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Opening the black box of editors' work

This issue consists of four peer-reviewed articles, and two nonreviewed texts: a book review and a discussion paper. The publication of any text in a journal takes part in the knowledge production in multiple ways. Firstly, in research, the selection of the topic is inherently political in nature: What are the topics that are brought to the fore and how? The topics of the articles published in this issue, digitalization, teacher autonomy in high-stakes and low-stakes accountability governance models, public–private partnerships in education and reforms related to educare of school-age children reflect the changing context of education policy in the Nordic countries. The changing education policy context compels researchers to acknowledge the complexity of power relations and governance in teachers', students' and children's lives.

Secondly, the peer review process that is an essential part of scholarly discussion both adds to, and is part of, the knowledge-making process, and this collaborative work between authors, reviewers and editors has epistemic consequences beyond a particular publication. Therefore, discussing the nature and principles of the publication process, including peer review and editorial work, is vital for the whole field of education policy research. This editorial will focus on this topic, epistemic power of publication process.

Before diving into this topic, we will introduce the four articles of this issue. In the first article of this issue, Marita Ljungqvist and Anders Sonesson examine the discourses related to the digitalization of education. They ask what the values embedded in the argumentation promoting the acceleration of digitalization in education are. They demonstrate how policy argumentation related to digitalization is characterized by a reductionist neoliberal framing of education. In this discourse, students are represented as entrepreneurial citizens with a moral obligation to renew human capital by adapting to market demands. The educational system is constructed as a flexible and automated infrastructure in which teaching is framed as 'facilitating'.

In the second article, Ana Lucia Lennert da Silva examines teacher autonomy in different models of educational governance. The author uses quantitative data from the OECD TALIS 2018 to compare experienced autonomy of teachers in countries with a high-stakes accountability governance model and countries with a low-stakes accountability model. In addition, the author uses qualitative interview data from

a study on teacher autonomy conducted in Norway and Brazil. Here, the argument is that teachers perceive that they have good control over teaching and planning at the classroom level, regardless of the model. The responses might reflect the views of what is considered possible – autonomy horizons are different depending on the context. The teachers also report that they experience low social value and low policy influence, which raises questions concerning what we mean by teacher autonomy, for example, in policy discussions.

Mathilde Hjerrild Carlsen explores the topic of public–private partnership in education by presenting a Danish case of setting up a new secondary school in a collaboration involving municipal schools and more than 20 private-sector companies in the third article of this issue. By drawing on the sociology of engagement – especially the concepts of engagement in exploration, familiarity and planned action – the article explores the diverse forms of engagement established in studied public–private partnerships. Carlsen argues that the relations between public and private actors in the studied partnership manifest as a particular form, which Carlsen conceptualizes as 'a familiar stranger'. A familiar stranger form of engagement combines both exploratory and familiar forms of mutual engagements. Further, the study shows that the management of partnership entails building up mutual engagement but importantly also of 'handling conflicts and clashes between the differing forms of mutual engagement and of dealing with situations where they fail'. In these ways, Carlsen offers a critical look at the public–private partnership engagements that current education policies in many contexts have a strong belief in.

In the fourth peer-reviewed article published in this issue, Richard Andersson examines policies related to school-age educare in the Swedish context. Swedish school-age educare has been the object of multiple government-enforced reform initiatives. A teacher certification reform has been imposed to concretize responsibilities between professionals and regulate hiring procedures to raise the number of qualified personnel. At the same time, Sweden has been battling a severe teacher shortage, including teachers certified for school-age educare. Andersson explores the local responses to this policy dilemma. The article focuses on the ways in which reform demands have been translated into organizational

routines. Andersson shows that actors make sense of the policy dilemma and demands based on their prior beliefs. However, when their scripts collide with performative organizational constraints, pragmatic routines are changed to sustain apprehensions from the initial reform translation.

All the above mentioned articles have taken and continue taking part in the epistemic process in the field of education policy research having passed the gatekeepers of the publication. The collaborative work between authors, reviewers and editors during the different phases of publication process has epistemic consequences for several reasons. Editors, with the help of reviewers, act as the gatekeepers of publishing. To publish in a certain journal, authors need to both provide evidence for the argument they intend to make that convinces the gatekeepers and argue why the argument is worth making, that is, what its relevance is, especially for the scholarly community.

This is one of the issues Nelli Piattoeva and Camilla Addey's edited book *Intimate Accounts of Education Policy Research. The Practice of Methods* published in 2021 reviewed by Anna Kokko in this issue touches upon. Piattoeva and Addey have encouraged contributors to abandon the conventional academic writing and share 'just a little bit more' about their decision- and sense-making and the obstacles they have encountered as a way to expose themselves to the scrutiny of their practices in educational policy research. In the edited volume, Radhika Gorur has responded to their call by 'opening the black box of reviewers' work'. Using examples from her own experiences as an author who receives reviewer feedback, as a reviewer giving feedback and as an editor working as a gatekeeper of publishing, she asks what peer review as a methodology does for legitimizing questions, approaches and research. Her chapter, including the title, serves as the inspiration for this editorial.

Research shows that arguments that are considered convincing and relevant are context dependent – the criteria for convincing and relevant arguments are not the same in each field of study, varying within the field as well. For example, Gorur (2021) shows how the same conference paper was evaluated as poor in one field of study and as top-notch in another. Also, numerical evaluations of grant proposals have rather poor internal correlations, meaning that the independent evaluations made by several reviewers of one specific proposal quite often differ. From the editors' point of view, this is not surprising because, when thinking about possible reviewers for a manuscript, we quite often try to find reviewers with complementing expertise, for example, a reviewer who has expertise in the theoretical and methodological premises of the research the manuscript reports and a reviewer who is familiar with the substance and/or the context of the manuscript. Therefore, it is understandable that they pay attention

to the different aspects of the manuscript; thus, their comments may vary.

However, paying attention to context specificity is important in unravelling the epistemic power of the publication process. When drafting an argument, the authors might write for a very specific audience – they keep the gatekeepers in mind. While writing, they likely consider what editors and reviewers need to know about the theoretical premises of the research, the context of the study and the methods used. In what way and to what extent does the earlier research about the topic need to be presented to convince the gatekeepers that the argument has relevance for the field? Is there a specific structure that is expected to be used? Therefore, in addition to the gatekeepers' actual feedback, the authors' expectations concerning the gatekeepers' thinking processes structure and direct the knowledge production process.

Reviewers are invaluable for the work of any journal. Reviewing a manuscript is a laborious, responsible and ethically binding task of carefully evaluating the quality of the manuscript. The review enables authors to improve the quality of their work, and aids journal editors in making their decisions about the publication of it in the journal. While starting to draft a review, a reviewer might ask whether the journal has a template for writing a review, and they might want to see the evaluations of the other reviewers to compare whether they paid attention to similar things or whether there was something they 'missed'. This shows that the reviewers' work is not independent of social expectations: many of the reviewers perform a review with the question of 'what kind of reviewer is considered as a good reviewer' in mind. Many of us have learned how to review by following examples: we learn from the reviewers who have reviewed our own manuscripts. This is one of the mechanisms of the peer review process causing epistemic consequences in the field. In addition to taking part in the production of the knowledge presented in the manuscript under review, the reviewer takes part producing the knowledge concerning what kind of review is the social norm in this particular field. Thus, the reviewers' work has epistemic consequences beyond a specific review task.

Sometimes, following the examples of reviews that we have received ourselves or following the technical 'how to act as a review' advice might lead to mechanistic reviewing. This might be, for example, asking for earlier examples of structure of the text that have diverged from a structure that the reviewer considers traditional or typical, even though the reviewer does not voice any concerns about the main argument posed in the manuscript (Gorur, 2021). *Nordic Journal of Studies in Education Policy* does not provide a formal review template for reviewers. Rather,

we trust and encourage our reviewers to uphold the research integrity by carefully explaining the reasoning related to their comments and recommendations.

Editors are not above these social processes, either. When making a decision concerning a manuscript, we have a certain audience in mind. We think whether the readers of this journal are provided with sufficient information to understand the train of thought presented in the paper, and whether the argument is well justified, relevant for the scholarly discussion on the particular topic and of interest of our readers. However, our construction of the audience might differ from the construction some others might have. Also, the readers of the journal are not a homogeneous group but include students, practitioners, and scholars from various fields of studies. When encountering the limits of our own expertise, we turn to our editor colleagues to ask how they have solved a particular dilemma. These discussions with our editor colleagues take part in the construction of how we, in this journal, view as a just peer-review process. In sum, context-specific social expectations concerning the scholarly publication process guide editors' work as well.

In addition to the social norms concerning scholarly practice, we – as editors, reviewers and authors – are bounded by other aspects of socio-material reality that also take part in knowledge production. For example, editors navigate between the eager anticipation of authors who are often being embedded in the institutional imperatives that encourage quick publication and the decreasing time resource of reviewers whose expertise and advice are invaluable for our work. Editors are familiar with both the importance of the swift publication process, for example, for the advancement of PhD processes, but also the time constraints with which the reviewers struggle. When the author receives an email informing that 'because of unexpected circumstances, there has been a delay in the review process', anything between technical issues that have delayed the anonymization of the manuscript or the sickness or death of a reviewer or their close ones might have happened.

In this issue, we publish a shorter nonreviewed commentary by Thomas Englund. This is a continuation for the discussion paper 'Toward a Deliberative Curriculum?' that he published in the first issue of the *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy* in 2015. In his text, Englund further develops the idea of a deliberative curriculum that, in one sense, might be seen as utopian (Englund 2015, 54) but remains an important aim for the development of sustainable democratic societies and educated citizens living educationally. Although Englund's argument is about a deliberative curriculum, the text is particularly topical for this editorial. It is evident that the publication process of scientific journals does not follow the principle of deliberative democracy – there are power relations involved. This sets requirements for the gatekeepers,

reviewers and, especially, editors: a need to be reflexive in terms of the bias and beliefs concerning the criteria of the relevancy and convincingness of the scholarly argument related to education policy. Obviously, the process of knowledge-making does not stop with publication. The use of the arguments of the papers is what makes the contribution to the scholarly literature and, consequently, to society more generally. Although we cannot claim that the scholarly discussion after meeting the publication threshold would be beyond the reach of power relations, the basic principles of democratic deliberation might provide tools to reflect our own role in the scholarly discussion.

In *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, we are committed to the idea that ethical publishing leads to a better research community. This has consequences for the collaboration between the authors, reviewers and editors of the journal and for the coproduction of knowledge. In *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, this means that we are committed to high publication ethical standards. This includes reflection of our own editorial work, and continuous efforts to manage the publication process to be ethically sustainable. In practice, this means, for example, that we give consideration to each manuscript submitted for publication based on its merits, without regard to race, religion, nationality, sex, seniority or institutional affiliation of the author(s); we do not forward reviews that we find including unconstructive and unjustified criticism; we keep the peer review process confidential and do not share information about a manuscript with anyone outside of this process; we aim to help authors understand the main points the reviewers have raised; and if we receive a credible allegation of misconduct, we investigate the matter swiftly. In our work, we are supported by publication ethical guidelines by national and international publication ethical organizations, such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), but also by open communication between the members of the journals' editorial board, reviewers, authors and readers.

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