Innovative government initiatives to prevent upper secondary school dropout: organisational learning and institutional change at the local level

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Abstract: This paper investigates how a specific public innovation in Norway, the New Possibilities Strategy, has influenced the implementation of anti-dropout measures at local education authority levels. In Norway, approximately 100% of all 16-year-olds start upper secondary education. However, about one-third of the students does not complete or graduate within a five-year period. Dropout rates have received increasing political attention as a societal problem, resulting in a number of different policy strategies. The paper aims to reduce the lack of knowledge on how innovations in education may contribute to solving an apparently stable educational problem, by enhancing learning outcomes and reducing the number of young people that do not complete and graduate from upper secondary education. Utilising a framework for government and public sector innovation and implementation, together with concepts of institutional change, will give a new understanding of how a public innovative strategy influences organisational learning.

Keywords: innovation; education; dropout; upper secondary education; policy strategy; learning outcomes; institutional change; organisational learning; government and public sector innovation; implementation; Norway.


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1 Introduction

What can one learn about innovation in the public sector when it comes to educational reforms and the consequences these reforms have for the educational sector? These questions would we like to discuss in the paper. What comes after an innovation has been set in motion is as important as the innovation itself. We aim to investigate how a specific public innovation in Norway, a new way of ensuring that lower performing students get help to improve their skills in the last year of lower and the first two years of upper secondary school, has influenced the implementation of anti-dropout measures at the local level. The innovation called the New Possibilities Strategy included two subprojects: the Transition Project, covered in this paper, and the Follow-Up Project.1 The Ministry of Education organised and steered the strategy as a three-year project. Central, top-down steering is an unusual way to organise and implement new national strategies in Norway. We have studied what measures came out of the strategy with the purpose of exploring the organisational learning outcomes of this specific public innovation. Implementation and the continuation of public innovations are of special interest for understanding how a policy works, and is an important issue for education governance.

In Norway and the Nordic countries, high dropout rates and low completion rates in upper secondary education are seen as a big societal and political problem (Markussen, 2010). When one-third of the young people between 16 and 21 do not complete secondary education, the education system is at risk of failing its social responsibility to these students. It is a challenge for individuals and society because these young persons have more difficulties to enter the labour market, and in turn, the labour market loses their possible knowledge and competence (Arntzen and Grogaard, 2012; Bäckman et al., 2015; Lundahl and Olofsson, 2014). There is existing knowledge on who drops out, where, and why they do not complete upper secondary school. Still, there is little-accumulated knowledge on efforts made and measures taken to prevent this undesirable characteristic of upper secondary education in Norway. This paper aims to reduce the lack of knowledge on how innovations in education may contribute to solving an apparently stable educational problem by enhancing learning outcomes and reducing the
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number of young people that do not complete or graduate from upper secondary education.

We will explore a public innovative policy to enhance the number of youths that graduate from upper secondary school in Norway. We focus on one piece of the New Possibilities Strategy, New Possibilities: The Transition Project (NPTP for short), a government initiated three year project (2010–2013) that included all lower and upper secondary schools as well as all municipalities and county municipalities, which are responsible for schooling in Norway. While primary and lower secondary education (grades 1–10) is the responsibility of the municipalities, the county municipalities are responsible for the provision of upper secondary education (grades 11–13). The main objective of the project was to strengthen the transition between lower and upper secondary education in order to reduce the dropout rate from upper secondary education, both general and vocational. In addition, the aim was to establish a permanent cooperation platform between government, county municipalities and municipalities to improve the students’ overall condition to complete and pass upper secondary education (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016).

We argue that the NPTP was an encompassing public innovation and explore how the local education authority level (county municipalities and municipalities) have received and continued the innovation since 2013. Our research question is twofold:

- How was the NPTP initiated and implemented throughout the country?
- Has the NPTP led to organisational learning and institutional change at the local level?

We will analyse the launching and implementation of the NPTP by applying a framework for Government and public sector thinking and action in promoting and implementing innovation, introduced by Mulgan and Albury (2003). Within the research project Lost in Transition: Governance, Management and Organisation of Policy Programs to Improve Completion of Upper Secondary Education we have mapped the continuation of the NPTP in 15 Norwegian counties. Further, we will present an analysis of the measures mapped in our study and analyse these to see if there are organisational learning potentials in the NPTP as a public innovation. The paper consists of four sections. First, in the background section, we give an overview of dropout rates as a societal problem and the reasons for students dropping out in the Norwegian context. Second, we present our theoretical approach, the method and data, and third, we show how the NPTP is a public innovation. In Section 4, we present our analysis. Finally, we discuss our findings and conclude.

2 The problem of upper secondary school dropout

Despite comparable education systems, the dropout rate is relatively high in Norway compared to the other Scandinavian countries. For the last two decades, approximately 100% of all 16-year-olds have started upper secondary education, but 30% of the students have not completed. There are four educational programs in upper secondary school, which give access to university studies, and eight vocational (VET) programs leading to more than 180 different trade- and journeyman’s certificates (Borge et al., 2011).
The most critical phases when it comes to non-completion is the transitional stages between different educational levels, for example from lower to upper secondary school or between the different upper secondary school levels. Furthermore, the completion rate is higher in the academic than in the vocational programs.

Both international and Norwegian literature points to four main reasons for dropout, early leaving, non-completion and completion/graduation: social background, prior school performance, academic commitments and social commitments, in addition to contextual variables (Lamb et al., 2004; Markussen, 2010; Traag and van der Velden, 2008; Reegård and Rogstad, 2016). Three main elements of risk for being outside of the labour market at 25 years of age are identified (Markussen, 2016): not living with parents at 15 years of age, low marks, and low attendance during the last year at lower secondary school. In addition, those who drop out or fail to complete secondary school are also at risk of having a weak connection to the labour market later on, which the comprehensive school system tries to rectify.

The universalistic transition regimes in Nordic countries, such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark, have comprehensive school systems. National frameworks set standards in education and training, but there is flexibility in the system to allow for individual learning and training plans. There is an expectation that young people are in education, and youth policies aim to give the youths the chance to become a potential resource for society in the future (Walther, 2006, p.127). The different measures are specially organised to give a second chance to re-enter education so young people have the opportunity to complete a degree and thereafter aspire to take part in further education and/or employment. If a youth decides to go for the training path after dropping out, there is still a chance to better their life prospects, in contrast to the system in many other countries (see for example Walther, 2006).

Students graduating from elementary school differ significantly in learning achievement, which implies variations in qualifications for completing upper secondary school. However, in the Norwegian case, Borge et al. (2011) argue that social background, earlier school performance, academic commitment and social commitment do not explain the complete variation between counties and regions in dropout rates. Contextual variables such as the county municipalities’ role as school owners/governors are important in addition to governing of the measures, managing and organising between and within the different levels and authorities. It is of special interest how the two levels of school ownership, the county municipalities and the municipalities, interact and respond to central policy. Additionally, how they implement these policies.

Dropout rates have received increasing political attention as a societal problem over the last years, resulting in a number of different policy strategies. The 1994 Norwegian upper secondary school reform gave all students the right to upper secondary education and contributed to a significant increase in the number of students passing. Subsequently, since the 1994 reform, a range of different programs has been introduced in order to prevent or reduce dropouts from upper secondary school. As early as 1994, the government established a mandatory Follow-up Service in each county. The purpose for the Follow-up Service is to guide youths between 16 and 21 that are outside of school or work. The aim is to help the adolescents into education or waged labour. Moreover, since 2000 the efforts of reducing dropout rates have been intensified (Markussen, 2010). In 2003, the national government introduced a strategic plan with numerous measures at
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Counting and school levels as part of an anti-poverty program. Evaluating the strategy, Buland and Havn (2007) stressed that the way to succeed with such a strategy is to apply different methods, in addition, to continuously and systematically working to help and support the students. The 2006 Knowledge Promotion Reform aimed to improve completion and reduce dropout rates by including both elementary school and upper secondary school in the education reform, prioritising the teaching of basic skills (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007–2008). Moreover, after introducing some minor anti-dropout policy measures since 2000, from 2011 implementing gradually the national strategy New Possibilities: The Transition Project (NPTP) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2014).

The NPTP represents a new strategic and innovative approach to reducing dropout rates. According to Halvorsen et al. (2005), we can label the NPTP an organisational innovation, as it implies changes in the organisational frames for production and delivering of anti-dropout measures. In addition, characterising the NPTP a ‘strategic policy innovation’, in the way that the project partly changes the rationale of public policy by changing the understanding of the problem and redefining aims and instruments. The main objective was to ease the transition between lower and upper secondary education, implying cooperation between the municipalities and the county municipalities where systematic cooperation between these two levels was a new factor. Several researchers, using different methodological and theoretical approaches (Eielsen et al., 2013; Helgoy and Homme, 2013; Holen and Lødøing, 2013; Ronning et al., 2013; Sletten et al., 2011) have evaluated the first three years of the project. So far, the evaluation studies have not confirmed that the program works as intended (see also Huitfeldt et al., 2016). However, finding effects of the programs is a challenging matter due to a proliferation of different projects and strategies implemented at the same time in both elementary and upper secondary school (Christensen et al., 2010). Our qualitative survey among counties of how they have further developed the NPTP can give some new answers about the follow-up of the initiative.

3 Public innovation, organisational learning, and institutional change

“Innovation refers to a more or less intentional and proactive process that develops, implements and spreads new and creative ideas, and which creates a qualitative change in a given context” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2011, p.29, our translation). The innovation is not a goal for itself, but rather as a means to obtain a further benefit for society. Furthermore, seeing innovation as a learning-based practice that incorporates occasional chance discoveries where the users are able to domesticate the new strategy (Sørensen, 2013). Innovation breaks with conventional wisdom and well-established practices and brings about qualitative change (Roberts and King, 1996). However, innovation is not the origin of new solutions; rather, it involves identifying, translating and adjusting new ideas and solutions from other countries, policy fields or organisations. Hence, it is rather the implementation context where practices determine whether they are new and innovative (Roberts and King, 1996).

Mulgan and Albury (2003) suggest a framework for Government and public sector thinking and action both in promoting successful innovation and in the implementation of it. Successful innovation is defined as “… the creation and implementation of new processes, products, services and methods of delivery which result in significant
improvements in outcomes efficiency, effectiveness or quality” (Mulgan and Albury, 2003, p.3). Mulgan and Albury point to four main elements in the innovation process:

- **Generating possibilities**: i.e., stimulation and support of ideas for innovation.
- **Incubating and prototyping**: i.e., mechanisms for developing promising ideas and managing attendant risks.
- Replicating and scaling up: i.e., promotion of rapid and effective diffusion of successful innovation.
- **Analysing and learning**: i.e., evaluation of what works and what does not, in order to promote continuous learning and improvement.

Each element of the process draws on different skills, resources, organisational methods, leadership and cultures according to Mulgan and Albury (2003). We will analyse the NPTP as an innovation process and, in particular, draw our attention to the fourth element, analysing and learning. As a rule, the government initiated projects are followed by one or several evaluations in order to explore whether the policies and initiatives produce the intended outcomes or outputs, but these evaluations are seldom concerned with what works in which circumstances and why (Mulgan and Albury, 2003, p.28). Evaluations may inhibit innovation because the evaluation of rigid systems requires fixed models. In the policy area, however, one may find it more useful to adapt, learn and innovate in real time (Mulgan and Albury, 2003). This means there is a need for the deeper level of understanding of how the policy is implemented, adjusted and transformed in different local contexts. Mulgan and Albury point to several means to achieve understanding and improvements in practice. We are especially concerned about whether the innovation process has led to double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978) at the organisational level, i.e., at school owner and school levels.

Double-loop learning implies a modification of an organisation’s underlying norms, policies, and objectives and may contribute to a deeper level of understanding and improvements in practice, and may lead to innovation processes at the local level (Mulgan and Albury, 2003). Employees and civil servants that do innovation work may be part of a relational innovation process. Innovation happens in relations where different actors meet and develop ideas, which are set in motion, spread and lead to something new or some qualitative change in a given context. We will show how the possibilities – i.e., stimulation and support of ideas for the NPTP arose (first element) and the process of incubating and development of the NPTP (second element). The third element of the NPTP phase implied replicating and scaling up. Following Mulgan and Albury (2003), the third element is decisive for making the innovation rapid and effective. Last, but not least, we will use our research project data to explore the analysing and learning element of the innovation (fourth element) in order to discuss whether the innovation has promoted continuous learning and improvement.

Organisational learning indicates institutional change; the education authorities in the county municipalities (and municipalities) that have implemented and continued the NPTP or modified and adjusted the measures locally have changed, although the organisational structures are the same. Learning at the organisational level implies that something new, for instance, new knowledge, communicates to others within the organisation. If the group agrees to change a practice or start something new, then one can talk about an organisational change of practice. To ensure that the measure remains
and is developed in the organisation the practice must be systematised. Additionally, to secure further existence it is often necessary to put the new measures into writing, as procedures, guidelines, or instructions (Irgens and Wennes, 2011).

According to Streeck and Thelen (2005), it is important to distinguish between processes of change as incremental or abrupt, additionally to distinguish between results of change as continuity or break. Thelen (2003) introduces the concepts of layering and conversion as tools to analyse institutional change. Change may take place under the surface of presumably stable institutions by having new elements added to the institution, characterised as layering. If change implies the transformation of the institution’s objective without change of structures, the change is conversion. There are also mechanisms that prevent change, and these locked-in mechanisms are due to human and material costs of change and imply continuity (Thelen, 2003, p.209). In addition, survival and return is a relevant stabilising factor. Survival and return relate to continued institutions despite historical breaks. Even though altering formal structures and settlements, they re-establish or re-emerge as informal institutional arrangements. We will explore to which extent the NPTP has led to organisational learning and use the historical institutional concepts presented by Streeck and Thelen to analyse whether the implementation of the project has led to institutional change.

To be able to learn from the innovation process, we compare the anti-dropout measures that the county municipalities have reported as NPTP measures. Based on the comparison we identify how the project is implemented, adjusted and transformed at the school and school owner levels. The main interest is the degree of continuation of the NPTP: whether the mapping indicates implementation of NPTP, and if measures have lead to organisational learning and institutional change at the different levels. In order to compare the measures designed for the NPTP with the measures reported from the counties, we apply four dimensions:

- the problem definition of dropping out from upper secondary education
- actors involved (and at which organisational level and sector)
- definition of target groups
- type of anti-dropout measures

We claim that the NP Strategy and the Transition Project represented an innovative and new anti-dropout policy in Norway due to four characteristic features:

- it was implemented nationwide
- it included tight collaboration between the two different public school owners in each county: municipalities and county municipalities
- intensive teaching in basic skills offered the 10% lowest performing students in school year 10
- which was to be continued in upper secondary school, years 11 and 12.

We will further scrutinise how the policy has devolved at the local level, and discuss what we can learn about innovation in education and to which extent the policy has led to institutional change.
4 Method and data

Three different data sources have been utilised to study measures to prevent dropout from upper secondary schools (both academic and vocational programs). First, we conducted a web and documentation study during the autumn of 2014 in which each county municipality’s self-presentation of their measures with the goal to increase completion was registered. County municipalities present their initiatives differently and the websites are not always updated. Nevertheless, much information can be found in their yearly education reports. In addition, we got access to a mapping of the measures that the counties regard as successful when it comes to improving the school completion rate, which the Ministry of Education and Research had conducted during the spring of 2015. These two mappings showed that the counties have a broad definition of what measures they define as anti-dropout measures. The mappings gave us an entry to be able to create a survey for all the county municipalities and the largest municipality in each county, which most often is the location of the county municipality administration.

During the summer of 2015, we conducted a qualitative electronic survey to map the counties’ different measures regarding dropout and their activity regarding NPTP after the project was transferred to the county level from the Ministry. A similar electronic survey was sent to the largest municipality in each county with identical questions regarding the general New Possibilities Strategy. These four different data sources give a broad picture of many different efforts, but are not complete because not all the county municipalities or municipalities replied to the e-survey. Additionally, the Ministry’s mapping only focused on measures regarded as successful at the county municipality level. However, this data material will give an extensive overview together with different classifications of the measures utilised at the county municipality level.

The e-mapping was sent to the director of education at the county municipality level in mid-June 2015, and after some rounds of reminders both by e-mail and by telephone, the survey was closed in mid-September 2015. 15 of 19 counties took part in the survey, and the data from these 15 will be presented. The e-survey of the municipalities was addressed to the chief municipal education officer in mid-June 2015. This survey was closed at the same time as the county mapping after rounds of reminders where 14 of 19 municipalities participated. The aim of both surveys was to get an insight into a continuation of measures from the NPTP, in addition to what types of measures the county municipalities and municipalities run themselves. We asked for joint projects between municipalities and county municipalities. In addition, the intention was to get an overview over collaborating actors.

5 ‘New Possibilities: The Transition Project’ as a public innovation

5.1 Generating possibilities for the NPTP

In 2011, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research launched the national strategy New Possibilities to increase successful completion of upper secondary education and training. The 2006 Knowledge Promotion Reform aimed to improve completion and reduce dropout rates by including both elementary school and upper secondary school in the education reform and prioritising the teaching of basic skills. Implemented gradually from 2011, the NPTP aimed to ease the transition between lower
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and upper secondary education, implying cooperation between the municipalities and the county municipalities where systematic cooperation between these two school governors was a new factor. Thus, the NPTP added something completely new to the Norwegian anti-dropout policy; in addition to following up on students who dropped out, it included preventive intervention such as intensive teaching in both literacy and numeracy.

5.2 Incubating and prototyping the NPTP

The New Possibilities Transition Project targeted the lowest-performing 10% of the 10th-grade students. The aim was that the NPTP students would get further support in upper secondary education. The NPTP consisted of four main measures:

- Intensive tutoring of the target group took place during the final semester of the 10th grade with follow-up of the same students through upper secondary education and training.
- Two 10th-grade teachers at each lower secondary school and two teachers at each upper secondary school in Norway attended courses on teaching techniques for developing students’ basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy. A main ambition of the NPTP was to reform the classroom and teaching practice by training ‘New Possibilities’ (NP) teachers in courses on specific pedagogical techniques that have general application as standards in the intensive teaching courses in schools.
- Networking among teachers and the promotion of teaching techniques to improve general classroom practice was encouraged through centrally governed platforms. In addition, networks for school leaders, advisors forums and other meetings were established at the county level with the aim of exchanging information between different governing levels.
- Close cooperation between various levels of government and school owners, a collaboration between teachers in each school and the division of responsibilities were considered as vital to successful implementation.

Project coordinators (at the county municipality and municipality levels) were given local responsibility for the project to support both the lower and upper secondary schools in implementing the program. Furthermore, the head teachers (or deputy head teachers) were important for program implementation at the school level, expecting to collaborate with school leader colleagues and school owners (Helgøy and Homme, 2013). The identification of a target group of students was made at the municipal level, although a certain amount of discretion was granted to schools, which weighed students’ performance, motivation and potential for improved learning in the selection process. The trained NP teachers were key actors at the school level. They were responsible for the intensive teaching, in addition to the tutoring of the specific teaching method to other teachers. The networks included the NP teachers at both school levels, and represented yet another actor in the project. The intention with the teacher networks was to maintain and develop the acquired teaching techniques, the practicalities of teaching low-performing students and the promotion of the program’s teaching techniques within the schools. Based on information about the strategy and the intensive teaching course, the targeted students and their parents had to decide whether to participate in the program or not. If they decided to participate, signing a contract stating responsibilities and rights
for both parties. During the NPTP period, different tools were launched, such as the statistical overview of how many students complete their upper secondary education within five years. Our analysis of educational strategies at the county level showed that the statistical material is widely used by the counties in their work for making strategies on how to enhance the completion rates. It is the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training who is responsible for launching the statistical overview each year (see, for example, Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016).

5.3 Replicating and scaling up the NPTP

Looking at the replicating and scaling element of the NPTP, we find that it was a large-scale innovation gradually implemented to all municipalities, county municipalities, and schools over a three-year period. The first introduction of the strategy was during the 2010/2011 school year in a small number of schools in the largest municipality in each county. The number of schools gradually increased in 2011/2012, and by 2012/2013 adopted in all secondary schools on a national basis. Following the three-year project period, the Government expected that the school owners would continue the measures as part of their responsibilities and daily work (Project report, Ministry of Education and Research, 2014). If we were to find such a change in local anti-dropout policy at school owner level, this can be characterised as institutional layering, as an element added to the existing institutional structures (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Above we have presented the NPTP as a government initiated innovation aiming to reduce dropout rates from upper secondary education in Norway, and have given an overview of the replicating and scaling up part of the process. In the next section, we will focus on the analysing and learning element of NPTP. Did the NPTP influence how the counties work to reduce dropout, and did the NP project lead to organisational learning?

5.4 Analysing and learning from the NPTP

Since the NPTP period ended in 2013, the county municipalities and municipalities have not received funding for a continuation of the strategy measures. If a measure is continued after a period of implementation we can presume that it has been taken in as a part of the school’s or school owner’s collection of instruments, and that the initiative is valued as an asset and something the school owners would like to develop further. Hence, an organisational learning experience has taken place. However, we cannot conclude that those who have not continued the NPTP measures have not learned from the experience, but they have not been willing or able to prioritise the continuation. As mentioned above, the county municipalities are responsible for the measures at the upper secondary level and the municipalities are responsible for the lower secondary level. From our survey of the county municipalities, we found that all 15 have continued some of the NPTP measures. Eleven of 15 county municipalities report that they are continuing the measure of intensive tutoring during upper secondary school after the NPTP period.

5.5 Intensive tutoring

Different types of intensive tutoring were also used as measures before the NPTP. For instance, summer school courses are mainly for students that fail their exams or do not have final assessment during the first or second year of upper secondary school.
These students are offered the opportunity to participate in a shorter course during the summer in which students get intensified tutoring in one specific subject with the possibility to take a new exam. Offering the different measures to a small number of students with the aim of helping students continue their education or be qualified for an apprenticeship. Most of the county municipalities have incorporated intensive tutoring into their toolbox, but there are some differences regarding how they organise it. Counting on the school owners’ experience of what the students need, they have transformed the measure according to the needs of students at the upper secondary level in their county. The schools offering the different types of tutoring courses influence the content and adjust the curricula to the attending students. We suspect that since the intensive tutoring courses were already a part of the county municipalities’ strategy before the NPTP and were further supported by the strategy, there is a higher possibility for its continuation. Segregating the weakest students from their class for intensive tutoring represents a break with the egalitarian unitary school principle in Norwegian education. Relying on historical institutionalism, this change of institutional structure can be characterised as institutional layering (Thelen, 2003). Data from the qualitative survey reveals continuing of intensified tutoring in the last semester of the 10th grade in some of the municipalities. However, only five of the 14 municipalities in our sample report that they have continued the intensive tutoring teaching initiative during 10th grade. The different upper secondary schools run different projects with the aim of enhancing completion in addition to intensive tutoring. Our mapping reveals that there are many measures directed toward helping or changing the path of students who are in danger of quitting school, but not directly related to continuation of the NPTP and the New Possibilities Strategy.

5.6 Teacher courses and networks

Only a few municipalities still offer courses in NP methods and specific pedagogical techniques for teachers, and as such, this specific initiative is not very well implemented or continued. The municipalities, which have continued using the specific teaching methods and/or intensive tutoring for students, have incorporated the NPTP within their own educational toolbox, as the strategy intended. This change too, can be characterised as a form of institutional layering where a new element is incorporated in the school without a change of structure (Thelen, 2003). When it comes to the teachers and advisors at the school level, there are some NPTP initiatives that have been developed further. The network for school counsellors from both lower and upper secondary schools have been continued within each county municipality, and is often organised in smaller networks within the different county regions. According to the e-mapping, in some counties, the lower and upper secondary teachers organise networks for subject development and curricula exchange. Networks between school levels are also new elements that can be identified as contributing to an institutional layering, as new elements are added to the existing ones (Thelen, 2003).

5.7 Cooperation between level of governments and school owners

One of the initiatives that started during the NPTP was the network among school leaders, head teachers and school owners. Exchange of information between the different types of schools and levels is an administrative tool and eight of the counties in this
mapping especially emphasised the networks. The different formal networks at the county level and also at regional county level exchange information and statistics, and discuss relevant issues concerning the development within their field. The participants vary depending on the topic, but school leaders, head teachers, teachers, and other professional groups involved with the school attend on a regular basis. One of the inventions developed from the NPTP was the transition form or transition meeting between lower and upper secondary school with the aim of exchanging information so that the new school could be aware of the NPTP student and possibly adjust the transition to a new school for the student. Seven of the county municipalities report continuing these collaboration efforts. It was up to the county municipalities and municipalities themselves to develop tools for information exchange, and as such, this was an organisational invention. These findings indicate that the school owners who have continued the information exchange procedures have analysed and learned from the process and see this as an asset. The different networks that interconnect schools and school owners at both the same and different levels are continued and developed after the NPTP period, and all the counties report on different network and qualification initiatives. Thus, it appears as one of the most influential measures coming out of the NPTP. The aim of the network initiative was to develop a better and permanent cooperation platform between government, county municipalities and municipalities to influence the conditions for students to complete and pass secondary school. These networks are a form of organisational learning practice where the different administrative levels meet, exchange information and learn from their different experiences. Even though we identify signs of institutional change following the NPTP, it is evident that some of the strategy measures were not fully implemented or continued after the project period. One of the intentions was that the methods and tools introduced as part of the strategy should be a part of the individual school’s toolbox. Our mapping shows that some county municipalities and municipalities have continued their collaboration and others have not. However, depending on the extent to which the school owners cooperate, the cross level collaboration is an element that has been added to the institution, and therefore a kind of institutional layering (Thelen, 2003).

6 Conclusion

Norway, as the rest of the Scandinavian countries, has a comprehensive school system, where a national framework sets standards for education and training. Young people are expected to be in education, but the system allows for individual learning and training plans if there is a special need for it. Over the years, different policies have been developed to support youth, where the social contract implies that youth can complete education in spite of some delays because there is an expectation that he or she will contribute to the society in the end. The society supports changes and adapts policies that have flexibility built-in. The aim of the paper has been to find out how the NPTP as a public innovation has been initiated and implemented throughout Norway by analysing the main elements in the innovation process: generating possibilities for innovation, developing promising ideas and managing attendant risks, replicating and scaling up, and analysing and learning (see Mulgan and Albury, 2003). Our main interest has been to investigate if the NPTP has led to organisational learning and institutional change at the local level. The first element in the transformation process was defining the problem of
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Innovative government initiatives to prevent upper secondary school dropout as a societal and political problem that the school system could actively help curbing, developing the NP Strategy from existing knowledge about where the difficulties are especially apparent: the transition between lower and upper secondary school. The argument for the innovation was clear that it would be beneficial both for the individual student and for the society if more students complete their education.

The NPTP can be labelled a public innovation, as it was the first attempt to launch a national initiative across the different school levels. Norway holds a strong tradition for autonomous school management at the local level, and the strategy was a cross-cutting initiative that tried to overcome some of the barriers for collaboration between different levels. Some of the strategic measures have successfully been modified and continued. School owners and schools have evaluated what worked and what did not work, to promote continuous improvement of the anti-dropout activities. Implying implementation of the innovation, in addition to organisational learning at the local level. At the government level, the strategy has been partly followed by the ‘Strategy for enhancing completion’. This following strategy has enhanced the county municipalities’ own ability to come up with appropriate measures to solve local dropout challenges. Delegating the responsibility for finding the best solutions to the local level opens up the possibility of understanding and defining the dropout problem differently.

The NPTP generated possibilities by adding something completely new to the Norwegian dropout policy; in addition to following up on students who have dropped out, it includes preventive intervention such as intensive tutoring in basic skills in both literacy and numeracy. There were traces of incubating and prototyping in counties with closer collaboration between various levels of government and school owners as well as between teachers across individual schools. The division of responsibilities between the collaborators was considered as vital to successful implementation. Moreover, the replication and scaling up of the project was important to realise the nationwide project.

After the NPTP ended in 2013, the county municipalities and municipalities have not received any earmarked funding for a continuation of the policy. The Government’s intention was that the project period should be devoted to the implementation process, and that once implemented, the measures would be integrated in the school institutional structures. However, other government initiatives have followed and there has been an increased attention at all levels regarding dropout and initiatives to enhance completion. Further, the analysis shows that the NPTP has strengthened the school owners’ argument for the continuation of the measure. There is no doubt that the strategy has led to varying degrees of organisational learning, due to local experiences from the implementation process. Especially continuing different network and seminar activities after the NPTP period ended. Moreover, the networks have gained importance as an administrative and management tool to govern the educational sector.

For an educational innovation at the national level to have the leverage it is necessary that there is a clear vision of what the purpose is and a conviction that the purpose will be realised – that youth complete their education. Deployment of the NPTP as a public innovation is about how it has been set in use, how the school level, county municipalities, municipalities, and the teachers have taken the strategy in use and made it their own. Our mapping shows that there are rather different practices developed, where some actors have incorporated the strategy in their toolbox adding their own understanding of how to develop it further, while others have abandoned most of the strategy except the network groups. Those who succeeded in continuation made the strategy their own, incorporated it into their own routines and toolbox for dealing with
dropouts. Innovation and organisational learning is not only about creating something new, but also developing it further, making the new elements stable through translating it and thus domesticating the strategy. As such, we argue that the implementation of the NPTP demonstrates a type of institutional change where new elements are added, but also where new structures have become a part of the organisation without change of structure; in institutional layering.

References


Innovative government initiatives to prevent upper secondary school dropout


Notes


296% of the primary and lower secondary school pupils attend public schools, i.e., schools owned by the municipality. The numbers of upper secondary school pupils in public schooling, i.e., owned by the county municipality, are a bit lower compared to primary and lower secondary schools (Statistics Norway, 2016).