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4 Understanding the space for parental voices in school governance

Perspectives from Norway

Unn-Doris K. Bæck

Introduction

School governance is a multi-faceted topic that includes a number of different levels and a wide array of actors. System-level governance of schools is important, but so is the relationship between schools and actors in the schools' environments, involving the school in the wider community and the wider community in the school (Brown & Duku, 2008). In many countries, the role of parents in schools has been emphasized more in recent years and parents have been put forward as a central partner for the education system to cooperate with around children's education. Numerous researchers have demonstrated positive consequences of home-school cooperation; for example when it comes to educational achievements in different subjects (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2012; Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afoi, Talenia & O'Regan, 2009; Fletcher, Greenwood & Parkhill, 2010; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein & Lloyd, 2013), school motivation (Semke & Sheridan, 2011) and early school-leaving (Rumberger, 2011), to mention a few. Several typologies of parental involvement in school have included parents' role in processes connected to decision making and school governance, something that has also been pointed out by Ng (2013). This is the case in Epstein's (2010) well-known framework of six types of involvement, where "decision making" entails including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives. However, whereas the positive effects of parents' direct involvement in their own child's school work is well documented and cooperation between school and the home around the individual child is well established, for example through parent–teacher conferences, the situation around parents' role in decision-making processes and school governance is much more vague.

In this chapter, the focus is on whether parents' voice is also acknowledged in matters connected to school governance. This will be addressed through focusing on how formal legislation facilitates for parents' possibilities to be involved at this level, how tensions to be found in the school–parent or teacher–parent relationship may cause challenges, and on how the structure of the education system itself represents a foundation that promotes or hinders

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parents' role in school governance. Do parents have the opportunity to participate in the governance of educational institutions? Which processes may hinder such participation?

The analytic intake in this chapter stems from Margaret Archer's morphogenetic approach to social analysis and specifically her use of the concepts of centralized versus decentralized education systems (Archer, 2013). Archer's approach specifies how structural conditioning, set in specific contexts, conditions social interaction, and serves as a fruitful intake as we are to focus on a specific national context.

The chapter relates to the Norwegian setting and employs examples from Norway. Norway represents a particular kind of educational system, which is important to account for when discussing the relationship between an educational system and its surroundings. With the aim of discussing the premises for parents' role in school governance and obstacles to including parents, the chapter will show that even though a formal foundation has been put down to ensure the formal rights of parents when it comes to their children's schooling, it is an open question to what extent the formal rights have materialized in actual influence in the governance of schools.

Decentralized versus centralized education systems as a framework for understanding the space for parents in school governance

The concepts of decentralized versus centralized education systems, as outlined by Archer (2013), serves as a framework for understanding the space for parents in school governance in this chapter. Archer (2013, p. 54) defines a state education system as a nationwide and differentiated collection of institutions devoted to formal education, whose overall control and supervision is at least partly governmental and whose components and processes are related to one another. For a state education system to exist, two major sets of relations must be present: (a) the connection to the state, and (b) the systemic form. The connection to the state entails at least some state control and supervision, but also that central political decision making affects the system. The system formation means that all the elements and processes in the system are related to one another and that changes in one element lead to changes throughout the system. Archer's definition sees state education systems as a set of structures, which means that the constituent elements are internally related. As pointed out by Skinningsrud (2019), state educational systems are also multi-integrated in the sense that they are connected with a multiplicity of other social institutions. One such social institution is the family.

Furthermore, Archer uses two pairs of characteristics to discuss the difference between centralized versus decentralized education systems; unification plus systematization, and differentiation plus specialization. Unification and systematization have to do with the structural changes common to all state education systems as a consequence of education being related to the

state. *Unification* refers to the development of diverse establishments, activities and personnel under a central, national, and specifically educational framework of administration (Archer, 2013, p. 174). This includes standardization of certain educational inputs, processes and outputs on a nationwide basis. *Systematization* means that the education system is put together by a series of interconnected elements within a unified whole. Systematization consists in the "strengthening of pre-existing relations among the parts, the development of relations among parts previously unrelated, the gradual addition of parts and relations to a system, or some combination of these changes" (Archer, 2013, p. 176). In a centralized education system, there is high unification by the state and high systematization, referring to the principled connection between educational components.

When it comes to differentiation and specialization, this result from the education system's relation to society and is more prominent in decentralized systems (Skinningsrud, 2019). According to Archer (2013, p. 179), *differentiation* has to do with how education is differentiated from other parts of society. Educational differentiation in a system is the result of the multiplicity of goals imposed on education by various influential parties and pressures of powerful interest groups associated with different social institutions. They can be sections of the central political elite or independent assertive groups. *Specialization* refers to the development of internal educational specialization within the education system, that is, an internal differentiation of the system itself. This is connected to a certain degree of specialization in intake, processes and outputs to meet demands whose diversity is incompatible with unitary procedures (Archer, 2013, p. 181). How much specialization develops depends partly upon the range, variety and complementarity of the services demanded from it, and partly on the relative power of those voicing the demands. The relationship between the education system and the family can be understood in light of whether the education system has inherently centralized or decentralized characteristics, and Archer's concepts will therefore be used in order to analyze and discuss parents' position in educational governance in Norway.

The Norwegian education system shows dominant characteristics of being a centralized education system, for example through detailed and binding framework plans, rigid administrative regulations, control systems, evaluations and sanctioning systems (Aasen, 1999, 2013; Karseth, Møller & Aasen, 2013; Møller, Prøitz, Rye & Aasen, 2013; Skinningsrud, 2014; Telhaug, Mediås & Aasen, 2006). According to Skinningsrud (2012, 2014), education in Norway has been a concern for the state ever since the reformation (1537–1537), including the entire epoch of the union with Denmark (1537–1814). After the dissolution of the union with Denmark, a ministry of church and education was established in Norway, which in addition to taking care of church related issues also managed the whole education system. According to Skinningsrud, the emergence of the state education system in Norway was very different from what took place in for example the UK, which has been

described and analyzed thoroughly by Archer (2013). Archer shows, that in the UK, the church played a central role when it comes to the development of a state education system, leading to a differentiation of the education system and a decentralized governance structure. The historical emergence of a centralized state education system in Norway, is relevant in order to understand parents' position in education governance. Decisions regarding education have traditionally belonged at the national level, and this also has a strong holding today, making it hard for other voices, such as those of parents, to be heard.

In order to give readers a context in which the arguments in this chapter has been developed, the next section will give a brief introduction to the Norwegian education system and the governance system. This is followed by an outline of the formal legislations when it comes to the relationship between parents and school.

The education system in Norway and the legislation regarding home-school cooperation

The education system in Norway

In Norway, there is a comprehensive school system, or a School for All, as it is often referred to in the Nordic context (*enhetsskolen*). The education system aims at being free of charge, inclusive, comprehensive, with no streaming and with easy passages between the levels, and almost all students with special needs are included in the regular system (99.7 %). Education in Norway, at all levels, from kindergarten and throughout higher education, is predominantly public. Less than 3 % of the students in compulsory education attend private schools.

Kindergarten is not formally a part of the education system, but for most children in Norway, the trajectory in educational institutions starts in kindergarten, with 90 % of the 1–6 years old attending. Then there is 10 years of compulsory schooling, starting the year the child turns 6. Compulsory schooling includes primary (years 1–7) and lower secondary school (years 8–10). Even though upper secondary education is not compulsory, more than 90 % of the students continue straight to upper secondary education after completing year 10. Upper secondary education is divided into a vocational and an academic study track, with 60 % of the students choosing the latter.

As mentioned above, the Norwegian education system has characteristics of a centralized system. The Norwegian parliament and the government sets the goals and decides the framework for the education sector, while the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for carrying out national educational policy. Legislation, regulations, curricula and framework plans ensure that national standards are met. The financing of primary and secondary education and training is also set at the state level. The County Governor acts as a link between the Ministry of Education and Research and

the Directorate for Education and Training on the one hand and the education sector in municipalities and counties on the other. The County Governor offers guidance to county, municipal and private school owners, in accordance with the Education Act and the Independent Schools Act. Also, the County Governor is responsible for supervision to ensure that school owners operate in accordance with laws and regulations. The municipalities are responsible for operating and administering primary and lower secondary schools, whereas the county authorities are responsible for upper secondary education and training. Legislation and regulations, including the National Curriculum, form a binding framework, but within this framework the municipal and county authorities, schools and teachers can influence the implementation of the education and training (Bæck, 2020). Each school has a head teacher and various boards, councils and committees.

National legislation regarding home-school cooperation in Norway

The Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act of 1969 first introduced a foundation for cooperation between home and school in Norway (Holthe, 2000). The 1969 Act (section 1) states that the goals of primary and lower secondary education are to be reached through cooperation with and in understanding with the home. And further, that the school shall emphasize establishing good forms of collaboration between teacher and student and between home and school. The Act also introduced some formal bodies for the cooperation between home and school and the parents' committee for primary and lower secondary education; a national committee appointed by the Ministry of Education, which was implemented in 1976 and known today as "National Parents' Committee for Primary and Secondary Education" (*Foreldreutvalget for grunnopplæringen*).

As shown elsewhere, the 1969 Act recognized the role of parents in school, and parents' position and formal rights in school have been clarified and extended in subsequent legal texts (Bæck, 2020). The current Education Act of 2006 (sections 1–1 and 13–3d) further emphasizes the importance of *cooperation* between school and home. It opens up for parents' right to some form of participation and co-determination within the education system through the implementation of a number of formal forums for home-school cooperation.

Formal home-school cooperation bodies

With the Education Act of 2006, several formal bodies were established to enable contact and cooperation between home and school, with school as the responsible party when it comes to instigate this cooperation. Parent meetings and parent-teacher-conferences are the two main bodies for cooperation, and schools are obliged to arrange for parent meetings for all parents at least once a year and parent–teacher conferences twice a year. The conferences

between parents and teachers about the individual child are to be planned and structured, and there are detailed requirements about what kind of information parents should receive and what kind of topics should be addressed (Bæck, 2020). Firstly, the conference will be about how the student works on a daily basis. Secondly, the teacher will inform the parents about the students' progress, as measured against relevant competence requirements in each subject. Thirdly, there will be a conversation about how the student, school and parents can cooperate in order to facilitate for the students' learning and development processes and also about how parents can contribute to helping the student with his or her school work.

When it comes to parents' co-determination within the education system, this is also opened up for through the Education Act. Parent representatives are elected among the parent body each school year. It is the parent representative's task to keep close contact with teachers and school administrators on behalf of the parent body. Parent representatives are also expected to activate and organize the rest of the parents when it comes to contributing on different school events, such as open day. Schools are obliged through law to have two formal bodies in place as part of the governing of the individual schools. These are the Parents Working Committee (*FAU Foreldrerådets arbeidsutvalg*) and the Coordinating Committee (*SU Samarbeidsutvalget*). The parent representatives represent the parents in these fora. Parents Working Committee is put together by all the elected parent representatives in the school. The task of this body is, among other things, to ensure a good school environment, to inform and listen to parents about current issues, and to cooperate with school and other relevant organs such as the student council, principal and teachers. Parents Working Committee can also address issues that are brought up by the school or the municipality, for example in regards to rules of conduct.

The Coordinating Committee is the school's highest advisory body. This body has the right to issue statements with regard to all matters concerning the school, such as budget proposals, activity and development plans for the school, plans for home-school cooperation, school assessment, plans for alterations to and maintenance of the school's facilities, the school's information activities, principles for selecting books for the school library, leisure activities, school transport, traffic conditions as well as rules concerning conduct and behavior (Bæck, 2020). All the parties in the school are represented in the Coordinating Committee, including students, parents, teaching staff, other employees, and representatives from the local authority (one of which must be the principal of the school). To begin with, as an advisory board, the Coordinating Committee does not have the authority to make decisions. Nonetheless, as the school owner, the municipality has the opportunity to delegate decision-making authority to the committee. In addition, the municipality can also choose to elect the committee as a board for the school.

Through changes and additions to the 2006 Act, national authorities have sought to strengthen parents' position in education. Schools are obliged to

maintain contact with the home throughout the school year (section 20–3), and the parent–teacher conferences and parent meetings are not necessarily regarded as sufficient for ensuring contact between school and parents. As pointed out elsewhere, the purpose of the change is to ensure the information exchange between home and school, but since the Act does not state anything specific when it comes to the organization of this contact, this is left to the individual school (Bæck, 2020). The additions and changes to the 2006 Act are also more specific when it comes to the type of information parents are entitled to receive from the school (section 20–3, second part), including information about the school, contents of the curriculum, possibilities for parental participation, school routines and other issues relevant for parents. It is interesting to note that with this addition to the Act, the concept of 'participation' (*medvirkning*) is starting to replace 'cooperation' as the preferred term in policy documents.

Interestingly enough, additions to the Act also accentuates that there have to be some limitations when it comes to the amount of contact schools can be expected and directed to have with the parents.

A missing foundation for parents in school governance

As shown above, parents are well included in the national policy documents for education in Norway. The focus is predominantly on parents' role as educators of their own child, but as shown, the municipality (the school owner) can also delegate decision-making authority to the Coordinating Committee in the school and can also choose to elect the committee as a board for the school. In theory, therefore, there should be ample opportunities to activate parents as a resource in school governance. Also, studies show that parents in Norway are very conscientious when it comes to attending parent meetings and parent–teacher conferences and that the majority of parents are satisfied with the home-school cooperation they take part in (Bæck, 2010a; Nordahl, 2007). Activating parents in school governance should therefore be possible to do.

However, there are obstacles to successful inclusion of parents in school governance. For one thing, even though there is already a potential for increased formal power in the legislation, in the sense that the municipalities can choose to grant the coordinating committees decision-making authority, this is very seldom done. Also, the relationship between home and school is wrath with tensions that may challenge parents' opportunities to be involved through the more conventional channels, whether it is in relation to the cooperation around the individual child or whether it has to do with parents' involvement in formal bodies for cooperation regarding the school at large. As shown elsewhere (Bæck, 2009), in discussions connected to the main task of the school, the teaching and learning, parents are rarely included, and the term *distance* can be used to describe how parents experience being left out. In another study from Norway, Westergård and Galloway (2004, 2010) have

used the term *parental disillusionment* to describe challenges for developing successful cooperation. They show that parents often experience not being heard or safeguarded when they reach out to the school about their challenges or problems, and that they therefore express a sense of disillusionment in relation to school.

Research, both nationally and internationally, has also pointed out that teachers' insecurities when it comes to home-school cooperation can lead to teacher burnout and teacher attrition (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Roksvaag & Texmon, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Stoeber & Rennert, 2008), especially among novice teachers (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Meister & Melnick, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). In a recent study from Norway, I have linked this to a lack of emphasis on home-school cooperation in teacher education (Bæck, 2020). The study shows that when such topics are addressed, the focus is usually on teaching the students methods to *cope* with parents and ways to *relate* to parents in a professional way. How to *engage* parents as partners in pupils' learning processes and how to *engage* parents as partners in school, receive less attention. The sparse focus on parents' role in school affects teachers' abilities, competence and confidence when it comes to working with parents. Researchers in many other countries have also pointed out similar concerns caused by lack of instruction, limited theorizing and subsequent unpreparedness in the area of parent engagement and family-school partnerships in teacher education (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Daniel, 2011; Hargreaves, 1991). Baum and McMurray-Schwarz (2004) point out that in spite of an overwhelming agreement among professionals about the importance of family involvement in education, there is a gap between these beliefs and the practices of teacher educators. Saltmarsh, Barr and Chapman (2015) state, that a missing realization at the school level of the policy ideal of parent engagement is in part a question of lack of professional preparation and a question of whether teachers and principals are adequately equipped for developing and sustaining effective parent–school relationships. They claim that teacher education prepares new teachers for parent engagement in a remarkably diffuse way, with changing constellations of stand-alone units, special interest subjects and programs, inclusions embedded within foundational areas of educational study, and experiences of parent engagement during practicum placements. They state that more could be done to ensure continuity across programs and in the tertiary sector more broadly to ensure that all new teachers enter the profession sufficiently equipped for what they see as a complex and important aspect of teachers work.

The research findings quoted above show that there are several factors voting against inclusion of parents in school in general. They also give an indication when it comes to the potential challenges for allocating parents a more prominent role in school governance, more specifically. As shown by Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren (2009), despite thorough knowledge about the significance of well-functioning parent–school relationships, emphasis on

these issues in school governance is rather limited. Legal texts and policy documents represent an ideal situation when it comes to home-school cooperation in a national context. As shown above, in the Norwegian context, there are indeed challenges when it comes to how the ideals hold up when confronted with reality. *In reality* there is little to suggest that parents in Norway are given any central formal role when it comes to the governance of schools (Bæck, 2020; Holthe, 2000; Nordahl, 2003). The research quoted above provides knowledge about how parents experience their encounters with schools, how the relationship between teachers and parents play out and how they regard one another, and how teacher students are taught about home-school cooperation. Within all of these areas we see indications of a gap between ideals and reality when it comes to parents' position in school governance. However, exploring parents' position in school governance also entails investigating mechanisms that can *explain* the existence of such a climate – how can we explain that parents are not included in school governance in Norway, despite policy documents and legal texts that open up for such inclusion?

Parents' in school governance in a centralized education system: A contradiction in terms

As mentioned in the introduction, whether the education system has inherently centralized or decentralized characteristics, is relevant in order to understand the relationship between the education system and the family. The Norwegian education system has many traits that justify characterizing it as a predominantly centralized system (Karseth, Møller & Aasen, 2013; Møller, Prøitz, Rye & Aasen, 2013; Skinningsrud, 2014). The standing parents have in the education system contributes to this impression. Even though formal regulations of the school-family relationship are in place, parents' position in school governance is very limited. Awarding a more prominent role in governance processes to parents would mean moving towards a more decentralized education system, but it is hard to see any evidence of such movement.

As also mentioned in the introduction, Archer (2013) uses two pairs of characteristics to discuss the difference between centralized versus decentralized education systems; unification plus systematization, and differentiation plus specialization. While unification and systematization have to do with structural features of the education system as a consequence of how education is related to the state, differentiation and specialization have to do with the education system's relation to society. The difference between centralized versus decentralized educational systems is represented through the relative strength of the two pairs of characteristics, which Archer holds to be the most significant and far-reaching difference between state education systems. According to Archer, these common characteristics differ in strength and importance according to the strategy that has generated the state

education system in different national contexts. For the purpose of this article, the latter of the two pairs of characteristics is particularly interesting to focus on.

Skinningsrud (2019) points out, that specialization and differentiation are more likely to dominate in decentralized education systems due to the structures connecting education with external interest groups and the teaching profession. She claims, that in such a situation, teachers will strive to increase autonomy for the system, that is, differentiation, and external interest groups will transact specialized provisions that are tailormade for their educational needs, moving towards increased specialization. Parents can be viewed as a potential external interest group, but this requires a form of collective organization of parents giving them agency as a group. According to Archer (1995), agents are collectivities sharing the same life chances through having common relations to a set of structural resources. She distinguishes between corporate and primary agents. The common denominators of corporate agents are articulation and organization. They have articulated to themselves and to others what they want, and they have organized themselves in order to get it. They can therefore engage in concerted action to reshape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question (1995: 258). As shown in this article, there is little to suggest that parents in Norway hold this position vis-à-vis the educational system, and as a group, parents do not seem to be in a position to negotiate or demand specialized provisions tailormade for them. They are therefore better understood as primary agents, that is, agents who neither express interests nor organize for their strategic pursuit, either in society or a given institutional sector – which also implies that in contrast to corporate agents they do not have a say in structural or cultural modeling (Archer 1995: 258).

However, as emphasized by Archer, the categories of corporate and primary agents are *not fixed, but are mobile* over time, meaning that a primary agent in one domain may be a corporate agent in another at any specific point in time (Archer 1995: 259). In order to function as an external interest group, or as a corporate agent, parents as a collective would need to articulate their interests and organize as a group. In Norway, parents have collective representation within the state education system through the National Parents' Committee for Primary and Secondary Education (Norwegian abbreviation FUG), which is a national committee for parents who have children in primary and/or secondary education. This committee could, in theory, serve as a corporate agent for parents in the education system. The main tasks of the committee are to be a service and information body for parent representatives and for formal committees for home-school cooperation. In addition, it also gives advice to the education authorities concerning matters relating to the home-school partnership. However, even though FUG can voice political opinions and in that sense influence policymakers, its real influence on parents' behalf is very limited. Also, the heterogenous nature of school parents makes collective representation of this group in school

governance challenging. It entails a conglomerate of opposing viewpoints, cultural backgrounds, political beliefs, geographical backgrounds etc., making it near impossible to articulate shared interests and goals. This is not to say that the way parents as primary agents act towards teachers and schools is insignificant. According to Archer, to lack a say in systemic organization and reorganization is not the same as to have no effect on it. Collectivities without a say, but similarly situated, still react and respond to their context as a consequence of living within it. The effects are, however, unarticulated in the sense that they are uncoordinated in action and unstated in aim. Archer writes:

> Collectivities without a say, but similarly situated, still react and respond to their context as part and parcel of living within it. Yet similarities of response from those similarly placed can generate powerful, though unintended aggregate effects which is what makes everyone an agent.
> (1995: 259)

When privileged middle-class parents, for example, voice their opinions and concerns and put pressure on schools in order to have demands met, it may affect how schools address issues connected to school quality. And it may, as shown elsewhere (Bæck, 2009) affect how teachers relate to parents; how they seek to manage increased parental pressure through emphasizing and maintaining a professional distance towards them (Bæck, 2010b).

Conclusions: Parents' place in school governance

The aim of this chapter was to discuss to what extent parents are included in processes connected to school governance within the Norwegian education system. Parents' role in education is often emphasized by policy makers, but at the same time parents are seldom included in the actual governance of schools. As shown in this chapter, parents' position in school governance can be seen as a result of the education system's relation to society as a state education system. In a centralized education system, the logic of the system limits which voices that are heard and affects the status of the knowledge and experiences of different agents. In this way, the centralized characteristics of the education system serves as a mechanism that limits parents' space in school governance. Even though parents seemingly have been given more leeway when it comes to their relationship to school, the emphasis on parents' position in school in official policy documents come across as mere concessions on paper, that do not really admit parents any real weight when it comes to school governance.

It has not been the intention of this chapter to argue for or against an increased inclusion of parents in school governance. There are certainly challenges that need to be addressed before reaching any conclusion on this matter. For example, the heterogenous nature of the parents as a group, as

already mentioned, implies that different parents will have different preferences when it comes to how their relationship to school should be, how their role in their children's education should be like and so forth. Increasing parents' authority in school governance could imply giving more voice to the already vocal parent groups, thus making the already socially and culturally skewed profile of the education system even more so. Another matter has to do with the status of the teachers in school governance. Allowing parents a more prominent position, could happen at the expense of the teachers. Diminishing their authority as professionals in the educational field would imply putting extra strain on teachers and adding to the pressure that is already there, as demonstrated through studies by for example Hakanen, Bakker and Schaufeli (2006), Stoeber and Rennert (2008) and Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010). Working in one of the professions that experience the highest degree of work related stress (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010), many teachers choose to withdraw from the profession, making high levels of teacher attrition a major problem (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Roksvaag & Texmon, 2012). One-third of the students graduating from teacher education programs in Norway in 2006–2011, had left the profession by 2012 (Bæck, 2013).

The intention of this chapter has been to problematize the relationship between ideals and realities when it comes to parents' place in school governance. The intention has also been to discuss how the structure of the educational system itself has an effect on this issue. Within a centralized education system, allowing for more actual power for the parents through participation in school governance will in many ways be a contradiction in terms, making it a hard battle to win for those who want a wider space for parents in school governance.

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