Chapter 9
Competence and Understanding in the Governance Chain

Elisabet Nihlfors, Hans Christian Høyer, Klaus Kasper Kofod, and Mika Risku

Abstract Education is of fundamental value for a society; to raise and foster a new generation of citizens in a global and local multicultural context. It is therefore crucial to identify the competences that are needed for multiple actors in the school governance chain, with the aim of achieving this mission in different contexts over time.

An underlying question in this chapter, when dealing with competence and understanding, is what the purposes of education are and who has the power to decide how national decisions should be understood and realized locally. In this chapter some of the prerequisites for discussing this question will be problematized. The focus is on political and professional leaders at the local level and their possible impact on the prerequisites for education. The research results presented here are derived from analyses made of the statements of different leaders – both political and professional – preferably at the municipal level, and of their work in the governance chain in a municipality.

The empirical data are analysed from descriptions of what is required to translate individual knowledge into joint or shared competences, which in turn may increase the possibilities for action in order to achieve educational policy goals. To this is added the importance of understanding one's assignment to increase the organizational competence in a municipal organization. A guiding presumption of this chapter is that if leaders who govern schools – both political and professional leaders at different levels – are able to take charge of different areas of knowledge within the

E. Nihlfors (✉)
Department of Education, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden
e-mail: elisabet.nihlfors@edu.uu.se

H.C. Høyer
Faculty of Business Administration, Hedmark University College, Elverum, Norway
e-mail: hans.hoyer@hihm.no

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

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

L. Moos et al. (eds.), *Nordic Superintendents: Agents in a Broken Chain*,
Educational Governance Research 2, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-25106-6_9

organization and translate that into joint competences, shared and used by all, the possibilities of identifying and determining the relevant prerequisites for education in a broad sense will increase.

Keywords Shared competence • Shared understanding • Prerequisities for education • Purpose of education • Relation politicians and professionals

1 Introduction

Ensuring educational quality is high on the agenda in many countries and municipalities. Performance indicators of students' learning outcomes are shared and compared between schools, municipalities and countries. At the same time our data show that there are members of school boards, in some countries, who believe that students' results have improved when they have actually worsened (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013) and school board members who feel that their level of influence on school-based decision-making is low (Nihlfors et al. 2014). The relationship between the school boards and school leaders is relatively weak and infrequent in some of the Nordic countries (Paulsen and Moos 2014), but in all of the Nordic countries there is a tight coupling between the school administration/superintendent and the chair of the school board when it comes to organizational, strategic and financial matters (ibid.). Our body of research, as such, portrays a web of tight and loose couplings between the key actors in local school governance in the Nordic countries, and some of these connections are also embedded in asymmetric power relations. Even if the municipalities have an important role in the governance of schools, the state still remains an active player. At the same time, however, educational policy is moving towards being subjected to the increasing influence of outside experts and agents, who often use standards and data which can be seen as depoliticizing the field (Moos 2009; Skedsmo 2009). These results raise certain questions: how, for example, can different actors, stakeholders and others at different levels be involved in sense-making processes if they have such different knowledge and also different purposes?

There are big demands and expectations of an organization that both has knowledge as a fundament for people working in the organization and as a goal for all its students. Added to this is the fact that, in Sweden, there is a statutory requirement for education to be based on research and proven experience (Swedish Education Act, Chapter 1, section 5), which makes it even more obvious that different types of knowledge are needed as the basis for this work. Knowledge is needed not only for educational and learning issues but also in several other different fields, such as organizing for learning, allocating resources, analysing students' results, taking responsibility for children's health care, food issues, leisure activities etc.

1.1 Different Actors

In the Nordics countries the chairman of a board or committee who is responsible for education in a municipality gets a great deal of her/his information from the central administration, which is usually led by one or more superintendents. The superintendent gets her/his information from different co-workers; directly from the school leaders or via some form of middle management and also from the administration at municipal level. Overall, and with different networks included, a large number of people are directly or indirectly involved in the governance of education and in the construction of the organizational knowledge required in the governance process. If we add actors in the national and global arenas, it becomes obvious that different actors have to cover a large number of different areas of expertise where different types of knowledge and competences are needed. We have in our questionnaires and interviews asked, among other things, how different actors perceive their own and others' knowledge, skills and capacity, and have also asked questions related to different values and expectations from and of each other, and the expectations as well as influences of different stakeholders.

As a starting point we can state, on the basis of our empirical research, that a majority of our respondents – school leaders, superintendents and school board members –are well educated and dedicated to the work. They like their work or their position of trust and want to make a difference, and are convinced that they *can* make a difference, for and in the education sector. Most of the superintendents and school leaders have a background in education, while the politicians' backgrounds differ. A majority of politicians, in most of the Nordic countries, have a background in the public sector (Moos and Merok Paulsen 2014). We will discuss in this chapter to what extent different respondents' statements indicate that there are prerequisites for different types of individual knowledge and skills that can be turned into shared competences, that can in turn form a base for shared actions that are embedded in trusting relationships in the governance of schools in the municipal sector.

1.2 Different Context

All the municipalities in the four Nordic countries work under very different circumstances. The differences are both inside the countries and between them. A couple of examples of these differences are the size of municipality, the number of inhabitants, the volume of people moving out of and into a municipality, the presence of immigrants and refugees, demographic composition, diversity of employers, rate of unemployment, distance to a bigger city, distance to college or university etc. In some municipalities students and parents can choose between different schools in the same municipality and/or between independent and municipal schools. In other municipalities there is a struggle to prevent schools from closing. These circumstances may affect the enactment of national educational reforms, as

politicians, superintendents and school leaders not only understand the reforms differently but are also motivated – or not – to carry them out depending on their different purposes, political or professional. Interpreting the circumstances at hand also needs a certain type of expert knowledge and a certain level of shared understanding. If, for example, interdependent actors in the governance chain have incompatible frames of reference, often conceived as a high cognitive distance, the risk of conflict increases (Nooteboom et al. 2007).

There are some differences in the Nordic countries when it comes to the level of decentralization, recentralization or both at the same time in different areas of education. Finland and Sweden can be taken as examples of two extremes; Hargreavs and Shirley (2009) describe Finland as steered from the top, built from the bottom, and both motivated and supported from the sides, while Sweden is described by Blanchenay et al. (2014) as a mismatch between official responsibilities and the actual powers of the various stakeholders. They find it difficult to know who is in charge of what. Norway has during the last decade decentralized formal powers and authorities from the state to the municipalities in important pedagogical matters, such local curriculum development, teacher training and leadership training, associated with the implementation of the curriculum reform known as the "Knowledge Promotion" (2006–2010). Yet on the other hand, the state has strengthened its indirect and direct steering through performance indicators, national training programmes and directives aimed at municipalities and schools, and local decisions have increasingly become "blueprints" of national policies (Engeland 2000). There can, as such, be assumed to be an imbalance between state control and local autonomy in the school governance chain (Paulsen and Skedsmo 2014). Regardless of this or other circumstances, the school leaders in all the Nordic countries have a duty and responsibility for running the local schools and the superintendents for leading and managing the local provisions of education.

The reasons for decentralization differ between countries and at different times even if the economic issue is often one of the reasons (Weiler 1990). When something is decentralized, differences between municipalities and schools may be expected and also required, which may also be a reason why decentralization is used. One might say that to fulfil the goals of decentralization demands differences in the performance of different schools. Questions that may be raised in this context are whether legislation and the funding system are designed so as to create and support the required (e)quality; how large differences are acceptable; and who are the ones to judge /…/… *there may be differences in education itself that makes it unequal even if the targets are met*. (Quennerstedt 2006 p. 117 *Our translation*). In all four Nordic countries there is an attempt to guarantee both equality and equity in relation to education from the national level, through national laws on school education and through public funding for those schools that are free of charge for the students. Public commitment to education and to equality and equity is high in all the Nordic countries.

The municipalities are to a great extent self-governing authorities with a range of responsibilities including education. Financial issues are a key responsibility for the municipalities. In most of the Nordic countries, money for education was for a long

time transferred from the national to the municipal level as earmarked funding. This system ended in, for example, Finland and Sweden in the mid-1990s, and has had an impact on the relations between the national and local level especially as concerns educational reforms, since extra money has not been included for implementation at local level. Sweden has, for example, in the last two decades had a large number of nationally decided educational reforms every year, or every second year, and many municipalities think that the reforms have been "under-funded". This is an example of demands being made on municipal authorities for the knowledge and skills relevant for implementing different new reforms while they also have to enact those reforms and at the same time be in charge of financial issues.

Another factor that may affect what competences are needed is whether or not education is looked upon as just one among various other responsibilities for the local school board. In some municipalities a board may have responsibility for education as well as other areas like elderly care, leisure activities and/or culture. Other boards may be responsible for some or all education, from preschool to upper secondary school education (Moos and Merok Paulsen 2014). Another factor to examine is whether or not education is handled in a specific way. Is it looked upon purely as a state-driven activity or is it an activity "owned" by the municipality or the independent school owner? Schools and education are formally "owned" by the municipalities or by independent school owners when it comes to fulfilling the national goals in all four Nordic countries. The question of ownership is here put forward as an issue of values that can affect decision-making. Regardless of the answers to these questions, national decisions made by the Parliament are supposed to be enacted by the municipalities whatever their local circumstances might be. Both politicians and professionals in different positions in the municipality or in independents schools are responsible for the results. The question elaborated in this chapter is whether our data indicate that there are prerequisites for shared competences and understanding to guide decision-making.

A question that arises is whether the competences within the organization are valued and visible and whether this in turn influences the processes of enactment. We have earlier shown that there is a difference in the degree of trust and confidence between politicians and professionals on different levels in the Nordic countries (Høyer et al. 2014). When it comes to control and trust in Local School Governance, one analysis of the Nordic data shows that: *Educational policy was increasingly moving toward a governance space developed by experts and agents and depoliticized through standards and data* (Moos 2009; Skedsmo 2009 in Høyer et al. 2014). One might ask whether these movements also have something to do with the complexity of education that requires a high degree of competence on different levels and from different actors. Our attempt in this chapter is to investigate, by analysing our empirical data as inspired by Hall (1990) and Sandberg and Targama (1998), whether we can identify weaker and stronger elements that might explain some of the differences between the four countries when it comes to the process regarding competence and understanding.

These few examples above are aimed at highlighting the fundamental underlying questions of education in a discussion of knowledge and shared competences for

governing education; what purpose do schools and education have from the single municipality's point of view? The answers may differ, depending on both the political point of view and the local circumstances, some of which are mentioned above. The answers may, in the next step, also influence the understanding of different reforms as well as single decisions by the school board that will affect the prerequisites for a school leader at a single preschool or school.

1.3 Different Understanding

There is a complexity and a wide range of areas that school leaders, superintendents and school board members have to respond to. This in turn raises the question of how different actors in the field *understand* the purpose behind, for example, national decisions; how they understand the actual situation for education in a single municipality, the needs at different schools, the differences in working environments for single preschools and schools in the municipality or in the context of independent school owners etc. Here, understanding should be interpreted as the ability to consider how to create the best prerequisites for teachers and school leaders to fulfil the aims of the curriculum in a way that lives up to its purpose. Decisions are both political and professional and are influenced by different stakeholders in the wider society, each with their own understanding.

The present Education Act in Sweden states, as mentioned earlier, that school leaders and teachers shall work on the basis of scientific knowledge and proven experience. This law underlines the importance of knowledge-based decisions and also shines a light on the borderline between political and professional decisions when it comes to fulfilling the purpose of education in a single school. What knowledge and skills are important on different levels to live up to this objective, and how are political and professional sense-making processes made possible? In Denmark, for example, the law on the *folkeskole* is broad in its expression in terms of what kind of knowledge should be taught and how it should be taught. This leaves room for school leaders and teachers to interpret and choose both the knowledge to be learned and the didactic methods (Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen/The Folkeskole Act 2013, section 1). Nevertheless the understanding between actors at different levels is needed to make it possible for school board members to make knowledge-based decisions that take account of the situation in a particular school.

The legislation in all the Nordic countries concentrates primarily on the obligations of the education provider or school owner. One finds no mention of the school superintendent or the municipal school board in the legislation. With regard to school leaders and teachers, the legislation states that each school has to have a school leader responsible for the school's operations, and an adequate number of staff. However, the core curricula express explicitly how education has to be organized nationally in terms of agreements between the various stakeholders.

School board members, superintendents, school leaders and teachers all have different expectations of how things should be handled and for what purpose. That

is something that can be a strength or a weakness, depending on how these differences are used in the governance chain. A question that arises is, therefore, how much do the different actors know and understand of one another's interpretations and understanding. We have shown that there seems to be a sense-making process between the superintendent and the chair of the board, but that does not seem to be enough, since mistrust can be found, for example in Sweden, between different layers in the chain (Nihlfors and Johansson 2013).

In this chapter we have chosen to discuss knowledge as something partly separate from, yet interdependent with, competence. Our approach to the generic competence construct concurs with other conceptualizations that emphasize that competence embraces skills and attitudes complementary to knowledge in the cognitive sense (Cannon-Bowers et al. 1995). Moreover, work-related competence is mostly situated in specific work contexts or group relations, from which it is hardly possible to separate it (Wenger 1998). Further, a key component in this approach is shared understandings within a focal group, most likely a function of within-group negotiations for the purpose of making sense of difficult situations (Brown and Duguid 2001). This means that for superintendents that cross internal and external boundaries continuously in their daily work, competence is re-defined and re-negotiated when superintendents enter, respectively, school board meetings, school leader group meetings, administrative school office staff meetings and, finally, senior leadership team meetings at the top of the municipal hierarchy. This is, relative to our empirical data, necessary to make explicit as we are working with several different actors with different backgrounds and understandings of what education is and can be. We restrict our presentation to visible meeting places and attempts to see how various actors express their prerequisites for their different experiences. Is their understanding challenged and/or do they have conflicts between the missions given to them (by, for example, the state or municipal council) and their own understanding?

To be able to understand implicitly it may help if you are prepared to challenge your own views, that you are humble and respectful of other people's thinking, and that you have an open mind in listening to political and professional knowledge expressed on various questions (Sandberg and Targama 1998). Dialogue and mutual respect are an ingredient required to achieve this kind of understanding. And a better mutual understanding can be part of the extension to build competence for creating actions in terms of negotiated decisions that lay the ground for actors to work towards common goals.

2 Theoretical Framework and Method

The theory of competence connection by Hall (1990) is used as a starting point for our analyses. He shows that a high performing organization is /…/… *characterized by equally strong forces for the three dimensions of collaboration*, *engagement and creativity* (ibid, p. 153 *Our translation*). Competence, according to Hall, is

something that is changeable as well as being dependent on the interaction between collaboration, engagement and creativity.

Hall (1990) defines personal competence as the interaction between adaptability, creativity and commitment: *competence is a state of adaptability*, *response preparedness consisting of people's enduring ability to react in a committed and creative manner to the requirements set by the surrounding world* (ibid. p. 38 *Our translation*). This definition can be combined with a salutogenic view: competence is being able to get a sense of coherence (Antonovskij 1991). Some prerequisites for achieving coherence are that you are able to create your own understanding of the situation and make it meaningful, which in turn affects your possibility to handle the situation.

The importance of understanding as a foundation for developing competence has also been problematized in work by Sandberg and Targama (1998). They see competence among professionals as the way the individual understands her/his duty in the actual context. *This understanding gives meaning to the experience and decides which theoretical and practical knowledge an individual perceives herself/himself to have*, *and how the knowledge is utilized* (ibid., p. 164 *Our translation*). They make clear that they do not see competence as being the same thing as a person's knowledge, values and experiences. It is more like a raw material that is meaningful if and when it is integrated in the person's understanding of the mission or the work that should be done.

2.1 Competence Connection

Shared competence enhances the possibilities for an organization to handle situations, something that is closely connected to both political and professional leadership. To be able to be involved primarily in the decisions that affect your own day-to-day work is crucial but it must also be extended into goal setting, analyses of results, and discussions about measures as they create personal engagement and creativity. School leaders, superintendents and school board members are actors on different levels but at the same time part of the same processes to enhance students' learning, to mention one important issue. To reach full competence the environment has to enhance the connection of the individual engagement and creativity with the shared competence. To have the ability to achieve excellence, one has to be in an environment where the competence is requested and appreciated

In Hall's thinking, collaboration is the source from which engagement and creativity have the potential to flow; collaboration starts the process. What is important to stress is that these processes have a goal; a performance or action. Collaboration is not something for its own sake. Collaboration is a dimension which defines to what extent you participate in decision-making as well as in finding solutions to problems in your work. The core of engagement is a question of partnership, to have influence over your own work, to make it meaningful and to provide context. The

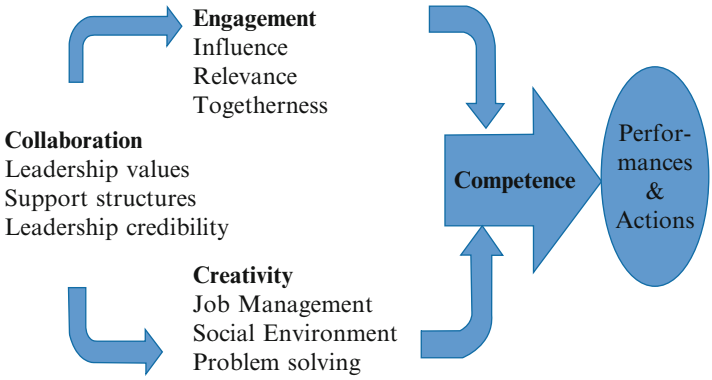

Fig. 9.1 Competence connection Hall (1990). *Our translation*

dimension of creativity, on the other hand, is where the competence processes are created thanks to collaboration and engagement. To make it happen the environment has to be inviting and supportive.

In Fig. 9.1 the different dimensions of Hall's model are presented. Each dimension has different areas. These are very briefly presented below.

Collaboration; *Leadership values*: How are co-workers valued in the organization, how do leaders value competence among co-workers? *Support structures*: Different types of power and influence, working relations and information flows. *Leadership credibility*: What is the estimated result of giving management suggestions and opinions, how are rules and principles dealt with, how do leaders select experts who manage work planning and organization?

Engagement; *Influence*: The perception of, for example, the degree of control you have over your own work, the freedom to decide on time, resources and how to organize your own work. *Relevance*: Do co-workers feel that their work is appreciated, are working goals demanding and realistic? *Togetherness*: Do the leaders encourage collaboration and respect for different knowledge and skills?

Creativity; *Job Management*: How is the work/commitment presented, how is work distributed, do co-workers have access to the resources they need when they need them? *Social environment*: Are feed-back and criticism used as common development tools, do the leaders encourage individual initiatives? *Problem solving*: How is common problem solving dealt with, how are conflicts handled?

As an analytic tool the different perspectives can be judged separately, but Hall's (1990) model is characterized by equally strong forces for the three dimensions of collaboration, engagement and creativity. The competence connections are both vertical and horizontal but they are isodynamic; equally strong and values and actions consistently mutually reinforce each other (Table 9.1).

The three different dimensions in Hall's model have been used as a grid on our empirical data. The data are gathered from three different questionnaires issued in

Table 9.1 Competence connection

Collaboration	Engagement	Creativity
Leadership values	Influence	Job management
Support structure	Relevance	Social environment
Leadership credibility	Togetherness	Problem solving

From Hall (1990). *Our translation*

each country: one to school board members, one to superintendents and one to school leaders. Each dimension has been analysed separately for each respondent group in each country. Thereafter a conclusion is drawn as to the relationship between the three dimensions, and the similarities and differences between the four countries are discussed. The results are also discussed together with Sandberg and Targamas' (1998) conclusion that:

> Since no-one has the ability to opt out of their own understanding the only way seems to be an open and trusting dialogue, in which all parties can clarify their ideas and opinions, and at the same time try to clarify their premises and basic approaches (ibid. p. 153–154 *Our translation*).

There is also a pre-understanding in this chapter in alignment to Sandberg and Targama (1998), which is that reflection is a prerequisite for learning, which can be developed by understanding through self-reflection, reflection and dialogue with others and through being informed by current research (ibid).

3 Competence Connection in the Four Nordic Countries

In this part we present data from the four Nordic countries following Hall's three dimensions and the underlying areas.

3.1 Collaboration

Collaboration in this context should be looked upon as a starting point for the competence process. The main underlying areas are: Leadership values, Supporting structures and Leadership credibility (Hall 1990).

Leadership values School superintendents in the Nordic countries work with a variety of school administrators, both in terms of numbers and skills. Both superintendents and politicians are content with their own capacity and as a whole also with that of others. When it comes to the relations between school leaders and

politicians, Sweden stands out as a country where the majority do not trust one another's capacity in the governance chain when it comes to school development.

Support structures All the respondents in the Nordic countries are active in formal and informal networks. Especially the horizontal networks seem particularly valuable. Many superintendents have a close network with other superintendents but also with other managers in the municipality. One third have an extra level between themselves as superintendents and school leaders. In some cases this seems to draw the different levels apart, but in some parts of the different countries the regional or district level is necessary to keep the system together. In Finland, a gradual growth in municipal size has been identified due to municipalities merging. As a result, a new, intermediate level between the superintendent and school leaders may be seen to have formed. Collaboration between municipalities exists in a more or less structured and formal fashion in the Nordic countries.

The relations between the chair of the school board and the superintendent are characterized by closeness. They meet regularly. The superintendent also meets the school leaders regularly, but only half of the school leaders think that the superintendent asks for or requests their experience, while at the same time three out of four think that the superintendent takes their values into account on different issues.

Leadership credibility When it comes to trust in the relations between the superintendents, municipal school boards and school leaders, we can state on the basis of our surveys that that does not seem to be a major question in Finland, in contrast to the other countries. In Finland there is trust between the various actors, although another issue is, however, that some studies indicate that there are problems in transforming evaluation results into concrete decisions (Lapiolahti 2007; Svedlin 2003). In many municipalities in Sweden, the data show a kind of insecurity when it comes to what facts and data the school board get as a foundation for their decision-making. It is both the school leaders and the politicians who express this insecurity, which is a question for the administration and superintendent to deal with. One problem seems to be that the material given to the school board is a generalization of the situation in the municipality, which does not show the differences between schools in the same municipality, which can be huge. Most of the respondents think that the quality reports from the individual schools are of interest, but it is rarely that they lead to a decision by the board. Norway stands out here, as they have working dialogue meetings between responsible leaders at regional and local level to decide how to handle the results in the quality reports. On the other hand, only a minority of the school leaders perceive the work with the quality report as being valuable for their school development endeavour. In Sweden it is evident that when the National Schools Inspectorate hands over its reports to the local school board after an inspection, these are taken into account and the required decisions are made.

3.2 Engagement

The second dimension in this competence process is engagement or commitment, and the prerequisites for this are: Influence, Relevance and Togetherness (Hall 1990).

Influence There are strong indications of this element in all the Nordic countries. All the respondents feel that they can act freely and have a high degree of autonomy. Most superintendents and school leaders have no written instructions (beyond national documents like the education act and curricula). Finnish superintendents and school leaders express themselves differently compared with the rest when they say that they serve the education provider or school owner and not the state, but they also feel that the decisions of the local authorities can be contradictory to the national ones.

The agenda for the school board is decided by the superintendent and the school board chair in close collaboration. The board members think they can have influence on the municipal board when it comes to education matters. The influence over the economy and who to hire and fire at school level is limited for most of the school leaders. There are some differences between the countries but also between different municipalities in the same country.

Relevance Here it is once again noticeable that not all knowledge within the organization appears to be used, as few of the school leaders think their experience is wanted. Denmark and Finland stand out in a positive way, as in these two countries the school superintendents or superiors do ask for the school leaders' experience (around 60–70 %). On the other hand, Finland's superintendents regard their working goals as often contradictory and thus unrealistic, which causes them a lot of stress.

Togetherness In many respects, the school organization works in a hierarchical manner. That being said, the horizontal networks seem to be stronger than the vertical. However, the school leaders get much of their engagement from the students and staff.

3.3 Creativity

If collaboration is the triggering dimension and the energy comes from engagement, it is in the creative dimension that the competence process really starts. Creativity includes: Job management, Working environments and Problem solving (Hall 1990).

Job management The different organization schemes demonstrate, but also the respondents' answers indicate, that with a middle leader there is a greater distance between the school leader and the superintendent than before, which affects the

possibilities for school leaders to argue their own case directly with the superintendent. There are different reasons for the existence of middle leaders; geographic reasons, division of work, to reduce the workload for the superintendent etc. Middle leaders also appear in smaller municipalities and sometimes the middle leader can facilitate for school leaders. This is especially the case for smaller entities, which allows them to have a say in the agenda of the school owner. There are differences across the Nordic countries when it comes to the frequency of middle leaders between the school leaders and the superintendents. In Norway, with its scattered municipal structure, a middle-level leadership layer would be found only in Oslo. In most of the other 427 municipalities there will seldom be a middle level between the superintendents and the school leaders.

Social environment Feed-back scores low for superintendents and school leaders in Sweden but scores high in Denmark and Finland. To take a couple of examples, nearly all superintendents in Denmark are evaluated on their work, while only half the superintendents in Sweden get personal feed-back from the politicians.

We have no questions in our surveys that can give us indications of innovative acceptance. If innovation can be understood as trying out new things, across borders etc., it may be interesting to note that in no country do as many as 50 % of the superintendents and school leaders say that they need to bend the rules in order to manage their work. Bending the rules can also be seen as a question of ethics, and from that point of view it is not a question of innovation. If bending the rules is interpreted as something that is necessary to be able to handle the situation at hand, this can be compared with other results which show that few school leaders at any level ever experience conflict situations in their work due to their own grounded values.

Another example of caution or fear may be the effect of having a strong National Schools Inspectorate. Some school leaders in Sweden say that they prefer to wait to try something new until the National Schools Inspectorate has visited the school. This is an example of hindrance to individual innovative forces unfolding, because a national inspection agency may promote isomorphic tendencies and hence be an obstacle to individual innovation (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2014). Another case of isomorphism is illustrated by the way in which national agencies and bodies implement national training programmes for school leaders, leader recruits and teachers – within a national framework. In Norway, the National Directorate of Education and Training has decided national frameworks for school principal training programmes and, similarly, for school leader candidates and leaders of day care institutions. The universities that provide programmes thus need to adapt their curriculum to the pre-defined national framework in order to get funding from the Directorate. By implication, this means homogenization of the understanding of what kind of competencies school leaders, day care leaders and leadership recruits require in order to function well in a leadership position. In a wider sense, this set of governing universities is close to coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), where a dominant actor in the university's environment by means of financial power forces the organization to adapt their understanding of school leadership competence to the external standards defined by state agencies. As noted by

DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this specific form of isomorphism within a field is based on asymmetric power relations between the dominant actor in the environment and the focal organization, and it is by implication a different mechanism compared with mimetic isomorphism (fads and fashion) and normative isomorphism. The latter is for example the case when professionals show loyalty to norms determined by their profession and impose followership demands on their colleagues. On a general basis, as seen in the case of national training programmes, coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism can work fairly well work in concert as institutionalization mechanisms for the purpose of enhancing shared understandings and competences within a sector

Problem solving As mentioned above, few respondents in the Nordic countries say that they have conflicts between their own values and their professional duties. To some extent, the politicians, along with the superintendents and school leaders, think there are tensions between the national and municipal level; often this is about lack of money. The politicians in the interviews show different ways of managing national decisions in the local context. It is not just about the positions from different parties and economic considerations, but also about the municipality's ability to practically and concretely implement various proposals in competition with other urgent areas in the municipality. There are quite often difficulties in solving problems directly when they are dependent on changes in allocation of money or issues around personnel which affect other schools or levels.

4 Discussion

Collaboration has the potential to contribute to engagement and creativity so that shared competences are created which may trigger actions. In this process described by Hall (1990)'s theoretical account, we added that shared understanding, created in communication with others, forms the basis of the expertise or competence that the community develops in the work (Sandberg and Targama 1998, p. 95). We find rather similar results from all our four countries, with variations within each country, but of course also some differences at country level.

There are *collaborations* within the three different groups of politicians, superintendents and school leaders, yet less collaboration between these groups. School board members mostly rely and/or have to rely on the superintendent and her/his staff in the initial policy processes of agenda setting and selection of informational sources. One may assume that the superintendent, on the other hand, relies mostly on her/his administration and the school leaders – in order to exert influence on the core activities of schooling. Notwithstanding, when it comes to collaboration, these horizontal networks are more frequent and more appreciated than the vertical ones in most countries. There is at the same time some uncertainty about how information from one level to another is disseminated, handled and understood, both from a bottom-up and a top-down perspective. Even if there is close collaboration between

the chair of the school board and the superintendent, as they meet regularly and discuss the board's agenda, there is much to indicate that many proposals are drawn up by the superintendents' administration. The question of where the borderline goes between collaboration and dependence is one that we will have to leave aside.

There are differences between the Nordic countries in terms of how much the various respondents feel that they are listened to, and their views taken into account etc. There are also descriptive accounts of weak links between school board members and the school superintendent and strong links between the chair and the superintendent (Nihlfors et al. 2013). This can be seen as a sign of strong organizational couplings between the chair of the educational board and the superintendent, while the couplings have become weaker between some superintendents and their school leaders and between superintendents and board members (Weick 2001).

An explanation for these phenomena may be that most of the board members are spare- time politicians, which creates some limitations and at the same time confines the possibility of having a deeper understanding of the field(s) they have responsibility for. The tight couplings between the superintendent and the board chair and the weaker couplings between the superintendent and school leaders and board members may be an indication of an increasing concentration of power around the top of the administration and the top political echelon of the municipal administration (Sørensen 2002; Sørensen and Torfing 2005). A question that remains is how much shared understanding there is in decision- making by the school board even if most of the decisions are made by consensus according to our results.

When it comes to *engagement* and *creativity*, the degree of autonomy is substantial, as our respondents see it, and they are confident that they (no matter which actor) can make a difference. Few school leaders think they can influence the decisions at school board level, which most board members confirm to be the case. It is interesting to note that the Finnish school leaders do not rate the influence on the school board as high as the superintendents but it is still explicitly above the neutral value. Few school leaders in the Nordic countries think they have access to all the tools needed to be able to take responsibility the whole way through. Nevertheless, very few respond that they have or have experienced conflicts between their own values and the values of the school owner or the state. There is a question mark over the possibility of enacting different new policies if both knowledge and resources are lacking at school level, but that does not seem to influence the feeling of autonomy and engagement.

4.1 Understanding Texts

The data give us a picture of many meetings in large groups, in terms of school board meetings, senior leadership team meetings (where superintendents participate) and municipal school leader meetings headed by the

superintendent. What seems to be of significant importance is to produce written documents, even if they are used only to some extent for dialogue meetings. Texts are one of the strongest foundations of policy processes and negotiations in the form of laws, curricula, quality reports but also other different reports used as a basis for decision-making.

Many actors on different levels are involved both in developing different documents and in interpreting them, with everyone's interpretations based on their own knowledge and understanding. A re-contextualization of the text thus takes place, and the contexts that are involved also depend, to a certain degree, on the autonomy each level has (Bernstein 1990). Therefore language has a big impact on what and how different issues are understood.

It is rare that our respondents cite the preparatory work to a national reform. In the Nordic countries most of the laws and curricula, decided by the parliament, are built on different preparatory works. In a time perspective, the preparatory work for major national decisions and reforms have been extensive products which both provided a historical background and framed the proposals in the current context. Earlier, this preparatory work was done over a long period of time, which included hearings and debates and establishing committees of, for example, different stakeholders. In the last two decades, however, preparatory work has frequently been done by a single investigator in a shorter period of time and with a prescribed clear political will. This requires and sets high expectations of competence and understanding in the governance chain, to be able to interpret the law and curricula and other national proposals at local level. It seems rare for the local actors to take these preparatory works into account, and one may ask how many of them are familiar with this type of text and from there are able to understand the text at a deeper level. What we do know is if and when they read them, they interpret them out of their own understanding (Ball et al. 2012).

Other written texts of major importance are the official documents prepared by the superintendents and their administration for the local school board. We may assume that the preparation of these texts in the administration, between the superintendent and the chair, influence not only the proposals made but also the language used. From the responses in our survey, it is evident that they themselves, the chair and the superintendent, say that it is not easy to tell who is influencing who and how. But we can see that there is a distance between the chair and the members of the board who are not as much involved in the preparation work as the chair.

Global perspectives are also visible in these texts mentioned above; words and expressions may be derived from, for example, OECD, EU and/or New Public Management vocabulary. The words can, not least in the educational field, be understood both as ordinary vocabulary but also as part of, for example, New Public Management vocabulary, which has other value-added connotations. All the texts mentioned above are official and are in turn read and interpreted not only by school leaders but also by, for example, the mass media and other stakeholders. Various interpretations are made by different stakeholders and co-workers in the organization before a text becomes the ingredients of teachers' daily work.

The existence – or not – of a common language or at least a shared understanding of the content have importance for the governance of schools from national to local level (see for example Alvesson and Björkman 1992). A challenge for leaders who want to work on the basis of their own and their co-workers' understanding is to have or to create a shared meaning with the overall mission. From there, different processes for competence development can be worked out.

5 Concluding Remarks

The starting point of this chapter was that education is of fundamental value for a society; to raise and foster a new generation of citizens in a global and local multicultural context. It is therefore a delicate task to identify the competences needed to achieve this mission in different contexts over time. By using theories of competence connection propounded by Hall (1990) and of understanding by Sandberg and Targama (1998) we have attempted to problematize whether shared competence, built on knowledge and shared understanding between politicians and professionals, can affect the prerequisites for good performances in the organization. Our results show a rather mixed picture of the governance of schools which gives us no clear answers, but rather new questions. Specifically, the findings that emerge from the Nordic studies of municipal school governance show that some actors are tightly connected to one another whereas others are *not*. For example, school boards tend to be well positioned to negotiate in the policy processes taking place in the municipal councils, whereas they are partly decoupled from the enactment of the same policies at the schools level. So when schoolteachers and school leaders engage in sense making of political decisions, in order to create shared understandings, school politicians are decoupled.

One fundamental result, with few exceptions, however, is a lack of communication and dialogue in basic educational issues between different actors on different levels. The lack of communication reduces the possibilities to create shared competences. Roald (2009) has identified four different strategies in working with quality evaluation, which he terms: control oriented, decision oriented, learning oriented and process oriented. The last strategy presupposes knowledge oriented collaboration in order to be able to gain a deeper understanding of complex problems, to understand the challenges and to find possible solutions.

> A master key to an active school ownership appears to be a learning approach which understands the fundamental difference between linear information transfer and dynamic knowledge development (Roald and Røvik 2009 p. 132 *Our translation*)

Another conclusion may be that there are possibilities in all the countries (some more than others) to have even more creative and innovative moves by using only the text materials that are at hand (for example quality reports and other data), by working with feed-back, by seeking to enhance mutual understanding, by providing

open support and, of course, by including risk taking; in other words by building and preserving a trustworthy organization.

To attain dynamic knowledge development it may be of importance to discuss one's understanding of roles and positions in the governance of schools. The borderline between politicians and superintendents is, in our data, sometimes obscure and sometimes evidences a clear division of power. What could be discussed is whether the borderlines in different municipalities are situated where they are due to lack of knowledge, out of shared competences in the organization, or as a result of power. How clearly are different roles and functions in the governance chain expressed and how well known are they?

We are dealing, according to the educational system, with both politicians and professionals, both civil servants on the administrative level and on the school level, and we are moving in-between different rules, norms and cultures. The self-reported data we have used here does not give us the possibility to analyse the power relations between different actors in different organizations. But we can conclude that there is a mix of substantial, relational and institutional power (Christensen et al. 2011) in the relationship between the chair of the board, the board members and the superintendent. And this same mix of power is also found between the chair of the board and the chair of the municipal council that has the economic power in the municipality. Furthermore, even if and when the educational board have taken decisions, the power in the main question is often on the next levels: the city/municipal council and, ultimately, the national level who allocate money and determine the budget.

This in turn shows clearly that decisions about the prerequisites for school leaders' day-to-day work are made on several different levels, with actors take decisions on the basis of different competences and different knowledge of the actual situation. And it is different knowledge and competences that are required for different positions in the educational system. This applies not only to the relationship between political and professional considerations but also to the relationship to different stakeholders globally as well as in the surrounding society. Different knowledge is required, for example, to analyze data on a global, national or local level and another set of knowledge to be able to decide about relevant measures or to handle the leadership in an individual school or workplace. How you understand, for example, national reforms is not only a question of which political party you belong to. Various settings have their different educational histories, different ways of valuing knowledge and of understanding learning. This is one explanation of why knowledge and understanding are closely related to each other and why different actions have to rely on the possibility of enhancing shared competence on the basis of the individual knowledge at hand. To obtain these skills we need to challenge our way of looking at organizing and leading education, including ways of communication to promote, for example, collaboration, engagement and creativity for a common purpose.

The municipal level is interesting to focus on in research as it is an example of a point where national and local decisions, influenced more or less by international policies, are handled by spare-time politicians negotiating with professionals in dif-

ferent professions and with many stakeholders observing and trying to influence the outcomes. Another question that needs further research is what it means for the local school when and if the municipal level loses its influence on the curriculum? *The local curriculum, traditionally a characteristic of Nordic education, is disappearing to make room for a national curriculum, and thus transnational, indicators and standards. Finland is the exception to this trend, as it is part of the PISA programme* (Moos and Merok Paulsen 2014). And there are more than PISA results to consider in the curricula, as Widmalm and Gustavsson (2015) argue: schools adapted to PISA standards erode independence and tolerance: *If we are focused solely on PISA results, the risk is that we will throw away things that work well and which nurture citizens who are democratically minded, resourceful, and able to work on their own responsibility* (ibid).

One crucial point seems to be to achieve or to ascertain different ways of knowing and understanding at local level when it comes to the main purpose of schooling. That discussions and dialogue may perhaps bring new dimensions to the discussions about systematic quality work that are supposed to take place in the individual school. It seems to be a long journey to reach a shared competence between school leaders, superintendent and school board members, and perhaps that is not a goal in itself but more a process that strives towards greater understanding and respect for different assignments in the governance chain.

References

Alvesson, M., & Björkman, I. (1992). *Organisationsidentitet och organisationsbyggande. En studie av ett industriföretag*. [Organizational identity and organization building. A study of an industrial company]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Antonovskij, A. (1991). *Hälsans mysterium*. [The mystery of health]. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. London: Routledge.

Bekendtgørelse af lov om folkeskolen/The Folkeskole Act/ LBK nr 521 af 27/05/2013 (2013).

Bernstein, R. J. (1990). *Class, codes and control. Volume IV, The structuring of pedagogic discourse.* London: Routledge, Chapter 5.

Blanchenay, P., Burnd, T., & Köster, F. (2014). *Shifting responsibilities – 20 years of education devolution in Sweden: A governing complex education systems case study*. OECD Education Working Papers, No 104. Paris: OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jz2jg1rqrd7-en

Brown, J. S., & Duguid, P. (2001). Knowledge and organization: A social-practice perspective. *Organization Science, 12*(2), 198–213.

Cannon-Bowers, J. A., Tannenbaum, S. I., Salas, E., & Volpe, C. E. (1995). Defining competencies and establishing team training requirements. In R. A. Guzzo & E. Salas (Eds.), *Team effectiveness and decision making in organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Christensen, S., Daugaard Jensen, P. E., & Lindkvist, L. (2011). *Makt, Beslut, Ledarskap. Märkbar och obemärkt makt*. [Power, decision, leadership; Noticeable and unnoticeable power]. Stockholm: SNS Förlag.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 48*, 147–160.

Engeland, Ø. (2000). *Skolen i kommunalt eie – Politisk styrt eller profesjonell ledet skoleutvikling?/ School in municipal ownership – Politically controlled or professionally led school development?/*PhD thesis. Faculty of Educational Science, University of Oslo, Oslo.

Hall, J. (1990). *Kompetens i organisationen*. [Competence connection]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Hargreavs, A., & Shirley, D. (2009). *The fourth way. The inspiring future for educational change*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

Høyer, H. C., Paulsen, J. M., Nihlfors, E., Kofod, K. K., Kanervio, P., & Pulkkinen, S. (2014). Control and trust in local school governance. In L. Moos & J. M. Paulsen (Eds.), *School boards in the governance process*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Lapiolahti, R. (2007). *Koulutuksen arviointi kunnallisen koulutuksen järjestäjän tehtävänä. Paikallisen arvioinnin toteutumisedellytysten arviointia erään kuntaorganisaation näkökulmasta*. [Evaluation of education as a task for municipal providers of education. Evaluation of prerequisites for enacting local evaluation from the point of view of one municipal organization]. Jyväskylä Studies in Education, Psychology and Social Research 308. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Printing House.

Moos, L. (2009). Hard and soft governance: The journey from transnational agencies to school leadership. *European Educational Research Journal, 8*(3), 397–406.

Moos, L., & Merok Paulsen, J. (2014). *School boards in the governance process*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Nihlfors, E., & Johansson, O. (2013). *Rektor – en stark länk i styrningen av skolan*. [The principal – a strong link in governing of schools]. Stockholm: SNS Publisher.

Nihlfors, E., Johansson, O., Moos, L., Paulsen, J. M., & Risku, M. (2013). The Nordic superintendents' leadership roles: Cross-national comparison. In L. Moos (Ed.), *Transnational influences on values and practices in Nordic educational leadership – Is there a Nordic model?* Dordrecht: Springer.

Nihlfors, E., Paulsen, J. M., Skedsmo, G., Moos, L., Pulkkinen, S., & Kanervio, P. (2014). Role and influence of school boards on improving educational quality. In L. Moos & J. M. Paulsen (Eds.), *School boards in the governance process*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Nooteboom, B., Vanhaverbeke, W., Duysters, G., Gilsing, V., & Van den Oord, A. (2007). Optimal cognitive distance and absorptive capacity. *Research Policy, 36*, 1016–1034.

Paulsen, J. M., & Moos, L. (2014). Globalisation and europeanisation of Nordic governance. In L. Moos & M. J. Paulsen (Eds.), *School boards in the governance process*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Paulsen, J. M., & Skedsmo, G. (2014). Mediating tensions between state control, local autonomy and professional trust. Norwegian School District Leadership in Practice. In A. Nir (Ed.), The *school superintendent: An international perspective*. New York: Nova Publishers, Inc.

Quennerstedt, A. (2006). *Kommunen – en part i utbildningspolitiken?* [The municipality – a party in educational policy?]. Örebro: Örebro Universitet.

Roald, K. (2009). *Kvalitetsvurdering som organisajonslaering mellom skole og skoleeiger.* [*Quality assessment as organisational learning between schools and school owners*]. PhD Thesis. University of Bergen, Bergen.

Roald, K., & Røvik, K. A. (2009). Aktivt skoleeierskap ut fra et forskerperspektiv. [Active school ownership from a research perspective]. In PricewaterhouseCoopers 2009: *Kom nærmer! / Come closer/.* Slutrapport fra FoU-prosjektet "Hvordan lykkes som skoleeier? Om kommuner og fylkeskommuners arbeid for å øke elevenes læringsutbytte." Oslo: PWC.

Sandberg, J., & Targama, A. (1998). Ledning och förståelse. [Leadership and understanding]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations. Ideas, interests, and identities*. Los Angeles/ London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington, DC: Sage.

Skedsmo, G. (2009). *School governing in transition? Perspectives, purposes and perceptions of evaluation policy.* PhD thesis. Department of Teacher Education and School Development, Faculty of Education. University of Oslo, Oslo.

Svedlin, R. (2003). *Pedagogik: Utvärdering i skolan – mellan skolutveckling och styrpolitik*. [Pedagogy: Evaluation at school – between school development and steering policy]. Helsinki: Helsingfors universitet pedagogiska institutionens forskningsrapport 185.

Swedish Education Act: SFS 2010: 800.

Sørensen, E. (2002). *Politikerne og nætverksdemokratiet. Fra suveræn politiker ti meta-givernør.* [The politicians and the network democracy. From sovereign politicians to meta governor] (1st ed.). København: Jurist- og Økonomforbundets Forlag.

Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2005). *Netværksstyring – fra government til governance /Network government – from government to governance* (87-7867-298-8, Trans.). Gredriksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.

Weick, K. E. (2001). *Making sense of the organization* (1st ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Weiler, H. N. (1990). Desentralisering og styrning av utdanning – En øvelse i motsigelser? / Decentralization and steering of education – an exercise in contradictions?/. In M. Granheim, U. P. Lundgren, & T. Tiller (Eds.), *Utdanningskvalitet – styrbar eller ustyrlig*? [Educational quality – controllable or uncontrollable]. Oslo: TANO.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Widmalm, S., & Gustavsson, S. (2015). Schools adapted to PISA standards erode independence and tolerance. DN; Debattartikel 150325/Daily News, Debate 25 of March 2015; http://www.dn.se/debatt/pisa-anpassad-skola-urholkar-sjalvstandighet-och-tolerans/