MANAGEMENT, LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Article topic	Management, leadership and governance in primary education (Norway)
Author 1	Jorunn Møller
Author 1 affiliation	Jorunn Møller is Professor Emerita at the University of Oslo
Author 2	
Author 2 affiliation	
Regional Editor	Dr. Karin Hognestad
Editor in Chief	Professor Ian Menter and Professor Maria Teresa Tatto

Keywords

Educational leadership, education as ‘public good’, legitimacy, professional discretion, legal standards, leadership education, centralization and decentralization, soft governance, school inspection, advisory team

Research on management, leadership and governance in Norwegian primary education

Most studies focusing on governance and leadership in primary education will include informants from primary, lower and upper secondary schools. The studies draw upon multiple theoretical frameworks, and the individual leader is seldom the only unit of analysis in these studies; instead, the schools are conceptualized as interconnected organizations (Møller, 2009; 2016).

Studies on successful leadership in primary schools demonstrate that leadership is almost entirely practices through collaboration and team efforts. A learning-centered approach and respect for the individual student and colleague in the building of professional communities of practice seem to be a guiding norm of conduct. Mutual trust is at the core to establish legitimacy for improvement strategies, and principal gains legitimacy if the teachers also get the opportunity to both discuss and transform the external impulses and demands in relation to their own context (e.g. Møller et al., 2007; Vedøy and Møller, 2007).

Other studies show how professional development, designed for a variety of opportunities for individual and collective reflections, supports leaders in becoming learners with the capacity to make changes in their leadership practices and their school (Aas, 2017).

Research on education reform includes studies of new modes of governing drawing on a comprehensive set of sources and data. The findings demonstrate many tensions and ambiguities in governing processes, and the data indicate the multi-layered character of autonomy and control in school leadership (e.g. Elstad 2009; Karseth et al. 2013; Møller and Skedsmo 2013; Skedsmo 2009). Policy studies do not offer advice or clear-cut solutions for policymakers, but offer accounts of how reforms are interpreted and translated at different levels. As such, they inform the decision-making processes and provide a tool for understanding the logic of practice.

More recently the interplay between legal standards and principals’ professional discretion has been examined. These studies illustrate that although legal regulation has increased, there

is still space that allows for professional discretion (Hall 2016; Karseth and Møller 2020; Ottesen and Møller, 2017).

Structure

The Norwegian education system is predominantly public. The Directorate for Education and Training is the executive agency for the Ministry of Education and Research and responsible for the development of primary education, while municipal authorities are in charge of running most primary schools. The establishment of private schools is strictly regulated, with only 4% of the school-aged population enrolled in private primary schools (Statistics Norway 2018).

An overview of school governing in Norway is presented below:

Children start attending school at age six, and primary education comprises seven years. There is no streaming according to ability, gender, or other factors, and more than 95% of Norwegian students are enrolled in regular classes. This is based on the ideology that all children, irrespective of physical or mental disabilities or learning difficulties, should be integrated as much as possible into the ordinary school system. Students in primary school receive no marks or grades and there is no “failure” and repeating of classes.

According to the Norwegian Education Act, section 9–1, each school must have professional, educational and administrative management. It is expected that the principal maintains familiarity with the day-to-day activities of the schools and strives to improve performance.

With support from the government, master’s programs in educational leadership and management at the university level have been offered since the beginning of the new millennium. Moreover, in 2009, the government developed a national program for principals. Currently, six higher education institutions have been accepted as providers. It is not a

mandatory requirement for a leadership qualification, but most municipalities support their school leaders attendance at education programs offered by higher education institutions.

A principal leads each school and depending on the school's size, they work closely with an assistant principal and a leadership team. Team leaders are responsible for following up teachers in grade 1–4 and grade 5–7. The principals see the leadership team as vehicles for communication and keeping in touch with school-wide developments and, to some extent, leadership teams bolster the principals' control and authority.

All schools are also required to have routines for cooperation with the psychological counselling service (PPT) and the school nurse, and a resource team will meet regularly with these external professionals.

Administration

Local municipalities play a strong role in school governance. The leadership responsibility at the municipal level is shared between professional administrators and elected politicians. Through this linkage, education is connected to broader community affairs. Municipalities finance the schools and perform a key role in providing in-service training. It is required by the central government that municipalities establish a system for evaluating and following up on the schools' quality of education and students' academic performance.

Many municipalities have developed more evidence-based approaches to school governance, along with new national expectations regarding the use of performance data to enhance educational quality (Møller and Skedsmo 2013). The use of new evaluation technologies both by managers at the municipal level and principals to monitor student outcomes can be read as a shift toward what has been termed organizational professionalism (Evetts 2009), which incorporates standardised work procedures and relies on external regulation and accountability measures.

Leadership

The local educational authority in each municipality employs principals and teachers. Principals must have pedagogical qualifications and the necessary leadership abilities. They might be appointed on fixed-term contracts, but lifetime tenure is more common. The municipality is also in charge of hiring teachers, but normally, principals have a voice in the hiring process although they highly depend on effective collaboration with their superintendent. It is demanding to terminate principals (or teachers) unless they have committed a criminal act.

The leadership role is embedded in a larger legal framework. Some leadership practices are regulated by law to ensure representation from teachers, parents, and students in the governance of the school, and the Education Act requires that each school create formal bodies for user participation. For instance, there shall be a coordinating committee at each

school with two representatives for the teaching staff, one for other employees, two for the parents' council, two for the students and two for the municipality. One of the representatives for the municipality shall be the school's principal (Education Act, sec. 11–1).

Moreover, each primary school must establish a student council with representatives from grades 5-7. These students are elected for one year. One of the teachers is responsible for assisting the students in their work, and has the right to attend and speak at meetings of the students' council. The aim is to create a good learning environment. The council may also express its views and present proposals in matters relating the students' local environment. As such, the students have a voice in the decision-making processes in the school (Education Act, sec. 11–2).

Each school must also establish a parents' council where all parents who have children at the school are members. This council shall promote the parents' shared interests and help to ensure that students and parents take an active part in creating a satisfactory school environment. The parents' council shall work to promote an atmosphere of solidarity between home and school, lay a basis for well-being and positive development for the students and foster contact between the school and the local community. The parents' council elects an executive committee, which itself elects two representatives with personal deputies to the coordinating committee (Education Act, sec. 11–4).

The Core Curriculum specifies how the local educational authorities, school leaders and teachers have a joint responsibility for laying the ground for a professional environment to promote school development.

Supervision

The county governors are responsible for carrying out the intentions, goals, and regulations expressed by parliament and the Ministry of Education, through school inspection and supervision. National inspections are considered to be important regulatory instruments to reveal lack of legal compliance, and started in 2007 (Hall 2016). In a similar way, each local educational authority is responsible for controlling, following up and supporting schools within their jurisdictions.

In 2009, the government launched the Advisory Team Project (ATP), in which teams of advisors, trained by the Directorate for Education and Training, offer their services to municipalities to stimulate school development. Analysis demonstrates how the ATP regulates knowledge about what counts in school development, and controls participants' identification of problem areas. At the onset, the ATP aims to meet the needs of local schools that face exceptional challenges based on national test results. These new forms may seem “soft” because they build on principles of autonomy and self-determination for participating schools and municipalities. However, the effects may be substantial. Furthermore, the government aims to raise the quality of mentoring *within* schools through formal mentor education.

Challenges

Norway has defended the comprehensive and public organization of education, and has therefore, remained more reluctant in adopting managerial ideas such as allowing private providers to play a much more significant role in delivering education services. From an equity perspective this is a strength. Research shows how a strong value commitment among school leaders and teachers is visible. In most municipalities, the relationships between leaders and teachers are not very hierarchical in practice, and teachers enjoy considerable trust and autonomy.

Mediocre results on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) tests have resulted in a strong focus on students' academic achievement. Local authorities expect school principals and teachers to use national test results to improve their practice in ways that enhance student outcomes and add strong pressures to the principal's role. This focus on "objective" measurement has connected education more closely with economic progress and performance in Norway, an issue that is highly contested. Currently, much faith is put in assessment tools that provide data and information and trust in the profession itself seems gradually to be replaced by trust in the results (Gunnulfsen 2018; Skedsmo and Møller 2016).

These new expectations of public reporting and external accountability create both challenges and possibilities for school leaders, but how these affect the work of school leaders very much depends on the local organizational work contexts. Moreover, local schools are important for ensuring the survival of the many small communities in the country where the population is geographically dispersed. Maintaining this system makes it difficult to consolidate schools, tighten networks, increase oversight and ensure the achievement of common objectives (Hatch 2013).

References

- Elstad, E. 2009. "Schools Which are Named, Shamed and Blamed by the Media: School Accountability in Norway." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(2); 173–189.
- Gunnulfsen, A.- E. 2018. "Micro Policy Making in Schools. Use of National Test Results in a Norwegian context." PhD-theses, University of Oslo
- Hall, J. B. 2016. "State School Inspection: The Norwegian Example." PhD-thesis, University of Oslo.
- Hatch, T. (2013). "Beneath the Surface of Accountability: Answerability, Responsibility and Capacity-Building in Recent Education Reforms in Norway." *Journal of Educational Change*, 14 (2): 113–138.

- Karseth, B., J. Møller and P. Aasen (eds.) 2013. *Reformtakter. Om fornyelse og stabilitet i grunnopplæringen*. (Education Reforms – Renewal and Stability in Primary and Secondary Schools). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Karseth, B. and J. Møller. 2020. “Legal Regulation and Professional Discretion in Schools.” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64 (2): 195–210.
- Møller, J. 2009. “Approaches to school leadership in Scandinavia”. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 41 (2): 165–177.
- Møller, J. 2016. “Norway: Researching Norwegian Principals.” In *A Decade of Research on School Principals– Cases from 24 Countries*, edited by H. Ärlestig, C. Day and O. Johansson 77-101. Dortrecht: Springer.
- Møller, J. and G. Skedsmo. 2013. “Modernizing education: NPM reform in the Norwegian education system.” *Journal of Educational Administration & History*, 45 (4): 336–353.
- Ottesen, E. and J. Møller. 2016. “Organisational routines – the interplay of legal standards and professional discretion.” *European Educational Research Journal*, 15(4), 428-446.
- Skedsmo, G. 2009. “School Governing in Transition? Perspectives, Purposes and Perceptions of Evaluation Policy.” PhD-thesis, University of Oslo.
- Skedsmo, G. and J. Møller. 2016. “Governing by new performance expectations in Norwegian Schools.” In *NPM and educational reform in Europe*, edited by H. Gunter, E. Grimaldi, D. Hall & R. Serpieri, 53 – 65. London: Routledge.
- Statistics Norway. 2018. Facts About Education in Norway. Oslo: Statistics Norway.
- Vedøy, G. and J. Møller. 2007. «Successful School Leadership for Diversity. Examining Two Contrasting Examples of Working for Democracy in Norway.” *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 35, (3): 58–67.
- Aas, M. 2017. “Leaders as Learners: Developing New Leadership Practices.” *Professional Development in Education*, 43 (3): 439–453.