


FORUM

Looking Ahead: Nordic and British Perspectives on History of Education

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Abstract

From a Nordic and British perspective, the history of education is a vibrant field of knowledge production. It invites scholars from the humanities and social sciences to investigate the continuities and changes in education over time, as well as *Bildung*, nurturing, learning, and teaching. By underlining the breadth of the history of education and using Nordic and British examples, I argue that the field is not shrinking but growing. A broader definition of the field expands the field's scope beyond historical studies of formal schooling. It also enhances the field's significance and reveals how it has a meaningful role in research policy, and practice.

Keywords: history of education; field definitions; Nordic and British perspectives; trading zones for knowledge; multidisciplinary

This issue's call for papers stated that the field of history of education “is shrinking in many parts of the world—both in its institutional footprint and in its membership.” What does “the field” mean in this statement, and is it a reasonable description of the knowledge production and practice of scholars in the field? In this essay I want to illuminate how different approaches to the history of education, taken in different national and regional contexts, shape how and why we describe the field, and what kind of research and practices are considered to be significant.

From a Nordic and British context, the field of history of education in the last few decades has produced vital knowledge and grown in many areas.¹ This has become evident during my time as a PhD student visiting Sheffield University, UK, from Uppsala University, Sweden. According to Johannes Westberg, the field has grown stronger in the last twenty or thirty years “in terms of active research, environment, output and

¹Johannes Westberg, “Bright Nordic Lights: A Revitalised Interdisciplinary History of Education in the Massified Higher Education of the Nordics,” *History of Education* 52, no. 2-3 (2023), 330–54; Tom Woodin and Susannah Wright, “The History of Education in Britain and Ireland: Changing Perspectives and Continuing Themes,” *History of Education* 52, no. 2-3 (May 2023), 421–41.

coordination.”² This growth should be understood as a development “in accordance with its institutions’ and the national conditions of higher education.”³ The flourishing of the history of education is linked to changes in how scholars have posed and answered scientific questions regarding education as a historical phenomenon. In the 2023 double special issue of the UK’s *History of Education*, titled “Histories of Education in the Past, Present and Future: Trends and Intersections,” this trend can be seen globally, where multiple developments in the field have taken and still are taking place.⁴ The field’s expansion is thus interrelated with how one defines and practices the history of education. With a broader and more inclusive mindset, scholars are shedding new light on the field. This has affected how theoretical and methodological approaches are being applied, how scholars explain educational projects, and how education is related to wider historical contexts.

In a Nordic and British context, scholars have moved from focusing primarily on formal school histories and producing celebratory jubilee volumes about universities, to including these institutions in a wider discussion of the continuities and changes in education, as well as *Bildung*, nurturing, learning, and teaching over time.⁵ Scholars of the humanities and the social sciences are contextualizing both formal and informal educational projects as they relate to different social and cultural developments, and explaining education’s role in the complex processes of societal change.⁶ Today, Nordic scholars collectively have an awareness of methods and perspectives from different disciplines and therefore are able to have a wider and more critical discussion about what the history of education has been historically, and what it is today. The same trend can be seen in Britain and Ireland, where education has increasingly been located in larger contexts and conceptualized in new ways to make sense of the continuities and changes in British and Irish history.⁷

²Westberg, “Bright Nordic Lights,” 351.

³Westberg, “Bright Nordic Lights,” 332, 350.

⁴For a complete historiography of history of education in a Nordic and British context, see Heather Ellis, Mark Freeman, and Stephanie Olsen, introduction to *History of Education* 52, no. 2-3 (2023), 148.

⁵Pieter Dhondt, “University History as Part of the History of Education,” in *University Jubilees and University History Writing: A Challenging Relationship*, ed. Pieter Dhondt (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 29–30.

⁶For recent publications from the Nordic countries, see Kirsi Ahonen, *Sharing the Treasure of Knowledge: Nineteenth-Century Nordic Adult Education Initiatives and Their Outcomes* (PhD diss., Tampere University, 2022); Gustav Berry, *Den självstyrda periferin: Lanthushållsundervisningen och styrningen av den svenska landsbygden, 1890-1970* (PhD diss., Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2023); Christin Mays, *Have Money, Will Travel: Scholarships and Academic Exchange between Sweden and the United States, 1912-1980* (PhD diss., Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2022); Tuva Skjelbred Nodeland, *A Battle over Children: Nonformal Education in Norwegian Uniformed Children’s Organisations, 1910-1960* (PhD diss., Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2023); Nanna Ramsing Enemark, *Handling Dilemmas in Reception Approaches for Newly Arrived Migrant Pupils in the Danish Welfare State* (PhD diss., Aalborg University, 2023); Katharina Sass, *The Politics of Comprehensive School Reforms: Cleavages and Coalitions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Carl-Filip Smedberg, *Klassriket: Socialgruppsindelningen som skillnadsteknologi under 1900-talet* (PhD diss., Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2022); Linnea Tillema, *Övningar i frihet: Pedagogiseringen av känslolivet och mellanmänskliga relationer i 1970-talets Sverige* (Stockholm: Makadam, 2021); Hampus Östh Gustafsson, *Folkhemmets styvbarn: Humanioras legitimitet i svensk kunskapspolitik 1935-1980* (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2020).

⁷For recent publications from Britain and Ireland, see Tim Allender and Stephanie Spencer, eds., *“Femininity” and the History of Women’s Education: Shifting the Frame* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave

In Nordic countries, the history of education is not a formal academic discipline but a multidisciplinary operation, one which is interwoven within research environments in pedagogy, history, and sociology of education. It can also be found in departments of history of science and ideas.⁸ Swedish scholars have seen this as particularly significant for knowledge production and practice within the history of education, which becomes apparent in conversations with scholars from overlapping fields, such as intellectual history and the history of knowledge.⁹ The focus has been on developing an inclusive approach regarding different theoretical and methodological perspectives.¹⁰ For instance, several Swedish universities have created an annual workshop on history of education for PhD students from different disciplinary backgrounds in Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands. During these workshops, the emphasis has been on producing high-quality research and creating an active and inclusive network for the next generation of scholars.¹¹

One of the field's most significant and overarching attributes is its ability to contextualize and recontextualize preexisting narratives and myths about education.¹² The use of contextualization can reveal how different ideas, activities, and practices have shaped formal state-governed school systems as well as informal education projects. This trend has definitely had an impact on the research conducted in Nordic and British contexts. There are several examples of these research efforts—such as the Centre of Excellence in History of Experiences (HEX) at Tampere University in Finland, and Uppsala Studies of History and Education (SHED) at Uppsala University—that, because of their more inclusive approach, successively are able to recontextualize and link historical educational projects to larger social, economic, scientific, religious, and cultural structures.¹³

Macmillan, 2021); Hester Barron, *The Social World of the School* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Joanna Bourke, *Birkbeck: 200 Years of Radical Learning for Working People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Robert Burroughs, *Black Students in Imperial Britain: The African Institute, Colwyn Bay, 1889-1911* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023); Felicity Jensz, *Missionaries and Modernity: Education in the British Empire, 1830-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022); Laura Newman, *Germs in the English Workplace, c. 1880-1945* (London: Routledge, 2021); Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford, *Piety and Privilege: Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and the Theocratic State, 1922-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Helen Sunderland, "Politics in Schoolgirl Debating Cultures in England, 1886-1914," *Historical Journal* 63, no. 4 (2022), 935-57.

⁸"History of Education, the Department of History of Science and Ideas," Uppsala University, <https://www.idehist.uu.se/research/history-of-education/>.

⁹For an in-depth discussion on exploring the history of knowledge and education, see Björn Lundberg, introduction to "Special Issue: Exploring the History of Knowledge and Education," *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 9, no. 2 (2022), 1-11; Heather Ellis, "Concluding Remarks," in "Special Issue: Exploring the History of Knowledge and Education," ed. Björn Lundberg, *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 9, no. 2 (2022), 149-155; Staffan Bergwik, Johan Östling, and Anna Larsson, "Idéforum: Hur kan idéhistoria, kunskaps historia och utbildnings historia utvecklas i förhållande till varandra?" *Lychnos*, no. 1 (2022), 237-57.

¹⁰Bergwik, Östling, and Larsson, "Idéforum," 241.

¹¹As a member of the Graduate School of Applied History of Education (PEDASK), I have partaken in three of these workshops.

¹²Marc Depaepe, "The Ten Commandments of Good Practices in History of Education Research," *Zeitschrift Für Pädagogische Historiographie* 16, no. 1 (2010), 31-34.

¹³In addition to HEX and SHED, see History and Education at Umeå University in Sweden; Centre for Education Policy Research at Aalborg University in Denmark; Institute for Education and Lifelong

One example of this is SHED member Emma Hellström's ongoing PhD project, which is recontextualizing pre-existing narratives about how the Swedish primary school (*folkskola*) became a secular project in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ Hellström argues that instead of being a purely secular project, the primary school was part of a broader ongoing negotiation between religious and secular groups until the late 1960s. The groups were thus trying to define what a democratic education should entail from different ideological points of departure. One of her big findings is that the simultaneous transformation of Christianity during the twentieth century enabled Swedish Protestantism to remain at the center of the primary school's democratic education mission. Hellström's project helps us understand the complex relationship between religion, education, secularization, and democratization in new, meaningful ways, and also shows this project's relevance to other overlapping areas, in this case church history and intellectual history.

A broader and more inclusive field also affects how historians of education communicate, ask questions, and influence policymaking and public practice. Education is an issue that tends to stir up emotions in political and public settings. Without larger and longer perspectives on educational issues, debates concerning education today can become historically disconnected. Historians of education have been applying different approaches to explain how and why politicians and policymakers (both past and present) use different historical myths for their own ends.¹⁵ These historians also help journalists and policymakers to understand educational phenomena from a wider historical perspective.¹⁶ Depending on how the study is conducted, new possibilities can arise for creating dialogues with the general public. Using approaches such as oral history helps scholars not only to have a dialogue with study participants; it also creates wider awareness and possibilities to connect with new audiences through social media and other public platforms.¹⁷ There is a democratic and intellectual need to uphold a transparent and respectful relationship between scholars and the general

Learning at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim; the Department of Education at the University of Oslo; the University of South-Eastern Norway; and Institute of Historical Research at University College London.

¹⁴Emma Hellström, "På objektiv, vetenskaplig eller pedagogisk grund: Statens läroboksnämnd som källmaterial vad studiet av religionens roll i den demokratiska skolans framväxt," in *Ny utbildningshistorisk forskning II: Nio bidrag från Forskarskolan i tillämpad utbildningshistoria*, ed. Johannes Westberg and Germund Larsson (Uppsala: Uppsala Studies of History and Education, 2023), 115-36.

¹⁵Johan Prytz and Johanna Ringarp, "Local versus National History of Education: The Case of Swedish School Governance, 1950-1990," in *Transnational Perspectives on Curriculum History*, ed. Gary McCulloch, Ivor Goodson, and Mariano González-Delgado (New York: Routledge, 2020), 131-48; Johan Prytz, "Grundskolans kursplaner i matematik: Igår, idag och imorgon," *Näringslivets skolforum* (Stockholm: Svenskt näringsliv, 2023) https://www.svensktnaringsliv.se/bilder_och_dokument/rapporter/lwfcj_grundskolans_kursplaner_i_matematik-rapport_juni_2023pdf_1200685.html/Grundskolans_kursplaner_i_matematik-rapport_juni_2023.pdf; Joakim Landahl, David Sjögren, and Johannes Westberg, eds., *Skolans kriser: Historiska perspektiv på utbildningsformer och skoldebatter* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2021).

¹⁶Elise Farstad Djupedal and Jan Arvid Haugan, "Krav i skolen: Ja, men ikke som i gamle dager," *Midnorsk debatt*, Nov. 2023, <https://www.adressa.no/midnorskdebatt/i/mQb2gg/krav-i-skolen-ja-men-ikke-som-i-gamle-dager>; "Skolutmaningen," *Agenda* (SVT, Nov. 2022), <https://www.svtplay.se/video/KrJBAB7/agenda/avsnitt-1>.

¹⁷See Heather Ellis, Gary McCulloch, and Gurpinder Singh Lalli's project about the past, present and future of the school meals service in Britain: "Researchers Receive a £1 Million Grant to

public through discourse, particularly on a topic as complex as education. In the dialogue between historians of education, policymakers, and the general public, we could benefit from what Peter Galison calls “trading zones” for knowledge.¹⁸

Social media, articles, and public presentations are important mediums for historians of education to extend their knowledge to the field of public practice. Being in direct dialogue with teachers, parents, and other engaged citizens is crucial to demonstrating the relevance of the history of education. However, another useful though sometimes forgotten approach is through one of the core elements of the university: teaching and course development. In Swedish teacher training programs, there is a compulsory module on the history of education in Sweden that shows the field’s practical value and significance. Here the idea of an inclusive field could be implemented even further—for example, through the development of joint courses between departments. There are a few good examples of this approach at the postgraduate level, such as the Graduate School in Applied History of Education (PEDASK), but this needs to be implemented at the undergraduate level as well, and it should be connected not only to teacher training programs but to other departments, faculties, and universities.¹⁹

One could ask, does a broader and more inclusive approach pose the risk that the field loses part of its core mission? Looking at the thriving output and practice that has been presented here, it is clear that education as a broad category for historical analysis is appealing and relevant not only on its own but also in relation to other fields of research, policy, and practice. Underlining the field’s breadth not only enhances the understanding of education as a historical phenomenon but also highlights its strong scientific foundation and scholarly expertise. A better awareness of the conditions of the field’s framework today in turn creates a greater overarching awareness of its meaningful role in research, policy, and practice.

Rebecka Göransdotter is a PhD student in sociology of education at Uppsala University, Sweden, and a member of the Graduate School in Applied History of Education (PEDASK). Göransdotter investigates how and why the first women to hold PhDs in Sweden formed a scientific movement that fought for *bildning* (scientific education) and *fostran* (nurturing) for women in the first half of the twentieth century.

Investigate School Meals Service” University of Sheffield, Nov. 2, 2022, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/education/news/researchers-receive-ps1-million-grant-investigate-school-meals-service>; “School Food Histories,” University of Sheffield Player, <https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/events/school-food-histories>.

¹⁸Peter Galison, “Trading Zone: Coordinating Action and Belief,” in *The Science Studies Reader*, ed. Mario Biagioli (New York: Routledge, 1998), 137–60; Jenny Beckman, “Landskapsfloror: Att inventera över gränser,” in *Vetenskapens sociala strukturer: Sju historiska fallstudier om konflikt, samverkan och makt*, ed. Sven Widmalm (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2008), 219–62.

¹⁹“About,” Graduate School of Applied History of Education (PEDASK), <https://appliedhistoryofeducation.school.blog/om/about/>.

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