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Education for All in Norway: Unpacking Quality and Equity

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Abstract

The discourses of equity and quality in education have permeated the international debates about education whether they occur in the context of research, policy, curriculum or teaching and learning. Rather than being directly articulated, they often remain implicit and assumed. Norway is strongly influenced by these discourses, emphasising both equity and quality as valued outcomes in teacher education. Through a socio-political post-structural reading of White-papers, strategic research-political documents, as well as evaluation reports on educational research in a Nordic context, we have examined the theoretical underpinnings and tacit relations between equity and quality in the Norwegian educational context.

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1. Introduction

This paper adopts a critical policy studies orientation, drawing on policy-as-discourse literature (Ball, 2003). Based on such an approach, this work regards the policy-making processes as a political struggle over ideas and practices that involve revision, negotiation and efforts to resolve conflicting interests in education. Following a critical approach to policy analysis implies providing a comprehensive account of the political educational arena, the actors involved in the policy-making processes and their conflicting interests related to equity and quality discourses within the landscape of education.

The discourses of equity and quality in education have permeated the international debates about education whether they occur in the context of research, policy, curriculum or teaching and learning. Rather than being directly articulated, they often remain implicit and assumed. When they are articulated, their understandings are not clearly theorised. Arguably, of greater importance is that the relationship between them is often left unexamined. Norway is strongly influenced by these discourses, which for example have resulted in new teacher educations both for early childhood education and care (ECEC), and for the primary and lower secondary schools, emphasising both equity and quality as valued outcomes. Although studies, which were referred by government, dealing with equity and quality in education acknowledge the social and political dimensions of the problem, we shall argue that such studies insist on addressing the problem of inequity and quality as if it could be understood and solved within education itself. It seems to be admitting that the problem has an economic and political nature, going way beyond the classroom, but, since we are educators, we must investigate it in the classroom. This approach – which consists

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of reducing a political problem to a didactical one, thus making it possible to solve through the development and implementation of better stratagems to teach and learn – cannot be said to have produced the desired result, namely the commonly shared desire of “Education for all”.

Through a socio-political post-structural reading of White-papers, strategic research-political documents, as well as evaluation reports on educational research in a Nordic context, we have examined the theoretical underpinnings and tacit relations between equity and quality in the Norwegian educational context related to “Education for all”. A historical and contemporary account of the policy creation precedes the textual analysis of the policy documents. We conducted a textual analysis of the documents to understand how the use of certain words and ideas advance a particular understanding of choice and argumentations. The analysis identifies repetition to determine what seems to become the main focus of the documents. Furthermore, the analysis identifies patterns, shifts as well as ambiguities, contradictions and omissions. Mindful of the relations of power at play during the policy creation, this study also examined the competing arguments and demands of the different policy actors (Latour, 2005) and how they are articulated in the policy documents. We start by contextualising Norwegian school and early childhood politics.

2. Background

Norwegian schools and kindergartens are strongly influenced by ideologies associated with the principles of collective teaching and learning and equal rights in education. This is in part the effect of 50-60 years of social democratic politics, which have aimed for social and economic levelling, including equal access to any position in society regardless of one’s socioeconomic background (Telhaug, 1997). Some central characteristics of the ideal of a *good* Nordic childhood are articulated in primary school and early childhood institutions. A well-known characteristic of childhood, as proposed by Kristjánsson (2006), includes the naturalness of childhood, free-play, democracy, equity and egalitarianism and liberation from over-supervision and over-control by adults. These ideas are documented in public policy and the Norwegian Curriculum Framework Plan for Kindergartens (2011), which indicate that children have the right to participate, that is, to have their voices respected and heard both from an individual and a collective position (Braathe & Otterstad, 2012). Every child has the right to a place in the kindergarten from one year of age, and children start school when they are six years old. The Government financially supports all kindergartens and has a certain responsibility to follow up the content in line with the national Curriculum Framework Plan (2011).

Thus, Norwegian education today has certain important features: nearly 100% of students are enrolled in public [i.e., state] schools; curricula for all levels and disciplines have the same form and function throughout the country; no marks are given before grade eight (age 13); permanent and structural streaming based on marks or ability is only recent, having been prohibited until 2003; and there is no subject specialisation before the last two years of upper secondary schooling (years 12 and 13, ages 18-19).

The source of this strong and nationally shared egalitarianism can be traced to the political and cultural history of Norway. Between the late 1930s and the 1990s the Norwegian Labour Party dominated educational politics, working strategically towards social levelling and equalisation with a constant equal rights claim, especially when it came to access to education. The Second World War framed institution-building in Norway around knowledge and knowledge production, which were regarded as important tools in building the modern Norway. The Labour Party’s aim was to build a social democratic Norway that included a welfare state, social cohesion and equality as important factors. Comprehensive schooling was a central strategy, and the expansion of the compulsory free education for all students, regardless of where they lived in the country, was enshrined in law. The premise that school should be for everyone was an important prerequisite for building the social democratic Norway. Both knowledge and national culture were considered key carriers for the community. The main goal was equality, community, prosperity, solidarity and welfare. These egalitarian ideologies are strong discursive forces, in some sense taken for granted as a striving for social justice including equity regarding Education for all.

However, all sectors of the education system underwent reform during the 1990’s. In this period, traditional egalitarianism in education was at risk. As in other Western countries, economic and cultural individualism and marketization supported new Right demands for increased parental choice of schools. The traditional ideas of

solidarity and equality came under strong pressure. Norway was influenced by the trends towards accountability and standards control elsewhere in Europe and the USA, leading to a centralisation of power and a combination of social democratic and neo-liberal discourses in education (Trippedstad, 2009). The result was new discourses of schooling and the beginning of a new school era. As Ball (2003, 2008) notes, we can see these new discourses as being driven by policy technologies like the market, managerialism and performativity. The traditional discourses of egalitarianism and solidarity were challenged by discourses of competition and inequality under the public rhetoric of raising Quality in Education (Braathe, 2012a).

3. Framing quality

In June 2008, White Paper 31 ‘Quality in Education’ (Ministry of Education, 2008) was presented. In it the Government elaborated on goals for schools. It begins with a chapter entitled “Joint efforts for better quality”, where the Government elaborates on its definition of quality, the purpose of schooling, and its plans for possible changes in the curriculum. The chapter discusses in general the social mandate and objectives of education. In Section 1.3 these goals are concretised under the heading ‘Objectives for Quality in Education’. The Government emphasises that the quality of basic education is characterised by the degree to which the various objectives of basic education in the social mandate, expressed in the objects clause, is realised. Three points are highlighted in the text, as the Government’s goals for basic education. These are as follows:

1. All students who leave school shall master the basic skills that enable them to participate in further education and employment.
 2. All students and apprentices who are able to do so, shall complete education with a certificate of competence that is recognised for further study or employment.
 3. All students and trainees should be included and experience a sense of achievement.
- (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11, our translation)

The Government has thus operationalized the concept of quality in school. First, students will master basic skills. Secondly, as many as possible should complete secondary education, with reduced dropout. And third, all students shall experience a sense of achievement. Indicators that will be used to assess the degree to which these goals are achieved are described for each point.

This is a key text, since it explicitly states what measures need to be taken in order to meet the vision expressed in the object clause. Quality indicators regarding the first point, “all students should master basic skills” are defined as follows:

- At the national level: *the proportion of students performing* at the lowest level of competence in international studies in reading and mathematics.
 - At the local level: *the proportion of students performing* at the lowest level in reading and mathematics in national tests compared to the national average.
- (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11, our translation, italics added)

Goal attainment is therefore related to the proportion of students’ *performance* in reading and mathematics. Similarly, the quality indicators for the next goal “all students and apprentices should complete education” are:

- *The proportion of students* who complete upper secondary school distributed over theoretical and practical tracks.
 - *The proportion of students* who achieve planned competence on a lower level among those who do not complete upper secondary school.
- (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11, our translation, italics added)

And for the third goal, regarding “all students and trainees should be included and experience a sense of achievement”:

- *The proportion of students* who thrive well in school.
- *The proportion of students* who are bullied in school.
- *The proportion of students* who experience enough challenges in school.
- *The proportion of students* who express that they experience that the teaching is adjusted to their level of knowledge.
- *The proportion of students* who experience that they get relevant feedback.
(Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11, our translation, italics added)

We see that the Government defines quality through these indicators as a relative concept related to the three goals for basic education in Norway, defined as percentages of students who fulfil the quality expectations.

4. Framing equity

Ozga (2008) and others have pointed to the newly emerging neo-liberal governance. The new governance produces a range of sophisticated instruments for the steering of education policy; standardisation, quality benchmarking and data harmonisation. Governance blurs into governmentality, particularly through attendance to the interdependence of governing and knowledge production of education. The new governance promotes the collection and use of comparative data on performance as a way of controlling and shaping the behaviour of students and educators. These regulatory mechanisms “act as ‘political technologies’ which seek to bring persons, organisation and objectives into alignment” (p. 266), and therefore “[t]he quality debate is best understood as part of the technology of governance” (p. 262). In this way, quality as a relative concept needs comparative data for conceptualisation and experts for producing these according to the agreed upon indicators. The indicators above fit these technologies and underline the overall, universal ideal of “Education for all” by connecting quality to the percentage of students who fulfil the quality expectations. Discourses of equity underpinning this conception of quality can be identified in the operationalization of the indicators above. This fact emphasises that discussions of equity and quality are necessarily political, since they allow us to address the values and ideologies that make part of the educational practices, as well as the whole set of practices and social organisations that extend beyond the classrooms.

5. Framing the relation between equity and quality

Who would publicly deny that education should be concerned with equity and quality? Nowadays, the terms appear side-by-side and it seems “natural” to have them together and to know what is understood by the terms. In this paper, we attend to the “naturalisation” of the meaning of these terms and their relationship. The systematic underachievement and its consequences for certain groups of students is not acceptable, particularly in times where the agenda of “Education for all” seems to have permeated policy documents all around the world. By connecting equity to measuring quality, that is quality is defined as a function of equity, it can also be read the other way as if there is a causal relation; that improving quality in education will reduce inequality in education. In recent literature, the concern for equity is addressed in different forms by different authors. The understanding of what it means to address and achieve equity also diverges, and some authors prefer to use terms such as social justice, democratic access or inclusion/exclusion. It is also common to find the declaration that research on equity requires social and political approaches that situate the problem in a broader context than the classroom or schools (Pais & Valero, 2011).

6. Kunnskapsløftet – a reformed curricular plan

In the midst of the ‘quality’ concerned climate, Norway elected a Conservative right-wing government, which then took responsibility for Norwegian education in 2001. There was a broad consensus among all politicians that something had to be done about schooling. Public and political discourses became dominated by rhetoric pointing out that the knowledge level was lower than it should be according to international tests; that there were major differences between students and schools; and that teachers seem to be unable to maintain discipline in the classroom.

This opened up the way for a new and radically different school reform answering the travelling discourses about raising quality in education and influencing Norwegian education policy (Bergesen, 2006). The right-wing government went straight on to design a new curriculum. Applying policy technologies aligned with the neo-liberal ideas of efficiency, productivity, competition and privatisation, the right-wing government defined a new political context for education in Kunnskapsløftet.[†] It set national competencies; it gave local freedom to organise teaching and learning; and set national control for achieved results. National control took the form of national tests.

One of the main ideological features of Kunnskapsløftet involves granting local freedom to organise teaching and learning, based on the neo-liberal rationale of competition between schools in attracting students and parents. This clearly breaks with the tradition of setting central standards and requirements for both the organisation of time and the working practices. Local freedom includes allowing schools to organise children into groups according to perceived ability, which had previously been forbidden by law since 1978. This was also a major break with the widely accepted social democratic egalitarian ideologies of the Norwegian school system. Together with the contemporary push for outcomes-based learning in which students’ progress is mapped against levels, this reform led many schools in Norway to abandon the old system of heterogeneous classes and begin streaming students into ability groups (Braathe, 2012a).

Labour Party domination returned following an election in 2005, and this government adopted Kunnskapsløftet and responsibility for its implementation in 2006. In June 2008, White Paper 31 ‘Quality in Education’ (Ministry of Education, 2008) was presented. In it the Government elaborated on the goals for schools, thereby going beyond a mere inheritance of the reform carved out by the previous right-wing government, and putting its stamp on it including the referred quality indicators and the equity discourses.

7. Kunnskapsløftet and quality and equity?

The overall goal of the school reform was to increase the level of knowledge and the basic skills among all pupils, which is raising quality to increase equity. A major research program has evaluated and studied the implementation processes and learning outcomes of the reform. This program was initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research and is organised and financed by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. Within this program, NOVA – Norwegian Social Research – has studied whether the reform contributes to a reduction of the social inequalities in learning outcomes between pupils of different socioeconomic backgrounds, gender and immigrant statuses (Bakken & Elvestad, 2012). In the final report of this research project, all students who graduated from lower secondary school (10th grade) during the period 2002-2011 are studied. The analyses are primarily based on pupils’ grades and exam results.

Bakken and Elvestad (2012) find that after four years with the new curriculum there is little to suggest that Kunnskapsløftet has contributed to less social inequalities at the end of the compulsory education. The pattern of social inequalities in grades continues to be at more or less the same level during the reform period as compared to the situation before the reform was introduced. However, in some areas there have been changes in the direction of increasing social inequalities; an increase in inequality has taken place between students from families "low" and

[†] The official translation of the Norwegian name for this new Curriculum plan Kunnskapsløftet, is “Knowledge Promotion”. The name indicates a desire to focus on knowledge, indirectly criticising former plans for focusing on democratic and social aspects of schooling in Norway.

"high" in the socioeconomic status hierarchy. Specifically, they detect this increase in difference in an increase in top marks in pupils from high socioeconomic status, and an increase in students who are missing grades when they are finishing 10th grade from the lowest socioeconomic status. Therefore, according to Bakken and Elvestad (2012), there has been a polarisation in primary education under Kunnskapsløftet in Norway since 2006.

From their data, they cannot say if it is the reformed curriculum that is directly contributing to this polarisation and the increase in inequity, but they put up some hypotheses for further inquiry. The analyses of trends show a striking feature, with a turning point that in time falls along with the introduction of Kunnskapsløftet. Even though the changes are not dramatic, this may be a hint that there is something in the reform – directly or through spin-offs – which pulls in the direction of greater social inequality in school grades. In the report, some possible mechanisms of the reform are discussed, and due to lack of data they speculate on possible factors pulling in the direction of increased social differences in students' school performance.

Their speculations are pointing to four aspects that they think might have influenced these processes. First, they point to the fact that in this quality discourse where Kunnskapsløftet is located, it requires a greater focus on promoting knowledge and academic and basic skills. The school is so to speak to a greater extent oriented towards the type of knowledge and skills that in the working life (and elsewhere) are to a particular extent demanded (and mastered) by the well-educated middle class. The new demands on students from the reform are almost playing in tune with the highly educated, and students from such layers will therefore perhaps be better equipped to adapt to the learning goals under Kunnskapsløftet. In addition, a goal-directed curriculum and emphasis on better cooperation between home and school may have contributed in the same direction. As parental resources vary in terms of opportunities and conditions to be partners with the school, it is conceivable that increased demands on parental involvement from the schools can differentiate further according to their own home school resources.

Second, the use of assessment tools and other types of tests can serve in the same direction. Frequent feedback reports to each student about how well academic knowledge and skills are mastered means a stream of signals to individual pupils about how "successful" – in light of the curriculum – he or she is, and the effect can be an enhanced gap between students.

The third possible explanation for the increased differences may be changes in how teachers assess their pupils. Teachers may have reacted to a shift towards the more knowledge-related aspects of the school by revising the ways they classify their own students. If the grading scale is increasingly used to distinguish more clearly between the students' level of knowledge, changes in teachers' collective assessment practices can generate a tendency towards increasing social inequality in grades.

A fourth possible explanation is the parents' role, which may have been changed because of the debate around the introduction of Kunnskapsløftet. As the rhetoric of quality and knowledge in school has permeated the official discourse over time, more and more parents believe that it is important that the level of knowledge in schools is raised (Braathe, 2012b). These patterns show that there has been a change in the educational climate at the cultural level. However, there are clear social patterns: the higher the parents' education, the greater the support for the importance of knowledge in school (Ball, 2008). Little is known about what kind of processes within the family such cultural changes have triggered. It is conceivable that social differences in the way academic knowledge and basic skills are valued might generate increasing social inequality in how the parents emphasise their children's education efforts, which in turn is reflected back into a greater social differentiation in students' grades (Bakken & Elvestad, 2012).

8. Lifelong learning and learnification

Kunnskapsløftet is part of the new school era strongly influenced by the policy technologies identified by Ball (2003, 2008) and the emerging neo-liberal governance pointed to by Ozga (2008). From the quality indicators for the first point above, we see that what is measured is the competences in reading and mathematics. The trends indicated by Bakken and Elvestad (2012) above are especially strong when it comes to school mathematics. We will therefore look more closely into Mathematics for all as a crucial aspect of Education for all, since this seems to represent a major aspect of the ideologies framing equity and quality in educational policy.

Biesta (2009) analyses the functions that education fulfils in today's society. *The function of qualification* has to do with the role of education to provide people with the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to fulfil a productive function. *The function of socialisation* has to do with the role of education in enculturating people to become members of a particular society. Analysis of the justification for teaching and learning leads us to see that education builds fundamentally on the fulfilment of the qualification and socialisation functions. On the other hand, mathematics teaching and learning is also important because it allows nurturing the next generation of mathematicians and those who will use mathematics in their work, therefore assuring the development of a workforce equipped to successfully compete in the global economy of our high-tech society. Since school mathematics is posited as indispensable to becoming both a productive and competent citizen, the purpose of mathematics education research should be to improve students' mathematical learning. Naturally, this has established research in mathematics education with a strong focus on theories of learning. Biesta (2005) has pointed to this shift in that the language of educational research has been replaced by a technical language of learning. A central concern is to make the schooling more effective and the problem of schooling and school subjects are not political or ideological, but have become primarily technical and didactical. In most cases, solutions to educational problems are reduced to better methods and techniques to teach and learn, to improve the use of technology, to assess students' performance, etcetera. Education has been progressively reduced to a controllable, designable, engineerable and operational framework for individuals' cognitive change. Such tendencies are what Biesta (2005) calls the *learnification* of education. This reduction of education to learning disavows the political magnitude of education.

It is the "naturalisation" of the meaning of the terms quality and equity that we are focusing on in this paper. We will do that by using Kunnskapsløftet as a generic example of ideological inconsistencies in the educational policies underpinning these neo-liberal discourses fabricating learnification and the lifelong learner in a regime of "Education for all". We use ideology as a concept close to a Foucaultian "regime of truth"; that is something we think from and not on (Braathe & Ongstad, 2001), and the connections between knowledge and power (Foucault, 2002). The strategy to criticise this mode of ideology is to carry out a symptomatic reading that exhibits the discrepancies between public discourses supporting Kunnskapsløftet and to see how the document bears in itself the impossibility of achieving its stated goals.

9. Ideological inconsistencies

Results from comparative international and national tests show that the hoped for quality is not achieved. Both from the logic of the relation between quality and equity explained above, and the NOVA report (Bakken & Elvestad, 2012), we read that the hoped for goals for equity are not achieved either. Kunnskapsløftet expresses an official discourse with all the virtues and democratic goals that society stands for. In this case, the ideological critique will be concerned not with the understanding of why in practice those desirable aims continue to fail – as if it were a problem of implementation – but to understand how the discrepancy is already being created at the level of the official discourse. In the case of Kunnskapsløftet, the interesting point is not to focus on why the implementation fails in the hands of incompetent authorities, administrators and teachers, or of the "deficient" children.

According to Gutiérrez (2007), "[e]quity is threatened by the underlying belief that not all students can learn" (p. 40). Although we agree with Gutiérrez, we see that other beliefs are at stake, namely the not underlined but publicly assumed belief that all students can learn. The interplay between these two discourses makes visible how ideology works today. The view that all students can learn – the official view, present in curricula, political documents and research, attesting that Education is for all, including Mathematics for all – conceals the commonly shared but not assumed belief that there will always be someone who fails. When we read an abstract ideological proclamation such as "Mathematics for all", we should be aware that people's experiences are different – for teachers and students know and experience that in many mathematics classes there will always be some – or many – who fail.

Kunnskapsløftet, strongly influenced by neo-liberal ideologies, including discourses of individualism, competition and inequality, masks this fact by promoting quality and equity because it presupposes equity in schools as an extension of the equity in the market. In other words, the official discourse conceals the inconsistency of a

system that, on the one hand, demands Education for all while, on the other hand, uses school, and especially school mathematics, as a privileged mechanism of selection and credit. Included in these ideologies is a strong focus on accountability, and technical mechanisms for controlling educators and students. These are all important policy technologies underpinning official discourse promoting “Education for all”, concealing the important function of schooling in an economic-driven society (Foucault, 2002), producing economic citizens by mechanisms like learnification producing individuals for lifelong learning.

10. Education for all?

Unpacking direct and indirect power structures in political texts puts creative and systematic thinking to work. Re-reading texts is also about unpacking how the welfare-state is increasingly steering through soft, appellant and indirect ways of using power. Political documents are part of the Government’s political strategy for educational systems in Norway. This paper has focused on how equity and quality might be/become “naturalised” when Education for all is the critical issue. The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. Knowledge and power are integrated with one another (Foucault, 2002), and are always already embedded in ideological constructions about equity and quality and Education for all.

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