

Organizational learning the Nordic way: learning through participation

Organizational
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Nordic way

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Thomas Dahl and Eirik J. Irgens

*Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology,
Trondheim, Norway*

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Abstract

Purpose – Is there a specific way of thinking about organisational learning in Nordic countries? Are concepts such as organisational learning and learning organisations imported, or do they emerge with specific meanings from more local discourses? Beyond that, are they supported by specific learning theories? The purpose of this paper is to trace the way that the concepts of organisational learning and learning organisations appear in research and policy documents in Norway and to identify what sort of learning theories pertain to those concepts. The authors discuss whether Norway's case exemplifies a Nordic way of thinking about learning in organisations.

Design/methodology/approach – Through an archaeological investigation into the concepts of organisational learning and learning organisations, the authors explore the theoretical and cultural framing of the concepts in research and policy. The authors limit our work to large industrial field experiments conducted in the 1960s and to large education reform in the 2000s.

Findings – During the industrial field experiments in the 1960s, the concept of organisational learning evolved to form participatory learning processes in non-hierarchical organisations able to contribute to democracy at work. Education policy in the 2000s, by contrast, imported the concept of the learning organisation that primarily viewed learning as an instrumental process of knowledge production. That strategy is incommensurable to what we define as a Nordic way, one in which learning is also understood as a cultural and social process advanced by democratic participation.

Originality/value – The authors add to organisational learning theories by demonstrating the importance of cultural context for theories and showing that the understanding of learning is historically and culturally embedded.

Keywords Leadership, Democracy, Organizational learning, Participation, Education reform

Paper type Research paper

1. A call for learning organisations

In 2001, Norway experienced what has become known as the “PISA shock”. At the time, results from tests initiated by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(2008\)](#) (OECD) revealed that European education systems did not live up to the belief that the system was good and sufficiently adapted to meet the needs of society. Those findings sent shockwaves through many European countries, and Norway was no exception.

In response, Norway took a series of measures, including a sequence of nationwide programmes aimed at improving the quality of schools. A large curriculum reform for both



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primary and secondary education, Kunnskapsløftet (knowledge promotion), was also launched to define what had to change: “If we are to succeed, schools must become learning organisations”, the government advised (St.meld. nr. 30,2003/2004, p. 3).

Several studies have shown, however, that few schools in Norway undertook systematic measures to become learning organisations or at least somewhat similar to them. There were also few indications that their capacity to learn had been improved (Dahl *et al.*, 2012; Ekspertgruppa om lærerrollen, 2016; Postholm *et al.*, 2018). In all, the curriculum reform had not achieved the ambition of turning schools into learning organisations. According to the evaluation of the reform, “Schools in Norway did not follow the call from the Government to become learning organisations” (Dahl *et al.*, 2012, p. 128).

The call for schools to become learning organisations was made with reference to Peter Senge’s (1990) book *The Fifth Discipline*, translated into Norwegian in 1991 (Senge, 1991). Although the reform had imported theories from abroad and used them as vehicles for change, theories on how to generate learning processes were already available in Norway. During large industrial field experiments conducted in the 1960s and in the work–research tradition that followed, the term *organisational learning* surfaced, albeit without reference to any theories, as a way of describing learning processes within industrial organisations. In addition, from empirical studies on development processes within the public sector, Johan P. Olsen gave Cyert and March’s (1963) theory of organisational learning a different flair with the so-called “garbage can model” (Cohen *et al.*, 1972). In that context, did those ways of thinking about organisational learning conflict with the way that the education reform promoted learning organisations? Could those ways of thinking about organisational learning be more fruitful in developing the capacity to learn in schools? Were the imported ideas about learning in the reform incommensurable with the Nordic way of thinking about learning that emerged from theories originating in the 1960s and 1970s? If a Nordic way of thinking about learning truly exists, then what has been at its core? Those questions are all examples of inquiries that motivated our research.

Those questions help to shed light on the purpose of this article – that is, to trace the way that the concepts of organisational learning and learning organisations have appeared in research and policy documents in Norway and to identify what sort of learning theories pertain to the concepts. To that end, we have adopted a historical perspective in combination with an intercultural lens on learning approaches and their political applications. Methodologically, we first performed an archaeological investigation into so-called “old” theoretical contributions and ideas concerning organisational learning in Norway that evolved in the 1960s and 1970s and continued developing in the decades that followed. Secondly, we did the same with policy documents regarding large education reform in Norway in the 2000s. In our methodology, inspired by the archaeology and discourse analysis of Michel Foucault (1969, 1971), we seek to trace the cultural embeddedness of theoretical contributions, particularly ones that discuss learning in organisations. Our selection of material from Norwegian contributions is additionally supported by the work of Luhmann (2000), for they are contributions that he also discussed in his seminal work on organisational theories.

2. The export and import of mainstream theories

After undertaking a large intercultural analysis of national cultures half a century ago, Geert Hofstede warned against the influence of US-inspired management. Those theories plainly collide with cultures and theories in many other parts of the world, Hofstede (1980) concluded. Whereas the core element of work organisations in many parts of the world tended to be the people who perform the work, Hofstede found that literature from the USA,

whether explicitly or implicitly, focused on managers as the crucial factor within organisations. Hofstede hypothesised that the focus had resulted from a combination of a strong tendency towards masculinity and extreme individualism in US culture, one that “has turned the manager into a culture hero of almost mythical proportions. For example, he – not really she – is supposed to make decisions all the time. Those of you who are or have been managers must know that this is a fable” (Hofstede, 1993, pp. 92–93). What Hofstede describes is a culture of leadership that seems to clash with how several authors have described the Nordic countries, as places with democratic, collective traditions that expect managers to include employees in decision-making processes (Brodbeck *et al.*, 2000; Klemsdal, 2009; Læg Reid *et al.*, 2013; Schramm-Nielsen *et al.*, 2004).

The democratic and collective tradition manifested in how leadership in Nordic countries is conceived has always been challenged. In the mid-20th century, US management consultant George Kenning visited Scandinavia as part of the post-war Marshall Plan. In the 1950s and the three decades that followed, Kenning worked closely with a series of large Norwegian corporations, and in the process, his insights were formulated into the Aker model, named after the industrial corporation that he was most strongly associated with. In Norway, Kenning’s impact was so strong that he was made a Knight of the Order of St. Olav of the First Class by the Norwegian king.

Kenning’s ideas were doubtlessly authoritarian and top–down, with a strong focus on managers and less interest in teams, collaboration, democracy and the co-creation of knowledge. Kenning based his education of Scandinavian managers on 31 principles that he called *management praxes*. Interestingly, those principles, written as bullet-points, comprise Kenning’s full output on management. In them, leadership is synonymous with management: “Management is direction. It is neither consensus nor example”. Moreover, that direction was to be set by managers: “Management is those who regulate effort to achieve fixed objectives”. In that framework, employees have no obligations other than to follow the order and managers are tasked with supporting all company decisions and demonstrating absolute loyalty to all organisational authorities.

Revang and Sørensen (1994, p. 36) have analysed how Kenning’s ideas paved the way for a Norwegian management culture based on assumptions of subordinates and superiors, authority, control and consequences, all ideas with much in common with Fredrick W. Taylor’s principles of scientific management. At roughly the same time, Kalleberg (1991, p. 241) characterised Kenning’s tradition in Norwegian management to be an expression of a universalising, mechanical and bureaucratic mentality of control that afforded little room for innovation and participation. Sørhaug (1994) concluded that the spread of Kenning’s ideology was not a phenomenon limited to Norway and Scandinavia but was typical of the entire US management tradition.

According to Sørhaug (1994), Kenning’s most important antagonist on the Norwegian scene was Einar Thorsrud. Whereas Kenning’s work experience was primarily gained at General Motors and in US automobile production, Thorsrud focused on work tasks, participation, teams and systems, and thus, took a critical stance towards hierarchies, as well as towards Kenning’s focus on accountability, management and line authority (Sørhaug, 1994, p. 510).

3. Field experiments in industry

In a triadic partnership of employers, employees and researchers between trade unions, employer’s associations and research institutes, field experiments in work organisation were conducted in four major industrial companies in Norway during the 1960s. A central person in those experiments, as head of the Institute for Research on Industrial Environment at

NTH – the Norwegian Institute of Technology, was Einar Thorsrud. However, Thorsrud was not alone on the side of the researchers. Having visited the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London several times, he convinced some of the researchers there, including Fred Emery and Phillip Herbst, to take part in the experiments. Many of the ideas implemented in those industrial experiments were developed at Tavistock. Such traces can be found in the writings of the researchers involved in the field experiments, in the action research approach developed at Tavistock and in its journal *Human Relations* (Lewin, 1947), in the group's dynamics and its psychological working conditions (Trist & Bamforth, 1951) as well as the cultural sociology of Karl Mannheim (Thorsrud & Emery, 1964, p. 14).

Although many of the ideas behind the field experiments were of both Anglo-Saxon and continental origin, Norway became the site for putting those ideas into practice. As Thorsrud wrote, in Norway it was “easier in the early 1960s to start the Industrial Democracy Project, sponsored jointly by unions, employers, and government” (1977, p. 411). In Norway, it was even possible to recruit the government as an ally for such a project. Thorsrud and Emery attributed the idea behind the project to the minister of social affairs, who at the Norwegian College of Technology in 1959 had called for research on “industrial democracy” (Thorsrud & Emery, 1964, p. 7).

The Norwegian context for the experiments can be viewed as part of the larger Nordic context, which is marked by collaboration between employers and employees and between labour organisations and employers' organisations. Several events in history contributed to the institutionalisation of that collaboration. The so-called “Septemberforliget” (September Agreement) in Copenhagen in 1899 played an especially important role. That agreement between employees' and employers' associations was followed by similar agreements in Sweden in 1906, in Norway in 1907 (Nielsen, 1992, 1996) and, some years later, in Finland. The agreements establish the important groundwork for a strengthened understanding of the possibility and importance of “cooperating with one hand while fighting with the other” and led to increased mutual respect for the parties' different roles as well as a common interest in finding shared solutions via agreements (Irgens, 2017). Democratic rights, working conditions and ways of collaborating were increasingly put on the agenda, with government and state authorities as third parties in tripartite cooperation (Irgens, 2016, p. 335; Irgens & Ness, 2007; Nielsen, 1996). A Nordic cooperation model (Øyum *et al.*, 2010, p. 9) paved the way for and was further developed by Thorsrud and his colleagues when they initiated and conducted the experiments in cooperation with labour and employers' associations.

That characteristic of Norway and the Nordic countries has been described by Olsen (1996) as an important element for explaining the way in which learning processes in the public sector are implemented (Olsen, 1996), as discussed in the following section.

4. Organisational learning as a non-hierarchical way of learning

In the literature from the researchers involved in the field experiments, the term *organisational learning* was first used in the works of Philipp Herbst. From the Tavistock Institute, Herbst made long visits to Norway and participated in several research projects in which he used the term frequently. He published a book in 1974 that was based on action research in the Norwegian shipbuilding industry and financed with a grant from the Norwegian Research Council. One chapter in the book was titled “Organisational Learning and Organisational Change on Merchant Ships”. Therein, Herbst (1974) describes what he calls a “learning programme” aboard merchant vessels (p. 55). Instead of emphasising the elementary training of young sailors, merchant organisations should, as the action research showed, focus on “the provision of conditions for the development of a teaching-learning

culture based on the total crew on board” (Herbst, 1974, p. 59). Such a learning culture would be a better way to develop those organisations than by focusing solely on individual learning processes. It would also differ from the way in which learning was achieved in schools, where “the schoolish teacher is concerned with the ability of his student to follow instructions and to perform precisely a predetermined programme” (Herbst, 1974, p. 185). For Herbst, however, the learning programme should accommodate an open process in which learning what should be learned is a collective endeavour. By so doing, not only would the organisation develop but also the people therein. “The product of work is people” Herbst (1974, p. 212) stated. With organisational learning, organisations could enable people to develop, flourish and forge alternatives to hierarchical organisations and hierarchical ways of learning (Herbst, 1977).

Einar Thorsrud clarified that the purpose of organisational learning was developing not only the organisation but also its members. He had developed a simplified concept of learning in organisations that he described as “a step-by-step learning process: two steps forward – one step back” (Thorsrud, 1977, pp. 411–412). For Thorsrud (1977), such a process was similar to the process of democratisation: a step-by-step learning process that cannot “be understood and planned as a production process” (p. 412).

Organisational learning was a way for organisations to develop in contrast to the traditional hierarchical way, in which what organisations should do and learn was decided from above. Thorsrud and Emery thus also had a specific view on leadership. With reference to Karl Mannheim, they defined the condition for what they called “effective leadership” as leadership that would “ensure effective democracy” (Emery *et al.*, 1974, pp. 4–5). To bring about that condition, work organisations and their leaders should promote “democracy at work” as a way of developing both the organisation and the members within.

5. Naive belief in consensus?

The organisational learning processes in the field experiments served as a means to achieve democracy at work. The learning had to be based on participation and be collaborative and was best achieved when the different members of the organisation could reach a consensus on where and how they should proceed and what they should achieve. Fred Emery thus developed what would be called “consensus conferences” as a prerequisite for the learning processes in organisations. Those conferences applied a so-called “double-loop learning” strategy to establish a common basis for developing work and generating local knowledge (Ebeltoft, 1991). An important goal of the conferences was also to establish a “democratic dialogue” (Finsrud, 2009, p. 71) and to “give all relevant stakeholders a voice” (Klev & Levin, 2012, p. 152).

However, Niklas Luhmann has critiqued the Norwegian tradition for having a rather naive understanding of learning. It “would be a crude simplification to see innovation, creativity and learning as something positive (as it is normally done)” (Luhmann, 2000, p. 360), he stated. Although Thorsrud and Emery’s idea about learning was based on a belief in consensus as to the best way for “continuous learning” (Luhmann, 2000, p. 339), they failed to recognise that learning “is fully related to the ideas and mentalities of the reformer” (Luhmann, 2000, p. 25) and that immanent conflicts in an organisation may undermine the assumed neutrality of learning.

But did Thorsrud and Herbst view organisational learning as a neutral process? Thorsrud (1977) explicitly stated that learning could not “be understood and planned as a production process” (p. 412), while Herbst (1974) contrasted his idea of organisational learning with what he called a “technical learning programme” (p. 55). For both thinkers, learning was a result of interaction between all members of an organisation in which conflict

and different interests could be expected. The consensus conferences were thus a way to redefine the goals of the organisations based on the experiences of the organisation and its members. They were also a means to avoid developing reforms and change processes that were the result of only one reformer. To have learning defined by the “mentalities of the reformer”, as Luhmann claimed that they were doing, diametrically opposed to how Thorsrud had defined the role of management.

Although critical of what he called a “naive view on learning”, [Luhmann \(2000\)](#) appreciated what he understood as a “theory of adaptive learning in organisations” (p. 74) and referred to contributions from Norway, namely, the work of Johan P. Olsen. However, did Olsen’s view on learning differ from that of Thorsrud, Emery and Herbst?

6. The garbage can

Olsen worked closely with James G. March, with whom he became acquainted as a visiting scholar at the University of California, Irvine in 1968–1969. Afterward, March served as a visiting scholar at the University of Bergen, where Olsen was completing his doctoral education. The most well-known result of their collaboration is their theory on decision making in organisations, the garbage can model, which they presented along with [Cohen et al. \(1972\)](#) and which became one of the most cited articles in studies on organisations. Their collaboration continued for several decades and produced numerous works and co-publications.

Together with Richard Cyert, March was one of the first thinkers to give the concept of organisational learning a theoretical backbone. In their book *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, [Cyert and March \(1963\)](#) elaborated the concept without referring to any other discussions about the term, as Herbst had also done not 10 years later. Cyert and March defined their theory, as Luhmann rightly called it, to be a theory about adaptation. As their book’s title clearly states, Cyert and March viewed organisations with a behavioural lens. An organisation, as a living organism, could adapt to its environment by way of learning. Organisational learning was thus a way for a system to cope with its environment and for an organisation – Luhmann would call it a “system” – to cope with its environment as well.

However, in the article introducing the garbage can model, the focus shifted from the question of adaptation to the environment to a question of what happens inside organisations. The behaviour of an organisation is the “result of learning and negotiation within the organisation” ([Cohen et al., 1972](#), p. 13), they stated, and the garbage can model is thus a model to deal with organisations “plagued with goal ambiguity and conflict, with poorly understood problems that wander in and out of the system, with a variable environment, and with decision-makers who may have other things on their minds” (p. 16).

Olsen’s doctoral thesis, *On the Theory of Organisational Decision Making* ([Olsen, 1971a, 1971b](#)), addressed the decision-making processes of organisations and the people who take part in them, including Emery and Thorsrud. In his empirical study of universities and decision-making processes therein, he used the term “garbage can” to describe how those processes in universities played out: that all sorts of problems were thrown into the processes, with a large mix of different interests but without any system for determining who should participate in the decisions. [Olsen’s \(1971b\)](#) general claim was those dynamics characterised how decision-making processes happen in large organisations, partly because “the participation issue never became a very central one” (p. 78).

Although Olsen did not discuss the concept of learning in his thesis, the description of the reorganisation processes was also a description of learning processes. An organisation could learn to better manage what its members threw into the garbage can. It had to learn not only how to manage participation but also how to become democratic.

In 1995, Olsen and March published a book devoted to the question of democratic governance (March & Olsen, 1995). Therein, they defined *democracy* as “a culture, a faith, and an ethos that develops through interpretations, practice wars, and revolutions. It discovers new meanings and new possibilities in new experiences and ideologies” (March & Olsen, 1995, p. 2). That messy business of democracy is an engine for learning if it secures participation in the learning process, for “to enact knowledge in a democracy depends on the extent to which that knowledge is shared [. . .] Knowledge known to only a few and for only a short time is disadvantaged” (March & Olsen, 1995, p. 210). In democratic societies, learning has the aim of contributing to democracy and its way of achieving that end is through participation. In that light, Olsen and March’s description of the learning processes for democratic development in society is similar to Thorsrud and Herbst’s description of learning processes for industrial development.

7. Importation of learning theories

Albeit in different ways, the organisational learning theories in the work of Herbst, Thorsrud and Olsen all state that learning requires participation and that, via participation, groups may ultimately reach a consensus about the purpose of the learning processes: to develop democracy (Olsen) or to make space for human development (Thorsrud and Herbst). Organisational learning should thus both incorporate democratic ways to make decisions and contribute to democracy, and incorporated the Nordic model of cooperation between different interests and actors. In Herbst’s case, the concept of organisational learning grew out of empirical studies on the Norwegian shipping industry, whereas Olsen connected his studies on decision-making processes at a Norwegian university with James March’s organisational learning theory. In both cases, however, the so-called “theory” of organisational learning resulted from a blend of different traditions and conventions between cultures that, in one way or another, were democratic processes in themselves. In time, the theories were translated and adapted to an understanding of the importance of participation.

The large education reform, introduced under the banner of “Knowledge Promotion”, also imported theories. The reform, enacted by the Norwegian Parliament in 2004 and based on a governmental white paper titled “Culture for Learning”, called for schools to “become learning organisations” (St.meld. nr. 30,2003/2004, p. 3). The reform also brought with it other concepts related to learning, the most important one being learning outcomes. Although perhaps an essential notion in discussing the purpose of schools today, learning outcomes were mentioned only in the white paper and in the reports by expert groups tasked with establishing the groundwork for the reform. In Parliament and in the Educational Committee therein, however, the term was not in use. Even the report from the Committee shows no use of the term except by a member of Fremskrittspartiet (“Progress Party”), a right-wing liberal party (Innst.S.nr. 268,2003/2004). Because the term was a foreign word in Norwegian, where did the concept come from?

Although tracing the concept is difficult, it clearly seems to have been part of an international trend, most notably in the part of the trend characterised by the belief of the importance of measuring the added value of schools and within the so-called “school effective movement”. Both movements had their origin in the USA and, to some extent, in Great Britain (Chitty, 1997; Cooper, 1988) but were adopted by international organisations such as the World Bank and the OECD (Greaney & Kellaghan, 1996; OECD, 2008).

The Norwegian reports and their emphasis on the importance of measuring learning outcomes and elements that contribute to schools’ learning outcomes clearly mirror that primarily Anglo-Saxon trend in education. Informed by recent research on the effectiveness of schools, the reports underscore that “the results for ‘school effectiveness research’ had

shown that it is difficult to find the relation between different factors such as resources and teacher competence and learning outcome” (NOU, 2002, p. 30). The solution to that lack of research evidence on causality was systematic reviews: “School owners have to make a systematic review of the process quality in school as a basis for developing schools as learning organisations” (NOU, 2002, p. 32). The concept of school owners was also new in the Norwegian context, where schools are primarily public except for ones building upon specific pedagogical values or with particular religious affiliations. In any case, the concept soon found its way into the new legislation following the reform.

Developing the quality of schools by imposing and raising learning outcomes was the responsibility of the school owners. They were expected to undertake systematic reviews based on indicators of quality to support schools with data. It was in that context that the concept of the learning organisation became central. Schools were prescribed to become learning organisations to learn from the data generated from the systematic reviews.

If turning schools into learning organisations was the responsibility of school owners, then the most significant factor was the school leader. Likewise, school leaders were identified as the most important figures in the reform – “Leadership is a key factor for successful school development” (NOU, 2003, p. 25) – such that leadership was to be prioritised. Leaders were also expected to produce results. It was the responsibility of school owners to systematise data from the systematic reviews and to follow up on the school principals’ efforts to improve learning outcomes based on the data: “Leadership is about getting results” (NOU, 2003, p. 248).

School leaders’ responsibility for learning intensity is also underscored in the reports, and that priority also calls for a specific type of leader: “Another challenge for the school’s learning intensity is related to what research calls submissive leaders” (St.meld. nr. 30,2003/2004, p. 28). Submissive leaders disproportionately transfer responsibility for teaching to teachers such that traditional ways of schooling are perpetuated and necessary steps for changes and improvements to occur are not taken [1]. Under such leaders, the lack of results is the problem, and the solution is powerful, strong, unambiguous leadership “that knows the learning goals of the school” St.meld. nr. 30 (2003/2004). The descriptions of leadership and the role of leaders more strongly echo Kenning’s tradition than the ways in which Thorsrud and Emery had described the role of leaders. Along those lines, schools were advised to become better at achieving learning outcomes by adopting a hierarchical system with school owners on top.

8. Collaboration for better learning outcomes

The education reform, given its tools for raising the learning outcomes achieved at schools, took an approach to develop organisations that starkly differed from the approaches of Thorsrud, Herbst and Olsen. Schools were to become learning organisations by way of strong leadership, not participation, which conflicted with other theories of organisational learning. The ideas of Peter Senge were imported but without reflecting on the different disciplines in Senge’s book, nor on his differentiation of adaptive from generative learning.

The way in which leadership should operate according to the reform also corresponded poorly with other theories on organisational learning. Senge’s teacher on organisational learning was Chris Argyris, who together with Donald Schön made the term *organisational learning* well known with the publication of their book with the same title (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Although Argyris also recognised the need for strong leaders who would not avoid confrontations, he described strong leaders rather differently. Whereas the white paper “Culture for Learning” could be read as a call for strong, powerful, unambiguous leaders who should not be meek or submit to their teachers, Argyris called for leaders of a different

sort: ones who dared to be vulnerable. Those leaders should defend their positions but only in ways that invited others to question and evaluate their thoughts and beliefs. The inclination to strive for unilateral control was an example of the model in the white paper and what leaders should avoid. By contrast, leaders in the model were considered to be strong if they dared to be vulnerable and, in so doing, expose themselves to having their minds changed along with the ways that they perceived challenges at hand. That sort of leader should be willing to yield to better arguments and new knowledge, and the collective capacity to solve problems should be increased via shared control and shared leadership (Irgens, 2018, p. 32).

9. Conflicts with the Nordic participatory model

In a recent white paper issued more than 10 years after *Culture for Learning*, the Norwegian government summarised evaluations of several national initiatives taken to improve results in Norwegian schools. They concluded that measures planned and initiated at the national level had neither been sufficiently adapted to meet local needs nor sufficiently anchored in local circumstances. They had not taken into account that implementation is demanding and takes time and that information about measures has to proceed through many levels in the education system before reaching the individuals or groups who were expected to implement it (Ministry of Education & Research, 2017, p. 89).

The new reform represented a shift from “Knowledge Promotion” in many ways. Firstly, the reform stressed the need for schools to operate according to values and general principles. It also stressed the importance of the mission statement of the Education Act, which defines the overall purpose of the school that had been largely ignored by the policy of “Knowledge Promotion”: “The values are the foundation of our democracy and should help us to live, learn and work together in a complex society and with an unknown future” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2018, p. 5). The espoused theories from the state thus reverted to addressing the purpose and values of the education system. Different statements about leadership emerged as well. The document prescribing values and principles for the curriculum, which has the weight of legislation in Norway, states the following about school leadership:

Good school leadership is based on legitimacy and a good understanding of the pedagogical and other challenges teachers and other employees face. Good leadership prioritises the development of cooperation and relations that build trust in the organisation. (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2018, p. 18)

That statement echoes statements from the tradition of democracy at work on leadership. The reform of reform also saw the need for cooperation and participation to develop schools. The Norwegian Parliament obliged the government to “cooperate with teachers and school leaders unions” in the further development of the reform and “to make sure that it is the teachers’ responsibility and professional judgement that decides which methods and tools to be used in the education” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 213). As such, the workers – the teachers and staff – were to be empowered once again and again to have the final say on how their schools should fulfil their primary goal: to reach “the societal purpose of the school” (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p. 213).

The general tendency of the reform may thus be understood as an attempt to reinstate an education system that fulfils a democratic purpose, with schools that can develop themselves via participation, trust and good relations between the members of the organisation.

A similar change occurred in the education policy in Denmark, which experienced the massive reform of its primary education system in 2013, the so-called “Folkeskolereformen”. Primary school in Denmark, as in Norway, is called “Folkeskolen,” which is directly

translated as “people’s school”: a school for all. Although the Danish reform made no call for schools to become learning organisations, many responsibilities were delegated to school leadership, and the development of schools was to be based on “a running and systematic evaluation” that produced data about the learning outcomes.

Even so, as in the case of the reform in Norway, the chief conclusion of the evaluation of the reform in Denmark was that it had failed to accomplish the goal of ensuring learning outcomes (“det faglige nivået”) among students. As in Norway, Denmark’s government thus determined that a new approach to developing schools was needed and has since launched a new reform called “Sammen for skolen” (“Together for School”). According to the premises of the reform, “Changes must take place with the involvement of the actors who have their everyday life at school. For they are the ones that are crucial in order to succeed in creating a good primary school” (Rosenkrantz-Theil, 2021, p. 12).

10. A cultural collision

The education reforms in Norway and Denmark were largely built on imported theories and policy elements and clearly had a taste for new public management. In his famous speech on education in 1996, Tony Blair identified “Education, education, education” as a strategy for achieving the “renewal of our public services”. The thinking based on new public management in that renewal was made even more explicit in Denmark, whose prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, answered the question of how to make schools better in 2009 by saying “Management, management, management” (Olesen, 2014, p. 36).

Education may be seen as a latecomer in absorbing the ideas of new public management because, as Weick and Westley (1996) have stated, “Organising and learning are essentially antithetical processes” (p. 440). Even in the early 2000s, when the reform in Norway was launched, studies on reforms in the public sector had shown that the ideas of new public management represented a “cultural collision”.

One of those studies was performed by Johan P. Olsen. In a book that Olsen edited with B. Guy Peters and subtitled “Experiential Learning in Administrative Reforms in Eight Democracies” (Olsen & Peters, 1996), he presented the case of Norway (Olsen, 1996). As Olsen and Peters investigated the learning processes in the reform, they defined the reforms as experiments, but what “experimental learning” did the reform produce? Generally speaking, Olsen indicated that the weakness of the reform was its primary concern for “managerial learning” and identifying “how managers may learn and thereby become more efficient in reaching pre-stated political targets” (Olsen, 1996, p. 182). Less attention was given to what Olsen called “political learning”, however, which was learning “related to ideals of democratic governance” and where “attention is also called to the fact that experiential learning is a precarious process. Political and social life are different from perfect scientific experiments” (Olsen, 1996, pp. 182–183).

The lack of attention to political learning in Norway, as in the other countries that Olsen and Peters presented, did not, however, give free licence to managerial learning. In Norway, the policy style was marked by a “‘peaceful coexistence and revolution in slow motion’, based on a spirit of sharing, more than winner-takes-all” (Olsen, 1996, p. 187). That policy strongly contrasts Blair’s (1996) ideas on education and education’s potential to reach a “world-class standard”. It also contrasts the policy of having Norway top OECD’s PISA rankings by positioning schools as learning organisations.

However, in both Norway and Denmark, if there was no unlearning, there was at least a break from what we may, following Arne Ebeltoft (1971), one of Thorsrud’s co-researchers in a book on learning in schools, call “mechanical” because of the lack of cooperation among teachers.

11. Hyggelig learning

The education reform in Norway may be understood as a cultural collision between external ideas and the ideas and values in Norwegian culture on how to learn. Learning, as explicitly presented in the theories of Thorsrud, Emery and Herbst, should be a democratic process that involves the learners. Organisational learning indeed concerns involvement and participation, and its outcome is strengthened democracy. The role of the school as a builder of democracy has been presented in both Norwegian and Danish schools since the establishment of so-called “people’s” primary schools. This purpose of education is part of what Peter Dahler-Larsen has called “horizontal enlightenment” in contrast with the vertical enlightenment in continental Europe (Dahler-Larsen, 2006).

That view on learning is deeply rooted in Norse medieval culture. The term normally translated to “learn” or to similar terms such as “think” and “remember” from Old Norse is the verb *hyggja* (Heggstad *et al.*, 1958, p. 327). That verb, used to describe processes related to learning, has found its way into modern Scandinavian languages in the term *hygge*, which is often found to be untranslatable into English and has been imported directly into the English language as a noun, not as a verb. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *hygge* as “a quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being; contentment from simple pleasures, including warmth, food, friends, etc.”. *Hygge* also appears in Nordic education policy. Despite the call for schools to become learning organisations, there has always been a focus on students’ well-being; and if the PISA results show that the Nordic countries, with exception of Finland, do not produce excellent learning outcomes when such outcomes are measured via tests in mathematics, natural sciences and languages, then the students are world-leading in *hygge*.

Investigating this correlation of *hygge* with learning may be a way to handle what Barbara Simpson and Nick Marshall have defined as “one of the key problematic in the contemporary organisational literature”: “how best to understand the relationship between emotion and learning” (Simpson & Marshall, 2010, p. 3). Simpson and Marshall’s “solution” to the “key problematic” is to focus on the dynamic flow of events in social interactions. In the Nordic setting, this flow is designed to create learning and well-being.

The core of the Nordic way of organisational learning is participation, in which participants feel that they are part of a community. However, to think exclusively about *hygge* as the core of the learning process falls under Luhmann’s critique of naivety. Olsen (1996) also explicitly criticised Norwegian learning in the public sector for being too slow, lacking the structural elements in the learning processes and being “unable to unlearn obsolete and dysfunctional beliefs and causal models, attitudes and values, standard operating procedures, and institutional arrangements” (p. 211).

Another element in the Nordic model has been its ability to incorporate and modify ideas and theories with existing cultural traits. Both so-called “democracy at work” and “the garbage can” were sorts of melting pots of ideas and theories from different cultural settings. The education reform in Norway in the 2000s was different, for it maintained that the direct importation of specific theories and ideas would bring about change in schools. That instrumental belief in learning theories failed to fully understand the cultural setting in which they should operate. They were not translated or modified so that they could have communicated with schools.

To understand the challenges that follow government-initiated reforms that attempt to import knowledge to be implemented in schools, we may draw on Frank Blackler’s (1995) practice perspective: that knowledge should not be seen as a static entity but rather as knowing and “analyzed as an active process that is mediated, situated, provisional, pragmatic and contested” (p. 1021). We argue that such a practice perspective is important but that it should be combined with a historical perspective and an intercultural lens on learning approaches and their political applications.

Note

1. The Norwegian word used in the report is *føyelig*, meaning “meek”, “submissive” and “compliant”.

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Corresponding author

Thomas Dahl can be contacted at: thomas.dahl@ntnu.no

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