

Caroline Benn Memorial Lecture 2006

Comprehensive schooling: current trends in England and the Nordic countries

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I am very pleased to give this lecture. I was a great admirer of Caroline Benn. I met her on a number of occasions when I was working for ILEA and she was a governor of Holland Park School. I have also studied her two excellent books about the struggle for comprehensive education – ‘*Half way there*’ and ‘*Thirty years on*’. I admired her not only as a great advocate of the comprehensive cause but as someone who, unlike those who provide support in principle but consider the system not quite suitable for their own family, chose to entrust her children to a comprehensive school where - as we know from Melissa Benn’s lecture last year – they flourished.

In this lecture I will note some of the risks and the potential benefits of using a comparative approach to examine the role and success of school systems. I will then describe briefly some of the characteristics of four of the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. Analyses of the results of an international test of fifteen year-olds[i] will be used to illustrate the performance of these countries in comparison to that of England. I will end by asking the question as to whether there are any lessons that can be learned about comprehensive education from these Nordic countries.

First, though, there are a number of caveats to be made. Since my retirement in 2000 I have spent some time in Denmark and Norway as a consultant for the OECD and have visited many schools and spoken to students and teachers. But I still have much to learn about the Nordic way of life and cannot claim to be an expert. I hope to live in Denmark for six months next year as a way of increasing my understanding. In the meantime, I have been assisted greatly by the Eurydice data base[ii]

The risks and rewards of a comparative approach

It is all too easy to gain a superficial knowledge of the culture of other countries whilst failing to grasp the real complexity of issues. As we know from our own country, powerful factors often appear in subtle forms. Misunderstandings and lack of knowledge can lead to serious misinterpretations of the data.

On the other hand, comparative studies can reveal new policies and practices which are worth studying to consider whether they could be incorporated into our system. Moreover, learning about another system always provides a greater understanding of ones own. The poet Kipling - newly returned from the Boer war – expressed this sentiment when he wrote “*And what should they know of England, who only England know*”[iii]. Robin Alexander, a Cambridge Professor of Education, argues that, in a global age, “*National education debates need international perspectives*”.[iv]

Denmark

Denmark is part of the European Union (EU) but declined to join the Euro-zone. It consists of the Jutland peninsula and some 400 islands. Its economy is strong and is based on a mixture of industry much of which has developed into high tech manufacturing from its traditional sources. It has a centre-right Government.

Finland

Finland has been ruled by Sweden and was a Russian protectorate. It is a member of the EU and the Euro-zone. Its economy is based on timber, minerals and high tech industries (including the giant mobile phone company Nokia). It has a centre-left Government.

Norway

Norway is not a member of the EU. It is a very rich country with an economy based on oil, gas, fishing and manufacturing. At its elections in 2005 it changed a centre-right government for a centre-left one.

Sweden

Sweden is part of the EU but not the Euro-zone. It, too, has a strong economy based on natural minerals, steel, paper and high tech industries. In this year's elections it voted in a centre-right Government.

England

England – as everyone here will know – is part of the United Kingdom. It has a strong economy based on service industries. London is the financial capital of the world. Since 1997 it has had a New Labour Government. In this lecture some of the data will be for the UK rather than for England.

Table 1 Comparative Data

	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	England (UK)
Area (km²)	43,094	338,145	324,220	449,964	130,410
Pop (Millions)	5.3	5.2	4.5	9.02	49.6
GDP (US \$)	34,800	31,000	42,800	29,800	30,100
Top% (rate tax)	59	32.5	51.3	56	40
Gini	24.7	25.6	25.8	25	36.8

Source: data assembled from national sources

As can be seen, the largest country is Sweden and the smallest is Denmark. All the Nordic countries have a much smaller population than England. In terms of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) the countries are fairly similar with Norway being the richest and Sweden having the smallest figure. The tax regimes are quite different. Sweden has experimented with different rules over the years. Finland has a low maximum rate whilst the other Nordic countries all have a top rate above 50 percent, in contrast to the UK's top rate of 40 percent.

The Gini Index provides an indication of the level of equality within the different countries when account has been taken of the cost of living, tax rates and so forth. The Index uses a statistical tool – the Lorenze curve - to indicate how near the country is to 'perfect' equality (shown by a score of 0) or to 'perfect' (and thus gross) inequality (shown by a score of 1). As may be seen, the country with the lowest figure and therefore the most equal is Denmark, and the one with the highest figure and therefore the least equal (by a considerable margin) is the UK.

My impressions of cultural attitudes

In my experience the Nordic countries appear to be far less influenced by - and aware of - social class differences. The styles of the Royal families (Finland is a republic) also appear different to, and far less stuffy than, those of the British Royals. There is an interesting mixture of strong individualism and powerful collectivism in the populations with trades unions enjoying support and seemingly respected

by governments. Families are well supported and, with high proportions of both parents working, childcare is well organised by the respective states. Although such care can be provided privately it is generally government regulated and fees are subject to controls. Prisons are much more humane than in England and a far smaller proportion of the population is incarcerated. The environment is valued and, in Norway especially, education includes substantial experience of life in the open-air. Cycling is a major activity in Denmark which boasts wide, safe, bicycle lanes.

Current trends in the Nordic education systems

In the Nordic countries generally, nursery provision – up to age seven – is organised and regulated by the state. Formal schooling starts at either six or seven. Comprehensive schools are the norm up to age seventeen. In Denmark, the folkeskole runs from six to seventeen. Upper secondary provision is divided into general academic, commercial and technical strands except in Norway. There, comprehensive upper secondary schools have parallel courses and easy transfer provides a range of courses of equal status.

I believe that all the Nordic countries have National curricula but that there is far more scope for teachers to choose topics and plan learning experiences for their students than is the case in England. Classes are also smaller and there is far less emphasis on tests and examinations.

As can be seen from recent OECD data shown in Table 2, the Nordic governments invest high levels of resources in their educational systems. They still spend more than the UK, despite the extra resources being invested by the current Government.

Table 2` Educational expenditure as a % of GDP for all levels of education (2002)

country	percentage
Denmark	7.1
Finland	6.0
Norway	6.9
Sweden	6.3
UK	5.9

Source OECD Education at a Glance 2005

A very revealing – but little publicised - comparison between the quality and style of provision for 6 year-olds in two of the Nordic countries and in England was made in a Report published by Ofsted in 2003. Its authors noted that the Nordic teachers were more confident than their English counterparts and that they focused on the development of positive attitudes to learning and social development rather than – as was the case with the English teachers – on knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the Nordic teachers stressed the importance of cooperation and sought to keep the class together in their development whilst the emphasis of the English teachers was on differentiation[v].

Current trends in English education

Many proposals for changes to the English system were signalled in last year’s White Paper and included in the Education and Inspection Act of 2006. There is an insistence on market competition for all schools, diversity of funding, governance arrangements and the creation of a profusion of types of secondary schools. Such schools include faith schools (surely a highly questionable policy choice in the light of experience in Northern Ireland and current concern about the exclusive promotion of a

single faith). These developments are quite clearly anti comprehensive and anti local authority. They continue the hard-line emphasis on assessment and inspection of previous governments. (See the discussion of these issues in the 2005 Caroline Benn Memorial lecture given by Melissa Benn and Fiona Millar[vi]).

More in line with the spirit of Nordic systems, there appears to be genuine concern about the educational chances of disadvantaged pupils and, especially, those ‘cared-for’ children who do not live with their natural parents. There is also an interesting idea about personalised learning though this idea needs fleshing out if it is to play a part in the education system.

How do the different systems perform?

Using the PISA data it is clear that Finland performs well on both quality (measured by the average scores achieved in the various tests) and equity (estimated by the amount of dispersion within the scores – the standard deviations). Thus, in Finland the distance between the average and the lowest performing groups was much smaller than in almost all other countries.

Sweden performs reasonably well on both these measures though it lags well behind Finland. Denmark and Norway perform at about the OECD average on both measures. The UK (no separate data available for England) performs quite well on the quality measure but rather poorly on that of equity.

Table 3 Quality of educational outcomes – as measured by a combined performance score

Country	Score
Denmark	494
Finland	545
Norway	493
Sweden	510
UK	511

Source: Adapted from PISA 2003

As can be seen, the UK and Sweden perform better than Denmark and Norway but are well behind Finland.

Table 4 Equity of educational outcomes – as measured by the size of the standard deviations

Country	Score
Denmark	96
Finland	85
Norway	97
Sweden	92
UK	97

In this table, which shows an average of the size of the standard deviations of the three assessments (and thus provides an indication of the *distribution* of achievement), all the countries except Finland perform similarly. Finland performs much better. This demonstrates that it is possible to pursue high quality and maintain a strong emphasis on equity.

Source: Adapted from PISA 2003

Gender differences in the PISA outcomes

Sweden emerges as the country with the smallest gender differences in outcomes, followed by the UK. Norway has the largest difference between its girls and its boys. Denmark is interesting in that its highest achieving girls appear to perform less well in literacy than their international counterparts. In contrast, it also has some of the largest differences between the sexes in mathematics and science with the girls falling well behind the boys. Quite why Denmark's young women should appear to underachieve in this way is a cause for concern.

Ethnic differences in the PISA outcomes

Looking at just the reading scores, it appears that the UK does relatively well with less than 20 points separating the average scores of its native speakers and its first generation immigrants. In contrast, in Denmark this gap is over 90 points on the PISA scale. Sweden and Norway have averages of between 35 and 45 points. No data are yet available for Finland where large-scale immigration is relatively new.

A slightly different story emerges when we look at the difference between the native speakers and non-natives (foreign born children). Finland and Norway have the smallest differences between the average scores (60 points) whilst the other three countries have differences of over 70 points. It is difficult to interpret such differences, however, without accurate knowledge of the social and economic backgrounds and, indeed, from which countries such children have come.

Summary of educational performance at age 15/16

It appears that, at age 15/16, students from two of the Nordic Countries – Denmark and Norway – perform only at the OECD average whether quality or equity is taken into account. Sweden has better outcomes, whilst Finland excels on both measures. In comparison, the UK performs reasonably in terms of quality but disappointingly when it comes to the measure of equity.

Subsequent educational performance

It is obviously important, however, to examine data for older age groups to see if the pattern established at age 16 is repeated or varied.

Table 5 Completion of upper secondary education

Country	Percentage
Denmark	81
Finland	76
Norway	80
Sweden	82
UK	65

Source: Adapted from PISA 2003

It immediately becomes clear that all the Nordic countries comfortably exceed the UK figure. Interestingly, Finland – the country that performs best in PISA - has slightly lower levels of participation than the other three Nordic countries. Despite the lower PISA scores, the Norwegian and Danish young people elect to remain in full-time education until 18/19.

An even longer-term measure is collected by the European Union[vii]. This is concerned with participation in ‘life-long learning’. As may be seen in Table 6, all the Nordic countries have higher rates of participation than does the UK - three of them exceeding it by over 10 percent.

Table 6 Participation in life-long learning

Country	Percentage
Denmark	56
Finland	53
Norway	42
Sweden	52
UK	40

Source: CEDEFOP, 2003

One of the most significant outcomes of any education system is the adult literacy rate of the population. This measure can be estimated from the OECD Adult Literacy Survey. This survey uses three separate tests (prose; documentation; quantification) to estimate the general literacy of the adult population of a country[viii].

Table 7 Adult literacy using the prose measure

Country	SCORE
Denmark	275
Finland	289
Norway	289
Sweden	301
UK	267

Source: OECD, 2004 Adult literacy survey Table 6.6 page 448

As can be seen, all the Nordic countries exceed the UK score. Three countries have an average score more than 20 points higher. So it appears that, in relation to England and the UK, the Nordic countries have more patient systems which, even if school pupils perform relatively poorly at age 15, encourage a greater proportion to stay in education until 18 or 19 and inculcate a greater inclination towards life-long learning. Thus the Nordic countries end up with a better educated population - despite having started formal schooling one or even two years later than their English counterparts.

Strengths of the Nordic systems

There are many strong points within these different systems. Generally, pupils seem to enjoy and want to go to school. Furthermore, Nordic young people appear confident and competent – and almost all speak excellent English.

The Nordic countries support the learning needs of children and young people. Low fees for childcare, after-school care, and various holiday schemes make life better for young people and more manageable

for their working parents. There is also free schooling and a complete absence of university tuition fees. Maintenance grants and – where needed – low-cost loans to students are provided by the state. Unlike in England, having supported themselves mainly with grants and part-time work, few Nordic students need to leave university with large debts.

In the Nordic countries there is a high level integration into mainstream education of special needs pupils, with only the most seriously disabled young people attending specialist schools and centres.

Schools and municipalities appear to have considerable scope for innovation: I have observed, for example, flexible schooling; the integration of school and after-school care; and the adoption, in one municipality, of the use of ‘portfolios’ as the principal learning tool of students. I also visited one school which had created an IT curriculum and information store and provided almost all its teaching in this mode.

Finally, it appears to me that reform is undertaken intelligently, with much discussion and consultation, rather than by way of government dictats. Perhaps this is the outcome of political systems based on more on forming alliances than adversarial posturing.

Weaknesses of the Nordic systems

Of course, as with any system, there are also weaknesses. In both Denmark and Norway insufficient attention appears to be given to early reading problems. There is a need for the systematic application of a scheme such as Reading Recovery[ix]. The failure to challenge sufficiently young people in the mid teen years in Denmark and Norway is also a serious problem.

There is a lack of what can be termed a culture of evaluation within schools. Teachers lack benchmarks of what to expect and, as a result, can fail to stretch their students’ intellectual capabilities. This can lead to serious underachievement at end of the years of compulsory schooling.

Furthermore, whilst, the training of teachers in Finland is superb – with all teachers studying at university up to the level of a masters’ degree and receiving pedagogical training – the provision in Denmark and Norway still resembles that of the teacher training colleges abolished in the UK in the 1980s. There is also a lack of sufficiently high calibre in-service training for practising teachers – some of whom may not have taken an additional course since they began teaching.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing those responsible for the education systems of the Nordic countries is how best to prepare their students for life in multi-cultural societies. As you will know from the political debacle over the publication of anti-Islamic cartoons in a Danish newspaper, the issue of how best to integrate new arrivals from different cultures, religions and traditions is a dominant factor in Nordic countries today. Inadequate support for multi-cultural education and for bilingual students is one element. But the issues are far deeper and affect the way Nordic citizens feel about immigrants. The traditional caring attitude of a liberal consensual society which, in the past, has led to the positive Gini index and which - through its strategies of high tax/high universal benefits – has gone a long way to creating a just society is being questioned. I hope it will emerge strengthened.

What then can we learn from the education systems of the Nordic countries?

As I noted at the beginning of this lecture, it is easy to misunderstand how other countries education systems work. It is possible to misinterpret the reasons underlying particular outcomes and to compound the error by seeking to import features of a different system, operating in a different culture, into English education.

With that warning in mind, I want to argue that there are still some lessons which policy makers should ponder before pursuing yet more reforms. I will provide five examples but there are many others which could have been chosen.

1. Commitment to comprehensive education

The anti-comprehensive stance of so many in the English media, and even within the current government (as is illustrated so vividly in the publication by Melissa Benn and Fiona Millar[x]) seems to be rare in the Nordic countries. In contrast, there appears to be a clear recognition that a modern society needs an education system in which no child will be unduly favoured and all children will have access to the best available system. There are, of course, global political pressures to create elitist schools. I hope that the Nordic countries will continue to resist them.

2. Value of a constitutional relationship between central & local government

To someone who has grown used to seeing central government (of whatever political party) riding roughshod over local government, it comes as a pleasant surprise to realise that, in the Nordic countries, the municipalities are the school owners. The existence of clear roles and responsibilities within the community and the tradition of attending local schools (helped by the geography) has kept local government important to the lives of people. The recent abolition of counties in Denmark and the incorporation of upper secondary schools, however, illustrates that change is possible and that if Nordic people believe in local democracy they may have to fight hard to preserve it.

3. Power of a single teachers' union

The existence of a single union for a particular phase of schooling allows the teaching profession scope in the formulation of policy at both central and local level. The contrast with the situation in England, where four teachers' and two head teachers' unions can be so easily divided by a determined government, is stark. Of course, there is a danger that a union can be too powerful. Skilled leadership and increased flexibility of the all encompassing 'contract' made between the municipalities and the teachers is required (see the OECD Report for a discussion of this issue[xi]).

4. Treating pupils (and their union) as active partners rather than passive subjects

Unlike in England, there is a tradition in the Nordic countries for unions of school students to play a role in the organisation of schooling[xii]. The National Union of School Students (NUSS) enjoyed a brief life in the 1980s but never really achieved the recognition it deserved. Its contemporary counterpart, the English School Students Association (ESSA), will need to work hard at changing attitudes if it is to emulate its Nordic counterparts and establish an active role in the education system rather than one of passive acquiescence.

5. Intelligent education reform

The political traditions of the Nordic countries involve proportional representation and the pursuance of coalitions and negotiated compromises - rather than the more macho British adversarial style. In undertaking educational reform, Denmark, for example, has consulted widely and taken time to develop its proposals. It has not sought to equate the need to make changes with the imperative of particular ideological changes as is happening in England (see Education Guardian[xiii]). In trying to create tests which are diagnostic - to support the learning and teaching within schools and to provide feedback for those most involved - the Government has followed a different path to England. It has also announced its intention to make league tables illegal - rejecting the market competition approach to improvement that, in my view, so bedevils the English system. If Denmark succeeds it will have established itself as a model and will have provided a lesson from which many countries can learn.

In this lecture, I have endeavoured to provide an account of some of the most interesting differences between the English education system and those of the Nordic countries. As I noted at the start, whilst

there are dangers in a comparative approach there are also considerable opportunities. Looking at the outstanding achievement of Finland and experiencing the atmosphere of schools in Denmark and Norway has reminded me that there are different ways to run education systems. A high stakes, competitive, league-table-dominated, market-driven approach is not – in my view – the best way to educate children and young people. It is surely time to revert to the comprehensive model so championed by Caroline Benn.

References

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- [xii] See, for instance, the work of Danske Skoleelever – the Danish school students' union.
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