



Preparing for a New Norwegian Curriculum: Strategies, Legitimization, and Tensions

Summary of Report no. 2

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Practices (EVA2020)

Summary of Report no. 2

This report conveys how county and municipal authorities and schools prepared for the implementation of the Knowledge Promotion Reform as renewed and revised in the national curriculum known as LK20. The report focuses on preliminary steps taken before implementation of the LK20 in the fall of 2020, and we investigate how schools and counties/municipalities dealt with this preparatory phase. This investigation corresponds to the third phase in the national strategy in which actors prepare for and put the LK20 to use at regional and local levels.

The report communicates how representatives from the local education authorities and school leaders, together with pedagogical staff at the school level, prepare and make use of diverse tools in the early phase of implementing the LK20. By applying three theoretical lenses, we examine how these actors work and collaborate in the initial stages of curriculum renewal. First, we make use of theory and research on reform processes. Second, we draw on institutional theory with a particular focus on institutional work. Finally, we apply theories of strategy to expound on the choices actors make in the preparatory work in the organisations. Three research questions form the basis for the investigation and the ensuing report: (1) What strategies and processes do municipalities, counties and schools build on in their work? (2) How are these strategies justified and legitimised? (3) What tensions arise and how are these tensions dealt with locally?

The data material that comprises this report consists of four cases that involve municipal and local plans and steering documents, semi-structured interviews with representatives from the local education authorities and school leaders, and field observations from leadership meetings. Data were collected mainly during spring 2020. Quantitative data reflecting the preparatory work were collected via the survey 'Questions to Norwegian schools' during spring 2020 and are included in the analysis.

Strategy documents

An analysis of the data shows that variation exists between the municipalities and schools relating to how they have prepared for the curriculum renewal, what has been prioritised during the process, and how far they have come in this process. One common denominator for the four case municipalities and schools is that all are currently engaged in the process, although this varies in terms of the extent, prioritised areas and expectations put on the different actors participating. The sector was invited to participate in developing the LK20 curriculum through hearings, proposals and

co-creation; however, we found few strategy documents that clearly communicated how municipalities and schools planned to operationalise the curriculum.

Despite the partial absence of local plans that could be directly linked to the implementation of the LK20, our analyses demonstrate that the overarching plans for development and quality work constitute substantial contributions since they describe the municipalities' and schools' strategies for developmental work. Thus, the schools' and the municipalities' plans implicitly carried importance for the work to be carried out with the subject curricula constituting the LK20.

Strategic work

Our analyses identified a number of strategies and processes across several municipalities and schools, revealing, with some variation, a series of recurring strategies. In two of the municipal cases, the work on strategies stands out. We find that the differences between these two and the others can be understood when local work is aligned with contexts that exceed the renewal of the curriculum, such as the merging of municipalities and demographic or geographic variables. Our analyses show that strategic work is aligned with current challenges and is operationalised in continuing the processes of cooperation involving different actors. These processes result in great flexibility for schools and municipalities and can result in subtle modifications for the local context. On the other hand, this can also prevent overall commitment in which the various components amount to an amalgamated effort of developmental work.

The data show that a single municipality can have wide-ranging and complex structures and arenas for working with the LK20 and that such structures vary with the size of the municipality. One example illustrates how structures and arenas are conducive to joint efforts among staff; plan groups are continuously planning and preparing for school development. As for justification and legitimisation, these often concern connecting what is seen as national or municipal expectations with locally prioritised developmental areas at the separate schools. All the schools in our material have chosen to start working with the LK20 by focusing on values and principles in the overarching core section. The principal argument is that this section of the LK20 constitutes the basis for reform work at the organisational level.

One important tendency in the quantitative material indicates that the net-based resources made available by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, i.e. supporting material and competence modules preparing for the implementation of LK20, are utilised to a lesser extent by

secondary schools than at primary and lower secondary levels. Qualitative analyses confirm the impression that leaders at both levels acknowledge and take responsibility for the renewal processes. Concerning collaboration between schools, our data from one secondary school show a wide-ranging and well-organised network across schools, for example, with regard to subject-specific networks.

Among case schools that have entered into collaboration with external competence providers, we identify certain challenges linked to strategic work. Our interpretation of the interviews indicates that strategic work is shifted from the responsible party in the municipality or school to the external provider, primarily because municipalities “buy” a strategy plan already developed by the provider. We see examples of resistance in schools because this plan does not quite match what is perceived as what the schools need. On the other hand, there is no doubt that collaboration with an external competence provider adds important resources (e.g. staff, digital tools and structures) to ensure progress in the schools’ developmental work.

Expectations, justifications and tensions

One vital finding across the data material is the need for an early start and allocating enough time; several representatives from the local education authorities point to time as the decisive factor. At the same time, representatives from the local education authorities highlight the need for schools to advance at their own pace and to develop a collective culture based on sharing. Document analysis and interviews show that strategic work for operationalising the LK20 happens when actors from diverse sectors, professions and positions join efforts. There are clear expectations connected to taking advantage of the Directorate’s competence modules/supporting material and/or to collaborate with external competence providers. This material was used by several municipalities, partly with modules supplied by external providers.

Another finding pertains to different tensions connected to deciding on which strategies and processes to engage in and the need to justify and legitimise alternatives. In particular, we found tensions and challenges in efforts to connect the LK20’s core section with its emphasis on values and principles to the initial work with subject-specific syllabi. A second tension that emerged in the survey is that among the informants, only one-half of school leaders in primary and lower secondary schools and only one-third of school leaders in secondary schools experienced that sufficient time was allocated to working with the LK20. Making space for LK20-related processes, finding time and legitimising the need for time can be related to the need to maintain a fine balance between stability and transformation, for example, when planning and strategic groups were reorganised and given

new assignments. Typically, these groups also retained their already existing assignments, adding to maintaining the delicate balance between 'new' and 'existing'.