INTRODUCTION

Local Autonomy or State Control?
Exploring the Effects of New Forms of Regulation in Education

Education reforms dismantling centralised education bureaucracies are emerging all over Europe. A main aim is to enhance autonomy at local government and school levels. As a result new forms of regulation in education are being established. By regulation we mean the public activity which is normatively founded in the law and the legislative procedures aiming to supervise and control what is subject to regulation (Lægreid & Christensen, 2006). Hence, deregulation implies a reduction of centrally directed activity. The introduction of private schools followed by the marketisation of state schooling within decentralised systems of control where responsibilities are devolved to municipalities are examples of deregulation. Re-regulation occurs when central government reclaims control, often in an indirect manner through such means as target setting, performance measurement and the use of quality indicators. This thematic issue is devoted to exploring the deregulation and re-regulation of compulsory education in Britain and Scandinavia.

Traditionally education in Scandinavia has been subject to rigorous central regulation. Yet during the last two decades it has undergone processes of decentralisation and deregulation and, more recently – since the beginning of this century – signs of re-regulation have appeared. In Britain education reforms have followed a different direction, moving away from local governance towards a system of stronger central regulation and increased marketisation. In both Britain and the Scandinavian countries these developments are associated with the rise of the New Public Management (NPM). NPM approaches to education and welfare provision involve challenging central government control and emphasising greater autonomy at subordinate levels and entities in order to promote cost containment, efficiency, service quality and consumer empowerment.

However, deregulation emphasising increased local autonomy seems to accommodate mechanisms which, paradoxically, tend to increase central control. The concept of autonomy is commonly understood as freedom and capacity to act (Lundquist, 1987). A consequence of this enhanced freedom and capacity to act at a local level is that the central government loses its grip. Accordingly, in both the Scandinavian and British reforms we observe a kind of re-regulation through the introduction of audit and control systems of reporting and evaluation in the public sector. Yet, at the same time, the importance of autonomous municipalities and schools is still being emphasised. Thus, there seems to be an interaction and overlapping of state control and local autonomy which will be explored from different angles throughout this journal issue.

The articles problematise and contest some aspects of how local autonomy – i.e. the autonomy of local authorities, schools and professionals – is treated within NPM discourse. The NPM rhetoric around autonomy is ambiguous. On the one hand, the NPM logic favours a considerable degree of independence for local political and professional decision makers. On the other hand, the NPM has involved the use of central political decision making to frame local autonomy, so that in practice, a clear-cut division between both autonomy and control and politics and professionalism is difficult to uphold. The growing influence of the NPM in the field of education is also transforming the relationship between politics and professionalism in significant ways. Implicitly, a profession is defined by its jurisdiction over a specific occupational field (Abbott,
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However, advocates of NPM tend to argue for a reduction of professional influence in politics (Byrkjeflot, 2005) whilst professionals tend to mistrust politicians’ capacity to govern. This means that teacher autonomy might conflict with politicians’ interest in governing education. Moreover, NPM implies new conditions for professionals, emphasising an individualised type of professionalism which relies on situational knowledge, competence and performance (Svensson, 2006) in contrast to the more traditional conditions of formal education, occupation, monopoly and licensing. Linked to this is NPM’s emphasis on openness and a wider public understanding of processes, results and effects in education, sometimes referred to as transparency processes. Accordingly, schools and professionals are becoming more accountable for providing education and achieving results. This trend is reflected in the increased use of performance measurement technologies, such as regularly administered standardised national tests, inspections and evaluations, to monitor the performance of both educational providers and students.

However, although different national educational systems are being re-regulated by the introduction of more or less similar reforms, there is still a lack of understanding about the degree of convergence or divergence due to difficulties in making meaningful cross-national comparisons. Discussions of these questions from a comparative perspective have tended to anticipate a convergence of western educational systems. The articles in this issue reject this stance. The degree of convergence and divergence that can be observed depends on the focus or level of analysis and the determination of indicators to be compared. Changes can be identified at different stages and levels; for instance, in political ideas and debates, in reform decisions, in actual practice or in policy results (cf. Pollitt, 2001), or at central, municipal, school or classroom levels. Conclusions about convergence in education at one stage or level do not necessarily correspond with convergence at others; and increased devolution and accountability, as well as demands for audit and control, might have different motivations (e.g. educational quality-related or cost-saving related motivations) and effects in different countries.

The contributions to this issue were first presented at the workshop ‘Local autonomy or state control? Exploring the effects of new regulation in education’ at the Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies, University of Bergen, supported by the Norwegian Research Council. The contributions reflect the interdisciplinary character of the workshop and include comparisons between Britain and Scandinavian countries, and between Norway and Sweden and Scotland and England. Two of the three European welfare state models, i.e. the social democratic and the liberal, are included (cf. Esping Andersen, 2002).

National comparisons of the consequences of new modes of regulation for local or professional autonomy are relatively limited in educational research. In order to make meaningful comparisons of the consequences of new forms of regulation in compulsory education several clarifications and tasks are needed. In the article ‘Unpacking Autonomy and Control in Education: some conceptual and normative groundwork for a comparative analysis’ Alan Cribb & Sharon Gewirtz make a contribution to this relatively neglected field of educational research. The article begins with a consideration of some of the conceptual complexities involved in making sense of autonomy and control, sketching out a three-dimensional analytical scheme focused on: the loci and modes of autonomy (who are the agents and how is their agency being exercised?), the domains of autonomy and control (what are the spheres over which autonomy/control is being exercised?) and the loci and modes of control (the general forms and specific mechanisms by which autonomy is regulated, the agents of control and how their agency is exercised). Then, by setting out the main arguments around autonomy and control, the article goes on to illustrate the major value conflicts that arise in processes of enacting autonomy/control. A particular purpose of the article is to avoid the seemingly widespread – and usually unspoken – normative presumption that autonomy is good and control is bad. In education the balance between local autonomy and state control is obviously important but what is exactly at stake if we speak about the balance shifting between the two? Teachers do need both autonomy and control; the issue is the balance between the closely linked ideas and the forms they take in combination.

There is no doubt that the balance between state control and local autonomy has been challenged in Swedish compulsory education. From being once strongly state centred, compulsory
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education has from the beginning of the 1990s been affected by far-reaching reforms which have attempted to deregulate the schooling system and increase local autonomy. A new policy initiative on school time which allows school professionals freedom to make decisions on time distribution was implemented as a five-year experiment from 1999. In the article ‘A Recent Swedish Attempt to Weaken State Control and Strengthen School Autonomy: the experiment with local time schedules’ Linda Rönnberg analyses and discusses whether the experiment has affected school autonomy. In order to understand local autonomy two dimensions have to be accounted for: the freedom to act and local actors’ capacity to act. The experiment made discretionary space available for local actors but in some cases local autonomy was limited by the actors’ limited capacity for action. Rönnberg argues that both of these dimensions need to be considered in any analysis of local autonomy. She also suggests that even if the actors have the discretionary space and the capacity to make use of that space they may lack an interest in implementing reforms, or they may see the reforms as irrelevant. The authorities’ lack of effort in building schools’ capacity and interest in making use of local freedom suggests the reform may be essentially symbolic in character and this may also explain why some schools avoided implementing the experiment.

In line with Rönnberg’s findings based on the study of the Swedish local time schedule project is the idea that devolution of decision making to school level does not mean that teachers are necessarily capable of making use of the autonomy. Nor does devolution necessarily correspond to a strengthening of teachers’ status and authority. Teachers’ professional autonomy in Sweden and Norway is sensitive to the complexity of changing conditions. In the article ‘Towards a New Professionalism in School? A Comparative Study of Teacher Autonomy in Norway and Sweden’ Ingrid Helgøy & Anne Homme explore changes in education regulation in the two countries and their implications for teacher autonomy. The comparison, which is based on policy analysis and teacher interviews, indicates a striking difference in the conditions for teacher professionalism in the two countries: while Norwegian teachers’ daily work has been regulated by a prescriptive and detailed national curriculum, the autonomy of Swedish teachers has been framed by a goal-oriented national curriculum. The Norwegian teachers are characterised by weakened individual autonomy but also by a relatively strong collective professional identity. Teachers accept national standards and control in education which function to provide a secure body of professional knowledge for teachers and to underline the significance of teachers’ formal education. In contrast, Swedish teachers experience a high degree of individual autonomy but rely on a more personalised type of professionalism emphasising teachers’ knowledge, competence and performance as individual properties. Based on this finding Helgøy & Homme identify a need to redefine the concept of professionalism and suggest a differentiation between old and new professionalism. Using the dimension of individualism/collectivism the authors explore the concept of teacher professionalism and point to the limits of autonomy in relation to devolved responsibilities in the governing of education.

Helgøy & Homme’s study of teacher autonomy in Norway and Sweden indicates considerable differences between two countries often described as very similar. Cross-national comparisons in the field of education show that while globalisation may be a convergent force, nationalism can act as a divergent force. A comparison of aspects of NPM at work in Scotland and England highlights some significant differences. Margaret Arnott & Ian Menter explore the relationship between local autonomy and central control. Their article ‘The Same but Different? Post-devolution Regulation and Control in Scotland and England’ analyses changes in secondary education policy. Privatisation, performativity and the policy process are examined in the two national contexts. Arnott & Menter argue that to understand the ways NPM has evolved in post-devolution UK it is essential to analyse pressures for convergence and divergence in education. The welfare state and the public sector were questioned in the 1980s and 1990s in Scotland, but the loss of public confidence was not perceived to be as striking as in England. The premise of much of the NPM agenda was that the public sector was failing. The process of questioning in the Scottish political scene arguably stemmed from financial pressures rather than a questioning of relationships between welfare professionals, the state and individuals, which drove the agenda in England. Although there is evidence that aspects of the Scottish cultural tradition and visions of ‘the new
Scotland’ are having effects on both policy processes and outcomes, the signs of convergence in the enactment of NPM are strong when comparing Scotland and England. However, the impact of market forces and competition on schools and local authorities is much more visible in England than has been the case in Scotland. Even though NPM is evident in the regulation of education in both countries, national historical institutional traditions act as modifying influences.

Changes in the governance of education are considered to be a common trait shared by the Nordic countries and Britain. Devolution and NPM reforms are shared characteristics implying a shift from government to governance, from strong hierarchical educational systems to decentralisation and local autonomy including an expansion in the numbers of actors influencing education. In the article ‘Governing the Governance of Education – the state strikes back?’ Christine Hudson suggests that the state is able to adapt to changing circumstances and find new ways of governing rather than being forced to step back and allow other interests to play the primary role in governing education. The argument is built upon a comparison of the education systems in the Nordic countries and Britain. The comparison shows that despite cross-national differences all countries have introduced new forms of ‘soft’ regulation and have widened the range of actors involved in education. Because of the importance of education the state will not disappear, Hudson argues; rather, the increased use of output controls indicate that the state is more present than ever but that it is operating in coexistence with other actors. This challenges some of the literature on governance which implies a ‘hollowing out’ of the state.

The articles in this thematic issue offer new insights for understanding and evaluating the nature and operation of local autonomy and central control in education. From different perspectives the articles illuminate the dynamic processes of decentralisation and centralisation and the relationships between them. The articles show how processes of regulation can be both congruent and incongruent. In general, increased local autonomy seems to imply strengthened state control. However, this sample of nation-specific studies implies different combinations of state regulation–local autonomy relations and different degrees to which local autonomy is being utilised. The collection of articles represents an initial step which points to three main issues around which there is considerable scope for further research. First, the normative connotations of autonomy as solely beneficial are opposed by findings in the articles. For example, local autonomy can be an efficient tool for producing variation which in turn might increase social inequality in, and unequal access to, education. Further, local autonomy can threaten teachers’ collective professional identity by individualising demands for teacher performance. Second, there is a need for multilevel analysis in education research. The specific patterns of interconnection between the different levels in the governance of education shape education practice; and policy effects have to be explored at school level and be related to subsequent processes of policy making. Third, we hope to have demonstrated the advantage of doing cross-national analysis in education. National education policies are inspired by global trends but modified within national institutional contexts. The difference between England and Scotland, despite a long period under the same education government, shows the significance of national educational traditions. The Scottish national identity has been prominent in both pre- and post-devolution Scotland. In contrast, Norway and Sweden have similar national educational traditions but because of different financial positions reforms have been implemented differently since the 1990s. Accordingly, it would seem that national transformations of global trends may be driven by different forces set into motion by specific incidents.

Ingrid Helgøy, Anne Homme & Sharon Gewirtz

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