

Why does analysis of educational policy documents across countries matter?



In order to understand at the policy level how school communities should work to promote integration of pupils with migrant backgrounds, TEAMS studied the educational policy documents that frame and guide teaching and learning practices in Finland, Sweden, and Scotland.

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Increasing mobility has forced societies to find solutions for newcomers' integration within schools and more widely in their community. In the school context, the burning question of increasingly diverse classrooms appears to centre around how to support the participation and learning of all students. When considering teachers as transformers of classrooms, and integration as a multi-layered and complex process with many intersecting factors, teachers and other school staff should be able adapt to change and promote pupil agency. In TEAMS-project, in order to understand at the policy level how school communities should work to promote integration of pupils with migrant backgrounds, we studied the educational policy documents that frame and guide teaching and learning practices in Finland, Sweden, and Scotland.

So, why do educational policies matter? Such policies involve more than documents, incorporating the political, social and economic contexts (Ozga, 2000) and the way these shape the development and implementation of policy. Educational policy documents, for example, differ in their binding nature: are they mandatory or simply recommended? Policies do not exist purely as documents, but rather they are contested, mediated and differentially represented by different actors in different contexts. They are also produced and formed by assumed and implicit knowledge about the world and ourselves (Ball 2015). In other words, even if policies are expected to guide the promotion of diversity and integration within schools, the relationship between policy and practice may not be streamlined. Economic and social resources, the professional development and beliefs of school staff, pedagogical practices, collaboration between stakeholders and leadership may all be reasons why policy and practice are not aligned.

For the analysis of policy documents, we selected 19 documents based on the following criteria: 1) they are core documents both legally and educationally, 2) they have guide management in schools; 3) they have similar policy intentions in all three countries; and 4) they were in force at the time of selection. The purpose of the analysis was to recognise patterns within policy documents in the framework of nine themes as follows: 1) teacher qualification; 2) teacher-to-teacher collaboration; 3) collaboration between school and students' homes; 4) collaboration between teachers and other specialists; 5) the right to attend school; 6) support for learning; 7) promoting cultural diversity and multilingualism; 8) belonging and community (organisational culture); 9) teachers' professional development and learning. We focused on these themes because they are considered essential in terms of supporting learning, participation and belonging.

When analysing the documents across three countries we met regularly online. These meetings provided interesting insights into the educational policies of the three countries. These discussions taught us to co-read policy documents and made us negotiate how we interpret policy documents. They also challenged us to think about what we understand by, for example, support for learning, collaboration, or cultural diversity and how these are implemented in each country's educational system. For me, studying documents from other countries also taught me something new about my own country's education policy, when seen alongside other countries

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too. It was insightful to realise that although all countries have a strong, shared will to support cultural diversity and inclusion, there are differences in the interpretation and guidance of policy across educational systems. To mention a few concrete examples: how binding documents are generally; how collaboration between homes and other specialists is guided; whether students can have instruction in their mother tongue at school; whether there is preparatory instruction available for newcomers, and if so, how long this is available for.

Education policies are rooted in societal structures, political decisions, socio-economic issues and other factors. The analysis as well as the comparison of the three countries was therefore challenging as well as insightful. This does not imply that policy analysis across countries is not beneficial, but rather it helps to understand the data collected from schools in Finland, Scotland and in Sweden in a broader context. Analysis of policy documents also shows how the key issues from the point of view of support for integration and inclusion are conceptualised in the policy documents across countries. Finally, when combining findings from different data sources, we found it to be of helps in identifying challenges that could contribute to future policy actions.

References

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