 different Norwegian sources and 1 Swedish source)

(continued)

Table 12.2 (continued)

ID	Title	Location of publication	Type	In-degree
5782324	<i>Grunderna för läroplanen för den grundläggande utbildningen 2004</i> [The Curriculum for Basic Education 2004]	Finland	4	3 (cited by 1 Danish source and 2 different Norwegian sources)
5781048	Basic learning: Thematic report 1: Ensuring basic skills for all, Working Group 1, København	Denmark	1	2 (cited by 2 different Norwegian sources)
5781956	<i>Resultater fra Kartleggingsundersøkelse i Kristiansand kommune 2013</i> [Results from a Survey (on students' learning performance) in Kristiansand]	Denmark	1	2 (cited by 2 different Norwegian sources)

Note: "Nordic" references refer to those published in a Nordic country that are cited by source documents published in a different Nordic country (e.g., Danish documents cited by Swedish source documents or Finnish documents cited by Norwegian source documents)

technology. From early on, these Nordic institutions initiated evaluations, conferences, and formal inquiries to address issues of significance for the governance of Nordic school reforms. One known report published by the Nordic committee for educational research, chaired by Johs Sandven, addressed, for example, how programmed teaching and innovative usage of new technology can improve teaching in schools (Dahllöf & Wallin, 1969). Another report about the administration of the Nordic school systems was published in 1974 after two years of work by a Nordic working group of civil servants who had the mandate to help harmonize the national curricula for the compulsory school systems (Nordiska rådet, 1974). They were also asked to provide information about the Nordic school system of relevance for teachers, associations, and administrative bodies. The Nordic Council (Nordiska Ministerrådet, 1978) made a revision of the report four years later. Here, they presented formal

information about the different school types within the education system and how they were reformed within the single country.

Later reports offered evidence of systematic cooperation across the Nordic countries, partly formalized through a governing body of civil servants from the Nordic ministries and a working group that was responsible for meetings and conferences (Nordisk Ministerråd, 1990). One outcome in the early 2000s was the conference report *Vision and Reality* (Sigurðardóttir & Harðardóttir, 2000), which addressed evaluation and assessment in Nordic schools. A later report from the Nordic Council of Ministers was *Northern Lights on PISA 2003—A Reflection from the Nordic Countries* (Mejding & Roe, 2006).

This report, however, did not originate from the work of the Nordic Council; instead, it was written by Nordic researchers who collaborated within the OECD. The Department of Teacher Education and School Development at the University of Oslo had published an earlier report entitled *Northern Lights on PISA, Unity and Diversity in the Nordic Countries in PISA 2000* (Roe et al., 2003). This report stated that PISA represented a new commitment by the governments of OECD countries to monitor the outcomes of education systems with a focus on learning achievement. From then on, it seems that Nordic data and knowledge about the quality of the school systems was hijacked by organizations other than the Nordic Council. Yet, meetings among civil servants and experts within the context of the Nordic Council continued.

To further illustrate the frequency of Nordic cooperation in the field of education, Table 12.3 presents the number of meetings taking place between top political and administrative levels, as a matter of course, every year within the arena of education and research (and a similar pattern would be obtained for a number of other arenas).

The informants in all three countries talked about constant and regular formal cooperation, such as annual meetings of the directors of the national education agencies, meetings of Nordic curriculum specialists once or twice a year, and cooperation within the Nordic Council of the Ministers. In addition, ad hoc groups are formed to deal with pressing

Table 12.3 Number of meetings each year 2013–2019 under the auspices of the Nordic Council and Nordic Council of Ministers

Nordic Council for Culture and Education	Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research	
Number of meetings of political representatives	Number of ministerial meetings	Number of ministerial administrator meetings
2013	1	5
2014	1	4
2015	1	4
2016 5	2	4
2017 5	2	4
2018 5	1	4
2019 5	1	4

Source: <https://www.norden.org/en/organisation/nordic-co-operation>

Note: These meetings related to education involved at different times parliamentary representatives, ministers of education, and civil servants at the ministries of education. Adapted from the webpage Nordic cooperation, which describes the organization of both the Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers

issues when the need arises. Although the bibliometric network analysis demonstrated a very low percentage of regional references, with Norway being the only Nordic country that seemed to refer substantially more to other Nordic countries, the expert interviews revealed active and vivid cooperation and communication among the Nordic countries. Our informants noted that, in addition to the official meetings, several groups met regularly at the Nordic ministerial level or among the governmental organizations outside the purview of the formal Nordic Council cooperation. Several experts talked about frequent but more informal communication and collaboration, like phone calls and study visits. Coherent documentation of this is not available as formal minutes are not always written or centrally available even though all the meetings are filed within individual ministries. There is no question of extensive Nordic contact and discussion at the Nordic policy level, but little evidence is available about the actual impact of those meetings on policy formation.

Legitimation, Policy Dynamics, and the Omnipresent Nordic Other

Since the bibliometric network analysis revealed a very low use of regional Nordic references despite well-established Nordic political and cultural cooperation, we decided to conduct interviews with the key experts involved in the reforms in question in Finland, Iceland, and Norway. In a total of 18 interviews, we asked the informants questions about their role in the reform or working group, their professional background, and the issues and themes they considered relevant during the reform process, in the work of a working group or commission, or in the Nordic cooperation more generally. In addition, we asked about any national, Nordic, or international conferences, workshops, or meetings they attended during the process with a particular focus on any Nordic meetings or other forms of Nordic cooperation.

We also specifically asked them for possible explanations for the lack of Nordic references in the key policy documents. The absence of regional bibliometric references in our data came as a surprise to most informants, as they all considered Nordic cooperation important and meaningful. From responses to the question on the possible reasons for the absence of references to Nordic knowledge sources in the actual policy documents, we identified four main narratives the informants used to explain this absence:

1. Nordic cooperation is not well documented and does not produce data that lends itself easily to reference.
2. Nordic cooperation is such an implicit part of policy cooperation that it does not need specific mentioning.
3. Legitimation function and hierarchization of evidence play roles when choosing evidence to reference in written documents.
4. In the curriculum reforms, national orientation and political dynamics still play the greatest role.

The first narrative our informants provided for the absence of Nordic evidence in the actual written documents was that Nordic cooperation is often rather informal in nature and hence not well documented. Earlier

in this chapter, we discussed the official forms of cooperation. However, many informants asserted that a significant part of the cooperation occurs in more informal contexts and ways. For instance, they described study visits as being very common between the Nordic countries. These visits seemed to be particularly common when a country was in the middle of a reform process. Informants in all countries reported this kind of visit as one form of collecting knowledge and ideas. Several Finnish and Norwegian informants mentioned the study visit of the Norwegian Ludvigsen's committee to Finland. Although the Norwegian committee prompted the visit and prepared a set of questions it specifically wanted to discuss to learn about the recent Finnish core curriculum reform, the Finnish informants described the meeting as one of mutual exchange and learning. In general, the informants described Nordic education cooperation as the "kind of expert kind of cooperation, where we do discuss very profoundly why someone has done something" (working group member, Finland). Since this kind of cooperation is not documented in memos, meeting minutes, or reports, it does not produce data that lends itself to reference in the sense of assertions backed up with information (Cairney, 2016) like the bibliometric references examined in this chapter.

The second narrative we discovered is that Nordic cooperation is such an implicit part of policy cooperation that it does not need to be mentioned specifically. This second narrative is closely linked to the first one. Most informants declared that in general other Nordic countries were always looked at and their policy developments carefully followed and that in any reform process, one tended to always start by looking at other Nordic countries. One informant specifically explained that "we always start by looking at other Nordic countries." More specifically in the reforms we examined, the informants assured that this was in fact done, even if it may not have been translated into bibliometric references. This discrepancy can partly be explained by the first narrative, in which cooperation and policy influences are not carefully documented. Another explanation for Nordic evidence being tangential at most in the documents we scrutinized could be that Nordic cooperation is axiomatic and no bibliometric reference is possible or needed. The following two Icelandic interview excerpts illustrate this point with lucidity. While

discussing updating a law on compulsory education, an Icelandic informant noted:

Thus, it was in all this process that the Nordic laws were always on the table, as a sort of a working document, and we used arguments from the Nordic background documents. I am pretty certain. But it was such a matter of course that it didn't need mentioning. (Civil servant, Iceland)

In discussing updating the curriculum, an informant stated:

I am pretty certain, as I remember it, we were all reading the Nordic curricula, and this was taken for granted and didn't need discussing. (Civil servant, Iceland)

For some of these Icelandic informants, the Nordic space was such an implicit part of the process that it did not need to be acknowledged specifically. Furthermore, we encountered similar narratives in the Finnish and Norwegian interviews. The narratives we discovered of the Nordic space being so implicit yet simultaneously omnipresent bear similarities to the description of pre-Lisbon European education space, as described by Grek and Rinne (2011). Unlike the European education space, the Nordic is not built on harmonization through benchmarking and numbers, but it still pre-exists in the hearts and minds of the people, like the pre-Lisbon European space did (Grek & Rinne, 2011, pp. 29–30). As such, it is so ubiquitous that no distinct mentioning is required.

According to several informants, the absence of regional Nordic evidence may be related to the dynamics of externalization (the inclination to refer to the education systems of other countries or information produced by global actors in reform proposals, see for instance: Steiner-Khamsi, 2003) and to the tendency to maintain the status quo and avoid including Nordic knowledge that may prove controversial compared to the predominant global policy discourses. In an interview about the Norwegian committee work, one informant described the following:

I think it's about externalization. I think international references are much heavier in those situations. When it comes to writing policy texts, so there were a lot of Nordic references in the discussions but yeah, I can also see

that in order to get legitimacy for the policymaking international references are playing a much more, a larger role than the Nordic references so, and I think it's about not to challenge the consensus too much. If you bring in domestic or Nordic references, it could be more controversial because the discussions that usually emerge in reform topics are much more a local thing. (Committee member, Norway)

This excerpt illustrates well the third narrative we identified, which is that the legitimation function and hierarchization of evidence play roles in choosing evidence to reference in written documents. Several informants acknowledged that Nordic cooperation does not produce data that can be used as references in policy documents, but they also stated that, even if it did, international evidence would still enjoy a higher status as a legitimation instrument. Our informants frequently brought up legitimation as an explanation for the absence of Nordic knowledge as evidence. In particular, they mentioned the OECD as one of the main providers of policy evidence used for legitimation of nationally made decisions.

These findings are perfectly in line with the theorizations of Wendy Espeland (2015) and Deborah Stone (2016), who stated that numbers are particularly appealing for policymakers and politicians since their ostensible objectivity makes them ideal in legitimating any political argument. The OECD produces typically comparative data based on standardized indicators detached from both the multiplicities of local cultures and situations and the organization's own political agenda. This perceived objectivity makes this data an excellent tool for mechanical objectivity (Eyal, 2019), as it can be used to match any central topic or issue in the national reform processes.

The OECD also produces an extensive amount of reports and other written materials where this data is documented and easily usable for bibliometric reference. However, our informants stressed the legitimation status and function of the OECD data over the mere technicalities of it being carefully documented. In fact, one informant even mentioned that country reports were specifically ordered for national legitimation purposes. The informant questioned the previous research on transnational governance, claiming that the data production of the OECD often stems from national needs for evidence. The informant further asserted that the

OECD's reports are frequently commissioned by national governments for specific legitimation needs. He stated:

Well, that transnational governance, there is of course this point of view related to it, that the OECD produces different kinds of data. That there is real data that can be analyzed nationally and base the decisions on, to use it as basis for decision. But then there are also these country reports that the OECD countries can order, so this kind of commissioned research. And it is of course so, and we have examples of this as well in our state governance, that if not directly that, that they stem from the own interests of the country in question. That one decides on a political measure, and then one orders the country report from the OECD, where then international evaluators become involved. And before these reports are published, the countries and the OECD do discuss them. So I think this idea of transnational governance is just one angle, namely this when one uses these country reports. But here one comes to what I said before, the blanks in evaluating research, that one legitimizes one's own views with some material produced by an international actor. (Working group member, Finland)

This interview excerpt illustrates the fourth narrative as well. Most informants acknowledged and underlined the fact that in curriculum reforms, the national orientation and political dynamics still played the greatest role. In general, national core curricula, as they have been described by our informants, are securely in the national domain of education policy and politics, as this Norwegian informant emphasized:

Perhaps one of the explanations is that in most countries they probably consider such curriculum work as a very national domain. ... Every time in a way curricula are put on the agenda internationally it is like—the first things everyone says, is that curricula are a national domain. We do not want such an international decision on that. That this area is not suitable for that. (Committee member, Norway)

The fact that curriculum development is still seen as a very national domain of education policy may well explain not only the absence of regional references in our data, but also the self-referential nature of the country cases addressed in more detail in the previous chapters. Perhaps research on another domain of education policy, for instance higher

education policy, would have produced data that included more international and regional references. However, the influence of evidence or the best available knowledge did not seem to be the most important factor in determining the direction for the reforms. The result of the reforms often arose from negotiations, and issues on the reform agenda sometimes became politicized. In a conflict or gridlock situation, compromises were inevitable, even if it meant not utilizing the best knowledge available, as demonstrated in the following interview exchange:

Interviewer: Do you remember any official Nordic meeting or network that you were in contact with during the reform processes?

Informant: No, not directly—not directly in the project [of writing a white paper]. But we have working groups that work like that, and everything we have written has in a way also been negotiated by them. And we also get text input from people who also have this as their specialized area.

Interviewer: I wonder about the process of deciding which sources of knowledge are relevant to draw on—in a report to the parliament. How have you decided which sources you would like to take a closer look at and include in your writing process?

Informant: I have actually tried to have as broad an approach as possible to see what exists. ... If you look at the assessment chapter, for example, I have to see what is the latest and what is really happening in that field now. So I have in a way tried to be as broad as possible—for the recommendations in the NOU¹ is one thing, and they are evaluated against a knowledge base, too, but at the same time we have to see if there are other things, and it is often the case that maybe the politicians want something else than what is recommended and proposed in the NOU, as well.

Interviewer: A naive question: is it in the end a process where you look at the list and just check if the reference list reveals different selection criteria? Or is that list just a result?

Informant: I wish I could answer that [laughs], but I think it's a result. (Committee member, Norway)

In spite of the narratives explaining the absent Nordic “other,” our informants described Nordic policy cooperation as a space of oneness. In the interviews, many described this space as a feeling of belonging. According to our interview findings, the Nordic education space works as an arena where issues and policy developments are discussed with the like-minded. Still, the actors are simultaneously aware that the education systems, the political situations, and even the degree of marketization tendencies in the five countries are rather different. Though the cooperation may not produce actual evidence according to the definition we employ in this chapter, the Nordic education space had concrete benefits as well according to our informants. These benefits materialized particularly in the global policy space, for example in the meetings organized by the OECD where the Nordic representatives collaborated, for instance, by voting for same policy solutions and recommendations. An important part of informal cooperation happens in this kind of international setting, as demonstrated in this excerpt from an Icelandic civil servant:

Informant: As you look to these countries, then one sees a certain underlying OECD influence. Some may think that this is a hard line coming from above, but that is not correct. These are influences formed in unison by the participating countries, and I think this has normally been so. I think there are both indirect and direct influences from there. You attend twice a year with representatives from all the countries. There is a special Nordic meeting, always a preparatory meeting before the OECD meeting, where you discuss with your Nordic colleagues.

Interviewer: Is it a special meeting, or does it connect to the OECD meeting?

Informant: There is always a dinner before, and thus you get to know these Nordic representatives and people discuss issues. Hardly ever a formal Nordic stand is taken but, yes, some coordination. If the Nordics want to take the initiative, then it is coordinated there.

Interviewer: Is this a formal meeting with an agenda?

Informant: No, this is just an informal dinner. Yes, just discussion. Of course, at these [OECD] meetings, there are loads of reports and documents, project proposals. The Nordic countries may have

decided to take a stand on some emphasis in new projects, as there are votes on what to research.

Interviewer: And this carries with it some influence? Nordic influence?

Informant: Absolutely. The Nordic countries carry much influence in there. They are always, normally, in agreement. One takes the floor, and the others support. It carries some weight. Even China or large countries like the US, which are always on their own, they have their one vote each. Thus, yes, of course, it carries some weight. And people notice. (Civil servant, Iceland)

In this case, the international setting acted as a glue between the Nordic countries, since the Nordic representatives met beforehand during an informal dinner to discuss the formal issues on the OECD meeting agenda. The Nordic community of sameness was, in this setting, a strategic tool to gain more power in an international setting, as the Nordic countries supported each other in official votes. This arrangement indicates that, regardless of the possible differences in education systems, policymaking procedures, and political situations in these countries, they share some fundamentally similar values and interests that allow them to reach such consensus. The aforementioned excerpt also validates the previous claim of several scholars that the Nordic countries are seen as one entity from the outside. It demonstrates that other countries and regions acknowledge the weight of Nordic unity.

Moreover, the conduct and practices of the Nordic actors in the international policy space also demonstrate how the national, regional, and international are not layered and separate. The global dynamics of the education space are not just a matter of international organizations exercising their influence on the national level, with the regional level acting possibly as a buffer or a mediator in this process. Instead, our interviews painted a picture of an active and rather powerful Nordic education space that stretches out through the connections of the national actors and exercises its influence as one entity in the international decisions and recommendations of the OECD and other organizations. Even if this

influence cannot be traced back in the policy documents as bibliometric references or as evidence in the way defined by Paul Cairney (2016), the Nordic education space has in fact influenced what is included in the international policy recommendations (e.g., the OECD reports) now used as evidence in the national documents. The regional context may shape receptiveness to evidence, but it may also shape the actual sources of evidence when they are created and drafted in the international context of policy cooperation. In short, there certainly is more in the policy process than meets the eye.

Conclusions

Previous research has implied that neighboring countries may be more receptive to the same policy solutions due to their commitment to a common culture and similarities in their legal and political systems. The Nordic region can be looked upon as a cluster of such countries. They are often, both from the inside and the outside, perceived as one cultural and political territory. One could thereby expect considerable transfer of policy knowledge within this region. However, our findings reveal that the Nordic policy cooperation and exchange of policy knowledge in the field of education is far more complex and influenced by multitude of aspects and dynamics, in addition to cultural, legal, and political similarities.

In this chapter, we have investigated the use of regional Nordic policy knowledge in education reforms in three of the Nordic countries: Finland, Iceland, and Norway. Our starting point was the definition of evidence by Paul Cairney (2016, 3) as “an argument backed by information.” By employing both bibliometric network analysis and thematic analysis of expert interviews, we have examined how policymakers and experts in these three countries locate themselves in a larger political reference space when they develop ideas and collect evidence to justify school reforms in their respective countries. We have asked whether government-appointed expert panels and policymakers within the state administration consider knowledge and information from

other Nordic countries relevant. Moreover, we examined whether they demonstrate a specific interest in authorizing such sources by referencing them in public policy, and investigated the factors guiding these decisions.

Our bibliometric network analysis revealed a notable absence of Nordic references in the source documents we included in our study. Regional Nordic references amounted to only 1–7% of all the references, and we found very few references that were cited by more than one country. This finding indicates that publications from other Nordic countries are not considered relevant in terms of “authorized evidence” that is explicitly included in reference lists or footnotes in white and green papers. Nevertheless, our interview data shows that Nordic cooperation in the field of education policy is vivid, frequent, and ample. Therefore, good reasons remain to argue that the expert panels and policymakers involved in these reforms are very well informed about emerging trends and ongoing reforms in other countries.

In the interviews, we asked our informants for reasons why Nordic knowledge does not appear as the most prominent reference source in policy processes; in other words, we wondered why it is not referenced and used as evidence in the policy documents. We discovered four main explanatory narratives for this phenomenon. First, Nordic cooperation is not thoroughly documented nor does it produce data that lends itself easily to reference. Second, Nordic cooperation is such an implicit part of the policy process that it does not need to be mentioned specifically. The third explanatory narrative is related to the legitimation function and hierarchization of policy evidence. Even if Nordic cooperation would produce data that was easy to reference, international evidence still had a higher status as a legitimation device than regional evidence. Finally, the fourth explanatory narrative offered by our informants was that national orientation and political dynamics still play the greatest role in curriculum reforms. Despite increasing transnational influences, the curriculum is still characterized as a particular domain in education policymaking and politics, considered predominantly national by character. Although school reforms reflect international influence, the problems addressed turn into national concerns when they are handled. In particular, the policymakers writing the white papers argue that their job is to bridge the

gap between political aims and projects on the one hand and broad expertise on the other hand, which implies complex processes that involve a range of stakeholders.

In addition to investigating why Nordic evidence is or is not referenced in the policy documents, our aim in this chapter was to examine how policymakers and experts in Finland, Iceland, and Norway locate themselves in a larger political reference space. We have developed a notion of a Nordic education space in which national experts and policymakers “make meaning and attempt coherence in networked forms” (Grek et al., 2020, p. 4). The Nordic policy space is characterized by fluidity. We have shown that there are several forms and networks of Nordic cooperation in the field of education policy, and national experts often participate in multitudes of networks and forms of cooperation. The reference space of the Nordic experts stretches out from the national to the transnational through their interactions, connections, and networks. The Nordic education policy space is constructed and maintained in different settings of cooperation and communication, with some taking place in the regional and some in the international domain. When the actors meet in international settings, consensus-making is of core importance between representatives from the Nordic countries. This differs from regional meetings where they rather explore national solutions to common problems. Thus, we demonstrate that there are several forms and networks of Nordic cooperation that have various functions in terms of evidence-based policymaking depending on the context in which collaboration takes place.

To conclude, the regional Nordic policy space is, in fact, in constant movement and a state of becoming. As a result, both comparative research and the actors involved in this continuously evolving space are challenged to explain its role and function and to pinpoint its changing forms in a comprehensive manner. We have aimed to contribute to this discussion, but we acknowledge that, in line with the nature of the constant becoming of this space, we may have posed more questions than we have answered. Instead of offering finite conclusions, we have created new openings for further discussion. These openings are much like the policy space we have examined—in a constant state of becoming and hence infinite in nature.

Note

1. NOUs are Norwegian Official Reports.

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