Chapter 9
Role and Influence of School Boards on Improving Educational Quality

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Abstract Ensuring educational quality is high on the policy agenda in many countries, especially efforts regarding students' learning outcomes.

In the Nordic countries, local school authorities are in charge of developing systems to assure and enhance school quality. This chapter discusses how members of the school boards perceive their roles, functions, and positions. Based on a survey, we report on the extent to which they are satisfied with student achievements,

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their expectations towards the work of the superintendent and principals, and their own work related to improving school quality. We examine how the school board members see their own opportunities to influence decisions about school practices and whether the knowledge and capacity in different professional groups are to sufficiently fulfill tasks and responsibilities.

In this chapter, we will argue that new governing modes and accountability processes have led to the establishment of new roles and relationships between national authorities and local levels of school governing. One example is quality assurance and the use of quality reports. During the last decade, the focus on establishing systems for quality assurance has intensified. A quality assurance system, in the sense of quality reports, is included in Education Acts in each country. The ways in which reporting and feedback systems are organized differ, but in all Nordic countries quality assurance is an important task for school boards.

9.1 Introduction

The comprehensive education system is regarded as a distinguished feature of the Nordic education model, which reflects a deep belief in community and collaboration (Moos 2013). This model is linked to pivotal values such as social justice, equity, participative democracy, and inclusion (Telhaug et al. 2006). Moreover, comprehensive education has strong local community roots. Local municipalities and counties have played, and still play, a strong role in school governing, but in some cases (such as Denmark and Sweden) this role is challenged by national recentralization. Leadership responsibility at municipal and county levels is shared between professional administrators and elected politicians. Through this linkage, education is connected to broader community affairs in a strongly institutionalized system of local democracy in the Nordic countries (Engeland 2000). The local school governing context is in all countries characterized by a long tradition of trust among stakeholders, manifested by openness and inclusion of interest groups in various decision-making processes (Ekholm 2012; Moos and Kofod 2012). Municipal school boards have had a key role in local school governing in all Nordic countries, and board members are typically appointed by their respective political parties for a period of 4 years. On the one hand, they are (in political terms) responsible for implementing the national educational policy and they have a statutory duty to assure the quality of education in their municipalities. On the other hand, they have some room to maneuver, in the frame of the national educational system, to decide how to create the best prerequisites for education in each municipality. The politically elected school boards are responsible for policy and service areas such as preschool, compulsory education, adult education, and sometimes also other public service areas (e.g., culture, sports, etc.) depending on the structures of departments and committees. During the last decade, the focus on establishing systems for quality assurance has been accentuated in three of the countries: Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Through the construction of multilevel quality assurance embracing state directorates and

independent state bodies, regional agencies, and municipalities, it is fair to interpret, at least as a working hypothesis, that the "trade-off" between administrative steering and local policy making is gradually shifting in favor of the administrative apparatus in municipalities. The latter point brings the relationship between the school board and the school superintendent to the forefront of local school governing, in particular with respect to quality assurance.

By "school superintendent" we mean the incumbent of a managerial role in the municipality's (i.e., school district's) hierarchy who is, firstly, responsible for primary and/or secondary education within the entire municipality and thereby in direct contact with school principals; secondly, subordinated to a municipal school committee or school board; thirdly, leading a central school office in the municipal hierarchy; and finally, being coupled to the top apex of the municipal hierarchy through membership in the senior leadership team (Johansson et al. 2011).

In this chapter, we focus on the role of the political school board, its opportunity to take responsibility for the quality in schools, and the extent to which the school board can influence the work in schools.

9.2 Decentralization and Recentralization: Local Tasks and Responsibilities

Decentralization strategies during the 1980s and 1990s were intended to strengthen local responsibility for changes and to develop school practices (Engeland 2000; Gundem 1993a, b; Karlsen 1993). In all four Nordic countries, the municipalities were given increased responsibility for school sectors during the 1990s, especially when it came to budget, financial issues, and personnel management, for example, undertaking local tariff agreements with teachers' trade unions. The introduction of national evaluation systems and, in some countries, national inspections, during the 2000s can be seen as an attempt to recentralize through monitoring and output control. This development has been reinforced by the reformulation of goals in terms of competency aims (Sivesind 2009).

In Finland, the municipalities and schools have great autonomy when it comes to drawing up their own curricula (Aho et al. 2006; Kupiainen et al. 2009). Superintendents, principals, and teachers in Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, are recruited by municipalities and serve them to carry out goals and legislation (Alava et al. 2013; Pennanen 2006; Souri 2009).

There are, although to a different extent, tendencies by the state to bypass municipalities in respect to curricula, standards, and testing. In Norway, the state has only a slight tendency to bypass municipalities. In practical terms, this is observable in terms of routine descriptions and official interpretations transmitted directly from the state Directorate of Education and Training towards schools. Yet the main trend is non-bypassing. This pattern may not necessarily be rooted in a lack of ambition on the part of the large state directorate to govern schools directly. Rather, it is fair to say that the scattered school structure in Norway creates a stronger interdependence

between each individual primary school and its municipal administration (in terms of demand for administrative and expertise support). In consequence, the state depends more heavily on the municipalities' capacity in the governing chain. In Sweden, principals have, parallel to this, gotten a stronger position through the Education Act, which challenges the relation to the municipality especially when it comes to financial issues (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013). In Denmark, the national level is issuing more detailed standards and more tests and is encouraging schools to become more self-steering. The 2013 Act on teachers' working conditions points in the same direction.

While there are several indicators of increased central governing in most of the Nordic countries, the concrete tools introduced in the different countries to measure and monitor educational quality and accompanying accountability processes show some variety across country contexts. While Sweden has reintroduced national school inspections, standardized testing, regulations, and the use of economic sanctions, the other three countries seem to have adopted a softer approach by establishing national evaluation systems that are not tied to any concrete sanctions (Johansson et al. 2013). Relationships between the municipalities and national educational authorities, as well as between municipalities and schools, also differ.

These development trends can be described and understood in different ways. Centralization of political decisions, tasks, and responsibilities can be seen as a necessity to avoid fragmentation. At the same time, the increased focus on educational outcomes and demands of transparency and efficiency on different levels in the school system are connected to reform ideas for the public sector in general, often referred to as evidence-based governing or an audit society. In educational policy rhetoric, it is often argued that increased information and transparency concerning school results will lead to an increased public trust in the school system as necessary actions are taken to improve conditions. However, several scholars have pointed out that the need for oversight, transparency, and accountability indicates the opposite: namely, a lack of trust in public services (c.f. Power 2000; Strathern 2000; Weiler 1990). Even if the countries do handle this differently, the changed modes of school governing seem to reinforce the hierarchical relations between the local and central levels at the same time as accountability is placed at the school level (Johansson et al. 2013). This has consequences for the role of the school boards, which may seem less visible and influential in school governing issues.

In Sweden, a state inspectorate was reintroduced around 10 years after the national decision was made about stronger local autonomy. Some of the most common arguments for this decision were the bad test results and the lack of quality work at the municipal level (Rönnberg 2012). The Swedish inspectorate works directly with single schools and reports back to the municipalities, in a sense a "bypass" of the municipality, as laid out in the Swedish country report.

In Norway, state supervision follows a system revision approach to ensure that legal regulations are followed (Sivesind 2009). Yet in Norway, municipalities are a target for state supervision, and there is, unlike in Sweden, no state body responsible for inspection per se. In the Norwegian system, there are three distinctive points that deserve a comment. First, responsibility for state supervision is delegated to 18

regional offices, a system that represents a looser coupling than in the case of a central inspectorate. Second, within each of the counties, only a sample of municipalities is selected for supervision each year. Third, within the municipalities, only a sample of schools is selected for "school visits." There is, as such, a more loosely and flexibly coupled system than in a mainstream state inspectorate, and the different elements within the Norwegian system are internally more loosely coupled than is the case in other Nordic countries (Paulsen and Skedsmo 2014).

In Denmark, there are no inspections and the like, but there is legislation on quality reports from schools to municipalities and further to the ministry. In Finland, the inspection structure was demolished in 1994. The process to demolish the inspection structure was started at the end of the 1980s and was based on changes in comprehensive education. The current educational system is based on trust. Even though the FNBE[1] makes several assessments every year, each school is selected for assessment at least once every 3 years, the assessment is not standardized, and some of the assessments measure only the learning process (e.g., how the students experience the learning process). Due to this, the Finnish questionnaire did not include questions concerning the state's supervision in the general sense.

These examples show that all levels are included in quality assurance but in different ways. Student outcomes and legal compliance are the most important quality indicators for which the local levels are measured and held to account. Less visible is the evaluation of the costs for education, perhaps because responsibility for financial issues in all countries is a question mainly for municipalities. The state allocates resources to the municipalities, but the resources are not earmarked for different duties in the municipalities. The total costs for education in a municipality are financed around 50–50 between the state and the municipality. Danish municipalities administer this option differently, so that funds allocated for schools can differ up to 30 % per student per year.

9.3 National Quality Assurance in Loosely Coupled Systems

The state has a strong role in education in all of the Nordic countries. In some countries, the controlling function for evaluation has been strengthened, which affects the relations between professional and political power on all levels. Differences appear in the way that information and data are distributed, aggregated, and communicated (c.f. Ozga et al. 2011). In theoretical terms, this pattern briefly described above can be understood as coexistence of loose and tight coupling within the same governing system. Moreover, elements are coupled in a mixed fashion, and there are dissimilarities across the Nordic systems in terms of how the elements in the system are ordered – and how the system works in reality.

[1] The Finnish National Board of Education.

9.3.1 Loose and Tight Couplings: What Can It Mean?

As noted by several scholars, educational systems often exhibit a "managerial paradox" manifested by a disconnection between tight management systems conducted in a top-down fashion, e.g., a national quality assurance system and the technical core of classroom teaching – a phenomenon often conceived as loose couplings in education (Orton and Weick 1990; Rowan and Miskel 1999; Weick 1976, 1982). In general terms, loose couplings connote some lack of correspondence between goals, plans, and the control system on one hand and work processes and outcomes on the other (March and Olsen 1976). It describes different forms of limitations in decision-making rationality, as "the concept of loose coupling indicates why people cannot predict much of what happens in organizations" (Weick 2001, p. 384). Weick (2001) suggests loose coupling as evident "when the components of a system affect each others (1) suddenly rather than continuously, (2) occasionally rather than constantly, (3) negligibly rather than significantly, (4) indirectly rather than directly, and (5) eventually rather than immediately" (Weick 2001, p. 383). In contrast, a tightly coupled management system, as found in many business sectors and even in civil service, basically share four characteristics: (1) there are rules, (2) there is a widely shared agreement on what these rules are and what they mean in practice, (3) there is a system of inspection to see if compliance occurs, and (4) there are feedback systems (and sanctions) designed to improve compliance (Weick 1982).

9.3.2 The Dialectical Nature of Loose Couplings

A crucial but mostly overlooked point inherent in Weick's (1976) proposition is that loose couplings must be understood as a dialectical phenomenon. As noted by Orton and Weick: "Organizations appear to be both rational determinate and closed systems that search for certainty and open systems searching for indeterminateness" (Orton and Weick 1990, p. 204). The recognition of the dialectical nature opens up the possibility that these two incompatible logics may coexist in different parts of the quality assurance system. Another implication is the possibility that loose and tight couplings may exist side by side and even at the same level of the control system. Similarly, the same unit of a school organization can be *both* loosely and tightly coupled. As noted by Weick: "Some aspects of schools – the bus schedule for example – are tightly coupled. Students and drivers know where people are supposed to be and whether and when buses are running late or early" (Weick 1982, p. 673). The dialectical nature of school governing, in terms of coexistence of loose and tight couplings, also underscores the idea that several possible combinations of tight and loose couplings are possible, and Brian Rowan labels this property "a tangled web of couplings" in educational organizations (Rowan 2002).

9.3.3 Implications for Quality Assurance Systems

The underlying rationale of quality assurance is a tightly managed or coupled system that spans multiple levels of educational policy making and governing: government, a state department, an educational directorate, regional governors, municipalities, and schools. The quality assurance system is to be capable of producing feedback for national policy making, at the same time that the system is aimed at contributing to school improvement – we must talk, first, about a tightly managed system in Weick's (1982) terminology, characterized by shared agreements of goals and rules and how to understand these among national agencies, municipalities, school principals, and teachers. Second, a tightly managed system presumes a feedback and sanction system in order to affect school strategies, work procedures, and pedagogical decision making in the classrooms. The counterhypothesis, derived from Weick's (1976) loose coupling argument, posits that a national quality assurance system will typically consist of a blend of loose and tight couplings. For example, it is possible that upward information feedback (based on national data aggregation) from municipalities to the state can be tightly coupled to national policy making (agenda setting, negotiations between parties, choices, and national planning). In a similar vein, the same data-information procedures can fairly well be close to decoupled from school leadership and school improvement (Skedsmo 2009) at the "street-level" of the educational system. Moreover, school boards' decision-making processes can be relatively tightly connected to the work with the quality report, whereas superintendents can loosen the same couplings by means of sheltering principals from some of the demands (Paulsen and Skedsmo 2014). Taken together, several possible combinations of tight and loose couplings must be accounted for, which is also shown in this chapter when Nordic quality assurance systems are described.

9.4 Members of the School Board and Quality Assurance

9.4.1 The Board Members' Opportunity to Influence

The board members in all Nordic countries are well educated and have a high motivation to work on the school board; many of them have a strong desire to make a change for the better. The types of items that occur most frequently on the agenda are of course budgeting and financial issues, but after that they differ between the countries: pupils' results (Sw), building and structure (Fi), strategies (De), and policy goals (No). We also find many answers in this open-ended question that relate to democratic values, gender equality, and concerns about the teachers' and principals' competence and ability to create a good learning environment for the students. This is linked to the board members concern for the students' knowledge improvement.

In Norway, the policy preference structure of the board reflects a managerial focus on targets that are important for the municipal organization, independent of sectors (education, healthcare, social services, and so forth). Quality of the teachers' work is assessed as important and very important, below the two issues commented on above. Raising student levels in testing achievement is rated by just over half of the sample as important and/or very important. Over and above that, there is only a modest focus on pedagogical and student learning matters in the school board's preference structure.

The tools that board members have to fulfill their "mission" are the local administration. It has to be noted that most of the members of the board are spare time politicians. In Finland, all politicians are, but in the other countries, the chairperson and sometimes vice chairperson can be paid for this assignment.

The relationship between the administration and the superintendent is essential; they meet often and they decide the agenda and what material should be presented for the board. The agendas for school board meetings are often set by the chairperson together with the superintendent. In Finland, the agenda is set most often together with the administration. Here we can see differences in the answers from the chairperson and the rest of the board regarding the chairperson's influence. Half of the board members think that the decisions are almost always taken in a unanimous manner, and the other usual way is that decisions are based on what the political majority in the board supports.

The board members see their own opportunity to influence some areas as positive. It is obvious that the chairperson feels most involved. The most important information is provided by the superintendent. The board members both in Finland and Sweden, even if their evaluation and control systems differ, say that they think the schools' quality reports are informative but that they rarely lead to decisions by the board. In Sweden, on the other hand, the state inspection reports include decisions. In the Finnish and Danish context, one can plead that the principal is in charge and that the board should not intervene or that they trust their principals. But the quality work is intended, in the legislation, to include dialogues between the municipal and school levels. It seems that this is only the case in some municipalities. In Sweden, the principals' work is strongly regulated by the Education Act, and at the same time their influence and communication with the school board is low. In Sweden, the state inspectorate has been accepted as an independent body by the board members and as a state representative for the principals (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013).

9.4.2 Expectations and Capacity

We have also asked the school board members about their view on different actors' ability to perform in relation to different important tasks; we only report strongly agree (i.e., 5 and 6 on a 6-grade scale).

Our first item was about the capacity of the school administration to lead school improvement.[2] Around half of the board members think that the administration has the

[2] Norway didn't have this question.

capacity required for leading school improvement as well as conducting necessary quality control activities in the municipality. On the same level is their view on the superintendent and his/her leadership of the principals in school improvement matters.

Around half of the school board members in Sweden and Denmark say that there is a great variation between different principals, in regard to their professional competence, but only one third of the Finish board members agree on this. A few (around 30 % or less) think that principals have the capacity to lead school improvement in their own schools. At the same time the board members think, to some extent, that the principals see the pupils' learning as something important when they have to choose between conflicting interests.

In Denmark, there is also a general satisfaction with municipalities' supply of schools, but almost half of the chairpersons did not answer the question of responsibility to the schools. Maybe the chairpersons do not consider this issue to be part of their responsibility in a decentered school system. That can be an explanation for why the chairpersons do not wish to interfere in a model of administration that especially prepares the ground for a division of the political system and the individual school.

9.4.3 Satisfaction over School Results

School board members in all four countries reported about recent improvement of student achievements. Roughly half of the school board members in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, but only one third of the Finnish board members, think that student achievement levels have declined.

When we compare the board's answers in Sweden with the municipality schools goal achievement (i.e., number of pupils with marks in all subjects), we find that of boards with a positive perception of their schools, more than 50 % have the highest goal achievement; but for the rest there is not a perfect match. We find board members who think that pupils' results have increased when they actually have decreased (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013). The reason for this, among others, could be that the superintendent does not give clear information to the board; but it could also be that the board members express a general opinion related to their political party's opinion. Notable is that the discussion above is a not a question in Finland.

When we ask if the school board gets a good picture of a school's quality out of the school's own quality reports, not even half of the members agree on that. In most cases these reports do not lead to decisions asking for improvement in the board.[3] As a contrast, around half of the board members in Sweden think that the state school inspection gives a reliable picture of the situation and leads to decisions by the board. In Norway, the school board members were asked in a slightly different way about their experiences with state supervision. The open answers cluster around two main groups of perceptions. The first group sees this as external control from the state, whereas the other group accepts the initiative as an activation trigger for discussing quality improvement.

[3] This question was not included in the Norwegian survey because this questionnaire was sent out earlier than in the other countries, and the other three countries added some new questions.

We see in our material that the school board members are devoted to fulfilling their responsibilities but seem to have difficulties in finding the balance between professional and political issues. It is clear that the relationship between the superintendent and the chairperson is of great importance for local school governing (c.f. James et al. 2013; Kowalski 2009; Leibetseder 2011). The development of different assessment and international comparisons is also a question of balance between political or bureaucratic/managerial forms of accountability (c.f. Kelly 2009).

Findings show that most of the board members are satisfied with the competencies of the local school administration and that they are also satisfied, to some extent, with pupils' learning outcomes. Moreover, there is a strong belief among the board members, including the chairperson, in their capacity to influence decision-making processes related to education in the municipality. The board members' sense of influence and impact on decision-making processes is strong within the political system when they relate to the municipal council, municipal board, and the school administration. At the same time, a significant portion of the board members experience tension between the interests of the local and national actors.

9.5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The findings show that the dialectical nature of school governing, in terms of coexistence of loose and tight couplings, underscores the combinations of tight and loose couplings. The school administration and the school system are characterized as loosely coupled systems (Weick 1976) which among other things lack coordination and give room to adapt local contexts into problems that have to be solved. What we see in our data is a mix of loose and tight organizational control. Questions can be raised whether the control in some ways is too tight and in other ways too loose with respect to what should be achieved (c.f. Orton and Weick 1990). Based on literature studies and our empirical data, we have identified four types of tensions:

- Tensions between national quality assurance procedures (inspection and state supervision) and local municipal autonomy
- Tensions between transnational forces and national cultures
- Tensions between school boards and the administrative apparatus (depoliticization)
- Decoupling of school boards from the "core business of schooling"

9.5.1 Tensions Between National Quality Assurance Procedures (Inspection and State Supervision) and Local Municipal Autonomy

The framework for the quality reports is decided by politicians at the national level. The reports are written by the professionals at the local level, and they are used for decision making by the local school administration and the school boards.

There are political or ideological questions embodied in what is measured, what is good quality, and what is valued both nationally and locally. We know by experience that things that are measured very often become important. The mission in the curricula is broader than the current measured areas, so what is not measured? The board members often have to relate to results when they haven't been part of formulating the questions or the purpose behind the questions.

The country case reports illustrate tensions activated by top-down quality assurance routines, such as inspection and state supervision. As noted in the Norwegian sample, a significant portion of the school board members sees state supervision as bureaucratic external control imposed on them by the state agency and also a redundant control procedure that leads to more reporting work. On the other hand, a significant portion of the same sample also sees state supervision as activation procedures for school improvement at the municipal (i.e., school owner) level – which help the politicians to form better school strategies. In Sweden, we see a similar pattern when it comes to the school board members' perception of school inspection, yet they are more positive to inspection compared to the Norwegian politicians.

9.5.2 Tensions Between Transnational Forces and National Cultures

New governing modes are influenced by global trends and transnational bodies such as the OECD and the EU (Meyer and Benavot 2013) which can lead to that some priorities to a greater degree are set outside the national educational context. The discussions about different international results, for example, PISA, are held on international and national levels. These tests are made by experts for the international arena (Petersson 2008). Also, at the local municipality level the results are compared with national results, but the results are very seldom translated to the context of the single municipality or specific school (Gustafsson and Yang Hansen 2011). When the board members get the results from the quality reports made by single schools, the results often are aggregated to the municipal level.

9.5.3 Tensions Related to Depoliticization and Increased Management

There are several indications of depoliticization of school boards in the data material. At different stages of the policy process, we see tendencies that initiatives are mostly taken by school superintendents. For example, the superintendents are in a position to control the information stream to the boards, and they are key agents in agenda setting. Moreover, in terms of stakeholder influence on decision making, the board members assess the influence exerted by school administrations and superintendents as strongest. Taken together, these data suggest a pattern of depoliticization of the

school board's work, because the administration is a relatively dominant actor in the important steps in the policy process: information, agenda setting, and choice of solution (Jenkins 1997).

9.5.4 Decoupling of School Boards from the "Core Business of Schooling"

In line with research that shows weak connections between quality assurance reporting (data aggregation and reports) and school improvement initiatives taken by the school principals, we see a similar pattern of decoupling in the studies undertaken in the Nordic countries. In a similar vein, the school boards perceive that their influence towards school-based decision making is low, significantly lower than towards the policy processes in the municipal council and municipal board. The members are close to inactive in formation, selection, and implementation of local assessment practices, which indicates that they implement national routines without interference rooted in local policy making.

There is a need for dialogue between several links in the governance of schools to strengthen the ideological linkage. Government processes have transformed from focusing primarily on input factors, rules, and conditions to emphasizing assessment of education in terms of school achievements retrospectively (c.f. Skedsmo 2009; Wahlström 2002). "We see a gradual shift in capacity to monitor measure and evaluate performance within and across systems, accompanied by a move away from reliance on expert judgment or professionally controlled assessment." (Ozga et al. 2011, p. 101).

The relations between the professionals' own judgment of the curricula, local culture in the nearby society, and the politicians in school boards need further research to find out how and to what extent these relations affect and influence the quality of education.

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