The individual articles in this issue of NordSTEP have been selected for their distinct qualities and topicality rather than to comprise a special issue. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the articles seem to point towards a number of shared concerns. One of these concerns is the intrinsic vulnerabilities of educational systems. In each their way, the contributions open our eyes to these vulnerabilities by showing how the implementation of educational policies may cause scars and disturbances in existing balances, which may even counteract the political intentions being there in the first place. Dealing with issues of motivation, satisfaction and equality, the articles draw attention to and explore the (often unintended or unconsidered) jeopardy of educational policy.

The topic of motivation in the field of educational policy is the theme of the article Rolling the dice in a game of trust (Ahlström & Danell, 2019). This article shows how conflict and insecurity among Swedish teachers result from a salary-boosting reform intended to improve student achievement. The unintended effects of using motivation as a tool of governance by raising the salaries of selected teachers are substantial. The decision is described as fuelling ‘a spiral of mistrust’, inflicting deep scars on existing, deep-rooted relations of trust among Swedish teachers – a trust that has been taken for granted and only became apparent when it began to crumble. Creating performance-based differences in salary does not only create incentives, it jeopardizes basic relations and understandings.

In order to get a historical view of developments within the field of public management and the emergence of the idea of using performance-based differences in salary as a form of motivation, we asked Margit Neisig from Roskilde University (Denmark) to present an overview of her interesting analysis of theories of motivation in public and private sector management. Neisig’s discussion piece (Neisig 2019) shows that the kinds of performance management and incentivizing reward systems that inspired both new public management (NPM) and human resource management (HRM) a few decades ago are now in decline. Neisig closely examines how the inherent logics in NPM motivation theories cause demotivation and impair productivity. Neisig also suggests moving away from the idea of homo economicus towards a concept of homo curacum creativitus (the man who cares creatively), thereby arguing that creativity and care, rather than simple economic self-interest, are key motivators in the contemporary workplace. While the origins of the discussion in Neisig’s text are outside the field of educational research, it can hopefully inspire (and provoke) further discussion of the use of NPM and related theories in the shaping and implementation of educational policies.

Motivation is also a central theme in the issue’s third article The mass production of learning: positive behaviour in a datafied education system on the educational programme ‘School-wide positive behaviour support’ (Thoutenhoofd, 2019). This programme is intended to reduce youth-related problems and redirect unwelcome behaviour among students towards learning. Toutenhoofd shows how the programme ends up excluding students who exhibit resistance to learning at school through the stigma of categorization embedded in the programme itself.

The fourth article Parental school satisfaction in the context of segregation of basic education in urban Finland (Tikkanen, 2019) picks up on the NPM theme, analysing a shift towards parentocracy in the implementation of large-scale neoliberal educational reforms in Finland over the last thirty years. The vulnerability of the educational system comes to the fore in the form of severe social segregation as a side-effect of the implementation of an open enrolment policy for schools as part of these reforms. It turns out that school satisfaction and social economic background are tied closer together as students with more privileged social backgrounds excel in competing for the more popular schools.

Finally, we include an article Revisiting ‘curriculum crisis’ dialogue: in search of an antidote (Tahirsylaj, 2019) dealing theoretically with the international discussion of a ‘curriculum crisis’ initiated by Michael Young in 2013. The theme of crisis makes the discussion of the vulnerability of educational systems explicit, but compared with the other contributions to this issue of NordSTEP, it is twisted in a new direction by downplaying the negative reading of the circumstances involved. Tahirsylaj questions whether it is relevant to talk about a curriculum crisis at all. Where Young argued for the necessity of bringing knowledge back into the curriculum, Tahirsylaj reminds us of the situatedness of education, therefore claiming that it is not just a matter of bringing knowledge back. Such knowledge will inevitably have to be adapted to a changing world, and also be aware of the need of bridging knowledge and new approaches to learning.

In this editorial, we have drawn attention to the vulnerabilities in/of education and educational
systems and to the (unintended) jeopardy often involved in educational policies. This is one among many important concerns and discussions to be found across the articles presented. We hope you enjoy and find inspiration in this issue of NordSTEP.

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