Parental Involvement All the Way Through Local School Boards.

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This article comments on the development of school boards in Sweden. These boards are elected with parents in majority in compulsory schools. Data were gathered through interviews, observations and analysis of documents (e.g., school board minutes). The results indicate that different interests are not adequately balanced on the boards. Communication between the board and parents not on the board was unsatisfactory in many cases and such parents felt excluded from the board's activity. The principal's collaboration with the board's chairperson was an important influence on the board. Evaluation, support and feedback from the local school authority were often neglected. These developments are linked to the transfer of welfare policy in Sweden and to the resultant market-oriented political governance. Partnership became the new prestige word. Parents are today seen as individual consumers in a market, yet if they become board members, they are expected to make decisions for all parents. Parental influence is increased in the schools, but the net effect may increase differences between pupils and between parents since the parents are never a homogenous group. The state implementation of local school boards in Sweden and in many countries is, therefore, complex and is reflected in the weak interest shown towards the top-down creation of boards.

Keywords: local school board, governance, frame factor theory, case study, parents, partnership

The Swedish school

The previous Swedish school system was strongly centralized at the state level, and during the 1980s an extensive process of decentralization took place, which ended in shifts for control between central and local governments for the school (Petersson, 1998; Andersson & Nilsson, 2000). Since 1991, however, municipalities have full responsibility for their teachers, administrators and staff and for choosing their own pathways to reach national goals.

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Parents' influence in schools was the subject of parallel national discussion during the 1980s. More recently, the Government has endeavoured to increase parental influence in schools.

This resulted in the Government passing a resolution establishing a pilot scheme involving "*Local school boards with an elected parent majority in compulsory school and compulsory special schools*". The trial period started 15 July, 1996, and ran until 30 June, 2001. This has been extended four times: in 2003, in 2007, 2008 and latest in 2009.

This has been a *top down* innovation in school management (Sannerstedt, 2002). Interest in parental involvement has not come from the schools, nor from the parents.

The fact that the trial period has been prolonged suggests that it has been difficult for the politicians to come to a firm decision.

One reason for implementing boards in Swedish public schools has been to mirror the practice in independent schools, where parents are usually represented. There has also been some political interest in strengthening public school. This interest, however, has not extended to the municipalities who, as a result, have not favoured such increased parental involvement. The proposal from the Ministry of Education stipulated that the boards should be permanent, although optional (Ds. 2003:46). This proposal also required the establishment of an obligatory council in each school. The aim was to give the parents collective influence in discussing school activity. The principal is responsible for establishing councils and each municipality and each school decides how these councils should work. The point is that elected board members make decisions on the local school board whereas school principals are empowered to take the final decision in matters discussed by a school council.

Aim of the study

My interest is mainly governance, management, communication and partnership. The purpose of this paper is to describe the boards comprehensively and discuss aspects of education policy that lay behind the implementation of the boards. The purpose is also to see whose interests predominate when parents are in a majority on a school board. The phenomenon of partnership is discussed and also how the different elements of schooling (parents, pupils, teachers, and principals) come into the purview of the boards. Such changes in governance, management, communication and partnership in educational policy are also evident internationally. (see, for example, Alexander, Osborn, & Phillips, 2000).

Theory

The research is built on frame factor theory (Lundgren, 1972; 1999), which aids the exploration of relations between factors which affect local school boards. Frame factor theory is used to achieve a critical analysis of the various parts of local school boards.

What does it mean when responsibilities and rights move from the municipality level to the local school board? What kinds of influences have national, economic, social, cultural and political issues on the boards? These factors are frame factors. There was also an interest to look at local school boards in the light of school management and governance. Which is the intention of the state in governing the schools and how are these intentions mediated by principals?

The reason why communication has been chosen as one of the central concepts has to do with the wish to see whether local boards had any influence on the different actors' interests and involvement. A deeper look into communication also makes it possible to reflect upon the ideological meaning and practical significance of the new partnership. Interestingly, this made it possible to reflect upon relative influence of parents and other citizens on the work of boards and the schools.

Method

The outlook of this study has a hermeneutics stance (Ödman, 1979), which means endeavouring to understand different aspects of the boards in their context. Data are drawn from nine local school boards in Sweden (Kristoffersson, 2002) and two Danish school boards (Kristoffersson, 2007). Data are drawn from interviews, observations, minutes, analyses of documents, participation in board meetings, and school visits (Kvale, 1997; Starrin, & Svensson, 1994). The collected data were used to understand the process in each school board and to capture an overall picture of school board phenomena.

Results and discussion

Swedish cases

The implementation of a board with parental involvement was designed to have a positive effect on local democracy, but Swedish studies (Jarl, 2004; Kristoffersson, 2002, 2005, 2007) have revealed many problems in relation to the boards. One problem relates to communication between the parents on the boards and parents who are not members of the boards. Another problem is that the schools have "contact parents" in each group of pupils but the contact parent's role lacks clarity.

Likewise, pupils on the board have difficulties in taking part in the work of the boards. And finally, communication between the board, the

school and the parents outside the board is complex.

Almost inevitably, principals have a pivotal role. Similarly, the relation between the boards' chairperson and the principal is also important for the form and quality of the boards' resultant activities and for the overall collaboration between the different actors on the board.

It is also evident that follow-up studies and evaluations of the boards have been neglected. Insofar as the school has the role to be a democratic institution that advances equality in Swedish society (Lpo 94), the existence of boards in compulsory schools means that new and possibly greater demands will be placed on the politicians who are responsible for them at both local and national levels.

Another general issue is that different constituencies on board are not, in many cases, satisfactorily balanced. While neoliberal tendencies regard parents as the most important constituency on a board it is difficult to reconcile the interests of individual parents and the collective interest of parents. Individual parents are assumed to act as consumers of services offered in a market. They are not expected to act on behalf of other parents. Accordingly, there is an intrinsic complexity which allows individual interests to predominate.

While parents as board members can influence decisions, their responsibilities, and the rights of the board are not clearly specified. Parent representatives feel uncertain in their decision-making. Although partnership is the intended image, competition may rule. Equality in schools is still politically desired but, in reality, competition and individualistic solutions have spread in the schools.

Equally, teachers are uncertain of their roles, perhaps seeing a changed role as a threat to their professional status. In Swedish school boards, principals are constrained to assume two roles simultaneously: bureaucratic-executive and decision-maker. This can lead to a conflict of loyalties. Should they be faithful to the policies of the state, of the municipality, or of the local board? There is a need for role clarification. Similarly, the constitutional basis for school boards in a democracy deserves further attention. Parents are given power and responsibility without knowing why, and without having the total responsibility for the school budget.

Danish cases

Two Danish school boards were included in the investigation. Denmark introduced a legislation in 1990 that created local boards for compulsory schools which were designed to have a majority of parent representatives. The results of the Danish study indicate that parents are not strongly interested in this voluntarily work. School boards in Denmark, therefore, have not strengthened or increased parental influence. As a result, parental involvement in Danish schools is paradoxical. Parents have reduced their interest in school boards at a time when the central state has tried to strengthen the parental voice.

Results in relation to international research

International research about local boards with parents in the majority also illuminates the Swedish experience. International researchers (e.g. Sörensen, 1998; Howell, 2005 and Farrel, 2005) seem to agree that the recent implementation of boards has been related to a transfer from welfare politics to more market oriented policies. In many countries, for instance, neo liberal policies have stressed individualism and partnership (see, for instance, Ball, 2003; Franklin, Bloch & Popkewitz, 2004; Ball, Goodson, & Maguire, 2007). Overall governance, however, is unclear resulting in uncertainty among the actors on the board (Ball, 2003; Berg, 2003). Some researchers are dubious about the boards, believing that it is incorrect to let a school be governed by lay parents. But there are also researchers who feel that boards can serve as a forum for discussion, information and consulting. But are either of these cases partnership?

At the same time, there has been official apprehension about the role of parents in school improvement. Indeed there is evidence that implementing school boards can lead to increased conflicts among pupils and among parents. Parents are not a homogenous group. Their activities are influenced by their social, cultural and economic circumstances (David, 2003; Ravn, 2005). From this point of view, the democratic role of schooling is undermined by the inclusion and exclusion of parents and pupils. Legislation in favour of boards may create two types of schools: those with boards and those who have opted to manage without boards.

The state implementation of local school boards in Sweden and in many other countries is problematic. This can be seen in terms of the generally weak interest in boards, in the top-

down, rather than bottom-up, character of this state initiative. In the present study, for instance, many parents indicated that they had no spare time to serve on boards and that, in turn, they had insufficient influence on the working of the boards. In association with international research this article contributes to widen the perspective on local boards in schools. Finally this study can be seen as another example of where school practices have an international dimension. They arise as much from global as from local factors.

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