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Accountability under Ambiguity

Dilemmas and Contradictions in Education¹

Petter Aasen, Vestfold University College, Norway

Nothing is as political as education. It is through education we reproduce our culture – our values, habits, attitudes and knowledge – from one generation to the next. It is by education we create conditions for cultural, social and economic renewal and growth. Hence, education is connected to ideology and power in different ways. The Danish social scientist Peter Dahler-Larsen (2003) has described these relations by using the three concepts policy, politics and the political. In this article I will draw upon these concepts to discuss new forms of governing education and how they challenge the system, schools, teachers and teacher education.

Key words: Educational Policy, Governing Education, Reproduction of Culture

Education policy

A policy is typically described as a principle or rule to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). Policy refers to the 'what' and the 'why' generally adopted by governance bodies within the public and private sector. A policy can be considered as a statement of intent or a commitment. A policy guides actions towards those that are most likely to achieve a desired outcome.

The concept policy or education policy refers to decisions made by bodies with legal and legitimate authority. Education policy is constituted through

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legislation, regulations, curricula and assessment systems. In Norway the national parliament and national government define the goals and decide the framework for the education sector. The Ministry of Education and Research and the Directorate for Education and Training are responsible for carrying out national education policy. The latest national comprehensive reform in the 10-year compulsory school and in upper secondary education and training from 2006, in English referred to as the Knowledge Promotion Reform, is an expression of education policy. It introduces certain changes in substance, structure and organization from the first grade in compulsory school to the last grade in upper secondary education and training. However, education policy is also shaped by other agencies. Norway has a two tier-system of local government, and together with the state, the regional level (consisting of 19 counties) and local level (consisting of 430 municipalities) form the political-administrative apparatus (Aasen & Sandberg, 2010). Regional and local levels are essential in the implementation of national policies, but at the same time they are autonomous political levels. To a certain extent, counties and municipalities are self-governed, empowered by authority delegated from the State, set out in legislation. Thus, the municipalities and counties are essential in the implementation of national policies, but moreover they are self-governed entities with responsibility to constitute and authorize education policy.

The cornerstone of the Knowledge Promotion Reform, as expressed in reform documents and other policy documents prior to the reform, is that it aims to achieve new forms in governing, management and administration of schools, which mark a systems change (Aasen et al., 2012). The intentions of the Knowledge Promotion Reform as a governance reform are increased decentralization and devolution of decision-making and responsibilities in the education sector. The term school owner in Norway refers to county authorities with responsibility for upper secondary schools and training establishments, and municipalities with responsibility for primary and lower secondary schools – and through the reform school owners along with schools and teachers are intended to gain more autonomy and freedom. The systems change envisioned is intended to improve the conditions for education by fostering a local culture of learning and developing schools as learning organizations. The reform also marks a serious effort to introduce robust performance management and results management into the Norwegian education system. Key measures in the governance approach include competence aims, a national quality assessment system and an emphasis on the quality of results and the documentation of results achieved. Local competence and capacity building are stressed as well as the development of

schools as knowledge-based learning organizations, and there is emphasis on clear and determined leadership in schools as well as in classrooms (Aasen et al., 2012).

The principle of local autonomy is a vital part of the Norwegian political system, and the balance between central and local governance, central control and local independence, is continuously debated (Telhaug, Mediås & Aasen, 2006). The recent reform reinforces deregulation and pushes policy-making authority downwards in the education system. Based on the analysis of the stated intentions of the reform, four key elements can be identified as central to the Knowledge Promotion Reform's approach to governance: objectives- and performance management, knowledge-based management and practice, empowering the teacher and school leader professions and accountability.

Policy motives and governance dimensions and instruments

Behind the Norwegian reform, we can identify three main motives for decentralization (Sandberg & Aasen, 2008): Firstly, the democratization motive, which argues for a renewal of democratic influence. Through decentralization the political decisions will be taken close to where education is taking place. Secondly, the efficiency motive, which argues that decentralization means better disposition of resources and modalities for reaching the given goals. And, finally, the professional motive, which argues that changes in knowledge volume and structure demand more professional control over education content and methods for learning. Hence, the professionalization of school leaders and teachers and new professional understanding and practice are essential.

Decentralization of education, irrespective of motives, puts in focus the balance between political and professional power and control over education. The governing or steering of an education system can be described in two dimensions. On the one hand, it is a question of where the power is; on the other, it is a question of who has the power. These two dimensions can be illustrated graphically as shown in Figure 1 below (Lundgren, 1977; Aasen et al., 2012).

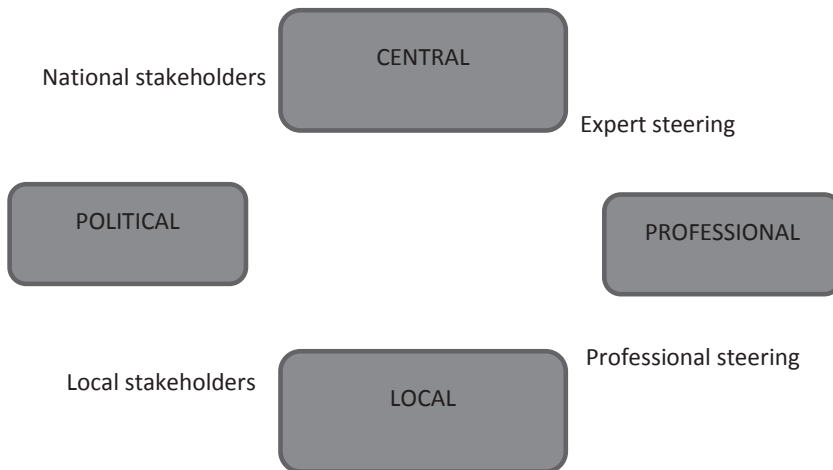


Figure 1. Dimensions in education governance.

On the vertical central – local axis we can use various terms such as state, county, municipality or community. The same structure holds not only for centralization – decentralization but also for the relation between state and private school enterprises. Through education we reproduce our culture from one generation to the next; through education we create the conditions for social coherence and cultural and economic growth. Accordingly, having a common value-base requires some form of central goals and control. In that sense there is always a need for a degree of centralization of national school systems.

Basically, there are four instruments or systems for political governing of education (Eide, 1973; Lindensjø & Lundgren, 2000; Whitty, 2002):

- The legal system.
- The economic system.
- The ideological system (defining goals, content and outcome).
- The evaluation system.

These four systems interact. The basic characteristics of centralized systems are that they are governed by resources through the economic and legal system, and thus centralized systems are strongly regulated and framed. In a centralized system ideological steering devices are expressed in e.g. rather detailed curricula describing the subject matter, approved textbooks

and certified teacher education programs. Movement towards decentralization weakens governing by resources and legal regulations. If decentralized governance is to serve the purpose of promoting equality and reproducing and renewing a common value- and knowledge base, what remain for the center in a decentralized system are the ideological system and the evaluation system (Aasen, 2007, Aasen et al, 2012).

Ideological steering is, however, challenged by the rapid changes in knowledge. Access to information is rapidly increasing. Schools as institutions were created in a society poor in information. This is reflected in the way curricula and syllabi have been constructed (Lundgren, 1979). In information-dense societies the gravitation point in curricula cannot anymore be the organization and order of content. We have reached a Copernican turning point, in which curricula must be based on how knowledge is structured and articulated in basic concepts, theories, models and competencies, which in their turn must be expressed in terms of goals and expected learning outcomes. With the new and rapidly changing economy and production, as well as globalization, and the rather dramatic changes in the volume and structure of knowledge, it is becoming more and more difficult to plan and regulate the content of education centrally.

Steering education by expressing goals to be achieved and by evaluating the achievements demands new conditions for governing. To function as a steering device goals have to be clear. Here a new problem or dilemma arises. In a modern, complex society with fragmented and specialized sectors, and in a multicultural and globalized society, there is pressure from various interest groups, and thus goals easily become broader and more abstract. Consequently, there are processes within a nation such as Norway which are contradictory to the demands of steering by clear goals (Aasen, 2003).

One way out of this dilemma, as we have seen in the Norwegian reform, is to reorganize the governing and administrative system towards decentralization and renew the steering documents. However, with decentralization and moving from central towards more local governing, the question of who has responsibility is sharpened. Thus a movement towards decentralization focuses the professional ability of teachers and their professional responsibility and accountability. The horizontal axis in Figure 1 above illustrates this tension between political and professional governing of education.

Responsibility and accountability

To govern by goals requires clear goals. But then again these goals must give space for interpretation. The essence of goals is that they are not formed as rules. Goals have to be owned by those who have the responsibility to implement them. Here, the essence of goals meets the essence of professionalism in the sense of having a knowledge base to interpret and make goals concrete in relation to teaching and learning processes. Furthermore, it calls for a clear division of responsibility and, hence, accountability. Thus, new forms of governing exemplified by the Norwegian reform imply that political authorities at national and local level should not enter the school gate. At the school gate professional teachers should take responsibility, and in turn be accountable for the pupils' learning outcomes when they leave through the school gates.

In one respect education has always been governed by goals. That is the essence of pedagogy. But steering learning by goals and learning outcomes is not the same as steering the system by goals, competence aims and learning outcome. This means that governing by goals needs more than goals and learning outcomes for individual pupils or students. The goals must, moreover, express the overall societal goals for the education system and the quality ambitions of the system. Therefore, decentralization and governing by goals and outcomes/results introduces a system with two legs. One is the articulation and implementation of goals, competence aims and learning outcomes; the other is the construction of control and accountability systems (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Hopmann, 2008). To govern by goals and learning outcomes demands that goals are followed up and evaluated. And, above all, it demands that the goals and outcome ambitions are formulated in such a way that they can be assessed and evaluated.

Again, as pointed out earlier, key measures in the new governing approach in the Norwegian reform include a national quality assessment system and an emphasis on the quality of results and documentation of results achieved. The consequence of more emphasis on assessment, evaluation, follow-up measures and quality assurance is that education becomes more transparent. By making the results more visible, the pressures for change increase. Results or outcomes that are public are the basis for accountability. However, seeing this from a broader political perspective, a new dilemma is discernible. During the last decade the media world has changed dramatically. New modalities have been established and competition has intensified. Thus, the pressure from the media on decision-makers has strengthened. It can even be argued that the media sets the political

agenda. Decentralization means that national politicians have lost clear-cut instruments for action. Media storms, however, tend to withdraw the initiative from the local level to an impatient central level, which affects the legitimacy of a decentralization process and can even block the implementation of decentralization. It seems also to change the balance between governing by goals and governing by standardization, by increasing the central control of education and limiting the space for professional development. It is a risk that decentralization becomes a new centralization through governing by standardization and evaluation, and so taking away the flexibility that is necessary for local development.

Our research on the implementation of the new education reform in Norway confirms this risk (Aasen et al., 2012). Political follow-up initiatives have strengthened centralized steering, both national political stakeholders and national experts, through increased evaluations, control and inspection. Accordingly, school owners, head teachers and teachers have experienced that local decision-making authority and freedom have been reduced during the reform implementation.

Early in the reform period (2007-2008), a large majority of school owners felt that they had been given greater autonomy to make independent decisions, and that the reform had increased the influence of school leaders. By 2011, only a minority of municipalities and counties felt the same way. Likewise, flexibility and openness in relation to local conditions and solutions seem to have been weakened throughout the reform period. In 2011, 5 years after the reform was introduced, only 40% of municipalities and 8 of 19 counties said their experience was that the reform provides more flexibility and openness in relation to local conditions and choice of solutions.

In 2011, when asked if they had been given more independence or autonomy than before the reform, the proportion answering that they had was 12% among upper secondary school teachers, 16% among year 10 teachers and 22% among home room teachers in grades 4 and 7. Thus from the perspective of educational actors the reform so far does not seem to have had a significant impact on empowering teachers as professional workers. On the contrary, decentralization seems to increase central control and limit the space for professional development and steering.

Politics in education policy

The above illustrates that we cannot understand the relation between education and ideology and power if we reduce the relation to decisions defining ambitions, goals, and legal, financial and pedagogical measures.

To understand the relation we also need to focus on disagreements and conflicts of interest in the policy making process and in the implementation of education reforms. Thus, the relation is also characterized by politics. Politics is a process by which groups of people make collective decisions. The term is generally applied to the art or science of running governmental or state affairs, but it also refers to behavior within civil governments. Politics can obviously also be observed in other group interactions, including academic institutions. Politics consists of social relations involving authority or power and refers to the regulation of affairs within a political unit, and to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy. The concept of politics draws our attention to processes that define who gets what, when and how. Hence, in order to understand education it is vital to examine the politics of policy making processes and the ongoing conflicts over state policy with an eye to the ways in which ideological positions are mediated and transformed.

In Norwegian education reforms after World War II, we can identify different ideologies constituted by different perspectives on the relation between education and society and the goals and organization of the education project (Aasen, Sandberg & Prøitz, forthcoming). In examining the education system they define different problems to act on and prescribe diverse solutions at system as well as school level. The different political ideologies have different views of the knowledge base for education policy and practice. Furthermore, they have different answers both to Herbert Spencer's powerful question What knowledge is most worth?, and to Michael Apple's even more provocative question What counts as official knowledge? (Spencer, 1859; Apple, 2003).

Tensions and contradictions

The different ideologies work simultaneously and comprise different perspectives on knowledge and education: different understandings of the education project and the relation between education and society. In the policy documents introducing the new national education reform in Norway and in the central political and administrative follow-up initiatives, different ideologies can be identified. This illustrates the fact that there are always contradictions embedded in education reforms creating tensions on several dimensions.

On the social dimension (Figure 2) we witness strains between education as an individual good and education as a common good, between equity

as equality and equity as equivalence, and between the importance of early intervention and a more patient approach to learning.

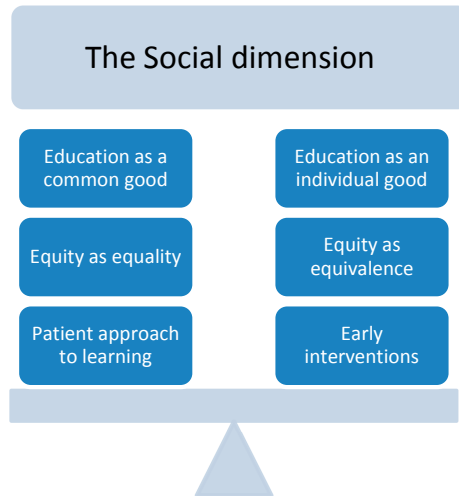


Figure 2. The social dimension in education policy.

On the governance dimension (Figure 3) we observe tensions between national steering authority and locally elected political bodies' authority to act autonomously, and between decentralization as delegation and decentralization as devolution.

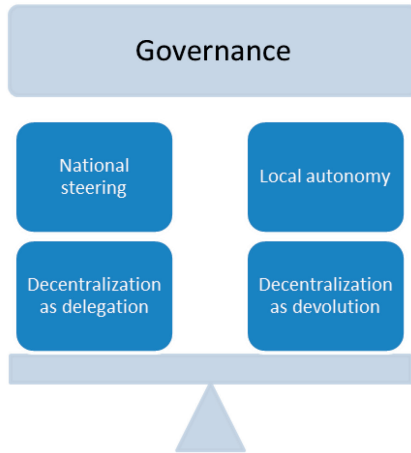


Figure 3. The governance dimensions in education policy.

On the systemic relation dimension (Figure 4) we observe tensions between central detailed control and state steering at a distance through empowering local authority. The central state demand for extensive documentation is often interpreted as a form of “feeding the beast”, while local governments and schools ask for national support.

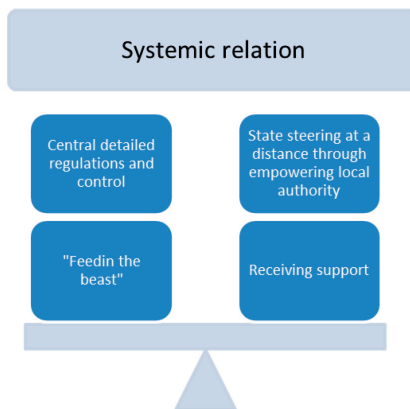


Figure 4. The systemic relation dimension in education policy.

On the knowledge base dimension (Figure 5) there are tensions between evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence, between research-based solutions and experience-based reasoning, between efficient intervention and professional reflection, and between knowledge directed to what works and knowledge focusing on when and whom it works for.

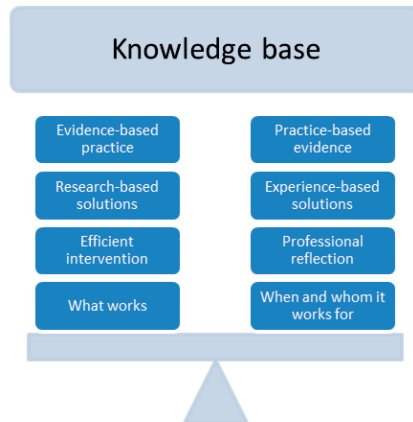


Figure 5. The knowledge base dimension in education policy.

On the school contents or subject matter dimension (Figure 6) there are tensions between knowledge and competence, between competence and skills, and between focusing on learning processes and the demand for documented learning outcome.

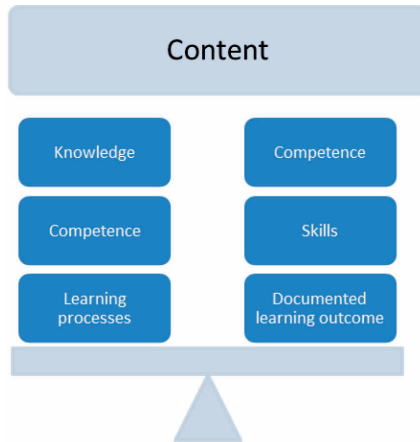


Figure 6. *The content dimension in education policy.*

Accountability is in some ways the foundation of public services today. Without accountability there is no legitimacy; without legitimacy there is no support; without support there are no resources; and without resources there are no services. However, on *the accountability dimension* (Figure 7) in education there are tensions between professionalism and managerialism; between professional trust and an increased administrative technocracy.



Figure 7. *The accountability dimension in education policy.*

Our studies of the implementation of the Norwegian reform show that these contradictions in education policy also work within education practice at the school and classroom level (Aasen et al., 2012). The contradictions challenge local authorities, school leaders, but also teachers in the classrooms. At the local and school level they can generate ambiguity and frustration. Thus, we can observe demands for a return to stronger and clearer hierarchical guidelines and mechanisms. On the other hand, however, we also can observe how school leaders and teachers collectively and in creative ways offensively occupy openings and spaces formed by the contradictions. Accordingly, the awareness of tensions and contradictions is important not only to understand the circulation of national policy documents and technical and administrative plans. The awareness of ideologies working simultaneously and thus generating contradictions can also help us to better understand the situation to those involved in education practice. This is vital since education policy must be understood as continuously remade in use, and schooling ultimately is built from the ground up.

The political in education

Policy and politics are important concepts in understanding the development of education both at system and practice level. However, to fully understand the relationship between ideology, power and education, we must include the term the political. The term does not limit the relation to decisions made by governing bodies or to policymaking processes, but implies an understanding of education as inherently a political act. Thus, the political in education refers to the fact that education procedures and practice – the questions of the 'what', 'how', 'where', and 'when' in education practice – constantly include priorities and decisions at the school and classroom level that include answers to questions like who ultimately gains the most from the ways our schools, and the curriculum and practices within them, are organized and operated.

The political in education points to one other fundamental argument for governing education by goals and outcomes. Resources and rules can govern areas or sectors within which we have profound research based knowledge and agreement of the relations between goals and methods. To take a simple example from traffic policy, if we know that there is a clear relationship between speed, the conditions of roads and car accidents, we can implement governing by resources and rules. On the other hand, the less general knowledge there is of the relation between goals and methods, the more governing by goals is applicable. Education defi-

nately can draw upon researched based evidence, but practice and experience based reasoning is equally important. This in turn demands qualified personal with skills, knowledge and professional judgment and discretion to adjust methods to specific circumstances. Decentralization of education and governing by goals and results demands new forms of qualifications of teachers. Furthermore, governing by goals demands new forms of school management and leadership. As pointed out above, key elements in the Norwegian Knowledge Promotion Reform are objectives- and performance management combined with clear allocation of responsibility and accountability of school owners, schools and professional teachers. The government has also recently introduced reforms in teacher education to meet new and different professional demands. The programs enforce both a research based and practice based knowledge and professional development.

Conclusion and implications

My argumentation in this article can be summarized in the following way: Central ideological steering of education is challenged by the rapid change in information and knowledge; it is difficult to plan and regulate the content of education from the central political level. The gravitation point in curricula cannot anymore be the organization and order of content. Curricula must be based on how knowledge is structured and articulated in concepts, theories, models, competencies and skills, which must be expressed in terms of goals and expected learning outcomes. Steering education by expressing goals and competencies to be achieved and by evaluating achievements demands new conditions for governing. To govern by goals require clear goals. At the same time they must give space for local and professional interpretation.

The intention of the Norwegian Knowledge Promotion Reform as a governance reform is increased decentralization and devolution of decision-making and responsibilities in the education sector. A movement towards decentralization focuses on the professional ability of teachers, their professional understanding, reasoning, responsibility and accountability. I have described the new forms in governing as a balance between central and local steering; and between political and professional power and accountability. I have underlined that the professionalization of school leaders and teachers and a new professional understanding and practice are essential elements in recent education reforms, in Norway as elsewhere.

New forms of national governance require a balance of responsibility between the center and the periphery, between politicians, management and professionals. There must be a clear division of accountability, and furthermore, governing by goals demands governing by participation. Those who are implementing national goals must be given an opportunity to own the goals. The goals must be expressed in such ways that they give openings for interpretation and thus create working processes involving all that are responsible for implementation. To meet new demands education institutions have to learn how to use the collective capacity and competence. Thus, in order to meet the new challenges introduced by new forms of governing, teachers as a collegium must be given space for professional development to avoid recentralization and de-professionalization.

Steering documents like curricula must be expressed in terms of goals, learning outcomes and guidelines, with teachers having control over the selection of content and methods. The new forms of governing include a system for assessment, evaluation and quality assurance. This must build on a clear division of responsibility, which means that there must be both central and local evaluations and quality assurance. Evaluation and quality assurance must be balanced and not the dominant instrument for central governing. We need accountability which serves three functions: giving quality assurance; showing the public that they are getting value for money, and above all helping the system learn from systemized experiences and documentation.

Reforms must embrace all levels and all instruments for governance. This means that changes in the legal system must follow changes in the other systems and vice versa. Decentralization calls for a new type of central governing; new competencies must be recruited and developed. Central authorities must have the ability to govern by goals and by results and at the same time maintain a hands off stance. The new forms of governing make education more transparent and thus more open for public criticism and debate. This again challenges local capacity building and teacher education.

The question is how teacher education programs address education policy, the tensions in education created by the politics of education, and the professional role as inherently a political act. Forms of governing and professional accountability are ambiguous. The professional development of teachers depends on the ability of teacher education to empower teachers as a profession to meet the ambiguity by occupying the spaces given by tensions and contradictions generated by the politics in education policy. Nothing is as political as teacher education.

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