Following up the learning outcomes and challenges in Norwegian school improvement

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Abstract
In 2005, the Norwegian government initiated a program for school improvement called Knowledge promotion – from word to deed. The program is not only aimed at improving schools, but at the development of knowledge about school improvement processes and the outcome of these processes as well. The program represents a unique strategy for policymaking, and the results has caused, or contributed to new foci and programmes for school improvement in Norway.

The program Knowledge promotion – from word to deed has been evaluated and the program results have been analyzed in various ways. The government has designed new improvement strategies based on the experiences and knowledge gained from this program. The aim is increased quality of the school’s core activities, here defined as improved results, improved implementation and an improved learning environment. (Ministry of Education 2007-2008) Experiences and knowledge gained from this program have been developed in close cooperation between educational authorities on a national and local level, school leaders and school employees, and external resource environments.

This knowledge is translated into new national efforts in the process of improving the quality of Norwegian schools. In this paper we focus on some of the results, the challenges and some of the initiatives that have been taken to meet these challenges. The initiatives we highlight are launching a permanent corps of advisors and strengthening school leadership.

1. The Norwegian school improvement strategies, exemplified by the school development program The Knowledge Promotion reform – from word to deed

Strategy for quality development in Norway
After the millennium major international comparative studies have dominated the Norwegian debate on quality in education. The recommendation from the Søgten committee, NOU 2002:10 Forsteklasses fra første klasse (First-class from the first grade) defines three types of quality in education for children and young persons: structural quality, process quality and result quality, where structural quality defines the external framework of the education, process quality is the measure for the internal processes in the schools, and result quality explains the competence attained by the pupils. Result quality thus comprises the total effect of learning.
National and international research has paid special attention to the role of school owners and the school administration as key factors for the three quality areas. Report to Parliament no. 30 (2003–2004) Kultur for læring (Culture for learning), which formed the basis for the Knowledge Promotion reform, emphasized local freedom and local responsibility for developing quality in school.

The Knowledge Promotion Reform

The Knowledge Promotion Reform, a comprehensive curriculum reform, was introduced in autumn 2006. The reform covers primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education and training. The Knowledge Promotion Reform introduces certain changes in substance, structure and organization and its goal is to help all pupils to develop fundamental skills that will enable them to participate actively in our society of knowledge. The Norwegian school system is inclusive; there must be room for all. Everyone is to be given the same opportunities to develop their abilities. The Knowledge Promotion, with its special emphasis on learning, is meant to help ensure that all pupils receive a differentiated education.

The following are the most important changes in the Norwegian school system that stems from the Knowledge Promotion:

- Basic skills are to be strengthened
- Reading and writing are emphasized from the first grade
- New subject syllabuses in all subjects, clearly indicating what pupils and apprentices are expected to learn
- New distributions of teaching hours per subject
- New structure of available choices within education programs
- Freedom at the local level with respect to work methods, teaching materials and the organization of classroom instruction

The Knowledge Promotion reform was a quality development reform which emphasized the importance of the teachers, and in addition there was an increasing realization of the importance of leadership and of the need for developing the school organization. It was as well a reform which emphasized and strengthened the responsibility of the school owner.

The program Knowledge promotion reform – from word to deed

In spite of these strategies, in 2005, when the ministry gave a Competency report and the school development program Knowledge promotion reform – from word to deed was initiated, its focus on the school organization was still unfamiliar to the schools and to the school owners.

The theoretical background of this strategy emphasises the schools as learning organisations (Senge 2006, Fullan 2001, Fullan 2003). It also emphasises the shared responsibility for school improvement between three parties, the school, the school owner and the external competence partners.
The Program for school development was initiated by a conservative-liberal government in 2005 and was taken over and expanded by a more left-wing government in 2007 under the name of Knowledge Promotion – from word to deed. Schools and their owners; the municipalities, have been invited by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training to apply for substantial funding for improvement actions that are in harmony with the guidelines that the government has presented. To be able to receive the improvement grant that ran for two years the municipalities and the schools had to cooperate with an academic institution so that the improvement work is based on scientific knowledge, and so that research perspectives could be used to draw conclusions from the improvement work about the school development processes. An evaluation is made of this large scale school development effort through a research project that studies the cooperation between schools, school owners and academic institutions and the outcomes of the improvement initiatives.

This program, as a strategy for policy development, was a top-down strategy in the sense that the ministry initiated it and stated a direction, aims and some money for school improvement, with demands on contribution from the schools and their school owner. At the same time it was a bottom-up strategy, as it required from the schools that they developed their own improvement theme and plan, on the background of their assessment of quality in pedagogy and organization.

The overriding aim of the program was to enable more schools to improve pupils' learning and the learning environment by focusing on the school as an organization. The main goal for the program was that the participating schools should undertake focused and systematic development activities and develop in accordance with the ideal of learning organizations.

These sub-goals had been established for the projects:
1 Participating schools and school owners shall improve ability to asses their practices and results systematically by applying available quality data and local observations
2 Participating schools and school owners shall improve their ability to undertake comprehensive development projects in cooperation with external cooperation partners to achieve better learning environments and learning for the pupils.
3 Development projects shall promote knowledge development and skills in practical school development in external competence milieus after the program is completed.
4 Development projects shall produce knowledge-based and useful tools (as procedures, models and guides) for use on holistic school development.

These sub-goals have been established for the entire program:
5 The program shall make the tools and knowledge on using them available through established websites and arenas where knowledge can be generated.
6 The program shall build and disseminate knowledge on various techniques for quality assessment in school with relevance for future school policies.

Program participants
A total of 270 schools and 40 kindergartens or early childhood centers have taken part in the program. 110 different external competence partners are involved in the projects.

Project funding has been announced three times, in 2006, 2007 and 2008. In 2006, there was one topic: Introduction of the Knowledge Promotion. In 2007 the program was extended with to new topics to follow up the intentions in Report to Storting no. 16 (2006–2007): “Early effort to strengthen basic skills” and “Increased completion rates in upper secondary education and training”. These were also topics in the 2008 announcement.

Open and guided application round
One aim was that the program should have greater diversity of participants than those who, by their own initiative usually apply to take part in state development programs. This was accomplished through targeted recruitment and guidance of selected applicants. There were two ways into the program, guided and open announcements of project funding. The aim was to recruit schools and school owners with varying experience from such work. The idea was to have a broad and varied background for the knowledge brought in, as this was seen as the best guarantee for success in school development. (Rambøll Management 2008).

Quality analyzing and assessment tools developed and used in the program
1. The status analysis tool is a reflection tool to be used as the point of departure for planning and anchoring quality development in individual schools. It samples all the quality data for the specific school, and in addition runs through a questionnaire on how the staff experiences their school.

2. After the projects have been granted funding, the participating schools carry out the organization analysis. This is done digitally to determine what the school is like as a learning organization and a workplace. This tool is suitable for measuring the schools temperature, to point out main patterns and stimulate discussion on areas that might be improved. [http://skoleporten.no](http://skoleporten.no)

3. Selected schools in the program are offered a launch process based on a school assessment method drawn up by Kompetanseregion Hardanger/Voss and developed under the auspices of the program. The method aims to ensure that the project activities get off to a good start. Experienced external school assessors are present at the school for four days to deal with the topic the school is to work within the project. The school's practice is assessed in comparison with an ideal picture based on written documentation, observation and interviews with pupils, parents and employees, and the school receives the report on the final day of the assessment week. (Skandsen 2006)

In 2010, the secretariat, with helpers from schools and the external competence partners have been touring the 18 counties to teach the schools and the school owners why and how to use the Quality tools developed by the program.
2. Program results, and the challenges we face after the conclusion of the program

The program has created optimism, engagement and faith in improvement in quality in the schools. The program has put focus on quality development in the school, and it has contributed to changes in how the school understand development of their pedagogical and organizational practice, and how the two parts are intertwined or two sides of the same quality development work.

The experiences from the management of local school development processes are now completed in hundreds of Norwegian schools. Researchers that collaborated with the schools have investigated what was going on and reports have been written. FAFO/University of Karlstad has been evaluating the program. I addition, several individual assignments have been given to evaluate elements, portfolios and processes within the program.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training are distributing the experiences gained from the program through conferences, the internet and the media, by books and leaflets. The knowledge that the schools and their academic partners have produced are put forward in an anthology (Ekholm et al 2010). Themes like the start of school improvement processes, working processes for learning and development among school staff, evaluation of school improvement work, schools as learning organizations, and leadership for school development are touched. The analysis of effects and effectiveness of the means applied in the program will be related to its six subsidiary objectives in addition to the overarching aims of improvement in learning environment and in learning outcomes of the schools.

Aims and learning points achieved at school level and at local and national level during the program will be further exposed at the ICSEI conference symposium in Cyprus.

3. National initiatives for further quality development: Corps of Advisors

Two specific action programs are examples of how experiences, knowledge and theory on school improvement are used to meet our challenges in Norway at the moment.

A central government program is the scheme with a Corps of Advisors, which was established in the autumn of 2009. The scheme is aimed at schools and school owners that face special challenges and need guidance in order to get started improving the teaching processes in the school.

(The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2010: http://www.udir.no/Artikler/Veilederkorps-for-skoleutvikling/)

A team of supervisors is now established on a national level. Their task will be to contribute to the development of schools and to supervise school leaders who are facing special challenges and their school owners. The program will be aimed at school owners and schools that have special challenges in the core areas for quality:

- Students lacking in reading and maths skills
- Learning environments that don’t promote learning
- Students and apprentices who do not complete upper secondary education or do not pass their exams in upper secondary education and training

The team of supervisors is governmental, and has no formal authority. This is placed with the school owner on a municipal level. It is therefore up to the municipal authority whether it will accept support from the team of supervisors. The team of supervisors will and shall not under any circumstances assume responsibility for the development processes. The contracts between the school owner and the
Directorate for Education and Training will be entered into during the fall of 2010, valid for a period of 1.5 years.

The aim for the team of supervisors is to provide a supervision that enables school owners and schools to implement local development strategies, based on recognized needs, e.g. uncovered through the use of national tests, student assessments or other tests. The experiences from Knowledge Promotion – from word to deed program and the pilot project show that the needs are numerous and complex. The supervision will, however, primarily be aimed at leaders on municipal and school level attempting to strengthen the school as an organisation, and will be based on a solid organisational and managerial foundation, using tools and methods that have been tested and proven effective. The supervision will focus especially on the school owners and schools on a system level; how they function and how they can be developed further. Some schools may also be in need of competence building related to basic skills, assessments or other core activities in the school.

The team of supervisors will assist in finding relevant resource environments, but will not offer supervision in these areas. Their focus will be how to implement this new competence and new methods of teaching into a learning organisation.

The team of supervisors will be further exposed at the ICSEI conference in Cyprus.

4. National initiatives for further quality development: Strengthen the school leader function

The national school leadership program is the other important action made on national level for school improvement. We now know relatively much about the situation in the schools and in the education sector, based on experience, research, reports and international studies. We have ambitions, national goals, plans, initiatives, reforms, political documents, projects, strategies and a high degree of political agreement and willingness. We have dedicated teachers and school leaders. And we have money and resources. The problem lies in our ability to utilise the knowledge, our ability to direct the processes to actually achieve development, implementation and change. There is a large gap between ambition level on one side and school practice on the other (Directorate tender document: Competency level for principals – expectations and demands. December 2008)

The schools that have achieved particularly good results are characterized by having a school culture in which teachers and administrators work together towards common goals and in which the basic values are reflected in the practical work with the pupils. In order to lead the school in the right direction, the head teacher must have insight into the academic and educational work. The head teacher must understand pedagogical methods and what characterizes the effective teaching of different groups of pupils; must know about curricular work and pupil assessment and have the ability to establish and follow up rules for order and conduct.

The national education authorities’ initiative for a national education program for head teachers is intended to help provide school owners with resources, competence and assistance in ensuring good and relevant competence development for school administrators. The aim is to support and help the school owners, and the training program for head teachers is seen as a way of making such support more concrete and as a way of introducing new forms of collaboration with school owners. It is vital that the training of administrators does not undermine the ownership responsibility of the local authorities and that the government and the local authorities cooperate well (Ministry of Education 2007-2008).

International trends - school leadership
The report Improving School Leadership (OECD 2008) deals with school leadership in 22 member countries, including Norway. The report sheds light on important factors that affect this field, e.g. historical, political, demographic, social and cultural factors. In this kind of international, comparative perspective, there are numerous common features. In many countries, school leadership is given high priority, but the recruitment to leadership positions is weak. This increases the relevance of topics related to the school system, such as organization, leadership qualifications, leadership roles and responsibility.

The OECD report concludes with four recommendations to all participating countries about how they can improve the conditions for school leadership, very relevant for Norway:

1. Redefine roles and responsibilities for the school leaders.
   The role of school leader has changed in recent years, not least as a result of the introduction of the scheme with so-called dual-level municipalities. In many places, the school leaders have been delegated much greater responsibility than previously without strengthening the support for the leader. As a result, the leadership tasks entail a great deal of administration, a certain amount of personnel management and less academic leadership. There are good reasons why the reverse ought to be the case.

2. Let many people take part in the leadership task.
   Leadership can be described through particular functions and tasks. Someone must perform these functions and tasks, but it does not have to be the leader him/herself. The leader is the responsible, but many tasks can be delegated, and many persons ought to be mobilized to take part in the leadership tasks.

3. Develop knowledge about and skills in school leadership (Effective School Leadership)
   Very many school leaders want and need to improve their competence. They need management education, management training and management development. It is challenging to establish better, more relevant and more beneficial programmes than those that exist at present.

4. Make school leadership an attractive career path.
   At present it is difficult to recruit school leaders. That is true of Norway, and likewise most other OECD countries. It is a major challenge to make it so attractive to become a school leader that the best candidates can be recruited. In Norway, the efforts to train head teachers are inspired in part by the results and recommendations from the OECD survey (OECD 2008)

The international OECD survey of teaching and learning (TALIS)

The findings from the TALIS surveys show us that there are conditions that are challenging to the Norwegian school system, related to teacher competence and school leadership, feedback and assessment, teaching practices, interaction and cooperation. TALIS provides no direct information about consequences for the learning outcomes of the pupils.

Quality improvement in the school system is related to professional development. Norwegian lower secondary school pupils have experienced teachers who enjoy their work, are secure in their role as a teacher and are satisfied with their job.

In the TALIS survey, a distinction is drawn between administrative leadership and instructional leadership. Norwegian school leaders perform their leadership roles by attaching greater importance to administrative than to instructional leadership. The school leadership in lower secondary school gives priority to accountability and management by rules. Less importance is clearly attached to management for school goals, instructional management and direct supervision of instruction in the school. This is especially true of the control dimen-
sion, and is apparent, for example, in that the teachers report that school leaders are not very active when it comes to observation of the teaching and advice about follow-up. The two forms of leadership are not in opposition to each other, but Norwegian school leaders practice a relatively passive form of instructional leadership. This can be seen in connection with the findings that show inadequate facilitation of competence building and guidance of newly employed teachers. Otherwise, the survey shows that it is important to have clear leadership in the school, whether the leadership is mainly instructional or administrative.

One necessary condition for a common school culture is common awareness that a good dialogue, interaction and cooperation are necessary among the participants in the various arenas in the school; i.e. between pupils and teachers, between teachers and school leaders and between school leaders and school owners. The findings in the TALIS survey indicate several main challenges for school teachers, leaders and school owners, and they are related to both attitudes and competence.

TALIS shows that the cultures of evaluation and cooperation are related. Instructional leadership is related to a culture of cooperation, and clear leadership is related to a good classroom climate and good relations between teachers and pupils. It is the latter in turn that creates a good classroom environment. Knowledge about the use of various tools for local external and internal assessment and about their utility is relatively weak in the Norwegian school system (Allerup et al. 2009), but ought to be included in a systematic and comprehensive improvement effort. The fact that teachers report that there is tolerance of poorly executed work over a period of time and that on the whole they experience appraisals and feedback as irrelevant and not specific enough becomes apparent as a clear challenge for Norwegian school leadership when it comes to the pedagogical practicing of the leadership role and the professional practicing of the teacher role. The findings from TALIS show that there is a need for objective, continuous, experience-based, varied competence building for teachers and leaders in order to be able to increase their competence in key areas in the Norwegian primary and lower secondary school. In these efforts, the school owner plays a key role in both a recruitment and a follow-up perspective.

**National Training Program for Head Teachers**

School leadership has a strong, albeit indirect, influence on the pupils' results (cf. for example Waters et al. 2003, Leithwood et al. 2006 and National College 2007). The national training programme for head teachers started up in the autumn of 2009. The programme is an education and training programme for all newly hired head teachers and head teachers who do not have formal management qualifications. It shall be controlled and targeted, have a practical aim and be based on the real needs of head teachers and other school leaders. A national standard for good school leadership has been developed, which is incorporated in five areas of competence (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2008):

- The pupils' learning outcomes and learning environment
- Management and administration
- Cooperation and organisational development, supervision of teachers
- Development and change
- The relationship to the role of leader

For each of these areas of competence, expectations of and requirements to the individual head teacher have been formulated with regard to knowledge (what the head teacher should know, be aware of and understand), skills (what the head teacher should be able to do and master) and attitudes (what the head teacher should stand for, identify with, be committed to and signal) (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2008).

An extension of the programme is planned to other target groups beside head teachers; i.e. other school leaders. In that case, there shall also be a focus on the leadership capacity of the
school owner, e.g. through clearer accountability, better organisation and competence building.

There are limits on the inherent effect that education has on the behaviour and performance of leaders. General leadership research shows that other forms of learning are more effective when the goal is better leadership (Mintzberg 2004). Therefore, the management training ought to be improved through other measures that can supplement the head teacher training and that are closely integrated into the context and the challenges of the individual leader. The most important training arena is the job of the leader itself. Leaders who are learning their job prefer mentoring, coaching, training, reflection and discussions with others in similar situations and in similar roles. In order to achieve this kind of training, the competence and capacity must be considerably upgraded in a dialogue with the institutions that offer management training. Over a slightly longer period of time, there will be a need to broaden the definition of the role of the head teacher through clearer responsibility, a greater emphasis on academic leadership and the development of the school as an organization. The role of the head teacher can also be strengthened a great deal by seeing that a better support system is developed for head teachers (cf. the scheme involving the corps of advisors). The intention is that these measures shall help facilitate better recruitment both to teaching positions and school leader positions. An extensive evaluation of the national training program for head teachers shall be conducted starting in the autumn of 2010 and lasting for a period of four years.
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