Introduction: mapping commercial interests and imaginaries in Nordic education

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Commercializing education

Would it be possible to foster the development of a strong pedagogical industry that could be compared to the pharmaceutical industry in the health sector? (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2007).

Almost 15 years on, it is tempting to revisit the question posed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with a touch of biblical irony: ‘We have the prophetic word confirmed’ (Peter 2, 1:19). Since 2007, the rise of markets for teaching and learning has turned education into one of the fastest growing worldwide, with recent prophecies suggesting a staggering $10 Trillion education industry in 2030 (HolonIQ, 2020). Spearheaded by massive infrastructural investments in digitization, Venture Capital investments in companies working in education are at a record high: Annual Venture Capital (VC) investments in European education start-ups grew from 140 million USD in 2014 to 2.5 billion USD in 2021 (Brighteye Ventures, 2022). The Nordic countries have not escaped this trend.

Defined most broadly as ‘the opening up of schools and their practices to goods and services from commercial providers with the express purpose of leveraging profit from schools’ (Hogan & Thompson, 2017, p. 2), the large-scale commercialization of education in and beyond the Nordic countries affects more than just corporate bottom lines and stock markets. In classrooms across the Global North, the involvement of commercial actors is reconfiguring the very foundations of what teaching and learning is about, who should participate in it, and where it should occur: Teachers creating tasks in Google Classroom, students finishing their assignments on Seesaw, parents checking in on their students’ work on Aula, principals preparing Kahoot quizzes for the next staff meeting, schools rebuilding their pedagogical profiles based on partnerships with Lego Education. As the boundaries between public education and corporate interests continue to blur, it is more vital than ever to examine the political, social, and pedagogical implications of these reconfigurations.

While there is a significant body of scholarship addressing private schools and non-state actors’ involvement in the pluralistic governance of Nordic education (Larsen et al., 2021; Wiborg & Larsen, 2017), questions of profit, branding, and capitalization within schools are relatively new topics in Nordic education research (Rönnberg, 2017; Seppänen et al., 2021). Building on recent scholarship examining the political economies underpinning contemporary forms of market-making and capital (Birch & Muniesa, 2020; Çalışkan & Callon, 2009; Sadowski, 2020; Srnicek, 2016), the present concern with commercialization in schools appears to involve at least three intertwined tendencies. Through different mechanisms and at varying rates, these tendencies constitute the backdrop for the commercial entanglements addressed in this special issue.

First, it involves a movement towards privatization of educational functions, denoting a process by which private sector actors are either contracted or enticed via deregulation to manage services and infrastructures in education (Alexiadou, 2013; Starr, 1989). In the Nordic countries and Europe in particular, this process is commonly realized through mechanisms associated with soft privatization, in which private sector involvement emerges not as a direct replacement of or ideological alternative to public government and welfare state control, but rather as embedded within the regulatory frameworks of outcome-based governance (Cone & Brogger, 2020; Moos, 2009). Second, it involves the increasing digitalization of educational governance, revolving around the use of algorithms, websites, and quantitative data to (re)present, reconfigure, and govern educational activities and relations (Cone et al., 2021; Gorur et al., 2019; Williamson, 2016). More recently, this tendency has
found expression in a growing body of literature on platformization, in which processes of digitization converge upon commercially driven platform ecosystems designed to integrate, present, and connect educational information and data in corporate learning environments (Cone, 2021; Decuyper & Landri, 2021; Grimaldi & Ball, 2021; Kerssems & Van Dijck, 2021; Komljenovic, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Third, it involves the respatialization of educational relations, referring to the recallibration of spatial proximities associated with the global standardization of educational concepts, standards, discourses, and technologies (Amin, 2002; Grimaldi & Ball, 2021; Lewis, 2017; Lewis et al., 2016). Of particular relevance here is the ongoing branding of the Nordic countries as commercial export-havens for a more student-centred approach to education, with companies and transnational organizations performatively asserting a techno-pedagogical imaginary where LEGO-bricks, learning platforms, and maker-spaces based on ‘Nordic values’ (Nordic EdTech, 2021) will lead the way towards student empowerment across the globe (HolonIQ, 2020; Rönnberg, 2017).

While by no means comprehensive, the parallel processes of privatization, digitalization, and respatialization have all played a constitutive role in opening the Nordic education systems towards ‘pathways of influence that now lie open to educational capitalism’ (Jones et al., 2008, p. 83). As the themes addressed in this special issue illustrate, the materialization of these pathways of influence is by no means linear and ubiquitous. Rather, they are intricately tied to the different cultural histories, patterns of practice, and policies that shape who and what matters in different educational settings. The question is how the forces of commercialization noted above affect these matterings: How does the involvement of commercially driven actors in core educational functions affect public decision-making regarding the aims and methods of education (Powell & Menendian, 2011; Tarlau & Moeller, 2019)? Which student and teacher ontologies are enabled through the incorporation of platforms and teaching outcomes embedded in corporate partnerships designed to ‘disrupt’ the traditional classroom and its purportedly outdated model of teacher authority (Braidotti, 2005; Sellar & Thompson, 2016)? How do global market practices impact the recognition and administration of cultural, historical, and socio-economic differences in education governance (Belina, 2019; Thrift, 2005)? What comes to matter when the abstract axiomatic of capitalist exchange becomes the dominant framework for articulating and enacting value in education (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983)?

Importantly, responding to these questions is not about exposing an ‘essence’ or ‘nature’ of commercialization as either good or bad for educational relations. As Hogan and her colleagues aptly suggest, ‘commercialized products and services are not necessarily problematic if the teachers and schools that choose to use them are aware of the significance of their choices and how those choices influence their educative responsibilities’ (Hogan et al., 2018, p. 627). Engaging with the issues raised above, then, is first and foremost an empirical bidding: to follow commercial markets as they unfold, to examine what certain products do or allow different settings, to trace the mechanisms and strategies employed by a given organization that make their solutions appear natural and necessary. Drawing on Jasanoff’s concept of socio-technical imaginaries as ‘collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of […] technological projects’ (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, p. 120), this bidding is as much a matter of questioning how education becomes commercialized as of how commercial services and technologies become educational. From different theoretical and empirical standpoints, it is our hope that this special issue will shed light on some of these educational and commercial reconfigurations to help researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and corporations navigate more carefully and cleverly through the booming education industry.

In the following section, we will present a brief historical overview of how and where commercial activities have entered the discussion of educational practice and governance in Nordic education. The historical overview is followed by a short discussion of the governance frameworks through which the tendencies noted above have emerged across the Nordic countries. Finally, we give a brief presentation of the articles included in this special issue.

A (very brief) history of commercialization in Nordic education

In contrast to Anglophone school systems, commercial actors in education have received only little attention in Nordic educational research (Cone, 2021; Dovemark et al., 2018; Wiborg, 2013). With the exception of the infamous for-profit school chains in Sweden (Rönnberg, 2015), corporations have played only a peripheral role in the development of the so-called Nordic model of education after WWII (Telhaug et al., 2006). As Wiborg has suggested, the relatively marginal role of commercial actors is intrinsically tied to a historical pattern of state involvement in the production of public services as a ‘tool of pursuing social equality through producing services itself, and thereby freeing citizens from market dependence’ (Wiborg, 2013, p. 410). Buoyed by a hierarchical top-down form of ‘hard’ government of public institutions, the variety of different education policies introduced up through the last half of the 20th century bear witness to the effects of this commitment to education as ‘an extension of the state’s duty to provide
equality of opportunity for all members of society’ (Telhaug et al., 2006, p. 251). A comprehensive school structure with unstreamed classes, national curricula, earmarked state financing for specific activities, and a shared political emphasis on democratic values make up some of the more well-known legislative structures that have contributed to restrain market transactions and consumerism in formal education (Blossing et al., 2013; Proitz & Aasen, 2017).

Importantly, the contribution of the structures above towards ‘marginalizing the market as the principal agent of distribution’ (Proitz & Aasen, 2017, p. 215) in education does not mean that commercial actors have had no say in schools and universities before the advent of the commercialization processes noted above. From corporate donations of wall charts (see, figures 1 and 2) to privately developed textbooks, commercial actors have long sought to build their brands, attract future workers, and turn a profit within formal education systems (Molnar, 1996). Yet as noted by historian Larry Cuban in relation to the US education system, the corporate strategies employed by companies up through the 20th century remained predominantly peripheral forms of commercial activity (Cuban, 2004). Companies could sell books or learning materials, sure; but for the most part, the core activities and contents of classroom instruction remained largely impervious to commercial ventures and directives (Molnar, 1996). Between regulations, national curricula, and a wide-spread conception of teachers as public servants, the influence of commercial actors tended to stop outside the classroom door.

As scholars of Nordic education governance have demonstrated over the course of the last two decades, the rise of neo-liberal policies and New Public Management during the last two decades of the 20th century blew new wind in the involvement of commercial actors in the region’s education sectors (Fredriksson, 2009; Lundahl, 2016; Moos, 2013, 2014; Wiborg, 2013). Supported by the development of transnational agencies and agreements such as the OECD, GATS, the EC, and UNESCO, a range of novel ‘soft’ strategies were conceived to circumvent the legislative constraints of ‘hard’ governments anchored within the legal impediments of nation-state sovereignty in public education governance. As stated in already in the OECD’s Education Catalogue from 1998, soft governance strategies are less about telling governments what to do as it is about establishing an infrastructure of comparison and accountability that ‘encourages countries to be transparent, to accept explanations and justification, and to become self-critical’ (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 1998, p. 2). Over the course of the last two decades, these infrastructural strategies have included the introduction of learning outcomes rather than content-based governance of education; the disintegration of public sectors into semi-autonomous units at several levels; the increasing use of private-public partnerships (PPPs) and contract-based governance; the establishing of national and international comparisons of qualifications; the use of incentivization to guide competition between providers through performance-based rewards; the promotion of global evidence-based practice; and, finally, the quantification of

Figure 1. How a Tuborg is made’. Educational wall chart sponsored by the Danish brewery Tuborg, 1950. Image courtesy of Aarhus University Library. Available online at skolehistorie.au.dk.
student, teacher, and school performances through large-scale tests (Carlos, 2012; Cone & Bregger, 2020; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Moos, 2009, 2011; Moos et al., 2014; Simons, 2015).

The performative dictate of these ‘soft’ strategies of governance is, by now, well-known: to be able to succeed in the competition on a global market, the European national systems of education would need to establish clear systems of equivalence between their standards and measurements of education across all levels (Moos, 2009). By fuelling pressure on homogenization and standardization, the strategies of soft governance have played a key role in pushing a view of education as an economy in itself, maintained through the possibilities of transnational data-collection, comparison, and competition (Krejsler & Moos, 2021). In terms of the present theme, this strategic economic reframing is important to bear in mind for two reasons. First, it illustrates that the commercially driven networks and partnerships currently emerging across the Nordic countries did not simply ‘discover’ or ‘invent’ the field of education as a space for production and exchange. Rather, they responded to a much broader restructuring of education as quantifiable, measurable, and comparable – in short, as a standardized commodity whose value is attained through its circulation on a global market of abstract comparison (Marx, 1978). Second, it suggests that the tendencies towards increasing privatization, digitalization, and respatialization of education did not emerge, as many companies continue to claim, as ‘natural’ effects of students and teacher needs in the 21st century (Google, 2020; Selwyn, 2016; Sundin & Carlsson, 2016). As much as Google or LEGO may insist on the ubiquitous potentials of their platforms and products, the techno-social imaginaries of learning processes as context-independent experiences do not express an epochal fact. They are rather an effect of concrete policies, practices, and Silicon Valley imaginaries targeting the deconstruction of ‘traditional’ education as a territorially bound event (Williamson, 2017). What these points highlight is that there is nothing natural about the idea that private companies are necessary for innovating the Nordic countries’ public education system, that commercially driven platforms are prerequisites for a personalized learning experience, or that education in the 21st century can
happen to anyone anywhere. This makes it important to critically scrutinize how commercialization is performed and legitimized, and question the extent to which teachers, policymakers, researchers, and other actors involved in the field are in a critical position to trace, examine, and possibly reject the imaginaries and commercial realities they encounter.

**Mapping the influx of commercial actors and partnerships in Nordic education**

This special issue brings together seven articles exploring the dynamics of governing and enacting public education on various levels alongside commercial interests and partnerships. We begin in Sweden, where market-oriented policies up through the 1990’s galvanized conditions for a lucrative education market for companies operating free schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) provisions. In ‘Swedish free school companies going global: Spatial imaginaries and movable pedagogical ideas’, Linda Rønnberg, Nafsika Alexiadou, Malin Benerdal, Sara Carlbaum, Ann-Sofie Holm, and Lisbeth Lundahl examine the foreign operations of three Swedish edu-businesses. Through a thorough document and website analyses, the authors focus on the companies’ self-representations in relation to the construction of narratives and imaginaries that bolster their branding by grounding them in a purportedly Scandinavian, child-centred approach. The study shows that even as edu-businesses are ‘going global’, nations (still) matter: all three companies’ business models are deeply intertwined with the distinctive development of Swedish politics in education governance which undergirding their development and strategies for cross-border expansions.

Shifting focus from spatial to socio-technical imaginaries in ‘The imaginary of personalization in relation to platforms and teacher agency in Denmark’, Rasmus Leth Jørnø, Bjarke Lindso Andersen, and Peter Gundersen explore two widely debated cases regarding the purported importance and limits of digital technologies in Danish education. Building on a distinction between tech boosters and doomsters, the authors theorize a move beyond causal understandings of technology as either the future or end of education proper, arguing instead for the need to look at imaginaries as competing alternatives involving a variety of material, political, and economical factors in their realization. Rather than evaluate each position, the authors illustrate how both boosters and doomsters are concerned primarily with an imaginary of personalization as a pathway to improve teaching and learning, and question why this ideal can operate as a framework for both adopting and rejecting (commercial) platforms, algorithms, and AI in education.

In ‘Negotiating the value of ‘corporations’ capital’ in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and care provision’, Anne Sigrid Haugset provides an insight into the shifting conditions of the Norwegian ECEC sector, where corporate and for-profit providers have increased their share of the market. While the quality, contents, and funding of ECEC is generally regarded as a public responsibility in the Nordic countries, changing reform agendas up through the 2000’s have corporate ECEC actors with an increasingly pivotal role in making the sector more efficient and of a higher quality. Drawing on a large body of data consisting of regulatory drafts, minutes from parliamentary debates, and stakeholder responses, the author draws forth the strategies of corporate providers to establish legitimacy by arguing in terms of cost-efficiency and challenge conventional forms of local cooperation in the ECEC field. As quality standards become linked to economic measures of scalability and efficiency, the author questions how this development may affect what, who, and where matters in ECEC provisions.

The thematic focus on market involvement and corporate partnerships in public education governance continues in Ingvil Bjordal’s article, ‘Soft privatization in the Norwegian school: cooperation between public government and private consultancies in developing ‘failing’ schools’. Situated against a reformatory backdrop of assessment and testing practices demonstrating the apparent failures of certain children, schools, and communities, the author draws on the concept of soft privatization to show how New Public Management and private-sector participation have become embedded within the Norwegian public education system, looking specifically at a school development project in Oslo. The author applies Carol Bacchi’s WPR approach (‘What’s the problem represented to be?’) to demonstrate how a set of ‘problems’ were generated regarding outcomes-based learning, performance management and accountability policies, establishing private sector participation and increased privatization as a seemingly natural solution.

In ‘Teachers’ negotiations of bias in relation to teaching resources offered to schools by industrial actors’, Lena Hansson and Maria Andrée investigate how 20 teachers negotiate the participation of industrial actors in Swedish science and technology education, where a range of sponsored programmes and free resources have been made available by commercial actors. Focusing on issues of legitimacy, bias, and neutrality, the authors discuss the teachers’ capacities in evaluating and naming the purported objectivity of privately provided resources. Drawing on discussions of teacher agency, the article concludes by problematizing the extent to which teachers in a decentralized Nordic model of teacher authority can achieve agency when encountering externally produced teaching
resources – many of which are invested with brand- ing interests that can be difficult to decipher.

The issues of bias and corporate interests are brought into a Danish context by Palle Rasmussen in 'Educational research – public responsibility, private funding?' In the article, the author illustrates how responsibilities for funding education and educational research is gradually shifting from being exclusively a state-affair to include private actors in Denmark as well as the other Nordic welfare states. By examining a sample of private foundations engaged in educational research from a Bourdieuan perspective, the article discusses how novel forms of privately sponsored development projects may produce new quality research of societal relevance, but also lead to narrow criteria for topics and methods. Rasmussen goes on to argue that private participation may influence education research in two ways: in the choice of aims and criteria and in the circulation of research results. The article concludes by problematizing the effects of this narrowing as particular pedagogical priorities take precedence in educational research and debates, including Lego’ interest in child’s play and the health industries’ interest in STEM subjects.

In the final article of the special issue, ‘Cooperation with local community and business: quality negotiations in upper secondary education’, Heidun Oldervik, Ellen Saur, and Hans Petter Ulleberg present a study of two Norwegian upper secondary schools’ cooperation with local businesses. Drawing on a large body of empirical material including document analyses, observations, and interviews, the article demonstrates how ‘quality’ is negotiated by different members of the school leadership, showing how mutual dependencies emerge through a pragmatic and pupil-centred approach to school development. Rather than enforce a regime of quality from above through either large-scale corporate interests or governance standards, the authors illustrate how tailored partnerships and efforts to focus on the actual conditions of each student may become a form of counter-conduct in the face of standardized quality systems.

**Educational implications**

Looking across the private foundations, for-profit schools, adaptive platforms, and partnerships addressed in this special issue, the point is not to renounce or celebrate commercial production and sale in public education per se. As Oldervik, Saur, and Ulleberg demonstrate in their article, corporate involvement in public education may in some instances further opportunities for addressing pedagogical ideals that are seldomly possible within bureaucratic and hierarchical standards-based governance frameworks. Rather, what the articles first and foremost encourage is an analytical attention to the educational implications of commercial involvement, questioning what kind of capacities for acting on and in the world together emerge and disappear in the daily activities of teachers, school leaders, and students navigating an increasingly blurred field of pedagogical interests. Keeping with Andréé and Hansson’s discussions of Swedish teachers’ negotiations of bias in teaching resources, these capacities are not something that teachers, students, and other actors have, but rather depend on agental assemblages of space, time, and resources that allow for certain questions and practices to emerge. In a climate of Nordic educational reforms characterized by demands for efficiency and seamless use of data for improving pedagogical interventions, the articles in this issue highlight the importance of maintaining this openness in educational settings that too often end up being occupied by market forces and commercial imaginaries that leave little space for experimenting with alternative forms of pedagogical relations.

**Endnotes**

1. GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services), the EC (European Commission), and UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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