



A study of Norwegian schools achieving good national test results



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 June 2015

Received in revised form 3 June 2016

Accepted 10 June 2016

Available online xxx

ABSTRACT

This article presents a qualitative case study of seven Norwegian schools that over a period of at least three years have achieved good results on national tests. The schools are situated in socioeconomic areas where one statistically would not expect such results. This article sheds light on how national tests influence various elements of practice in these schools: specifically how school leaders, teachers, and pupils talk about the tests; how they prepare their pupils for the tests; and how they use the test results. We found there is a gap between the participants' opinions of national tests and their practice when applying the tests results.

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1. Introduction

During the last 25 years, we have seen a remarkable rise in both testing and the application of test results as a means of measuring the educational impact of these tests. International comparative studies like PISA (Programme for International Pupil Assessment) and TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), as well as national tests, are introduced in many countries. Pupils' achievement test scores have come to dominate educational discourse among educators, policy makers, media, and the general public (Levine & Levine, 2013). The extensive international and national testing we have seen over the last years, and the fact that test results are made public, have affected practice in different ways and lead to changes in teaching classroom strategies (Barrett, 2009; Berliner, 2011; Biesta, 2009; Lowrie & Diezmann, 2009; Mausethagen, 2013; Stauffer & Mason, 2013; Valli & Buese, 2007). According to news reports, teaching to the test and the exemption of weak pupils from the tests are possible ways to ensure that test scores appear high or show improvement. Berliner (2011) reports that some schools, in their desire to improve test results, narrow the curriculum so that more instructional time is dedicated to subjects that matter for the tests. School activities that are meant to foster citizenship, as well as physical education and art, are cut out or reduced. Finally, recess is made shorter because it is not really important nor directly effects what is measured in pupils' learning outcome. All of this is done so that more time can be dedicated to the specific subjects and skills that are to be tested.

Similar tendencies are documented in Norway, but on a smaller scale. The most common way to approach national testing is to prepare pupils by focusing on how much time the test will take and what kind of questions to expect, as well as concentrating on teaching basic skills in reading literacy, numeracy and English throughout the school year (Grøgaard, 2012). Allerup, Kovač, Kvåle, Langfeldt, and Skov (2009) have found that national tests have led to a practice where teaching is more

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orientated towards these tests, indicating that different kinds of standardised tests both effect and lead to changes in classroom practices in several ways.

Very few studies have explored the implementation of national tests in Norway even though they are designed to be a tool for developing classroom practice. However, existing research reports have suggested that the usefulness of these tests depends on ones position in the educational system. A report by [Allerup et al. \(2009\)](#) evaluating the national tests in Norway indicates that school leaders see more value in the tests than the teachers who are generally more sceptical towards external control mechanisms ([Mausethagen & Granlund, 2012](#)). [Seland, Vibe, and Hovdhaugen \(2013\)](#) have evaluated how the results from national tests are used in schools, arriving at the conclusion that although teachers use test results to provide feedback to pupils' parents, they feel these results have limited value as an educational tool. [Vestheim \(2014\)](#) found that schools with high scores on national tests collaborate when analysing and reflecting upon their own practice; results from national tests are one of many sources they use. The study reported in this article builds on these findings, exploring how national tests are implemented and affect practices in seven specific Norwegian schools. It is interesting to note that ninety-seven percent of Norwegian children attend a comprehensive school owned by their municipality, and there is a solid tradition of inclusion, equity, and equality the Norwegian educational system ([Haugen, Hestbek, & Øfsti, 2014](#); [Solstad, 2004](#)).

1.1. Purpose and research questions

National tests were first introduced in Norway in 2004, and today are a standard part of the national quality assessment system. They are used in conjunction with the new national competence-based curriculum implemented in 2006. Coincidentally, both the creation of national tests and the new curriculum guidelines coincided with an increased decentralized government during this time period ([Hopmann, 2008](#)). The main objective of the national tests is to evaluate performance on individual and system levels, subsequently leading to increased quality of learning for both pupils, schools and school leadership ([Elstad, Hopmann, & Langfeldt, 2008](#); [Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2015](#)). In the Norwegian educational system, the counties and municipalities are responsible for the quality of the primary- and lower secondary schools within the frames of the national curriculum and the national test system. Results from national tests have no direct consequences for either headmasters, teachers or pupils ([Elstad, 2009](#)). In other countries, that often are described as high-stake testing regimes, test scores on standardised tests have direct impact in forms of different actions like dismissal of headmasters and removal of teachers ([Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009](#); [Jacob, 2005](#)). The tests are held in years 5, 8, and 9 in reading literacy, numeracy and English, and they address the competence aims in the national curriculum by aiming to measure basic skills across subjects. The pupils use computers when they take the ninety-minute test.

High scores in such standardised tests can often be explained by underlying factors related to pupils' socioeconomic status ([Grøgaard, 2012](#); [Marks, Cresswell, & Ainley, 2006](#)). Nevertheless, some schools in lower socioeconomic areas manage to achieve good results. This might indicate that practices at those schools have a considerable impact on the pupils' test results. Some schools are better at developing their organisation with the aim of improving practice ([Edwards-Groves, 2008](#)) or overall school improvement ([Chapman & Sammons, 2013](#); [MacBeath, 2008](#)). One of the primary objectives of this study was to understand how such schools in lower socioeconomic areas maximize achievement through practice. In this article, we investigate how national tests influence practice at schools achieving high results in Norwegian primary and secondary schools using the results of a qualitative study in which we interviewed schools leaders, teachers and pupils at Norwegian schools achieving high results on national tests in lower socioeconomic standard areas. The following research question was examined:

How do national tests influence practice at schools achieving high results in national tests in Norway?

To study practice, we analysed the interviews we conducted with the objective of better understanding what the informants thought about national tests, how they described their preparations before testing, and how they used the test results. Our focus was not on the explicit classroom practice, but on how national tests influenced practice in these schools.

In the next part of this article, we outline the theoretical framework and the methodology of this study before presenting and discussing our findings.

2. Theoretical framework

In order to examine how national tests influence and are interwoven into schools' practice, this study draws upon the theory of practice architectures ([Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008](#); [Kemmis et al., 2014](#)). [Kemmis \(2009\)](#) argues that practices are shaped not only by the intentional actions and knowledge of participants, but also by circumstances and conditions that are "external" to them. In other words, the practice architectures are shaped by factors on both the inside and the outside of the organisation. National tests are then an external factor developed by national school authorities that in one way or another will influence the practice of teaching in the school organisation. This external factor, in addition to many other factors, forms the web of practices that are situated in a particular social context where people meet and interact with one another. [Kemmis and Grootenboer \(2008, p. 57\)](#) state that organisations, institutions and settings, as well as the people in them, create practice architectures that prefigure practices. This in turn enables and constrains *sayings, doings* and *relatings* among the people within them, as well as in relation to others outside them. These three elements contribute

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