Chapter 8
Political Cultures

Klaus Kasper Kofod, Olof Johansson, Jan Merok Paulsen, and Mika Risku

Abstract This thematic chapter analyses both similarities and differences between the political cultures of the participating Nordic countries. It has been demonstrated that a country's specific political culture has a great impact on the way its schooling system is organised. This view was centred on national cultures. In the Nordic countries, with their traditions of decentralised systems, many of the most important decision are taken by the municipal systems. Therefore this chapter seeks to apply the concepts of national political culture to the local municipal level. The chapter aims to explore the differences between the Nordic countries' schooling systems through the lens of how different political cultures influence the organisation of the national school systems and draw them in different directions.

Keywords Municipalities • Nordic school systems • State vs. municipality • Organizational levels • Conceptual framework

1 Comparing Nordic Policy Cultures in Education

Internationally, there has been a tendency to view the Nordic countries' schooling systems as very similar, for example in the ISSPP (Day and Leithwood 2001). A number of Scandinavian trends that differ from those in other parts of the world have been identified: a relatively strong state, relatively strong local authorities,

K.K. Kofod (✉)
Department of Education, Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: kako@edu.au.dk

O. Johansson
Center for Principal Development, Umeå University, Umea, Sweden
e-mail: olof.ca.johansson@umu.se

J.M. Paulsen
Faculty of Teacher Education and International Studies, Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Science, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: Jan-Merok.Paulsen@hioa.no

M. Risku
Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland
e-mail: mika.risku@jyu.fi

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comprehensive education, and a collaborative leadership. These strong trends build on national values that are in some ways alike (Moos 2013b). Of course there are similarities, but there are also differences.

The comparison of similarities and differences between the Scandinavian countries' political cultures may contribute to clarifying our pictures of those cultures in Sartre's sense, namely that we can only see what a thing, for example a culture, is, when we see what it is not (Sartre 1972 [1943]). Cultures that seem alike may, if compared, exhibit differences if these are looked for, and that may be a tool better to understand the influence of the domestic culture on the school system, and in turn on the superintendent's opportunities and restraints in the system.

What we are looking for in what follows is how the governing of the various countries' school systems is executed. It is not possible to govern a nation and its institutions strictly by economic and administrative means through legislation alone. Cultural norms, traditions and values – in short, culture – permeates the way things are done, and the cultural traits that lie behind the ways things are done may be more important than formal government tools in steering the schools systems (Moos 2013c).

The increasing influence of globalisation on societies also influences education. As relations between national states and systems have become stronger, it is to be expected that policies on education will be influenced across borders, through what Røvik (2005) calls recipes, which prescribe what is to be done (Røvik 1998/2005). Such prescriptions spring, for example, from international comparisons such as TIMMS and PISA and the subsequent prescriptions from institutions such as the European Union (EU-Oplysning 2008) and the OECD (Pont et al. 2008).

This influence becomes modified and translated before its implementation in the school system. The translation process differs between countries owing to differences in context and especially owing to differences in national and political culture. Among the Nordic countries, however, the connections are close, and institutions exist in which issues of common interest are discussed. In 1952 the Nordic Council was formed, and in 1971 the Nordic Council of Ministers in order to better formalise coordination between member governments (Moos 2013c).

The translation of imported ideas into practice may take place at national, local, or institutional level, and that will often make the resulting practices different from one another. In our case, the differences may be due to differences in translation between the respective countries, but within countries they may differ again owing to different translations in different municipalities and different schools – because policies, ideas and their translations are social constructions. As Røvik states, "General and abstract ideas may be concretised, mixed with local traditions […]" (Moos 2013a).

It has been demonstrated (Moos 2013c) that context plays an important role when education leadership is assessed and compared. Political culture constitutes an important context for the way schools and schooling systems function. Therefore it is important to be aware of the political, societal, cultural and institutional context in which the leadership of the schooling system works (Moos 2013c). Those contexts are part of the opportunities and constraints with which the superintendent

must cope. As Bourdieu and Passeron (2006) have demonstrated, the old practice, structures, values, and norms of society, be it great or small, are still present for new perceptions and influences (Bourdieu and Passeron 2006 [1970]).

Louis and van Velzen (2012) look upon political cultures from a national perspective (Louis and van Velzen 2012). But political cultures unfold and are active on a local level as well as the national level. Precisely because in all the Nordic countries there exists local room for manoeuvre in school administration and development, it is therefore safe to use the concept of political culture elaborated in this book in the analysis of the political cultures (van Velzen et al. 2012). Therefore it is important to look at the local cultures when comparing across country borders. That is the task of this chapter.

The hypothesis of the chapter is that aspects of the similarities and the differences are due not only to specific differences between the political cultures but also to the common Nordic model. This approach will be the lens through which our topic is analysed.

The concept of political culture is here to be understood as a plurality of values that for the duration of a particular period of time characterises a country's political institutions. 'Freedom,' 'equality,' 'equal opportunities' are examples of values that constitute a political culture when, throughout a period of time, they are consistently coupled in an interpretation that wins broad acceptance (Pedersen 2011).

The chapter will try to investigate similarities as well as differences in political cultures across the participating Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden – in order to illuminate the meaning and influence of local political cultures on development of the schooling system.

1.1 Methodological Considerations

The methodological approach of the chapter is founded on our survey investigation results as presented in the separate country reports. These outline the specific traits of political culture in these countries. On this basis, we will make comparisons between the analyses of the country results; and on the basis of these observations we will try to use the differences and similarities established as a guide to understanding the role played by historical and cultural differences in the field of school administration.

The focal point of our analysis is the superintendent. It is the superintendent who at the local, municipal, level in the parliamentary steering chain (Kofod 2007) is the linkage between the political and the administrative part of the school system, and it is thus the administrative and policymaking or implementing function that on the one hand has the greatest share of responsibility for the implementation in daily practice in the schools of political decisions by the municipal council and board. On the other hand, it is the superintendent, who is senior to the school leaders, who is the last joint in the parliamentary steering chain between parliament and students.

With the superintendent as our focal point of analysis, we hope to be able to cast light on the local political cultures in the school administrative system by using data extracted from the municipal school board chairs, members, and the school leaders. One might say that this approach is an attempt to map the political cultures of the school systems of the Nordic countries with the use of the pointers that will be elaborated below.

1.2 The Conceptual Framework

We intend to use the same analysis framework that has proven its worth in the work of Louis and van Velzen and, particularly, Devos (Louis and van Velzen 2012; Devos et al. 2012). This work identifies seven pointers, from which we have selected six, for use in the analysis of political cultures in various European countries and two states in the United States. Following this method but shifting the focus from the central national level, to the decentralised municipal political and administrative level, we hope to gain a more detailed picture, closer to the operating core of the school system (Mintzberg 1983) than that showing the national picture. The pointers we will use as analysing focus are the following:

Openness: the amount of availability of political participation for stakeholders and citizens on school matters >< constrained or elite dominance

Decentralism: the degree of distribution of power sources in school matters: decentred >< centred power resources. The degree of centralisation of power in the municipality, the superintendent >< the power at the decentralised level, for example a specific school.

Egalitarianism: the degree of the persistence of government or municipal policies to redistribute resources so as to minimise disparities >< limited efforts in redistribution.

Efficiency: emphasis on cost–benefits and optimisation of policy performance in school matters >< limited discussion of input–output considerations.

Quality: emphasis on an elaborated state and/or municipal role in providing oversight and monitoring the quality of school performance >< less systematic, *laissez-faire* approach to determining quality.

Choice: the degree of emphasis on increasing the range of options available to families and opportunities to influence school policy at multiple levels (Devos et al. 2012).

These pointers were the framework for analysing the different political cultures of seven countries, six of which were West European countries and the last of which was the United States, focused on the aggregate state or societal level in the various countries. With the focus on the municipal level, we will gain a more close-up picture of the influence of political cultures on day-to-day work with children's education at the municipal level, the level where the centrally decided laws are implemented through the municipal councils, the municipal committees, and the schools.

These six pointers will be further elaborated in the paragraphs that follow.

1.2.1 Openness

Governments and municipalities construct political processes and structures so that stakeholders' access is facilitated. The idea is embraced that politics is ideally a matter of concern for every stakeholder in society and for every citizen. The concept of openness is characterised by an open political culture which offers multiple venues for stakeholders to exercise influence on policymaking. In our pointer of openness we will focus on stakeholders' access to the municipalities' decision-making process in the form of the development of premises and the definition of frameworks, decision-making, and the connection to existing administrative and political practices.

There are both formal and informal forms for construction of the premises for decision-making.

The most common form of formal construction of the premises of decision-making is indirect: through the organisation of the political system and elected politicians in the municipal committee.

Another way in which citizens can influence the construction of decision premises is through the public discourse in the press, through influence and pressure on the elected politicians, and through framing ideas that are included in the political processes.

It is in what takes place before deliberations and decisions in the municipal council or school board that the openness varies most. Prior to any formal consideration by the municipality there is a period in which decisions are made on what ideas will appear on the agenda. This informal period may encourage wide participation, or may be confined to a more or less closed circle. Ideas are often discussed in formal and informal networks that may establish themselves as more or less permanent coalitions. These networks may create the expectation that they are part of the formal proceedings, or even that they have been able to establish themselves as part of the political process itself.

In Denmark, and in a similar vein in Norway, there is the tradition or political culture that before a new law in the educational field is put forward, central stakeholders such as the teachers union, the national association of municipalities' (i.e. the school owners), the industrial council (the consumers of the educational programmes), school and society (the parents association) and sometimes the students association are consulted and asked for ideas. The same process takes place in Sweden, both in relation to proposals by state commissions (the SOU or Statens offentliga utredningar) and in relation to the formal lawmaking process. Any proposed new law has to go through certain stages before it goes to parliament for decision. In Finland, too, the decision process is founded firmly on dialogue between the various stakeholders at all the levels of the education system.

In the present analysis, our focus is on the degree to which the agenda-setting and issue-formulating processes in educational policymaking are more or less open (Devos et al. 2012, pp. 11–13).

At the political level, municipalities in the Nordic countries are typically governed through standing committees, and among these is the committee that has schools as its field of responsibility.[1] In these committees, politicians have the ultimate overall political responsibility for the operations of the schools. These politicians have been chosen, in some cases through elections, and this way of influencing the construction of premises of decisions is thus an example of an elite making decisions in a rather closed circle, and thus of a quite elite-based way of making decisions. In other cases, for example in Denmark, Finland, and Norway, school politicians are appointed by the municipal council to the school board.

With the new, larger municipalities since the Danish municipal reform of 2007, the relation between politicians and civil servants has changed, with the politicians' responsibility becoming more of an overall than hands-on political responsibility, while direct responsibility for daily operations is taken care of by the superintendent (Christoffersen and Klausen 2012, p. 58[2]; Moos et al. 2014, p. 12). This development is an example of a loosening of the couplings between politicians' hands-on day-to-day decisions in educational matters in the municipalities to the benefit of the elitist-based layer of municipal administration (Weick 1976, 2001).

Superintendents participate in several working groups or networks with top municipal managers or directors on the management of crosscutting and overarching municipal tasks. This includes them in the elite-based municipal management and leadership beyond their initial field of work. The main purposes of superintendents' meetings with their seniors and peers in municipal administration are coordination and producing development and coherence cross-sector and across the whole municipality (Moos et al. 2014). Superintendents' participation in these networks where cases are often discussed and informally decided upon is also a sign of a closed and elite-based decision culture. But a further problem with the networking is that the superintendent is thus distanced from his educational administration of the school sector. We can see that in about 30 % of municipalities, superintendents have introduced an administrative structure between themselves and school leaders because they need help in the schools governing process. As the size of municipalities grows in Finland, a similar trend of intermediate layers is discernible, resulting in challenges to maintain the decision process as open and genuinely interactive as it has been in the past.

Regarding the public sector, it was decided in the Danish parliament to focus on the importance of the public sector being 'close to the citizen': that the greatest possible number of decisions should be taken at the local level, that citizens should

[1] The name and area of responsibility change from municipality to municipality, but there is always a committee that has schools as its responsibility.

[2] When we talk about how the municipalities are governed, it is important to stress that there is no single picture of how the municipalities are organised; there are variations among the municipalities because there is room for discretion in the law, so the description is that of an ideal type.

have a say on what goods and how should be provided by the public sector, and that public institutions should be transparent (Finansministeriet 1983). A few examples serve to illustrate this, including increased influence for parents at school level in the form of school boards, as well as parents' free choice of schools (Moos et al. 2014, p. 6).

The local school board is supposed to lay out the overall principles for the organising of instruction, cooperation between school and home, information for homes about student results, the distribution of work between teachers, and collective social arrangements for students (Lov om folkeskolen 1993, § 42–44; Moos et al. 2014, p. 7). There has been a tendency to broaden out the construction of decision premises at the local institutional level through local school boards giving the parents a stronger say than before.

It is however debated how much real influence these boards have or whether they are merely hostages of the system as a part of a co-optation strategy (Klausen 1996, 2001). This is an example of the loosening of the organisational couplings between the central municipal administration and citizens and school stakeholders. It could be regarded as an augmentation of citizens' possibilities to influence decisions at the expense of the administrative and political elites. The question is, however, how these possibilities are used, as it is not a given that possibilities for influence are actually used. Many believe the local school boards to lack substantial power or real influence, and the voter turnouts for elections to local school boards are very low. So the question is whether parents' membership of and majority on local school boards really is a case of enhanced openness.

Board chairs and members themselves believe that they are indeed influential – particularly 'upwards' in strategic decisions and economic prioritising within their area of responsibility. Superintendents find that the level of influence on local educational politics is such that the politicians in the municipality are very interested in schools and education (Moos et al. 2014).

The superintendents point to the chair of the municipal board and the mayor as the most influential. This could be an indication of a steep hierarchy in local governance, with the top positions making the most important decisions. It is in a closed circle that the political elite take the important decisions. At the same time there also seems to be an image of clear demarcation lines between the political actors and the civil servant, the superintendent, so that the democratic steering chain (Kofod 2007) really does seem to function.

The board chairs and members also think that the board is very important 'downwards,' for the development of schools. They consider themselves to be important for the municipal development of the schools (Moos et al. 2014, p. 15). Preparation of the school board's agenda for its meetings is increasingly being taken over by the administrative and judicial civil servants in the municipal administrations. There thus seems to be agreement between officials and politicians that there is a rather elite-based decision culture in the Danish municipalities, and that the day-to-day organisation of work on the board is being taken over by the professional staff. Superintendents are centrally positioned when it comes to construction of premises

for decision-making, for implementing decisions, and for connecting practices to decisions.

In Denmark, the most important actors giving information to the board members are: teachers, other political parties, national evaluations, the internet, students, and media reports on schools. The least important informants are the school administration and the superintendent (Moos et al. 2014). The board members do not seem to have any priorities regarding information gathering, and in this respect there does not seem to be an especially elite-based culture. Norway emerges as a partly contrasting case to Denmark in this respect, since board members there assess school administration as the most important source of information, while teachers are typically low-scorers.

The Nordic superintendents say that they feel they have plenty of room for manoeuvre (Moos et al. 2014, p. 27). Regarding their perception of influence, the superintendents see themselves as members of the municipal administrative leadership, with their prior loyalty as senior administrative officers going to the municipal education administration. As senior administrative officers, the superintendents have a great deal of influence and in many ways drive a parallel pathway to that of the politicians. But it is the top politicians who are sitting in the driver's seat, as an expression of a rather elite-based political culture.

One can make the case that in Finland there still exists a shared will to base decision-making on the traditional principle of civil servants preparing and politicians deciding. In addition, rather than trying to find alternative pathways for decision-making, novel ways are being sought for to maintain and develop the dialogue between the various stakeholders. Furthermore, in legislation the status of participation has been strengthened in several ways in recent decades. Risku et al. even claim that Finnish schools and local providers of education are not able to operate successfully without a well-functioning collaboration between all the stakeholders, both in common and individual issues.

As in the other Nordic countries, in Finland the superintendent has a central role in local decision-making as interlocutor between the various stakeholders. Both board members and school leaders name superintendents as their primary sources of information. For board members the superintendent seems to have quite a sovereign position, also in preparing the agenda for the board meetings. Superintendents themselves mostly rely on the views of school leaders, teachers and the municipal central administration when preparing issues for board members to decide on. School leaders appear to draw on a many-sided flow of information, with the views of teachers, school boards, municipal councils and executive boards, municipal central administration, various reports, pupils and students as well as parents all ranking high. Most primary schools have school-based parental boards. Student boards are obligatory both in basic and upper secondary schools, and their role increases in step with student age. The role of trade unions and political ideologies in the dialogues does not seem strong.

In Norway, the value of openness is captured both by board member and superintendent assessments of stakeholder influence in their policy processes. When superintendents are asked in their own words to rank the regular issues they discuss

with their school leaders, parental collaboration is hardly mentioned at all as important. When school board members are asked to rank the various stakeholders' and actors' influence on decisions made by the board, the tendency is clear that they assess the influence from the school administration and superintendent highly. The pattern is converse when it comes to teachers, teacher unions and parents, which score low in perceived influence on decisions made by the board. Taken together, these findings indicate that the actual corporative power of formal trade unions in local school governance is declining, while parents are still held at arm's-length in pedagogical matters.

In Sweden, the general governing structure follows the pattern of municipal council/parliament, then municipal board/government, then school board, then superintendent and school leader. But during the last 15 years, local school systems have tried to make changes in the role of the school board. This board has been abolished and replaced by a committee of fewer politicians, linked to the municipal board. The chair of the committee has in most cases been a member of the municipal board. In some cases this has not been a good solution, and some of the municipalities have gone back to having school boards. The other change that has taken place in most municipalities of over 40,000 is the introduction of a deputy superintendent position, so that in some municipalities there are now two layers of deputy superintendents between the superintendent and the school leader. This is a development that in some cases has had a negative effect on communication in the governing structure.

In contrast to Denmark and Sweden, Finland and Norway are characterised by diversity in the form of many small municipalities. Accordingly there is no uniform way in which the municipalities are governed and led, and this pattern of tolerance for different solutions has become an institutional norm of the Finnish and Norwegian municipality sector during the last three decades. On the other hand, trends of mimetic isomorphism in Norway have also frequently been observed, particularly in the choice to deflate the administrative organisation around the millennium. In many cases however these redesign efforts have emerged as ambiguous in content (Brunsson 2000; March and Olsen 1976).

Paired with a tolerance for ambiguity and diversity (Hofstede et al. 2010), openness has been a long-standing tradition characterising the policy culture of Norwegian public services. A "corporative democracy" exists (Nordby 1994), in which the trade unions have played an important role both in formal negotiations and in hearings (Hernes 1983; Olsen 1978). There is also a long tradition of parental cooperation at all levels of the Norwegian school institution – from national bodies to local committees at each primary school (Bæck 2010a). Not surprisingly, similar aspirations are found also in Finland. On the other hand, when it comes to participation in the pedagogical discourse, most parents feel that they are excluded, and this pattern runs across social class and parental educational level (Bæck 2010b, c; Paulsen 2012). In Finland, however, according to surveys, parents still seem to be quite satisfied with their participation in educational matters. Opinions vary greatly, however, ranging from those who feel they receive too much information to react to,

to those who feel they do not receive vital information or enough options to reflect upon.

In conclusion, there seems in general in all the Nordic countries to be a rather closed political culture in which the political and administrative elite has the greatest influence both directly in taking decisions on educational matters in the municipality and indirectly in planning and agenda-setting. The situation is not uniform, however. There is of course some local influence, especially in the local school boards of Danish schools, where parents constitute the majority of the board members and where decisions are taken by school leaders on the school's administration and economy. Finland has its informal parental boards, which take part in the dialogue but do not make decisions as such. In general, it can be questioned exactly how much influence the Danish and Finnish boards really have. This does not apply in Norway and Sweden, where there are no school boards at the school level.

At the same time there is a common feature across all four states that can be seen as a doxa (Bourdieu and Passeron 2006 [1970]), in which because it is taken as given that these are societies where democracy is well established, it is not questioned in the public debate that these societies are open and democratic with respect to citizens' opinions and influence. It is thus rather remarkable that citizen access to influence on school matters seems rather limited in the Nordic countries, as it is the political and administrative elites that both set the agenda for schools development at the municipal level and construct the decision premises regarding decisions on school matters. In the Finnish system, the existence of the various municipal and school-based solutions creates the opportunity for much variation, although the legislative obligation to openness and dialogue is explicitly determined.

1.2.2 Decentralism

Decentralisation can be understood as the situation in which the power to make decisions is placed closer to or further from the setting where the decision will have impact. There are however various forms of these centre–periphery relationships.

1. *Decentralisation*
   1.1. In political settings, *territorial decentralisation* refers to the situation in which tasks that could have been executed by a central agency are assigned to sub-agencies in regions where each sub-agency reflects the region.
   1.2. *Functional decentralisation* exists when specific tasks that were previously executed at a central level are delegated to organisations that focus on that specific task.

   Decentralisation implies that power is distributed among different legal entities, each of which has the same standing as the others.

2. *Deconcentration* is a semi-permanent delegation of tasks and responsibilities to internal units that are totally owned by the larger unit. Deconcentration maintains organised units within a web of hierarchical responsibility and control.

3. *Deregulation* involves a reduction in the quantity and scope of legal rules and obligations. This does not automatically accompany decentralisation.

Decentralisation, deconcentration, and deregulation are not a guarantee of greater professional autonomy, understood as the capacity to design and live within laws and regulations designed by oneself. From the perspective of those working in agencies that are not at the centre, making use of decentralisation requires courage, as well as a mindset that seeks and accepts the responsibility that autonomy implies (Devos et al. 2012).

The Danish municipalities have gradually acquired more power concentrated around the elected mayor and the employed city manager, at the expense of the power of the politically composed elected municipal council (Sørensen and Torfing 2005). As the municipalities were merged into a smaller number of larger units in 2007 (from 171 to 98), many schools were shut down or merged into departmental schools. In 2011, there were 1317 public schools or *folkeskoler* compared to 1708 in 1996, a decrease of 391 or 23 %. There has thus been a territorial centralisation in the school structure around fewer, larger schools.

In the last 30 years of new public management as a dominating steering technology and ideology, we have witnessed a functional and territorial decentralisation of tasks and of responsibility from the state to the municipalities and to the schools. Legislators and municipal politicians have therefore perceived the need to strengthen the organisational couplings between the various administrative layers of the schooling system in order to be able to manage it (Weick 1976). Various new social steering technologies have been developed in order to be able to control a system that is now characterised by being at the same time both strongly and loosely coupled. Among these technologies can be mentioned the use of assessment data, the monitoring and publication of student results, and accounting reports that represent new ways of coordinating and monitoring the school system. New ways of interaction have thus been introduced between state, local authorities, and schools. These developments have resulted in – on the one hand – less local autonomy and increased bureaucratisation, and – on the other hand – enhanced local autonomy among municipalities and schools through the decentralisation (Paulsen et al. 2014). This has meant decentralisation and centralisation at one and the same time – centralisation within the decentralisation.

In general, there is a widespread feeling among municipal politicians that the state interferes too much with the decentralised public school. In recent years the state level has centralised a number of issues at the expense of the municipal levels' influence, especially regarding centralised tests, comparisons between schools through publishing school exams results, and numerous alterations in the law of the comprehensive school – 18 alterations within 10 years. These issues, and this functional centralisation, suggest that there are tensions between the state and the municipal level regarding educational issues.

Whenever the educational system is centralised or decentralised, the balance between professional and political power at all levels in the system is changed. Responsibility and professional ability for school leaders and teachers are enhanced,

while at the same time evaluation becomes an important instrument for governing and… *In using more control and in seeing the educational system as being in a global competition*, *the politics of education will be more and more reactive in its scope*… (Official Journal C 318 2008/C 319). During a period characterised by strong trend of re-centralisation of school content (curricula and accountability), the schools find themselves in charge of finances, human resource and day-to-day management, yet at the same time the municipalities have become an important factor in the ministry's 'quality assurance system'(Moos et al. 2014, pp. 6–7). On the centralisation side, there seems to be a tendency to centralise the core business of teaching, augmenting the control with schools' teaching results.

On the other hand, 83 % of the Danish superintendents surveyed indicated that they feel they have plenty of room for manoeuvre, even if the structure of the political construction points to considerable decentralisations from the top towards committees and their political members and chairs (Moos et al. 2014, p. 15). In the realm of administrative matters, decentralisation has not been rolled back to the state level: there is still substantial autonomy in the municipalities' dealings with the administration of schools.

Relations between superintendents and school leaders are direct, as only 7 % of the Danish superintendents report the presence of an additional level of leadership between themselves and school leaders. In other research projects (Moos and Kofod 2009), we have heard school leaders in the new, larger municipalities complain that the ongoing direct communication between school leadership and local administration/superintendent has been transformed into written communication. They complain that they seldom have the chance to meet with the superintendent, who has so many institutions to look after and has to therefore write many policies and principles (Moos et al. 2014, p. 26). Inside the municipalities, therefore, school leaders feel that the system has become more centralised.

School leaders feel that they have discretion concerning the internal organisation of school (61 %), educational work (54 %), and prioritising of their work (47 %). The most striking finding is perhaps that almost half school leaders do not feel empowered to decide on their own prioritising of their work. They seem to feel steered from outside, rather than being self-steered. The administrative municipal system seems to have become functionally and also territorially centralised in the hands of the superintendent, with a sharper division between the administration around the superintendent in the town hall and in schools. This state of affairs is counter to the general image that Danish schools are very autonomous, and these answers seem to contradict that image (Moos et al. 2014, p. 28).

In all the Nordic countries, school leaders experience according to the surveys freedom and discretion, but they seldom use it in its full capacity. They can in many ways be characterised as afraid: they do not challenge their teachers, and express the opinion that they cannot ask them to do more because they have so much planning and administration. Yet in Denmark the most widespread model of municipal administration is the so-called company model, the preferred model in 78 % of the municipalities. According to this model, the school system is administered by a board of managers which as top administrative management conducts strategy,

coordination and development. The responsibility for day-to-day matters is delegated to decentred schools (Christoffersen and Klausen 2012; Moos et al. 2005).

In all the Nordic countries, we see the state simultaneously employing both decentralisation and centralisation as twin strategies (Møller and Skedsmo 2013). There has been a functional decentralisation between schools and municipal administration around the position of the superintendent regarding administrative, managerial matters, with the leadership regarding this as a loosening of the organisational couplings between these functions. On the other hand there has been a functional centralisation as between schools, the municipal administration and the state, which increasingly oversees the curriculum, thus bypassing the democratic governance chain. On the territorial side, there has been centralisation, with mergers of schools occurring alongside an administrative separation between schools and municipal administration.

In Norway, longitudinal research indicates differences of perception of centralisation and decentralisation between local politicians and municipal administrative managers (Hagen and Sørensen 2001). Whereas local school politicians were generally critical of the state two decades ago, seeing the state's steering of municipal primary education as too strong, this tendency subsided after the year 2000. Specifically, a majority of local politicians in 2007 saw the state's governing of the education sector as "appropriate" (Fiva et al. 2014). However, municipal administrative leaders perceived the state's governing as *too strong*, and they are particularly critical of the state's steering of basic education, daycare institutions and care homes for the elderly (Fiva et al. 2014, p. 42). This research thus indicates that local politicians are less critical of centralisation tendencies than their administrative counterparts.

Superintendents' assessments of their professional autonomy show that 92 % of them assess that they have "*freedom to make decisions in my daily work*." Moreover, 81 % assess that they "*have a large degree of control over my daily work*", and 76 % perceive that they "*can implement actions towards the school leaders in accordance with my own judgements*." Finally, 75 % assess that they have "the authority to assess the work of school leaders." Thus the Norwegian picture is more or less the same as in Denmark.

Turning to the school board members, the main trend is a high level of perceived influence. For example, 76 % assess that "*the school board has the ability to affect the municipal council in school policy issues*." Measures of influence in other domains of upwards influence towards the dominant political coalitions display a similar trend of significant perceived influence. However, when it comes to downwards influence towards the schools, teachers, and school leaders, the picture changes. Only 56 % perceive that "*the school board can exert influence on the prioritisations of our schools*"; and 36 % perceive that "*the school board is empowered to set the agenda for the schools' prioritisations*." In accordance with this, only 20 % of the sample perceives that the "*school board is empowered to make decisions about local curriculum development*." The school leaders also perceive a high level of autonomy in their daily work. For example, 88 % perceive high level of autonomy "*in decisions on the internal organisation of the schoo*l."

In Sweden the same picture emerges, but there is also evidence that school leaders have not adapted their internal organisation to become more effective and to access help with instructional leadership processes in the schools, a right given to them by the school act of 2010. That act also gives them the right to ask staff members who are especially competent to take on different tasks, and, again, they use this possibility if they have an assistant school leader.

In Finland, similar trends can be identified as in the other Nordic countries, but, again, there are also noteworthy differences. As regards the relationship between the state and the municipalities, the previous state-led, system-oriented centralised education system was radically decentralised in the 1990s. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) call the new system the *Fourth Way*. The fourth-way system is led from the top, built from the bottom, and both motivated and supported from the sides. In Finland, there seems to exist both the demand for and acceptance of a shared national will to be enacted autonomously by local actors. For that purpose, local authorities have the obligation to fulfil the tasks mandated for them in legislation, as well as the constitutional autonomy to do so.

Finnish municipalities and schools seem to use their autonomy efficiently. The organisational solutions found by both municipalities and schools differ remarkably from each other in accordance with local context. According to Ryynänen (2004), Finland follows the ideology of *democratic individualism* which, in alignment with contingency theory, is based on the notion of local decision-making being the most efficient and democratic way to organise society.

It might be claimed that, in the case of Finland, decision-making by the state establishes the framework within which local actors operate autonomously. The general principle appears to be accepted by all, and there seems to be no significant criticism of the state interfering too strongly in local matters either. There is tension between state and local authorities, however, for three main reasons. First, for historical reasons, Finland is only now beginning to undergo similar structural changes (including municipality mergers) to those that most Nordic countries experienced decades ago. Recent demographic and financial developments in Finland render that process very challenging. Secondly, the goals set at the national level encounter a scarcity of resources at the local level, establishing contradictory commitments for local actors. And thirdly, there has been a growing dissatisfaction because the governments have not been able to establish a sustainable framework within which local authorities can work.

Technical pressure on local actors in the form of standardisation, national testing and inspection appears to be softer in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. Might that be one reason why local actors in general seem rather satisfied with their own situation? Superintendents report being most satisfied in their work with the opportunities to use their own competencies, make their own decisions, realise the issues they consider good and, in general, to develop their local provision of education. Almost exactly the same views can be found among school leaders. In addition, members of the municipal school boards report that they are satisfied both with their capacity to influence educational issues and their status in the municipalities.

Several authors have argued that in the present situation, across different national systems, the state has increasingly tightened its grip through indirect steering in the form of soft governance (Hudson 2007; Moos 2009). A growing trend in Norway (though less visible than in Sweden) is for the state to utilise a sort of "licence to bypass" the municipalities by forwarding directives and initiatives directly to schools and school leaders. Once again, the situation in Finland is different, although similar tendencies can be noted there as well.

Taken together, several different partly conflicting trends in centralism in the Norwegian policy culture underscore that centralisation and decentralisation are "twin strategies" in practical politics. This has also been the case over the decades. Specifically, the professionalisation of municipal service production, including school administration, has reduced the degree of freedom for local autonomy in practice. However, the empirical pattern presented reveals a pattern of local autonomy, with internal couplings in the governance chain that are both tight and loose. The superintendents are active players in micro-policy processes by means of tight couplings to the school leaders embedded in a pattern of vertical trust, as well as tight couplings to the school boards mainly as a product of asymmetrical distribution of knowledge. Further, the school board members see themselves as empowered in general school policy matters in the political organisation of the municipality, yet when it comes to downwards influence towards schools, the level of perceived influence decreases.

In Norway, as in Denmark, we see a twin strategy of functional decentralisation and recentralisation. The centralisation is on both national and local level; the decentralisation is particularly between schools and the municipal administration.

In Sweden, a functionally decentralised system has existed, yet with a clear division of power, since the early 1990s. The state still makes all the laws and has an implementation and control structure of quality in place as a functionally centralised system. The municipalities and the individual schools run the schools and hire both school leader and teachers. But even here the state has decided on the qualifications for these people. So we can say that in the school sector we have a very controlled, functionally decentralised system; but we can also underscore that the school districts for the public schools work very effectively as a local governing body. One example illustrating this situation would be if a school leader wished to hire an English teacher but, after finding someone who would fit in very well, was unable to hire them because another person in the organisation who had been made redundant in another school had the right to any free position as English teacher for a period of 6 months (the length of this right can vary between school districts).

In Finland also, the simple dichotomy of centralisation and decentralisation does not work either. However, several sometimes contradictory tendencies can be identified both in the overall system and at the various levels. It seems that the various actors are still learning how to manage in the new societal approach established in the 1990s. In general it can be claimed that the territorial and functional decentralisation as well as the deregulation appear to have constructed quite a consistent entity. Due to demographic and financial challenges, however, much remains to be done regarding deconcentration. The current situation with its decision-making and

solutions based on state-level, municipal-level and school-level structures and processes is not sufficient; both trans-municipal and trans-school decision-making and solutions will be called for in future.

There seems to be a general trend in Denmark, Norway and Sweden that, following general functional decentralisation as a consequence of the new public management wave of the 1980s, the decentralisation has been followed by a sort of counter-functional centralisation by the state, particularly in the areas of the curriculum and the testing regime. There has thus been a sort of twin strategy of simultaneously strengthening and loosening the organisational couplings between state level and municipal level. On top of that, in all three countries a state functional centralism seems to have developed: in other words, the state bypasses the municipal level and interferes in the schools as a group rather than with individual schools, influencing the curriculum through testing and ranking of schools. Within the municipalities, the superintendents have been actors in a centralisation campaign between the schools and the municipal administration. In Denmark, on the one hand school leaders feel that it has become increasingly difficult to get in contact with the administration; on the other hand, school leaders feel that their degree of local autonomy is limited. By contrast, the Norwegian board members feel that it is difficult for them to influence school leaders. In all three countries, the pattern of decentralisation has been determined by each country's overall administrative traditions and construction.

In Finland and Norway, with their territorially decentralised municipal systems and many small municipalities, there is a feeling among superintendents and schools that superintendents, board members, and school leaders have a reasonable room for manoeuvre. The territorial decentralisation has influenced the functional decentralisation. Sweden and Denmark are in this respect more centralised territorially, with larger municipalities; in Denmark there has also been a wave of centralisation with mergers of schools.

In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, functional decentralisation has occurred from the municipality to the schools in the management of the administration and leadership of staff and the curriculum; at the same time, there seems to be a tendency concerning the output or results of the work with the curriculum for the state level to bypass the municipalities' authority in controlling the schools' results and checking the results through national testing of the students. There is thus a double strategy of both tightening and loosening organisational couplings between schools, municipal administrations, and the state. As often, some of the general Nordic trends can be identified also in Finland, but in a milder form.

1.2.3 Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism is often linked with the concept of justice and is one of the central focal points of modern democracies. But the concept of egalitarianism is an ambiguous concept with several different meanings:

1. The right of citizens to keep what is earned through his/her efforts.
2. The principle that all citizens should be treated equally and have equal opportunities.
3. The principle that social policies and therefore education policies shall remove the barriers to success for individuals or groups (Lauglo 1998).

In modern societies, education is a tool that can both create equality and perpetuate economic inequality. In an egalitarian society, all have the same right to fulfil their life-projects. Society and its institutions are to serve the citizens so that they can realise their life-projects.

When equality is on the agenda, politicians look for evidence that their regulations do not directly disadvantage groups of citizens by gender, race, religion, immigration status etc. All democratic countries pay some degree of attention to this goal in connection to the level of access to educational opportunities.

Political design decisions may lead to equality in a society. There are basically two ways to achieve this goal:

1. *Vertical equality*: the most common way is to compensate those who start out with disadvantages with special support.
2. *Horizontal equality*: emphasis on providing everyone with the same resources to engage in their life-project.

The two concepts of equality are often mutually incompatible. When a country emphasises egalitarian solutions, the result is usually high levels of taxation and public spending that conflict with the right for citizens to keep what they earn. An emphasis on inclusion may on the other hand undermine the rights of individuals to enact their life-projects in their own way (Devos et al. 2012, pp. 15–18).

In Denmark a municipality is required to run its operations based on objectives and frameworks established by parliament and government. There is discretion in determining how the operation is to be organised in order to achieve the objectives. For example, what resources are to be used, how are they to be organised, how are the premises to be designed and, to some extent, what staff are to be employed. Regardless of how a municipality decides to organise this, they must guarantee all children and students an equivalent education (Lov om kommuners styrelse 2013; Moos et al. 2014, p. 5).

The state uses active financial resource allocation in combination with reporting procedures as an indirect control instrument; municipalities must report their use of financial costs and human resources to state agencies on a yearly basis, thus also securing a minimum of equal opportunities for the students (Moos et al. 2014, p. 7).

This endeavour to create equal opportunities for students is also regarded as an obstacle to the development of special treatment for gifted students in the Nordic countries. The focus is thus on vertical equality: gifted students are not supported in developing their talents, so that they do not outstrip less gifted students too visibly in school. It seems that all are be treated equally, rather than according to their gifts and talents. Board members seem to be somewhat dissatisfied that school leaders do not create good conditions for high-performing students. This could reflect the tra-

dition of very egalitarian Nordic school systems, which traditionally have focused more on students with special needs than on high-performing students (Moos et al. 2014, p. 27). The responses from board members indicate that the historical social-democratic welfare state's vertical equality values are now being questioned and challenged by values which weight horizontal equality, giving weight to the principle that citizens are to be treated equally and have equal opportunities, in line with the principles of the new public management competitive state (Pedersen 2011) and the general neoliberal trend in Western societies.

Norwegian educational policy has been strongly influenced by egalitarian values since the early twentieth century. The term 'equality denotes the principle of horizon equality: an overall goal emphasising that the same resources and opportunities should be provided for all students, independent of their socio-economic or cultural background.

In Norway too, the policy ideal has gradually changed from horizontal equality of opportunity towards vertical equality in results. For children from different backgrounds to have similar opportunities in life, they would have to be treated differently. The underlying line of argument states that equality of results would necessitate inequality of provisions and distribution of resources. The ideology indicates that the state is responsible not only for providing opportunities for all to participate in education, but also for whether people are actually successful in doing so. This shift reflects a more general debate about what equality means in reality. For example, the educational policy literature distinguishes between different facets of the equality concept, including equality of access, equality of survival (the capacity to fulfil the completion cycle), equality of output (of schooling) and equality of outcome (the societal capitalisation of the individual's educational output). In this respect, the qualitative shift of the 1990s from a horizontal to a vertical view of equality represents a move towards emphasising equality of output. This development can be regarded as a change from a primary focus on horizontal to an increased focus on vertical equality. This contrasts with the Danish development.

In all Nordic countries, the individual student's right to receive special education (in accordance with professional judgement, carried out by the pedagogical and psychological services) is anchored in the Educational Act and in several directives. Thus it is taken for granted, and accordingly partly absent on the various task-preference structures in the investigations. However, it is noteworthy that student special needs are close to absent in superintendents' regular dialogue with their school leaders. Among school leaders, 72 % perceive a strong demand from the municipality to prioritise "*students facing difficulties to achieve the goals to get appropriate help and support*." In other words, this issue is higher on the school leader agenda than it is for superintendents and school boards. One reason for this is that while in Norway and Sweden school leaders are highly conscious of these children in their schools, the higher district level sees this phenomenon as something for which the schools already have funds; their view, accordingly, is that it is up to the school leader to use his/her power to reorganise the school so that money will be there for these children. This conflict frequently leads to situation where school leaders do not push for additional funds.

It can be argued that the achievement of egalitarianism and the Nordic welfare state were the primary societal goals for Finland after gaining independence in 1917. As in the other Nordic countries, the focus here was on horizontal equality – until the 1980s, when the Nordic welfare state and structural equality in education had mostly been fulfilled. That process was managed through a state-led, system-oriented, centralised administration. Once the primary goals were achieved, Finnish society has partly continued to proceed along the same path and partly been trying to find the next major goals to aim for. Increasing demographic and financial challenges have hampered both efforts. Regarding egalitarianism, Finland, like Norway, has moved strongly in the direction of vertical equality. The approach is often referred to as radical equality. There have been several legislative reforms to strengthen the process, and local authorities often criticise that they do not have the resources to meet mandated goals. However, there seems to be a shared acceptance of the goal and its priority among municipal school board members, superintendents and school leaders alike. As in Denmark, there is an increasing concern about how to support gifted students.

All the Nordic countries share a long tradition of egalitarianism in the public schools in the sense that the focus has been on all students having the same opportunities. The problem is, what is to be understood as equal opportunity? Should all schools have the same access to economic resources per student? Or should education policies remove the barriers to success for individuals or groups? In Denmark, vertical equality has tended to prevail, but the focus is increasingly changing to horizontal equality. This development can be interpreted as an increase in recent years of the neoliberal influence towards building a competitive state, moving away from the more general humanistic trend of the traditional welfare state in later years, perhaps as a consequence of Denmark's membership of the European Union and its open market since 1973. In Norway, which is not a member of the European Union, there has on the other hand has been a shift from the stance of horizontal equality to a stance whereby all students have access to same results, meaning that there must be an unequal distribution of resources between the privileged and less privileged, the concept of vertical equality. Although Finland is an EU member state, a development similar to that in Norway can be identified there as well.

1.2.4 Efficiency

In our context, efficiency often focuses on scrutinising public expenditures in order to improve the use of resources. How the efficiency matter is embedded in political cultures varies from country to country. In some countries the focus has been on shifting public services into what is claimed to be a more efficient private market. In others, there is only a public recognition that public service can be delivered with less waste and without weight on privatisation. In most cases, an emphasis on efficiency requires accepting a degree of inequality. The neoliberal emphasis on efficiency has characterised all governments in the Nordic countries, both centre-right and centre-left governments.

The acceptance of efficiency as a goal leads to the search for measurable and objective units of comparison. In many countries there is a tendency to equate quality with efficiency, with less attention paid to the alternative ways of defining quality that might require deeper discussions about innate excellence. When efficiency is promoted in the public sector focus, it is often about management of perceived waste (Devos et al. 2012, pp. 22–23).

In Denmark, superintendents feel that they have to prioritise most of their time for 'budget and finances,' even if they find this area less interesting and less meaningful. There is a weak tendency towards seeing themselves as being more policy-makers than implementation-responsible or administrators.

The issues most frequently processed in school board meetings are 'economy, resources, and budget issues,' 'information from the school administration,' and 'information from the superintendent.' These priorities can be explained by the fact that the school board is primarily an economic board that listens to information from administrative managers. It is very seldom that the school board deals with individual problems (Moos et al. 2014, p. 13).

As the government has cut funding to the municipalities, finances remain a challenging issue for the political board. A lot of detailed structuring and planning was therefore needed at this level (Moos et al. 2014, p. 14). These responses in the survey show that efficiency takes a prominent place in the boards' focus. This can be explained as the consequence of a double reasoning process: first, that efficiency is the most prominent responsibility of the municipal council, and therefore also of the municipal boards; and secondly, because a shrinkage in the economy as has been the case since 2008 places additional emphasis on economy, because it is the municipal council's responsibility to see that taxpayers' money is spent as efficiently as possible.

School leaders perceive that the school boards' expectations of them to keep to budget are very high (82 %), lower (58 %) on implementing new school acts, and still lower (53 %) on the ability to lead education in their schools. Other expectations score lower than 50 % (DCR p. 19). Efficiency is thus very much in focus simultaneously at several levels in the school administration.

Efficiency has thus been much in focus in Denmark, as part of the post-1980s new public management wave, as a means to adapt the Danish economy to the global competition. This was partly triggered by poor Danish competitiveness in the international markets and by almost permanent public budget deficits dating back to the 1970s. Economically speaking, the Danish public sector ran out of control. Parallel to this development, the focus on efficiency in the public sector was also inspired by regarding Denmark as a competitive state in which welfare state thinking had been superimposed by competitive state thinking, which demanded efficiency in the public sector and in the school sector. Education and the school are today regarded as important means to enhance Danish competitive power (Pedersen 2011).

Regarding efficiency, similar phenomena can be noted in Finland as in Denmark. It can even be claimed that many aspects of the efficiency concept manifest themselves even more strongly in Finland. On the one hand, Finland is now for the first

time experiencing structural changes, such as municipality mergers, that Denmark (and Sweden, partly also Norway) embarked upon decades ago. On the other hand, demographical, ideological and financial development in Finland further complicate efforts. Regarding demographic changes, Finnish society is ageing more rapidly than any other nation in the European Union, and internal migration from the countryside into (particularly south-western) towns is strong. Ideologically, the relationship between the state and municipalities was radically reversed in the 1990s, and today local authorities are the main providers of education services. This they have to do with outdated municipal structures and fewer and fewer resources. The municipal structures have not been modified to meet the changed demographic profile, and each municipality wishes to maintain its sovereignty. The scarcity of resources, on the other hand, is a result of the revision of the state funding system; it has intensified with the prolonged recession that Finland has faced since the 1990s. It is not surprising that financial issues and efforts to increase efficiency are the top single task for Finnish municipal school members, superintendents and school leaders.

The issue of cost efficiency and reduction of financial inflow to primary education has not been high on the Norwegian policy agenda due to the nation's favourable national economy and funding of its welfare-state model. A wave of increasing efficiency was initiated by the government around the millennium shift (Møller and Skedsmo 2013), but the introduction of a major curriculum reform from 2006 downplayed this agenda. This is not to say that financial management is not important; rather the opposite is the case. Superintendents rank financial management and budgeting high in their task-preference structure, and so too do school boards. Also school leaders see "*keeping the school's budget*" as a central expectation in their work – both imposed by the municipality (96 %) and as a self-regulated demand of their own (91 %).

Efficiency plays, it would seem, a bigger role in the Danish and Finnish school system than in the Norwegian system, due to the greater slack in Norwegian public finances. In Denmark, and as earlier described in Finland, this issue is among the most prominent, both for municipal boards and for schools. Thus there would seem to be a rather distinct difference between the Norwegian situation, where the efficiency matter in schools does not play a prominent role, and that in Denmark and Finland, where it is very much in focus both as economic steering (as an important part of the Danish and Finnish endeavour to enhance the country's competitive power in globalised world markets) and as a prominent means in the competitive state's toolbox. Traditionally Denmark and Finland have been small, open economies without many raw materials, whereas Norway has its oil. These differences may explain why the efficiency issue plays a bigger role in the Danish and Finnish school systems than in that of Norway. In Sweden there are differing views on this issue. One is that there is too little money in the system; the other argument says the problem is not too little money.

1.2.5 Quality

The concept of quality serves as a benchmark for the effectiveness of an educational system. The quality question in this sense asks for the character of an educational system. Globalisation in education has brought a comparative element into the concept of quality that has transformed this question into a quantitative one in which comparisons may be made using international assessments, such as for example PISA. This shift from a qualitative, descriptive perspective to a measurement- and quantitative-based one has brought about a major change in how policymakers think about how to assure that the public schools are good (Devos et al. 2012, pp. 19–21).

The regulation of the Nordic school systems has changed in many ways during the last two decades. At the beginning of the 1980s there was a strong and general move to decentralise finances, personnel management and other areas from state level to local municipal level, and in many cases from there further down to the school level. These changes were introduced at a time when several countries faced a difficult economic situation because expenses in the public sector had run out of control. At the end of the 1990s a recentralisation of the goal-setting and evaluation of schools' work was also observed (Tanggaard 2011) in order that the central authorities should regain control over and enhance the quality of the public sector's output (Moos et al. 2014, p. 6).

Quality has begun to play an important role since the PISA investigations have shown that the Danish school system has not lived up to political expectations. Therefore it is not surprising that 95 % of the superintendents are assessed by their superiors, either annually (80 %) or every half year (11 %). Nine per cent are assessed by their political leaders. The main reasons for this assessment are, in prioritised sequence: (1) in order to make superintendents accountable to known expectations, (2) in order to identify areas that need improvement, (3) to contribute to CDP, (4) in order to describe relevant goals, and (5) to identify strengths, (Moos et al. 2014, p. 12).

The prominent position of quality in the municipalities' work with schools is shown by the board members when these report that quality and curriculum, meaning student learning, learning environment and teaching are the most important issues they work with (for board members, 33 %; for board chairs, 15 %). This comes before even economic issues.

Board members emphasise quality and curriculum twice as much as chairs do (Moos et al. 2014, p. 14). The political interest in education in general and in quality assurance/assessment is high. This goes for both local initiatives and those that are initiated at national level (DCR p. 15).

School boards expect superintendents to be the active party in quality assurance with schools. When the administration finds that a school is underperforming, the superintendent is expected to intervene with school leaders. School boards can examine and discuss the situation, but have no active role in relation to school leaders.

Superintendents prioritise face-to-face interactions with school leaders: communication and sparring, but also through work in respect to the school and municipal organisation and the quality report (Moos et al. 2014, p. 17).

Quality plays a prominent role among both Danish board members and Danish superintendents in their perception of their jobs. Probably the most important factor in influencing the political culture around the quality issue is the introduction of international comparisons such as TIMMS, PISA, TALLIS etc. Participation in these comparisons showed that Danish students scored worse than students in the other countries that were used. These international measurements and comparisons – part of the globalisation movement and part of the view of the state as a competitive state in which education plays an important part in building up the nation's competitive force – actualised the need to scrutinise and rethink what was needed for Danish schools development. It is in that context that the discussion of quality in the Danish school should be understood, and that is why focus on quality in schools is shifting from processes in the schools to their output in recent years. That is reflected in the responses to the questionnaire, which show that the quality question plays an important role in the school boards, which, as representatives of the school owners, are responsible for securing that the schools can maintain and augment the quality of their results.

Recent changes in Norwegian educational policy may be evident in the introduction of the national quality assurance system (NQAS), which includes evaluations and standardised achievement tests. These measures increase the focus on educational outcomes in terms of student performance in achievement tests, indicating new modes of school governing (Helgøy and Homme 2006).

The increased focus on educational outcomes in terms of student performance in achievement tests includes concepts of educational quality that seem to have been defined by expectations of specific outcomes (Skedsmo 2009). An important aspect related to the increased focus on evaluation and measurement is the need to make key actors such as superintendents, school leaders and teachers accountable (Johansson et al. 2013).

When school board members were asked to prioritise tasks for which they felt they should hold superintendents responsible, the responses were:

- Student achievements in national tests.
- Reaching budget targets.
- Monitoring school results and quality indicators.
- Producing the quality report.

The free-form answers cluster and cohere around a set of demands that hold the superintendent accountable for student quality in terms of an appropriate level of student achievement.

Compared to the inspection-driven systems found in many other Western democracies, the Norwegian approach does not imply direct control of educational quality in terms of teaching and learning in schools. The state supervision follows a system-revision approach and aims to expose cases where legal regulations are not followed (Sivesind 2009). So far, state supervision has focused on areas such as the

right to special education and adapted teaching, securing a safe school environment, and the extent to which the municipalities have established a system for quality assurance.

Swedish political discussion has been highly focused on the quality of schools, and the debate has been hard because Sweden has lost its position as one of the ten best-performing countries in PISA. There have been many attempts, through changing the law and school practice, to try to regain PISA position. Sweden has looked at the top-performing countries and tried to adjust to their standard way of performance. There has even been a state commission to look into how long different implementation structures for school reforms should be expected to take. For the moment, the government and the opposition have decided to work together with a quality agenda for schools all the way up to 2020. But at the same time Sweden has a very active state schools inspectorate that is conducting not only school evaluations according to school law, but also wider quality analysis of different aspects of the local school system.

Quality insurance is perhaps the area where Finland differs most from the other Nordic countries. This may be a consequence of Finland excelling in international learning-outcome and societal-impact surveys in recent decades. A further reason may be that with the rearrangement of the relationship between the state and municipalities as well as the financial recessions, the tradition of the state being financially committed to finance the implementation of educational reforms no longer exists. The state is no longer committed to fund the legislative reforms and obligations as it was before. On the other hand, it also seems that the state cannot direct municipalities in detail as it used to. An evaluation system confined to supervision, quantitative factors and outcomes will not suffice in the present situation.

In contrast to what is often presented, Finland does have an extensive evaluation system that includes international, national, regional and local levels. The scope of the evaluation system is not on outcomes but on the process. Likewise, the data of the evaluation system are not confined to results, but attempt to capture many-sided information. The salient findings of the evaluations are public, but the emphasis is on the supporting actors in the various levels being able to develop their operations rather autonomously. In the opinion of Finnish municipal school board members, superintendents and school leaders, quality is an essential issue; but it does not manifest itself in the everyday in the same way as in the other Nordic countries. The technical pressure is softer.

To sum up. In all the Nordic countries, quality has in recent years taken on a prominent role in the assessment of the school system and schools. A very important trigger for the introduction of this focus on the quality issue in the Nordic countries has unquestionably been the introduction of international and transnational comparisons as a by-product of the increasing globalisation in which three of the Nordic countries are involved. In Finland, the scarcity of resources also plays an important role. School quality has become an important factor in augmenting the countries' relative competitive strengths. In order to be able to compare school quality rather easily between countries, measurements are being converted into quantifiable figures, and the quality that is measured is the quality of the outcome of

student work. At the present time, quality is in these countries measured by national tests, possibly with the exception of Finland, and school boards in all Nordic countries think that the quality issue is an important one.

There are both similarities and differences between the Nordic countries in how the quality issue is handled. Common to all the Nordic countries is that the outcome is measured nationally and that all countries are participating in the international measurements, for example PISA. Common to all the countries is that the national parliament and state administrations are 'meta-steering' the schools through legislation and supervising test results for the schools, at least in some way. The day-to-day handling of schools, however, is the responsibility of the municipalities as the school owners (except in the case of the private schools).

There are however differences in the ways in which the quality of school outcomes is monitored. At one end of the continuum there is Sweden, which has a centralised system with a state commission that is the agency that monitors school quality. Norway has a sort of middle position, where there is state supervision not so much of school results as of whether things are in accordance with the law. In Finland there is a lot of evaluation at various levels, but the information is mainly used to guide the process at the various levels autonomously. At the other end of the scale, in Denmark, there is no central state supervision and control organ. Monitoring of school quality is handled mainly by the municipalities, owing to the decentralisation of the primary responsibility for the quality of the school system from the state level to the municipalities. This does not mean that the state does not interfere in school matters, but that it is happening in a more indirect way than in the other two countries.

1.2.6 Choice

A central question in discussions about social values is how to resolve the tension between individual rights and social responsibilities. Educational choice can be the result of different intentions.

In certain countries the right to choose a school according to one's own preferences is a fundamental question in the educational system, reflecting pluralism. Freedom of education is enshrined in the constitution in the Nordic countries, and that includes more and less government funding for all schools, including independent or private schools. Public schools are run by the municipalities, under a certain level of government supervision. Choice is in a state of tension between equity and social segregation.

Choice has recently been associated with increasing competition between schools and marketisation. The argument for this trend is that when products compete in a free market, they are forced to improve. Thus the argument continues that the product of the educational system would likewise improve once subjected to market forces. In the same direction is the argument that such a market environment would encourage schools to be more responsive, resulting in educational practice that better meets parents' preferences (Devos et al. 2012, pp. 23–26).

The idea that the public sector is best governed using steering techniques inspired by private-sector competition, consumer choice and transparent institutions has been fostered by new public management as a steering technology and technique. One sign of this tendency is free parental school choice, both across school and daycare institution catchment areas and across municipal borders (Moos et al. 2014, p. 5).

By tradition, the municipalities have been important agents in the governance of the public sector. Decentralised educational governance has, according to the Danish 'free/independent school' tradition, also been a very central part of the Danish educational self-understanding, and to some extent of the practice (Moos et al. 2014, p. 7).

Denmark has a long tradition of choice, which is regarded as a core characteristic of liberal democracy. Concerning parents' opportunities to send their children to an independent school, it has been decided ever since the first constitution of 1849 that there is an obligation that all children must have an education, but there is no obligation that they have to go to a school (Skott and Kofod 2013). Therefore around 15 % of Danish school children go to a private school (Bang 2003). On the other hand, there has for many years been the tradition that children in the public schools are allocated to schools according to where they live. Public schools have had certain catchment areas from which they recruit their students. In recent years, as part of the new public management wave and the neoliberal ascendancy, that has been changed. It now is possible to choose school across catchment areas. There has thus been a trend towards more choice in the public school system too.

In Finland, the foundation of the education system still strongly follows egalitarian principles. Most schools are public and managed by the municipalities. The few independent schools have either a religious or ideological approach. There seems to be a societal view in favour of keeping things as they are. Local authorities have the obligation to provide education, and they allocate a local school to each pupil. One can also note neoliberal trends. In comprehensive education, parents have the right to decide whether to send their child to school or not and to choose the school for their child. In practice, children attend the local school, partly because in the sparsely populated countryside it is not that easy to go to another school, and partly because variations in school quality are among the smallest in the OECD countries. In upper secondary education, the young have total freedom in what school to select.

Free schools within the primary education sector in Norway are restricted to religious groups or distinct pedagogical communities such as Steiner or Montessori. This differs from the Swedish system with its commercial free schools. This special property of the Norwegian primary education system ensures that most children enter a public school independent of social class. Furthermore, free school choice within the municipality is restricted to a small number of municipalities, among them Oslo, with its largest population. Over and above this, the restrictive attitude to choice has been a central value in the social-democratic and left-wing camps, strongly supported by the teachers trade unions. On the other hand, the centre-conservative wing has shown a positive approach to private schools, yet in a more regulated commercial regime than in Sweden. Thus the current conservative

government has launched a liberalisation of free-school regulations, in line with the former centre-conservative government in office 2001–2005. Taken together, the issue of choice reflects deeper ideological conflicts over the normative and cultural-cognitive, i.e. ideological, basis of the Norwegian unified school institution.

Sweden is very different from Norway but similar to Denmark in respect of private or free schools. It has about 25 % free schools that are run as businesses, and some of these generate a healthy profit. There is debate in Sweden today over whether this should be allowed or whether the laws should be changed in order to prevent the free schools generating profit.

In all the Nordic countries, the majority of students go to public schools, and free, independent or private schools constitute a minority of schools. Norway is the most restrictive country regarding the possibility of choice between public and private schools. In Denmark, the possibility of sending children to a private school is part of the understanding of democracy. Therefore about 70 % of the school fees is paid by government funding (Skott and Kofod 2013) and 15 % of the children attend private school. In Sweden, 25 % of children attend private school. But in contrast to Denmark and Norway, the Swedish private schools are publicly funded, and the private owners are allowed to generate profit from the school. In Finland, independent schools obtain their funding from the state according to the same criteria as municipal schools.

1.3 Reflections and Conclusions on Political Cultures

The main object of this chapter on political cultures and their significance for the running of the school system in the respective countries has shown that there are, as expected, both similarities across and differences between the Nordic countries. There is a great deal of evidence that national culture influences the way things are executed in organisations (Hofstede 1985, 1991).

In this chapter we have probed the meaning of the local political municipal cultures and the way in which these influence schools in the different Nordic countries. This investigation has shown that there are important shared influences from the international environment in all three countries.

There seems in all these countries to be an interaction between the globalisation of the economy and the national political cultures: an interaction that is having pronounced implications for the countries' school systems. For the last 20 years, the Nordic countries have participated in international comparisons on schools across boarders: TIMMS (since 1995 in mathematics and natural science), PISA (since 2000 in overall school results), PIRLS (since 2006 in reading), and TALIS (since 2008 in teacher and leader attitudes to the school milieu). In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, schools scored below expectations, and these scores became a wakeup call for the politicians, resulting in initiatives in legislation, the establishment of evaluation and supervision agencies, and a special focus on how to improve schools' results. The different ways in which these basically similar challenges have been

tackled in the different countries show the difference in political culture. Finland's success in these international surveys has allowed development to focus on other issues, or on the same issues in another way. Of course, the different Finnish context has also influenced the differences.

All Nordic countries have as a consequence of globalisation been greatly influenced by the new public management wave as a means for the respective countries to cope with international competition. Common to all the Nordic countries is that they build on the so-called Nordic welfare state, inspired by traditionally strong social-democratic values and a relatively strong state. Therefore equity – of various forms – plays an important role in the political cultures. The analysis in this chapter has shown that there is perhaps a tendency towards a more competitive situation, in which education is regarded as an important factor in the international competition. Hence the focus on how the respective school systems score internationally, as well as the focus on quality, but regarded as efficiency and assessed in numbers.

The Nordic countries have different administrative histories and histories of the school's placement in the administrative system. These history and administrative traditions differ in each country. Denmark has a rather long history of a decentralised administrative system, in which the school owners are the municipalities and in which it is difficult just to bypass the municipalities in matters of school. Sweden has a more centralised but no less democratic system, whereas Norway has a tradition in between the other two countries. The Finnish system, on the other hand, was until the 1980s strictly state-led, system-oriented and centralised; then the roles of the state and municipalities were radically reversed. This history and these traditions have had and still have a great impact on how the political cultures function today. They are important explanations for the differences between the Nordic countries' political cultures. In spite of this, there often seems to be a rather elite-based culture in the school sector. There seems to be an interaction between the state and the municipal political and administrative structures and the cultures that define how the schools are handled in the respective countries. The history and the administrative and political traditions have to a great extent been defining factors that have created the political and administrative culture that has determined how the schools are handled. These are the differences and the similarities that we have identified in the above analysis.

With this picture one might about the roles of the various functions, i.e. in what ways the superintendent, the board chair, the board members or the school leaders influence the political culture that frames the way in which decisions on schools are taken at the municipal level. The broad picture shown by our country reports is that in the interplay between the administrative structures, which are more or less regulated by a combination of national legislation and local agreements on the one side and the persons taking the specific decisions on the other, the structures frame the sample space for the culture, and the culture, for its part, frames the possibilities for the decision-makers. On the other hand, at the same time as the actors' and the decision-makers' possibilities are enhanced and also limited by the decision structures and the culture, they are also actors in shaping and influencing both the structure and the culture (Giddens 1984/1999).

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly which of the stakeholders and actors that have been discussed play the most defining role in developing the political culture, because culture and formal structures define the sample space and actors influence both culture and structure. And in this sense, the different cultures are products of, among other things, the public debate on schools and the quality of national schooling as reflected in the international assessments, the various countries' administrative and political histories, the national, transnational and international competition, the local political and cultural history, the view of the school's role in society, and the specific actors that run the municipal school administration.

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