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Civics and Social Science Education in the Nordic Conference on School Subjects (NoFa 6)¹

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1 Introduction

On May 29-31, 2017, the University of Southern Denmark in Odense hosted the sixth Nordic conference on school subjects (NoFa-6). This conference, held regularly every two years, can now look back on an eight-year tradition. Previous hosts were Oslo (Norway, 2007, although it was not named NoFa at that time), Middelfart (Denmark, 2009²), Karlstad (Sweden, 2011), Trondheim (Norway, 2013) and Helsinki (Finland, 2015, see Löffström 2015).

The abbreviation NoFa originates from the Norwegian and Danish 'NOrdisk' 'Fagdidaktik(k)', for Nordic subject didactics. This is also understood in Swedish, although they don't use the term 'fag', they understand the term. In the meantime, the NoFa is very well established as the central place to exchange ideas between the scholars/scientists of the Nordic societies in the area of didactics, as well in the school context as in the broader context of general education. The regional specificity of the conference, which is already evident from the name, can be traced back to the long-standing common history of these countries in a global context, the cultural and political analogies, common educational interests, and, last but not least, spatial proximity. This has led to intensive and progressive cooperation in the education and research sector over recent years.

This NoFa 6 conference took place under the title: *"Interplay between general and subject specific knowledge about teaching and learning in school and teacher education - perspectives and challenges."* Accordingly, the task was to connect insights and experiences about the general conditions of school education with the specific requirements of individual subjects, and to discuss challenges and possible developments that lie ahead. The urgency of this topic has already been substantiated in the conference program, with perceptible tensions between the two research areas and their partly

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separate character. The detailed presentation of the conference theme can be found on the conference homepage, www.sdu.dk/en/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ikv/konferencer+og+seminarer/2017+-+nofa+6/konferencens+tema (Read Jul 20, 2017).

Furthermore, participants were invited to consider in how far the research results of other subjects would be applicable to their own subjects. This question aims at developing a comparative didactics (Sammenlignende fagdidaktik, in Danish language) in the future.

This year's 250 participants from 11 countries were composed of renowned professors, academics, researchers, teachers and doctoral students. In whole about 171 papers were submitted, which can be found under the following link on the homepage in the abstract book, www.sdu.dk/en/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ikv/konferencer+og+seminarer/2017+-+nofa+6/program (Read Jul 20, 2017).

Overall, the conference offered three options for participation. In the 25 90-minute symposia, which were mostly scheduled in parallel slots, the focus was on presenting a thematic focus from different professional perspectives, followed by a discussion in the plenum. The 98 paper sessions provided the opportunity to present one's own research projects and to get into conversation with the other participants. For each session, 3 projects were presented in 20 minutes and subsequently discussed in the plenum for 10 minutes. In the poster session, which was held once, 6 posters were presented on partly completed or current projects. Afterwards, in a sort of gallery walk, there was the possibility to get in contact with the speakers and to ask them questions. Fundamentally, all forms of contributions offered enough space to enter into an intensive exchange of experience and to discuss joint research interests.

The linguistic diversity of the conference has again increased with the NoFa 6. The contributions were not only held in English, as in the last NoFa 5 in Helsinki³, but also in Nordic, which is a mixture of the languages Danish, Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian.

2 Keynotes

This year, there were four keynote speeches at the NoFa 6 conference which are to be briefly described in the following, due to their importance for the field of Civics and Social Science Education.

Prof. em. Karen Risager, who is a member of the Department of Communication and Arts, in the field of Cultural Encounters at the University of Roskilde, Denmark, started off with her contribution to the topic:



“Representations of the world in learning materials: What directions for intercultural competence?” She presented an excerpt from her research into teaching materials for the English language teaching, in which she evaluates intercultural competence as a non country specific dimension. In doing so, she confronts the teaching materials on a total of five levels with questions such as: How detailed and in which way are the student’s own country and other countries represented in the text book? What cultural and social identities are represented? How is intercultural learning promoted among pupils? How are the relations and historical connections of the countries represented among each other? She noticed that in many cases the E. U. was represented either insufficiently or not at all.

The second speaker was Prof. Dr. Marte S. Gulliksen, chair of Culture Education, Cultural Production and Aesthetical Practice at University College of Southeast Norway (USN). She dealt with the topic, *“Making matters: Unpacking the role of practical aesthetic making activities in the general education through the theoretical lens of embodied learning”*. In her presentation, she shared the experience of her research into the process of “making”, as a learner’s way of accessing their entire environment, their immediate community and society in general. In doing so, she emphasized the role of practical learning in the learning process and that this process becomes again very important in our digital world.

Prof. Dr. Candia Morgan, who is faculty member at the Department of Mathematics Education at the University College of London Institute of Education, spoke about the topic, *“The specialised language of subject and subject pedagogy: a discourse analytic approach to studying curriculum change – the case of mathematics”*. Despite the exemplary reference to mathematics, emphasis was placed on the disclosure of the general structure of specialized linguistics. In this context, she highlighted which features and components (for example symbols, vocabulary, models) make a certain form of expression into subject specific expert language. Furthermore, the specific developments and the forms of specialization were discussed. By looking at these aspects, teachers are able to recognize, understand and resolve the problems of the students at an early stage.

The fourth contribution, directly related to the field of Civics and Social Science Education, was provided by Prof. Dr. Tilman Grammes, professor of education with a special focus on social science education at Universität Hamburg, Germany. He spoke on the topic: *“Contested democracy - how to develop knowledge about controversial issues in a pluralistic school culture”*. With an introduction to the principles of the Beutelsbach consensus as well as their reference to current projects in German schools, he illustrated the necessity of the critical self-reflection of the own role understanding as a teacher in social science in relation to the needs of the pupils. Every generation comes with its individual views and deals with politics and democracy in its own specific way. Our task as a teacher is to enable our students to take a critical look at these issues and to accompany and

support them in their opinion-forming process according to their needs. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to realise at which point it becomes necessary to intervene on behalf of the democratic idea, and to act accordingly (see Kamp, 2017).

All lectures clearly reflected the “connecting character” of the conference between school education in a general and specific sense, thus opening up new points of connection between the individual disciplines to their listeners. For more information on keynote speaker publications, please visit the conference homepage, www.sdu.dk/en/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ikv/konferenc+og+seminarer/2017+-+nofa+6/keynote+forelaesere (Read Jul 20, 2017).

3 Research on civics/ social science education: topics and methods

Compared to NoFa 5, the number of papers and meetings in the field of Civics / Social Science has increased. In total, there were 23 reviews under the title “Social Science” (1 symposia, 21 paper sessions, 1 poster), made by 32 participants. This shows that the urgently needed research in this area is slowly increasing in the Nordic countries. Nevertheless, in some countries, social science as a school subject still has to struggle to establish itself as independent and necessary field of research, and to free itself from the mistaken view that it was only a branch of another subject or, at best, a minor field of study. In the corresponding symposium “Social Science, Samfundsfag”, the representatives of Denmark (Anders Stig Christensen & Torben Spanget Christensen), Sweden (Cecilia Lundholm), Finland (Jan Löfström) and Norway (Kjetil Børhaug) discussed the current state of the school subject and the related teacher training. According to Sweden, the subject of social science is defined by the task of explaining the issues and connections of social coexistence to the pupils and making them tangible. The questions about the competences required for this, as well as the role and task of knowledge in the educational process, are still unresolved. The overall objective of educating pupils to become educated and politically mature citizens is unquestioned in all countries. In this context, Finland focuses particularly on the principle of student orientation and would like to examine the connections and approaches that the subject offers to the students’ living environment. In Norway, one would like to find out how the school subject can be combined with science and how the academic knowledge can be usefully connected with actual practice in school and with didactics. Another open problem, according to the representatives from Denmark, is the prevailing name confusion between social studies and social science. While social studies, for teachers of the secondary level in Denmark, is based on a parallel formation of theory and didactics, in social science at the university, the master degree is without any educational and didactical elements. Accordingly, the qualified teachers of the two divisions have a different knowledge and competency. Basically, it is agreed that the research field of teacher training and the school



subject in the field of social science is still in its infancy and has to be pushed forward.

The diversity of the topics of the paper sessions at the NoFa 6 also highlights the problems in education and society as well as the relevance of their research.

The papers raised questions on the understanding and characterization of political problems at 16-year-old pupils (Nora E.H. Mathé), influence factors on the party selection of first voters (Niels Nørgaard Kristensen & Trond Solhaug) and the gender-specific choices of pupils at matriculation examination questions (Jan Löfström).

A large part of the papers was directly related to the events in the classroom and the teacher-student interaction. It was investigated how pronounced the phenomenon of gatekeeping and the fight for recognition really are in social science education (Katarina Blennow), how current topics and societal problems can best be integrated into the lessons (Ylva Wibaeus & Max Strandberg), from which the motivation for participation in community teaching is dependent (Mona Langø), which effects mock-elections have on students (Julie Ane Ødegaard Borge) and how best to deal with controversial issues in community teaching (Lars Larsson).

In the area of the development of new teaching-learning methods, questions were asked about learning methods for connecting the scientific and everyday knowledge of pupils in upper elementary schools (Gabriel Bladh, Martin Kristiansson & Martin Stolare), the use of virtual simulations for the understanding of complex economic contexts (Charlotta Hilli) and the use of skriveidaktik (writing didactics) for the support of opinion-forming processes and the practice of argumentations (Peter Hobel).

The spectrum of methodology is varied. Mostly, there were qualitative analyses in the form of telephone interviews (Larsson), interviews with pupils and teachers in school (Mathé, Langø), interviews with students (Lundholm, Hilli), classroom observations (Blennow, Lundberg) and the use of case studies (Wibaeus & Strandberg).

In summary, research in the field of social science has increased in comparison with the past few years and we can look forward to the project of developing a comparative didactics (Sammenlignende fagdidaktik), developing core didactical principles from the numerous subject matter didactics and compare the meaning and use of them (see Nordidactica/Nordic Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education, www.kau.se/nordidactica).

The next NoFa conference (NoFa 7) is expected to take place from 13th to 15th May 2019 in Stockholm.

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NoFa 6 conference theme: www.sdu.dk/en/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ikv/konferencer+og+seminarer/2017+-+nofa+6/konferencens+tema (Read Jul 20, 2017).

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Endnotes

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² The second NoFa conference was held in Middelfart, organized by University of Southern Denmark (SDU) and University College Lillebaelt (UCL). The name was NoFa 2. And this was the first time the name NoFa was used.

³ Finnish is not an official conference language at NoFa, because hardly nobody except the Finns themselves speak it. Therefore English for the first time was introduced as an official conference language at NoFa 5. This was in line with the ambition of opening the conference up towards non-Nordic speakers.