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To cite this article: Heidun Oldervik, Ellen Saur & Hans Petter Ulleberg (2022) Cooperation with local community and businesses: quality negotiations in upper secondary education, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 8:1, 75-83, DOI: [10.1080/20020317.2022.2031597](https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2022.2031597)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2022.2031597>



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Published online: 02 Feb 2022.



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Cooperation with local community and businesses: quality negotiations in upper secondary education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how quality is negotiated and challenged when two Norwegian rural schools cooperate with the local community and businesses. The article builds on three sub-studies on two upper secondary schools in the process of merging in the areas of follow-up services, physical school environment and leadership. Several methodological access points for the field are utilized, including interviews, shadowing and document analyses. By questioning quality in these local settings, we found that both schools and local business took a pragmatic and pupil-centred approach to quality. We discuss how quality is understood locally, how different quality practices are conducted and their significance for the schools.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 3 June 2021
Accepted 14 January 2022

KEYWORDS

Quality; upper secondary education; local community; local businesses

Introduction

In this article, we examine practices and perceptions of quality when two schools cooperate with the local community and businesses. As stated by Moos and Cone in the introduction to this special issue, it is not a linear and ubiquitous pathway between privatization, digitalization and respatialization in education. A small rural community might face other challenges than urban settings when local community, businesses and school are closely connected and interdependent of each other. Taking governmentality as perspective, we discuss how quality is performed and what significance various quality practices have for the schools. Here, a point of interest is whether the quality negotiations between the schools and their surroundings are transparent or blurred and how businesses' economic force and power relations might have influence. Data has been collected in three areas: follow-up services,¹ physical environment of the schools and leadership group.

The two schools in our study obtained different scores on the first national school quality measurement for upper secondary education, referred to as 'school performance indicators' and 'measurements of school quality'. The Centre for Economic Research conducted this quality measurement, which was published in *SØF Report No. 01/16* (Falch et al., 2016). The schools were fairly similar in respect of size and educational provision and were located about 50 kilometres apart, although the towns belonged to different municipalities and had different county municipal owners. By way of the research project, which was carried out by a research group that had

obtained access to the two schools and conducted a broad research project,² it became clear that there were no obvious differences between the schools that would explain why their rankings in the SØF Report were so different. The quality of the schools' cooperation with the local community and local businesses appeared to be especially important and interesting, but also challenging, and in this article we will further pursue the examination of quality negotiations in this area. The Norwegian municipal and regional reform initiated in 2014 was the reason behind the two municipalities and county municipalities in this study merging, thus starting the process of consolidating the schools. The municipalities and counties have now merged, and the two schools will be located together in a new school building beginning in 2023. This consolidation process has mobilized residents, politicians and businesses in the two municipalities. A pivotal issue in the debate has been whether two school buildings should be retained, whether only the larger school should remain, or whether an entirely new school should be built to replace the two original buildings at a new location between the two existing schools. In the debate, the results of the SØF report were used strategically.

The discourse on quality is international in nature, and the debate on quality is often linked to neo-liberal governance of the public sector, which has consequences for the development of quality assurance systems for welfare professions generally (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2012; Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013). The debate on quality has gradually expanded in respect of schools and education. How

quality is perceived in national and international measurements is affected by international trends in education policy, in which education is increasingly understood as a factor contributing to a global competitive economy (Moos, 2019; Volckmar, 2016). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with its PISA study and recommendations for important competences for the future, makes a major contribution to this understanding (NOU 2018: 2; OECD, 2018). When quality in schools is measured according to narrow indicators such as marks and completion rates, it tells us little about the quality of the content in the schools and the quality of the encounters among the various actors.

Method and analytical perspective

This article is based on shadowing of and interviews with counsellors from the follow-up services, interviews with the schools' group of leaders and studies of public case documents and op-ed articles in local newspapers on the consolidation of the schools and the construction of a new joint school.

Individual interviews were conducted with 11 persons in leadership positions – the principals, assistant principals, department leaders of various education programmes, counsellors from the follow-up services and administrative managers. The interviews were conducted as conversations on the following topics: the meaning of quality in practice, quality measurements and the consolidation process for the schools. A discursive approach was selected for the interviews, and the perspective taken that meaning and knowledge are produced in the local and dynamic interactions in the interview situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 169). Three counsellors from the follow-up services were interviewed in a focus group – two counsellors affiliated with the two schools, as well as one at a larger city school – in order to gain an insight into whether the issues at the two schools were specific or identifiable in a different context. Given the researchers' knowledge of the local context, gained partly through several visits to the schools, it appeared that the interview statements reflected a range of views among school staff members. Prior to the focus group interview with the counsellors from the follow-up services, two of the counsellors were shadowed, one at one of the merging schools and one a city school in same county. Shadowing, as described by Barbara Czarniawska, is 'fieldwork on the move', 'a way of doing research that mirrors the mobility of contemporary life' (Czarniawska, 2007, p. 58). The purpose of shadowing the counsellors was to gain insight into different work tasks, contact points and the positions filled by the follow-up services.³

The interviews were recorded on a tape recorder and then transcribed. The information from the study has been appropriately handled and informants made anonymous in accordance with the guidelines of the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).⁴

The written source material consists of municipal and county municipal case documents, political decisions, assessments, consultations, and op-eds in local newspapers. Case documents and decisions from 39 municipal meetings and three county council meetings from 2014 to 2019 have been reviewed. Of these sources, four case presentations and decisions were selected for more in-depth analysis. The case documents also contained consultative comments by companies, schools, several local organizations, and individuals on the consolidation of the schools. A search using the newspaper database A-tekst was also conducted to find relevant articles or op-eds from local and regional newspapers from 2008 to 2020 in respect of a new, joint upper secondary school. This search generated 50 newspaper articles; of these, two op-eds were selected for analysis.

Relating our study to questions raised in the introduction to this special issue (p. 3–4), our approach is how commercial forces and global quality practices, like quality measurements, matter in the local context. To grasp the complexity and ambivalence of the governing technologies of quality locally and how these have significance for the shaping of the schools, counsellors and leaders, we have combined governmentality (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1979) with insights from studies on the role of the physical environment in education (Frelin & Grannäs, 2014; Gislason, 2010; Higgins et al., 2005), bricolage (Halme et al., 2012; Phillimore et al., 2016) and the concept of 'the well-tempered self' (Krüger & Trippestad, 2003; Miller, 1993).

The schools, local communities and local businesses

The work preparatory to the act on upper secondary education in 1974 emphasized that significant geographical differences in services and admissions to upper secondary schools should be reduced (Berglie, 2020; Report to the Storting (White Paper) no.16 (2006 -- 2007)). The two upper secondary schools in our study were established in the latter half of the 1970s, just in time for postwar children to fulfil their educational dreams without having to move to a bedsit in the nearest major city. The internal organization of the two schools was also a result of 1970s coordination efforts in upper secondary education, as both schools offer a university preparatory programme and vocational programmes. At the beginning of the project

each school had between 100 and 150 pupils. The smaller school, which is located in the smaller municipality, had been threatened with closure for many years. The situation was better for the larger school in the larger municipality, although it, too, struggled to provide complete programmes for certain studies.

Over time, upper secondary education in Norway is extended to new groups of students and is now a right and a part of the comprehensive and compulsory school system (Thuen & Volckmar, 2020). Upper secondary education with study programmes for everyone is a county municipal responsibility and is divided into university preparatory study programmes (3 years) and vocational training programmes (4 years), which lead to either university and college admissions certification or vocational competency. More than 90% of Norwegian 16- to 19-year-olds are pupils, apprentices, or trainee candidates in upper secondary education (Statistics Norway, 2018), and the pupils are distributed fairly evenly between the two study programmes. Upper secondary education in Norway has a long tradition for cooperating with the public sector and commercial companies, and this is especially apparent today through Vocational Specialization (YFF) and the apprentice scheme for vocational programmes.

Two major topics dominate the discussion on upper secondary education in Norway today – dropout rates and vocational training. There is a certain connection between these topics since vocational training has the highest dropout rate. For many pupils, getting an apprenticeship after two years of schooling may present a bottleneck and lead to dropout. Another reason for dropout is the theorization of vocational subjects, which is partly due to the 1970s coordination of school systems, and Reform 94's intent to make it easier for pupils in vocational studies to be able to obtain university and college admissions certification (Berglie, 2020). Broader research on neo-liberal trends in education problematize the involvement of commercial actors in the educational sector and the fuelling of restructuring education towards homogenization and standardization based on quantifiable and measurable results (Moos & Cone, 2022). With this background it is interesting to study how the two upper secondary schools in this study cooperate with local business, giving a high quality and relevant education for all kinds of pupils and their local community.

Characterizing both schools is their extensive collaboration with local businesses and industry, where the public sector also accepts apprentices for vocational programmes. The university preparatory programme collaborates with local businesses on traineeships, various development projects and entrepreneurship in the school context. The private sector in the recently merged municipality is industrial in

character, ranging from larger shipyards to smaller mechanical industries and a number of workshops, as well as high-tech entrepreneurial activities, in both sea-based and agricultural primary sectors. There is a longstanding tradition of industrial activity in both former municipalities, with the smaller of the two even being referred to as an industrial village, an industrial adventure, and as 'legendary in the Norwegian context' (Dahle, 2003; Jacobsen, 2002). The proportion of the population working in industry ranges from 30 and 40% in both former municipalities, which is quite high by Norwegian standards. Much of the industry has developed from rural craftsmanship traditions and is based on the needs of the primary industries, and the organization of the work, to a greater or lesser extent, continues to reflect this (Karlsen, 2009, p. 24). More recently, local industry has been characterized by innovation and offshoots of 'parent companies'. In a larger study that includes some of these local businesses, Karlsen (2009) has shown that reuse of developed knowledge in new contexts is essential, and that knowledge and learning are embedded in communities of practice developed over time, where values and professional identity are also important factors. In the cooperation between school and business, there is a transfer of knowledge, wherein the schools are updated in terms of the needs of the labour market and individual pupils learn within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2004), and where the companies benefit from the pupil (Rokkones, 2020).

Local practices and perceptions of quality

New school building: location and local quality expectations

In the new municipality, the vision of a new upper secondary school became a material symbol and expression of a sustainable future for the municipality (Ulleberg & Bergschöld, 2020). In general, schools are important as educational institutions in society and are also physical locations where education in its wider sense takes place. School buildings are a major investment in and for society and represent considerable economic, pedagogical, and environmental efforts, both nationally and locally. The buildings are expected to be structurally sustainable, and they are to be filled with sustainable pedagogy and academic content to build a sustainable society for the future.

The physical environment of schools is part of a school's structural quality (NOU, 2003: 16; NOU, 2002: 10) and comprises one of several factors that affect the quality of a school's activities (Ulleberg & Bergschöld, 2020). Schools are designed and built for specific educational purposes, and schools are thereby products of their time. Architectural and pedagogical

ideals change as a result of changes in schools' tasks and functions. Changes in pedagogical knowledge and what is at any given time considered good pedagogical practice, are also a result of what kinds of citizens and society we intend to nurture and educate (Ulleberg, 2016; Ulleberg & Bergschöld, 2020). This entails school building designs that relates to curricula, how schools can promote pupils' skills and competency and how the physical environment of schools can create and recognize diversity and inclusion among the schools' pupils. Curricula and practical pedagogy are key factors in the functionality of school buildings, and the academic and social goals of education must be said to 'translate' into schools' physical design. This physical framework may appear to be stimulating or limiting in terms of instruction, learning and social life at schools (Frelin & Grannäs, 2014; Gislason, 2010; Higgins et al., 2005).

Central to the discussion in the new municipality concerning merging of two local schools was the close collaboration between the schools and local businesses and how both the schools and businesses might benefit from the possible choices on the table. Building a new school appeared as an important idea and representation in the local community. In both public case documents and op-ed articles in local newspapers expectations and desires, views, and needs relating to the new school were expressed. In order to meet an unpredictable future with anticipated changes in teaching and learning methods, as well as changes in labour market and society, the school owner (the county) was arguing for the importance of designing adaptable and flexible school buildings. At the same time; one can say it might be a difficult exercise to visualize learning and teaching for the future, and develop new school buildings that are appropriate for a 'learning future' that remains unknown (Watson, 2007). A key argument for a new and larger joint school was that it would be sufficiently robust to offer more varied programmes of study than possible at the two smaller schools, and, in turn, that this might attract more pupils in a situation where many pupils were applying to upper secondary schools outside of the municipality after lower secondary school. It was believed that a broader range of programmes of study would be capable of attracting more pupils. It was pronounced that establishing a new joint upper secondary school would develop a more robust academic environment and better conditions for the recruitment of highly qualified teachers. These arguments are in line with unrestricted school choice (Regjeringen, 2021), where upper secondary schools compete for the same pupils. However, opinions about the new joint school were divided and some leaders at each school were concerned that it would be too far for many pupils to travel to the new joint school. This especially related

to pupils in 'dropout mode', who literally required assistance getting up in the morning and who, as one of the leaders noted, would have major challenges in relation to bussing and longer commutes. Travel distance would also influence the significance and role of the school building as a local gathering place after school hours, as the new school is not located near the urban areas where the two previous schools had been located (Ulleberg & Bergschöld, 2020).

Taking care of pupils at risk – the need for vocational subjects

A central theme in the case documents, consultations and debates in the local press is that quality involves a close connection with the local community and business sector and the ability to properly follow up pupils. Deciding to build a new upper secondary school was to ensure that the county and the new municipality would have a modern upper secondary school; a school adapted to the future needs of education, the community and businesses and a flagship for both the county municipality and the municipality. Objections from certain areas of the business sector and people in leadership positions to the new, larger school in a new location relate to the risk of jeopardizing current good practices. A businessperson who authored an op-ed in the local newspaper expressed concern about the conditions for vocational subjects and pupils with more practical skills, stating that building a new, larger joint school was inconsistent with helping young people in terms of preventing student dropout and mental health issues. Furthermore, that collaboration with local companies would suffer and vocational subjects depend on collaboration with companies. The leader of the follow-up service at one of the schools shared some of these opinions, saying: 'I strongly believe that schools should be where the jobs are ... Or, [for] vocational training at least – where the jobs are is where people live' [meaning that few people are living where the new school would be located]. He added:

So, I wouldn't complain if they had tried to experiment with a school that had a more decentralised structure than the one we have today, where everything will be built together in one big building. They think it's very smart, so it's uncertain that it is in fact very smart. It could be that future learning should actually take place to a larger extent [...] where the jobs are.

At one school in particular, the concepts of customization and real-life assignments have developed into a kind of pedagogical guidelines. On the one hand, this approach encompasses both an individual approach and the customizing of teaching plans for individual pupils, and on the other hand, the social mission and relationship with the local community by undertaking assignments from the business sector.

By way of real-life assignments, collaboration is developed between the school and some of the relevant employers and apprenticeship locations, and pupils are also given the opportunity to feel that they are useful. This usefulness experienced through the school's collaboration with various actors, facilitate meaningful and good trainee experiences. The pupils may be in learning situations that have significance beyond their own learning process, and this helps to increase motivation for many pupils as long as it is adapted to their level (Utvær & Saur, 2019).

Counsellors and leaders deal with complexity and dilemmas in quality negotiations

As having the greatest number of pupils attend upper secondary school is viewed as an important quality criterion, follow-up services have become an important component of these efforts. While at an overarching level, quality is viewed in the context of effective educational pathways, the counsellors must relate to pupils who break with this notion. Counsellors clearly state that, in order to provide good assistance to the pupils, they require flexibility within the external frameworks that are provided, and that this flexibility must be communicated, negotiated and embedded in management that is based on trust rather than control. This is also justified because the counsellors have to manage a complex work situation and they demand that they be allowed to define this complexity themselves based on their knowledge and experience of the needs they are to cover. The counsellors describe how they need to handle multiple contact points and cooperation partners in many different interdisciplinary collaborative relationships – in the schools, companies and support services. They utilize the flexibility they have, are pragmatic in their approach and are good at improvisation. Their pedagogical work is dynamic and requires the use of academic discretion developed based on knowledge and experience, and the counsellor manages and improvises in relation to time use and frameworks for the work on the basis of communication and trust.

Even though it is a complex and demanding undertaking, the quality of education and opportunities for success are contingent on the counsellors caring for their pupils and being driven by a desire for them to succeed in the long term. This means that they need to show pupils that they are engaged and concerned about them as whole and complex individuals and that they don't view them as simply needing to complete their educational pathway as quickly as possible. They say that they exercise a form of controlled action. According to the counsellors many of the pupils have encountered few expectations that they can succeed and have often experienced defeat in the school setting. Encountering expectations of being able to contribute, cope and succeed in some areas will then be an important quality in the service.

Reciprocity in the relationship between local community, business sector and school is something every interview subject in the leadership groups at the schools has emphasized, as expressed here by one of the principals:

In other words, the fact that upper secondary schools try to keep in touch with the businesses is not so unique, but the fact that the business community is concerned with the same may not be as common as it is here in this municipality. The local businesses are very concerned about the contact with the upper secondary school and being able to provide something to us.

The partnership also includes high-tech equipment: one of the schools has received expensive CNC (computer numerical control) equipment from the business sector. The leadership groups at both schools refer to both support and demands from the business sector and cooperation on joint development projects, as well as local knowledge helping the school to customize educational pathways for the pupils. The leader of the follow-up service would have liked more extensive cooperation with businesses for all pupils: '(...) one could engage in more dialogue and discuss the values and important issues relating to the company'. One of the principal's states that

We would not have been anything without what is around us. (...) We are not doing this for our own sake. We must have a business community that are able to accommodate students. It is quite demanding for them too. At the same time, it is a way for them to ensure recruitment.

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School leaders have a key role in facilitating the cooperation with the local community and local businesses. Ambivalence and tensions can be seen between, on the one hand the local leaders' responsibility for a school of high quality and for pupils and partners, and, on the other hand, quality measurements 'from above'. School leaders especially question the relevance and usefulness of the new quality measurement systems when it comes to giving the pupils the best possible education. The SØF report was used strategically in the merger of the schools and municipalities, putting the leaders in the local spotlight for both good and bad results. The leaders, especially the two principals, find that local strategies and discussions about the schools' results in the SØF report and the schools' part in the coming municipality and county mergers are time-consuming and take attention away from what they consider to be important tasks. This fits well with studies showing that principals have additional obligations relating to external activities (Ladegård & Vabo, 2010; Møller, 2011) and that school leaders must handle dilemmas, tensions and paradoxes in their work (Møller, 2011, 2009).

Possibilities and challenges with local understanding and practices of quality

In this section we will first address how quality is handled and understood in the close cooperation between the schools and local enterprises, also in relation to a question stated in the introductory chapter: how commercial actors affect public decisions. Vocational programmes in upper secondary education in Norway have a longstanding tradition of collaboration with commercial enterprises and public sector. This collaboration and the local business expectations are apparent in the debate concerning the new school. In consultations, op-eds, public meetings and political debates, arguments both for and against a new school deal with the needs of local businesses and the prosperity of the municipality. In this local context with reforms and merging processes, maintaining and developing an autonomous and value-creating local community, has high standings. Here the traditional Norwegian district counter force (Innset, 2020) is merging with capitalist-exchange as an important framework for articulating and enacting, not only values (Moos & Cone, 2022, pp. 4, referring to Deleuze, Guattari, 1983), but also quality, locally. In the arguments we find in the op-eds and case-documents, ideas about effective learning, future learning and pupil-centred learning are intertwined with business and community development. The local political work for maintaining and developing their upper secondary school, seems to be in line with the two main objectives in the Nordic Model in education, *the instrumental or economic motive* and *the social or democratic motive*, both aimed at developing a prosperous welfare society and giving opportunities for the individual pupil (Telhaug et al., 2006, p. 253). Not having a relevant upper-secondary school in their vicinity tend to enhance socio-economic differences and cause drop-out (Falch et al., 2016). When these schools have close connections to local businesses and local community, there is a mutual obligation between school and local community. In the reciprocity and in the partnerships, there could be unfortunate bindings and potential conflicts over the meaning of quality. But, as referred to in the introduction (Moos & Cone, 2022), commercialized products and services are not necessarily problematic. It is how teachers and schools choose to use them, and an awareness of their significance and influence, that matters. (Moos & Cone, 2022, pp. 4, referring to Hogan, Enright, Stylianou., McCuaig, 2018). Although their networking happens in a landscape where lines may be blurred, leaders and counsellors in our study seem quite aware of their educational responsibilities in a wide sense. Being a quite small community, with mostly smaller local enterprises, the interaction between the schools and their surroundings is transparent, negotiating to secure an upper secondary education of high quality, locally.

Next, our point of discussion is how local quality-enactment meets the new modes of governing through new quality measurement systems, and with what significance for counsellors and leaders. The starting point of our study was a new quality measurement system as part of new modes of governing Norwegian upper secondary schools. As mentioned in the introduction (Moos & Cone, 2022), the rationality of these governing technologies is linked to measurable learning results, rather than a content-based governance of education. National governing of education and transnational agencies like OECD promotes measurable competencies and skills. Systems for measuring quality are held to promote quality through standardization and homogenization. Furthermore, the opportunity to compare quality has a logical correlation with being competitive on a market (Hverven, 2020). Critical evaluations of governance reforms such as NPM in the public sector identify a tension between the imposition of uniform standards, e.g. by way of quality programmes and measurements, and the need to allow local institutions to adapt to local needs (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen, 2013). Rephrasing the important question in the introduction (Moos & Cone, 2022, p. 3) we can ask which counsellor, leader and pupil ontologies are enabled through the local quality negotiations with tensions, dilemmas and obligations involved. Counsellors in the follow-up services, who encounter pupils who oppose the notion of effective educational pathways, are under pressure from above in connection with the discourse on educational efficiency and risk. In their work, the counsellors have a lot in common with what Phillimore et al. (2016) describe as ‘social bricoleurs’, mediating between internal and external resources in an organization. They describe how bricolage enables companies to mobilize available resources via their relationships and contacts, both within and outside their own organization. Halme et al. (2012) argue that bricolage involves one’s attitude to facing challenges and spotting opportunities, as supported by one’s knowledge and experience and based on a specific worldview. Follow-up counsellors as bricoleurs work with the resources at their disposal and attempt in creative ways to customize suitable programmes for the pupils who, for various reasons, are unable to fit into the school day. For follow-up counsellors to succeed at this assignment, they need various tools at their disposal and a willingness at the school for work to be performed in this manner. The counsellors also agree that it is necessary to design services at the various schools that safeguard the difference that is represented by the local community. According to the school leaders in this study, local norms and expectations may contradict external measurements and requirements of educational policy programmes. The scores in the SØF-report were used strategically by politicians and the business sector in the debate over the new school. This new system of quality measurements gave

the school leaders an extra dimension of visibility and responsibility, being ‘named, shamed or blamed’ (Elstad, 2009) for the results, whether good or bad. Through the Norwegian Education Act and curricula, schools generally have a comprehensive mandate and multiple goals, some of which may be contradictory and, not least, difficult to interpret. School leaders, then, must handle dilemmas, tensions and paradoxes relating to loyalties, new expectations and principles of governance (Møller, 2011, 2009). The term ‘well-tempered self’ (Krüger & Trippestad, 2003; Miller, 1993) illustrates a *subjectivation* process where individuals must handle and negotiate between conflicting demands. In this case, the importance of the schools’ relationship with the local community and businesses stands out as an added dimension of the condition of school leaders at a school in a small community (Oldervik, 2020).

Finally, we raise the discussion of what knowledge is of most worth, with possible consequences for vocational education and pupils. The follow-up services, based on their local knowledge, use various workplaces as learning arenas for technical knowledge; this use is also for the experience of usefulness, coping and motivation for pupils in vulnerable positions. In the local context, a successful industrial environment has arisen in which traditional mechanical industries have developed into enterprises that also have a considerable degree of advanced technology, CNC production and innovation. These local actors are, on the one hand, dependent on the necessary technical knowledge being generated through the school’s vocational study programmes. On the other hand, the enterprises need employees who also possess several types of knowledge, e.g. those found in the common core subjects (Report to the Storting (White Paper) no.21 (2020 –2021)) and in the OECD’s cross-sectoral skills (OECD, 2018). The rationality regarding how learning occurs and what constitutes preferred knowledge is materialized in different programmes for quality measurements, in policy documents such as curricula and in school buildings and are included in practices that shape all actors in the field of schools and are ‘practices of governing what a child should become’ (Popkewitz, 2009, p. 304). Knowledge then also becomes a question of power. What are defined as societally valid knowledge and skills are both reflected and challenged in local practices. The above-mentioned common core subjects might offer vocational education pupils an easier path to higher education. Together with an efficiency discourse based on market forces (Moos, 2006), this may have unfortunate consequences for vocational subjects where the knowledge base and skills are acquired through situated and slow practical training. Thus, it may appear as though vocational knowledge is not recognized as being of equal value, often assumed to be at a lower

level in the hierarchy of knowledge (Bleazby, 2015; Young, 2013). On the other hand, education can become too location-specific and overly vocational, not giving pupils access to the kind of knowledge that enables social mobility, civic participation and equal opportunities (Köpsén, 2019).

Summing up

As stated in the introductory chapter (Moos & Cone, 2022), the boundaries between private and public responsibilities continue to blur, and in this article, we have examined selected practices and perceptions of quality in two upper secondary schools and looked at what quality entails when the two schools cooperate with local businesses. In local terms, quality first and foremost involves being close to pupils and having good cooperation with local communities and the business sector to provide an education that is considered relevant, foregrounding the needs of pupils, the community and the business sector. Some of these time-honoured local practices are among the main topics in the discussions concerning the new joint school.

The discourse on how education authorities aim to achieve quality through various quality measurements challenges both how the school’s multifaceted mission is understood and carried out and the local expectations for quality. By questioning quality in these local settings, we found that both schools and local business and industry took a pragmatic and pupil-centred approach to quality. In working close to and cooperating with commercial companies and public enterprises, school leaders and follow-up counsellors showed a strong commitment both to the local community and industry and to pupils. There was a sense of mutual dependency between the schools and local community and industry. There are spaces for the schools’ actors to operate, presupposing and facilitating not only flexibility and creativity, but also ‘counter-conduct’. This is a productive form of resistance intrinsic in governmentality, in this case seen as struggling with implemented national systems of governing and working in the spaces of freedom with capacity for handling dilemmas and possibilities (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1979; Niesche, 2013). These schools seem to handle well the major concerns in upper secondary education today – dropout and vocational training, cooperating with local businesses. The local understanding and practices of quality in education provide a critical perspective, together with nuances, on aspects of quality measurements, market influence and international school policy discourse. How recent governmentalisation through certain rationalities and practices of standardized quality programmes serve local schools, professionals, pupils, local enterprises

and the local community – and, at the end – a prosperous welfare state, is not so obvious and calls for more research. Our findings and the concerns raised, justify a serious discussion about fundamental issues of quality that are relevant to the upper secondary stage in many education systems and countries.

Notes

1. The follow-up services are tasked with contacting pupils who, for various reasons, have not applied for upper secondary school or have dropped out of studies before completion. The counsellors in this service work to help pupils obtain formal competency, although this can take place outside the usual adaptations in school programmes and often takes longer than the usual course of study (Saur, 2020).
2. The background for this article is a project on how school quality can be described and understood, carried out by a research group and presented in the anthology *A Multitude of Qualities in Upper Secondary Education* (Oldervik et al., 2020) and the article ‘Economies and diseconomies of scale in vocational education: significance of location for training in school and business’ (Utvær & Saur, 2019).
3. The counsellor at the district school was followed through a selection of tasks and throughout certain days, while the counsellor at the city school was followed for an entire week. The reason for the different approaches was that the counsellor at the district school had several functions at the school.
4. <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/om-oss/komiteer-og-utvalg/nesh/>; <https://www.nsd.no/en>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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