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Merethe Roos / Kjell Lars Berge / Henrik Edgren / Pirjo Hiidenmaa / Christina Matthiesen (Hrsg.)

Exploring Textbooks and Cultural Change in Nordic Education 1536–2020

Leiden/Boston: Brill/Sense 2021

(388 S.; ISBN 978-90-04-44953-4; 135,00 EUR)

The starting point for this volume is the widely held view of the Nordic region as a specific entity, wherein the countries and autonomous regions are largely similar, but with some key differences. The introduction to the volume, written by two of the editors (Roos and Berge), extends this view of “similar, but not the same” to the educational field. The editors also subscribe to the view that educational textbooks are “central elements in the development of a society” (2), framing the volume they have edited as a piece of cultural history of the Nordic region. While much textbook research is synchronic and country-specific, this volume is diachronic, covering a rather long timeframe, and makes international comparisons, mainly within the Nordic context.

As most research on textbooks in a Nordic context has focused on the 20th century and, to some extent, the latter part of the 19th century, it is refreshing to see the substantial focus on the early-modern period in this volume. Around half of its 22 chapters deal with the period before 1850. The volume is further framed by the editor’s intention to facilitate a better understanding of the interplay between the textbooks and their context. The editors specifically encouraged the contributing authors to examine how control, participation and representation are featured in the textbooks, and other empirical material on which they focus in their chapters. Although the authors went about this in different ways, and with varying success, the approach nevertheless holds the volume together.

Each of the five strictly chronological parts of the volume begins with a helpful introduction by Henrik Edgren, who describes the relevant historical period in a Nordic context. By dividing the volume into chronological parts, with the first one covering the period 1536–1770, the second 1770–1820, the third 1820–1920, the fourth 1930–2000 and the fifth 1990–2020, time and synchronous ideas play a significant role in framing the chapters. Those covering the period between 1536 and 1820 are generally broader in their approach, dealing with educational reform in the wake of the reformation, the new emphasis on moral conduct and rising nationalism. Peter Bernhardsson’s chapter on the debate about science teaching in Swedish schools in the early 1800s is an interesting exception, in that it examines a more specific topic, although not specifically in relation to textbooks. Unsurprisingly, the chapters in the parts of the volume covering the period from the late 19th century to the early 21st century are more varied, and detailed, covering a range of specialist topics – from curricular outdoor activities and physical education to ethno-national narratives, sex education and the monitorial system. In most cases, separate chapters describe the same cultural development in one country at a time, albeit with different approaches.

The ambition is well thought-out and largely achieved. However, as always with large volumes that cover a long period of time, there are also some shortcomings in relation to the ambitions of the editors. Different cultural changes during the 500

years under scrutiny are sometimes dealt with in a single chapter focusing on the developments in one particular country, rather than in a comparative manner, or in multiple chapters describing how these changes affected different countries. Chapters that actively compare the developments in two different Nordic countries are, unfortunately, few and far between. While this could have been a problem in relation to the overall purpose and aim of the volume, the high number of chapters means there are plenty of different comparisons throughout the book, including some detailed analyses of, for example, the impact of Protestantism, democracy, and nationalism on the emergence of new educational ideals and on how various topics were covered in textbooks in different countries at a specific time. Textbooks are described as keys to the history of education in many different ways: as vehicles for change in the educational system, as a way to understand changes in educational discourse, or as a way to understand cultural politics at various times.

Although textbooks and educational media are the explicit themes of the volume, quite a few of the chapters do not primarily deal with these subjects. In these cases, the focus is predominantly on curricular reform and general educational policy, with textbooks only appearing as a secondary theme. While this contributes to the richness of the discussion of cultural change in the volume, it does have the effect of making it less coherent. As pointed out in the introduction, the different chapters cover new sources, new perspectives on already extensively researched sources and close readings of particular textbooks, as well as the introduction of new subjects. Rather puzzling, however, is the fact that many of the chapters utilize relatively few secondary references, making them less connected to the field of research to which they contribute. This is less problematic in some cases, because the perspective and/or subject matter does not really call for it. In other cases, however, the subject under scrutiny seems unnecessarily isolated from the field of textbook research by the absence of obvious source material related to educational media, and by a lack of references to the field of textbook research.

Given these (minor) shortcomings and the vast spectrum of topics covered, the volume would have benefited from a comprehensive conclusion, to bring together its extensive and sometimes discordant content. While the introduction does a good job of setting the scene, the 22 chapters never really come together as a whole. Still, this book is a great introduction to the history of education in the Nordic countries and, by focusing on textbooks, it demonstrates their utility in educational research, especially within the history of education. Taken as a whole, this volume manages to cover a great deal of cultural history on a variety of topics, and the breadth of the period studied makes it a welcome contribution to textbook research in the Nordic region.

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