

The Genius Loci* of Schooling

**Lærande regionar frå
eit europeiskt perspektiv**

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* "genius loci" – the spirit of a place

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Congratulations to a well designed and elaborated research project with results, which are

- I. timely,
- II. impressive,
- III. challenging, and
- IV. internationally important.

(using NOESIS & international research as background)

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I. Why is this project "timely"?

(1) The re-emergence of place as category of educational research.

(see e.g. Konstantopoulos & Borman 2011 on Coleman; German & Austrian research on "Standort-Effekte" etc.).

- Place is more than aggregated social background. (e.g. Knapp 2013)
- Persisting educational mindsets. (e.g. Hopmann 2008)



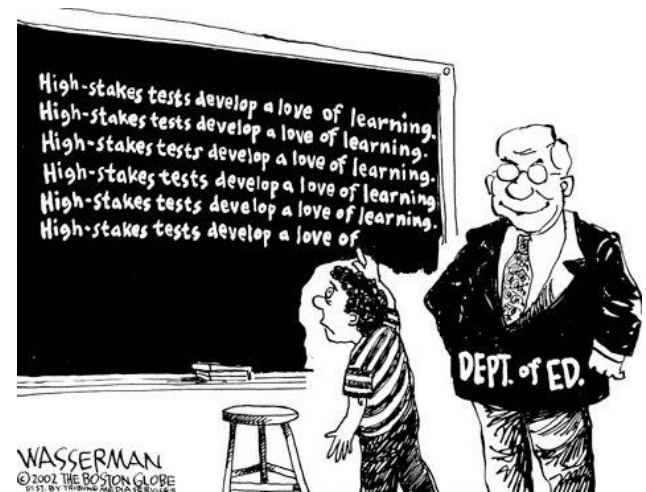
Rosegger's school.

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I. Why is this project "timely"?

(2) Accountability & Autonomy:
If being held accountable, one must have the option to make a difference.

- Autonomy seems to be crucial for success at least in developed countries.
(OECD, Hanushek, Woessmann, Bishop et al.).
- Yet, what shapes the space and use of accountability & autonomy at the local level?
(e.g. Elstad, Langfeldt & Hopmann 2008)



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I. Why is this project "timely"?

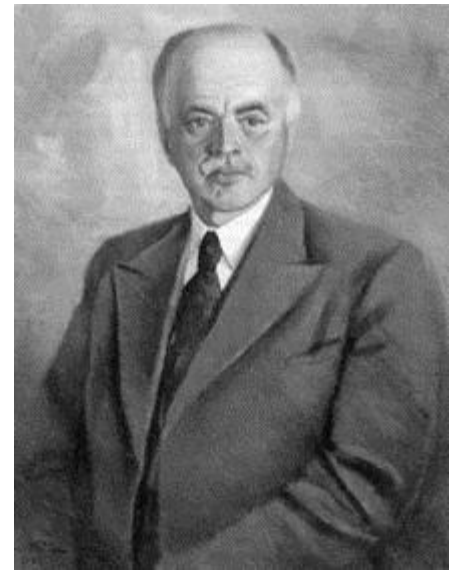
- (3) The West Coast Paradox:
Successful schooling without
economical pay off.
- Challenging one of the basic myths of education economy: Achievement equals economic success.
 - Or the other way round: Why is it that PISA losers (such as Germany and Austria) were better at managing the post-Lehman economic crisis?



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I. Why is this project "timely"?

- (4) Who else should be better equipped to put such questions than a Norwegian research project?
- A strong tradition of locally embedded schooling and school development.
 - A strong tradition of combining modern educational research to this effort. (since Kristvik & Strømnes)



E. Kristvik

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

- The multiple realities of schooling require disciplinary & interdisciplinary research.
- The multilevel character of schooling requires to take all levels from the classroom to the national system into account.
- A comparative approach needs in such a field a mixed method approach, if it wants to dig deeper.



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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(1) Setting the stage.

- **John P. Knudsen** on schooling and regional development.
 - An impressive reconstruction of the specific social history of Sogn & Fjordane.
 - Reminding of that it was not industry, but rather the combination of independent farmers, fishermen, crafts and trade which created modern schooling. See e.g. Hopmann 1992).
 - Giving idea of why this special character could persist until today.

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(1) Setting the stage.

- **Gunnar Yttri** on teachers as village chiefs.
 - Why is it that such a place "produces" more teachers than other counties?
 - The economic reason: Which other careers provided similar options in this region?
 - The cultural reason: Teachers as care takers of culture and development.
 - The political reason: Plenty of role models of good citizenship.
 - A kind of a "defensive modernization" (Wehler), i.e. by integrating new needs into old habits.

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(1) Setting the stage.

- **Øyvind Gløsvik** on a learning system.
 - How the spirit of the place (fostered by a history as shown by Knudsen & Yttri) can persist under the conditions of a modernized school administration.
 - It seems that is not so much the formal structure in which the county organizes its efforts, but rather the "spirit" of co-operation and sharing values which leads to joint efforts across all levels.
 - Yet, it shows as well that such traditions do not persist by themselves, but need to be renewed and integrated whenever new challenges pop up.

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(2) Digging deeper.

- **Kirsten Horrigmo** on place & school.
 - Impressive close up on how differently the interaction of school and place can unfold even under mostly similar regional conditions.
 - No surprise: The closer knitted a community, the easier to maintain a close relationship between school and environment. (similar results in NOESIS)
 - Yet, open question: How to maintain or achieve such a condition in a diversifying world?

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(2) Digging deeper.

- **Ilmi Willbergh et al. on Bildung.**
 - If the spirit of the place has a significant impact on schooling, then it should be observable in the classroom as well.
 - The authors come up with an impressive case study showing two fundamentally different approaches to student achievement, in which the one focused on achievement turns out to be less effective than the one based on a broader notion of Bildung.
 - Of course, I love the result. Yet, I wonder if this clear cut distinction is just case based or really permeating all of the counties' school cultures.

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(2) Digging deeper.

- **Thomas Nordahl & Hege Knudsmoen** on learning environments & parent involvement.
 - Question: What shapes the difference? (like NOESIS)
 - The interplay of local, school and classroom cultures seems to be important. It is the combination of an above average supportive school environment with a likewise supportive learning environment, which might contribute to Sogn & Fjordane`s success.
 - These results confirm recent international research that it is a shared spirit and engagement which makes for better schools. Yet, how to develop such community if not yet at hand?

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(3) Measuring up.

- **Liv Bente Friestad** on goal management.
 - Question: Is success in terms of school achievement manageable, and might this explain parts of the extraordinary results in Sogn & Fjordane?
 - This goes to the core of the whole accountability movement. If this is not the case, how then to ensure goal attainment?
 - Yet, the effects are small, if at all discernible: Could it be that goal management is rather more a symbolic effort than an effective strategy?
 - Or is it that it is not the formal structure, but rather the way it is contextualized which makes the difference (see Gløsvik)?

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(3) Measuring up.

- **Helge Hernes** on parents involvement.
 - Good question: If the interaction of school and place is crucial, shouldn't that shape the interaction of school and parents as well?
 - Yet, it seems that there are no big differences between Sogn & Fjordane and the other counties.
 - Like in the case of Friestad I wonder if it is not so much the structure of this interaction as less visible mindsets which shape the quality of the interaction. If so, this would require a more qualitative approach to how this interaction is "lived" by those involved.

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(3) Measuring up.

- **Anne Norstein & Terje Myklebust** on teacher qualifications.
 - There is plenty of research associating levels of teacher qualification with student achievement, yet the results are rather inconclusive.
 - Contrary to conventional wisdom, the study shows that higher qualifications only translate up to a certain degree into better results.
 - Could it be (like in the Friestad and Hernes cases) that it is not simply the qualification level, but rather how these qualification are embedded into local teaching? (see e.g. the local math teacher program)

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(3) Measuring up.

- **Karin E. Sørli et al.** on mastery.
 - This study moves beyond teaching and class room observation by asking if the different school cultures are reflected by the students themselves, e.g. in their believes on what they are able to achieve.
 - This seems to be the case to a certain degree, yet only for girls. Are boys not affected by school cultures?
 - Or is it that such a mastery concept (which is closely connected to a narrow concept of academic achievement) misses the added value of a broader approach to what is to be learned in schools (as discussed in Willbergh et al.)?

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

(3) Measuring up.

- **Kitt Lyngsnes & Petter Ole Westheim** on why schools succeed.
 - This study follows the line of typical school effectiveness research and comes up with similar results. Focus on learning, reflection, stability & co-operation seem to be important.
 - This holds true across all participating countries, is not a specific for Sogn & Fjordane.
 - Then what might be specific? Again one will have to dig deeper if these activities are filled differently depending on the surrounding school cultures.

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II. Why is this project "impressive"?

Changing course

- **"Gender, race and poverty – Give me something I can change ..."**

- Learning Regions contributes to the growing body of research looking into what actually can be changed.
- Contrary to the predominant patterns of accountability policies, it turns out that it maybe be exactly the local embeddedness of schooling which provides the best options for real change.
- Yet, to take advantage of this resource would require a turn away from the current focus on raising the achievement bars towards a different understanding of what schooling is about ...

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III. Why are the results "challenging"?

- Contradicting results?
 - The first (Setting the stage) and the second group (Digging deeper) of papers clearly support the notion of a special path of Sogn & Fjordane. They do so mostly by using theoretical lenses which are not usual in mainstream research on effective schooling.
 - The third group (Measuring up) is raising questions to what degree this special character is actually the case. They show that if there are effects on traditional measures of school quality (such as leadership formats, parental involvement, mastery etc.), the differences seem to be rather small.

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III. Why are the results "challenging"?

This raises two possible options:

- (1) Either Sogn & Fjordane matches just by chance the criteria of effective schooling, which are likewise valid everywhere else.
 - If that would be the case, the advice to other counties and countries would be: Copy their best practice example as good as you can!
 - Yet, this would undermine the idea that schools are embedded in a specific local spirit which shapes their options to develop.

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III. Why are the results "challenging"?

This raises two possible options:

- (2) Or using the usual effective schooling conceptualizations is only able to grasp such common features, and not what is specific about the local cultures.
- If that is the case, then the advice to other counties and countries would be: Try to identify what is specific about your place, and how school culture might be able to match this embeddedness!
- Yet, this would undermine the idea of current education policies that there are effective strategies to implement similar forms of accountability nationwide.

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III. Why are the results "challenging"?

Maybe there is a fundamental conceptual as well as empirical challenge in the background:

- As observed when setting the stage, Norway is characterized by at least two fundamental different models of what good schooling is about: The West Coast model rooted in a locally embedded notion of Bildung, and the Oslo model of effective schooling geared towards raising academic achievement.
- This difference is deeply rooted in different histories of schooling: The community model of schooling based on local needs versus a competition model of schooling based on generalized categories of academic education.

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III. Why are the results “challenging”?

There is good historical reason for this difference:

- Like elsewhere in Europe, the labor movement opted for getting access to and success in the academic model of education provided by the upper classes – and not for creating a new format.
- While late modernizers rather preferred a “defensive modernization” strategy in which such generalized expectations were adapted or even submerged to the locally embedded cultures.

(similar contradictions have been around before; see e.g. the monitorial movement in early 19th century)

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III. Why are the results "challenging"?

Yet, it may have a contra-intuitive outcome:

- The categories and tools of effective schooling stem from places attuned to the academic model. Therefore they have only limited ability to grasp the impact of local spirit on their re-contextualization.
- However, the irony of this seems to be that the "defensive modernizers" beat the effective movers even in their own prime goals, namely raising academic achievement and ensuring more equity.
- This is not only true in Norway, but as well in other European places. Achievement first policies tend to have weaker results as those insisting on defending a broader concept of locally shaped Bildung.

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IV. Why is this internationally important?

- The last two decades or so, most OECD members have pursued a unified approach to the question of school quality and equity: The hope was that by combining higher achievement standards with fitting accountability measures, one could implement more effective schooling from above.
- Those countries having most experience with this approach (the US and in the Commonwealth) have at best achieved disappointing results so far combined with many un-intended side-effects, not the least stagnating achievement patterns combined with growing inequality and higher school segregation. (see Berliner, Koretz, Elmore etc.)

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IV. Why is this internationally important?

- Not only did the approach of pushing achievement up by focusing schooling on short term academic results fail. Moreover, the politically accepted conventional wisdom of a linear link between effective schooling, school achievement and economic success turned out to be non-existing. It seem to be rather other factors which decide if schools fit the needs of society.
- It is exactly this experience, which has lead many research colleagues as well as a growing number of politicians to re-discover the specifics of place as crucial factor for school success. (e.g. Austria)

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IV. Why is this internationally important?

- As far as I understand this ongoing change, it is not about abandoning standards or monitoring or accountability.
- Rather it is about balancing the new tool kit of accountability by opening up for broader measures of what successful schooling is about as well as by taking the diversity of places and trajectories as a resource, instead of considering it being a threat.
- In short: The Sogn & Fjordane example contributes to the growing insight that future school development should embrace local autonomy and diversity as the best option available to improve achievement as well as equity.

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Thank you for the opportunity
to learn from your results and
thanks for your attention!