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## The ambivalence of the psychosocial in Norwegian education. A policy document analysis

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the central characteristics of the *psychosocial* as a field of knowledge in Norwegian education policy and the ways in which these characteristics are conditioned by their constituting social structures and historical contexts. This is achieved through a policy document analysis. Even though the psychosocial is habitually employed in educational discourses in Norway, its content often remains unclear. In the analysis, I derive three key dimensions of ambivalence from the documents. First, the psychosocial is ambivalent in its scope, as it oscillates between the entirety of the pupil's emotional and relational life and the specific phenomenon of bullying. Second, it appears ambivalent in relation to aspects of accountability, as it simultaneously demands responsibility from society as a whole and from specific groups of professionals. Lastly, the psychosocial is ambivalent in the way it asserts its relative and subjective dimension, while also claiming objective and rigid frameworks of control and measurement. Viewed from a broader perspective, I demonstrate that the ambivalences surrounding the psychosocial correspond with the binary concepts of the *liquid modernity* and the *new solidity*, as conceived by Per Bjørn Foros and Arne Johan Vetlesen.

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### Introduction



'There is always likely to be a tension between knowledge based on disciplinary expertise and knowledge based on political priorities. It seems likely that neither conflict nor collaboration adequately characterizes the relationship between research and policy'. (Young, 2008, p. 118)

Beyond the traditional paths of criticizing or supporting policymaking, Michael Young (2008) approximates his own version of a knowledge sociological approach to education policy. This approach is characterized by its rigorous attention to the social and institutional structures and epistemic practices constituting policy production and related knowledge communities and actors, while at the same time upholding the status of knowledge as a verifiable entity, which is produced, translated and distributed among and across knowledge fields and related political bodies. It is this brand of knowledge sociological enquiry of education policy – not to be thought as a criticism of power relations or as a form of collaboration to shape and impact policy but as a method to critically investigate education policy as complexly structured fields of knowledge – that has informed this article and its relation to its object of study.

In this article, I shed light on the *psychosocial* as a *field of knowledge* and how it is applied in education policy in Norway. I do this by means of a document analysis. More precisely, I investigate and critically analyse conceptions of the psychosocial in two central Norwegian education policy documents. The overarching research question is the following: What characterizes the field of knowledge of the psychosocial in Norwegian education policy, and how are these characteristics conditioned by its constituting social structures and historical contexts?

### The psychosocial in education

Among the theoretical attempts to bridge the gap between subject and object, between individual and collective, the term psychosocial has been established as a household concept in academia, politics and public discourse. The term psychosocial became prevalent in the early 1950s, particularly within the fields of medicine and psychiatry. However, it was not until the 1990s that the term started to gain traction and found its way to other disciplines (Roseneil, 2014). Stephen Frosh (2019) refers to the psychosocial as a 'new disciplinary space' (p. 1) to investigate the ways subjective experience and social life is interwo-

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ven. While the term psychosocial is, in principle, used to describe the manifold relations between the psychological and the social, it has remained a diversely defined and applied concept.

Over the past two decades especially, there has been increased attention to the psychosocial within education policies. In Norway, the government has, together with a network of organizations, institutions and researchers, taken a leading role in strengthening the field of the *psychosocial school environment*. This commitment resulted in a new article of the Education Act, Chapter 9A (which came into force in 2003) that gives all pupils in primary, secondary and high school the individual statutory right to a good psychosocial environment that promotes health, well-being and learning. In 2017, this legislation was altered to further strengthen and promote pupils' rights, and to make extensive demands on behalf of school owners and staff (Stette, 2017).

The nation-wide implementation of the psychosocial in Norwegian education policy can be seen as part of an international political commitment to the promotion of health and well-being in schools. The 1986 Ottawa Charter, especially – forged by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 1986) – established a widened definition of health, meaning a 'state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (World Health Organization, 2003, p. iv). Despite receiving considerable criticism for its, arguably, utopian holistic perspective on health and well-being (Madsen, 2018), the Charter has been brought into the domain of education in Europe under the label *Health Promoting Schools* (HPS). HPS recognizes schools as key spaces to promote psychosocial skills, mental health and well-being for each individual child. Based on the 'settings approach', which focuses on fostering successful health interventions in the entire school community and organization (World Health Organization, 1999, 1997), HPS promotes the self-realization of 'the whole human being'. In order to live up to this aim, schools must strengthen their 'psycho-social environment[s]' (World Health Organization, 2003, p. iv), nurture pupils' emotional and social development (World Health Organization, 1997) and discourage 'all types of school violence such as the abuse of pupils, sexual harassment and bullying' (World Health Organization, 2003, p. iv).

#### Literature review

The existing body of research that applies the term psychosocial in education largely corresponds with the definitions promoted by HPS, indicating a strong relationship between psychosocial school environments and pupils' emotional well-being, mental health and learning outcomes (e.g. Allodi, 2010; Bowe, 2015; Charalampous & Kokkinos, 2017;

Dorman, 2009; Green et al., 2016; Haapasalo et al., 2010). In line with WHO's expanded notion of health, Aldridge, McChesney and Afari's (2018) concept of the psychosocial school *climate* encompasses all of 'the attitudes, norms, beliefs, values and expectations that underpin school life and affect the extent to which members of the school community feel safe'. (p. 155) In turn, as suggested by Wong et al. (2008), negative psychosocial conditions translate into unstable emotions, poor relationships and dissatisfaction with academic results.

In order to live up to the encompassing responsibilities following from the psychosocial and to prevent its negative outcomes, specific methods and areas of focus are proposed. While Allodi (2010) emphasizes the importance of teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil relationships, Berkhout et al. (2010) identify the development of social competencies and emotional regulation as crucial for enabling individuals to cope with their psychosocial environments. What can be said in general about the epistemic content of the term psychosocial is that its acknowledgement of the individual within the context of social settings has given visibility to the importance of subjective states related to emotion and affect, identity and vulnerability.

Among the vulnerable and risky sides of psychosocial school life, the phenomenon of bullying has become a widely researched topic (e.g. Aldridge et al., 2018; Bouchard & Smith, 2017; Eriksen & Lyng, 2018; Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008; Stavrinides et al., 2011). Aldridge et al. (2018), for instance, define 'bullying [as] a complex psychosocial phenomenon that is established and perpetuated through the interplay of person and context over time'. (p. 109) What the psychosocial contributes to the scientific discourse of school bullying is that it goes beyond the boundaries of the inter-psychological relations of individuals, thereby taking into consideration the broader social dynamics in which bullying takes place. This taking-a-step-back in order to view the broader social fabric of bullying also relates closely to the *whole-school approach* and the *setting approach* forged by WHO, which reject limiting bullying and other psychosocial phenomena to individualized situations (e.g. Richard et al., 2011). Within the context of health promotion, the whole-school approach has been advocated for by a growing number of scholars, who emphasize the 'interconnections between physical, social, emotional and environmental factors' (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016, p. 155). Central to this approach is the notion that school organization, procedures, structures, normative rules and the pupils' families and communities are interactively influential on the health of the individual child (Stewart-Brown,

2006). Accordingly, mental health should not merely be addressed as an isolated topic in educational contexts but should be embedded in all facets of school life. Moreover, moving beyond the confines of schools and classrooms, whole schools engage their communities in a larger number of arenas (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016)

Scholarly contributions on the psychosocial range from large-scale quantitative studies (e.g. Edwards et al., 2019; Karvonen et al., 2005; Smith, 2013) to more exploratory and narrative-styled qualitative studies. Cases of the latter partly use storytelling as a tool to establish a more encompassing form of scientific report, one that is rooted in subjective consciousness and embodied being-in-the-world (e.g. Kovinthan, 2016; Chappell et al., 2014; Hogan, 2019; Walsh, 2014; West, 2014). Among these qualitative works, psychoanalytical perspectives on school life are prominent, allowing for viewing social interaction as affected by individuals' past experiences (Chappell et al., 2014; Hogan, 2019; Walsh, 2014; West, 2014). This perspective is to make visible phenomena that otherwise would go unnoticed, such as affective expressions, and unconscious drives and desires. Hogan (2019), for instance, employs a broad psychoanalytical register of unconscious affects like love, hate and desire as well as patterns of symbolic projection to explore experiences of trauma and support in pupil-teacher relationships.

What many contributions from both sides of the quantitative-qualitative spectrum have in common is their pursuit of knowledge, measures and tools to provide good psychosocial environments. This also applies to Olsen's (2019) investigation of the ideological underpinnings of the psychosocial environment in Norwegian policy documents. In her analysis, she gives recommendations to how schools – teachers in particular – should work towards meeting the goals formulated in the documents in question (e.g. through promoting health, learning and well-being).

While Olsen's approach can be criticized for too easily accepting the underlying preconceptions of the documents she set out to analyse, other psychosocial perspectives on education and education policy have received more profound criticism. Researchers like Vanessa Pupavac (2001) and Kathryn Ecclestone (2004) have challenged the *therapeutic* essence of many psychosocial approaches, which they claim undermine both the structural and contextual complexities of social situations and, more broadly, the notions of human agency, autonomy and resilience. Historically speaking, '[t]he 19th-century archetype of the robust risk-taking, self-made man is the antithesis of the risk-averse 21st century's exemplar of the vulnerable victim whose actions and environment are to be governed by the precautionary principle' (Pupavac, 2001, p.360). In education practices, such

reckoning with pathologized, at-risk and vulnerable individuals has, according to Ecclestone (2004), led to a blurring of the boundaries of the rational and the emotional: 'Such moves elevate emotion and personal experience as valid educational goals, alongside the exploration of how identities are formed and of the psychological capital they produce' (p.117). In a wider context, the *therapeutic paradigm* of the psychosocial has become integral to governance and political policy. States find themselves in the role of caregivers, as they regulate, tend to and appeal to the vulnerabilities of their fragile citizens (Pupavac, 2001). Or, as Pupavac (2001) puts it: 'Under therapeutic governance, rights are being reconceptualized in terms of psychological recognition and custodianship rather than freedoms, that is, as protection by official bodies, rather than protection from official bodies' (p.360).

To simplify, research about the psychosocial in education can be separated into two categories: 'advocators' and 'adversaries'. Advocators, which represent the majority of contributions on the psychosocial, generally support the idea that psychosocial environments should be prioritized in schools. Applying a psychosocial perspective is seen as beneficial for each individual pupil, as well as for society in general. The advocates emphasize promotion of mental health and emotional well-being, widely in accordance with WHO's holistic definition of health. Critical discussions among advocates mainly concern various approaches for how schools can create good psychosocial environments. The adversaries on the other hand, raise a more fundamental critique of the general therapeutic ethos that the psychosocial encompasses. Moving beyond clinical and medical environments, the therapeutic has established itself as a cultural field, which has increasingly become present in all areas of social life (Furedi, 2004, p. 22). Arguably, the psychosocial is one field of knowledge through which therapeutic ideals and practices have entered the arena of education.

#### Aim and scope

Positioning this article within the existing literature on the psychosocial, I wish to contribute to the growing research on how 'psy-expertise' and epistemic cultures play a key role in modern societies (e.g. Madsen, 2018; Nehring et al., 2020). Even though I do not share the overly pessimistic view of some of the adversaries of the psychosocial, my aim is to give a critical discussion of the psychosocial as a field of knowledge in Norwegian education policy and its relatedness to broader social and historical contexts. Exploring the application, conceptualization and contextualization of the psychosocial in education policy represents an important supplement to existing research, given the psychosocial's substantial outreach and impact in the form of normative

frameworks, epistemic practices and juridical obligations and rights. As influential as the psychosocial is in the Norwegian (and international) educational landscape, an in-depth analysis of its knowledge structures and themes, as well as its relation to particular and broader social and historical contexts, is warranted. A close analysis of policy documents is a productive research method, as it is in such documents knowledge of the psychosocial is applied, shaped, negotiated and put into action.

My use of the term field of knowledge to describe and analyse the psychosocial relates to the fact that the psychosocial as a set of knowledge is distributed and applied across various disciplines, institutional networks and social arenas. My analytical approach towards the education policy documents is inspired by Young's (2008) account of the sociology of knowledge, which, as mentioned, regards knowledge as simultaneously socially conditioned and (to a certain degree) autonomous and valid in itself. Young's perspective synthesizes the close study of specific knowledge structures and communities and the mapping of broader social and historical contexts, both of which are the aim of this study.

I will in the following be laying out the methodological premises of my analysis, in which I will also give a more detailed account of Young's position. The subsequent analysis is structured into three key dimensions of ambivalence, which I discovered and derived from the documents in question. These three dimensions will then be put into contact with Foros and Vetlesen's (2015) historical conceptual distinction between the *liquid modern* and the *new solidity* in order to consider the field of knowledge of the psychosocial in Norwegian education policy in its broader social and historical entanglement.

## Methodology

### The policy documents

Since the implementation of Chapter 9A of the Educational Act in 2003, a growing number of policy documents has been produced for the purpose of instructing and obligating actions that ensure the psychosocial health and well-being of each Norwegian pupil. The close analysis of such policy documents is a productive research method, as it is in such documents knowledge of the psychosocial is applied, shaped, negotiated and put into action (in the form of laws and guidelines). In this article, the following policy documents have been analysed:

- (1) *NOU 2015: 2. To belong. Measures for a safe psychosocial environment.*<sup>1</sup> (*Å høre til. Virkemidler for et trygt psykososialt skolemiljø*).

NOU is an official report commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. The

commission, led by former politician and county governor Øystein Djupedal, comprised a variety of experts from educational, political and juridical backgrounds. The commission's mandate was to explore, assess and, ultimately, recommend measures to create a good and safe psychosocial school environment. Their work resulted in the 448-page-long 'Djupedal-report', which was published in 2015, and includes a variety of measures, ranging from alterations of the existing legislation to pedagogical measures and organizational changes (NOU 2015: 2, 2015).

- (1) Prop. 57 L (2016–2017) *Proposition to the Storting (regarding legal act) Alterations in the Education Act (School environment)*. ((*forslag til lovvedtak*) *Endringer i opplæringslova og friskolelova (skolemiljø)*).

The Ministry of Education and Research produced Prop. 57 L as a resolution to be considered by the Norwegian Parliament. It involves propositions to alter Chapter 9A in the Educational Act and mentions the Djupedal-report as an important source of evidence and knowledge (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 10). The proposition includes comments and recommendations from a wide range of consultative bodies, such as local governments, non-governmental organizations and governmental organizations (pp. 7–12).

The two documents offer, in many ways, a representative account of the psychosocial in Norwegian education policy. There are four central arguments supporting this claim: First, the documents represent and present a broad range of actors, institutions, efforts and democratic processes involved in dealing with the field of the psychosocial in Norway. Second, the documents build on one another, as NOU provides an epistemic foundation taken up by Prop. 57 L and transformed into a proposition for new legislation. Thus, viewing the documents from a comparative perspective allows for insights into the relations of various actors concerned about the psychosocial. Third, the documents are comprehensive in how they address the psychosocial; especially the Djupedal-report, which includes broad and rich sets of data and knowledge. Fourth, they are official political documents, meaning that they are authoritative and impact-driven sources of knowledge with the main ambition to obligate various forms of action. This is especially the case for Prop. 57 L, where the aim is to arrive at specific juridical commitments.

### Analytical framework

Considering the psychosocial as a field of knowledge in its occurrence on policy level requires some theoretical contextualization. As mentioned in the introduction, my analytical approach is inspired by



Young's (2008) theorizations on the sociology of knowledge. Deviating from his own earlier social constructivist position, he establishes a middle ground between the social construction of knowledge and knowledge as essentially asocial and ahistorical. Consequently, I understand the psychosocial as, on the one hand, conditioned by its surrounding social structures, its actors, institutions and practices as well as by its broader social and historical contexts, while, on the other hand, it must be understood as knowledge in its own right and thus partly independent of these social conditions. As with any type of knowledge, one cannot reduce the psychosocial to social practice or, in particular, asymmetrical power relations. Rather than reducing the sociology of knowledge to matters of 'who speaks?', 'who holds the power?' and 'who is marginalized?', Young – while not denying the social conditioning of knowledge – defends its specific content and validity. Hence, it is important to consider the psychosocial as a specific field of knowledge with inner structures and complexities, which, at the same time, is established and negotiated by a network of actors and institutions, and processed within the framework of formal democratic processes.

Methodologically speaking, Young (2008) defines his brand of the sociology of knowledge as a 'set of conceptual tools' (p. 17) that bring together close-up studies of specific epistemic communities and the consideration of broader social and historical contexts. This combination of micro and macro perspectives brings the social dimension to the fore, which further forms the basis for knowledge production, distribution and application. According to Young, this method is particularly fruitful in 'exposing the hypocrisies and contradictions in official policies, and suggesting realistic criteria for alternatives' (p. 16.). While I would not base my analysis on the preconception of expecting and revealing 'hypocrisies' and other possible shortcomings, I find Young's dual approach to education policy beneficial for investigating the psychosocial.

In terms of the document analysis, my method combines the principles of qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. It involves organizing information into categories and general themes in order to describe the phenomenon under investigation (Bowen, 2009). Starting from an inductive perspective, my approach involved, first, skimming through each text, with specific focus on the key term 'psychosocial'. In doing this, I gained an initial sense of how the psychosocial is conceived in the policy documents. Second, based on the initial findings from the former stage, I engaged in a more detailed analysis of the two documents, in which I focused on their content, style, structure and arguments (Rapley, 2011).

Finally, I detected dominant themes and patterns, which I synthesized into three key dimensions, which reflect the interrelatedness and ambivalence of the psychosocial. I will elaborate on these dimensions later in the article. Furthermore, I will bring these three key dimensions into contact with Fors and Vetlesen's (2015) theoretical distinction between *solid* and *liquid* tendencies in modern society. Inspired by Baumann's (2000) concept of a *new liquid modernity*, the *liquid modern* represents subject-centred and relativist points of view, whereas the *new solidity* describes a diverse set of responses to the liquid modern, such as rigid ethical frameworks, demands for objective truths as well as control and management-based approaches.

### Conceptions of the psychosocial: three key dimensions

In the policy documents, there are some common features to be observed. First of all, the documents operate with the composite term 'psychosocial school environment', which is a well-established concept in the existing literature on the psychosocial. In line with WHO's holistic perspective on health, a good psychosocial school environment is considered a decisive determinant of school quality and pupils' emotional and social well-being (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 11). The juridical right to a good psychosocial school environment is both a goal in itself and intended as a means to accomplish increased learning (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 41). Secondly, even though the impact of the term psychosocial school environment can be regarded as significant in Norway – given its substantial role in educational research, policies and practices – the policy documents say little about the specific meaning and content of the psychosocial.

NOU 2015: 2 was commissioned by the department of education mainly to provide new knowledge about psychosocial school environments, to propose measures, and to clarify terminology necessary to discuss the psychosocial, (such as 'bullying', 'discrimination' and 'abuse'). As for the term psychosocial school environment, NOU 2015: 2 refers to the definition published by The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training in 2010. The slightly revised version of this definition used in NOU 2015: 2 is as follows:

[T]he psychosocial environment is understood as the interhuman relations at school, the social environment and how the pupils and the staff experience it. The psychosocial environment is affected by individual pupils, groups of pupils, the pupil community and the school's positions, values and norms, which, again, are affected by inner and outer factors, such as, among others, social, cultural, religious, education

and health-related conditions within a complex interplay between schools, groups, families and society. (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 30)

While this broad and encompassing definition may open up a path for a more detailed discussion, this opportunity is not taken. The psychosocial remains open to include all aspects of school life (and thus, similar to the whole school approach). Engaging in an in-depth investigation of the term psychosocial school environment is neither part of NOU's mandate, nor is it provided regardless of that. Prop. 57 L offers no substantial definition of the psychosocial, other than stating that 'pupils' school environment is the sum of both the physical and the psychosocial environments at school, and that these will affect each other' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 13). While strengthening the political and juridical framework of the psychosocial in the Education Act, the underlying definitions found in both documents lack clarity and elaboration. As such, the provided definitions are reminiscent of Warp's (2012) description of the psychosocial as a dynamic norm without a clear meaning, and therefore difficult to operationalize in practice.

While being frequently used throughout both documents, the terms psychosocial and psychosocial school environment are seemingly considered as terms that need no further explanation. One reason for this can be the moral weight attached to the psychosocial in the public discourse, which makes it difficult to challenge its content, and further, to engage in an open and critical discussion of the term and its meaning. There is clearly a moral pathos to be sensed in both texts in relation to the psychosocial and its related phenomena, such as bullying (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 4).

[T]he power and will that resides in all of us must be utilized each day, so that our children and youths will thrive and be well ... The individual right to a safe psychosocial school environment means zero tolerance for offences, bullying, harassment and discrimination of pupils. It is our collective responsibility and moral duty for us as citizens of society. This is an important message, and this is about the question what kind of society we wish to have. (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 17)

In the abovementioned quote, the psychosocial school environment is emphatically linked to society's duty to take care of 'our children'. The challenges of the psychosocial – such as bullying, discrimination, harassment – can have a unifying effect in education and society, with immediate measures as a potential outcome. However, one shortcoming of such an emotion-driven approach is that it is difficult to critically question the terms the documents operate with.

Based on the documents' frequent, yet not further reflected application of the term psychosocial school

environment, I propose describing the use of the term as *habitual*. While I am aware of the rich theoretical discourse surrounding habit and habitualness, I do not have the capacity exploring this theoretical discourse in depth here (neither is this necessary for my argument). It suffices to say that habit, very broadly speaking, can be defined as a 'settled or regular tendency or practice' (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.) In general, habitualness shows itself in concepts, statements and terminology that are frequently applied without questioning and investigating their meaning and content matter. The habitual use of the term psychosocial school environment takes for granted its distinct meaning and its underlying assumptions. It appears to be both familiar and alien at the same time; familiar because of its frequent use, alien since its conceptual content and meaning remain indistinct.

Based on the habitual application of the terms psychosocial and psychosocial school environment in both documents, they are susceptible to ambiguities, contradictions, ambivalences and blind spots. As part of my analytical approach (as described above), I have identified three interrelated key dimensions of ambivalence:

- Scope: wide versus narrow
- Accountability: us all versus them
- Subjectivity: autonomy versus control

These three key dimensions must be understood as dominant thematic patterns in both documents, which will be explored in detail in the following sections.

Scope: wide versus narrow

The Education Act §9a-1 gives pupils the individual right to a good physical and psychosocial school environment. The right applies to teaching situations in the areas of the school and when pupils are on excursions. The school environment should – both in individual cases and when it comes to the environment as a whole – promote the pupils' health, well-being and learning. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 11)

The quote from Prop. 57 L maps out a broad terrain regarding the imperatives and responsibilities of the right to a good and safe psychosocial school environment. What is presented as being at stake is the pupils' 'health, well-being and learning'. NOU 2015: 2, with its almost 450 pages, also rests on a broad and all-embracing characterization of the psychosocial. The document offers a variety of measures to prevent different forms of harassment and promote a safe psychosocial school environment. Such measures entail inclusion, implementation of new statutory rights, goal-oriented efforts against different forms of harassment, a shared knowledge base among school staff as well as improved interdisciplinary cooperation between different professions in order to build a 'team around the pupil' (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, pp. 20–28).

Such a broad notion of the psychosocial is also evident in the way in which the various actors involved in both

documents discuss the outline of the law. A common worry is that schools will interpret the law's scope of application too narrowly. While the Djupedal Committee recommends replacing the right to a *good* psychosocial environment with the right to a *safe* one, arguing that this would be easier to operationalize (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, pp. 209–210), the Department of Education and Research claims this would limit the scope of the statutory right. Consequently, the department concludes that both terms – good *and* safe – should be used (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 12). The new law, resulting from the recommendations given in Prop. 57 L, not only declares a zero-tolerance policy against bullying but also against violence, discrimination, harassment and other acts of insult. Some consultative bodies represented in Prop. 57 L demand even more areas included. For instance, The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud proposes hate-speech should be added to the list, and the County Governor of Trøndelag makes a case for including neglect and passive by-standing (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 14). For others, the promotion of 'health, well-being and learning' does not reach wide enough, and therefore demands that *social belonging* and *inclusiveness* are added (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 14). Yet, this broad perspective on the psychosocial represents only one side of its content. Its other side reduces the psychosocial to one phenomenon, namely bullying. As stated in Prop. 57 L:

Bullying is terrible for the individual child, and it is a serious problem in society. Despite many measures and campaigns in the last 20 years to provide a good school environment for children and youths, the number of pupils stating that they are bullied remained high. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 5)

Moreover, when quoting statistics that are intended to shed light on pupils' well-being, Prop. 57 L has an overwhelming focus on the amount of pupils who experience bullying at school. NOU 2015: 2 states: "This implies that in the current system there are many pupils who are deprived of their right to a good school environment without bullying and other offences" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 35). This emphasis on bullying – as the most urgent and most important issue to be addressed when focusing on the psychosocial – also reveals itself in a quantitative dimension. Olsen (2019, p. 22) counts the word 'bully' in all its different forms in the document 1992 times. To compare, 'psychosocial' is mentioned only 864 times. Given the dominance of the phenomenon of bullying in the two documents, it is not unlikely that a dysfunctional psychosocial school environment becomes more or less synonymous with a school plagued by bullying.

The close intertwining of the psychosocial and bullying is hardly surprising when viewed against the broader

background of its application in Norway. Bullying was the phenomenon that gained most attention in public debates prior to Norway's commitment to creating good psychosocial school environments, which is also reflected in NOU 2015: 2 (p. 17). In their evaluation of the Education Act's Chapter 9A, Warp and Welstad (2011) conclude that 'pupils' right to a good psychosocial environment has in great degree been overshadowed by the large focus on bullying [...] in society in general and in schools in particular.' (p. 1). Similarly, Olsen (2019) criticizes a lacking understanding of other forms of negative psychosocial environments, which are not exclusively affected by bullying but by phenomena such as loneliness, discomfort and mental illness (p. 26). At the same time, the worry of a narrow understanding of the psychosocial, limited to bullying and other types of aggressive behaviour, is somewhat expressed in Prop. 57 L. For example, the department and the different consultative bodies express concern that Article 9A may turn out to contain 'limited and controversial definitions of bullying and offence'. In order to make sure 'that the schools' duty goes beyond securing the pupil's freedom from offensive behaviour' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 24), they recommend an extension of the law to include all aspects of pupil well-being.

As the analysis has shown, the scope of the psychosocial is ambivalent. It is broad in the sense that it includes various tasks and challenges to be encountered in the social sphere of the school, and it is narrow because of its clear link to bullying as a designated core of unhealthy psychosocial environments. This can be further described as a contradictory coexistence of preventative and promoting notions. While the psychosocial can seem to be exclusively about preventing damage, it simultaneously takes on a much broader perspective in promoting health, well-being and other positive qualities.

Accountability: us all versus them

"It doesn't help to speak out, they don't do anything anyways". These are Odin's words, a thirteen-year-old boy who took his life after being bullied for a long time. Within the last year, the media have put many cases of bullying on the agenda, cases that have shocked us, cases that show how cunning and merciless bullying can be. Cases showing how unfair it is, how random and, not least, how powerless children and families exposed to it are. One pattern is the adults' ignorance. Adults who should take responsibility, and who do not. Adults who should protect, who should help, who should comfort and react turn their backs in their cowardice and lack of knowledge. (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 4)

NOU 2015: 2 starts with a quote from a child, Odin, and a tragic outcome of bullying. The quote contributes to setting a highly emotional tone from the very beginning of the document. The text uses emotionally laden words and a literary-like sentence structure to



place blame on the adults who should have provided care and protection, but who instead looked away in their ‘ignorance’ and ‘cowardice’. At the same time, this reads as more than an accusation, as the text also functions as a rhetorical means to raise the moral stakes in the debate: a strong call-to-action based on a claim that responsible adults by far did not do enough to stop bullying. Moreover, both documents consider the psychosocial school environment as a ‘problem of society’ (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 10) that needs to be solved through a ‘joint national effort’ (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 17).

Paradoxically, this all-encompassing national landscape is at the same time confined to the schools and their employees: School owners and school leaders are largely presented as the responsible actors. Accordingly, the main challenges related to the psychosocial are all located within the school. Despite recognizing that most pupils thrive at school (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 55), the committee expresses concern about staff’s lack of knowledge in multiple areas: formal rules and principles; schools’ inability to reinforce zero-tolerance policies against harassment, bullying and discrimination; schools’ unwillingness to involve and work with parents and pupils; teachers’ and leaders’ lacking competencies to create safe school environments in a systematic and result-oriented manner; and the necessity to better include support organizations such as the school health service (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, pp. 18–19). This concern for the psychosocial health and well-being of children further aligns with broader notions of holding schools responsible for combating a diverse range of personal, psychological and social disadvantages, notions which are present in Western political discourses and therapeutic cultures (Ecclestone, 2004).

It is also noteworthy how the opening paragraph in NOU 2015: 2 addresses bullying first and foremost by focusing on *the act of bullying* instead of on individuals involved. This implies a shift of focus: moving away from the ‘bully’ as the root of the problem and towards the social and cultural structures in which bullying as a phenomenon is played out. Bullying is considered as a complex social phenomenon with an extended range of actors and institutional frameworks, in line with much of the previously mentioned research (e.g. Aldridge et al., 2018; Eriksen & Lyng, 2018). As such, bullying is not longer viewed as a predominantly inter-psychological act of aggression between individuals but as a multifaceted psychosocial phenomenon. However, even though NOU 2015: 2 opens up towards a more holistic approach to bullying, the designated area of impact to prevent bullying still remains on the individual level: Teachers are expected to install emotional and social competencies like resilience, self confidence, creativity, self control and self regulation

in each individual pupil. Qualities as such are regarded as important tools for pupils to understand, control and process their emotions (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 170).

What becomes apparent both in the introductory section of NOU 2015: 2 and in the two documents in general is the lack of trust in teachers, school leaders and their professional judgement when handling critical situations where the well-being of pupils is at risk. In Prop 57 L., mistrust towards schools and their leaders and teachers permeates statements as the following:

To legislate an obligation to follow secures furthermore that no [school] employee or school can evade taking responsibility in a case by stating that they did not know what was happening, or that they had no suspicion that a pupil was not safe and well. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 21)

The notion of mistrust is particularly apparent in Prop. 57 L among some of the consultative bodies who express concern that the new law does not set clear enough obligational guidelines. For instance, the Norwegian Ombudsperson for Children worry that

such a threshold [to notify school leaders], as proposed by the department, would weaken the pupils’ legal protection if it lets the perception of the individual teacher be decisive. A hindering threshold for notifying and speaking out lays the ground [...] for an extensive trivialization and the risk that the totality of a child’s situation does not become visible for the principal and the school leadership (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 23).

This is one of the few times teachers are mentioned explicitly in Prop. 57 L. Elsewhere, the proposition refers to schools as institutions with joint responsibility. However, the department makes it clear that their expectations towards school staff with a caring role, such as teachers, assistances, milieu therapists or school leaders, are high. Teachers, among those, represent the most frequent and immediate contact points for pupils regarding their psychosocial well-being.

### **Subjectivity: autonomy versus control**

[T]he psychosocial environment should also promote social belonging. It is to be fixed by law that the pupil’s subjective experience is fundamental when it comes to the assessment whether a pupil was offended. It is to be fixed by law that there is zero tolerance for words and actions that offend a pupil’s dignity and integrity. The school owners’ obligation to implement measures to promote a safe psychosocial school environment for all pupils is specified in § 9A-1. (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 212)

The third key dimension marks another ambivalent characteristic of the psychosocial in Norwegian

educational policy. On the one hand, the psychosocial is seen as something categorically subjective and, thus, relative, whereas, on the other hand, it is portrayed as a realm to be controlled, mapped out and measured. This characteristic also shows in the quote above where the experience of being offended is entirely based on the pupils' subjectivity. At the same time, the individual and social fabric constituting the psychosocial school environment is to be controlled and acted upon through specific measures and juridical frameworks.

Fundamentally, the psychosocial school environment centres around the pupils' subjective opinions, experiences and feelings. It is not up to adults to decide whether a particular pupil thrives at school, based on established norms and rules; this is solely to be judged by the pupil in question. In challenges related to bullying and other offensive behaviour, especially, the therapeutic characteristic of the psychosocial, as critically pointed out by several researchers (see the article's literature review), comes to the fore. Both documents, particularly in their addressing of bullying, operate with a notion of the individual (pupil) that focuses on vulnerability, powerlessness and victimhood, while leaving little room for human resilience and the productivity of risk-taking.

The subjective and relative aspects of the psychosocial are expected to blend together with a robust, controllable and quantifiable framework. This becomes especially clear in the department's effort to ground the psychosocial in an obligating juridical framework, as illustrated in the following quote:

The school is obligated to implement measures that are fit to solve the pupil's problem and to secure a safe and good school environment for the pupil. The school's measures have to be adjusted to the specific case, among other things to the cause of the problem, and the choice of measures has to build upon concrete and professional judgments (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 26).

While the challenges of the psychosocial school environment have previously been regarded as too complex to be solved by schools and teachers alone (Ministry of Education and Research, 2002, p. 22), there are increased expectations to school staff in terms of accessing and controlling the psychosocial school environment (in order to meet the individual right of each pupil). Then again, the authors of NOU: 2015 describe teachers' handling of cases of offence and bullying as being driven by 'professional insecurity and uncertainty', due to the complex nature of such cases (NOU 2015: 2, 2015, p. 181).

### **Discussion: blending the solid and the liquid**

In the following, I will view the three key dimensions of ambivalence of the psychosocial from a broader educational, social and historical perspective. Here,

I also shift focus from the up-close study of the content and structures of the psychosocial as a field of knowledge and turn towards its relations to broader social and historical contexts, in accordance with Young's (2008) approach to the sociology of knowledge. This will be done in light of Foros and Vetlesen's (2015) theoretical and historical distinction between the liquid modernity and the new solidity; tendencies which are to be found in both policy documents. As I will discuss in the following, the simultaneous occurrence of solid and liquid properties within the field of knowledge of the psychosocial may be identified as an important driver and nurturer of the ambivalences that characterize the psychosocial in Norwegian education policy.

As mentioned, the liquid modern represents subject-centred and relativist points of view, whereas the new solidity describes a diverse set of responses to the liquid modern, such as rigid ethical frameworks, objective truths as well as control and management-based approaches. The roots of the liquid modernity reside in the successes of the market-liberal economic model in the postwar decades, which lead to concepts such as unity, equality and political control being replaced with (from the 1970s onward) concepts like diversity, individuality and personal freedom. Such tendencies were further fuelled as a result of postmodernism's efforts to relativize common values, collective opinions and measuring instruments. The individual was free (and condemned) to define and realize his or her own identity, potential and values.

The new solidity occurred as a reaction to fluid perspectives and includes diverse positions and developments. What these different positions share is the desire to reinstate objective and common values that go beyond contextual and cultural relativism and the experience of the authentic self. Solid tendencies have gained more territory in both science, politics and ethics in recent decades. Foros and Vetlesen themselves argue for the establishment of an ethical foundation for society, which has validity and applicability beyond the individual level (Foros & Vetlesen, 2015). Common moral values ought to be reinstalled and truth given back its validity beyond its historical construction by the powerful. Another aspect of the solid, however, is preoccupied with values in a less ethical and more numerical sense. The development of public management standards also opposes fluid forms of individual freedom with data and information-driven practices meant to measure, map out and evaluate performance and behaviour on an individual and collective level.

From an educational point of view, the liquid modern designates progressive tendencies in pedagogics occurring in the decades after WWII, based on the notion of children as unique human beings. This uniqueness implies a dynamic drive towards active

self-fulfilment and adds fluidity and relativity to the project of upbringing. Ideally, education should facilitate children's individual self-driven process of becoming authentic human beings (Taylor, 1991). In this regard, schools become places for freedom and outspoken tolerance for individual behaviour, removed from the controlling grip of common values and standards of measurement. Such tendencies also informed the Norwegian school system, a development that becomes tangible, for instance, in the replacement of the ideal of a *unitary school* by the ideal of *individually adapted teaching* (Foros & Vetlesen, 2015). Simultaneously, in schools, the new solidity manifests in the form of stricter demands and increased control through goal-oriented management, production frameworks and result monitoring. Such thinking has especially been adopted by the political right in Norway, calling for stronger and more efficient measures to control the behaviour of children. Ideally, pedagogical and methodological knowledge is to be used to control and form the pupils' educational, social and individual development, whereas the knowledge received by the pupil serves the purpose of preparing for a later occupation. With increased governmental influence on education, instrumentalist and solid positions appear to become more dominant in the current educational landscape in Norway (Foros & Vetlesen, 2015, p. 83).

In today's society, solid and liquid elements appear as 'a strange blending' between 'on the one side, freedom and responsibility' and, 'on the other side, demand and control' (Foros & Vetlesen, 2015, p. 84). I would argue that the psychosocial, as portrayed in the policy documents, shows clear signs of a blending of liquid and solid tendencies. Drawing on the three key dimensions of ambivalence derived from my analysis, I argue that each dimension shows traces of the contemporary blending of solid and liquid properties. Most obviously, as I will demonstrate, this applies to the psychosocial's ambivalent relation between subjective autonomy and control. Additionally, the ambivalence in terms of accountability clearly blends the broader social and cultural relevance of the psychosocial school climate (liquid) with the belief that professionals can control a psychosocial school environment by means of appropriate methodologies and measures (solid). Finally, in terms of scope, the psychosocial oscillates between the dynamic range of emotions encompassed in the notion of pupils' well-being (liquid) and the confinement to the phenomenon of bullying as a specific behaviour to be prevented (solid).

The psychosocial in Norway is solid in its expectation that schools ought to be accountable and able to control and affect psychosocial environments through specific measures. This is especially apparent in the new Chapter 9A of the Education Act, where

teachers, school leaders and other school staff are obligated to create activity plans, apply correct measures and produce documentation and proof of efficiency. Thus, the idea of the psychosocial rests on increased expectations towards school staff – teachers in particular – to access and control the psychosocial school environment with the help of evidence-based knowledge and intervention strategies. The solid position sets clear borders and rigid frameworks, whereas the liquid perspective calls into question such solidifying principles. It is important to note that the guidelines demanded by the solid side do not represent an ethical framework, as in a set of moral principles shared by all. What such a framework, first and foremost, is expected to provide is the ability to measure, analyse and process the outcome of specific situations affecting the psychosocial environment in an efficient manner.

The liquid side of the psychosocial shows in the insistence on its all-embracing scope and its subjective and relative nature, which ought to empower pupils and respect the irreducible uniqueness of their experience of well-being. Questions of morality are delegated towards an inner subjective voice, the authentic self (Taylor, 1991). The emotional inner life of the pupil becomes the sole indicator in matters of right or wrong, the violation of individual rights and experiences of discrimination and bullying. The fact that the pupil's authentic and subjective experience has become the fundament of a statutory right intended to secure a good psychosocial school environment is in itself an indicator of the psychosocial's liquid orientation. Chapter 9A can be seen as indicative of a general juridical trend, 'from an adversarial system to a form of therapeutic intervention and mediation' (Pupavac, 2001, p. 360) which, as a result, privileges subjectivity and emotion. With the authentic self and lived experience of the individual pupil at its liquid centre, the all-encompassing scope of the psychosocial views the entirety of the social sphere through a therapeutic lens, thereby subordinating all types of (inter)activity to the notion of individual well-being and health promotion.

The psychosocial is centred around the subjectivity of the pupil, who judges what is right or wrong based on his or her own feelings. In turn, school staff are expected to adjust and adhere to what Foros and Vetlesen (2015, p. 64) designate a *turn inward*, from the exterior to the interior, from structures to the individual, from community to self-realization. The pupil is not expected to betray his or her own authentic position when confronted with the perspective of the community. This also suggests that it might prove difficult to establish collective and enduring standards and principles of behaviour. A typical scenario is the difficulty to identify and ascribe guilt in situations of bullying. Viewed through the liquid

lens, it is important to overcome moral condemnation and attributions of guilt based on schematic notions of offender and victim. Asymmetrical relations, in which an external observer identifies offender and victim, are to be exchanged with a symmetry that expects all persons involved to reflect on their behaviour and to take responsibility (Foros & Vetlesen, 2015, p. 181). This model deviates from other influential research on bullying, for example, the individual-based position by Olweus, 1992, Olweus, 2005), who proclaims that conciliation inadequately addresses bullying situations, because there are such clear abusive borderlines between ‘victim’ and ‘offender’.

At the same time, a zero-tolerance policy against offences is expected to be in place in all schools, and it is primarily the teacher’s task to call out relevant incidents. Good class leadership and class culture are considered as crucial elements for a good psychosocial school environment (NOU 2015: 2, 2015). On the one hand, the teacher is expected to be a role model, a spokesperson for values that define an entire class community, and a manager to control the behaviour of the pupils. On the other hand, the authentic child is not supposed to abandon his or her own position, and what is commonly safe and good becomes identical with what is safe and good for each individual. Thus, the pupil’s psychosocial self is simultaneously viewed (and acted upon) through a solid and a liquid lens, a double vision that, despite its ambivalence, could be seen as both a strength and a weakness of the field of knowledge of the psychosocial.

## Conclusion

My analysis shows that the field of knowledge of the psychosocial in its occurrence within Norwegian policy is characterized by ambivalence. As a term, the psychosocial is habitually employed; however, its content remains unclear. The psychosocial is ambivalent in its scope, as it encompasses the entirety of pupil relations as well as emotional and psychological well-being, while also being narrowed down to measures against bullying, which is identified (by policymakers and society) as the most pressing psychosocial challenge in schools. Moreover, there is ambivalence in terms of ascribing accountability. The psychosocial school environment is at once a national arena in which each adult and the community as a whole have to take responsibility, and it is regarded as a specific duty for teachers and other school staff with a caring role to secure the individual child the right to a good psychosocial environment. Finally, there is a, seemingly irreconcilable, contradiction between the psychosocial as an essentially subjective, emotional and personal field and as a quantifiable

arena with effective measures in place to control and surveil pupil behaviour.

These different dimensions of ambivalence are, as I have argued, in many ways rooted in the overarching binary concepts of the liquid modernity and the new solidity (Foros & Vetlesen, 2015). The psychosocial in Norway is embedded in a blending of liquid and solid characteristics. Thus, schools are expected to follow solid principles and establish common values in class, while also respecting the authentic and subjective self of each pupil.

The ambivalent characteristic of the psychosocial as a field of knowledge appears to be driven from at least two directions: First, the inner logic of the psychosocial, that is to encompass both the psychological and the social, is perhaps likely to produce ambivalences, as they occur in the analysed policy documents. Second, the psychosocial’s close ties to the solid and liquid characteristics present in modern society and contemporary education results in an ambivalent blending of both categories. Neither of the policy documents show signs of awareness of this historical and broader social conditioning of the psychosocial, which may be the reason why these ambivalences and contradictions have not been contested more profoundly in Norwegian education policy.

Further, I would argue that the concept of the psychosocial school environment in Norway in many ways is indicative of the various developments that currently affect the educational landscape: from the expanded health concept promoted by the WHO to the blending of subjective and individualized ethics and instrumentalism, from the increasing pressure on the individual to pursuit self-optimization and self-realization to policy-driven education and the teacher’s dilemma of accountability and powerlessness.

This study has aimed to contribute to a broader understanding and further discussion of the complexities and ambivalences that characterize the psychosocial as a field of knowledge in Norway, and within the field of education policy in particular. Paananen and Pitkänen (2021) call for more ‘research about the mechanisms through which competing aims [and tensions in policy documents] materialize in the everyday practices of educational institutions’ (2021, p. 2). In light of this, and this article’s findings, a relevant area for future research revolves around how the psychosocial is structured, interpreted and practiced among teachers and other professional groups in education. And, further, how this relates to the characteristics of the psychosocial on a policy level. For example, in which ways does the ambivalent character of the psychosocial affect teachers’ work and professional self-understanding? This aspect may also be worth exploring in the context of teacher education, since the psychosocial here is



interpreted, taught and implemented in the process of preparing and forming future teachers.

## Note

1. My translation. If not stated otherwise, all translations from Norwegian to English in this article are mine.

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