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Local educational actors doing of education – a study of how local autonomy meets international and national quality policy rhetoric

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This article studies how local autonomy meets international and national quality policy rhetoric. The research question asked is: How can the local doing of education be understood in relation to international and national quality policy rhetoric, and how does this affect teachers’ autonomy to realise nationally formulated goals? To answer this, two sets of theoretical concepts are combined: horizon of expectation and space of experience (Koselleck, 2002) and autonomy and control (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007). An earlier study (Bergh, 2010) of how the use of the quality concept has successively changed in Swedish authoritative educational texts from the 1990s and onwards provides a broader context for the local study, which empirically builds on interviews with local politicians, civil servants, school leaders and teachers. The results show that the national policy rhetoric has a strong impact on local practice, but also that certain interpretations are taken further in the local context, such as an emphasis on market forces. Although possible conflicts in the national context are concealed by the use of positive concepts like quality, these conflicts eventually erupt in the local setting, often with far reaching consequences for its different actors and for the education in question.

Keywords: quality; conceptual history; autonomy; control; teacher; Sweden

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When the goal- and result-oriented system was introduced in Swedish education in the early 1990s, the political rhetoric emphasised decentralisation and local participation in goal setting. Today, the emphasis is on quality, equivalence and goal attainment. Despite this changed rhetoric, and the fact that extensive educational reforms have been carried out over the last decade, the government states that the educational assignment is still formulated in the same way as it was in the early 1990s (Bill 2008/09:87). Against this background, a central starting point for the article is that in the interpretation of the educational assignment tensions could arise between the goals and values formulated in the national curricula and syllabus documents and other aspects of the governing of education, such as the dominating policy rhetoric and structural changes in the educational system as a whole.

With a view to providing an empirical focus that is specific and at the same time facilitates a broad contextual understanding, the article takes its point of departure in the international and national policy concept of quality and, with Sweden as a case, reports on the national and local implications of different interpretations. This empirical focus is chosen because within a very short period the introduction of the quality concept radically challenged and partly marginalised the earlier national education tradition. In earlier research, the years around 2000 are characterised as a challenging period, with demands for new solutions and actions (Bergh, 2010, 2011, 2015). From 2006 onwards, this was followed by an extensive restructuring of the Swedish education system. However, while great efforts have been made in the last decade’s educational reforms to make the system controllable, the focus on pedagogical aspects has been very limited.

Following this, a central argument in this article is that it cannot be taken for granted that national needs for control of the education system coincide with the autonomy required by local actors to conduct good education. Therefore, the aim is to investigate whether the tensions identified in the national policy texts also have an impact on the education that takes shape at local level, with a focus on local politicians, civil servants, school leaders and teachers. The specific research question is: How can the local doing of education be understood in relation to international and national quality policy...
rhetoric, and how does this affect teachers’ autonomy to realise nationally formulated goals?

In answering this question, the study not only contributes knowledge about the Swedish case but also about the international education policy research field. The development that is taking place around the quality concept in Swedish education is not limited to a single concept or specific nation (Bergh, 2010) but reflects a wider social transformation in many countries. Although for a long time educational issues have primarily been a national concern, reports from several countries show how in recent decades education has gradually become part of an international development (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012; Biesta, 2004; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm & Simola, 2011; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). As Sivesind, van den Akker and Rosenmund (2012, p. 321) formulate it: ‘A multitude of treaties, agreements and strategies, existing within the European policy and education space, steadily challenge nation-states and local institutions with new prospects to renew their education systems’. Following this, the same authors conclude that the formal curricula and their associated pedagogic practices remain largely under-researched as elements in the shaping and governing of education across Europe. Thus, there is a need to acquire more knowledge about how international policy trends are interpreted and ‘translated’ in national and local educational contexts (cf. Ball et al., 2012).

This article is structured into four sections. The first section consists of this introduction, which also includes the analytical concepts used in the analysis and an overview of earlier research to give the local study a broader context. The following two sections present a two-step analysis of the local ‘doing’, where the first makes use of conceptual history and the second analyses the tensions between the different forms of autonomy and control. The empirical material used for the local study consists of interviews with different actors from a municipality chosen for its clearly expressed intention to work with and improve quality in the frames provided by the goal- and result-oriented steering system. Four individual interviews with two politicians (chair of the board and a minority politician) and two with leading civil servants are reported, as are two focus group interviews, one with teachers and one with a group of school leaders. The fourth section consists of final reflections.

**Using conceptual history and the concepts of autonomy and control for educational analysis**

As a concept like quality can be used by different social forces with different intentions, there is a need to develop a theoretical approach that opens for a broad conceptual understanding and at the same time facilitates an analysis of the different ways in which the quality concept is used in specific contexts. To do this, the study is initially inspired by educational research that stresses the importance of not viewing policy as a one-sided process of implementation, but as an on-going process of ‘doing’ that implies interaction within and between several levels and actors (Ball et al., 2012; Bergh, 2010; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Englund, Forsberg & Sundberg, 2012). However, to analyse whether and how the national quality rhetoric affects local actors doing of education, further analytical perspectives are needed. This is provided for by combining two sets of theoretical concepts: horizon of expectation and space of experience from Koselleck (2002) and conceptual history and autonomy and control from Cribb and Gewirtz (2007).

According to Koselleck (2002), political and social concepts like quality can be seen as navigational instruments of history, because in addition to indicating or recording given facts, they also help to form consciousness and control behaviour. A central point of departure in conceptual history is that the concepts we use consist of memory and hope, experience and expectations. From this, it follows that history is not only past time but is instead made up of the experiences and expectations of acting and suffering humans. To facilitate an empirical analysis of how political and social concepts contain layers of the past and the present as well as expectations of the future, Koselleck uses the analytical concepts of horizon of expectation and space of experience. Whereas an experience from the past is spatial and collected into a whole, an expectation of the future is more like a horizon in the distance that cannot yet be grasped. As Koselleck explains, the two categories of experience and expectation are ‘suitable for detecting historical time in the domain of empirical research since, when substantially augmented, they provide guidance to concrete agencies in the course of social or political movement’ (2004, p. 258).

For this study, the use of conceptual history has methodological implications. The first is that the material from the interviewed local actors is interpreted with an interest in understanding the relation between expectations and experiences, which is also supported by the accompanying language. The second is that an earlier study (Bergh, 2010) of how the use of the quality concept has changed over time in authoritative policy documents provides an important contextualisation. The third is that the study of national education policy also uses the concepts horizon of expectation and space of experience, which makes it possible to analyse whether the tensions that have been identified in the national policy texts also have an impact on the education that takes shape at the local level.

However, to answer the research question of how international and national quality policy rhetoric affects teachers’ autonomy to realise nationally formulated goals, additional theoretical perspectives are needed. These are provided by Cribb and Gewirtz’s (2007) work on autonomy and control (cf. Bergh, 2015). As they point out: ‘In making assessments about the value of different patterns
of autonomy-control it is necessary to grapple with conceptual, empirical and normative complexities’ (p. 212). To support this, the study is guided by three analytical questions: Whose autonomy is in question? Autonomy/control over what? Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised? By answering these questions, the intention is to grapple with the conceptual complexities of the concepts autonomy and control and contribute knowledge that avoids ‘the seemingly widespread – and usually unspoken – normative presumption that autonomy is good and control is bad and to open up space for the possibility of richer debates about the value of different forms of and balances between autonomy and control’ (p. 203).

Thus, with the chosen approach, the article analyses whether and how the linguistic force of authoritative actors at national and local levels and the different structures frame and control teachers’ autonomy over the educational practices that prevail in school.

A changed social perception of education

When the goal- and result-oriented steering system was introduced in the early 1990s, instruments for the reporting of results were not provided for, but were introduced in connection with the requirement for written quality reports in 1997 (Bergh, 2015; Skr. 1996/97:112). However, what is important to notice is that this regulation was first presented in relation to the earlier tradition of Swedish education, with an emphasis on local autonomy and where complex and qualitative goals were placed at the local level to be interpreted and dealt with by professional teachers. Within the space of only a few years, this then changed to an emphasis on building an education system with strengthened national control. With an increased focus on quality, interpreted as goal achievement, politicians agreed on a number of structural changes that have transformed the design of the educational system. For example, from 2006 onwards, an increased number of tests, inspections and a new grading system have been introduced.

Using the analytical concepts horizon of expectation and space of experience, the earlier mentioned study of Swedish education policy (Bergh, 2010) shows that certain understandings, long associated with education due to the changing horizon of expectations, have gradually been challenged and partly marginalised. While expectations in the 1990s referred to experiences from the earlier Swedish ‘education’ tradition, at the beginning of the 21st century this changed to experiences originating from ideas about how to build ‘quality systems’, ‘international policy’ expectations and ‘juridical regulations’. As a consequence of the linguistic change, it can be argued that the concept of quality has led to an acceptance of new social perceptions of education. Among other things, the systemic approach has led to an increased juridification and a quality thinking that can be traced to what in international literature is often called Total Quality Management.

This linguistic change has also facilitated the appearance of new actors and perspectives. In the early 1990s, when expectations were still related to educational experiences, educational practitioners and researchers were regarded as having the most expertise. However, new ideas about the improvement of international competitiveness, the strengthening of juridical regulations and the building of quality systems subsequently led to a change in agency. For example, whereas in the 1990s discussions about teachers’ competences in national texts were expressed in terms of concepts such as reflection, goal interpretation and school development, this emphasis changed over time to include questions that were instrumental in character. Now, the teacher’s role as an administrative link in the education system, mainly for a higher goal achievement, appears to be more important than pedagogical competence (cf. Solbrekke & Englund, 2011). The national political conditions have also changed. Instead of discussions about education as a societal and principle question, the national political role has increasingly become one of international education cooperation, with a focus on carrying out and administering international policy decisions. When content-related matters at national political level become non-issues, potential conflicts over goals are instead transferred downwards in the education system to national administrators and the different actors at local level.

Moreover, following the understanding earlier referred to of not viewing policy as a one-sided process of implementation, but rather as an on-going process that implies interaction within and between several levels and actors, the ‘doing’ is not just a question of the relation between local and national levels. Instead, the degree of autonomy given to teachers is also affected by the control ambitions and pedagogical ideals of different actors in the local context. In his study of different forms of autonomy, Frostensson (2012) looks at professional, collegial and individual aspects of autonomy. His conclusions are that autonomy can exist in collegial or individual form even if the overall professional autonomy has eroded, that collegial autonomy can take two different forms and either depart from collegial needs or from management preferences, and that individual autonomy is directly dependent on school leaders or the local authority’s requirements for individual members of the organisation to be flexible. Frostensson (p. 78) concludes ‘that a fragmentation of the teaching profession evolves, which can be explained by the degree of autonomy that is given to the teachers’, and that the ‘control ambitions and pedagogical ideals of the local school management and the principal organisers of education explain to what extent the teachers are granted autonomy in their work’.
Thus, from earlier research we know that around the new millennium, there was a shift in Swedish educational policy, which is also closely connected to a shift from governing by goals to governing by results (Wahlström, 2002). But what do we not know very much about is the extent to which this shift also affects educational practices and the everyday choices made by school leaders and teachers. Therefore, in the following two sections local educational practices will be analysed in the light of the broader policy context provided here.

The local doing of education – interpreted as expectations and experiences

The chosen municipality is situated in a metropolitan area with a long tradition of a right-wing majority. Two central principles are formulated and highlighted as a basis for all local political activities: freedom of choice and competitive neutrality. As a consequence, both municipality-driven schools and independent schools are encouraged within the municipality’s geographical borders.

Starting with the two locally decided principles of freedom of choice and competition neutrality, different steering instruments are organised at the political level, the overriding municipality administration level and each school’s management level. First, at the political level, the local education policy strategy is accompanied by a comprehensive system for follow-up and evaluation, including results in the form of grades, tests, economy, customer satisfaction, self-evaluations and observations. As these political steering instruments cover all the schools in the municipality’s geographical boundaries (including the independent schools), the steering that is organised at the overriding municipality level simply targets the municipality-driven schools. This includes balanced score cards and a contract with each school leader that is combined with a system for result-based salaries. In addition to those two levels, each school has its own instruments. In the investigated school, a survey was conducted in which each teacher received personal feedback based on the students’ evaluations of his or her teaching. As well as being shared with the teacher in question, the content was also used in discussions between the individual teacher, the principal and the teaching team. In addition, this specific school was also certified by a quality assurance institute every second year.

Compared to the four spaces of experience emanating from the study (Bergh, 2010) of national authoritative texts, namely ‘education’, ‘international policy’, ‘juridical regulation’ and ‘quality system’, the local study shows that the same spaces of experience are reflected in the interviews, with one exception. Instead of ‘international policy’, which over time became increasingly central for the national policy actors, in the local context this is represented by a space of experience named ‘market’.

However, despite the different use of terminology (international policy vs. market), which often reflects a number of variations, there are many conceptual parallels between the two. While the national policy actors’ expectations are to improve Sweden’s international competitiveness, the local actors formulate beliefs in local market forces.

In this section, the analysis of the interviews with the local actors is presented with the support of the four spaces of experience hitherto referred to, namely ‘market’, ‘quality system’, ‘juridical regulation’ and ‘education’.

Politicians – market, juridical regulation and education

To illustrate the tension between the different interpretations of quality, the following quotes show how the two interviewed politicians refer to different spaces of experience and as a consequence express completely different expectations of education.

In our municipality the principals are the key players who ensure that our system works. They should be general managers … and everything should always be transparent … Knowledge is the central aspect, delivering what has been promised … (Majority politician)

… as I see it, it is actually a deeply philosophical question; should we have education that aims at producing citizens who have learned about the society in which we live and its functions, or should we educate people on the basis of their own needs, desires and visions that then shape society? I think that they are two different things. For me it is the latter that is more interesting. (Minority politician)

For the majority politician, who is also chair of the board, the way towards a high-quality education refers to his experience as a manager in the business sector. In contrast to his expectations on systemic aspects, transparency and delivering knowledge, the minority politician is strongly critical of what he describes as the dominating ‘customer and market inspired approach’. Instead, he calls for a discussion about ‘what it means to be a good school in a true and honest democratic system”; a discussion that can be understood in relation to the earlier Swedish tradition of comprehensive education for democracy and equality (cf. Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). In addition to the political difficulties of discussing issues like this, the minority politician claims that local civil servants should present material that facilitates a problematisation of the different questions, instead of ‘presenting a facade where everything seems fine but where the important questions that should be asked are not articulated’ (Minority politician).

The dominating tension between the expectations formulated by the two politicians can primarily be understood as related to the ‘market’ and ‘education’ spaces of experience. The analytical point is that even though they

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both express ideas about education, the more specific meanings of this differ due to their different reference points. In addition, both politicians refer to experiences that can be understood as related to the ‘juridical regulation’ and/or ‘quality system’ spaces of experience. This is done in two quite different ways. The majority politician refers to the national school inspection and concludes that the inspectors were impressed; something that he sees as ‘confirmation that our way of governing works’. The minority politician, on the other hand, agrees that it is good to hear about positive things. However, what is more important in his eyes is acquiring knowledge about the things that do not work – information that he has never received.

Management – quality system, market and juridical regulation
The tensions between the different spaces of experience are also reflected in the interviews with the managers in the municipality’s administration. Compared to the interviews with the politicians, the interviews with the management staff give quite another picture. Here, the interviewees stress the importance of building a system, having control of the results and continuously improving those things that can be measured.

To achieve goal- and result-oriented steering, the head of administration stresses the importance of all goals pointing in the same direction and argues that local politicians should not formulate any additional goals beyond the national. When it comes to the local educational policy strategy, she explains that this has great legitimacy among politicians and different professional groups, which she thinks could be explained by the fact that it does not add anything to what has already been formulated in the national curricula. With reference to what she calls ‘quality research’ the head of administration explains that success means ‘making sure that the minimum level is raised, is of basic quality, rewards the best and lets them fly, so that they take others with them’. To do this, a quality system needs to be developed that is simple and clear.

And then when you have done that it should be simple, clear and visible. And you have to use the results. You should not do anything if you don’t use the results. You need to go all the way and ensure that measures are taken that reflect the results. And that you persevere and don’t keep chopping and changing but stick to the objectives and don’t complicate things. I think that this is fundamental and know that it leads to success. (Head of administration)

The deputy head of administration has overriding responsibility for all the municipality-driven preschools and schools. She emphasises the importance of building a system that, with its different instruments and experts, helps those working in the organisation to continuously improve what they are doing. She reflects on her own role and concludes that over time she has become a much more strategic leader. The work with visions and balanced score cards has accelerated the process of improved results and today she has access to a lot of information.

We have digitised the entire administrative process. Everything is digitised. Nothing is written on small pieces of paper and pinned up in a corner, but the whole process is very professional. So the principal can press a button and have immediate access to facts 24/7. And that’s a powerful thing. The principal knows what he or she is dealing with. This is how I explain it: that I’m sitting in the eye of the storm, there should be peace and quiet, systematics, we should know what we are doing and why and that we are here for the schools, we are a support process, myself and the support and expertise that is to hand. (Deputy Head of Administration)

In the above excerpts, the two administrative heads talk about quality by referring to the ‘market’, ‘quality system’ and ‘juridical regulation’ spaces of experience. However, neither of them reflect on what can be measured and what is educationally desirable. An illustrative example of the absence of educational aspects is when the deputy head of administration explains that the goal with competence development activities is ‘just to get better and better, there is no other goal’. A strong focus on ‘quality system’ can also be identified when the same person uses the terms ‘remote steering’ and ‘trust system’ when talking about her relations with teachers and school leaders. In this manner, ‘quality system’ and ‘juridical regulation’ help to structure the political ‘market’ expectations of realising the central principles of freedom of choice and competition neutrality. When the head of administration explains that she has no problem referring to students and parents as customers, she bases her argument on them being customers with the right to choose a preschool or school: ‘but once they have chosen a school, the school activities must follow the Education Act and other regulations, so actually we have a very rule-governed school’.

School leaders – quality system, market and education
The interviewed school leaders explain that their ambitions are to develop a common way of understanding the concept of knowledge and the education assignment from the preschool to Year 9. At the same time as striving for a school with no clear divisions between the different subjects, they reflect that the political development seems to be going in the opposite direction. One example of this is that the school leaders see the need to stress both goals and results, while acknowledging that the political focus
is on results. If the emphasis is on goals or results, rather than goals and results, this leads to conflict.

We want to strive for goals that are never-ending, where there is always a lot further to go. At the same time, we need to make assessments in relation to grades, i.e. a result that has to be achieved in order to obtain a grade. For the pedagogue, student and parent this can be a conflict. We strive towards one thing but have to measure something else. We have to assess something and it’s difficult to put it all together in a proper manner. (School leader 1)

A consequence of the strong emphasis on grades and documentation is that it is no longer possible to work towards more open goals. Instead, the focus is on predefined results. According to the school leaders, this in combination with freedom of choice lead to different kinds of conflict. An example of this is when parents think that they always have the right to choose and to formulate their demands, as has been signalled by local politicians.

The political goal is that parents should be included and express their opinions. This also includes the choice of school – that you choose a school that is good or not. This has led to people feeling that they can choose exactly when they want and that “I can make a difference, I can go in and make demands and say that’s how I think things should be”. Parents can thus have two completely different pictures. This also rubs off onto the student, of course. These direct demands, the direct need for satisfaction, that “now I want this” because this is the political signal that has been sent. That’s what we are striving for in the municipality and it leads to conflict. (School leader 1)

The strong focus on results also affects the school’s possibility to enable democratic influence. On the one hand, the school has an ambition to develop questions about influence and involvement, which requires working with values that cannot easily be measured. On the other hand, demands for clarity and grades require that the conditions are made clear in advance; something that the school leader (1) argues is supported by the system for freedom and choice: “Where do you create participation, where do you create influence on things that are to some extent taken for granted? Yes, it’s very difficult and it’s that which is measured, but what can you be involved in and decide about?”.

Although the views expressed by the school leaders in the interview with them can be interpreted as strong criticism of the constant measuring and emphasis on freedom of choice, at the same time they also explain that they can see that the political focus on continuous improvement has had a positive effect: “people here are used to being scanned from right and left and we discuss the results and one asks: What can I do differently in my teaching to increase the values?” (School leader 2). Attempts to make everything transparent have had both favourable and unfavourable effects. The favourable effects are that teachers have started to sit in on each other’s lessons, give feedback and learn from each other, while an unfavourable effect, in terms of competition between schools, is that some schools are no longer cooperative.

Thus, a conclusion that can be drawn from the interview with the school leaders is that the ‘education’ space of experience, which clearly relates to the expectations they formulate, is in tension with the ‘market’ and ‘quality system’ spaces of experience. However – and perhaps more importantly – there are also conflicts between the latter. While ‘quality system’ expectations have contributed to an increased awareness and cooperation between teachers, ‘market expectations have led to isolation’. In addition, there are also conflicts of interest within the ‘quality system’ space of experience. In contrast to the experience of increased awareness and cooperation, another picture is that educational practices have to be adapted and reduced to what can be measured.

**Teachers – quality system, market and education**

Like the school leaders, the teachers explain that the expectation that everything should be transparent has favourable and unfavourable sides to it. A favourable aspect is that they have had to develop as pedagogues and be more aware of what they do. An unfavourable aspect is that schools have become isolated due to the focus on results and competition.

There isn’t much cooperation between the schools because competition is so hard on the students. If you compare with the neighbouring municipality there they work a lot with joint projects, when it’s about grades, assessment and grading criteria. Things don’t work in the same way here. They don’t. So in that way a school becomes isolated. (Teacher Karin)

Although the teachers consider themselves to be very goal- and result-oriented, they think that the municipality emphasises results. The teachers’ opinions about this strong focus on results vary. Some of the teachers think it is positive that schooling is a prioritised arena, while others are more critical of human aspects getting lost: ‘I think that you lose the human being in this focus on quality and results. You lose the little child who is right in the middle of it’ (Teacher Ingela).

Some years before the interview was conducted, the teachers initiated work with the curriculum to develop a common approach to different forms of knowledge and abilities. This work included cooperation within and between different subjects for all students between the ages of 6 and 16. A favourable outcome of this, according to the teachers, is the development of a joint language,
which is important for the next step to also include students and parents.

The fact that many of the parents in this area are engaged is something that the teachers welcome, even though it is not always easy to explain what they mean by, for example, communicative, reflective and analytical abilities. Besides the challenge of communicating with parents who regard knowledge as different packages of facts, there are also those who formulate demands based on their own needs. One of the teachers (Mats) explains that there are lots of active, well-informed and verbal parents: ‘there are those who know everything about the curriculum and constantly ask questions about what we do’. Another teacher (Ingela) agrees: ‘You have to have control all the time because you can get the most unexpected questions’.

As in the interview with the school leaders, the teachers formulate their horizon of expectation on the basis of their ‘educational’ experiences. But, also here it is apparent that expectations that can be understood in relation to the ‘market’ space of experience challenge the teachers’ perspectives. For example, when parents act as demanding customers the teachers find this challenging, because as professionals they want to inform and involve the parents of their students. Furthermore, according to the interview with the teachers, the ‘quality system’ facilitates educational discussions at the same time as the strong focus on results tends to marginalise and instrumentalise the educational perspectives.

Tensions between autonomy and control
In this section, the four spaces of experience emanating from the local study in the previous part form the empirical context for an analysis of different kinds of autonomy and control. Throughout the analysis, the three questions mentioned earlier are answered (cf. Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007): Whose autonomy is in question? Autonomy/control over what? Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised?

Whose autonomy is in question?
Considering the actors interviewed and referred to above, there is no doubt that the teachers’ and school leaders’ autonomy to act in accordance with expectations that can be understood as ‘educational’ experiences is marginalised. However, it is also important to note that the minority politician’s autonomy is clearly reduced. For him, the dominating ‘customer and market inspired approach’, in combination with the ‘quality system’, works as a ‘facade’ that makes it impossible to ask questions of an educational character, such as what is education for. As a consequence, in his opinion there is no local political space for questioning the dominating ideological perspective that is embedded in the two principles of freedom of choice and neutrality in competition, or for discussing the philosophical or educational implications of this governing.

However, for the other three interviewees, that is, the majority politician and the head and the deputy head of administration, educational questions relating to content, goals and purposes seem to be non-issues. Even though these three people also mention limitations in autonomy, this is referred to in positive terms. One example is that the ‘juridical regulation’ provided by the state limits the municipality’s emphasis on freedom of choice, in that the ‘customers’ (students and parents) only have the right to choose a preschool or school: ‘but once they have chosen … the school activities must follow the Education Act and other regulations …’ (Head of administration).

Another example is how the majority politician sees the control conducted by the national school inspectorate as ‘confirmation that our way of governing works’.

In the investigated municipality, there is a clearly expressed intention to realise goal- and result-oriented steering. Following this, at the local policy and administration level, the decision has been taken not to formulate any more goals than those already formulated nationally. Instead, the responsibility for the interpretation of these is left to teachers and school leaders, while the political and administrative interest is directed towards follow-up and evaluation. A consequence of this governing is what can be characterised as a depoliticised political role and a politicised administrative role. When local politics are reduced to an administrative responsibility for financing, follow-up, control of goal achievement, etc., potential conflicts move down the local educational hierarchy. But instead of giving schools the autonomy to interpret the goals, this is limited by the ‘quality system’ and its function as ‘market’ information to help students and parents choose.

Autonomy/control over what?
Although the minority politician, school leaders and teachers take the question of what can be regarded as good education as a starting point, that is not the case for the majority politician or the head and deputy head of administration. For them, goals are something that are written into the national curricula documents and are thereafter, without any changes being made, copied and emphasised in the local educational policy strategy. Instead, their focus is on constructing a simple, clear and transparent ‘quality system’ that complements the national ‘juridical regulations’ and can create the necessary conditions for the local principles of freedom of choice and neutrality in competition.

From the way in which the question ‘Whose autonomy is in question?’ is answered, it is also important to note the consequences of the question ‘Autonomy/control over what?’. The tensions between the different spaces of experience do not just control and reduce the autonomy
of politicians and different professional groups, but also control and reduce the didactical choices of what is possible in education. As the school leaders and teachers explain, the demands for clarity, transparency and competition affect the school's assignment to work with knowledge and democracy. In this manner, the control imposed by ‘market’, ‘juridical regulation’ and ‘quality system’ expectations reduces the possible content and the educational processes; something that has consequences for the students’ learning possibilities and their parents’ democratic influence.

Although the interviewed school leaders and teachers experience that the local governance has led to some positive developments, none of them indicate that follow-ups and evaluations are primarily aimed at analysing professional needs. On the contrary, as the deputy head of administration explains, it is the customers who have ‘the right to tell you if there really was any improvement’. However, the study shows that the absence of content, in combination with the ambition to construct a simple and clear system, reduces complexity and diversity, which limits the possibility to politically discuss different issues and to constructively deal with them in educational practice.

Instead of working with goals as the teachers and school leaders would like, and thus making room for pedagogical processes and democratic influence, the national and local requirements for measurements, documentation and transparency mean that the teaching has to be adapted to specific goals – goals that due to their nature serve as predefined results rather than more openly point out a desired direction. The concept of influence can be used as an illustrative example of this. When expectations are formulated around this concept, with reference to an understanding of the ‘education’ space of experience, societal and democratic perspectives are opened up. But, when the horizon of expectation relates to the ‘market’ and ‘quality system’ spaces of experience, it is instead interpreted as a right for individuals to choose and demand within the space provided by ‘juridical regulation’.

Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised?

As already explained, the municipality has developed control structures at several different levels. This means that a comprehensive system for different kinds of follow-up and evaluation at the political level is combined with another system at the overriding municipality level, with balanced scores and contracts with each school leader and a system for each school, which in the investigated school consists of students’ evaluations of each teacher’s teaching and external certification performed by a quality assurance institute. A comment from the interviewed deputy head of administration can be used as an illustrative example of how the quality system or systems in the investigated municipality are constructed: ‘I’m sitting in the eye of the storm, there is peace and quiet, systematics, we should know what we are doing . . .’.

The answer to the question ‘Who are the agents of control and how is their agency exercised?’ is thus that control in the local context is shared between different actors. As a consequence, different forms of autonomy and control are combined in many and complex ways. Some become dominant, while others tend to be marginalised. According to the dominating approach, parents and to some extent their children are given the autonomy to choose the preschool or school they prefer. However, in order for the principles of freedom and choice and competition neutrality to work, the system must be controlled by the ‘quality system’ and ‘juridical regulation’. The information provided in the different systems not only serves as a control for the responsible politicians and management staff but also informs parents and students about the quality of the different schools. As has already been reported from England, this way of governing can mean that instead of being citizens in a democracy, parents become customers in a regulated market (cf. Biesta, 2004; Gewirtz, 2002).

The three local systems are related to each other in complex ways, which leads one to wonder how they relate to the national education system. One suggestion, based on the interviews, is that in a hierarchical sense the national juridical regulation and the national quality system are above the three local systems. On the other hand, when it comes to educational aspects, the opposite seems to be the case, in that in the curricula quality expectations are formulated through the national goals and values. In other words, just as questions about goals, values, possible goal conflicts, etc. are non-issues in the local political debate and for civil servants, in the investigated municipality these are hierarchically sorted under the three local systems.

From this, it follows that when the goals and values that are formulated in the national curriculum are subject to requirements of measurability and control, rather than being taken as starting points for a desired development, there is a risk that the ways in which different forms of autonomy and control are combined will become counterproductive (cf. Forsberg & Wallin, 2006). According to the interviewed teachers and school leaders, this is not in line with how they as professionals prefer to work.

Final reflections

The knowledge interest in this article has been to analyse whether the tensions observed in national policy texts impact the education that takes shape at the local level and, more specifically, how these tensions affect teachers’ autonomy to realise the nationally formulated goals. A general conclusion that can be drawn is that the national policy rhetoric has a strong impact on local practice. However, even though the way in which the quality
concept is used by local actors reflects the interpretations and tensions at the national level, certain interpretations are taken further in the local context, such as the emphasis on market forces, as described above. Moreover, this study has shown that it is not only the national rhetoric that has a strong impact on local educational contexts but also that conflicts eventually emerge somewhere in the local education system. In other words, although possible conflicts in the national context are concealed by the use of positive concepts like quality, these conflicts eventually erupt in the local setting, often with far reaching consequences for its different actors and for the education in question.

This study has demonstrated that the linguistic force of international and national policy, in combination with structures that have been developed to measure quality, has a strong impact on the way that local politicians and civil servants talk about quality. When the national use of language relates to goal achievement, results, documentation, systematics, clarity, responsibility, etc., it is difficult for local actors to use a different language. The study has also demonstrated that the qualitative goals and values formulated in the national curriculum are hard to measure, and thus risk being marginalised by those aspects that can more easily be quantitatively controlled, documented and demonstrated. As a consequence, conflicts arise between the different uses of language. This in turn leads to different actions and implications restricting teachers’ autonomy and thus what can be done in educational practice. However, even though we are embedded in practices and constrained by them, it does not mean that another language cannot be used. As Frostensson (2012, p. 78) argues: ‘challenges of professional autonomy may strike differently at different levels . . . ’ Here, conceptual history offers important insights and reminds us that political and social concepts, such as quality, do not only indicate or record given facts but can also become factors in the formation of consciousness and the control of behaviour (Koselleck, 2002). Given that the formulation of this educational assignment has not changed since the early 1990s, as the government has stated (cf. Bill, 2008/09:87), there is a need for further study and discussion about how different forms of autonomy and control can best be combined to arrive at the intended destination.

References