

Chapter 1

Comparing Educational Governance

Lejf Moos and Jan Merok Paulsen

Abstract The focus of this book is educational governance at the local school district level seen in a cross-cultural perspective, which is based on national survey studies of local school boards in the Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The overarching research question that has guided our studies is: *How are transnational influences and national policies transformed into local policy cultures when they meet the school boards?* In all the Nordic countries, the municipalities are equivalent with the school district level. But the point is that school districts play a similar role as the interface between state policies and the schools.

In this chapter, we briefly introduce our perspectives on the transnational influences, as they can be seen in the case of the OECD. This serves as a basis for discussing the need for looking into local conditions for educational governance that meet the transnational influences. We argue that policy borrowing should be based on robust and thorough knowledge of the context of the policy provider and also of the policy borrower. We also introduce the content of the book: the country reports and thematic chapters.

L. Moos (✉)

Department of Education, Aarhus University,
Tuborgvej 164, 2400 Copenhagen NV, Denmark
e-mail: moos@dpu.dk

J.M. Paulsen

Faculty of Teacher Education and International Studies, Oslo and Akershus University
College of Applied Sciences, Pilestredet 46, 0130 Oslo, Norway
e-mail: Jan-Merok.Paulsen@hioa.no

1.1 Transnational Influences

We know from research literature that the influences from transnational agencies, especially the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have been very visible over the last 20 years, so we wanted to find out in what ways these influences have been interpreted and translated into national political cultures and policies in our countries (Antunes 2006; Lawn and Lingard 2002). One transnational document seems to have been more influential than other: *Governance in Transition – Public Management Reforms in OECD Countries* (OECD 1995). It was produced following a well-known OECD ‘soft governance’ strategy, named the ‘peer learning’ method: Member countries have reported trends in their public management to the organisation, where the complex picture is clarified and simplified, as trends and tendencies across countries are categorised into a smaller number of main themes or categories: (1) devolving authority, providing flexibility; (2) ensuring performance, control and accountability; (3) developing competition and choice; (3) providing responsive service; (4) improving the management of human resources; (5) optimising information technology; (6) improving the quality of regulation; (7) strengthening steering functions at the centre; (8) implementing reform; and what’s next. The themes are not meant to be regulations or orders, but advices from the OECD to the member countries: National Ministries can take, transform or leave them (Moos 2009a). Knowing the OECD neo-liberal political preferences, the theme titles are extremely clear and informative.

1.2 Local and National Context

However, the advices have met country cultures, systems, traditions, and politics, and they have thereby been transformed into new shapes and forms. The ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) was not born at this moment, but it was certainly baptised, blessed and registered as a full-fledged child of the OECD with this report, and it has been adopted and transformed in many different shapes (Hood 1991). We are in a special situation, as the Nordic countries have for hundreds of years been regarded to be a much unified culture. It is so often repeated that the notion of ‘Nordic-ness’ seems to be an important aspect of dominant Nordic discourses. We are not sure that this is a correct image, so it is important for us to look into the actual politics and practice to see if this is the case, or if parliaments, ministries and practitioners at many levels have produced national and local ways of public governance. The US case is of course different, but we include it because the difference can, we think, make our analyses, arguments and discussions clearer and sharper.

There are several reasons for this specific research agenda. First, we know that there is substantial variation across different national systems in the degree of decentralism (i.e. the distribution of power sources between the state and local districts and institutions), which again may affect educational work and outcomes in

different ways (Moos 2013d). But we know too little about the processes through which these sources of local autonomy are put into practice by school boards. Moreover, it is evident that the nature of local policy making in the school boards is heavily affected by the local cultural and societal context in which the school boards are situated. We have been strongly motivated to explore deeper this interplay between context and policy making at the local level. Second, local democracy is a core component in the national systems subjected to the study, and we wanted to explore if local discourses expressed by school boards differ from national policies and transnational influences (Moos 2013c).

When we look at the transnational inspiration, it is clear to us that a number of well-known, mostly economical, theories can help us understand and explain the OECD influences and the national impacts, where they meet diverse perspectives, cultures and politics. The NPM is in many ways neo-liberal as the very core of the NPM is to adjust public sectors to a new international understanding of the roles and functions of the states in governing the institutions and sectors in the public sphere. Many countries have through the history treated public government as a political set of relations: election, division of state power into legislative, judiciary and executive powers. Decisions in the legislative sector were based on political judgements and interests. Over the past 40 years, more countries have entered the global competition and thus the global marketplace, where decisions are based on marketplace logics: profit, competition, consumers' free choice, etc. (Pedersen 2010).

Economic theories like principal-agent theory, scientific management theory, transaction-cost theory and rational choice theory are clearly recognisable in the political arguments, in the NPM and in the OECD report.

For example, the traditional Nordic discourse describes a participatory democracy and a comprehensive schooling with strong local community roots, and we assume that this policy culture is contested by transnational demands for accountability, standardisation and enhanced indirect steering from the stat level (Blossing et al. 2013). In the USA, on contrary, the school districts have been more autonomous than in the Nordic countries, at the same time as federal authorities currently intend to implement common core standards across states and districts, which again create tensions at the local school board level. Third, it is evident that transnational influences and national policies go through a transformative model when they meet the implementation level at local school districts. However, the shapes and forms of the various transformation processes and the impacts on school leaders, teachers, and students are under-investigated. Fourth, the members of school boards are mostly elected from within the municipal board; they represent political parties, while in the USA members are elected amongst the school district stakeholders.

Education and its governance are part of the general public sector and thus also subject to general changes and restructurings. This is the case with the size and number of local authorities: If they are too small, they are merged with other, small authorities in order to be more effective and efficient. This argument is of course economic and not political. This is the case in some Nordic countries, but in other places the argument of local culture prevails over the economic argument. In some places we see intermediate levels, agencies and authorities are restructured and even

closed down. The municipal level, which is by tradition the school district level in all Nordic countries, when it comes to primary and lower secondary education, is being bypassed in some cases, so that the traditional chain of governance is broken or bypassed by the state going directly to institutions (Moos 2013b).

In the municipal administration, we also see different restructurings that may mean having less, but bigger and more encompassing political committees or boards and a longer distance from politicians to institutions. Some of these restructurings carry new responsibilities to the political board and in some cases take away traditional ones, meaning that board members have got new tasks and responsibilities. So structures and functions of school boards are changed in Nordic systems, but differently. In some case new model, imported from business life, is implemented into the public sector, like in Denmark (Pedersen 2005). Now the municipal board is named the Concern, the management of a number of schools is named Company and the internal management of a school site is the Work Place.

1.3 Comparing Educational Governance

The first part of the book contains country reports from all involved countries. We produce and publish them in order to underscore one of our theoretical and pragmatic stand points: The national educational systems are the primary unit of analyses. The structures and cultures within the nations are complex and many faceted, but in some ways more coherent than bigger units, like the Nordic area. It is often claimed that we are very homogenous within this area, but we find that this is only partly true: In many respects there are rather big differences. We want to be able to point to the differences as well as the similarities and to shed more light through comparing them with each other.

Comparisons are employed as tools for research on policy and education and by policy makers themselves (Steiner-Khamsi 2010). Comparative researchers use comparisons to sharpen their optique in order to get a clearer picture of practices and politics, and policy makers refer to them when setting policy agendas based on international evidence, best practice, or international standards when they ‘borrow policies’ (Moos 2013a).

It is thus very important to gain a better understanding of the institutional context (Leithwood and Riehl 2003) and the historical and societal background in and against which educational leadership is situated, since leadership thinking and practices, as well as individual and community social capital (Bourdieu 1990), are formed by the society, culture and context of which they are a part. They are shaped by policies, discourses and literature but also by national/local values, traditions, structures and practices.

Methods of comparison in research have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention recently (Carney 2008; Steiner-Khamsi 2006, 2009, 2010; Walker and Dimmock 2002). This could be due to the increasing influence that globalisation is having on societies and education. Relations between national states and systems are becoming

increasingly interconnected and globally influenced, and it could be argued that comparisons are gaining influence for the same reasons: Amongst other agents, globalisation is furthered by transnational agencies¹ that use ‘soft governance’ to advice or encourage reflection on ‘peer pressure’ (OECD) or ‘open method of coordination’ (European Commission) (Antunes 2006; Lange and Alexiadou 2007; Lawn and Grek 2012; Lawn and Lingard 2002; Moos 2009b).

Therefore, research on educational governance needs to encompass analyses of the political, societal, cultural and institutional context of governance. Research also needs to analyse the broader context and historical processes in which governance is embedded: the practice, structure, values and norms of the local and greater communities that emerged over time and are still present as a sounding board for new perceptions, impressions and influences. International comparisons act as mirrors – just like educational outcomes or best practice – so that policy makers can reflect on the level of educational outcomes in their own systems and decide on their own reforms. More often than previously, we see policy makers argue with the need to comply with global or international standards or best practices, such as PISA. However, as Gita Steiner-Khamsi argues (2010, p. 332), policy transfer is not a passive process. It is mediated, shaped and given form by local policy makers, so the traveling reform undergoes many modifications depending on the political situation. Thus, buzzwords such as accountability, equity and standards are global ‘fluid signifiers’ that are given content and meaning in context. This means that, unless we refer to local contexts, structures, cultures and values, any comparisons made in an international research project will be complicated, intricate, senseless and absurd:

Without contextual comparison it is impossible to understand the political and economic reasons why traveling reforms are borrowed. (Steiner-Khamsi 2010, p. 339)

In order to pursue Steiner-Khamsi’s argument – that borrowing policies is not a passive process because local policy makers and practitioners modify it – it is necessary to refer to the neo-institutional theorist Kjell Arne Røvik (2011). He invokes the metaphor of a virus infection when identifying the ways in which the generic structure of political ideas – viruses – generic structures are changed or mutated in the interactions with local culture and values. One way in which management ideas (policies) are mutated is through a translation process, during which actors more or less deliberately (yet actively) attempt to transfer and implement management ideas (policies) by neglecting, omitting, reinforcing or altering aspects of the idea: ‘General and abstract ideas may be concretized, mixed with local traditions and sometimes shaped into sharp management tools’ (ibid. p. 642). Translation may occur through rules of copying, subtraction (neglecting or omitting aspects), adding (elements of local culture) or alteration (completely reshaping). We shall make use of these insights in the last, concluding chapter.

¹For example, WTO, World Trade Organization; OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; GATT, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade; IMF, International Monetary Fund; EU, European Union (especially ‘the Inner Market’ and the ‘Europe 2020’ statement); and the World Bank.

We have constructed images of the national contexts for school boards that are sensitive to societal, social, political, cultural and governance differences as well as similarities between our countries, in the country reports. They are in themselves good analyses of the school board position and relations and school board members' notions of their tasks, values and possibilities, and they also serve as the reference material for the thematic chapters.

1.4 The Method and the Country Reports

The study is a web-based survey. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, we used the same questionnaire. In Finland, the core of the questionnaires contained the same questions as the other, so comparisons were possible. In all countries we had a robust and representative response rate. The first analyses were described in the country reports.

The five country reports are structured around the same frame, stipulating the perspectives being analysed – the order of the themes was made in each country group:

1. *Where*: As this is a Nordic project, we are looking for similarities and differences between the educational governance systems: The national educational system, changes to the system and the governance system are analysed.
2. *Who*: The school boards themselves, age, gender, experience, education, etc.
3. *What*: This category contains the tasks, duties, assignments, etc., that school boards are supposed to carry out and want to carry out: economics, strategically, educational and personnel management. What is described in the regulations or job description, what is expected on top of this but maybe not explicated and what do they themselves think is their work area.
4. *With whom*: What kind of networks do they belong to, in what capacity (leaders or participants), how important are the networks for the school board members? What kind of relations do they enter into, with whom? In this category we also find organisation and structures that school boards participate in or relate to. The technologies, personnel, context and culture (Hatch and Cunliffe 2006).
5. *Why*: What is the purpose or aim of the activity/relation? What kind of values are underpinning or driving the activities or relations? Whom do those values belong to (meaning: do school boards consent to them)?
6. *How*: In this category we distinguish between diverse forms of influences/power that school boards are subject to and are making use of (Moos 2011).

1.5 Thematic Chapters

By analysing the country cases, build on parallel surveys in all involved countries, we find that on one hand they share important similarities, at the same time as they, along with other dimensions, are significant dissimilar descriptions.

These aspects are explored in cross-country, thematic cases with authors from all participating countries of each chapter. The themes have emerged from analysing data across countries and looking for important similarities and differences in the functions, relations and understandings of school board chairs and members. Comparing across countries and cultures gives us more clarity and insights in the function of individual systems.

Researchers from all involved Nordic countries wrote the thematic chapters. Here are abstracts from all thematic chapters:

Chapter 6: Educational Governance: Politics, Administration and Professionalism.

Contemporary restructuring of (Nordic) educational governance systems brings new relations between state, local authorities and schools and thus between politicians, managers and educational professionals. With inspiration from transnational agencies – primarily the OECD – new chains of governance are being created. Decentralising of elements of governance is being mixed with recentralisation of other parts; some couplings are being loosened on economies, human resource management and operations while, at the same time, couplings on educational content aims and accountabilities are being tightened. This tendency has also made many municipalities to restructure the municipal political and administrative system into a more steep hierarchy.

Restructurings also influence the work of school boards and their relations to administrators and educational practitioners. School boards are increasingly responsible for the greater part of the life of childhood and adolescence and therefore also need to be taken care of by many institutions. New power balances are created between diverse forms of influences: Structural, discursive and social technologies are used in new combinations and with priority to different groups of stakeholder. It seems that management and consumers are being prioritised, while politicians and educational professionals lose influence in new neo-liberally inspired forms of New Public Management.

Chapter 7: Control and Trust in Local School Governance. Educational policy makers in many countries have increasingly used standardisation and quality assurance as tools in order to steer schools, teachers and school leaders more tightly. The present chapter analyses the possible tensions embedded in these streams and how they are mediated by the local government level. Theoretically the analysis is based on two different conceptions of governance and control.

The first is rooted in institutional organisation theory and is referred to as ‘thick governance and control’: implying governance in the form of mobilisation of internal and implicit control factors between the one who governs and those who are governed. The second conception derives from the public choice theory and is referred to as ‘thin governance and control’. This approach considers the relationship between the one who governs and the governed as a pure principal-agent relationship where both are individually utility maximising rational agents that are controlled by external and explicit pressures and influences. Thin governing and control has gained increased importance as the rule rather than the exception for national governments. However, at school level there is still an

anticipation of ‘thin’ normatively integrated control, and the analysis models mediation of these tensions by school boards at the local level.

Chapter 8: The School Board Between Power and Influence. The decentralised Scandinavian school structure with the municipal school committee as a central factor between the municipal council and other school interests gives the school board a central role in the implementation of the centrally decided school legislation from the parliament. Therefore it is a central question in modern Scandinavian schooling what are the ways of influence and what power mechanisms are in play throughout the schooling system.

The chapter will investigate what power and influence mean in a school board context. We will conduct comparisons across countries and look into which influence and power relations there are between the school committee as the central focal point and the schools’ most important interests. Therefore, we will look at the relations between the board and the national parliamentary level, the superintendent/the municipal administration, the chair of the board, the principals/schools, and lastly the parents and the students. These relations between the board and its stakeholders will be analysed in the terms of power and influence in this chapter.

Chapter 9: The Role and Influence of School Boards on Improving Educational Quality: Ensuring educational quality is high on the policy agenda in many countries, especially efforts regarding enhancing students’ learning outcomes.

In the Nordic countries, the local school authorities are in charge of developing systems to assure and enhance school quality. This chapter discusses how the members of the school boards perceive their role and function and position. Based on a survey, we report on the extent to which they are satisfied with student achievements, their expectations towards the work of the superintendent and principals as well as their own work related to improving school quality. We examine how the school board members see their own opportunities to influence decisions about the school practice, and if the knowledge and capacity in different professional groups are to fulfil tasks and responsibilities.

In this chapter we will argue that the new governing modes and accountability processes imply new roles and relationships between national authorities and local levels of school governing being established. One example is quality assurance and the use of quality reports. During the last decade, the focus on establishing systems for quality assurance is accentuated. Quality assurance system, in the sense of quality reports, is stated in Education Act in each country. How reporting and the feedback system is organised differs but in all Nordic countries quality insurance is an important task for the school board.

Chapter 10: Multilevel Governance. Contemporary education is embedded in larger communities: municipality, region, nation-state and transnational as well as international communities. Schools are therefore important players in transnational as well as national politics; thus, they are included in chains of governance and cultures. First, transnational policies and demands are evidently filtered through policy cultures when they meet the national level, which explain variation in implementation patterns within the Nordic countries. Second, national

policies are mediated through local structures and policy preferences (shaped by local history and culture) in their way towards school principals and teachers.

Therefore, governing schools can be analysed as multilevel governance systems, a concept denoting both vertical and horizontal governing relations – between institutions on different levels and between formal and informal actors. The concept describes how governing de facto takes place in the public sector, and this perspective encompasses more than the formal actors involved. Rather multilevel governance highlights the importance to study the socioeconomic and cultural context in which the stakeholders and political actors are situated – in order to capture educational governance in practice in its richness. This present chapter analyses tensions between the levels and the actors, why these have emerged and how they are dealt with.

The last chapter – *Globalisation and Europeanisation of Nordic Governance* – sums up and concludes on the findings and arguments of all chapters.

References

- Antunes, F. (2006). Globalisation and Europeanisation of education policies: Routes, processes and metamorphoses. *European Educational Research Journal*, 5(1), 38–55.
- Blossing, U., Imsen, G., & Moos, L. (Eds.). (2013). *The Nordic education model: 'A school for all' encounters neo-liberal policy*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practise*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Carney, S. (2008). Negotiating policy in an age of globalization: Exploring educational “polyscapes” in Denmark, Nepal, and China. *Comparative Education Review*, 53(1), 63–88.
- Hatch, M. J., & Cunliffe, A. L. (2006). *Organization theory* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hood, C. (1991). A public management for all seasons. *Public Administration*, 69(Spring), 3–19.
- Lange, B., & Alexiadou, N. (2007). New forms of European governance in the education sector? A preliminary analysis of the open method of coordination. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(4), 321–335.
- Lawn, M., & Grek, S. (2012). *Europeanizing education – Governing a new policy space*. Oxford: Symposium.
- Lawn, M., & Lingard, B. (2002). Constructing a European policy space in educational governance: The role of transnational policy actors. *European Educational Research Journal*, 1(2), 290–307.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What do we already know about successful school leadership?* Toronto: OISE.
- Moos, L. (2009a). A general context for new social technologies. *Nordic Educational Research*, 29(1), 79–92.
- Moos, L. (2009b). Hard and soft governance: The journey from transnational agencies to school leadership. *European Educational Research Journal*, 8(3), 397–406.
- Moos, L. (2011). Governance of educational systems – Contextualizing and conceptualising influence. In F. Dietrich, M. Heinrich, & N. Thieme (Eds.), *Neue Steuerung – alte Ungleichheiten?* (pp. 23–34). Münster: Waxmann.
- Moos, L. (2013a). Comparing educational leadership research. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 12(3), 282–299.
- Moos, L. (2013b). Postlude: Wrap up of the argument. In L. Moos (Ed.), *Transnational influences on values and practices in Nordic educational leadership – Is there a Nordic model?* Dordrecht: Springer.

- Moos, L. (2013c). Prelude: Tuning the instrument. In L. Moos (Ed.), *Transnational influences on values and practices in Nordic educational leadership – Is there a Nordic model?* Dordrecht: Springer.
- Moos, L. (Ed.). (2013d). *Transnational influences on values and practices in Nordic educational leadership – Is there a Nordic model?* Dordrecht: Springer.
- OECD. (1995). *Governance in transition. Public management reforms in OECD countries*. Paris: OECD.
- Pedersen, D. (2005). Ledelsesrummet i managementstaten [The leadership space in the management state]. In D. Pedersen (Ed.), *Offentlig ledelse i managementstaten* [Public leadership in the management state]. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Pedersen, O. K. (2010). *Konkurrencestaten* [The competitive state]. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Røvik, K. A. (2011). From fashion to virus: An alternative theory of organizations' handling of management ideas. *Organization Studies*, 32(5), 631–653.
- Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2006). The economics of policy borrowing and lending: a study of late adopters. *Oxford Review of Education*, 32(5), 665–678.
- Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2009). Knowledge-based regulation and the politics of international comparison. *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 29(1), 61–71.
- Steiner-Khamsi, G. (2010). The politics and economics of comparison. *Comparative Education Review*, 54(3), 323–342.
- Walker, A., & Dimmock, C. (2002). Moving school leadership beyond its narrow boundaries: Developing a cross-cultural approach. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.), *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.