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## **External Control and Professional Trust in Norwegian School Governing: Synthesis from a Nordic Research Project**

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## **Introduction**

In an extensive policy review from 1990, new-institutional theorist Brian Rowan noted that states and school districts all over the United States in the 1980s seemed to bow to what he labeled as an *external control strategy* of educational reform, which had been initiated and implemented with the purpose of raising the level of educational outcomes in public schooling. Specifically, this reform strategy was characterized by curriculum control, behavioral control, standardization, and accountability devices through testing regimes and monitoring of results (Rowan & Miller, 2007). A contrasting and widely enacted reform model that was also observed was labeled a professional commitment strategy (Rosenholtz, 1987; Rowan, 1990). A collaborative trust culture was a key component of this model, emphasizing teacher autonomy, professional collaboration, and distributive leadership styles employed at

both school level and district level (Nir, 2014; Rosenholtz, 1989). In a theoretical sense, these two seemingly conflicting school reform strategies mirror conceptions of schools and municipalities as tightly coupled versus loosely coupled governance systems (Weick, 1982). The view of educational systems as tightly coupled implies a management model, in which school administrators at higher levels of the system employ control devices towards municipalities and schools, and the higher-ranked administrators can feel confident that school leaders and principals will implement decisions in practice (Weick, 1982). In contrast, the conception of school organizations as loosely coupled acknowledges that school governance takes place in multi-level systems, encompassing state agencies, municipalities and schools, which entails many broken chains (Paulsen, Johansson, Nihlfors, Moos, & Risku, 2014).

However, as noted by Rowan (1990), the models of external control and professional commitment were seldom implemented in a pure form in school districts and schools. This is not surprising “since they are abstract models” (Rowan, 1990, p. 381) and can therefore be conceived as “twin-strategies”. This crucial point corresponds with Weick’s widely overlooked theoretical proposition that loose coupling must be treated as a dialectical concept (Weick, 1976) since organizational systems tend to be both loosely and tightly coupled simultaneously, which means that some elements within the same system can be tightly coupled, whereas others are loosely coupled or even decoupled from each other (Weick, 1982). This is particularly the case in multi-level governance systems of public education, manifest in relations between state bodies, municipalities and schools that are coupled tightly in some areas and more loosely in others (Paulsen & Moos, 2014; Paulsen, Strand, et al., 2014). Specifically, when national control devices meet the local level in municipalities, several actors are involved in the further implementation towards schools and their leaders, and a transformation process will probably occur. Further, the local levels can be conceived as a political arena in which national control devices meet a more trust-based culture of school governing (Nir, 2014). In that respect, quality assurance concepts and control devices will go through “cultural compatibility tests” when they meet local cultures (Christensen & Lægreid, 2002), and both school boards and superintendents can both act as mediators in these processes. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately predict how national control is implemented when quality assurance devices they meet local government systems

and are enacted further towards school leaders and teachers. Moreover, it can be expected that school boards and superintendents act as translators and semi-autonomous agent in the process through which national control devices are enacted in the interplay with schools (Paulsen, 2015).

The current paper follows this line of reasoning and analyzes the ways in which school boards and school superintendents enact state strategies of external control when they encounter local school governance systems in Norwegian municipalities. The analysis is a review of published work in the form of journal articles, book chapters, and peer-reviewed conference papers, based on a synthesis of the *Norwegian* findings drawn from a large-scale Nordic research project undertaken from 2009 to 2014. During the research process, data from Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were collected from school board members, superintendents, and school principals through joint survey instruments. Specifically, the analysis seeks to shed light on how external control devices are enacted by school boards and superintendents in Norway when they meet local professional cultures.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *The concept of control in organizations*

In conceptual terms, control has been defined as “the ability to exert some influence over one’s environment so that the environment becomes more rewarding or less threatening” (Ganster, 1989, p. 3). The primary control activity is to search for and warn of mistakes and irregularities, which frequently stimulates hierarchical control activities towards subordinates. This form of control refers to post hoc investigations, which fail to directly affect current processes to prevent mistakes or losses from occurring in the future. Moreover, hierarchical control may occur internally; that is, where managers carry out the control activities themselves initiated by mismatches in performance compared with targets. Alternatively, the control may be external, where control authorities outside the formal decision-making system check whether procedures are being followed correctly in order to ensure that the surroundings do not suffer (Høyer et al., 2014). Specifically, external control also involves supervisory activities that are continuously undertaken to follow up on occurring

events in order to ensure that various management actors achieve the organization's goals.

Beck-Jørgensen (1987) identified five different forms of external control: bureaucracy, democracy, markets, knowledge, and collective norms and values. He believed that these forms of control capture the spectrum of control mechanisms through which external hierarchical control contrasts self-regulation as a form of empowered internal control (Beck-Jørgensen, 1987). State bodies, regional governors, municipal school administration, and local politicians operate their functions within the Norwegian national quality assurance system towards school leaders within a given municipality (Nihlfors et al., 2014; Paulsen, Strand, et al., 2014). Following, a cornerstone of the quality assurance regime presumes school leaders, i.e. principals and heads of subject-departments, to assess, monitor and supervise teachers in their classroom work based on academic performance targets. External control implemented in multi-level organizational systems evidently reflects an instrumental approach to organizations as tools that actors with clear goal-means perceptions have designed in order to achieve certain goals in predetermined ways (March & Olsen, 1989).

In educational systems, the purpose of external control is to “produce faithful implementation of a program's preferred teaching regime, through tight restrictions on teacher autonomy and a corresponding focus on a narrow band of teaching practices” (Rowan & Miller, 2007, p. 254). According to this perspective, the relationship between the leader and the co-workers, and between upper and lower levels in a governance system, is the co-existence of common interests and compatible goals. Accordingly, control and incentive mechanisms are necessary in order to make it unpalatable to *not* follow the behavioral norms issued through the formal organization structure. Therefore, trust that emerges from efficient control systems and incentive systems is considered a kind of “mistrust-based trust” (Høyer & Wood, 2011).

#### *The concept of trust in organizations*

In interpersonal and intra-organizational settings, trust is defined as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, &

Camerer, 1998, p. 395). Trust is often measured by three characteristics of the trustee; ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Gambetta (1988) argued that trust is irrelevant without some form of risk and freedom to behave in a manner that is unpredictable or contrary to the wishes of the actors. Therefore, trust and mistrust are theoretically strongly related to the phenomena of risk and uncertainty (Gambetta, 1988). Viewing risk as a dangerous property makes it easier to respond with distrust. On the other hand, a trusting actor may have stronger expectations of a positive outcome of cooperation and may therefore have more solid basic trust, which can reduce the focus on risk and the perception of the scope of the risk (Høyer & Wood, 2011). As noted: “Trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication, the foundations for cohesive and productive relationships in organizations” (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 549). Notably, there is also a relationship between interpersonal trust and teachers’ sense of empowerment in decision making: “When teachers not only have involvement but also influence over organizational decisions that affect them, the conditions necessary to foster mutual trust between teachers and principals becomes manifest” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 69).

Arguably, vertical organizational trust represents an alternative to external control mechanisms, both internal and external to the organization and co-temporal or retrospective to the event (Mayer et al., 1995). As such, trust between actors functions as a “lubricant” for productive collaboration in groups (Kahn, 1990) when people have confidence in other people’s words and deeds. Therefore, trust is a much faster and more economical than other means in terms of managing and leading organizational life (Powell, 1990). At the same time, actors in a trusting cooperation tend to be influenced by some kind of self-obligation, which includes *not* engaging in activities that may betray the mutual trust relationships that characterize cooperation. Beck-Jørgensen (1987) referred to such obligation approaches as self-regulation. A trusting interaction among people, groups, or organizational units that are interconnected in the same governance system also includes an element of risk, which measures or prescribed routines in an uncertain situation from a lack of control (Høyer & Wood, 2011). Finally, writers have pointed to the inherent delicate balance between control and trust in modern organizations (Sørhaug, 1996), where trust also is built by means of openness when control is exerted: “Principals also

garner the trust of their faculty by being open in both information and control”(Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 69).

*External control manifest in school reform strategies*

A range of scholars since Rowan (1990) have argued that the external control model has diffused towards a global standard or “reform movement” (Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Shirley, 2011). As posited by Pasi Sahlberg, “schools are more frequently controlled by data collected from various aspects of the teaching and learning process. Continuous reporting, evaluations, and inspections are diminishing the actual autonomy of teachers and the degrees of freedom of schools” (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 180). Over the past 20 years, educational tasks and responsibilities in Nordic countries have been decentralized from the state level to the municipal and school level. Consequently, “the national political level has perceived a need for the legislators and ministry to strengthen the control of the levels below in new ways, not merely via regulations” (Johansson et al., 2013, p. 174). In Sweden, for example, a new inspection agency has been established in the governance structures. In Norway, municipalities are required to establish quality assurance systems that are comprised of evaluating, documenting, and following up on the results of the schools, using the main control devices of state supervision and school inspection (Nihlfors et al., 2014). Then external control in practice refers to when an actor, by virtue of contractual obligations, “has the right to hold another actor responsible to a set of standards, to judge whether the standards have been met, and to intervene or impose sanctions if the standards are deemed unfulfilled” (Paulsen & Skedsmo, 2014, p. 43).

In the external control model, policy makers and administrators from the top of the hierarchy impose two main tools – curriculum alignment and behavioral control – on schools, principals, and teachers. Curriculum alignment encompasses several comprehensive control instruments, such as “systems of input, behavior, and output control designed to regulate classroom teaching and standardize student opportunities for learning” (Rowan, 1990, p. 354). Moreover, criterion-referenced tests were applied to control output in terms of student achievements. These input- and output control mechanisms were reinforced using the second main component; namely, behavioral control of teachers and school leaders. This was done through streamlined in-service workshops for teachers, uniform approaches to teaching, and uniform

supervisory practices paired with standardization of policy goals. Behavioral control was also launched in the form of a standardized training program for teachers, administrators, and school leaders, and clear preferences regarding the type of projects and developmental activities that would gain the support of the governance system (Rowan, 1990).

### *Trust-based commitment as educational reform strategy*

A trust-based commitment approach to instructional change works differently. First, it emphasizes teachers' discretion and empowerment in the adaptation of instructional changes to the genuine context of their classes and students. Second, the commitment model aims to strengthen the collective responsibility among teachers for instructional improvements by developing professional learning communities within schools. Third, a commitment strategy model expands teachers' engagement in professional network structures in order to strengthen their capacity to absorb external knowledge and utilize it for instructional improvement purposes. This conception of educational reform takes cultural control as its basic mechanism, as "we would expect 'cultural' control to replace formal controls and teachers to base their commitment to personal identification with the school rather than loyalty to superiors" (Rowan, 1990, p. 359). In this perspective, trust is rooted in loyalty and binds to norms, values, and belief systems that have gained hegemony, and this form of trust is *not* conditional on finding good control and incentive systems that make it profitable to follow the behavioral norms given through formal normative structures (Scott, 2001). Instead, trust is anchored in the basic notion that individual actions are characterized by the "logic of appropriateness" – the type of actions that are regarded as appropriate within the role set of a profession's normative sphere (March & Olsen, 1989). Such a culture of reform and governing, embodied by school boards and superintendents, is typically characterized by "a tendency to express high trust in schools evident in the limited efforts to control and closely monitor schools' conduct. This pattern grants school level educators considerable degrees of freedom, allowing them to act in accordance with their professional judgment within a predetermined framework set by state policies and regulations" (Nir, 2014, p. 9).



### *Trust-based group collaborations*

A trust-based school governing culture is also manifest in the relationship between the municipal school superintendent and the group of school principals to which that the superintendent is associated with. Specifically, it is arguably important that when school principals are assembled by superintendents in municipal school leadership groups, a climate of psychological safety is beneficial in terms of establishing shared understandings of how to deal with school reform implementation. Therefore, the extent to which school principals perceive the climate as safe and trusting will constitute an important coupling mechanism in the governance line. A safe group climate is then characterized by school leadership group members “feeling able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Psychological safety builds on and goes beyond trust, denoting a group climate characterized by a shared belief among the members that the team is a safe zone for speaking up, identifying problems, and bringing in new perspectives (Edmondson, 1999). When psychological safety is high, group members will be confident that no one will be embarrassed, rejected, or punished by someone else in the team for offering critical viewpoints, novelties, negative performance information, or contrasting perspectives. Groups whose members are not penalized for making a mistake, and are instead encouraged to ask for help, tend to utilize the team’s knowledge reservoir to improve work processes and find ways towards identify improvements (Edmondson, 1999; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). We consider this to be particularly important in a school governing system, where one of the main avenues of influence at superintendents’ hand goes through group interaction with school principals.

## **Methodology**

The current paper presents a review of published findings from a Nordic research project undertaken from 2009 to 2014 aiming to illuminate the processes through which national reform policies are filtered when they meet the ‘meso-level’ of the municipalities. The sample of published work, on which the current paper is based, is presented in table 1 below. The research project investigated school governing processes in Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Finnish municipalities by means of joint survey instruments developed in a theory-based evaluative design. Specifically,

the Nordic research team conducted a school superintendent survey in 2009, a school board survey in 2011, and a school principal survey in 2013 – all of them focused on the interplay between school politicians, superintendents and school leaders.

**Table 1: The empirical grounding of the article**

No	Authors	Type	Thematic focus
1	Paulsen, J.M & Skedsmo, G (2014)	Book chapter	Norwegian superintendents' role in the national quality assurance system
2	Paulsen, J.M (2014a)	Journal article	Norwegian superintendents as mediators of external control initiatives from the state
3	Paulsen, J. M., Johansson, O., Nihlfors, E., Moos, L., & Risku, M. (2014).	Journal article	Synthesis of Nordic findings on superintendent leadership under governance regimes in transition in the Nordic countries
4	Paulsen, J.M & Høyer (2015)	Book chapter	Norwegian superintendents' role in the school governance process – seen from three different perspectives: Superintendents, school board members and school principals
5	Paulsen, J.M; Nihlfors, E; Brinkkjær, U & Risku, M (2015)	Book chapter	The engagements in social networks within the municipalities as carried out by superintendents, school board members and school leaders
6	Paulsen, J.M & Strand, M (2014)	Book chapter	Norwegian school board members' roles and functions in local school governing
7	Høyer, H. C., Paulsen, J. M., Nihlfors, E., Kofod, K., Kanervio, P., & Pulkkinen, S. (2014)	Book chapter	Norwegian school board members' perceptions of external control and professional trust
8	Paulsen, J.M (2014b)	Peer-reviewed conference paper	Norwegian school principals' perceptions of vertical trust towards their superintendents and perceptions of municipal school owner competence

All questionnaires were transmitted electronically through self-managing web-survey systems, and dropout analyses were undertaken by all four research-teams, comparing the samples with the total population. The results indicate that the national samples of superintendents and school principals were fairly representative to their respective populations, whereas the school board survey in 2011 came out with a lower response rate and thereby a risk of some biases.

## Control devices in the Norwegian quality assurance system

### *Global standardization of school governing*

There is little doubt that Norwegian educational policies have been more strongly adapted to OECD standards during the last two decades, not least as a response on Norway's long-term mediocre position in the PISA studies. Essentially, the OECD influence takes the form of country reviews (for example, based on PISA results) and policy recommendations advising member nations' governments to take specific national actions, primarily based on the results of their international standardized tests (Paulsen & Moos, 2014). In Norway, the adaptation of national policies to the OECD frame of reference has been most noticeable in the introduction of the National System of Quality Assurance (NSQA) in 2005 (Eurydice, 2006).<sup>2</sup> By function, the evaluation tools in the NSQA provide information about student achievement levels on an aggregated level, which can be used as a foundation for national policymaking and setting priorities for improvement strategies. As such, it represents a strong indirect means of centrally regulating and coordinating the school system (Johansson et al., 2013; Skedsmo, 2009, 2011). Central tools of the system are a yearly quality report conducted by the municipalities, seen as school owners; state supervision towards municipalities and schools; and the majority of national achievement tests and standardized surveys (for example, student survey and teacher survey) being managed by the National Directorate of Training and Learning.<sup>3</sup>

### *Curriculum alignment as a control device*

In Rowan's (1990) terminology, the main instruments in the NSQA can also be seen as the employment of an external control strategy. Several instruments in use in the NSQA are implemented with the purpose of aligning local curricula, syllabuses, and teaching practices with national frames by means of standardizing systems of output control, which is designed to regulate classroom teaching and homogenize norms of

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<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian System of Quality Assurance (NSQA) is designed to contribute to quality development at all levels of compulsory education, with a particular focus on basic skills in language, reading, writing, arithmetic, and ICT (Eurydice 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The National Directorate of Education and Training is the executive agency for the Ministry of Education and Research. It has the overall responsibility for supervision, education, and governance of the education sector, as well as for the implementation of Acts of Parliament and regulations. The Directorate is responsible for all national statistics concerning kindergarten, primary, and secondary education. On the basis of these statistics, it initiates, develops, and monitors research and development. See: <http://www.udir.no/Stottemeny/English/Norwegian-Directorate-for-Education-and-Training/>

successful schooling. Moreover, national student achievement test programs, have been implemented on a yearly basis from 2005. Alongside national student survey and teacher survey, local school priorities are significantly aligned with national frames, which are also fairly well adapted to the OECD discourse of education.

**Table 2: Curriculum alignment devices prescribed in the NSQA**

Device	Description	External control agents
National criterion-referenced tests	National student achievement tests in literacy, math, and English are undertaken yearly for students at 5 <sup>th</sup> , 8 <sup>th</sup> , and 9 <sup>th</sup> grades	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The National Directorate of Education and Training is responsible for conducting and designing the tests, analyzing data, and presentation formats</li> <li>- Municipalities responsible for practical procedures and control of the data</li> </ul>
Student survey	The student survey is compulsory for students at 7 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> grades and voluntary for other levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The National Directorate of Education and Training is responsible for conducting and designing the tests, analyzing data, and presentation formats</li> <li>- Municipalities responsible for practical procedures and control of the data</li> </ul>
Teacher survey	Voluntary survey of teachers' perspective of the learning environment in their classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The National Directorate of Education and Training is responsible for conducting and designing the tests, analyzing data, and presentation formats</li> </ul>
Parental survey	Voluntary survey of parents' feedback	Collaborative project between the national association of municipalities (KS), teachers' union, the national committee of parents (FUG), and the student association

### *Behavioral control*

As Rowan (1990) also noted, the alignment of curriculum instruments tend to be reinforced by district-level administrators using the second main component, which is behavioral control of teachers and school leaders. This component involved standardized training programs for teachers, administrators, and school leaders paired with streamline in-service workshops for teachers. Since the establishment of the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training as a semi-independent state agency, there has been a series of national training programs for school leaders and teachers. Specifically, a national training program for school principals was launched in 2009, followed by a similar program for leaders of day-care institutions. Moreover, the Directorate has also conducted a national training program for

leadership recruits in education; that is, teachers who wish to enter leadership positions in schools.

Standardized national training programs can be seen as behavioral control instruments that state agencies use to steer and align conceptions of leadership in the practical field of the school institution by explicating a clear frame of reference of what is an “appropriate” understanding of contemporary school leadership. Behavioral control is also launched in the form of national school developmental projects initiated by the Directorate, which implies clear preferences for the type of projects and developmental activities that would gain the necessary funding and support of supervision. Table 3 provides an overview of the most important behavioral control devices in use.

**Table 3: Behavioral control devices in use**

Device	Description	External control agents
Quality report	Municipalities as school owners are prescribed to conduct a yearly quality report	State Governor of Education (in all 18 counties) The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training
State supervision system	Municipalities are selected for state supervision. Schools (within the municipality in target) selected for inspection.	State Governor of Education (in all 18 counties) The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training
National training programs	National training program for school principals and school leader recruits	The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training
National developmental projects	National developmental projects in which schools and municipalities can apply to participate	The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training

A predominant source of behavioral control of municipalities and schools is the state supervision system based on the yearly quality report. The Directorate of Education and Training is responsible for organizing the state supervision of targeted areas, developing methods and procedures for the supervision, and supervising private schools (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2010). The 19

county governors have to coordinate the state supervision within each of the counties. The supervision procedures are developed by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and assembled in a specific manual for supervision of municipalities and schools.

In cases where practice diverges from regulations, the supervision authority will instruct a change of practice (Skedsmo, 2009), which implies that the municipality literally has to initiate a practice that already was expected to be implemented - and thus not imply any new obligations (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2010).

## **Control and mistrust in local political school governing**

### *Mixed perceptions of state supervision among school board members*

As noted earlier, municipalities and not schools are the primary targets for state supervision in the Norwegian system. Consequently, inspection and control are only loosely coupled with the everyday life of principals and teachers, which creates the potential for critical issues to be filtered out when the system of state supervision meets the school level. Moreover, not all municipalities are selected for state supervision every year and when a municipality is selected for supervision (by the state governor) only a small number of its schools are subjected to inspection.

The Norwegian school board members participating in the research project were asked about possible tensions between the state and local politicians regarding state supervision. We first asked the members whether they have been targeted for state supervision during their four-year period, two contrasting sets of perceptions emerge: “The first perceives of state supervision as being externally controlled, as well as being another bureaucratic maneuver from the state’s side, both of which are overtly negative. The upfront cases cluster round an image of state supervision as an activation trigger for making improvement initiatives from the school owner’s side. In a similar vein, these members perceive performance monitoring in a more positive manner as a feedback mechanism that can be productively utilized” (Paulsen &

Strand, 2014, p. 58). Specifically, the Norwegian school board members viewed state supervision as a “methodology for detecting discrepancies and errors for subsequent improvement processes with the purpose of raising the general standard of schooling within the municipality” (Høyer et al., 2014, p. 108).

#### *Control devices towards superintendents and principals*

The school board members were also asked to respond, in their own words, regarding tasks and issues for which they will hold the superintendent accountable and responsible as related to educational targets. A visible focus on external control is manifested through demands for *responsibility* for quality control *procedures* when board members expressed their expectations of their municipal school superintendents: Monitoring and evaluating school results and quality indicators. In a similar vein, the Norwegian case also showed external control demands imposed on school superintendents in the form of *accountability* for student results (academic achievements and rankings on national tests). Specifically, the free-form responses indicate that board members tend to hold the superintendent accountable for the schools (within their municipality) delivering a satisfactory level of student achievements.

Similarly, the responses indicate the demand for accountability for pupils’ and students’ (of their municipality) rankings on national tests. Moreover, school board members tend to hold the superintendent responsible for quality assurance routines, such as monitoring and evaluating school results and quality indicators and reporting that deviates from professional practices (Paulsen & Strand, 2014). With regard to demands imposed on school principals, the survey instrument also asked the school board members what kind of educational targets and tasks they expect the superintendent to hold their principals responsible and accountable for. The rhetoric in these responses was notably softer. School board members expect school principals to be responsible for good learning conditions for students and good work conditions for teachers. Similarly, they expect principals to ensure good psychological support structure for their teachers (Høyer et al., 2014).

### *Mistrust in the local governance chain*

Using the example of Sweden, school board members there indicated a low level of trust in the capacity of school principals to lead school development, and also assessed the school principals' competence as mediocre (Nihlfors & Johansson, 2013, p. 6). On the other hand, the school principals showed strong loyalty to the state in governing Swedish schools and felt it was fair for the state to increasingly bypass the municipalities in school governing (Johansson, Nihlfors, & Steen, 2014). The Norwegian school board members were asked to assess their superintendents' competence in important leadership areas, such as ensuring good working conditions for schooling, allocating resources to the schools, mobilizing for school improvement and school development in general; the results indicated only a modest level of assessments (variation in positive assessments between 50 and 60 percent). Furthermore, when the board members assessed the level of competence among school principals (within their municipality), a further decline is observable, since "only 32% of the members in the sample saw their school principals as fairly good in leading school development. Moreover, when the board members were asked to express their perceptions about school principals' loyalty (with conflicting interests about student learning), only 41.5% of the board members trusted that their school principals would side with the interests of the students" (Paulsen & Strand, 2014, p. 41). We believe that this pattern indicates a low level of trust between local school politicians and principals.

### *Municipal school owners' competence assessed by principals*

The school principal survey assesses the municipalities' competence in critical domains of their functions as school owners. We used a well-rounded survey instrument that captures the principals' assessment of school owner competence in educational policy, leadership development, law issues, and local curriculum development (Paulsen, 2014b). Only 56 percent of the 949 school principals in the sample assessed the competence of their municipality as satisfactory in terms of "educational policies". This score must be regarded as mediocre considering the central role that municipalities are given in the Norwegian school governing chain. Furthermore, only 40 percent of the principals felt that "the municipality's work with the annual quality report supports my school development endeavors" and only 39



percent perceived that their municipality (school owner) “evaluates actively how reforms work at the school level.” It is noteworthy that, “among the principals in the sample, the municipalities are assessed as below mediocre when it comes to competence in leadership development, local curriculum development and evaluation. The assessment indicates, firstly, a modest level of capacity in pedagogical and leadership skills throughout the municipality sector, and, secondly, and large internal variation across the municipalities that are represented in the study” (Paulsen, 2014b, p. 13).

### **Trust in the administrative governing line**

#### *School principals' assessment of vertical trust to superintendents*

We also asked the school principals to assess the level of organizational trust in relation to their superintendent, by means of multiple pre-validated indicators adapted to the actual research setting. The findings show that school principals have a high level of vertical trust in superintendents along a range of domains (Paulsen, Nihlfors, Brinkkjær, & Risku, 2015). For example, 92 percent of principals indicated that they have no problem informing their superintendent if they have made a mistake in their job as principals. Seen against the backdrop of the mistrust problem in the relation between school politicians and principals, this homogenous response pattern assessed by principals shows a contrasting image.

The inference is supported when shifting to the school leader groups, led by the superintendent. The data portrays a high level of psychological safety in the groups (Paulsen, 2014b). As noted, psychological safety builds on a relation of trust between the members of the group. From this starting point, the members develop an emerging state of a trusting group climate, which is a crucial factor for learning in groups. According to Paulsen (2014b), “a sustainable learning climate characterized by psychological safety and openness for ideas is crucial for mutual adaptation between the school owner and the group of school principals that work in the crossfire of conflicting demands and expectations related to school improvement and reform implementation” (Paulsen, 2014b, p. 18). This finding concurs with a number of studies, which have shown that a supportive and coaching leadership style

promotes psychological safety in groups, in conjunction with trusting and authentic behavior (Edmondson, 1999).

*Superintendents as mediators of external control*

Our investigation indicates that superintendents are mediating agents in a broken chain of school governance: “Our findings underscore the hypothesis of a ‘political vacuum’ in Norwegian municipalities when it comes to local school governance evident in local curriculum development, evaluation criteria, implementation strategies, organizational innovation and learning goals. When this occurs in a situation characterized by a vague and unclear policy regime, it stimulates superintendents to fill the gaps by means of their own preferences” (Paulsen & Skedsmo, 2014, p. 48). In consequence, through performing mediation roles as coordinators and gatekeepers, “a series of national policy initiatives have been filtered out in the superintendents’ daily dialogues with the school principals. Moreover, the national quality assurance rhetoric has been translated into softer language when the superintendents meet their school principals through discussions focused on quality issues” (Paulsen & Skedsmo, 2014, p. 48).

Specifically, the superintendents in the sample were asked to rank their three most important tasks in relationship to working with their school principals. Two hundred and forty-seven out of the 291 superintendents in the study (85 percent) responded to this open question; their response rates appear within seven categories, which we identified as: (a) quality management, (b) human resource management, (c) financial management, (d) administration and coordination, (e) pedagogical leadership and school improvement, (f) student learning oriented tasks, and (g) strategic leadership.

The quality management theme is only modestly represented in the superintendents’ descriptive data regarding their ranked agendas with their school principals, counting for 89 out of 747 responses (11 percent). Also within this theme is a tendency in the superintendents’ rhetoric to avoid the control aspect in favor of softer terms such as quality development and quality- system development. Second, administrative themes in total account for 433 out of 747 responses (60 percent), which indicates a relatively strong administrative work profile among the superintendents in the sample. Third, pedagogical leadership and school development tasks accounted for

238 responses (31 percent), which represents a visible orientation toward the professional domain of the sector. Fourth, tasks related to the end products of schooling (such as pupil achievement, school climate, special needs, and learning environment) are only modestly represented in the bulk of self-reported categories: 49 out of 747 responses (6 percent).

Taken together, the presented findings about task preferences and leadership dialogue with school principals show a gap between policymakers' preferences and superintendents' task preferences when it comes to managerial accountability (for example, inspection, quality assurance, and follow-up of student achievement data). As such, the findings illustrate multiple mediation categories: buffering, filtering, and translation. Further, current school reform implementation, which in policy documents is infused with managerial rhetoric, has been typically translated into a traditional school development language in the daily leadership discourse.

## **Discussion**

### *A tangled web of couplings between actors*

Karl E. Weick (2001) argued that loose coupling is evident in a multi-level organizational system “when the components of a system affect each others: first, suddenly rather than continuously; second, occasionally rather than constantly; third, negligibly rather than significantly; fourth, indirectly rather than directly and fifth, eventually rather than immediately” (Weick, 2001, p. 383). Weick's crucial point is that some lack of correspondence can be expected between the formal organizational system architecture, in terms of the plans, goals, strategies, and routines developed by state agencies, on one hand, and the negotiations, decisions, power distribution and operational activities carried out by superintendents, school boards, and school principals on the other. Further, Weick (1982) and Rowan (1990) observed a clear tendency of external control strategies in operation to presume that educational systems work as more tightly coupled systems, and that they can be managed like businesses in the corporate world. As Weick (1982) puts it, “they do what most managers do: namely, try to monitor performance closely, correct deviation from standards, specify job descriptions, design routines to deal with problems, give orders” (Weick, 1982, p. 673).

The findings reviewed for the present paper underscore that the Norwegian school governing system entails a “fuzzy” blend of tight and loose couplings, as is clearly visible in the Norwegian quality assurance system. The coupling between the state level and the county level (the educational governor) is quite tight, whereas the couplings to the next layer (the municipalities) are loosened. In the state supervision system, the municipalities targeted for supervision enjoy a degree of freedom to select schools that will be subjected to inspection, and to influence the targets for monitoring. Municipalities also have some influence in terms of conducting the yearly quality report. Taken together, despite the “messages” from the national school legislation, the quality assurance systems and the municipalities’ official strategies about monitoring, auditing, and inspecting student learning and test data, it is not clear that these demands are imposed on schooling in practical life, simply because superintendents are uniquely positioned to mediate these demands in their roles as gatekeepers.

Turning to the political side in municipal school governing, school boards are tightly coupled to the superintendent and the school administration, yet partly decoupled from the practical life of schooling undertaken by principals and teachers (Paulsen & Strand, 2014). On the other hand, school board members are tightly coupled, not least through double membership in the municipal council, to the political power-center of the municipality. They are uniquely positioned to influence on strategic decision making in school matters, yet decoupled from the implementation process (Paulsen et al., 2015). Despite the pattern of disconnection from local politicians, school principals seem to be tightly coupled to their superintendents through a web of social ties, formal affiliations, and membership in school leader groups. In a similar vein, superintendents seem to be the most important actors in terms of filling the gaps in the partly broken chain of school governing with strong ties to both principals and local politicians. Moreover, superintendents are linked to the top apex of the municipality organization through strong and dense ties. However, while these connections bring superintendents into the power-play of strategic decision making, they are perceived as not very useful in educational matters (Paulsen et al., 2015). Taken together, a well-diversified blend of tight and loose couplings, and strong and weak network ties, are visible in the municipalities’ governing line.

*Control and trust in concert in Norwegian school governing*

The empirical research underpinning this review shows that the school governing system in Norway employs elements of both external control and professional trust. Seen from the bottom of the governing line, school principals express a high level of vertical trust towards their superintendent. Moreover, Norwegian superintendents are educators in the sense of being educated in teacher subjects and having worked most of their careers within the educational sector (Paulsen, 2014a). Therefore, it is fair to assume that superintendents and principals share a common ground of professional knowledge and dominant norms within the school institution. The strong indication of vertical trust is further supported by similar strong frequencies of a trusting climate in the school leader groups within the municipality organizations, which again strengthens the network embracing superintendents and school leaders. Finally, analysis of the superintendent data shows that Norwegian superintendents are active mediators of change initiatives through selection, translation, and buffering practices. Taken together, these elements bring evidence of trust and commitment components in practical school governing.

On the other hand, there are also massive elements of external control in the Norwegian school governing system. Specifically, the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, paired with the establishment of the NSQA, are in charge of a large number of instruments that have the purpose of curriculum alignment and behavioral control of school leaders and teachers. Whereas curriculum alignment instruments, such as national testing, monitoring and ranking of schools, receive frequent media exposure, this is not the case when it comes to the many behavioral control instruments employed by the National Directorate of Education and Training. In particular, the strength of normative steering through streamlining of teacher workshops and national standardized curricula for school principal training and programs for other school leaders, - should be subjected to more investigation. This use of behavioral control is evidently a case for strong normative steering of the school institution in Norway. In aggregate, the empirical evidence reviewed indicates that a delicate blend of control and trust strategies is operative in practical school governing in Norway.

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