

Governmentality and the Norwegian Knowledge Promotion Reform

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Abstract—The Norwegian ‘knowledge promotion reform’ was implemented in elementary schools and upper secondary schools in 2006. The goal of the reform was that all pupils should develop basic skills and competencies in order to take an active part in the knowledge society. This paper discusses how governmentality as a management principle is demonstrated through the Norwegian ‘knowledge promotion reform’. Evaluation reports and political documents are the basis for the discussion. The ‘knowledge promotion reform’ was including quality assurance for schools, teachers, and students and the authorities retained control by using curricula and national tests. The reform promoted several intentions that were not reached. In light of governmentality, it seemed that thoughts and intentions by the authorities differed from those in the world of practice. The quality assurances did not motivate the practitioners to be self-governing. The relationship between the authorities and the implementation actors was weak, and the reform was, therefore, difficult to implement in practice.

Keywords—Education politics, governance, governmentality, the Norwegian knowledge promotion reform.

I. INTRODUCTION

GOVERNANCE is a general term that explains different ways to manage actions and opportunities for public sector actors. Management principles describe concrete political goals such as streamlining, rationalisation, quality improvement, and so on. [1]. Governance has consequences for how education policy and reforms are understood and operationalised on a national level. The impact of educational policy depends on the chosen form of governance and planned or unplanned occurrences during the implementation [2]. In 2006, the ‘knowledge promotion reform’ was introduced to reduce the differences between pupils’ basic skills [3]. Teachers and school owners were given both the responsibility and decentralised power to increase these differences. National tests and other control methods were used to ensure the quality of achievement at every school [2]. New public management (NPM) inspired the management documents that formed the basis for the implementation of the ‘knowledge promotion reform’. The starting point for governance in this NPM-inspired reform is that the policy and its administrative apparatus should concentrate on the major issue in terms of key objectives and key priorities, while local government should be autonomous and take care of itself.

In NPM, local autonomy provides flexibility and creativity, which are necessary for adaptation to changing environments. The management should be directed as far as possible towards

self-management through the principle of ‘freedom to take responsibility’. Each school should not be rigidly controlled by government directives; the schools should instead use their own power, creativity and skills to create good schools and provide quality assurance. This self-governmentality, both in terms of individuals and organizations, is based on the Foucault's theories of governmentality [4]. This power technique does not directly affect community members. Instead, it refers to the power that affects indirectly. Overall, it is about ‘practices, techniques and procedures whose purpose is to shape, direct and influence human behavior’ [5].

In the light of governmentality as a management principle, the Norwegian knowledge promotion reform is discussed. The research question of this paper is as follows: Which elements of governmentality as a management principle can be identified through the implementation of Norwegian knowledge promotion reform? In the following sections, governmentality as a management principle and the main intentions and results of Norwegian knowledge promotion reform are discussed.

II. GOVERNMENTALITY

Foucault introduced the concept of governmentality in 1978-79 [5]. The concept is complex and can be understood in different ways. Dean's [5] understanding includes two dimensions, divided into ‘how we think about governance’ and the management practice based on ‘theories, ideas, philosophies, and forms of knowledge that are a part of our social and cultural products’. Dean [5] understands rationality as a systematic way of thinking and a certain mentality.

“It emphasizes the way in which the thinking involved in practices of government is explicit and embedded in language and other technical instruments but is also taken for granted, i.e. it is not usually open to questioning by its practitioners” [5], p. 25].

Governmentality can be regarded as one way the authorities can govern by guiding the population to be self-governing and rationally minded, with the political interests of the authorities as a basis. ‘Conduct of conduct’ [6] can be understood as governing the governance [7]. Modern self-management by subjects requires that those who are governed have a greater or lesser degree of freedom to act. Hence, governance, or the conduct of conduct, is an activity that forms actors' rooms for action, seeks to give liberty a form, and incorporates ‘the practices in order to control their own self, their character and personality’ [8]. Governance is about how the state indirectly

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controls the population and their actions by facilitating individuals to make the right choices. This happens by influencing the individuals, their common attitudes, and understandings based on knowledge, morals, and responsibilities; as well as by defining problems, goals, norms, and ideals [10].

Indirect governance developed because directives violate important liberal principles in modern society [8], [10]. The idea is that citizens form themselves by becoming 'inner-governed'. The individual thus plays a major role in the management through change or improvement of himself or herself. It is therefore interesting that such a management strategy can be used to reform larger social units by designating certain groups as government agents. Individuals are empowered by entering into a kind of contract where they are encouraged to become entrepreneurs and development agents.

Dean [5] explains the concept of governmentality as something that is built into the culture and taken for granted by the members. The members do not dedicate significant thought to management because they have internalized governmentality [9]. Governmentality also involves other forms of power, especially sovereignty and discipline. Dean also discussed Foucault's concepts of 'apparatuses and security' [5] that create opportunities for the population. Foucault links these forms in a triangle: sovereignty, discipline, and government. Government has the population as its main objective and various 'security devices' as a mechanism for governance [5]. By examining the concept of 'conduct of conduct' [6], it is possible to understand government as the power to influence the actions or behavior of others. "Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes" [5].

III. THE KNOWLEDGE PROMOTION REFORM

International surveys, such as the PISA surveys, suggest that Norwegian pupils had relatively poor academic results and overall a lack of important basic skills in relation to the resources that was invested in Norwegian education [11]. There were major differences due to social inequality, poor progression in upper secondary school, high level of dropouts, and education that was insufficiently adapted for all. There was therefore a broad political unity behind the 'knowledge promotion reform' introduced in the autumn of 2006. The reform pertained to basic education, elementary school and upper secondary school.

During the introduction of the 'knowledge promotion reform', there was an intention to further decentralize decision-making authorities and executive agencies in the education sector [11]. The municipalities, schools, and teachers were given more scope to determine teaching methods and choice of content in order to achieve national goals.

The 'knowledge promotion reform' is an example of an

educational reform which on one hand is an extension of previous national education reforms and on the other is a promoter for the general international reform discussion, which involves lifelong learning, strengthening individual skills, and equalization of differences. The goal of the 'knowledge promotion reform' was that all pupils should develop basic skills and competencies in order to take an active part in the knowledge society [12], [13]. Norwegian school should be inclusive with room for everyone and with an emphasis on academics. Everyone should have the same opportunities to develop their abilities. In particular, the 'knowledge promotion reform' should help ensure individualized education for all pupils - including adults in primary education [14].

Basic skills was to be strengthened through effective training in reading and writing [15], [12]. New curricula were developed in all subjects, with clear goals for the development of skills for students and apprentices. The reform also featured new academic and time allocation and a new offer structure in upper secondary education. Emphasis was placed on local freedom of choice in terms of working methods, study materials, and organization of the training. Useful intentions from previous reforms were better applied to upper secondary education, and better learning outcomes (or higher quality of completed candidates) were sought, as were better opportunities for the individual to become more attractive and qualified for working life [12]. These three goals therefore contribute to improvements on the situation after Reform94, Reform97, and Norwegian competence reform.

When the 'knowledge promotion reform' was introduced, the Ministry of Education had prepared for the education system to be based on clear, concrete, and visible national goals; local freedom of action; and the responsibility of school owners and teacher to find the means to reach those goals. School owners were held responsible for the school results and quality, and school leaders and teachers became more responsible for their own schools as performance units. The national tests measuring the students' skills were designed to be a pedagogical tool in education. The tests will give the teacher a better starting point for adapting every pupil's needs in education. In addition, they will provide information to students, parents, teachers, school leaders. Local and national authorities and the general public are the basis for dialogue and quality development [12].

There was no comprehensive implementation strategy when the reform was introduced. Evaluation reports indicated that the reform posed new requirements for local governance, and that variation in the skills of school owners, school leaders, and teachers were barriers to the implementation of the 'knowledge promotion reform' [11][11]. Five years after the reform was introduced, researchers found that school owners, school leaders, and teachers had finally gained an understanding of how to handle the reform and effectively use the freedom to act that they received [16], [11].

Skålid [17] refers to the evaluation of the 'knowledge promotion reform' and claims that 'the result is a development towards a stricter control regime by central authorities' [17]. Aasen [17] claims that decentralization results in some form of central management and documentation requirements. School

owners' and teachers' experiences increased central control and limited the opportunity for local and professional development and management [17][17]. Eriksen [18] refers to research suggesting that the 'knowledge promotion reform' did not lead to equality between pupils in terms of knowledge and assumptions. The results indicated that there were more pupils getting better grades, but these pupils were already getting the best grades from before. Boys were getting worse grades than girls, more pupils were offered special education, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds received inferior grades [18].

Hølleland [19] points out that after the war, several new reforms were implemented in the Norwegian school system that have not seemed to work as planned. Hølleland claims that one of the reasons for the ever-changing reforms is that they focus more on political needs than educational needs. The teachers gained greater freedom in the 'knowledge promotion reform', but this freedom is a controlled freedom [19]. Hølleland argues that steady introduction of new reforms leads to stable changes. According to Hølleland, it is difficult to institutionalize the changes that are described as 'changes in the school's culture and identity' [19][19]. The evaluation of the 'knowledge promotion reform' points out that there has been a clear tension in the relationship between increased freedom and action space on the one hand, and increased central management with reporting and supervision on the other hand [20][20]. Nordenbo [21] also confirmed that the 'knowledge promotion reform' only made minor changes, and it was unclear whether changes and results could be attributed to the reform. The small changes pointed towards increasing social inequality [22]. The researchers estimated that this could be due to the fact that the instruments in the reform were not specifically geared towards leveling [22]. Results also indicated that the dropout rate from upper secondary education had not decreased [23][23].

IV. DOCUMENTS AS THE BASIS FOR DISCUSSION

In this paper, theory, public policy documents, evaluation reports, and other research literature were used as a basis for reflecting on governmentality as the guiding principle in the 'knowledge promotion reform'. The deciding factor for the selection of documents has been a connection between the documents, the type of documents, and the research question. The 'knowledge promotion reform' was evaluated by several research environments. The evaluation resulted in 44 evaluation reports and four synthesis reports. Current political documents, evaluation papers, and current research will be discussed in relation to governmentality as a guiding principle to answer the research question.

V. DISCUSSION

With the decentralization of responsibilities in the 'knowledge promotion reform', each school and teacher ostensibly received a significant amount of freedom to organize and teach their pupils. Nevertheless, the educators were still controlled through national tests measuring quality assurance, for example. This quality assurance was also a way to ensure

that the schools performed well and that the desired actions were chosen. Even so, the fact that the 'knowledge promotion reform' did not result in increased equality between pupils [18] may indicate that the quality assurance did not work as planned.

After decentralization, educators could increasingly make independent decisions in relation to the local curriculum, learning methods, and materials. This was referred to as methodological freedom and educational freedom for teachers to achieve the central goals. However, when this freedom depends on a number of factors such as resource access, collaboration, environmental requirements, interpretation of the scope of responsibilities and roles, and control of the results, the true extent of that freedom can come into question. Freedom can also expire when the responsible actors does not manage to coordinate different factors and end up going in different directions. Kroken [24] discusses accountability and refers to how it is implemented through terms such as flexibility, empowerment, and quality control. She asks if these can constitute hidden power strategies.

When facilitating local freedom, there are also a number of conditions and responsibilities that are attached. Freedom is influenced by government authorities' expectations and indirect governance, in that the free actions and practices are directed against the determined goals. Restrictions of freedom lie in the increased participation by the pupils and their parents, and in expectations and requirements for the teachers' pursuit of their profession. In the evaluation of the 'knowledge promotion reform', it was observed that some teachers perceived freedom as a 'time-thief' because they had to spend significant amounts of time preparing their own plans [11]. As a result of the teachers taking their expected roles and guiding the results and established national standards, schools become units that were managed indirectly using self-regulation mechanisms and performance measurements.

'Conduct of conduct' or the facilitation of autonomy pervades the Norwegian welfare society and the guiding principles of implementing the 'knowledge promotion reform'. Authorization of teachers was a political goal in the reform. The idea that increased local freedom allows teachers and school owners to act and plan in relation to local needs was a governance principle behind the 'knowledge promotion reform' [11]. The authorities did not have the opportunity or competence to control all the elements in a field as complex as education. They were dependent on the community's own mechanisms; these mechanisms are the closest to the problems and therefore are motivated to find the best solutions [1]. The downside of this was that the control mechanisms and standardization partly undermined the intentions of individual facilitation.

Evaluation also demonstrated that the reform unintendedly contributed to increasing inequality [25][25]. The researchers estimated that this could be due to the fact that the instruments in the reform were not specifically geared towards leveling [25]. It was also the case that some schools and teachers were creative as well as motivated and maximized the leeway for action, while other schools did the same as they always had. This contributed to different learning cultures and practices, and

thus different offerings to the students [25].

Governmentality is a principle of governance that can be used to control actors through their thoughts and feelings, or their mentality. Hence, actors act in accordance with the government's wishes without actually thinking about it [5]. Dean's [5] explanation of the concept of governmentality as something built into culture demonstrates that governmentality is a kind of indirect governance; it reminds people of the norms and unwritten rules that are followed every day without contradiction or further thought because they feel correct.

The fact that it went five years after the 'knowledge promotion reform' was introduced, before the school owners, school leaders, and teachers had gained an understanding of how to face the reform. This indicates that controlling mentalities takes time. To control behavior from a distance through societal norms must necessarily take time – especially so in an established school culture. On the other hand, Hammer [1] discusses the governance that goes on 'downstairs', where society affects governance through the norms reproduced by the population. Hence, the teachers' practice is a product of society and is shaped by reproduced norms.

Utilizing the leeway for action that the teachers had can result in experiencing security and increased importance that safeguards the interest in creating expected and effective results. Through active participation in problem solving and more influence in decision making, teachers can stand stronger and maneuver more flexibly in their profession. The cultivation of self-control and flexibility can move power and authority down the system [26]. Developing a school and strengthening teacher's colleges through collaboration on teaching methods can be a motivational driving force to exploit the leeway for action. These methods can also provide new opportunities for developing good learning methods and well-functioning practices that create effective learning environments. The result is an ideal fusion between the teachers' need to manage themselves as best as possible within the freedom granted, and the authorities' need to solve society's problems and achieve goals.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

In the search for answers to which elements of governmentality can be identified through the implementation of the 'knowledge promotion reform', the paper has focused particularly on the freedom of the teachers because that factor was singled out in the evaluation of the reform. It took time before the local actors exploited the newly granted leeway for action; for a considerable time, they sat on the sidelines, waiting for directives.

The teachers' freedom to design local curricula and to use different learning methods and approaches to learning can contribute to a management gain if the teachers become motivated to develop the best practice for achieving the key performance goals. A governmentality approach can thus be effective and help solve problems in practice; managerial gains are made by increasing the authority of those who are closest to the problems and are therefore best placed to address them. This focus on results and goals can lead to the building of a culture

for learning, which in turn contributes to continuous improvement in practice.

Governmentality is a form of governance in which those who are governed are indirectly affected by the governing powers' use of different methods. Those who are controlled can take this influence for granted or not feel influenced, possibly because that influence occurs on a weekday that otherwise feels free. The freedom contained in governmentality must therefore be qualified as indirect and controlled freedom. Governmentality is present in the 'knowledge promotion reform' through quality assurance for schools, teachers, and students. Authorities retain control even without directing schools and teachers on teaching and planning; instead, they use tools such as the 'læringsplakaten' (the learning poster), curricula, and national tests.

It can be argued that the relationship between reforms and practices is weak, and that reforms belong to an ideology rather than the practical world. Modernity and rationality are examples of ideas that govern the content of reform. In the world of thought, requirements and criteria are different from those in the world of practice. In the world of thought, ideas are formulated and are apparently made clearly and simply. However, these ideas become even more difficult to implement in practice. Therefore, it will be difficult to achieve the effects that the reforms would like to achieve.

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