Since the turn of the century, expanding attention around the world has focused on the so-called shadow education system of private supplementary tutoring. The first global comparative study was authored by Bray (1999) and was titled *The Shadow Education System: Private Supplementary Tutoring and its Implications for Planners*. Bray employed the shadow metaphor for four reasons (p. 17):

First, private supplementary tutoring only exists because the mainstream exists; second, as the size and shape of the mainstream system change, so do the size and shape of supplementary tutoring; third, in almost all societies much more public attention focuses on the mainstream than on its shadow; and fourth, the features of the shadow system are much less distinct than those of the mainstream system.

The book set an agenda for research and policy analysis which has gathered considerable momentum and of which this special issue of the *ECNU Review of Education* is part.

Reflecting on the process of preparing his 1999 book, Bray (2010, p. 3) felt that the task resembled “assembly of a jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing.” Since then,
research by Bray himself (e.g., Bray, 2009) and many other researchers (e.g., Entrich, 2018; Kim, 2016) has provided many of those pieces. While much (but not all) early work focused on Asia—the world region where private tutoring is most conspicuous—research now documents features of shadow education in every major world region. Edited volumes providing global and regional perspectives on private supplementary tutoring (e.g., Aurini et al., 2013; Bray et al., 2013) co-exist with in-depth studies of specific regions and countries (e.g., Bray, 2021; Bray & Lykins, 2012; Joshi, 2020; Silova et al., 2006). Thus, the growing research literature has provided a much better sense of the global scope of private supplementary tutoring, and the variety of its forms and implications, than was the case at the turn of the century.

Many gaps remain, however. In the European context, one of these gaps is the Nordic region—that is, the group of Northern European countries which consists of the Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) plus Finland and Iceland. There are strong reasons why the Nordic region has so far been barely included in the literature on shadow education. Until 10–15 years ago, shadow education scarcely existed in the region. In a 2011 survey of shadow education in the European Union (EU), Bray (2011, p. 25) observed from the available (mainly Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]) evidence that, unlike other parts of Europe, the Nordic region remained largely unaffected by the rise of shadow education. Since then, the picture has changed. In all Nordic countries, private supplementary tutoring has become a notable feature of the educational landscape and a contentious issue in debates about the future of education. Such matters underline the need to explore the scope, meanings, and social implications of this development.

This special issue of the ECNU Review of Education is dedicated to the task and contributes a collection of missing pieces to the “jigsaw puzzle” of shadow education research. It does so not just in the sense of putting an as-yet-underexplored region on the map (“another country heard from,” as anthropologist Geertz [1973, p. 23] famously put it). Instead it also shows how the Nordic political and cultural contexts provide a distinctive perspective on the shadow education phenomenon more generally. Around the world, the Nordic countries are well known for their commitment to a universalist welfare state, their egalitarianism, and their dedication to free, comprehensive, and noncompetitive schooling. This heritage raises the question of how shadow education may emerge under social and political conditions that are usually considered inimical to the growth of such marketized enterprise. At the same time, the growth of shadow education raises questions about complacent (self-)images of Nordic universalism and egalitarianism in education. Before introducing the individual contributions to this issue, therefore, a sketch of the Nordic context and, more specifically, of “the Nordic model in education” provides important background information.
Universalism and egalitarianism: The Nordic welfare model

The Nordic countries have not always been viewed as a single group. For centuries, the two major regional powers, Denmark and Sweden, were involved in protracted struggles for regional dominance. Only in the early 19th century did the idea of Nordic (and, specifically, Scandinavian) unity emerge. This idea was animated by a Romanticist glorification of the Nordic cultural heritage (Norse mythology, in particular). At the same time, the rise of Prussia as the dominant Northern European power provided a palpable geo-political backdrop for this newfound Nordic unity.

The mid-19th century brought calls for political union of the Scandinavian countries, though these ideas never came to fruition. Later decades brought proposals for a defense alliance and an economic union that did not fare better. The idea of Norden has therefore never been embedded in strong institutions. In the decades following World War II the Nordic countries made widely different choices in terms of international collaboration, for example with Denmark and Norway joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization while Sweden and Finland remained neutral, and Denmark (and later Sweden and Finland) becoming EU members while Norway stayed out.

However, these patterns do not mean that Norden can be dismissed as a mere idea without material or institutional foundation. Paradoxically, even as calls for Nordic unity failed, the Nordic countries became increasingly similar in social and political institutions. From the mid-19th century onwards, the Scandinavian countries embarked on processes of modernization that bore strong similarities. In all cases, modernization was strongly driven by popular agrarian and labor movements. Furthermore, these popular movements were co-opted rather than opposed by the state—and thus integrated into state structures (Bendixsen et al., 2018).

A clear opposition between “the state” and “the people” (or between “the state” and “civil society”) therefore never materialized in the Nordic context. Due to the impact of popular movements on state formation, the state was never perceived as a distant “them” opposed to the “us” of the popular community. In this sense, the distinctive pattern of Nordic modernization provided the foundation for two features of Nordic societies: high levels of social and political trust, and commitment to egalitarianism. These features meant that not only citizens should be treated in formally equal terms, but also that public institutions should dedicate themselves to safeguarding social equality.

In the aftermath of World War II, these features were turned into cornerstones of the emerging Nordic welfare states. Compared to other contemporary regimes, the Nordic welfare states stood out by their dedication to a universalist conception of welfare. This implies that welfare is not a restricted range of services targeted at disadvantaged groups. Rather, it is a universal principle of social solidarity and redistribution that is supposed to benefit everybody—the people as a whole. Examples of this universalist approach are fee-free education (including at the...
university level), free health care, public child benefits (even for millionaires!), and public financial support for students.

Even if this universalist approach to welfare is frequently criticized by both liberals and conservatives as wasteful and expensive, it still attracts significant political consensus. The assumption is that universalism gives middle classes a stake in the welfare state while at the same time relieving disadvantaged groups of the stigma associated with welfare in nonuniversalist welfare regimes. In this sense, universalism is still commonly viewed as pivotal to upholding equality and social trust.

**The Nordic model in education**

Education is self-evidently a core component of this universalist welfare model. While it has long been disputed whether one can legitimately speak of a “Nordic educational tradition” (Balle et al., 2013), the Nordic education systems converged significantly during the 20th century. Thus, a group of Nordic researchers concluded that during the “the golden age of social democracy” from 1945 to 1970, a distinctive “Nordic model in education” emerged (Telhaug et al., 2006, p. 245).

Three aspects of this model may be highlighted here. The first is the dominance of public schooling. While to different degrees, the Nordic education systems also (and increasingly) include private schools, education is still fundamentally viewed as a public responsibility. Under the auspices of the Nordic welfare state, education should not only give students a satisfactory academic foundation but should also safeguard equality and social cohesion. It is the responsibility of the state to ensure that this happens.

The second dimension is free schooling—the idea being that parents’ financial resources should not determine the quantity or quality of education that a child can receive. Private schools do charge fees, but they are heavily subsidized by the state and thus accessible to most families. Furthermore, with the partial exception of Sweden, private schools are typically not-for-profit, rather they are institutions adhering to distinctive ethical, religious, or pedagogical principles (Telhaug et al., 2006, p. 251).

The third and perhaps most distinctive aspect of the Nordic model is comprehensive schooling—that is, the idea that all students, regardless of social background and academic ability, should be schooled together. Comprehensive schooling unites the ideas of social equality, trust, and democracy. By schooling all children together, the education system should contribute to “abolishing a class-based society,” as then Swedish Education Minister Olof Palme stated in 1968 (Telhaug et al., 2006, p. 253). Further, by bringing together students from different backgrounds on a daily basis, comprehensive schooling aims to strengthen trust and social cohesion. In this sense, comprehensive schooling should be a microcosm of democratic society itself. To the extent that
comprehensive schooling requires students to interact, cooperate and compromise across social distinctions, it can be viewed as a daily exercise in democratic citizenship.

In the decades following World War II, therefore, all forms of ability-based tracking and streaming were gradually abandoned. This development was accompanied by a strongly anticompetitive educational ideology, which manifested itself not only at the organizational level (comprehensive schools) but also at the level of didactics (promotion of project and group work over individual assignments) and in assessment (distrust of examinations and grades as psychologically and socially harmful). As the renowned Swedish educational psychologist Husén (1966, p. 282) famously put it “In the competitive group, death for one is life for the other.”

Such contextual factors make the recent emergence of private tutoring all the more significant both for the Nordic peoples themselves and for analysts elsewhere in the world. During the last few decades, the exalted (self-)image of Scandinavian education systems as global paragons of educational quality and justice has increasingly been challenged. One important reason for this is the impact of international comparative studies on educational achievement and in particular the PISA. When the first PISA study was published in 2001, it opened wide the cracks in the “Nordic model in education.” While, almost overnight, Finland shot to “PISA stardom,” the Scandinavian countries scored around the OECD average and, even worse, also did rather poorly in terms of lifting low achievers.

In this situation, as noted by Telhaug et al. (2006, p. 256), previous self-congratulatory statements on Scandinavian education (we have the best education systems in the world), were replaced by self-deprecatory ones (we have the most expensive education systems in the world). Reinforced by the neoliberal currents permeating global education policy, this gave rise to a more accountability-oriented approach to education policy. The emphasis was now less on the lofty ideals of democracy and equality and more on the (in)ability of Scandinavian education systems to provide the learning outcomes needed to sustain national competitiveness in a global knowledge economy.

**The papers in this special issue**

From different angles, the contributions to this special issue explore how supplementary tutoring (both private and public) arose in this new educational conjecture. The issue starts by putting the Nordic region into its wider European context. Updating his seminal 2011 report on shadow education in the EU, Bray (2021) shows that, due in part to the intensifying competitiveness of European education systems, shadow education has continued to grow in the EU. The overall regional patterns, however, remain the same: shadow education is most prevalent in Southern and Eastern Europe, less common in Western Europe, and least (although increasingly) common in Northern Europe.
Most of the other contributions focus on a single Nordic country. Two articles are dedicated to the case of Sweden—the “first mover” in terms of shadow education in the Nordic context. Hallsén (2021) shows how supplementary tutoring in Sweden has been shaped by the interplay between national policies and local practices. In 2007, the Swedish government introduced a tax-deduction scheme, which spurred the emergence of a commercial market for private tutoring. Subsequently, this policy was reversed but supplementary tutoring stuck. Tax deduction has been replaced by public grants for schools to offer supplementary tutoring themselves, thus enshrining supplementary tutoring within mainstream schooling.

The second Swedish article by Forsberg et al. (2021) examines developments from a curriculum-oriented angle. Conceptualizing shadow education as a “pedagogical object,” and including close analysis of interactional patterns between tutors and tutees, the authors explore how curriculum as a “boundary object” is negotiated across distinctions between supplementary tutoring and regular schooling, and between different forms of supplementary tutoring.

The rise of shadow education in Sweden is not just significant in itself, but also because it was instrumental in triggering similar developments in Denmark. The four articles on Denmark explore how and why this happened. In their article on the Danish private tutoring industry, Christensen et al. (2021) show how Swedish entrepreneurs in conjunction with the highly controversial 2013 Danish school reform laid the foundations for the Danish tutoring market. Mainly, however, their article is dedicated to examining the “modes of moral justification” employed by tutoring companies to legitimize a market for private tutoring in the Nordic welfare context.

These issues are also taken up in the contribution by Mikkelsen and Gravesen (2021). The authors ask not so much why shadow education has grown in Denmark, but rather why it remains limited compared to most other countries. To answer this question, they explore the Danish traditions of school and leisure-time pedagogy and conclude that together they create a rather unaccommodating environment for shadow education.

These cultural peculiarities of the Danish context also inform Cone’s (2021) article on parents’ and tutors’ experiences with private tutoring. Cone focuses especially on the affective ambiguities of being involved in shadow education in an egalitarian educational context. From his interviews, he identifies three affective patterns, which, taken together, constitute a specific “mood” sustaining experiences with shadow education.

Also to be mentioned in the group of Danish papers is Kany’s (2021) contribution in the Voice Section. Kany, the founder of Denmark’s largest private tutoring company, provides an insider’s perspective on the emergence of private tutoring. Recounting how the company sprung from his own experience as a substitute teacher in a public school, he explains that he came to see a private venture as the only way to realize his aspirations for a more flexible, individualized and engaging mode of teaching.
Taken together, the articles on Denmark and Sweden suggest a distinctive Scandinavian model of shadow education. In both Sweden and Denmark, private tutoring is referred to as “homework support” (läxhjälp/lektiehjælp). This notion implies more than a focus on daily school assignments: it also implies a particular relationship between tutors and tutees, stressing the personal and intimate rather than purely instructional aspects of tutoring. As tutors and tutees are close in age, tutors are depicted as motivational “role models” or caring “elder siblings” (Hallsén & Karlsson, 2019). In terms of pedagogical precepts, “homework support” therefore remains close to “the Nordic model in education.”

The homework support model first emerged in Sweden but has since been elaborated by the Danish company MentorDanmark. In the last few years, it has also become part of the Norwegian educational landscape as MentorDanmark has extended its operations to Norway (operating there as “MentorNorge”). Nevertheless, Norway has a different history of shadow education. In their contribution to this issue, Hu and Huang show that homework assistance first emerged through public rather than private initiative. Since 2010, the Norwegian government has gradually introduced a policy requiring schools to offer homework assistance for all students from Grade 1 to Grade 10. Hu and Huang argue that while this policy is aligned with Nordic principles of egalitarianism and universalism, it may not be beneficial for equity since it is based on a “one size fits all” model that does not take into consideration the different needs of different students.

The sole Finnish contribution, by Jokila et al. (2021), focuses on commercial examination-preparation courses. In Finland, access to higher education is partially decided by entrance examinations set by individual institutions. Drawing on the theory of marketization developed by Çalişkan and Callon (2010), the authors explore how this new tutoring market takes shape as an assemblage involving a variety of agents. While different from the homework support model, this form of private tutoring raises similar questions about the future of Nordic egalitarianism and universalism.

Next, Zhang (2021) presents an unusual and illuminating comparison of patterns in Denmark and China. These, she says, represent two extremes not only in scale but also in culture and history. Zhang bases her paper on personal observations as a Chinese researcher viewing patterns in Denmark and later welcoming Danish colleagues to China. The paper has methodological insights alongside its specific focus on provision of shadow education.

As the Nordic markets for shadow education are still in their infancy, it is difficult to gauge how Nordic education systems will be affected in the longer term. Other contexts show that shadow education can grow rapidly and have a profound impact on the entire educational landscape, but it remains to be seen how this will play out in the Nordic setting. As noted in several contributions to this issue, important social and cultural factors inhibit the growth of shadow education—and shape it towards alignment with Nordic educational culture. In this sense, the recent rise of shadow education bears witness to both the erosion and to the persistence of the “Nordic model in education.”
Conclusions

The above set of comments underlines the value of comparative analysis not only across space but also over time (Zhang & Bray, 2020). The fact that shadow education has emerged in the Nordic countries is of major significance not just to those countries but also to the wider picture. It shows that indeed shadow education has become a global phenomenon, albeit with different characteristics in individual countries. Shadow education in the Nordic countries is still modest in scale compared with other parts of Europe, let alone East Asia, South Asia and parts of the Middle East. Nevertheless, it will certainly continue to expand, bringing with it further challenges to the welfare systems for which the Nordic countries have been so famed. The shifts reflect significant undercurrents of marketization that themselves reflect advances in neoliberal ideologies across the globe. Yet they continue to show variations within and across the Nordic countries, reflecting variations in political forces and the roles of both state and markets.

For the ECNU Review of Education, this special issue may be juxtaposed with a predecessor, namely Volume 2, Issue 1 (2019), which focused on patterns of shadow education in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong SAR, and Macao SAR (Zhang & Bray, 2019). Hong Kong SAR has had a relatively long history of shadow education, but the Chinese mainland has “caught up” and indeed has overtaken as the economy has boomed and as society has become more urbanized (see also Zhang & Bray, 2021). Patterns in Macao SAR have been more fragmented because its schooling provision has also been more fragmented. Comparison of that special issue with the present one on Nordic countries still to some extent shows two ends of a spectrum not only in the scale and social implications of shadow education but also in the business models of its main actors. Thus while MentorDanmark operates mainly on a one-to-one basis through university students, the company in Hong Kong SAR presented by Eng (2019) and the company in Chinese mainland presented by Bai et al. (2019) contrast in their large-class teaching and, in the Chinese mainland case, the emphasis on teaching research. Other themes from that special issue focused on parental demand (Liu, 2019), regulations (Zhang, 2019), students’ perceptions (Chan, 2019) and research methods (Yung, 2019). Again some instructive parallels and complementarities may be found with this special issue on Nordic countries.

Alongside the collection of articles in this pair of special issues, moreover, are three individual articles in general issues focusing on China. Liao and Huang (2018) employed PISA data to ask who is more likely to participate in tutoring and whether it works, while Xue and Fang (2018) employed data from the China Family Panel Study conducted by the Peking University to identify status and trends. The third paper, by Liu (2018) reviewed regulatory policies in the fast-changing scene.

Since, moreover, the present issue has an article about Korean policies for shadow education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Piao & Hwang, 2021) in the Policy Review section following
the collection of Nordic papers, we can really say that even in its short life so far the journal has become a significant venue for comparative analysis of shadow education. In that vein, the journal will certainly welcome further contributions to the theme. In line with the journal’s mission statement, such contributions may focus on “issues in China and beyond.” We sincerely thank the colleagues in the Nordic countries for joining the dialog with this rich set of papers, and we look forward to a continued partnership in explorations of the theme. Through these contributions, we do have more “jigsaw pieces” to form a picture of the phenomenon. At the same time, we note that much further research is needed, not only because of gaps at any point in time but also because patterns are changing fast.

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**Note**

1. In official definitions, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Åland Islands are also included in the Nordic region. However, none of these are sovereign nations. Greenland and the Faroe Islands are autonomous territories within the Danish realm, the Åland Islands are a self-governing part of Finland.

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