

Norway: Its Educational System Clara Boavista

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Abstract

The Knowledge Promotion Reform, launched in 2006, aimed to restructure the education in Norway, to improve the student's knowledge with the current subjects and to place that nation in a higher position within the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) rank. This reform specifies that the formal leaders at school, in cooperation with teachers, have an undeniable responsibility towards the promotion of a good learning environment for the students. The schools' autonomy, interlinked with the political decentralizing process, transformed local governments into important management actors, being able to delegate obligations to the schools they have under their wings. Primary and lower secondary education start with the principle of equity¹ and adapted education, in order to face the social and individual inequalities of students, in a school system that is based upon the same National Curricula.

Keywords: student, education, management, equity, decentralization.

Introduction

Norway is a country with a reduced population of around 5 million inhabitants, considering the extension of its area. In the past thirty four years, there has been a huge influx of people coming from non western countries, which made this country's population more heterogeneous. We are talking about a country with a Social Welfare Status, which includes a strong participation from the State, both in Economy and in Education. In Norway and in most of the countries where external evaluation of schools exists, the external evaluators bear in mind the information concerning the students' school performance in order to evaluate their quality. The data about their performance most frequently considered, is those marks the students get in papers held all over the country and in standard national evaluations. There are other possible indicators of marks, such as the information relative to students in the teacher's evaluation, the data concerning the students' learning progression, the marks obtained in international studies and also, though not as common, the numbers of the labor market and either the students' or the parents' degree of satisfaction "as discussed by Eurydice [4]". Norway is the leader in the ranking of the 187 countries and territories in the latest human development index (HDI). In the past decades, "all groups and regions have witnessed a remarkable improvement in all the components of HDI, and a quicker progress has been registered in countries with a lower and average HDI", which indicates that the world is becoming less unequal "as discussed by Malik, p.1, [6]". With global access of the entire population to the elementary levels of learning, it's crucial to reflect upon the social heterogeneity that it creates and try to understand which are the educational policies adopted, to face the existing inequality in schools. A major equity between groups is fundamental and very important for the human development. One of the most powerful tools to achieve these goals is education.

¹Equity is considered a condition through which the individuals may get advantages from education and training, in terms of opportunities, access, frequency and results "as discussed by Demeuse, Baye & Doherty [2]".

Education raises the individual's self confidence, enables access to better jobs, it makes it possible to take part in public debate and ask the government for healthcare and social security, among other rights. The Knowledge Promotion Reform, launched in 2006, was the product of a wide consensus of the political parties coming from different tendencies, which aimed to restructure the education in Norway, to be able to strengthen the students with the learning contents and potentially allocate the country in a higher position in the PISA ranking. This reform specifies that the school's formal leaders, in cooperation with teachers, have an undeniable responsibility in the promotion of a good learning environment for the students. The *Learning Poster* at *skolenettet.no* accentuates the schools' responsibility in helping the teachers so as they are seen as visible leaders and examples for the students. This fact is related to the general part of the National Curricula that provides details about the role of teachers, about what a good teacher should be, outlining the importance of learning as a team work. Furthermore it emphasizes that coordinated efforts among schoolmates become essential for the students' final marks. The comments of *Learning Poster* specify the type of skills teachers must develop to respond to the expectations associated to their role, namely the professional skill, the ability to communicate, to organize, to give advice and to evaluate multicultural knowledge. In addition to this, teachers are expected to cooperate in the planning, performance and evaluation, as well as keeping themselves professionally and pedagogically updated. Some Norwegian studies refer that the teacher is considered a very important actor for the educational success and it emphasizes an enormous correspondence between the headmaster's actions and the class leader in school development "as discussed by Möller [7]".

Norway's educational system

School authorities and leadership are part of a national, regional and local ruling structure that applies to the whole country. The Law for Education and the National Curricula are determined nationwide. Administration wise, the exercise of authority is given to an executive county officer, who, in his turn, delegates his power to the school headmaster. People who operate formal authority become leaders in different levels of education. Whenever the expression *school leadership* is used, it refers to the person with the highest authority, although this can widely refer to all those who assume leadership roles at different levels. In every Norwegian school there are several individuals capable of embracing leadership although it should be very clear how, in fact, that responsibility is bestowed. The compliance of school attendance has been a social, political and educational tool to which every country in the European Union resort to, so that they promote and extend the universal schooling of Europeans and stimulate the democracy within each society. Historically, the length of compulsory schooling has improved and it shows a tendency to last for a period of time that equals the secondary higher education (16, 17 and 18 years old). Today compulsory schooling extends in general, for a period between nine and twelve years of coercive school attendance, between the ages of six and eighteen. In Norway, elementary school lasts thirteen years. The pupils begin school at the age of six and the first ten years of primary school and lower secondary school are compulsory. One may consider, extending compulsory schooling as a legislative initiative, corresponding to a political decision, whose aim is to promote access to all citizens to a fundamental social benefit in the modern societies of knowledge. The example of Norway clearly shows the tendencies followed, particularly by some countries in Northern Europe. The Directorate for Education and Training holds the global responsibility for education and monitors the governance for the education sector, and also how the rules and regulations coming from the Parliament are implemented. It is also responsible for the management of the support system for special education, public schools and the educational board of the national education centers, whose target is to ensure that all students get the highest quality of education they are entitled to have. The Directorate cooperates and discusses every challenges relative to education with the governors of each municipality, the latter bearing the responsibility at a regional level, for the local coordination, guidance, development work and supervision. The legislation has been gradually marked by a board that becomes clearer and clearer by giving authority to the municipalities and regions as a responsible organ for the primary, lower and higher secondary schools a wider freedom to make their own decisions about organization.

In most of the current reforms, started in 2006, curricula became less detailed. The new curricula for basic schooling, identifies a few basic skills that students should learn: speaking, reading, writing, arithmetic and the use of digital tools. Other skills are equally considered in this curricula, namely in the social and cultural domain, motivation and learning strategies. The Knowledge Promotion Reform created national common curricula for the 10 year compulsory schooling and for the upper secondary education. The principle of this reform is to keep and develop basic education (seen as going from primary school to the end of upper secondary school) in the best way possible, in order to prepare the students to face the challenges of the society of knowledge. The idea is to create a better *learning and motivation culture throughout life*. Parallel to that, with the evolution of students, school's main role is marked by the communication of values, the individual's education as a whole and culture.

In the European landscape, the most common tendency is to generate different educational opportunities for the students, according to the evaluation processes promoted by the educational institutions. These opportunities could be one of two types: curricular and institutional. The curricular diversion is marked by the creation of special classes included in the same school, for instance, through the institutionalization of alternative curricula, or even special and alternative courses, or by means of support mechanisms created to help with learning disabilities. In the latter case, there is no compliance to create separate classes; instead, it suggests the creation of temporary classes to help with learning disabilities “as discussed by Verdasca & Cruz [10]”. In Norway, institutional diversification occurs at the age of 16, usually at the end of the universal and compulsory schooling. Nevertheless, it also appeared that either the students’ academic success measured by the PISA results “as discussed by OCDE [8]” or the schooling rates in upper secondary school haven’t changed according to these differences in the educational policies. Joaquim Azevedo in his document about diversification, equity and quality of secondary teaching in the European Union, mentions that efficiency and equity in schools may be achieved by (i) means of a combination between, on one side, more decentralization and autonomy for schools and, on the other side, by central responsibility systems, that ensure monitoring, evaluation and correction of the inequality course between schools and pedagogical areas (ii) improving the experience quality and the teachers’ motivation, as well as the type of pedagogy they use, and last but not least (iii) the teachers team work with parents and the social support services, aiming to ensure the participation of those deprived students “as discussed by Azevedo [1]”. The promotion of equity in education should not lead to the promotion of equalitarian policies, so as to treat every citizen equally, but as if all of them were one. On the other hand, the promotion of equity in schooling requires that schools are institutionally supported by society, starting with the families and the communities where they are included “as discussed by Levin [5]”. Thus the policies for the promotion of equity will only be effective if they consider the diversity of personality, interests, skills and expectations, providing good educational propositions for each and every one. It is important to think about the educational and social mission of school and about the education’s capability to organize itself, aiming to host, teach and help each and every student to learn. In order to achieve this, diverse educational propositions should be created, marked by rules of quality and answering to pedagogical differentiation pedagogy, so that they can guaranty the necessary quality to the paths of citizenship’s development.

Norwegian schools hold total autonomy to choose the teaching method they wish, yet being subject to surveillance mechanisms, inspections. There is total freedom as for the criteria by which the students should be organized in classes for the compulsory schooling activity. Teachers and headmasters are the ones who decide together how to organize the students in groups “as discussed by OCDE [9]”. Curricula are determined by the central power. The Knowledge Promotion Reform and the National Curricula establish the school subjects to teach in compulsory school. The subjects are typified by themes, considered to be fundamental, as well as specific group of skills that the students must acquire. The local power may create and suggest curricula at their own level, by specifying goals for each school year. However, most of the times, this job is delegated to schools, that assign this responsibility to the head master “as discussed by Eurydice [3]”. Curricula demands that schools cooperate with the working life of the community where they belong, with local businesses, its art and culture, but also with local clubs and associations, to offer the students a real knowledge and to contribute in updating the school’s educational dispositions. It should also contribute to ensure that this cooperation promotes academic success, making it easy to transition between the different degrees in the learning process, and ensure the cooperation between school and other public bodies “as discussed by Eurydice [3]”. Schools are responsible for the development of their activities. In some municipalities, the responsibility to develop the support structures is given to the school registration office, by means of the creation of skills in human resources, and the creation and maintenance of networks between schools, while in other schools they are, very often, abandoned to their own luck as far as this matter is concerned. In both cases, the local policy provides guidelines that schools must follow. Thus the new curricula should embody the starting point for a dialogue among the different actors in the domain of education. To achieve that, they need to specify their goals and promote cooperation inside and outside the professional frontiers. In other words, the *Knowledge Promotion* presents a reform in which the curricula define goals for developing work at schools. An enormous responsibility has been given to schools as far as the specification of goals in the new curricula is concerned. Their monitoring depends on the way that schools choose their teaching materials, their teaching methods and their evaluation processes in the process of teaching. Therefore, school leadership must be practiced in a narrow connection with teaching and the students’ marks.

Conclusions

In Norwegian schools there are several actors that can play the role of leader. Schools are responsible as far as the visibility of their teachers as leaders is concerned, and it emphasizes some skills they should have: professional skill, capacity of communication, organization, of giving advice and evaluate, and also multicultural knowledge. In Norway and in most European countries, the school boards of management are open to a larger representation, which might include members of the local power or representatives from community in general. How these bodies are composed reflects the will to establish power relationships among the different professionals and users involved (school board, teachers, parents, students, local power) and also the community representatives (business, social and cultural groups, among others). In most of the cases, the composition of the school management board reflects the will to attribute the decision power to one of the groups. The decentralization of the responsibilities for the local communities and the school autonomy interconnect to increase the efficiency of the school management, undeniably accepting that the decisions taken closer to the field of action lead to a more effective use of the public resources. The Knowledge Promotion Reform aims to restructure education in Norway, by creating different educational opportunities for the students. This reform tries to cope with social and personal inequalities existing in schools and points out the responsibility taken both by the formal school leaders and the teachers in improving the culture of learning and the motivation throughout life. The extension of compulsory schooling to ten years is a legislative initiative that seeks to promote access to all the citizens to an essential social benefit in the modern societies of knowledge. Schools in Norway have total autonomy to choose the teaching method, whose mission is to generate good and diversified educational propositions, to meet the demands for quality, that are essential to paths for the promotion of citizenship.

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