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## POWER IN SCHOOLS

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Many things would change if schools didn't exist. This is probably the main reason why they aren't discontinued, why they continue to function as they have always done, and why we keep getting more of the same. But there are many other reasons for why the school endures. A school is like an organism that continues to grow all on its own and will keep doing so until some of the elements of its internal constitution are transformed. In this chapter, I will discuss the conditions required to bring about this internal transformation.

### **"A PART OF LIFE"**

Many people feel that schools have multiple purposes. Some individuals have taken note of this and at least made an effort to adapt the school to these myriad purposes. The Norwegian Parliament has also felt and observed this, and attempted its own adaptive measures. As I will illustrate below, however, the latter efforts are bound to fail. But let us first take a look at the aspirations of the Norwegian Parliament, as found

in the preamble of the revised Act concerning Primary and Lower Secondary Education (June 13, 1969, no. 24):

The primary and lower secondary school shall, in agreement and cooperation with the families, contribute to providing all students with a Christian and moral upbringing, foster the development of their abilities, both those of mind and body, and provide them with a solid general education, so as to enable them to become useful and independent human beings at home and in society.

The school shall promote freedom of spirit and tolerance, and endeavor to facilitate constructive modes of cooperation between teachers and students, and between schools and families.

There has been no small amount of struggle over each and every word in these paragraphs. Politicians and educators, administrators and parents, have all spent time in the trenches. But considerable doubt remains concerning the meaning of the term “useful human beings,” and even greater doubt as to how they are to be created. Some things are clear, though. The students are to receive a Christian upbringing, a good, general education, and develop their abilities. Beyond this, mention is made of something that was not included in the previous version of the act and therefore is of special importance: the students must now become “useful and *independent*.” The act of 1959 did not go any further than “useful.” And now they must become so both at home *and* in society. Previously, emphasis was placed only on society. Finally, and most important, the entire final paragraph of the preamble is new. It was not proposed by the committee writing the new act. Nor did it come from the ministry. Yet the Norwegian Parliament deemed it essential to include freedom of spirit, tolerance, and constructive

modes of cooperation. The Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs argued that

it is just as important for the individual to realize his or her skills and interests as it is to foster good attitudes in the students. To this end, the school environment plays a pivotal role. We must therefore, to a much greater extent, begin to view our schools as social communities. Schools can and must do more than prepare and qualify students for the life ahead of them. Schools are in their own right an essential part of life. Education has become—and will be even more so—an increasingly integral part of what it means to be a human being. Schools must therefore have an intrinsic value. Children and young people should be able to find joy in their existence while attending school. It will hence become a key responsibility for schools to promote well-being and happiness. (Recommendation to the Odelsting XIV, 1968–1969, 9)

If storage was indeed inevitable, it could hardly take place under better conditions than those outlined by the Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs.

When things didn't turn out as intended—and will not despite the new amendments—it is first and foremost because the Norwegian Parliament left the schools in the hands of the educationists. That sounds like a vile thing to say—and this is exactly how it is intended. I am, naturally, not referring to those who populate our schools. When I say “educationists,” I am referring to the experts and public servants. This “vile” sentiment was expressed perhaps most plainly in a speech given by Tønnes Andenæs, rephrasing an old saying before the Norwegian Parliament: the field of medicine is too important to be left in the hands of doctors.<sup>1</sup> Something similar could be said about our universities. They are too important for the development of our society to be left to

their own devices, in the same way as industrial matters are too important for significant parts of our society to be left in the hands of the people running those industries. And yet we do this all the time, producing nothing but unequal growth and hidden expenditures. But I digress. The subject at hand is the schools.

The underlying cause of many of the current challenges—some of which I will discuss below—stems from contradictions embedded in the Norwegian Parliament's ambitions. Not only do they aspire to create a healthy living space, but *also* an efficient space for learning the traditional skills for which schools were initially designed. And so they entrust both the nurturing of life and efficient teaching to staff who, until now, have only specialized in the latter. In the following, much of my critique will be directed toward the existing forms of education and current state of its personnel. But we are equally at fault. Without providing any clear instructions, we have asked specialists to do one thing, while in addition to this and sometimes even in opposition to it, have expected them to do something else entirely.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATIONISTS

The new amendment to the Act concerning Primary and Lower Secondary Education is, above all, a *framework*. It specifies a few learning objectives and some basic guidelines. But decisions about its contents were left to others. At some point, two general options existed in terms of who these “others” could be: either low-level politicians, such as municipal politicians, or even parental representatives, on the one hand, or public servants, on the other, ranging from the secretary of

education down to the youngest teacher in the classroom. Responsibility fell on the latter. Yet this was not the original intention. We will explore this matter in further detail below. For now, it is sufficient to establish who is given responsibility for the contents of the framework. The ministry is mentioned seventy-four times in the Act concerning Primary and Lower Secondary Education. We will look closely at two of these cases.

## A NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The most recent Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act (Section 7) states that

the Ministry will determine, after having heard expert opinions on its contents, the Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education, which will serve to specify the objectives that have been set for schools, including lesson plans, schedules, and subject-specific blueprints for all standard, supplementary, and special classes.

The lesson plans in the Curriculum Guidelines are to be compulsory for all schools, with the exception of schools offering additional instruction beyond the minimum number of school hours as determined by Parliament in Section 6. For the lower grades, however, up to six hours of the minimum requirement can be devoted to specific subject areas pending approval by the board of education.

The committee of experts was appointed in 1967 under the self-chosen name of the National Curriculum Committee (*Normalplanutvalget*). It consisted exclusively of educationists. At one large-scale committee meeting, only one out of fifty-one participants did not hold a position at a school or university. This person was the secretary. The committee

chair, Dokka, was a former teacher and associate professor in educational science at the time. Their activities resulted in two reports: “Preliminary Study for a National Curriculum for Compulsory Education” (referred to here as the National Curriculum Committee, 1970, Recommendation I), and “Proposal for National Curriculum for Compulsory Education” (referred to here as National Curriculum Committee, 1970, Recommendation II). The former provides us with a series of fundamental considerations as well as the history behind the curriculum, and the latter with a list of the specific materials suggested for all public schools in Norway. In the “An Open Curriculum” section in chapter 5 of this book, I will take a closer look at the Ministry of Education’s interpretation of these reports as this found expression in the Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education (*Mønsterplan for grunnskolen* 1971).

No national curriculum existed when the first public schools were created. Well, actually something similar did exist. Bishop Pontoppidan (1698–1764) was responsible for the interpretations of the scriptures at the time, and pastors, senior rectors, and other bishops took care of the remaining guidelines. As biblical texts waned in importance, a long period of independence followed—until the administration gradually began to grow. Municipal education commissioners soon arrived, making recommendations for their school districts. The recommendations were copied and centralized, leading to the first version of a national curriculum stipulating educational requirements for all public schools throughout the country in 1939. The contents presented there were formulated as *minimum requirements for the schools*; the curriculum was intended to apply to all students. The minimum

requirements were to be understood as an average. Some students would not fulfill all of them, while others would fare better.

With this in mind, the National Curriculum Committee (1970, Recommendation I, 103) attempted to accommodate these variations by ascribing greater degrees of freedom to each school:

The new national curriculum is not intended to serve as a simple formula for how and what to teach in each subject in school. It should be viewed as a guiding framework: as previously noted, the Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act underscores the importance of local influence—whereby the school boards, individual schools, and individual teachers will have greater influence on the shaping of the school and its contents. In correlation with this, the national curriculum will offer a series of suggestions while at the same time invite local stakeholders to have the final say in deciding the contents. These measures are, furthermore, necessary in the interest of providing for the potentially large variations in the number of classes and lessons assigned in the lower grades. It is, in this regard, of central importance to emphasize that the contents proposed by the national curriculum should not be considered compulsory for everyone. The scope pertains above all to the potential and likely additions to the number of lessons in the different subjects that might be expected to occur.

It sounds like unbridled freedom will reign in the Norwegian school system. This was hardly the intention. The deeds of the National Curriculum Committee countervail its promises. The committee's position on grading provides an illustrative case in point. Not only do the committee members accept the traditional notion of grading, but they encourage an increased centralization of the grading scheme

throughout the public school system. As Recommendation I (201) states,

During performance assessments in primary and lower secondary schools, the student must always be evaluated in relation to classmates from the same year. The student's performance is thus not to be assessed on the basis of absolute standards, or on the basis of more or less clearly defined notions of quality or performance ratings. Performance viewed in relation to a larger and representative group will serve as the foundation for ranking the level of the student or the entire class.

Their position on grading is hit home in Recommendation II (76):

As students advance through primary and lower secondary school, the necessity for an evaluation of the actual progress of the student's personal and academic development increases. Such awareness of the student's progress will be a matter of growing interest for the students, their parents, and the school. Ascertaining the actual abilities and progress of each student is especially important as the student transitions from school to work or higher education.

On assessing the progress of each student, it is not the individual student's performance that is to be evaluated but rather the performance of a group of students viewed as a whole in relation to defined standards or stipulated norms. Each student's progress will then be assessed in relation to his or her peers in such a way that his or her performance level is determined in relation to his or her year. These measures are based on the notion of primary and lower secondary schools as public schools, and as such, definitive requirements held to be valid for all students cannot be imposed.

The seemingly unquestionable benefits of being compared to a large group of peers—the actual important reference group—instead of in relation to the learning targets put forth by the National Curriculum Committee—are not



immediately evident. Regardless, the intention is clear: all students are to be assessed by the same standards. Whether or not the national curriculum is to be viewed as a *minimum requirement*, average requirement, or guideline is a matter of complete indifference insofar as the authors simultaneously insist on enforcing a rigorous control system to carefully rank students, teachers, and schools according to the students' success in learning the curriculum. Behold the brave student who, near the completion of seventh grade, stands up and says, "I refuse to go along with this! It runs counter to the Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs' promise that I should find joy in my existence while attending school." It would take an even braver teacher to listen.<sup>2</sup>

*And in what way, then, must the students outperform their peers?*

The Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act intimates an answer to this question. Section 7 lists the most important school subjects: "The school curriculum must cover Christianity, Norwegian, math, foreign languages, physical education, local geography, social studies, [and] natural sciences as well as studies in aesthetic, practical, and social matters." As for the instruction of Christianity studies, the requirements are specified in the act: all students "must become familiar with the main topics of the Bible, the central developments of the church, and the Christian teachings according to the Evangelical-Lutheran creed." The act continues, "In coordination with the instruction in social studies, Christianity studies must provide an overview of other religions and views of life, including the general aspirations towards peace and harmony between nations."

The rest is left to the discretion of the National Curriculum Committee. Table 4.1 illustrates the subjects to be included and the designated hours for each as suggested by the committee. There are few hints in the committee's recommendations as to why exactly these subjects and the number of hours for each subject are recommended. Most probably, and also most understandably, the designated hours for each subject are the product of compromises between competing school subjects.<sup>3</sup> Or as Dokka (1971, 62) candidly states, "During our work, we have also relied, to some extent at least, on our common knowledge of how the school actually is and an assessment of how it will be able to develop. It would indeed be close to impossible to form a lesson plan without pedagogical knowledge and estimates based on practical experiences."

The wording of another statement is a bit harsher: school subjects are chosen because they have been chosen before, and because we have teachers educated in these subjects to serve as instructors. Mathematics is a useful example. Math skills are undeniably essential for both well-being and lunar explorations, but are they relevant for the ordinary lower secondary school student? Yet throughout all lower secondary schools, the National Curriculum Committee has determined that students will spend four hours a week on this subject. Only the study of Norwegian requires an equal number of hours. There is not even a footnote mentioning the possibility that we might be better off without this requirement. Anyone wishing to learn how to take apart an engine can learn to do so by taking an elective. But to demand that everyone learn what only a tenth of the class will ever use makes it hard to see such arrangements as anything but a

**Table 4.1** Distribution of Hours for All Subjects in Primary and Lower Secondary School, Based on the National Curriculum Committee's Recommendations, 1971

	Grades									Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Christianity	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	16
Norwegian including handwriting	5	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	41
Mathematics	3	3	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	33
English				2	2	3	3	3	3	16
Local geography	2	2	2							6
Social science				2	2	4	3	4	4	19
Natural sciences				2	2	3	4	4	3	18
Music	1	1	1	2	2	1	2			10
Arts and crafts	1	1	2	4	4	4	3	2		21
Physical education	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
Home economics							3			3
Electives								6	8	14
<i>Total</i>	15	15	18	24	24	27	30	30	30	213

doltish residue from a struggle that was, at some point in time, initiated to combat widespread innumeracy. Where is the analysis of the actual needs of our children today? Under what rock must we search to find an example of the important research conducted on the life awaiting students on leaving school, or the analyses of what representatives from other levels of the education system have to say about the skills and abilities developed in primary and lower secondary schools? It is not hard to imagine that the advocates of a system intent on conveying a narrow agenda of filling jobs and social positions would grow anxious when listening to such analyses. Yet such an agenda must eventually confront the systematic research telling us that the exact opposite is needed. It is not knowledge acquisition but instead the ability to seek out knowledge that is required today. It is not about attaining information or fragments of reality but rather the ability to work with these pieces of reality over an extended period of time, articulating problems and discerning totalities. A different recommendation from the School Committee of 1965 (41–42), also referred to as the Steen Committee, published in the same year as the appointment of the National Curriculum Committee makes reference to some of these general skills, including specific suggestions for content:<sup>4</sup>

Of primary importance for the majority of the participants in the survey was the demand for general, study-related skills. Specifically, these skills involved the ability to identify the main points of a text, note taking, advanced literacy, and the ability to scrutinize, compare, and discuss data—in short, the ability to collect information in a library, and apply this information in an essay or reports of various kinds.

A similar line of reasoning is found in a recommendation for upper secondary schools. Nevertheless, our primary and lower secondary schools have become subject-based schools. This much is clear in reading the National Curriculum Committee's recommendation. It is not until the section in which the purpose and contents of *each subject* in school is listed that we find even the slightest mention of what is clearly the most fundamental question:

*WHY IS OUR CURRICULUM CURRICULUM?*

The aspirations of the Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act are becoming increasingly blurred here. Each subject, Recommendation I (108) states, hereunder their "logic and structure, types of problems and assignments, and compatibility with other subjects, must be respected." A little further down on the same page the point is driven home with even greater clarity: it should be the school *subjects*, not the Parliament, that determine the learning requirements.

If the total amount of subject matter to be covered by the schools is to remain within reasonable boundaries, this will entail letting go of the idea that each subject will "cover everything." It is, however, critical that these curtailments be based on specific principles to prevent elimination of the essential materials from the subject in question. For some subjects, it will make sense to prioritize the most *elementary* or fundamental aspects of the subject, while for other subjects there will be an emphasis on more *typical* or *general* aspects. *In general, it should be endeavored to include subject matter that based on a professional assessment, is of the greatest value and interest.*

The use of italics in the last sentence was my own doing. I did so because the sentence answers our question. The quote says little about why certain subjects are chosen in the first

place, but instead tells us why our schools have become structured around the subjects, once these have been chosen. A product of manifold interests and compromises, each subject sluggishly makes its way into the curriculum. *Once there*, the specialists are called in to decide which elements are of the most value and interest.

This final process is the central focus of the National Curriculum Committee's Recommendation II. Throughout more than four hundred pages, discussing in detail the subject matter deemed most worthwhile for the public school curriculum—from Christianity studies to public support services—the document scrutinizes everything from the contents and methods to the recommended subject-specific requirements for students on completing school.

The words of the lawmakers drift off into the distance—"an essential part of life," a place with "an intrinsic value," a place where children and youths "find joy in their existence," and "a key responsibility for schools to promote well-being and happiness"—and the phrases all fade away, for there are no *people* assigned to prioritize these ends in what is falsely labeled the school community. Look again at the division of subjects and hours presented above (table 4.1). It is a list of subjects, all stuffed to the point of bursting with materials deemed important by the respective subject specialists. Who do we suppose will take on the role of fulfilling all those other important aspirations? Which specialists are working to make the entire school a place with an intrinsic value? Or at least, What steps have been taken in the organization and design of the schools to accommodate this objective that everyone seems to agree is extremely important—at least, important enough for inclusion in the preamble to the act?

Which structures have been created to support its integration as a central component in the operation of the schools?

In my opinion, these aspirations have not been addressed, with the exception of a few dutiful nods of recognition in the preamble.

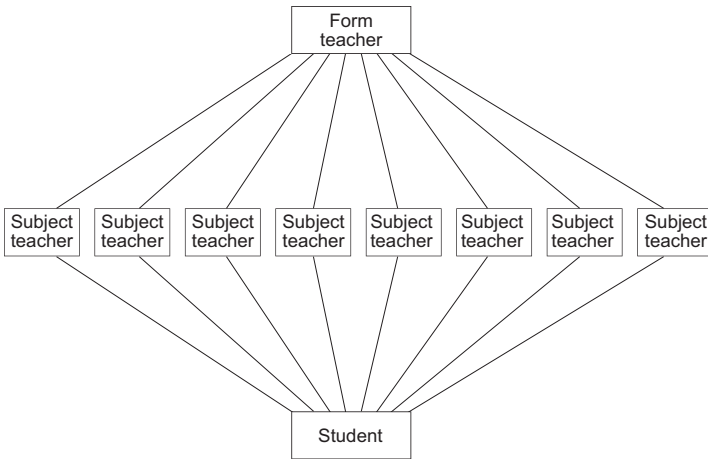
But others perceive the work of the National Curriculum Committee differently.

I will conclude this section with one such perception—here in the words of Torstein Harbo (1971, 58):<sup>5</sup>

The two recommendations that we have been working on—the Preliminary Study for a National Curriculum for Compulsory Education and the Recommendation for a National Curriculum for Compulsory Education—are both the product of the past fifteen years' reformatory efforts, and the seeds of reformatory efforts to come. We are a modest nation far up in the North, and our resources are limited. Yet we have created a nine-year system of compulsory education equaling that of any other system in the world, in both organization and content. There is every reason to believe that our system will attract the attention of educators from around the world in the years to come.

## **WATERTIGHT BULKHEADS**

By assigning the school subjects a central and defining position, a large part of the school's organization is already set in stone. The situation is illustrated in figure 4.1. The student is at the bottom. Above them, forming a long, horizontal row, are the teachers of specific subjects. They are separated by watertight bulkheads. This layout is, of course, a direct reflection of the general principles already laid out by the national curriculum. Tear away the rosy picture and we discover a system staffed with individuals whose primary task it is to



**Figure 4.1** The basic organization of a Norwegian school.

communicate in detail the contents of their respective subjects. The only exception is the form teacher: situated above the rest of the staff, the job of the form teacher is to coordinate the other teachers' schedules, contact parents, and take care of the needs of individual students. The Regulatory Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Schools (1970, 131)—which we will shortly address in further detail—has the following to say about the duties of the form teacher:

1. The form teacher's foremost responsibility is to help and guide students in their classes, both with regard to academic and social adjustment as well as questions or issues of a more personal nature. Of utmost importance is helping any students who are experiencing difficulties in school. The form teacher must endeavor to become apprised of the family life of each student, insofar as such knowledge may help in dealing with the student.



2. The form teacher is responsible for talking with students about their development and well-being at school, including being available for students during office hours.
3. The form teacher is responsible for overseeing the election of a chair, vice chair, and so on, including representatives for the student council where relevant. They are to serve as adviser for the student council and attend their meetings with the right to take the floor.

It all sounds promising—except that the Regulatory Committee seems to have forgotten that the form teacher is a subject-specific teacher just like the rest of the staff. The form teacher need not even be the teacher who spends the most time in the classroom.

A couple of years ago, I conducted a series of interviews with all the form teachers employed in a particular school district. The topic of the interviews concerned the relation between the form teachers and the students in their classes. The form teacher, I thought back then, would be the *generalist* of the school: they would *know* their class, be a stable ally, an adult with whom each student could have the closest form of contact. *But alas, most of the form teachers did not even know the names of all the students in their classes.* During the interviews, they were completely lost without their classroom rosters. And even with the roster placed in front of them, many struggled to recall who was who. The interviews took place at the end of the school year.

This doesn't mean that the form teachers were bad people—neither as human beings nor as teachers. It does, however, illustrate yet again the haphazard and outmoded way in which the schools have been organized in relation to and for the subjects. In-depth knowledge of a school subject

requires specialization. The specialist cannot cover too many other subjects, so to fill their schedule they are made responsible for conveying their knowledge to many different classes. They are not permitted to linger for too long in the same place. This would make them less of a specialist in their area of expertise. Situated thus, at the center of everything, the subject-based system effectively obstructs the single premise that could enable a form teacher to function effectively.

In order to mitigate the adverse effects of the subject-based school, a series of *integration specialist* positions have been created. Here I am referring to “advisers” and “counselors.” Among other things, counselors (Regulatory Committee, 1970, 134) are charged with the following:

Providing counsel on questions concerning further education and training, self-realization, and matters of social relations as well as other questions considered important by the student.

Helping students solve their personal as well as social difficulties and problems.

Documenting and recording needs for investigations, and treatment where necessary, as well as ensuring that students in need of help receive this.

The counselors (Regulatory Committee, 1970, 145) must “help students work out social difficulties and problems displayed in school [and] take preventive measures in the social sphere.”

This may well be a reasonable scheme—given that the schools have been organized according to the subjects. But compared with the other option—the generalist (i.e., the form teacher)—the measures seem highly inadequate.

Especially in larger schools, it seems unlikely that such specialists will get to know any students other than those who cause the most trouble, much less be able intervene in the unobtrusive, day-to-day manner of the generalist.

We thus arrive at a tentative answer to the question of who holds power over the school: the *subjects* hold power over the school. They play an essential role in deciding what should take place, and how.

### THE INNER LIFE OF SCHOOLS

“The school is to promote intellectual freedom and tolerance, and endeavor to facilitate constructive modes of cooperation between teachers and students and between the school and the family.” Thus sounded the autonomous and unambiguous will of the Norwegian Parliament. But it will not turn out that way if the Parliament allows its advisers to advise. The national curriculum—its subjects and testing systems—is reason enough. But the advice does not stop here.

Two committees were appointed to develop proposals on how to establish constructive modes of cooperation. First and foremost the Regulatory Committee was formed, inaugurated with a school inspector as its chair along with four additional educationists as ordinary members. The Regulatory Committee (1970) was charged with proposing regulations and providing standard guidelines for the inner life of schools. Shortly thereafter, another committee was created to carry out the task of providing more specific recommendations for how to structure the conditions for cooperation in schools. Their focus included all levels of schooling, and

for this reason the committee's members represented other levels of schooling as well—including both parent and student representatives. The latter committee issued a brief and unwarranted recommendation on how to establish coordinating bodies in primary and secondary schools (Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs, 1970). Its recommendation has been by and large incorporated into the Regulatory Committee's recommendation.

Both committees are determined to comply loyally with the intentions of Parliament. Cooperation should be initiated in all directions, from top to bottom. No less than ten smaller coordinating bodies are proposed, complete with standardized instructions for all of them:

1. *School council*—the chief municipal education officer as well as all principals and teachers employed on a full-time basis in each school district.
2. *Teachers' council*—all principals and teachers employed on a full-time basis at each school.
3. *Council for nonteaching personnel*—janitor, cleaning staff, school dentists and nurses, office employees, and so on.
4. *Class council, primary school*—elected student representatives from each class.
5. *Student council, primary school*—one representative and a potential alternate from each class, beginning in fourth grade.
6. *Class council, lower secondary school*—elected student representatives from each class.
7. *Student council, lower secondary school*—one representative and a potential alternate from each class, beginning in fourth grade.

8. *General meeting*—for all students at a given school, teachers are entitled to participate.
9. *Parents' council*—all parents or guardians of children in a given school.
10. *Liaison committee*—two representatives from the teachers' council, chair of the council for nonteaching personnel (or a third party elected by its members), the school principal, two representatives from the lower secondary school student council, two representatives from the parents' council, and one representative chosen by the school board.

It is, by all means, an impressive machinery for cooperation. But it will never work. It cannot work because *the machinery has nothing to work with*.

Let us take a closer look at two of the proposed councils—that of the parents and the lower secondary school students. We could have chosen any of the other councils. The principles at work are the same throughout. As for the parents' council, its purpose according to the Regulatory Committee (1970, 122) is to strengthen the bond between school and family, foster the student's well-being and development, and facilitate good contact between the school and society. A little further down in the recommendation, their tasks are specified in a bit more detail:

7. By hosting meetings, get-togethers, and via other measures, the working group for the parents' council must ensure that parents receive the information they need regarding both more general questions as well as those of special interest to the particular school.

8. In coordination with the school, the parents' council must take measures to promote sociopedagogical and recreational programs at the school.
9. The parents' council should address current matters relating to the entire school. The council should not consider issues pertaining to specific students nor directly intervene in day-to-day operations at the school.
10. The parents' council is to address matters presented by the liaison committee and school principal. (Regulatory Committee 1970, 123–124)

The alert reader may have noticed the absence of one particular word in the list of tasks. The word is "*DECIDE*." The parents' council is a body for orientation and deliberation. And even in conjunction with these matters, the council's influence is limited in that it is not permitted to discuss individual students or interfere with the daily operations of the school.

As with all the other proposed committees, the Standing Committee's (1970, 32–35) recommendation takes a much less restrictive approach. Among other things, it proposes that the following topics be addressed by the working group for the parents' councils:

School regulations

Allocation of the rooms of the school

The district's proposed school budget

Holidays and days off (school calendar)

Proposed changes in hours allocated to each school subject

Establishing or combining classes

The daily teaching hours

Length and time of recesses

School meal services

Traffic conditions and road safety around the school

School transportation and lodging

Safety and health-related initiatives for the students

Plans concerning repairs, renovation, and maintenance of  
school premises

Sociopedagogical initiatives

In addition, the recommendation notes that “the working group may establish direct contact with the school board’s representative on the school’s liaison committee. Should this representative be without a seat on the school board, the working group should ask their chair to request the right to participate and have a say on school board matters that involve the parents’ council.”

Although the parents’ council is prevented from *deciding* anything, it at least now has a seat on another body—namely, the proposed liaison committee. But if we were to subject this to scrutiny, we would find once again only proposals for nonbinding *statements*—with one exception. Both the Regulatory Committee and Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs propose that on “approval of the school board, the council can, in certain cases, be granted decision-making authority.” Which cases this would imply remains unspecified. Nor are there any reflections of this proposal in the provisions stipulating the duties of the school board.

As for the lower secondary school student councils—according to the recommendation from the Regulatory Committee (1970, 119–120)—they must promote the common interests of the school’s students and follow up on the work

done by the class councils to create a harmonious school community. The Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs (1970, 7) opted for brisker wording. Instead of “harmony,” it proposed that the student councils work toward creating a “thriving school community.” A memo from the Regulatory Committee specifies its work tasks:

The student council must serve as a unifying body for all students at the school. Therefore, it must refrain from engaging in the creation of resolutions or other forms of political or ideological activity. In coordination with its contact teacher/activity leader and the principal, the council should establish the foundation for the creation of student societies, clubs, study groups, and other activity groups at the school.

As should be evident by now, the Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs is a bit bolder. It agrees that the student council should neither engage in the work of resolutions nor in political or ideological activities, but adds that “questions concerning school politics should, however, be addressed by the student council and in coordination with the contact teacher/activity leader and the principal, the student council should establish the foundation for the creation of student societies, clubs, study groups, and other activity groups at the school.” Both committees agree that any “initiative proposed by the student council must first be approved by the principal.”

What the proposed councils all have in common is that they are overcontrolled and underemployed. The details of their work and how they should carry it out are determined by others, from the outside. And as if this weren’t enough, these others have decided that they aren’t going to decide anything. They must issue advice. Talk.



But we do know a thing or two about social life. We happen to know that social life functions according to some specific premises. As organisms, human beings are rational in their actions. Or they are, at least, *also* rational. They do not gather voluntarily unless they have something to give or there is some benefit to be derived from their being together. Parents are no different.

In his now-seminal analysis of the village of Hilltown, George Homans (1951) illustrates how community life withers when decision-making powers are taken out of the hands of the community.<sup>6</sup> There was once an important value ascribed to the prefatory discussions held on the street corner, at the store in the evenings, and finally at the city council meetings. These arenas played a key role in deciding how to spend the community's resources, where to construct wells and new roads, the location of the school, and how teaching should be carried out inside it. Important, provocative, conflict-inducing questions. People loathed one another those days. Skipping a meeting was out of the question because some outrageous decision might be made. But people were passionate about supporting their friends, and for that reason, were always around. Always, that is, until the day arrived when there was nothing real left to talk about.

And this was exactly what happened the day that Hilltown lost control of its own destiny. This was what happened once each and every important decision was made *outside* Hilltown. This was what happened once Hilltown was integrated into the greater society, where decisions on the construction and maintenance of roads were made by the Public Roads Administration, the local water supplies were

connected to the state's waterworks, and the church was run on external financing—and the school was subjugated to external powers. And just like that, people stopped gathering in the store in the evenings. Just like that, the local community suddenly became too tired to attend any more city council meetings. Convincing people to show up became an arduous task. They thought only of themselves and were unwilling to sacrifice anything for the community. They were rational beings; they knew all too well that their presence didn't matter anyway. But I guess we all know this. So too do the members of the Regulatory Committee and Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs. They do not participate anymore than others unless they somehow find it to be of significance.

Social organizations need sustenance. There are two common types of such sustenance. The first is access to important information that cannot be procured through other means. The second is power. There is little to suggest that any of the councils proposed above will be given either. The liaison committee will waste away. And the skeptics will receive confirmation: the students are too immature, and the parents are too unwilling to participate in the life of the school. It would be best if schools were run by the educationists.<sup>7</sup>

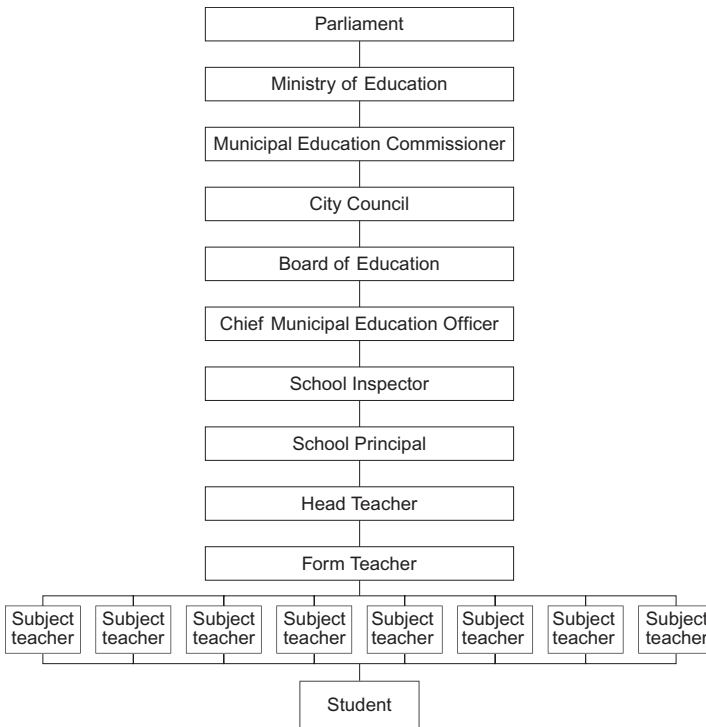
It would be best, this is true, as long as the fundamental premises remain unchanged. And neither the Norwegian Parliament, Regulatory Committee, nor Standing Committee on Cooperative Affairs express any inclination to make such changes. But if the school is to nurture cooperation, it must be granted dominion over its own life.

## POWER OVER SCHOOLS

The problem stems from the fact that both the Parliament and the writers of regulations are trying to achieve two things at once. The two things they are trying to achieve cannot coexist. On the one hand, they want to create a thriving school community, which is both beneficial and important. There is no cause to doubt the sincerity of their intentions in this regard. But they also want something else. They want to preserve the main characteristics of the existing organization of schools. And not only do they want to preserve it, they want expand its inherent idiosyncrasies along the same lines.

From the perspective of the students, it probably appears as if it is the teacher who reigns over the school. For the teacher, it appears as if it is the school principal. But the principal knows all too well that it is the chief municipal education officer, who knows that it is the board of education—whose members know, or at least suspect, that it is someone even higher up. Figure 4.2 presents an approximate image of the order of things. A quick glance should be enough to see the main point: the school is constructed as a profoundly hierarchical system. Between a single student and the highest authority there are at least ten agencies. Many more could have been listed. Municipal executives, the council for primary and lower secondary education, head teachers, and advisers are all to be found somewhere in between the student and the uppermost agency. Anyone seeking to travel through the system would be in for a long journey. But the diagram also illustrates another important point.

In a system replete with dignitaries, all of whom want to have a say, little remains to be shared with the newcomers.



**Figure 4.2** The hierarchy of the primary and secondary school system.

And if there is nothing to be shared, even parents lose their rights. Having little left, the *school principal* simply has no authority to bestow on the parents council. All matters of importance have either been decided in advance—the curriculum, length of the school year, schedule, lesson plans, and so on—or are decided by others, as in the case of the school’s budget, the hiring of teachers, or further expansions of the school. Principals administrate teachers inside the school. They file *recommendations* with the higher authorities. And

they can grant their teachers a leave of absence for no more than three days and their students for up to six days. But beyond these measures, they are first and foremost there to ensure that instructions are followed, and discipline and order prevail. Because they did well as a teacher, they have advanced to the role of supervisor on level five of the ladder.

*The chief municipal education officer* is there to keep the principal in check. According to the standard instructions offered by the Regulatory Committee (140–141), the chief municipal education officer must

ensure that the school is run according to the approved objectives and the most current laws, and in compliance with the provisions found in the curriculum, school regulations, and guidelines, and so on. ... In accordance with the decisions of the school board, he is responsible for allocating the school's budget and acquisitions. Each school principal is to be held accountable by the chief municipal education officer for management of the budget. He must ensure the disbursement of resources in a manner that is expedient and economical. ... He can close the school for a given number of hours or days. He can grant students a leave of absence for up to two weeks.

But above the chief municipal education officer is *the board of education*. The board “ensures that the school is run in accordance with the prevailing laws and regulations and municipal resolutions, and makes sure that the composition of the teaching staff is expedient in terms of the subjects to be taught, and that the school satisfies the prevailing requirements at any given time” (Primary and Lower Secondary Education Act, Section 26).

What follows is the creation of new positions, and subsequent to that, proposals for the school budget and potential expansions.

But the board of education must function in relation to not one but two superiors: the city council and the *municipal education commissioner*. As stated by the Regulatory Committee (105–106), the board of education must provide the commissioner with the following materials:

- A copy of the minutes from the most recent board meeting, no more than a week after the meeting has been held (L Section 27.9).
- For cases requiring special attention by an approving body, a copy of the notes must be appended. Suggested division of school classes (L Section 5.7).
- Suggestions on the organization of subjects and the school schedule, and lesson plans including guidelines and appendixes (L Section 7; Section 11).
- Decisions on the dates of school holidays and breaks during the school year (R Section 3).
- Applications for approval of school transportation arrangements (R Section 1).
- Appointment of staff members, announcements concerning short-term contracts, and decisions concerning full-time employment and the period of employment (L Section 18; Section 20).
- Applications for leave (L Section 18).
- Announcements concerning resignations and terminations.
- Announcements concerning the approval of new textbooks, ABC books, and reading materials to be introduced (L Section 40)—and concerning the language of instruction (L Section 41).<sup>8</sup>

- Announcements concerning deaf, blind, or mentally disabled children, children with speech, reading, or writing difficulties, and children with mental health issues or other disabilities.
- Suggestions for district changes, including the choice of a new location for the school (L Section 3).
- Blueprints for school buildings and student housing, plans for new buildings or reconstruction of the existing school and student housing, and plans for the design of outdoor areas with playgrounds (L Section 9).
- Applications for pilot schemes in schools (cf. the act concerning pilot schemes in schools).
- Estimates of expenses eligible for state subsidies (L Section 39).
- Tasks related to reimbursement of expenses from state subsidies in accordance with the provisions on state subsidies (L Section 39).<sup>9</sup>

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Education and Church Affairs, the municipal commissioner of education must “ensure compliance with all regulations pertaining to the primary and lower secondary school in legal documents, regulations, and guidelines, directives, and so on. ... The commissioner has the right to attend and speak at district meetings and meetings of the school boards, the city council, the county school board, and in the county parliament when school-related matters are under consideration” (Regulatory Committee, 136).

Put simply, there is no room for more people. Just about everything has already been decided by laws, regulations,

lesson plans, the curriculum, and examination requirements. Any further decisions that remain to be made have been so carefully dispensed to so many hierarchically situated agencies as to effectively remove any form of sustenance for the inner life of schools. The ten proposed coordinating councils will become nothing but pale shadows. Their members will know that things are actually being decided elsewhere. They will know where things are truly happening—that is, in places where they are not invited. So they may as well stay home.

Expanding the size of the agencies works in a similar fashion. In a small municipality, the need for administration will be kept at a minimum. The Board of Education would, perhaps, have no more than a single school to administer. And if the board members have children of compulsory school age, they would be enrolled in that school. The roles of board member and parent melt into one. If the school is small enough, the intermediary roles of head teacher and deputy head also become redundant. The same goes for form teachers and school principals. The municipal commissioner of education would be shared by several municipalities. Most matters would still be decided elsewhere, but at least the distance from the top to the bottom of the system would be reduced.

But this is far from the reality in most municipalities—and less and less so all the time. The agencies continue to grow. The organizational hierarchy is mobilized from top to bottom. The distance increases not just from top to bottom but also between each agency. Most evident is the gap between the individual school and board of education. In Oslo alone there are fifty-seven primary schools, twelve combined



primary and lower secondary schools, and sixteen lower secondary schools. Combined, they constitute a student body of almost fifty thousand. In addition to this there are vocational and academic upper secondary schools, institutions of higher learning, and so on. Not only have decisions been taken out of the hands of the individual schools. Now they are being made by strangers. Little can be done to impede such forces.

Another consequence—feeding the growth of the agencies—is the expanding power of the permanent employees within the administration. The sheer size of the system requires that still more time be spent on maintaining oversight. Amateurs are obliged to delegate more and more of their authority. As the number of intermediaries in the bureaucracy increases, so too does the number of administrative staff positioned somewhere above the publicly elected representatives—providing yet another reason to stay silent and let the professionals do the talking. The amateurs, for their own part, must then also try to become permanent specialists. The Oslo school board has twelve subcommittees attending to various tasks. In addition to the hierarchical structure, the school board—much like the school—thus becomes an organization based on specialization.

Many publicly elected representatives dream about a smaller system in which proximity and transparency replace specialization and bureaucracy. But they have both wage regulations and other internal growth factors against them. The larger the school, the more money the school principal makes, and the less available time there is for them to do any teaching. The same holds true for rectors and the administrators of schools for children with learning disabilities. To

employ a head teacher, the school must be of a certain size. And the larger the municipal school system—measured as the total number of teaching hours in the municipality—the greater the administration's salaries. Any person who is deliberately working to share their school or district with others would be an unselfish person indeed.

Large agencies are a good fit in terms of the other needs of the school system as a whole. Many have ambitions to make something of their lives. Often, these ambitions are synonymous with ascending through the ranks. A ladder with many rungs provides many people with the opportunity for upward mobility and a few with the possibility of making it all the way to the top. And so we once again find a harmonious correspondence between the school and the overall structure of society. We live in a stratified society that is mirrored in the inner structure of our schools. The educationists are no different from other people. There are, therefore, plentiful forces within the system pushing to create even greater distance between the ranks.

The organization of schools is a reflection of the surrounding society. And while this organization of the school's inner life makes it impossible to achieve other important objectives, there is little doubt as to which forces predominantly hold sway in the current situation. The inner life of schools parallels the common ways in which we organize ourselves as a society. And as long as schools satisfy their other primary functions of storage and certification, they are left in peace. Lindbekk (1971, 15) expresses amazement about how seldom the school is subjected to any scrutiny:

And the most peculiar aspect of the institution/society relation—at least with regard to the school—is how little the

surrounding society and its institutions actually seem to care, how rarely they place the products of schools under scrutiny, how rarely we see feedback from the consumer to the producer, and how rarely the recipients of the schools' output raise the all-important question, Is this output worth its investment—that is, the money that we, the recipients, channel toward the school through taxation, duties, and so on?

I agree with his observation, but not his sense of surprise. Only rarely do the school's recipients, society, ask such significant questions. But that is presumably because schools are effective at delivering their services. This is also why I disagree with Lindbekk (1971, 15) when he goes on to say that "from this perspective, the most astonishing fact about our school system is the degree to which this vast institutional apparatus has succeeded in detaching itself from the rest of society." This is, once again, only partially true. As illustrated in this chapter, the school does have a relatively large degree of autonomy. I have a strong suspicion, however, that this condition would be difficult to maintain the moment the school *ceased* to align itself so seamlessly with the principal structures of society and ceased to deliver the goods in demand by that society. The moment a school might venture to rattle its chains in such a way, the nature of those chains would become apparent for all to see. The entrenchment of schools in the order of things would be dragged out into the light of day. And we would realize—because the issue concerns a profession with comparatively low degrees of specialization—the defenselessness of schools in the face of pressure from the surrounding society. Such an opinion does not imply that we are powerless when it comes to implementing any changes. The next chapter is full of suggestions for change. But the odds are against us.

It has become a hierarchically structured system controlled chiefly by educationists. But it was not intended as such. During the previous century's struggles for municipal self-governance, the school was a key issue. The municipalities and especially parents were to be granted full authority over their own schools. Their struggle was initially successful. Once control over the municipalities had been placed in the hands of the people in 1884, control over the schools followed suit, on the force of the Education Act of 1889 (*folkeskoleloven*). Under the subtitle *A Growing Opposition's Ideals*, Dokka (1967, 407) writes,

The underlying idea of the initial program for public schools was that parents should maintain the rights and responsibility concerning their children's education and upbringing. The key points of the Education Act of 1889 were based on this fundamental idea. Parental rights were the chief reason why the school was placed under municipal authority to such a large degree. In principle, the intention was to grant parents the right to choose the kind of education and upbringing their children would receive. The selection of teachers and determination of teaching objectives therefore became municipal tasks. The school was governed by the people because it was considered to be the responsibility of parents.

In the second-to-last chapter of his opus on the historical foundations of the Norwegian public school, Dokka (1967, 409) goes on to add,

Through the implementation of the municipal reform (whereby control of the municipal government was devolved into the hands of the people in 1884), the path had been cleared for the chief aspect of the program for public schools—that is, that the school should be run by the people and should be their responsibility. Only then would the school be worthy of a free

people. Only then would it be able to fulfill its promise in a free society.

But the seeds preventing Dokka's descriptions from ever being realized had already been sown many years before by the first administrator to enter the Norwegian school system. They were sown through the Education Act of 1860 (*Lov om Allmueskolevæsenet på landet*), concerning the establishment of the rural public school system, when for the first time positions for municipal education commissioners were established. Some resisted, though. Dokka (1967, 181) writes that

especially [Søren Pedersen] Jaabæk expressed concern about the impact of newly established public offices on the continued growth of the public school.<sup>10</sup> Their introduction would result in such reinforcement and centralization of the overall administration, such an expansion of a clerical hierarchy with authority over the municipal school system, that there was every reason to fear the development of an increasingly uniform school.

Yet as so many times before, Jaabæk's concerns were ignored.

It should, by now, be increasingly apparent why this book opened with a section about a French village, followed by a section about the conditions of the Sioux people's school, and a section about life in a British lower secondary school. But I will put my pointer away. Let us instead approach our topic from a wholly different angle. So far, we have limited our scope to what *is*. Let us, in an attempt toward liberation, now turn toward an exploration of what *could be*.

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# **If Schools Didn't Exist**

## **A Study in the Sociology of Schools**

**By: Nils Christie**

**Edited by: Lucas Cone, Joachim Wiewiura**

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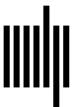
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