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Structural enablements and constraints in the creation and enactment of local content in Norwegian education

Daniel Andre Voll Rød  and Unn-Doris Karlsen Bæck

Department of Social Sciences, UiT the Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway

ABSTRACT

In Norway, the national curriculum together with the Education Act serves as the foundation for teaching and learning in primary and secondary education and training. Local educational providers are given autonomy to develop local adaptations of the centrally given subject-specific curriculum competence aims. This article explores some structural enablements and constraints tied to teachers' opportunities to make use of local content in curricula in lower secondary schools in Norway, including rural/urban differences. The analysis is based on data consisting of 18 qualitative interviews with teachers in two municipalities and participant observation in one of the municipalities in Northern Norway. The finding of this paper is that the design of the national curriculum allows for local content based on its competence aims. This serves as an enabler for teachers to create and enact local content in education. However, there are several constraints that limit local adaptation for teachers – time pressure, lack of access to content due to finances and distance and losing school control of local curriculum. Also, these constraints have a different impact depending on the geographical context. The article employs Margaret Archer's theories on centralized and decentralized educational systems to analyse these structural enablements and constraints.

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Introduction

The curriculum serves as the foundation for the learning experiences and knowledge acquisition of pupils in the course of their education. As stated by Priestley and Philippou (2019), the curriculum is the heart of any learning institution. In countries such as Norway, where a national curriculum is set up to provide nationwide uniformity of content and standards in compulsory education, adapting national standards to local circumstances is a crucial part of curriculum implementation at the school level.

In Norway, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for all levels of education. The Ministry sets the national curriculum for primary and secondary education and training through The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, with a *core curriculum* describing the fundamental values, cultural elements and learning objectives. According to the Education Act, governance of the education system is divided into three different levels. Municipalities are responsible for compulsory education, that is, primary and lower secondary schools; county authorities are responsible for upper secondary education; and the state is responsible for higher education (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016). Each level is also responsible for funding; in the case of municipalities and counties, this is based on tax income and state transfers (Solstad, 2009; Solstad & Andræ Thelin, 2006).

Implementation of the national curriculum in schools includes local curriculum development, which school authorities are obliged to facilitate. An important aspect of this has to do with developing a shared understanding of the curriculum, its concepts, principles and competence goals among teaching staff, administrators and school leaders. This is accomplished through dialogue and discussions. Another important aspect of local curriculum development concerns adapting the curriculum to local circumstances to ensure that local needs and priorities are considered. Introducing local content in education is a central part of this effort, which allows regional, geographical and contextual variation in the learning experiences and knowledge acquisition of students. However, there is limited knowledge regarding what degree this actually occurs in Norway and regarding how such efforts are experienced by different actors in the field. Researchers from many countries claim that curriculum is often developed without an explicit spatial awareness or with the urban population in mind (U. D. K. Bæck, 2016; Gruenewald, 2003; Roberts, 2013, 2017; Roberts & Green, 2013), meaning that regional, geographical and contextual variations are missing. The research also shows that introducing local content into teaching can make school more relevant for pupils, for example, for those on the verge of dropping out

(Dentzau, 2014; Solstad & Andræ Thelin, 2006). By integrating local content into the curriculum, learning can be based more on familiar experiences from the pupils' own lifeworld, potentially creating more meaningful learning contexts and improving learning processes. The effect also goes the other way, as local content in education can benefit the needs of local communities (Clarke & O'donoghue, 2017; Roberts & Green, 2013). In this article, we direct readers' attention to how this plays out in Norway by focusing on lower secondary school teachers' experiences with developing and using local content in curriculum in two different geographical contexts.

Teachers play a crucial role when it comes to developing and enacting local curricula. Their knowledge about local circumstances, their willingness to make use of local context in their teaching and their manoeuvring space afforded by circumstance, e.g. policy (Autti & Bæck, 2019; Clarke & O'donoghue, 2017; Solstad & Andræ Thelin, 2006; Tronsmo & Nerland, 2018). According to Priestley et al. (2012, such manoeuvring depends upon available resources and its material and social configuration in the present context, e.g., through educational policy and funding (see also Priestley & Drew, 2017). Furthermore, Priestley et al. (2012) claim that such manoeuvring, together with the beliefs, values and attributes teachers, is able to mobilize in particular situations can provide them with an agency, thus enabling them to engage in processes of change and innovation. Local curriculum is created between general standards and local needs, and if there is considerable distance between general standards and local needs, tensions may arise, as shown in Autti and Bæck (2019)'s study from rural Finland. They state: *'There is a disconnect between a policy level relating to a predominately urban frame of reference and a more practice oriented local level based in rural viewpoints'* (Autti & Bæck, 2019, p. 1). As shown by Autti and Bæck, the urban bias in education policy and the tensions this brings up in work on local curriculum are highly relevant for the processes we document in our study, as we investigate the development of local curricula under circumstances that in many ways differ considerably from general standards.

Local content in education became an important matter in Norway in the 1970s as part of decentralization processes taking place within the national education system at the time (Eilertsen & Solstad, 1980; Høgmo et al., 1981; Solstad & Andræ Thelin, 2006; Solstad & Andrews, 2020). The importance of local content and the link between school and local communities were emphasized in national education guidelines, starting with the national curriculum of 1987 (M87), continuing with the curriculum of 1997 (L97) and to a lesser degree the current Knowledge Promotion reform (LK06) of 2006 (Solstad, 2009; Solstad & Andrews, 2020).¹

The LK06 consists of a general part and a subject-specific part.² The general part of the curriculum acknowledges the differences in pupils' abilities, social backgrounds and local belonging and states that education must be adapted to such differences (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015). The subject-specific part includes *competence aims* for each school subject in primary and lower secondary education. A similar template exists in upper secondary education, differentiating between academic and vocational tracks. The *competence aims to provide direction* in terms of the knowledge and ability of the pupils rather than prescribing predefined curricula that the pupils should master.

In order to differentiate between and accommodate for different students and their needs, local school leaders and teachers have the option of developing local learning aims based on the nationally set competence aims of the LK06. It is up to the schools to decide how the aims are to be achieved, and the teachers are granted increased methodological freedom with the intention to facilitate achieving the competence aims under diverse local circumstances. Following this came a set of guidelines for the LK06, the 'Guidance of Local Work with Curriculum', provided by the directorate upon the request of schools and municipalities that served to limit the increased local autonomy introduced by the LK06 (Mølstad, 2015). These guidelines state:

Subject-specific curricula are formulated in a way that gives the school the opportunity to choose content, teaching materials, activities and teaching methods. Local flexibility provides the schools with the opportunity to adapt teaching to the pupils, and through the choices they make contribute to increased learning outcomes (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016).

According to Mølstad, stating competence aims is a way of steering learning outcomes through product control rather than the process control represented in the classical way of thinking about curricula. This product control can be understood as part of 'the age of accountability' (Hopmann, 2003, 2008; Mølstad, 2015). The increased level of accountability by focusing on student outcomes can be seen as challenging school and teacher autonomy and the trust in teachers (Mølstad, 2015; Priestley & Drew, 2017). In this way, the intention of developing a local curriculum appears to be to operationalize and deliver the existing national curriculum. This is different from Finland, for example, where teachers are creating a local curriculum approved at the municipality level to exist side by side with the national curriculum (Andreassen, 2016; Autti & Bæck, 2019; Mølstad, 2015). As a consequence, the manoeuvring space for teachers to construct local curriculum and the opportunities for teachers to exert agency both as a group and as individuals are limited by national educational policy and curriculum.

In this article, we take a policy stance to examine the processes and factors that may enable or constrain the making and enactment of local curriculum as understood through the experiences of lower secondary school teachers in two different contexts. We address the following research questions:

(1) *Which processes and factors may enable and constrain teacher's opportunities to make use of local curriculum?* (2) *How has the structure of the educational system and education policy impacted these enablements and constraints?*

We start by presenting the case municipalities before discussing the method and the theoretical framework on the structural context for the use of local content and local curriculum in compulsory education in Norway. This contextualization is important in order to understand the role of local curriculum and the framework it is created and enacted within.

Case municipalities

Case municipality 1, hereby referred to as the municipality of Grønnavik,³ is one of the largest municipalities in Norway in terms of land area. It is diverse in terms of geography and nature, with dramatic mountains, rivers, valleys, fjords and rich flora and fauna. It has a population of approximately 5000 people and is approximately a two-hour drive from any significantly larger municipality. Half of the population resides in or close to the municipal centre, with the rest residing in smaller communities scattered around the municipality. The largest employer is the public sector, particularly the health sector. Many people also work in the private sector, some work in the agriculture and fishery sectors, and a few work in the industry. A significant portion of the workforce works outside the municipality and commutes on a daily or weekly basis.

A significant part of the population in case municipality 1 identifies as Sami and/or Kven as well as Norwegian. The Sami is an indigenous group primarily situated in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, and there are several different Sami languages. The Kven is an ethnic minority who emigrated to Norway from Tornedalen on the borders between what is today Sweden and Finland from the 1700s onwards. Both have been subject to assimilation by the Norwegian state, which was a policy between 1850 and 1950. The educational sector played an important role in the assimilation process during this period, negatively affecting the Sami and Kven (Jensen, 2005; Keskitalo et al., 2013; Minde, 2003; Nergård & Mathiesen, 1994; Ngai et al., 2015; Niemi, 2017).

Case municipality 2, Tromsø, is one of the largest cities in Northern Norway, but it also contains areas that are more rural. The great majority of the municipality's more than 70,000 inhabitants reside in the

city, and there has been a constant increase in the population for decades. The city functions as a regional centre, and central institutions include a large hospital, a university, county administration and a significant retail sector. The majority of the population is employed in the public sector.

The two municipalities can be understood to represent different positions in the rural/urban continuum or dichotomy. However, distinguishing between the rural and the urban is in no way easy or straightforward, at least as a binary concept, as both terms are constructed and contested (U. D. K. Bæck, 2016; Roberts & Green, 2013; White & Corbett, 2014). Even so, it is important to keep in mind that the size of the municipal centre alone does not qualify it as rural, as is the case for the municipality of Grønnavik. Instead, the municipal centre of Grønnavik may be considered to be a town with a relatively dense population (SSB, 2019), as it has many features usually associated with more urban-like locations. At the same time, however, this vast school district's only public upper secondary school draws its pupils from the entirety of the municipality, including remote villages that are certainly more rural in nature.

Therefore, this article does not include a working taxonomy of the rural/urban continuum but instead focuses on *different spatial contexts, putting forward contextualization* as a way to address spatial differences (U. D. K. Bæck, 2016). However, in the discussion part of the article, we will address how case municipalities 1 and 2 can in certain ways can be understood to represent more rural versus more urban features, respectively, and as such may represent interesting cases for understanding how the development and enactment of local curricula may vary in terms of rural versus urban locations.

Methods

The empirical analyses in this article are based on 18 qualitative semi-structured interviews with teachers in the two case municipalities and on participant observation in the case municipality of Grønnavik over a period of three months during the first half of 2018. The interviews were semi-structured one-on-one interviews with a thematic interview guide and lasted about an hour long on average. They were collected with the written consent of the teachers, recorded electronically and transcribed and analysed using NVivo.

The interviews provided comparative insights into how the teachers experienced being involved in developing and enacting local content and local curriculum in education in the two municipalities. Participant observation provided information about institutional practices as well as valuable contextual information about Grønnavik and proved important in order to

understand and analyse the circumstances under which these experiences were formed. The combination of interviews and participant observation was synergic; observational data informed the interviews and vice versa, and it also allowed addressing the possible conflation between self-report and behaviour (Fangen, 2010; Jerolmack et al., 2014). No participant observation was carried out in Tromsø. However, the analysis also draws upon the authors' knowledge and experience of this case municipality. The background of the main author includes work experience as a teacher in Tromsø, as well as teacher training with work placements as part of becoming a certified teacher. Both authors also live in Tromsø, which also makes access to contextual information for the interviews easier.

The data material and analysis represent the teacher perspective. Teachers are in a very interesting position within the educational system, one that may provide them with insight into their own challenges as teachers and challenges faced by students and insight into how both parties relate to the context, for example, the educational system, national guidelines, school leaders, student families and the local community. The teacher position is in the centre of a web of educational relationships and is therefore uniquely practical when considering policy implementation in practice (Barter, 2013).

Theoretical framework: the centralized educational system

The relationship between the national curriculum and development and enactment of local content in education can be discussed within the framework of the educational system. An important aspect of the educational system is who can initiate change and how it can be done, as this has implications for the creation and content of curriculum. The terms *centralized* and *decentralized* are often used to define the distribution of decision-making power and strategies of governance *within* the educational system. Interestingly, there have been different conclusions about the Norwegian educational system and its degree of centralization or decentralization (e.g., Karseth et al., 2013; Kvalsund, 2009; Skinningsrud, 2014; Volckmar & Wiborg, 2014). According to Skinningsrud (2014), most definitions of decentralized and centralized educational systems only discuss properties within the system and do not describe the systems as a whole. She argues that in order to overcome these problems, Margaret Archer's analysis of state educational systems is a better way of addressing these issues (Skinningsrud, 2014).

Archer defines the state educational 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' (Archer, 2013, p. 54). According to Archer, as the need for education grew the state educational system evolved from being integrated with the church to being integrated with several interest groups within a nation-state. Whether the national educational system became centralized or decentralized was contingent upon the actors involved in challenging the church/state monopoly of education and the resources and strategies involved in their challenge of domination. Archer shows that in general there were two strategies at play – the strategy of *substitution* (competition), which led to several educational bidders and a decentralized educational system (e.g., England) or the strategy of political *restriction* through laws, which led to the state being in control and as a consequence a centralized educational system (e.g. France).

In Archer's terms, a centralized educational system is an educational system governed *centrally* by a leading group that creates reforms and guidelines from a centre of power. A centralized system has a high degree of *unification* of educational laws and educational policies such as guidelines, curriculum, standards and control over private provisions outside the state system. It also has a high degree of *systematization* in the relationship between educational institutions, such as a lack of bottlenecks between the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Another property of a centralized educational system is the low degree of *differentiation* between educational institutions and other institutions, meaning that the autonomy of the educational system is low. Last, the degree of *specialization* in the offerings given to students is low, as the admission requirements, processes and end competence achieved are universal in a centralized system.

In a centralized system, educational demands go through negotiations between representatives from the teaching profession and/or external interest groups and the aforementioned leading group, which in most cases is a sub-part of the central government. The latter then uniformly makes changes for the educational sector as a whole. The distribution of power in the society in general and within the educational system, in particular, is decisive for negotiating positions, the demands the negotiations are about and the educational changes that may or may not happen.

In contrast, in a decentralized system, the structure and content can be decided more locally, for example, through school boards. The degree of *unification* and *systematization* is lower, while the possibilities of *specialization* and *differentiation* are higher, as the greater number of educational actors with actual power allows for a more diverse and institutionally autonomous educational offering. Here, educational change is not only dependent on decisions made by a central government but also on direct pressure from representatives from the teaching profession or other

interest groups. Interest groups like teacher unions and others try to push for educational change not only towards a leading group like in the centralized system, but also more on a local basis, such as towards a local school board (Archer, 2013).

According to Archer's understanding of decentralized versus centralized educational systems, the Norwegian educational system would fall in the latter category. Researchers arguing the same have pointed out that in Norway, the unification and systematization are high and the differentiation and specialization are low. Politicians have direct control over unified laws relevant to education and its institutions, with a strongly unified and standardized core curriculum with low levels of specialization for students aged 6–16 and a high degree of systematization (e.g., lack of bottlenecks) between primary, secondary and tertiary schools (Nordkvelle et al., 2017; Skinningsrud, 2014, 2013; Solstad & Andr  Thelin, 2006). Furthermore, national education reforms in 1994 and 2006 (the R94 and LK06 reforms) brought with them increasing unification and a decreasing degree of specialization at the secondary level (Skinningsrud, 2014; Solstad & Andr  Thelin, 2006). For example, the 1994 reform reduced the number of vocational study programmes from 110 to 13, steering pupils into more unified educational trajectories (Solstad, 2009; Solstad & Andr  Thelin, 2006; Solstad & Andrews, 2020).

Within a centralized system, few real channels of influence exist. It takes a lot for the educational system itself to change, as it has to happen indirectly through a leading group, in this case, politicians in the government and parliament. According to Archer (2013), centralized systems rarely if ever change to decentralized systems, as that would mean both a loss of power and a loss of political capital to spend for the politicians in charge. To the extent that freedom and autonomy are given to actors within the system, it will be in ways that do not compromise the already established power distribution. Freedom and autonomy can, therefore, be thought of as *concessions*, meaning that the freedoms granted by the leading group do not change the power distribution (Archer, 2013; Nordkvelle et al., 2017). Next, we turn to the empirical data and focus on teachers' accounts of how local content and local curriculum are developed and used in practice.

Categories of structural enablements and constraints

In this section, we attempt to answer the first research question, which concerns *which* processes and factors may enable and constrain teacher's opportunities to make use of the local curriculum. The categories of structural enablements and constraints are based on the qualitative data collected, and relevant examples and quotes are provided.

The first category of constraints and enablements relevant to creating local content and local curriculum comprises an enablement and mandate found within the national curriculum and guidelines in LK06. As mentioned, the process of including local content in teaching is based on local operationalizations of the competence aims given in the national curriculum and the guidelines in LK06. This is done differently in various municipalities. In Gr nnvik, this was done at the school level, where teachers met at the beginning of each school year to discuss the content of the local learning aims. In Troms , this was taken care of at the municipal level. Representatives from each school would meet to discuss the local learning aims for the municipalities as a whole for a set amount of years. As will be shown later, the different ways of organizing this part of the work had consequences for the implementation of local content at the school level.

The teachers in both case municipalities embraced the idea of local content in education and saw it as an advantage for the pedagogical work in school. This is in line with the intentions of LK06, which emphasizes local curriculum from a didactical point of view, that is, as a tool to help engage a broader range of students. The teachers said they often found that introducing pupils to local topics increased pupils' motivation to do schoolwork. It could also be a way of re-engaging pupils who showed a disinterest in certain subjects or in school as a whole. One of the teachers described how she experienced this:

We are doing quite exciting things, and the most exciting is that the students are getting ownership to these histories. Students that haven't shown much interest earlier on are coming forward, and it is so great to see. They are getting a kind of "wow, this famous person is from the neighbouring municipality? And the great-grandchild is a teacher here?" It is very fun to observe.

The teachers were generally satisfied with the possibility of including local content in their teaching. They saw it as inherent in LK06, and one of the teachers pointed towards the open way that the competence aims were formulated as a possible explanation for this:

For example, when working in history and social science and larger conflicts, there are no mention of which conflict [in the competence aims] to teach. And when working with WWII, it is natural to look into the local context. There were prisoner camps only a couple of hundred meters away from here, and teaching about the prisoner camps and the histories of the incarcerated [seems natural].

The formulation of competence aims was perceived by the teachers as a possibility for manoeuvring and

creating local content. Schools and municipalities are encouraged to make local adaptations on didactical grounds, but for the teachers, local adaptations also meant an opportunity to include a focus on local culture and identity. The teachers emphasized the importance of teaching students about their own local culture and history and saw this as important to help the pupils gain a sense of pride about where they come from and to nurture their local identities. One of the teachers expressed this in the following way:

It is important that the children here gets a sense of ownership to our culture, to Northern Norway, to the war. We have had people in here that experienced the evacuation during WWII. And it is important that the children experiences that, it is their history, and it is important that they become proud of their identity (...). In that way, they can gain ownership to what they learn. And that is what we have used local curricula for.

Local curriculum as a space to promote local identity and culture was particularly prevalent in the Grønnevik interviews. As mentioned, Grønnevik is a multi-ethnic community where the presence of both indigenous Sami and the Kven minority is important (Jensen, 2005). The teachers were conscious of making connections to the ethnic history of the place in their teaching and also to do this across different subjects, as the following quote illustrates:

And Kven culture, we have a Kven history. And when one teaches Norwegian [as a subject], it is natural to work with the history of the Kven, also across subjects. This is also the case with the history part in social science, I think it is very fun, and the possibilities are endless.

Another way of incorporating Kven ethnicity into education was through an annual Kven week. Building up to the Kven week, the teachers would incorporate some basic Kven history and language into the regular classes, ending in an open day at school with student presentations, etc. For the local teachers and the students and their parents, the Kven week and the school also became an arena for revitalizing the Kven identity, which historically has been looked down upon and which has only quite recently begun to be revitalized in northern Norway (Jensen, 2005; Johansen, 2012; Kommunal- og Moderniseringsdepartementet, 2018; Norske Kveners Forbund, 2018; Storaas, 2007). It is interesting to note that when it comes to the incorporation of the ethnic historical legacy of this rural municipality into teaching, it was clear that for the teachers, the ethnopolitical project of ethnic revitalization played an important part. In other words, it not only had to do with fulfilling the obligation of introducing local content in school (inherent in LK06) but it was also about local

identity and ethnopolitics. Indigenous education and ethnic revitalization were thus to some degree included in the local content category by local teachers.

Even though the teachers in this study appreciated and emphasized the importance of local content in their teaching, they were also aware of issues that made it harder to prioritize. These problems are categorized into three types of constraints having to do with *time pressure*, lack of *access to content due to finances and distance* and *losing school control* of local curriculum. These will be analysed in more detail in the discussion part of the paper.

Time pressure

Teachers in both case municipalities embraced the idea of local content in teaching, and they were interested in increasing the use of local content in their own teaching practice. The most cited reason for not being able to increase local content was '*not having time*'. The teachers put forward the amount of competence aims in the curriculum as one explanation for the shortage of time. In their critique of the competence aims in LK06, teachers' interest organizations have also stated the aims are too numerous and too comprehensive, leading to superficial treatment of the curriculum (Ulvestad, 2018). The teachers also felt that more and more tasks were given to the educational system and the teachers, taking away valuable time to focus on the students and their learning processes. They gave numerous examples of activities that take time away from teaching, such as testing regimes and bureaucracy associated with solving bullying cases. According to the teachers, 'paperwork' and reporting were increasingly competing with and sometimes replacing the planning of learning activities, including developing, planning and teaching local curriculum. One of the teachers said she felt that the workload had increased during her years as a teacher and that she experienced this as highly problematic:

I am currently in a process where I am trying to find out whether being a teacher is worth it. The teacher profession has become very demanding in regards to student evaluation. (...) It is very good on a very fundamental level to do so, but it is very time demanding (...) There is a lot of documentation work to be done on top of that; I have meetings with students who need individual training plans, and this demand calling-up papers and reports. And there are student collaboration dialogues with individual students. And then there is our digital platform, where everything is supposed to be documented. (...) So the workload is very big.

Another teacher reflected up some of the reasons behind this:

Well, everything is supposed to happen through the school. (...) I believe that education policy has become hard to anticipate, politicians are making decisions, but they don't understand the consequences, as they do not know enough about school and education, both as an organisation and as a workplace.

The quotes above illustrate a growing concern among the teachers that new things and responsibilities are put into the educational system, but '*nothing is taken out*'. Another concern often brought up by teachers was the need for proactive documentation of classroom activities, often tied to complaints about grades or behavioural problems in school. For example, when a complaint about grades is made to the county by parents or students, the county investigates whether there is any validity in the complaint. The teachers then have to justify the grades by documenting the individual student's ability to vis-à-vis the competence aims. As the teachers cannot know beforehand whether which or any students or parents will complain, they tend to proactively document more than what is really needed as a precautionary measurement, leading to an increased workload.

Lack of access to content due to finances and distance

The second most mentioned issue in terms of challenges when it comes to developing and enacting local content and local curriculum in teaching was related to the financial problems many municipalities are facing. As mentioned earlier, municipalities are responsible for funding public elementary and lower secondary schools through tax income and state transfers. The municipality of Grønnvik, in particular, had economic problems, and this also affected the education sector. There had been a round of school closures, and periodic halts on purchasing had also led to a lack of educational tools, such as pencils and sketch books. There was also a lack of computers at the time of the interviews, and according to some of the teachers, this impacted students' computer literacy. The lack of economic resources also manifested in limited access to content deliverers, such as museums. In Grønnvik, visits to such places were also made challenging by the high cost of travel:

I miss going to museums with students. I like museums and my own children has visited almost all museums in the North Calotte, but there is not many others who have. I grew up [in a neighbouring municipality] with museums and art displays, but those who grew up here, the parent generation and those a bit younger have not.

While the above quote is concerned with access to museums, the economic worries also extend to any travelling outside the immediate surroundings of the

school due to increased costs and time spent away due to long travel distances. Several of the teachers sometimes spent their own money and time to acquire tools to teach local traditional crafts or to take children out into the local environment. They spoke about the financial and logistical difficulties at length, arguing that economic problems extend far beyond the occasional museum visit, visiting local places and investigating local nature.

The municipality of Tromsø had also experienced economic problems, but at the time of writing these were not as pronounced as in Grønnvik. The discontent of the teachers in Tromsø was more connected to the actual priorities of the politicians and the municipality rather than the lack of resources. None of the teachers mentioned finances as an issue in using or creating local content. They described the local offering of museums and other cultural institutions in the municipality as good.

Losing school control of local curriculum

The last type of constraint was found only in the urban municipality of Tromsø, and it is important to note that this issue is not necessarily found in the same form in other municipalities. According to the teachers, local competence aims were reworked at the municipality level; a selection of local teachers from different schools was grouped together to formulate local competence aims based on the national guidelines. These 'reworked' local competence aims were then regarded as obligatory for the schools in the municipality.

Not much is found about this practice in municipality policy papers, except that the articulated aim behind this practice is to unify the Tromsø school. One of the tools is to create a common progression between the different schools, and that the practice started back in 2014 (Tromsø Kommune, 2015). The motive behind creating locally unified competence aims according to the teachers was to streamline the progression in education, giving the students and their families a choice of which school to attend and allowing a smooth transition if they decided to change schools. According to some of the teachers, the idea behind the first sentiment is to create a 'market' for education, creating competition between schools while offering students the possibility of choosing which school they would like to attend based on student and family preference. While the idea is to benefit both the municipality as a school owner and the student as a 'customer', the practical implications of this local centralization can become an issue; these are discussed below.

Discussion

The teachers interviewed for this study were predominantly positive when it came to introducing local content in their teaching practice, and the mandate given to them through the LK06 reform was experienced as a positive enablement. At the same time, the data showed that there are processes and factors that serve to constrain the teachers' opportunities for actually doing so. The two most common constraints were lack of time and lack of resources. In this section, we try to address the problem as formulated in the second research question '*How has the structure of the educational system and education policy impacted these enablements and constraints?*' We will answer this question by explaining the structural focus on educational systems and Archer's centralized educational system (Archer, 2013).

To understand why the enablement of local adaptation of curriculum is the way it is, we revisit Archer's arguments on centralized educational systems and specifically the concessions a centralized educational system makes (Archer, 2013). The local operationalization of centrally given competence aims as a whole can be seen as a concession and a compromise between general standards and local needs. It gives teachers the opportunity to create local content adapted to the student's needs and the local identity, including ethnopolitics. At the same time, allowing teachers this opportunity does not change any power relationship or positions, as the state still has a strong role as deliverer of the competence aims. The local operationalization of centrally given competence aims can, therefore, be thought of as a currently working concession or compromise, where both teachers and the state get sufficient of what matters to them.

Time pressure and an excessive workload for teachers as exemplified in the result section have been pointed out by several researchers as problems strongly related to teachers' working conditions, which can lead to emotional exhaustion, teacher attrition, burnout or leaving the profession (Beck, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017, 2015; U.-D. K. Bæck, 2015). According to the teachers, time pressure came from many sources, but the amount of competence aims in LK06 was considered the main culprit. Could this constraint to introducing local content in teachers' teaching practices be overcome in any way? As outlined in the theory section of this article, Archer (2013) argues that there are few channels of influence in a centralized educational system and that change is usually introduced by a leading group, in this case by central politicians. This means that the amount of competence aims can be changed only through negotiation between the leading group and interest groups of a certain size, position and power,

such as teacher unions. This will be different within a decentralized system, where the municipality or even a local school board can decide their own curriculum, and local interest groups such as local industry or teacher groups can impact the negotiations (Archer, 2013). At the time of writing, the teachers' concern about too many competence aims in education has been recognized to a certain degree by central politicians and has been addressed in the new guidelines and educational reforms set for 2020. A significant decrease in competence aims has been decided upon; in some subjects the number of competence aims will be only half of what there were in the fall of 2020 (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019). This change is welcomed by the Union of Education Norway, who believes the decrease in competence aims will increase teacher manoeuvring space (Skjong, 2018).

Some of the time pressure also seems to derive from the accumulation of documentation tied to student evaluations, quality control systems, etc. The increase in documentation work can be understood as a result of politicians' increased interest in external controls and product control within education, for example, through national and international test regimes (e.g., PISA). An important aim in this regard seems to be to reassure the public that all measures that can increase school outcomes have been implemented (Hopmann, 2003, 2008; Mølsted, 2015). Political pressure on leading politicians could be a way to decrease unnecessary paperwork, as shown with the competence aims above.

While time pressure in itself is found to be common in teachers' work experience across different spatial contexts, it may still have an effect on spatial inequalities. Many researchers argue that curriculum is made with the urban population in mind, or at least without much thought for the more rural population (Autti & Bæck, 2019; U. D. K. Bæck, 2016; Gruenewald, 2003; Roberts, 2013, 2017; Roberts & Green, 2013). Spatial awareness in LK06 is somewhat vague. To some degree, LK06 acknowledges the need for local adaptation on behalf of the students, and there seems to be no actual limit in LK06 to create local content as long as one is operationalizing centrally given competence aims. At the same time, as pointed out by Solstad and Andrews (2020), LK06 is less spatially aware than its predecessor L97. The section about the locally oriented school is left out, and there is not 'any mentioning of the pedagogical use of local teaching resources or the school's active role in the local community in the new overarching values and principles for primary and secondary education which was approved in 2017' (Solstad & Andrews, 2020, pp. 300–301). If there is an urban bias in the curriculum in LK06 and subsequent reforms and in teacher materials such as textbooks, etc., then the workload needed to make local adaptations could be greater

in rural contexts than in urban ones. Some teachers argued along these lines, stating that some of the competence aims felt irrelevant for rural Northern Norway and that teaching material and textbooks seemed to have been made for the capital area in the southern part of Norway. Given that time is a valuable asset and time pressure exists equally across contexts, rural contexts could come out as the losers because the adaptation effort would be more time-consuming. However, this argument requires further validation through more empiric substantiation and more in-depth exploration and discussion.

For our two case municipalities, the spatial relevance is clearer when it comes to the second category of constraints to teachers' manoeuvring space for creating local content, namely the lack of economic resources. When it comes to the two municipalities in this study, this problem was more often addressed by the teachers in Grønnevik. If we try to understand this through the concepts of centralized versus decentralized education systems, a relevant point of departure is how school funding is set up. Funding is different in a centralized educational system than in a decentralized one, as the leading group in the centralized system has control over the funding of the educational system. In Norway, the municipal level is responsible for elementary and lower secondary education. Pre-1986, school budgets were approved by the state, and funds were earmarked and transferred to the municipalities based on the approved budget. In 1986, the government gave the municipalities responsibility for the funding and administration of public elementary and lower secondary schools. The funding of schools is currently derived from municipal tax income and transfers from the state. Municipalities in more rural areas tend to experience dwindling populations with ageing demographic profiles and lower socioeconomic status than their urban counterparts, negatively affecting the taxpayer base of the municipalities and thus the funding of schools (Johansen, 2009; Solstad, 2009). The state transfers are primarily based on the number of inhabitants in the municipality, with some modifiers. They do not adequately reflect differences between municipalities in, for example, health or infrastructure costs or the overhead differences between school sizes due to, for example, teacher salaries and building maintenance. When resources are experienced as scarce in municipalities under economic pressure, often due to low tax incomes and high welfare costs related to an ageing population, municipalities have to prioritize between public services, for example, health and education. This has led to a strained economic situation for the educational sector, and in poor rural municipalities schools have been closed down or amalgamated in order to save money (Kvalsund, 2009; Nordkvelle et al., 2017; Solstad, 2009; Solstad &

Andræ Thelin, 2006; Solstad et al., 2016). Similar issues relating to rural schools are also found elsewhere (e.g., Tieken and Auldridge-Reveles (2019), Biddle and Azano (2016), and Stelmach (2011)).

This does not mean that municipalities in more urban contexts do not experience economic hardship that affects the education sector. Tromsø, the more urban municipality in this study, is in a situation where harsh economic priorities affect education every year. However, it is important to note that although economic difficulties are present in both case municipalities, this has had a more severe effect on the development and enactment of local content and curriculum in education in Grønnevik because the more remote location makes it more expensive to visit museums or other relevant institutions both in terms of money and time. In Tromsø, however, schools can rely more on the local offering of educationally relevant institutions and activities, lowering travelling costs and time expenditure significantly, in addition to benefitting from being part of a large-scale operation.

Changes in the central funding system occur like most other political changes in a centralized educational system; political pressure and negotiation with the leading group of politicians are necessary measures. Negotiating for a more differentiated funding system targeted at addressing the poorer rural municipalities could change the material context and increase the manoeuvring space to create more local content (Solstad, 2009; Solstad & Andræ Thelin, 2006; Tronsmo & Nerland, 2018). One of the many possible ways of looking into the municipality and school funding system, at least for elementary and lower secondary education in a Norwegian context, could be to explore the opportunities for expanding the county governor's discretionary funds and mandate. The county governor is the supervising authority over its municipalities, and with the mandate comes discretionary funds from the government that can be given to municipalities to address local inequalities not accounted for in the municipality funding model. The annual size of this fund nationwide is slightly below 1 billion NOK (approximately 100,000 EUR) for 2020 (Troli & Sande, 2019). One suggestion is to expand the fund itself, as an eventual change in the municipality funding formula for the state transfers may not necessarily address all local inequalities and issues.

The third category of constraints has to do with losing school control when it comes to developing and enacting/implementing the local curriculum. Again, it is important to note that this issue is found within one urban municipality, and it may very well be different in other municipalities. It is included and discussed here, as it relates to the definition of power over 'what is local' and what constitutes 'local' in the creation of local curriculum. If the municipality is small and/or the differences among the schools are small, for example, in terms of size, historical context and livelihood

context, the impact of centralizing the creation of local competence aims can be negligible. In larger municipalities with smaller schools in more rural areas outside the cities, the smaller schools might lose out in the process of creating local learning goals based on centrally given competence aims, and the local curriculum could become an urban curriculum. It also has the potential to be an antagonist in terms of losing school control and teacher autonomy and manoeuvring space by taking away the power of individual schools and teachers to make adaptations for individual students as granted by policy by moving it up to the municipality level (Andreassen, 2016; Mølsted, 2015; Tronsmo & Nerland, 2018; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016).

The loss of school control over local content is not a direct result of the centralized educational system like the previous two structural constraints. However, some remedy can come from the government and relevant ministry, as they can repeat their insistence upon granting autonomy to create local content and curriculum to the schools themselves (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016). However, the solution to this problem is most likely to be found at the municipality level. A possible solution is for the municipality to shift the work of creating local competence aims down to the school level, or at least making participation in creating and using a unified set of local competence aims at the municipality level voluntary. The last possibility would be to assign competence aims to a specific school year without deciding the content, as that would address the political wish of streamlining education without taking away school control and teacher autonomy over the content of the local curriculum and competence aims.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored and discussed processes and factors that may enable and constrain teachers' opportunities to make use of local curriculum within the Norwegian educational system. The competence aims of the national curriculum in combination with a local adaption of those aims serve to enable the creation of a local curriculum. This enablement can be analysed as a concession given from the state, as allowing teachers this opportunity does not change any power relationship or position, as the state still has a strong role as deliverer of the competence aims. While the current educational reform gives teachers a certain amount of autonomy, it does not necessarily mean a larger manoeuvring space for teachers to include more local content and local curriculum due to the structural constraints of creating and enacting curriculum.

These constraints fall into three categories – *time pressure*, *lack of access to content due to finances and distance* and *losing school control of local curriculum*. None of the constraints are intended consequences of the national guidelines and national curriculum, but

all affect the manoeuvring space teachers have when trying to create and use local content and local curriculum. This paper offers a structural explanation of why the enablement and constraints have emerged by looking into the structure of the educational system itself. Archer's concepts of centralized and decentralized educational systems allow us to understand why and within which structures the constraints have surfaced, as the power relationships in a centralized or decentralized system direct how educational change (or reproduction) can happen.

We suggest some research-based ways to address the factors that constrain teachers' opportunities to create and enact local content and local curriculum. Some of the time pressure can and potentially is already dealt with through central negotiations for new educational reforms (e.g., reducing the amount of competence aims). Economic inequality can also be dealt with through the funding system of school owners, in this case municipalities. In the Norwegian case, this could be addressed, for example, by expanding the discretionary funds given to county administrations. The last category of constraints, losing school control of local curriculum, is the most fleeting because it might not exist in the exact same form across municipalities. However, compromises such as assigning competence aim to certain age classes but letting the schools themselves fill in the local content and curriculum are possibilities. The finding that the issues presented in this paper are contextual and that the power struggle between general standards and local needs is found to be strong outside of national guidelines underlines the need for researchers and policy designers to look into context and practice as well as relevant national guidelines in order to understand how educational policy affects its recipients and how to improve it.

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Notes

1. The national guidelines for the curriculum are also currently being reformed, set to be introduced in the fall of 2020, but this paper is concerned with LK06. See Utdanningsdirektoratet (2019). Fagfornyelsen Utdanningsdirektoratet [The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training].
2. The reformed national guidelines for the curriculum, set for implementation in 2020, will keep the form of competence aims. See Utdanningsdirektoratet (2017). Strategi for fagfornyelsen av kunnskapsløftet og kunnskapsløftet samisk Utdanningsdirektoratet [The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training].
3. The authors have chosen to not disclose the real name of case municipality 1 to keep the identity of teachers and students that have participated in the research

project safe as promised to the participants and national ethics board NSD. We have chosen to disclose the name of case municipality 2 for reasons further discussed in the methods chapter; the authors are currently living in Tromsø. We have also found this disclosure admissible because revealing the municipality does not reveal the school, its teachers or students.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Geolocation information

Geolocation information: Norway, Northern Norway

ORCID

Daniel Andre Voll Rød  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9145-4619>

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