Work in Progress!

Blurring the boundaries between public and private in the governance of education – is the state losing its grip?


Christine Hudson  
Department of Political Science  
Umeå University  
SE-901 87 Umeå  
Sweden  
chris.hudson@pol.umu.se
Blurring the boundaries between public and private in the governance of education – is the state losing its grip?

Introduction
Dramatic changes have occurred in education systems in most European countries in recent decades. Education has been challenged by developments taking place in society, politics and the economy. Globalization, the forward march of neo-liberalism, the growth of the knowledge economy and the new middle classes have encouraged the growth of powerful rhetoric around the need for education to be more pluralistic and individualized; and uniform, blanket solutions have been seen as increasingly inappropriate to meet the needs of more diverse and heterogeneous societies. In many countries, this has led to a decentralization of the responsibility for education from the state to local government, schools and/or the market and a move from detailed regulation to framework legislation as a means of steering education. Even the previously highly centrally controlled Nordic education systems have been municipalized and steering by goals and general grants have been introduced. These developments have been seen as part of the process of governance whereby the state is no longer able to ‘go it alone’ and is forced to step back and allow other interests to play a role. However, in recent years the ‘hollowing out’ of the state model has been challenged and more subtle theories of governance have been developed. These suggest that what we are witnessing is not the disappearance of the state but rather its ability to adapt to changing circumstances and find new ways of governing that, whilst bringing in new actors, enable the state to remain an active part of governance. The importance accorded to education not only in terms of creating and maintaining national identity but also for economic development suggests that this is an area from which the state will not willingly abdicate its role.

This paper begins by discussing the rise of governance and the development of new, more subtle theories in this field. It then considers whether support for these theories can be found in the field of education. It examines the growth in the attempts to control educational outputs through, for example, demands for quality controls, standardized testing, and evaluations and the introduction of national bodies responsible for carrying out these controls. It then discusses whether these can be interpreted as a sign that the state, far from relinquishing its role, is finding other ways of controlling education. Utilizing a comparative approach, the paper explores these ideas in relation to education systems in the Nordic countries. It
concludes with a discussion of whether or not the state is really relinquishing its control function in relation to education. The paper draws on a qualitative analysis of official policy documents, legislation and official statements concerning education in the respective countries.

The rise of governance
A common theme during the 1990s was the weakening of the nation state’s ability to govern. It was argued that, whilst remaining the basic unit of economic and political organization, nation states were challenged by changes taking place in both the economy and society at international, national and local levels and were losing their monopoly on policy making, representation, legitimation and questions of identity. On the one hand, greater economic, political and cultural integration and convergence were moving power upwards away from the state and, on the other, processes of regionalization, fragmentation and decentralization of authority were channelling power downwards. The forward march of neo-liberalism with its rhetoric of greater choice, accountability, efficiency, consumer empowerment and privatization of the public sector and reinforced by the rise of the new middle class which enamours individualism and choice were also seen as putting the position of the state into question. These trends, together with other developments generating greater differentiation, heterogeneity and complexity in society, such as the growth of new disaggregated modes of production, new social movements and increased immigration, have been regarded as presenting challenges to the state’s policy-making and steering ability. National government standardized policy solutions were seen as increasingly inappropriate to meet diverging problems and more varied needs. The state’s ability to ‘fly solo’ was questioned in many policy areas and demands were voiced for greater decentralization of responsibility both to local government and the market to facilitate greater flexibility and responsiveness to differentiated needs and problems.

Government, it was argued, was being replaced by governance, where policy is formulated through interactions between actors in different networks and service provision is shared among a range of agencies (both public and private) (see, for example, Rhodes 1997, John 2001, Pierre 1998). Initially, this change was seen as contributing to the hollowing out of the state as “the traditional method of governing from above – government – becomes more difficult” and directing is replaced by steering (Loughlin 2004: 11). Governance was seen as involving non-state actors in doing more societal coordination for themselves with far less (or
even no) central government involvement (Jordan et al 2005). This, it was suggested was encouraging the emergence of governing styles which were blurring the boundaries between and within public and private sectors. Accordingly, the essence of governance is seen as “its emphasis on governing mechanisms which do not rest on recourse to the authority and sanctions of government” (Stoker 1998: 17). Many of these changes seem to fit with what Bobbitt (2003) has called a shift from the nation state to the “market state”. He argues that, encouraged by the global economy, the market state emerged during the 1990s in the U.S. and Western Europe. Its role is not to provide welfare but to maximize the opportunity for people to advance themselves and to ensure the existence of the market structures that provide for wealth and social prosperity. Thus the state rather than “withering away” is transforming into something new. Indeed the view that governance sounded the ‘death knell’ for the nation state has been increasingly questioned. Loughlin (2004), for example, suggests that governance has always been a part of government “in the sense that there have always been interest groups from outside the official political system involved in the policy-making system” (Loughlin 2004: 13). Dale (2005) argues that we need to recognized that the state never did it all anyway and what becomes important is “what forms of governance … are in place where, and why, and what is the place and role of the state within them.” (Dale 2005: 129).

This leads us into the more nuanced versions of governance theory that have emerged in recent years, in which the state is seen as adjusting to a changing environment rather being ‘hollowed out’ i.e. the state is still very much part of governance. What we are witnessing, it is suggested, is a change in the methods of government steering rather than an abdication of control and the idea of governing without government is questioned (see, for example, Davies 2002). Kooiman (2003) has developed the concept of social-political governance where the focus is on the ‘totality of interactions’ between state, market and civil society actors participating in ‘solving societal problems or creating societal opportunities’ (Kooiman 2003: 4). Just because the state is apparently encouraging other actors to take responsibility for solving societal problems and developing policies this should not be taken as a sign that the state is reneging on its responsibility or loosing control (Kooiman 2003, Pierre & Peters 2000, Kohler-Koch 1996 and Pierre 2000). Dealing with multidimensional, dynamic problems or creating societal opportunities, is argued, requires more multifaceted responses which necessitate actors from the state, the market and civil society working in concert. Thus, according to this line of argument, what is happening should be interpreted as a deliberate strategy on the part of the state to cope with the increasingly complex nature of today’s
problems, showing its adaptability to a changing environment and its ability to find new ways of maintaining some degree of control rather than its disappearance from the scene altogether. Even if the state has been in flux in recent years, it has still retained many of its core features and is very much alive as an institution of governance (Kooiman 2003) i.e. government and governance are closely intertwined (Kohler-Koch 1996).

Some writers suggest that governance may even be leading to new forms of government and that regulation should not be rigidly coupled with state steering. Majone (1996) argues, for example, that privatisation and new public management, often seen as some of the most important driving forces behind governance, actually require more and not less regulation. This is supported by Jordan et al 2005 who find that “many of the new policy instruments used require some state involvement (that is, ‘government’), and very few are entirely devoid of state involvement (that is, pure ‘governance’)” (Jordan et al 2005: 477). Thus they argue that governance often complements rather than eclipses government and that there may even be cases of fusion where government and governance merge. The state, it is suggested, is being subtly transformed by newer hybrid forms of regulation or ‘soft governance’ such as self-monitoring (through, for example, benchmarking, peer review and the development of best practice) and societal self-organisation (Jacobsson, 2002). Indeed Bache (2003) goes as far as to suggest that governance can actually enhance the state’s power. Based on developments in English local government, he shows how central government introduced policies, such as public-private partnerships in the delivery of education, which both accelerated the process of governance and allowed the state to achieve its policy goals more effectively. The next section considers these ideas in relation to education.

On face value, the Nordic countries would appear to be a good example of the retreat of the state, particularly if we consider the period from the 1970s to around the end of the 1980s. A powerful rhetoric emerged concerning the unmanageability of the highly developed and extensive Nordic welfare states, and their inability to meet the new challenges presented by, for example, globalization (Micheletti 2000). The development of the knowledge economy, the growth of the new middle class and the spread of neo-liberalism created new, often more individualized demands coupled with a new post-industrial labour market (Ahonen 2002), emphasizing greater freedom of choice and individual rather than collective solutions. The Nordic countries also witnessed the growth of New Public Management with its focus on accountability, effectiveness, value for money, standards and quality assurance (even if there
were differences between countries with Sweden in the vanguard and Norway bringing up the rear).

Micheletti (2000) argues that the loss of the social democratic hegemonic hold on Nordic politics, the expansion of the EU and the growth of trans-boundary problems (making the countries more porous) have also weakened the position of the state and meant that the Nordic countries are no longer able to plan their futures in the way they could in the early post-war years. Thus she argues that “(b)ig government is being transformed into big governance” Micheletti (2000: 275) with an increasing involvement of non-governmental actors in securing the well-being of the Nordic societies and economies. Support for her view seems to be apparent in what Sørensen (1998) calls the third wave of decentralization in which there is an increasing cooperation between state/municipality and organizations within civil society such as firms and voluntary organizations.

The demise of the educative state?

However, is this the case even with the previously highly centrally regulated Nordic education systems? Is the state in these countries really stepping back in response to economic globalization and sub-national political assertiveness and allowing other institutions and actors to take a more prominent role? Are we witnessing an example of the “letting other regimes rule” governance scenario sketched out by Pierre & Peters (2000: 114ff) where the state steps back and other actors take over?

Increasingly in the Nordic countries, the responsibility for education has been transferred to local government, to schools and individuals (head teachers, teachers, pupils and parents) and/or the market (see, for example, Johannesson et al 2002, for Sweden, Finland and Iceland; Simola et al 2002 for Finland; Hudson & Lidström 2002, Lundahl 2002a, 2002b for Sweden, Mortimore 2004 for Norway; Sørensen 1998 for Denmark). In the last three decades, for example, Sweden has shifted from highly centralized and detailed national government control of school matters to having one of the most decentralized educational systems among the OECD countries (OECD 2002). The previously closely defined, state-run, regulatory systems with strict regulation of, for example, curriculum content, student/pupil numbers and resources started to be more loosely described in the regulations, framework legislation was introduced and there was a move towards a more decentralised, goal-oriented, result-driven education system (Johannesson et al 2002; Hudson & Lidström 2002). The actors involved in
education have also been broadened with the opening up of opportunities to establish
independent schools and the provision of greater scope for parental involvement in schooling.

However, is the state really relinquishing its control over education, particularly given the
importance being ascribed by governments in many countries to education in achieving
economic development? The rhetoric around the growth of the knowledge society has
accentuated the importance of education in economic growth and competition. Thus, for
example, we find arguments such as that, because society is gradually becoming more based
on the production, transfer and sharing of knowledge than on trade in goods, access to both
theoretical and practical knowledge is playing an increasingly important role; there is need for
a skilled workforce in order to be able to compete in the world economy; and that education in
important in achieving social cohesion and generating wealth (Hudson 2002). The benefits of
investing in education are also promoted, for example, “countries and continents that invest
heavily in education and skills benefit economically and socially from that choice”
(Schleicher 2006:2). Indeed, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has stated that

“Education is the best economic policy we have”¹ and he has gone so far as to argue that: “the
successful nations will see education as the key economic and social imperative for us all”.²

This is echoed in the Nordic countries. On the Finnish Ministry of Education’s home page, for
example, it states “Education is a factor for competitiveness” (The Finnish Ministry of
Education 2006)³ and in the in the comments in the Norwegian country report in the
Information Database on Education Systems in Europe (Eurydice) where a high standard of
education is seen as playing an important role in national development (Eurybase 2001/2:117)
and as an asset in international competition. Indeed the Danish Ministry of Education states
that “Provision of high quality education at all levels is essential to ensure competitiveness in
today's global society” (CIRUS 2006)⁴.

This raises, however, the thorny question of whether education systems can live up to these
expectations. As Robertson (2005) has shown, the global knowledge economy has become a
powerful discourse promoting the introduction of “markets and new providers along with
systems of accountability, efficiency and effectiveness intended to enable national states to

¹ Rt Hon Tony Blair MP, in the introduction to DfEE 1998b.
² The prime minister’s New Year message reported in The Guardian, 30 December 1999.
⁴ CIRIUS is a division within the Danish Ministry of Education working with the internationalisation of
education and training in Denmark.
deliver on their national and global competitiveness strategies.” (Robertson 2005: 153). The state has faced a quandary: standardized, mass produced education system have been seen as increasingly inappropriate for meeting the requirements of a more heterogeneous, rapidly changing society and for producing the type of ‘educational product’ required to enable it to compete in the globalized, knowledge economy. For example, Koritzinsky (2001) has pointed out in relation to Norway that, at the end of the 1980s, concerns were being expressed that “the country did not get enough competence out of the talents of the population. Without a change the population would be under-educated and the national standards would not meet the necessary international standards” Koritzinsky (2001:210).

Further, although change has been considered necessary, the transition from a strictly regulated education system to a more decentralized, deregulated, flexible and open system means that the state has faced the loss of (or a least a drastic reduction in) its ability for detailed steering through legal norms and the follow-up systems associated with these. It has been forced to recognize that it no longer has a monopoly on the ownership of education or the solutions to educational problems. Other actors have been allowed in to a greater extent than previously thus opening up for diversity and competition. Schools have become more independent and differentiated at the same time as it has become increasingly important for the state to ensure, given its own articulation of the importance of education for economic development, that the ‘end product’ enables it to improve or at least maintain its economic position internationally. This seems to have led to a shift in focus from the input to the output side of education. According to Simola et al (2002) a conviction has developed that the goals of education can only be realized “by setting national core goals, by evaluating achievements in the form of subsequent results and by directing educational institutions to compete with one another” (Simola et al 2002: 253)

The main direction of the changes taking place in the educational context in the Nordic countries is summarized in Figure 1 below. This is not to suggest that the developments in the right-hand column are replacing those in the left-hand, rather they are existing in parallel often in an uneasy state of tension.
Although the state appears to have been relaxing its formal regulation of education, a new and more subtle form of control has began to appear in relation to quality control, standard setting, monitoring of results and the increasing use of national and local evaluations (Söderberg et al 2004). As part of this process, it is also possible to discern the growth of another form of regulation - self-regulation whereby schools and other educational institutions (and even parents and pupils) are made responsible for controlling themselves. Thus for example, the Swedish National Agency for Education argues that the introduction of result-oriented education systems in which the state defines the objectives, and municipalities and schools choose how to achieve them “requires municipalities, pre-schools and schools to report on their results, examine themselves and compare themselves with others” (SIRIS 2006).

**Features of contemporary Nordic education policy**

**Continued central control**

Despite far-reaching decentralization, all central control was not relinquished in the Nordic countries. There are, indeed, some indications that the introduction of goal steering was also accompanied by some centralizing tendencies. Koritzinsky (2001) in the case of Norway and Ahonen (2001) in the case of Finland point out that a number of the reforms associated with the introduction of Management by Objectives had the effect of concentrating power. Indeed Koritzinsky (2001) suggests that the Norwegian Ministry of Education actually obtained a

more centralized political and administrative control over the education system as a result of the reforms. Thus he argues that during the 1990s, the Ministry of Education was able to consolidated its position by getting rid of some of its ‘competitors’ i.e. three of the most important semi-independent professional councils (for compulsory education, upper secondary school and teacher training) were disbanded in this period leaving, the Ministry ‘to rule the roost’. Similarly Ahonen (2001) argues that the reforms in Finland in the early 1990s meant that power was not only transferred down to local self-government, it was also transferred up to the state departments. These were given “planning and evaluation tasks that traditionally had been done by ad hoc nominated, politically representative committees” Ahonen (2001: 182). In other words, the state bureaucracy could still exercise a steering function over education and possibly even strengthen it through its responsibility for evaluation.

Curriculum control and school/teacher autonomy

All the Nordic countries have national curricula over which central government retains control. These are largely framework documents that specify the broad aims and guidelines for education and leave room for interpretation and adaptation to local circumstances by local authorities, schools and teachers (see Eurydice 2006a for Denmark; Eurydice 2006b for Finland; Eurydice 2005b for Iceland; Eurydice 2006c for Norway, Eurydice 2006d for Sweden). However, the introduction of such documents cannot unambiguously be interpreted as the retreat of the state. As (Koritzinsky 2001) points out when the Norwegian national curriculum was introduced for upper secondary in 1994 and for compulsory education in 1997, it was the first time that a curriculum had been given the formal status of a legal directive in Norway. Further, there are signs that the Nordic curricula are becoming more regulatory, for example, the 2004 Finnish national core curriculum contains more specific guidelines and a more detailed contextual framework compared with the 1994 curriculum (Eurydice 2006b). However, within this framework, schools and local authorities still form their own curricular regulations that are sensitive to the local context.

Central government can also provide various forms of ‘guidance’ that can, in effect, regulate how local authorities, schools and teachers interpret the curriculum. These are perhaps strongest in Iceland and Sweden. Iceland, for example, publishes National Curriculum Guidelines (NCG) which contain recommendations for assessment, progression and examinations (Eurydice 2005b). The NCG have the legal status of a ministry regulation and
interpret the articles of the compulsory School Act. They set the limits for the school with regard to its organization, implementation and evaluation of education, as well as stipulating the proportion of total teaching time that has to be devoted to each individual subject for each year (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture 2002). In Sweden, the curriculum forms the basis for the municipalities’ school plan setting out the general objectives for school activities. Further, in both Iceland and Sweden schools are required to write a work plan based on the curriculum but are allowed to take into account their own particular circumstances and special characteristics (Eurydice 2003; Eurydice 2006d).

There are also differences in teachers’ autonomy. In an international comparison, Finnish teachers are regarded as having a very strong position and ability to influence decisions concerning the running of the school (Nummenmaa & Välijärvi 2006). There are also differences, for example, between Sweden and Norway, Swedish teachers have greater individual autonomy, whereas Norwegian teachers are more able to influence national policy-making (see Helgøy & Homme forthcoming). In all the countries discussed here, teachers are supposedly free to decide on appropriate teaching methods (although in Denmark, teachers must meet the needs of all individuals in mixed ability groups, through the concept of differentiated teaching) and materials (with the exception of Iceland, where the Icelandic National Centre for Educational Materials publishes and distributes teaching and learning materials). A recent development in Swedish education which is again ambiguous with regard to central regulation is the pilot project with local timetables started in Sweden in 2000. A number of schools were allowed to design their own timetables in order to create a more flexible organisation and to meet the needs of every pupil. At first glance this would seem to reduce central steering. However, the proposal that the timetable in the compulsory school should be abolished has been motivated with the argument that this will reinforce the focus on goals and outcomes in schools (Hudson & Rönnberg 2007).

The growth of the evaluation culture
In the period since the end of the 1980s, we have witness the growth an invasive culture of educational evaluation in which local government, schools, teachers and pupils are both subjected to external evaluation and self-evaluation. This systematic evaluation encompasses both direct regulation and softer, more subtle forms of guidance through, for example, information dissemination on ‘best practice’ and ‘tool-kits’. There are, however, variations in how directly evaluations are used as a control function. Sweden still has, however, unlike the
other Nordic countries, an inspectorate and part of its role is to establish, through educational inspections, whether and how well an educational activity is functioning in relation to the regulations set out in the Swedish Education Act and school curricula (Skolverket 2005). This can be contrasted with the more subtle, indirect control found in the Finnish system where local government carries out evaluations and informs national government of the findings if it chooses. However, regardless of the way in which it is carried out, evaluation has become a means for the state to obtain information on the extent to which educational goals are being met. Linked to the drive for improved quality in education is the requirement for even better evaluation. Simola et al (2002) argue that in the new educational governance discourse “evaluation is seen as an essential tool of quality development” (Simola et al 2002: 253) Indeed, the information network on education in Europe, Eurydice, suggests that “The idea that improving quality entails an evaluation of education systems is now taken for granted.” (Eurydice 2004:2)

In the case of the Nordic countries, Denmark has had a leading role with respect to evaluation and quality control since the end of the 1980s. Evaluation was integrated in the Education (Folkeskole) Act in 1993. The state’s controlling function is apparent here in that setting targets for education, monitoring developments, intervening to improve the quality of education and continuously assessing how the quality level can be improved are all a central responsibility. However, despite nearly 20 years of evaluations, national government is still dissatisfied the evaluation work in schools. The Danish Minister for Education, Bertel Haarder, spoke in 2005 of the need to develop a better culture of evaluation in Danish schools. The more pluralistic school system in Denmark, which can complicate the state’s regulatory ability, may be one of the reasons why national government is emphasising the importance of schools’ self-regulation.

In Sweden, the focus on evaluating results is clear in the annual School Quality Reports (Eurybase 2005/6), where schools have to describe how well they are doing in relation to the national objectives i.e. there is an internal audit and assessment of the school’s performance (Skolverket 2005). These reports are publicly available to anyone who wants information about a specific municipality or school. A central regulating function can be discerned in this

---

7 introduced in 1997
quality assurance process. “The Government’s Quality programme aims at strengthening the systematic quality work throughout the educational system and standardized measures for assessing results to be used in quality reporting are developed by the Swedish National Agency for Education” (Eurydice 2006d: 6). Similarly in Norway the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research produced a White Paper in 2004 entitled ‘Culture for Learning’ which developed the idea of ‘the Quality Framework’ which is intended to clarify the school’s responsibilities (Eurydice 2006c). The overarching goal for the Norwegian national system of quality assessment is to contribute to quality development at all levels of compulsory education with focus on the individual pupil’s learning. Even here a central steering role can be identified in terms of regulating educational outcomes and the White Paper, sets out in detail what is expected of each pupil in terms of language, reading, writing, arithmetic and information and communication technology skills.

Finland also has a well-developed evaluation system (with evaluation statutory in all sectors of education since 1999) and has become “the ‘Evaluative State’ attempting to practice education policy through governing by results” (Simola et al 2002: 253). Once again these evaluations have a regulating function in that they are used as means for collecting data on which education policy decisions can be made and as a basis for information- and performance-based steering. The findings are used in the development of the education system and the core curricula and in practical teaching. Together with international comparative data they are also used as a tool for monitoring the realisation of equality and equity in education (Eurybase 2004/5b, Eurydice 2004, Eurydice 2006c).

The growth in the emphasis on evaluation has also been reflected in changes in the educational structures with the Nordic counties reforming their central administrative organization to strengthen their supervisory function through evaluation. Sweden is probably the Nordic country that has the strongest direct regulation. The Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE) was reformed in 2003 and divided into two agencies. The reformed NAE was given a supervisory role with responsibility for educational inspection and for ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Education Act (Eurybase 2005/6). It is playing an increasingly important part in the monitoring and evaluation of schools “using criteria that include a large proportion of their activities, including pupil performance” (Eurydice 2004: 62). From 2004 onwards, schools have been obliged to use the external evaluation criteria drawn up by the NAE (Eurydice 2004: 80). In addition, it now has a duty to collect
educational statistics that can be used as comparative indicators for schools. The new Swedish National Agency for School Improvement became responsible for support, school improvement and development activities. Again a ‘soft’ control function can be identified as its task is to support “local efforts towards the fulfilment of national goals for education and training” (Swedish National Agency for School Improvement 2006). This division into two agencies and the rebuilding of a strong and effective inspection section with regional offices within the National Agency for Education can be seen as reassertion, at least to some extent, of the state’s regulatory role.

The other Nordic countries have also established organizations responsible for evaluation. However, even if the direct control function is less blatant, these institutions nevertheless exercise a central control function. The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), set up in 1999 (Eurybase 2004/5a) as an independent institution under the Ministry of Education, is responsible for the systematic and mandatory evaluation of teaching and learning at all levels of the educational system from pre-school to post-graduate programmes. “Quality assurance of Danish education is the main focal point of EVA, and the primary task is to initiate and conduct evaluations in the educational sector” (CIRIUS 2006). Similarly, in Finland, a separate Council for Educational Evaluation was established under the Ministry of Education in 2003 (Eurybase 2004/5b). Its function is to organise external evaluations of “the operations and activities of education providers and educational policy, and arrange the publication of such evaluations” (Lyytinen & Hämäläinen 2005:2). Even Iceland has established an evaluation and supervision division in the Ministry of Education (Eurybase 2004/5c). Increased decentralization and schools’ greater responsibility for evaluating their own activities are seen as requiring the Ministry to monitor activities more closely than before (Ministry of Education Science & Culture 2005). In Norway, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training set up in 2004, has the overall responsibility for supervising education, implementing legislation and regulations and developing, organising and implementing the national system for quality assessment (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training). The Directorate’s control function is also discernable in that it is responsible for monitoring the County Governors (the extended arm of the state) who are charged with supervising the schools and safeguarding the rights of pupils in order “to ensure

---

equity in education in all parts of the country” (ibid). Further, it is responsible for all national statistics concerning primary and secondary education, making these public and for using them to continuously assess the status of Norwegian education.

Thus it could be argued that the changes that have taken place in the central organizations in all the Nordic countries to improve their capacity for evaluation during the end of 1990s/2000s have been working to reinforce the state’s regulatory function in education. Indeed Baldersheim & Stålberg (2002) suggest that although a common feature among the Nordic countries has been the reduction of rule-oriented control and a shift to softer types of control, government is still very much present. “The features of a guided democracy are being softened but are still evident ...” (Baldersheim & Stålberg 2002:88).

Standards, Assessment and Accountability.
Interestingly, the decentralization trend has frequently gone “hand in hand with a definition of standards - themselves far more centralised - to ensure that educational provision is both fair for all and fully consistent” (Eurydice 2004:2). The demand for stronger accountability and standard setting was stepped up in the beginning of the 2000s. The highly prominent accountability trend, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries (embodied for example in President Bush’s initiative the No Child Left Behind Act 2002 and the UK’s 2003 green paper Every Child Matters), also swept in over the Nordic countries. As Telhaug et al (2004) point out; governments in the Nordic counties have raised concerns over academic standards in primary and secondary education. “(T)hey have implemented instruments to check that the teaching of these basic skills is up to standard. All over Scandinavia, more attention is given to national teaching assessment exercises” (Telhaug et al 2004: 156)

Sweden is in the vanguard with regard to standardized testing among the Nordic countries. Although national tests are not new in Sweden10, what is new is the increased availability of information concerning the results of these tests and the greater opportunities for making comparisons between schools and municipalities. The Swedish National Agency for Education has developed an online information system containing information on results and quality, SIRIS (Skolverkets Internetbaserade Resultat- och kvalitets Informations System), which has been in operation since 2001. The focus on the need for improved accountability in

10 They are obligatory in Year 9 and optional in Year 5 and concern English, Maths, Swedish and Swedish as a second language.
education figures clearly in SIRIS’s aims. These include making it easier for schools and municipalities to identify where they can make improvements by examining their own performance and comparing themselves with others; as well as providing the public with a better understanding of how schools perform. Thus the Swedish National Agency for Education states:

“To reach a goal, you have to know where you stand and what needs improving. The National Agency for Education created SIRIS to make its own information about education and child care more accessible. The key social function of schools means that citizens have a democratic right to have access to this information. Child care and education affect almost everyone. In the Agency's view, public access must therefore be as extensive as possible. This applies particularly in view of the existing variations in quality between different schools”11 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2006)

The national tests are intended amongst other things to contribute to pupils’ attainment of the educational goals, to clarify these goals and reveal pupils’ strengths and weaknesses, to make course goals and examination criteria more tangible, ensure fairness in grading and form a basis for analyzing the extent to which the knowledge goals have been achieved at the level of the school, the municipality and nationally (The Swedish National Agency for Education 200612). Whilst ‘league tables’ of schools are not produced in Sweden, Bjöklund et al (2004) point out that the growth in competition between schools as a consequence of the introduction of greater parental choice has meant that Swedish schools increasingly use the results of national tests for marketing purposes i.e. to ‘sell’ themselves to parents. The use of tests for monitoring and accountability (and hence control) has been seen, in Sweden, as introducing a different and conflicting purpose into the system, one that compounds questions about validity, reliability and equity in assessment. In the past, testing tended to play a comparatively minor role in the education system, mainly serving to support fairness and consistency in teachers’ marking (Söderberg et al 2004). However, given greater parental choice, the growth of competition between schools, and a possible increase of public distrust in teachers, they suggest that there is a risk that assessments designed for summing up student achievement may be become a means for checking up on schools and teachers.

National tests are of more recent origin in the other Nordic counties. They were introduced in Norway in 2004 and are carried out in the beginning of Years 5 and 813 and the aim is to better adapt teaching to each pupil's needs. Again as, in Sweden, there is an emphasis on

13 Testing covers four subjects: reading, writing, English and mathematics.
making the results public (and thus open to comparison) and they are published on a special website – ‘Skoleporten’ (www.skoleporten.no) which contains various data concerning primary and secondary schools. According to the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, the website is intended to be a resource for schools and municipalities in relation to the systematic evaluation and development of education and contribute to quality assessment and development within schools. It is targeted mainly at head teachers, school administrators and politicians, but is also open to parents, pupils and the public in general (Skoleporten 2006).14 In Iceland, compulsory nationally co-ordinated examinations are held in Icelandic and mathematics in Years 4 and 7. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture produces survey examinations and standardised proficiency examinations for the schools, in order to measure the academic standing of pupils (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture 2002).

Denmark is in the process of introducing compulsory national tests in primary and lower secondary education15 in order to “to enhance the evaluation culture in the folkeskole”. (Eurydice 2006a: 5). Again, as in Norway and Sweden, there is a strong emphasis on making information readily available to parents and pupils and, by providing improved access to comparable information on education and schools, enabling individuals to make informed choices. The provision of systematic information to schools is intended to enable them to compare themselves with other schools, learn from the experience of others, and in this way promote the spread of good practice (Eurybase 2004/5a). All schools are required to have a web site containing detailed information about their educational provision, publish grade averages for individual subjects and levels as well as all other information deemed relevant for an assessing of the quality of the teaching provided.

Finland has dragged its feet when it comes to introducing standardized testing and evaluation. Tests are used for diagnosis and improvement (and never for ‘naming and shaming’) and there has been considerable discussion about whether results should be made public. It has, however, created a national test bank so it is possible to check skill levels and knowledge in school subjects. “Obligatory national testing has, however, never been applied in the Finnish comprehensive” (Rinne et al 2002: 650). Indeed, according to Aho et al (2006) Finland has not followed the Anglo-Saxon accountability trend, but has instead developed the idea of

---

15 During the nine years of compulsory schooling, ten compulsory national tests will be conducted in Danish, English, mathematics and the natural sciences.
flexible accountability in which the focus is on deep learning and not on testing. They argue that a culture of trust has developed in the Finish education system which means that “the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education, believes that teachers together with principals, parents, and their communities know how to provide the best possible education for their children and youth” (Aho et al 2006: 138). As Rinne et al 2002 point out the new means of control and assessment are not as burdensome or as strict as in many other countries.

However, despite the lack of league tables in the Nordic countries it is, nevertheless, possible to compare schools’ performances. This possibility enables not only the state to regulate the ‘output’ of schools; it also allows parents and the public in general to exercise a controlling function on its behalf.

Self-evaluation

It has been suggested that a more stringent economic situation, the introduction of New Public Management with demands for effectiveness and efficiency, in conjunction with greater freedom of choice and increased opportunities for choice for both pupils and parents, created an entirely new situation for evaluation in which it made sense to move evaluation down to the schools themselves (see Bjöklund et al 2004). This decentralization of evaluation can, however, also be related to Foucault’s ideas on self-disciplining. Using Bentham’s idea of the Panopticon\textsuperscript{16} he shows how disciplinary power is able to function. The Panopticon relies on surveillance to function and does not require the use of direct force (or in our case direct regulation). Instead the subject of surveillance disciplines him or herself (Foucault 1977). Relating this to what has been happening in education, the introduction of self-evaluation by schools can be seen as a smart move on the part of the state as it effectively gets schools to regulate themselves in the way it, the state, wants. It can do this either more directly by providing guidelines or a ‘model’ for evaluation or more indirectly by providing training courses, consultation services and/or materials and information services.

In Iceland, for example, schools are required, by law, to carry out self-evaluations and the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has responsibility for investigating the

\textsuperscript{16} This was a type of prison building designed to allow a watchman to observe all prisoners without the prisoners being able to tell if they are being observed or not. Bentham argued that as the watchmen cannot be seen, they need not be on duty at all times, effectively leaving the watching to the watched i.e. they regulate themselves.
self-evaluation methods used by the schools (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture 2005). To this end, it has published a booklet on internal evaluation Sjálfsmat skóla (Schools’ Self-Evaluation). This states criteria for self-evaluation, suggestions for how the self-evaluation should be carried out and contains a checklist and guidelines for the form of the self-evaluation report (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture 2004). In Norway there is a mandatory requirement for all schools to evaluate, on a regular basis, how far the organization and implementation of work at the school are in line with the objectives of the curriculum. Again the guiding hand of the state is felt in that the aim is to evaluate the extent to which the teaching and learning at a school correspond to the aims and principles of the curriculum (Eurydice 2006c). In Finland, schools and other education providers have a statutory duty to evaluate their own activities (Finish Ministry of Education 2006).

In Denmark, the requirement for systematic self-evaluation and follow-up is a central principle in the Danish approach to quality (Eurybase 2004/5a). However, as in Iceland, a model for the school’s own self-evaluation has been developed by the Danish Evaluation Institute. The model is set out in its publication ‘A Key to Change: School Improvement through Self-evaluation' (The Danish Evaluation Institute 2002) which is intended to guide the school through the evaluation process and make clear the types of issues that need to be tackled in the self-evaluation (Leth Nielsen & Munch Thorsen 2003). There is a similar situation in Sweden where schools are responsible for following up and evaluating their activities. They are required to have a work plan covering their activities and to prepare a yearly report on how these plans are implemented as well as produce an annual quality report (Eurybase 2005/6). Teachers, other staff and pupils, and even parents, participate in drawing up the quality reports. Again the central regulating function can be discerned as the report is supposed to assess the extent to which education achieves the goals set up by the state and make proposals for necessary changes if the goals are not being met. The schools are encouraged to use the national tests as a guide and the self-evaluations are to contain common and comparable measures of, for example, the national test results (Bjöklund et al 2004).

Further, the Swedish National Agency for Education also publishes general advice and comments on how quality standards and improvements should be presented in written form. When the National Agency for Education was given a more focused evaluative task, the

---

17 These are also published in the general section of the National Curriculum Guide for primary/secondary schools.


19 See, for example, Allmänna råd och kommentarer för kvalitetsredovisning
then Minister for Education, Thomas Östros wrote: “Every school should carry out annual self-evaluations of their own results and compare them with the basic national goals…. All schools’ evaluations should contain common and comparable measures of the results and their quality”. (Dagens Nyheter, March 3, 2003). Björklund et al 2004 suggest that, if this goal is to be achieved, it implies that national tests and other quantitative tests will be used more frequently than before. This gives the state potential for more closely regulating the outcomes of education.

Pupils are also being included in the process of self-regulation. For example, as part of the national quality assessment system, Norway has introduced a pupil inspectors scheme in order to collect and analyze the pupils’ opinion of their education and other factors concerning their school environment. This is done through means of an electronic questionnaire aimed at pupils in lower and upper secondary school. The pupils’ own experience and views on teaching and learning are seen as essential elements of the schools’ self-evaluation. The results are made available on Skoleporten.no – the Norwegian website for quality in school (The Norwegian Ministry of Education & Research 2006). The Danish Evaluation Institute is experimenting with the concept of pupils’ cafés to “find a self-evaluation method that takes into account the way children and young people think and express their thoughts” and to “learn more about questions to which there are no final answers, like ‘what is a good school?, ‘how can the teaching get better?’” (The Danish Evaluation Institute 2002: 21). The pupils’ café is aimed at developing a form of dialogue that can be used in primary schools’ self-evaluation. Whilst it is positive that pupils are able to participate in discussing the quality of their education, it is a somewhat worrying tendency if this leads to them being used as part of the state’s regulatory function.

**Conclusions**

At first glance, it might seem that national government in the Nordic countries has been relaxing its strict control on education, blurring the boundaries between public and private and opening up for pluralism and choice and letting "flowers of many kinds blossom". However, if we look more closely at what has been happening, it becomes apparent that the state is still active within the governance of education. It is the expression of its presence that has changed and rather than reneging on its responsibility for education, the state has been...

---


21 Speech Delivered by Lu Ting-yi, Director of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, on the Party’s Policy on Art, Literature, and Science, May 26, 1956
finding new ways of regulating it. Contrary to what has sometimes been suggested, the state in the Nordic countries is not being hollowed out; rather, the methods of steering are changing. This is very much in line with the more nuanced versions of governance theory that have emerged in recent years. The powerful discourse around the importance of education for a country’s well-being and competitiveness in the global market has presented the state with a quandary – education is too important for the state to relax its hold completely yet, at the same time, its means of regulation must not constrain the potential for finding new ways of meeting or adapting to increasingly diverse and changeable societies and problems. One way of doing this appears to be to shift the focus of control to the output side of education and, at the same time, introducing more subtle ‘soft’ forms of control. Linked to this is the increased use of evaluation and quality control. In particular, the development of internal or self-evaluation methods whereby the schools regulate themselves seems to be particularly effective method on the part of the state. It has even opened up possibilities for parents and the pupils themselves to participate in regulating education. Thus in the area of education in the Nordic countries, the state is clearly maintaining the presence of government in governance.

References
CIRIUS (2006) *The Danish Education System* CIRIUS, Denmark: Copenhagen, net based publication [http://eng.uvm.dk/](http://eng.uvm.dk/)


Eurydice (2005a) *Key Data on Education in Europe 2005* European Commission, Eurydice, Eurostat Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities,


Eurydice (2006d) National summary sheets on education systems in Europe and ongoing reforms: Sweden; Directorate-General for Education and Culture, European Commission, August 2006


Skolverket (2005) *Inspecting for improvement* - a brochure about the National Agency for Education’s Educational Inspectorate, Skolverket, Stockholm: Sweden


Sørensen, Eva (1998) “New forms of democratic empowerment: Introducing user influence in the primary school system in Denmark” *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* Vol. 101, N0. 2, pp129-143