

Chapter 11

Local Decisions Under Central Watch: A Nordic Quality Assurance System

Olof Johansson, Mikael Holmgren, Elisabet Nihlfors, Lejf Moos, Guri Skedsmo, Jan Merok Paulsen, and Mika Risku

11.1 Quality Assurance

After the Second World War, across all sectors of public welfare services, significant powers and authorities were delegated from state level to local levels simply in order to mobilise local entrepreneurship and resources in the construction phase of the Nordic welfare state model (Fimreite and Læg Reid 2005; Montin and Amnå 2000).

O. Johansson (✉)

Professor, Centre for Principal Development, Umeå University, S-901 87 Umeå, Sweden
e-mail: olof.johansson@pol.umu.se

M. Holmgren

Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: mikael.holmgren@gu.se

E. Nihlfors

Department of Education, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden
e-mail: elisabet.nihlfors@pedag.umu.se

L. Moos

Department of Education (DPU), Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: moos@dpu.dk

G. Skedsmo

Department of Teacher Education and School Research, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: guri.skedsmo@ils.uio.no

J.M. Paulsen

Volda University College, Norway
e-mail: jan.paulsen@hihm.no

M. Risku

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

Especially education tasks and responsibilities have been decentralised from state level to municipal level over the past 20 years in the Nordic countries, that is, school districts and the school level, and as a consequence of this, the national political level has perceived a need for the legislators and ministry to strengthen the control of the levels below in new ways, not merely via regulations. Thus, new forms of quality assurance have been created, and, for example, in Sweden a new inspection agency has also been developed and implemented in the governance structures. Quality assurance can in its best form describe a fruitful relation between state, municipalities and schools. The government formulates proposals for the parliament to legislate and return to the government for implementation. Implementation of legislation is done by state agencies, which issue regulations and establish the government's educational agenda.

Whenever the education system is decentralised, the balance between professional and political powers on all levels of the system is changed or challenged. The responsibility and professional ability of principals and teachers are enhanced, but responsibility and authority do not always go hand in hand, and at the same time, evaluation becomes an important instrument for governing both on local and national levels (Lundgren 1990).

The national level sets out the frames and aims of education and an overarching template for the quality reports. The municipal level develops the frames and aims and also the template for the report in line with local policies. Schools write reports every year, and the documents about quality are part of a school's self-evaluation of the results for the year and constitute a basis for formulating the aims for the next year. The combination of fixed issues and broader issues of school choice with self-evaluation procedures aims at producing a strong sense of responsibility and accountability.

The sense of accountability is placed at the school level, even if it can be argued that the responsible level is the school board. In the case of the quality report, school leaders are at the lower end in relation to the school district management, while the superintendent is in the lower end of the contact with the ministry and very often also with superiors within the municipal hierarchy.

The past decades have seen the Nordic education systems move towards a more decentralised education system. In this chapter, we compare recent political initiatives in order to reassert central command through national quality control in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. In this chapter, we focus on three dimensions: (1) the national standards, (2) the procedures used for determining whether the standards have been met and (3) how national actors might intervene in local leadership if the standards are deemed unfulfilled. By comparing four Nordic countries according to these dimensions, we will show that the Nordic states have all taken steps to reinforce hierarchical relations between the central and the local levels, but also that there is notable cross-country variation in the scope and form of the strategies used.

11.2 Political Initiatives for National Quality Control in Denmark

11.2.1 *School Inspector in a Welfare System*

It is necessary to go back half a century to understand the current situation of quality control in Danish schools. It is also necessary to look at how politicians and administrators have issued legislation and produced social technologies to describe aims of schooling and how they have created systems and discourses of quality control. It is interesting to see how political decisions on school content and curricula are moved from local levels to national levels and to school leadership. The schools used to be national-municipal schools; the government was in charge of the economy (distributing funds to schools according to number of students, etc.) and staff management (teachers were employed by the ministry). A very detailed set of regulations was issued.

The first Act on the *Folkeskole* (primary and lower secondary school) following the Second World War was issued in 1958 (Ministry of Education 1958). It was only agreed on in parliament after several years of public discussion, and it contained general regulations and very short statements on the aims of the subjects to be taught. Two years later, the ministry published a number of teaching to support municipal school districts to produce fixed curricula. The idea was that the government issued the general frame and aim of education, and local authorities at municipal level produced curricula. Most municipalities elevated the guides to municipal curricula. A regulation of national final examinations was issued at the same time with the title: Final examinations. Standards and demands (1961). This is an excellent example of an early social technology produced by the political-administrative system, because it describes in more detail general expectations to subject, themes and levels in each and every subject matter. This part was not up for local negotiations and decisions, but of course it was as always up for practical interpretations in everyday teaching and school life, with very little or no national control.

At the beginning of the welfare state construction process, it was a political-cultural premise that the government issued general frames and aims and left much to local, municipal level interpretation. The details in aims and also in the control of processes and outcomes were left to local agencies, as there was only one national set of tests, the final examinations. The practical interpretation was formally left to the municipal level, but in real school life, much of it was left to teachers. The general understanding was that teachers had much freedom of interpretation, called *freedom of methods*. Based on professional discretion and local knowledge of pupils' motivation and proficiency, local culture, practical frames and parents' interests, they were to make wise decisions on how, when and what to teach. The school leader, entitled the *school inspectors*, only interfered if there had been complaints from

students or parents, because her/his major responsibility was to see to it that regulations were acted upon, hence the title.

The next legislation on schools was issued in 1975 (Ministry of Education 1975). This act again issued the frame and general aim and left it to municipalities to write the curricula. At this point, many municipalities initiated long and intensive work on producing local guides. Parent and student organisations, teachers and politicians were involved in this work. The final examinations were adjusted to fit the new organisation of education, but nothing much was changed in the relations between national and local levels.

11.2.2 Towards a School Leader in a Competitive System

Relations between ministry and municipalities and schools changed at the beginning of the 1990s. It was called a decentralisation of municipalities, because the responsibility for finances and staff was given to the municipalities that could decide to pass it on to the individual schools.

From the beginning of the 2000s, the Ministry of Education has taken many initiatives, intended to give the national level more power and responsibility. The subject matter aims that used to be very broad and loose at this level were supplemented with *clear aims* that were developed into *shared aims* from 2006 onwards (Ministry of Education 2009b). These regulations were issued with inspiration from the English national curriculum, which is extremely detailed (Steffensen 2005, 8), and it was a first in Danish educational governance: detailed, national aims for the age levels.

Parallel to these initiatives, the minister for education called upon the OECD to undertake a review of the Danish *Folkeskole* (Mortimer et al. 2004). On the basis of a short report on the state of the art of the schooling system and 2 weeks' interviews with numerous stakeholders, the review group produced their recommendations. One central recommendation was that a *culture of evaluation* needed to be developed. The minister immediately took action and initiated a legislative process in 2006 that would multiply the number of national tests from one, the final examination, to one national test per school year.

The OECD is also of pivotal importance, when looking at the most powerful social technology in education: the international test and comparison (e.g. PISA). Denmark has participated right from the beginning, and politicians put a lot of prestige into the results. The then liberal prime minister declared in 2011 that he wanted Danish education to be among the top five countries in PISA by 2015.

At the same time, two more initiatives were taken. Schools were asked to write individual student plans (Ministry of Education 2009a): plans for each student's progress over a year in each subject. The *quality report* (Education 2007) is also a social technology that pulls decision-making or parts of decision-making from the local level to the central, national level. The act prescribes the procedure of self-evaluation: from school to superintendent to ministry (Moos 2013 forthcoming).

Another OECD report had some influence on the Danish educational discourse: the examiners' report on Danish educational research and dissemination (OECD 2004). In line with the generic OECD discourse of that time, the report found that teachers did not make use of educational research and evidence, like PISA. The report was read carefully by ministries, which found that it was time to introduce into educational research and education concepts like *evidence-based practice*, *best practice*, *clearinghouses* and more international tests (Ministry of Education and Science 2005; Moos 2006).

A national agency, the Council for Evaluation and Quality Control, replaced in 2006 the Basic School Council, signalling a shift in interest towards the contemporary neo-liberal focus on evaluation and quality control. Both of those councils were advisory with no management power. For a short period of time, there was a semi-autonomous Danish School Agency with managerial and monitoring functions. In 2011 it was, however, merged into the ministry because of economic cutbacks in the ministry.

Since the so-called decentralisation in 1992, which made each school more self-governing and more accountable, there has been a growing recognition of the need to have a manager of schools or a leader, who takes the blame *at the end of the day*. Municipal and national authorities need to know who they can address. Aided by the OECD report on school leadership (Pont et al. 2008) and other sources of inspiration, there is a growing attention to the need to also have school leaders lead education in schools. In relation to the contemporary social technologies – PISA, quality report, student plan, shared aims – school leadership is in high demand. School leaders need to be very active in monitoring, setting goals and controlling teachers and education, making use of the evidence and the data from the tests. The dominant discourse on school leadership does not often ask for school leaders to be partners in a dialogue with teachers and students.

The influences from transnational agencies are so very flagrantly manifested in the case of Danish educational politics.

11.3 The Finnish System of Quality Assurance

11.3.1 *From a Centralised to a Decentralised Society*

In the same way as the other Nordic countries, Finland experienced an exhaustive and extensive transition from a centralised society to a decentralised one at the end of the twentieth century. Before that, however, the state developed its norm-based, system-oriented and centralised steering apparatus to the maximum to ensure the successful implementation of the education reforms in the 1970s (Risku 2011). There was inclusive legislation, extensive administration at the national, provincial and local levels and abundant administrative staff to make sure, supervise and report that the reforms were implemented as the state had planned (Isosomppi 1996;

Kivinen 1988; Lapiolahti 2007; Lyytinen and Lukkarinen 2010; Nikki 2001; Sarjala 1982; Varjo 2007).

While the implementation was being conducted, the Finnish society changed fundamentally. As a result of the changes, new legislation has been passed since the 1980s to dismantle the centralised governance and to implement a decentralised system (Kuikka 1992; Peltonen 2002). The relationship between the state and the municipalities has been completely rearranged. Today municipalities are the main providers of education services, possessing a constitutional autonomy on how to provide the services (Risku 2011). Superintendents, principals and teachers do not serve the state. They are recruited by the education providers and serve them to fulfil the goals set in legislation (Alava et al. 2012; Pennanen 2006; Sourı 2009).

In 1983 the school and textbook inspections were abolished (Kupiainen et al. 2009; Lyytinen and Lukkarinen 2010; Nikki 2001). In 1985 the state ceased regulating the number of classes and class sizes in basic education (Laukkanen 1998; Sourı 2009). Legislation from 1991 expunged task lists for educational officials in municipalities, and the 1993 Act abrogated the cost-based and earmarked government transfer system, making it index based (Sourı 2009). From 1994 national core curricula have merely constituted common guidelines, leaving a lot of autonomy for municipalities and schools to draw up their own curricula (Aho et al. 2006; Kupiainen et al. 2009). In 1999 relative assessment in basic education was replaced by a criteria-based one (Risku 2011).

11.3.2 Evaluation of Education in the Decentralised System

The present evaluation system in education in Finland is based on legislation from 1998 (Acts 628–633), 2003 (Act 351) and 2009 (Act 558). According to the acts, the purpose of evaluation is to secure the execution of educational legislation, to support the development of education and to improve conditions for learning. The salient findings of evaluations are to be published.

The general framework for national evaluation of education is established by the Ministry of Education and Culture together with the Finnish Education Evaluation Council, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council and the National Board of Education. The framework consists of evaluation at the international, national, regional and local levels (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a, b; Ministry of Education and Culture 2012). The foci and objects of evaluation are based on the government platforms and five-year education and research plans (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012b).

There are presently three main actors responsible for carrying out the national evaluation of education. The Finnish Education Evaluation Council and the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council assist the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as education providers in conducting evaluation (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012). The third main actor, the National Board of Education, is responsible for the national evaluation of learning outcomes. In addition, there are thematic evaluations by several other actors (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a).

During the planning period of 2012–2015, external national evaluations will focus on the realisation of equality, on productivity and economy and on welfare, employability and competitiveness effects. National evaluations on learning outcomes in basic education will concentrate on the ninth form and include national sample-based assessments on a wide sphere of subjects according to a systematic framework. In vocational education, there will be national sample-based assessments on 12 vocational upper secondary qualifications (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a). The learning outcomes of general upper secondary education are assessed by an independent Matriculation Examination Board. The matriculation examination assesses learning outcomes in practice in all theoretical subjects offered nationally and is conducted biannually in all upper secondary schools (Finnish Matriculation Examination 2012).

At the regional level, regional state administrative agencies are responsible for the evaluation of the accessibility of basic services. During the planning period of 2012–2015, there will be regional evaluations on the accessibility of basic and upper secondary education as well as on the accessibility of basic education in the arts (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a).

Legislation mandates all municipalities to evaluate their operations and all education providers to evaluate their education and its effect and to participate in external evaluations as stated in legislation (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012b). Education providers are responsible for evaluating their education in order to be able to develop their operations and to compare their evaluation results with national evaluation results (Kupiainen et al. 2009; Lapiolahti 2007). Local evaluation is to be based on local goals, which are derived from national objectives (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a). The Finnish Association of Local and Regional Authorities represents the municipalities in the national discussion and decision-making, also producing educational indicators (Hannus et al. 2010).

11.3.3 Leading Development of Education Through Evaluation in the Decentralised System

One can claim that there is quite a lot of evaluation on education in Finland. The evaluation does not confine itself to assessing learning outcomes, but relies on an extensive sphere of evaluation information. The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for developing the education system, considering the quantitative foresight and the National Board of Education and the higher education institutions regarding the qualitative foresight (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012b). Municipalities and other education providers have the ultimate responsibility for the quality of their operations (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a, b).

The National Board of Education does not use lists based on school-specific average values, because they are considered to be uncertain. In addition, they do not often take into consideration the external context of the school, although it may have an essential effect on the learning outcomes. The National Board of Education wants to express its support to principals and teachers working in challenging

contexts and offer them information on the basis of which to develop their schools (Kuusela 2008).

International evaluations and assessments are used to position Finland in the global context and to identify national strengths and weaknesses. Finland also tries to take an active role in the development of international evaluations, so that they meet the needs of the Finnish education system (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2012a).

The state seems to support the development of local provisions of education through information and guidance rather than through legislation and funding (Kanervio and Risku 2009). An illustrative example is the quality criteria for basic education produced by the Ministry of Education and Culture (2010). It was designed to be a practical tool for the local evaluation and development of education. Each of its four quality cards for structures and seven for quality, as experienced by students, includes a description of the quality and its criteria and questions to both the education providers and schools with which to support evaluation and development. In the same way as national core curricula, the quality criteria for basic education does not prescribe, but steers local development, which is to be based on local contexts and goals derived from the national guidelines (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2010).

In addition, the quality criteria for basic education is a representative example of the dialogue with which the Finnish education system is developed. When the quality criteria for basic education was still a draft, the Finnish Association for Local and Regional Authorities compiled its own counterpart, developing the municipal-based education system (Juva et al. 2009). An intensive discourse was held, and the final quality criteria for basic education was a synthesis of the discourse (Hannus et al. 2010).

There is still a lot to do to improve the use of evaluation information to develop the Finnish education system. The national level has been criticised for not being able to take the changes in society and the everyday challenges of schools into consideration sufficiently. Thus, education policies and their goal settings may be based on theoretically ideal starting points, which do not correspond to the real situations of schools (Hannus et al. 2010). As one result, superintendents, principals and teachers often feel that they are in a crossfire between goals, expectations, needs and resources (Ahonen 2008; Kanervio and Risku 2009; Souru 2009; Suomen Rehtorit 2005; Vuohijoki 2006).

As the centralised governance system was dismantled, the personnel working in educational administration outside schools was cut by 40 % between 1990 and 1995. There seems to be autonomous, consistent and sustainable strategic thinking in the municipalities, but not enough personnel to lead the strategic development (Kanervio and Risku 2009). Local authorities seem to face significant challenges in developing their education services (see Löfström et al. 2005; Rajanen 2000). Evaluation information on education does not always realise itself in the best possible way as development at the local level (see Lapiolahti 2007; Svedlin 2003).

11.4 The Norwegian Quality System: Towards National Control and Authorised Empowerment

The Norwegian system of quality assurance is designed to contribute to quality development at all levels of compulsory education with a particular focus on basic skills in language, reading, writing, arithmetic and ICT (Eurydice 2006).

However, a national quality system of upwards reporting of cost indicators, national test data, evaluations and state supervision of schools refers in a wider sense to the *classic* tension between state regulation and local autonomy enjoyed by municipalities and schools (Baldersheim and Ståhlberg 1994; Læg Reid and Christensen 2006; Cribb and Gewirtz 2007). In Norway there has been a strong legacy of central regulation of compulsory education that can be traced back to the eighteenth century, where centralisation and standardisation were regarded as necessary in order to build up the school system to provide equal opportunities for all students and ensure the quality of public schooling (Lundgren 1990; Karlsen 1993). In the period after the Second World War, the political administration of educational reforms was centralised from the top down, where decision-makers at the national level formulated and prioritised goals, made plans and provided resources, while schools at the local level were viewed as possible instruments for the attainment of political goals (Lundgren 1990). The development and growth of the Norwegian comprehensive education system represent a visible trend towards centralisation, in which the state's role in providing legislation, rules, regulations, finances and laying down curricula and syllabuses gradually became more influential (Lauglo 1990; Gundem 1993). From the 1980s and onwards, decentralisation was put forward as an important quality improvement strategy (Engeland 2000).

In certain ways, there have always been tensions between state government and local autonomy in the Norwegian education system (Karlsen 1993; Gundem 1993). Decisions about the geographical location and size of the schools as well as the content and organization have, particularly from a historical standpoint, caused disagreements and even conflicts (Karlsen 1993; Gundem 1993). Decentralisation as a governing strategy was seen as democratic, since it provided greater opportunities to active participation at the local level (Karlsen 1993). In many ways, it was looked upon as an alternative strategy, which implied redistributing authority to the local level. Still, rules and procedures decided upon centrally had to be followed, but this type of 'authorized empowerment' (Sears and Marshall 1990) intended to promote more local adaptations and priorities, for instance, in terms of resource allocation (Karlsen 1993). Decentralisation has also been pointed out as a way of reducing possible conflicts on the national level by distributing difficult tasks and decisions to the local level (Weiler 1990). Different efforts were initiated to increase local autonomy. For instance, the Local Government Act of 1969 expanded the authority of the local politicians and administration with respect to decisions about school districts and the geographical location of schools (Karlsen 1993). The changes in the central allocation of resources from 1986 also represented a decentralisation

strategy in terms of transferring block grants to the municipalities (Royal Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development 1983–1984). This was seen as a necessary condition for local autonomy and more efficient resource allocation according to local needs (Karlsen 1993; Lauvdal 1996; Engeland 2000).

11.4.1 Soft Governance and Quality Assurance

Despite these attempts to decentralise tasks as well as the authority of the state, several studies show that the municipalities' influence on the schools was still limited (Askheim et al. 1992, 1993; Karlsen 1993; Engeland 2000). This was also the case after the Local Government Act of 1992 and the Act of Compulsory Education of 1993. Moreover, after the millennium shift, several visible trends of reregulation have emerged where seemingly 'the state strikes back' (Hudson 2007) in terms of indirect regulation, often labelled 'soft governance' (Moos 2009). In Norway, the increased use of assessment data and monitoring of results and accounting reports represent new ways of coordinating the education system in terms of quality control (Helgøy and Hømm 2006). The tools in use, and thereby the foundation for quality improvement, are based on premises defined by national authorities (Skedsmo 2009). This type of central coordination can create a certain dependency, which establishes new patterns of interaction between the national and local authorities (see Ozga 2009). These developments may result in less local autonomy and increased bureaucratisation of the school system. At the same time, local autonomy is emphasised in the national policy discourse. White Paper No. 30 refers to the municipalities as *school owners* and defines broad areas of tasks and responsibilities of municipalities and schools related to quality improvement (Royal Ministry of Education and Research 2003–2004).

11.4.2 Assessment of Education

The introduction of the national quality assessment system in 2005 (NQAS), which is a central part of the quality assurance system, can be described as a shift in Norwegian educational policy from input regulations (legislation, organisation and funding) towards a more output-oriented policy (Helgøy and Hømm 2007). Traditionally, public schooling was regulated through the Education Act and the national curriculum. These defined the overall purposes of public schooling as well as the individual subjects (Bachmann et al. 2008; Sivesind and Bachmann 2008). Furthermore, heavy investments in teacher education have also been an important strategy to ensure the quality of public schooling. Until the first OECD review of the Norwegian education system in 1988, there was a general assumption that the Norwegian education system met high standards. It was first and foremost the heavy investments in input factors that led to the public's belief that the quality of

the education system was good and that it assured equal opportunities for each and every student. However, in 1988, the OECD experts posed questions such as ‘How do you know that this is actually achieved?’ (OECD 1988–1989). Standardised tests were already then suggested as a possible way of gathering data about student achievements. The NQAS system comprises a mix of new and traditional tools. The national tests and the international comparative achievement studies, such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, are new inventions. To some extent, screening tests and information material can also be defined as new tools, while formative and summative assessments of students in terms of local tests can be characterised as traditional. However, it should be noted that they have not, until recent years, been used to providing educational statistics for governing purposes. By function, the evaluation tools in the NQAS provide information about student achievement levels on an aggregated level, which can be used as a foundation for national policymaking and setting priorities for improvement strategies (Skedsmo 2009, 2011). As such, it represents strong means of indirect central regulation and coordination of the school system.

11.4.3 New Forms of Input Governing

Along with the establishment of the NQAS and the implementation of K06, the Directorate of Education and Training has launched several national programmes. One example is from words to deeds, which was launched in 2006 along with the latest reform, the Knowledge Promotion. The programme provides funding for development projects designed to improve ‘the ability to evaluate outcomes and improve the school practice according to the aims in the Knowledge Promotion’ (The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training 2006). Other projects are launched which have the more direct aim of improving the students’ basic competencies and teachers’ assessment practices. The premises for the programme are centrally defined. Municipalities and schools can apply to participate in the programmes and in return receive economic support for their projects. Due to the ways in which these programmes are designed and managed, they represent a way for national authorities to steer school development with respect to expectations and requirements related to focus, the organization of the projects, the process and the outcomes (Skedsmo 2009).

11.4.4 Quality Reports

There are, however, some nuances that distinguish the Norwegian case from more tightly connected control systems (Hudson 2007). First, the municipalities and the counties enjoy some degrees of local autonomy in the design of the quality status report. There are several templates and tools available, linked to national register

databases, yet at the final stage the individual municipality decides itself about the components of the status report, in accordance with local priorities. Second, the operating level of the quality report system, the municipalities collect data from the school level and aggregate the sources into the report, which in the final round is submitted to the County Governor, located in each of the regional counties.

Third, the quality report then forms the basis of supervision practices, which ensure that the municipalities follow up on their responsibilities as *school owners* (Royal Ministry of Education and Research 2007–2008). Compared to inspection-driven systems found in many other Western democracies, this 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 reveal 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, to secure a safe school environment and the establishment of quality management systems in the municipalities.

11.5 Sweden: Decentralisation or Deconcentration and Increased State Control

The past few decades has seen Sweden gain a reputation for having one of the most decentralised education systems in the world, as decision-making powers previously held by the parliament have been delegated to quasi-markets, local authorities, school leaders and other actors. There is still a presumed hierarchy at play, where professionals, bureaucrats and local politicians are expected to follow rules laid down at the national level. To this end, and somewhat less famously, the same period has also seen the enactment of an extensive accountability regime through the use of regulations, national school inspections, standardised testing, economic sanctions and other procedures. During the post-war period, formal accountability was mainly considered a concern for the political parties at the national level. The parliament represented the will of the people and would both claim credit for success and receive support, or not, in general elections for their political programmes and actions. As decision-making authority was unloaded from the parliament, however, so were demands for accountability. The need to balance increased separation of powers in education with increased centralised quality control was raised by a government-commissioned taskforce as early as the 1970s, and this balancing act has been central to much of the public sector reform that has followed. In short, although many decisions that were previously handled at the national level are now made locally, this should not be misunderstood as implying that the state no longer governs (Hudson 2007; Segerholm 2009; Rönnerberg and Segerholm 2011).

Between 1945 and 1968, the Social Democratic Party governed Sweden with relatively few political constraints. Backed by a parliamentary majority and a strong economy, conditions were generally favourable for setting educational standards based on traditional social democratic values. The electoral landscape has changed considerably

since, however. Today coalition governments supported by parliamentary minorities and strained coffers are the norm rather than the exception, and the past 20 years have seen the Social Democratic Party increasingly challenged by liberal and conservative parties (Bergman and Bolin 2011). The increased ideological diversity has had a clear impact on the policy stream as well as the overall structure of education, and contemporary legislation and curricula now emphasise universalism, social equality, standardisation and central planning side by side with particularism, individual autonomy, differentiation and multilevel governance (Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Hudson 2007). Decisions concerning areas such as administrative organisation, recruitment, resource allocation and school profiles are now to a considerable extent left to the discretion of politicians and professionals at the local level, although with the caveat that local objectives must not conflict with national objectives. In other areas, such as teacher and school leader education, health services, working environment and quality control, the state remains an active policymaker.

The Swedish government primarily relies on three central agencies to steer education: the School Inspectorate, the National Agency for Education and the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools. The agencies have politically appointed directors, but they act independently in the sense that they are not part of any government ministry. In broad terms, the School Inspectorate is mostly tasked with oversight responsibilities, whereas the National Agency for Education and the National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools are mostly tasked with development and coordination responsibilities. For example, while the School Inspectorate performs site visits to individual municipalities and schools to determine whether conduct and ambitions are in accordance with national standards, the National Agency for Education oversees the development of curricula, national tests, grading criteria, legal prescriptions and teacher and school leader education while also coordinating various networks and arranging national conferences on current research, political developments and *best practices*. In practice, however, the division of labour between the agencies is more complex. The National Agency for Education is also expected to evaluate the efficacy of its instruments and oversee the analysis and collection of national statistics. The School Inspectorate, meanwhile, has increasingly adopted the role of consultant, following criticisms from local politicians and educational practitioners that too much focus was placed on areas in need of improvement while too little advice was offered on how to improve.

There is a variety of mechanisms through which the agencies and ruling political parties hope to learn about the characteristics and behaviour of the actors acting on their behalf, including procedures for screening, contract design, reporting requirements and monitoring.

Screening: Teacher and school leader training has historically been viewed as important means for securing the quality of education. The current system of university-level teacher education has its roots in the 1970s, but has been subjected to numerous reforms with the aim of keeping the skills and values of the profession aligned with the more general restructuring of education (Jarl and Rönnerberg 2010). School leadership training was first introduced in the 1970s with a three-year programme

provided by the National Agency for Education. The programme was transferred to eight universities in 1993, but it would take until 2009 for it to include academic accreditation. The current programme is divided into three courses, each focusing on law, management by objectives and results and leadership. Teacher education is the de facto standard, but not legally mandatory for being hired as a teacher. In contrast, school principals are required to enrol in the school leader training programme within 1 year of being appointed. However, the new education act (2010, ch. 2, sections 13–24; ch. 3, section 16) has also introduced a teaching certificate required for marking students, which demands that teachers spend at least 1 year in service under mentorship and receive a written recommendation from the responsible school principal before being eligible.

Contract. Design Employer responsibilities represent one of the areas where the state has most clearly retreated. During the post-war period, wage negotiation was a matter between unions and representatives of the state. Despite union resistance, employer responsibilities were transferred to the municipalities in 1991 and wage negotiation moved to the Swedish Association of Local Authorities. Municipalities and independent school owners now also hold the right to contract their own staff based on local requirements. However, while municipalities and independent school owners have the right to organise their own administration and establish voluntary functions such as the superintendent, other functions like the school principal are mandatory and entail regulated responsibilities and qualifications. In practice, part of the contract has thus already been formulated at the national level prior to any local negotiation.

Reporting Requirements: Sweden has a long tradition of self-evaluation within public services. Initially, the accelerated decentralisation of education in the 1990s was coupled with demands for locally developed school plans and yearly quality reports, detailing how the plans had been enacted. However, the plans came to remain unimplemented in many municipalities (Johansson and Lundberg 2002), and in contrast, the new education act (2010, ch. 4, sections 3–6) only demands that local quality assurance takes place and is documented; it does not specify how. Schools and municipalities are still legally obliged to provide information regarding results and finance when requested, however, and the National Agency for Education collects yearly statistics on a number of measures that are made available for public scrutiny. Additionally, schools must administer standardised national tests in English, mathematics, Swedish and Swedish as second language in the third, fifth and ninth form.

Monitoring: Through most of the twentieth century, national inspections were handled by a single central education agency tasked with both oversight and development responsibilities. The past two decades have seen the frequency and authority of inspections increased, however, and whereas previously typically performed after complaints inspections are now also performed for pre-emptive reasons. Current inspection duties are handled by the School Inspectorate through scheduled site visits to all municipalities and schools every 3 years and with written reports that are made available for public scrutiny (Rönnerberg and Segerholm 2011). Additionally, Sweden makes frequent use of external third-party evaluators, perhaps most notably

through long-standing memberships in transnational collaborations such as PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS, but also by financing research centres, doctoral students and other academic projects. Since the 1990s, attempts have also been made at promoting more decentralised forms of monitoring, that is, *fire alarms* as opposed to *police patrols* (see McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). One of the more politically prominent examples is the establishment of local school boards populated by parents and other stakeholders (Jarl 2004; Kristoffersson 2008), but the new education act also awards individual citizens expanded rights to appeal decisions made by local authorities and school leaders to the School Inspectorate.

If deviance was to be either discovered or anticipated, the state has the legal right to veto certain courses of action before they are pursued, to punish behaviour which it finds undesirable *ex post* as well as to de-authorise municipalities and independent school owners alike. For example, applications to establish independent schools are screened by the School Inspectorate and can be denied if deemed inadequate, but permission to operate may also be fully revoked once granted, following unsatisfactory inspection results. In contrast, the state has lost many of its direct veto powers in relation to the municipalities and has instead mainly relied on agenda control and earmarked allocation of resources. Until recently, the state could only impose economic sanctions by withholding resources that would otherwise have been delivered, but the new education act (2010, ch. 26, section 27) also awards the School Inspectorate right to fine independent school owners and municipalities. Moreover, the state does hold the right to seize full control of individual public schools for up to 6 months since the early 2000s (Swedish Education Act 2010, ch. 26, sections 17–18). It remains to be seen whether the latter is a credible threat, however, as, unlike the closing of independent schools, it is a right that has yet to be exercised.

11.6 Conclusions

When viewed as a group, Nordic national quality criteria tend to be less ideologically coherent than they once were, as social democracy has come to be increasingly challenged by liberalism and conservatism. Contemporary legislation and curricula draw on a mix of values and ideas, often emphasising universalism, social equality, standardisation and central planning side by side with competition, individual autonomy, differentiation and multilevel governance. The conduct and characteristics of local actors are evaluated through a variety of procedures, including screening, contract design, reporting requirements and monitoring, and the Nordic states employ both *soft* and *hard* social technologies to act on the judgement. There is generally a preference for steering schools indirectly – for example, through benchmarking, consultancy, guidelines and skill development – and the legal capacity of national agencies and politicians to intervene directly in the day-to-day work of teachers and school leaders remains for the most part limited. To the extent that the national evaluations are backed up by hard sanctions such as de-authorisation, economic

punishment and veto powers, they are typically directed at the top of the municipal political hierarchies rather than at individual schools or staff.

When compared, it is clear that Sweden has gone the furthest in reintroducing central command through the use of statutory regulations, oversight and sanctions, whereas Finland has largely abstained from developing a comprehensive system of national quality control. But in Finland, international evaluations and assessments are used to position the country in the global context and to identify national strengths and weaknesses. Finland also tries to take an active role in the development of international evaluations, so that they meet the needs of the Finnish education system. Denmark and Norway have positioned themselves in between the two extremes, both having developed national oversight systems with monitoring and reporting requirements, but so far without the addition of hard sanctions. In all four countries, the state remains an active player, however, and the future is likely to see further tensions in central-local relations. Educational policy is increasingly moved towards a governance space developed by experts and agents and depoliticised by use of standards and data.

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