Ingvil Bjordal* & Mette Nygård**

The process of going private – parental choice and mistrust of the public school system in Norway

Intersections. EEJSP
11(2): 101–118.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i2.1365
https://intersections.tk.hu

* [ingvil.bjordal@ntnu.no] (Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology)
** [mette.nygard@ntnu.no] (Department of Teacher Education, Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

Abstract

This article examines the issue of school choice in a Norwegian educational context. Based on a qualitative study examining parents choosing private schools, the objective is to shed light on how privatisation processes take place within a national context where the public schools command a strong position. Inspired by sociological perspectives on how the 'context of practice' is important for parents' orientation on the school market, the following research question is investigated: How are parents' choices of private schools in Norway related to the educational context in which the choices are made? Drawing on a broad concept of privatisation the study illuminates how different privatisation processes are interrelated and how privatisation of education, manifested through growth in private schools and increased support for private alternatives, is related to the governance of and regulations for the public school and particularly policies related to privatisation in public education.

Keywords: parental choice, privatisation, public school, Norwegian education

1 Introduction

One key feature of the Nordic education model is the emphasis on public education as a tool for promoting the social democratic ideals of social integration and equity (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). Within this context, Norway is among the most restrictive Nordic countries when it comes to facilitating private providers, resulting in a small private school sector (Volckmar, 2010; Dovemark et al., 2018). In contrast to Sweden and Denmark, private schools can only obtain approval if they represent a supplement to public education. This means they must provide alternative education that does not compete with the public system. To avoid segregation and commercialisation, school fees are kept at a low level through public funding, and it is prohibited to make a profit from providing education (Sivesind et al., 2022). During the last decade, however, the number of private schools at compulsory level and pupils attending them have increased significantly. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of private schools rose by 60 percent, and the proportion of students

attending these schools increased by 75 percent (Skrede, 2023, p. 15). Today, private schools make up 10 percent of primary and lower secondary schools, while 5 percent of all pupils at this level attend a private school (Ekren, 2024, p. 5). While this development is closely related to conservative governments' efforts over the past 20 years to liberalise private school legislation, official reports and research indicate that the increase in support for and the choice of private schools must be viewed in a broader political context. On this point, decentralisation policies devolving economic responsibility from the state to the municipal level have been important features when public schools have been replaced by private schools in financially disadvantaged municipalities (Volckmar, 2012). Moreover, New Public Management (NPM) reforms promoting performance management, choice and competition, as well as accountability policies, have restructured the public education sector in ways that have changed both the educational landscape and the position of parents in the school market (Bjordal & Haugen, 2021; Sivesind et al., 2022). What is evident is that privatisation policies are found to have a social bias, with parents' socio-economic background becoming increasingly significant for pupils' academic performance and school affiliation (Ekren et al., 2024; Hansen, 2017). Even though decentralisation policies and market-led reforms have been introduced alongside policies strengthening the provision of private education (Bjordal & Haugen, 2021; Dovemark et al., 2018; Imsen & Volckmar, 2014), there is limited research evidence that shows how the different policies interact and whether the greater support for private alternatives is related to how public schools have developed. This article illuminates the relationship between different forms of privatisation through a qualitative study of parents who choose private schools for their children in primary and lower secondary education. The research question addressed is: How are parents' choices of private schools in Norway related to the educational context in which the choices are made? Drawing on sociological perspectives on how choice making is related to the 'context of practice' (Bowe et al., 1994), parents' choices of private schools are analysed in relation to the educational context and what Ball et al. (2012) refer to as school-specific contextual dimensions. The analysis here points out that parents' choices of a private school are often the result of a complex process where multiple factors are in play and where different aspects of privatisation are interrelated. In contrast to political discourses framing choice of private schools as a 'conditioning of needs' (Bowe et al., 1994, p. 65), the analysis highlights how 'needs' in education are socially constructed and highly related to the educational context in which they take place. Here this is evident as the decision to go private is closely linked to what is perceived as unsatisfactory educational conditions in the public school. While the Norwegian society is known for placing high trust in public institutions and its public welfare system (Ljunggren & Andersen, 2021), the public services are vulnerable when underfunded and organised in ways that undermine the quality and effects of the service provided. Highlighting the factors and mechanisms in play when parents lose faith in the public school, this paper argues that the growing support for private alternatives is not only a matter of private provision but something that must be seen in relation to reforms in public education, particularly the effects of New Public Management (NPM). In line with this, the paper concludes that the interrelatedness between different forms of privatisation policies challenges the political discourses on the impetus behind privatisation from both sides of the political spectrum and points to a more balanced understanding rather than merely seeing the framing of privatisation as a conservative phenomenon.

2 Theoretical background: Privatisation, choice and the 'context of practice'

According to Ball & Youdell (2008), privatisation can be understood as a complex phenomenon including 'exogenous' privatisation or privatisation of public education, where "public sector activities are outsourced to private firms or non-profit organisations", and 'endogenous' privatisation or privatisation in public education, including "the importing of ideas, techniques and practices from the private sector in order to make the public sector more like businesses and more business-like" (Ball & Youdell, 2008, pp. 9-10). Whereas Ball & Youdell's (2008) conceptualization of privatisation as a multidimensional phenomenon is important for understanding how it may have various and sometimes hidden forms, it also highlights how different privatisation processes are interrelated and sometimes mutually reinforcing. These perspectives are of particular relevance when exploring how privatisation processes occur in Norway, where the public school commands a strong position, not least when taking into account Ball & Youdell's claim that "exogenous privatization in well-established state education systems is often made possible by prior endogenous reforms" (Ball & Youdell, 2008, p. 15).

While the growth in private schools and the number of pupils attending them has increased during a period when the Norwegian education system has been restructured in line with NPM, we know little about how the different policies are interrelated and how and why parents' support for private alternatives is related to the situation in public schools, or to a changed educational landscape. Research on school choice in Norway does indicate, however, that parents' orientation in the school market is not solely dependent on the private market provision but also related to a broader social and political context in which the distribution of material and cultural capital (Bowe et al., 1994, p. 76), as well as deregulation policies and market-led reforms in education, are important (Dovemark et al., 2018). In line with international research evidence, Norwegian researchers have documented that school choice in Norway has a social class dimension (Ekren et al., 2024; Hansen, 2005, 2017; Lauglo, 2010), and that such situated factors as school district and pupil composition are important for parents' school choices (Bjordal & Haugen, 2021; Sivesind et al., 2022). In 2022 private schools had a lower proportion of immigrant pupils and a higher proportion of pupils with highly educated parents, and higher household incomes, compared to public schools. The social composition and income differences between private and public schools were, however, greater in urban areas than in the districts (Ekren et al., 2024, p. 4). The latter is related to that the largest private schools were in and around the major cities of Oslo, Bergen, and Trondheim (UDIR, 2022) and that parents in Norwegian rural areas have been found to support private schools as a protest against centralisation and the closure of public schools (Volckmar & Wiborg, 2014). Research also points to private schooling as an alternative when parents are dissatisfied with the public school (Helgesen, 2003; Sivesind et al., 2022). While these studies identify social and political issues of relevance to school choice, they are not concerned with the focus of this study, that is what Bowe et al. (1994) refer to as the 'choice-making' process and questions exploring why particular factors are emphasised and how parents make their choices.

Our focus on the decision-making process has been inspired by the theoretical underpinnings informing the work of Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball (1994) on how school choice is a complex phenomenon closely related to political and economic change. This includes their

argument for the importance of taking context into account to avoid being 'captured by the discourse' of choice as a personal matter and as a question of the conditioning of given needs. Rather than accepting and reproducing the official discourse of parental choice as an issue of consumer power and a measure enabling parents to choose education that fits their individual needs, they argue that: "Needs are [...] not solely objective or rational, they are relational, contextual and 'imaginary'" (Bowe et al., 1994, p. 65). In other words, according to them, educational and individual needs are not something given but something socially constructed and closely related to a broader social and political context. Influenced by this perspective and research illuminating how neoliberal reforms in education can stimulate support for private alternatives (Ball & Youdell, 2008), the focus in this article is on what Bowe et al. (1994, p. 64) refer to as the 'context of practice' and how parents' choice-making is related to the educational context in which the choices are made. Educational context is here defined in relation to what Ball et al. (2012) refer to as different contextual dimensions or school-specific factors, such as the situated contexts (location, admission, school history), material contexts (physical aspects: staffing, budgets, buildings, infrastructure), the professional culture (values, teacher commitment, management) and external contexts (external regulations and expectations and legal requirements and responsibilities). Whereas the educational context typology has been developed by Ball et al. (2012) in their study on policy enactment in secondary schools with a focus on 'how schools do policy', we find the contextual dimensions to be relevant for exploring how 'parents do policy' and navigating the educational landscape they are part of and situated in. By contextualising the choice-making processes, our aim is not only to break 'out of the [political] discourse of choice' (Bowe et al. 1994, p. 76), but also to consider how the restructuring of the public education system is significant in the privatisation process. We would argue that this is crucial to avoid being 'captured by a discourse' of privatisation as exclusively a political right-wing phenomenon. In Norway, this is important, as will be elaborated on in the next section, as social democratic governments have opposed what Ball and Youdell (2008) refer to as exogenous privatisation or privatisation of the education sector, while they have supported and contributed to endogenous privatisation or privatisation in the public education sector (Volckmar, 2010).

3 Privatisation in and of Norwegian education

As mentioned in the introduction, Norway is one of the most restrictive Nordic countries when it comes to privatising the education sector, opening for private providers and introducing market-led reforms (Volckmar, 2010; Dovemark et al., 2018). In line with what has been described as the 'Nordic Model in Education', the development of a parallel private school system has been viewed as a threat to the social democratic ideal of the public school as an arena for social integration (Telhaug et al., 2006). In contrast to liberal welfare states that to a greater extent have allowed a parallel private education sector (Esping-Andersen, 1990), the Scandinavian strategy has been "based on construction of a publicly funded comprehensive school system without selecting, tracking or streaming students during their basic education until the age of 16" (Lie, Linnakylä, 2003, p. 8 referred to in

Antikainen, 2006, p. 231). In Norway, "a national comprehensive school system based on the goals of equity and participation" (Antikainen, 2006, p. 232) has been politically defined and manifested through the principle of the 'Enhetsskolen', a comprehensive 'school for all' model. Developed as part of the postwar school reform in Norway, this model has been based on four characteristics of significance for the development of the Norwegian school (Thuen & Volckmar, 2020). The first is equitable distribution of educational resources between municipalities. The second refers to the social dimension and the principle that schools should facilitate social interaction between all groups of children. The third then refers to the principle that social mobility and unity can be promoted through a nationally defined curriculum. The fourth characteristic "concerns a respect for diversity and an idea that equity in education is dependent on the pupil's right to get an education suited to their individual needs'' (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014, p. 36).

While the 'school for all' model has laid the groundwork for today's school and still exists as a political ideal, neoliberal ideas have challenged its cornerstones (Volckmar, 2010). In the 1990s, decentralisation policies giving municipalities more independent responsibility for the distribution of state funding introduced a competitive funding model where the school sector was forced to compete for funding with the municipal social and health sectors. This was done in parallel with the downsizing and restructuring of municipal school administration bodies (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). At the start of the millennium, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) test results showing average performance at the OECD level and a link between pupil performance and parental background were viewed as examples of evidence that the 'school for all' model had failed to provide quality and ensure social mobility (Volckmar, 2010). Bearing this in mind, there was political consensus on the need to restructure the education system in line with international trends and New Public Management. As a result, the Knowledge Promotion Reform that was implemented in 2006 by the left-wing so called red-green Parliamentary coalition introduced performance management, a competence-based curriculum, standardised tests and decentralised governance, in addition to accountability systems (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). Parallel to the introduction of market-led principles in public education, the then conservative government revised the Private School Act in 2003 in accordance with the ideal of Swedish legislation, with the ambition of making it easier for private providers to establish and offer education at the primary and lower secondary levels (Thuen & Tveit, 2013). Whereas the political consensus on the Knowledge Promotion Reform led to only a minor revision of the reform in 2020, there has been more conflict regarding legislation governing private schools. Between 2003 and 2024, the Private School Act was revised four times by the various political coalitions. In this regard, the political left has argued that a liberalised private school legislation may threaten the comprehensive 'school for all' project, whereas the political right has emphasised the need to strengthen freedom of choice by allowing private alternatives (Thuen & Volckmar, 2020). While the left's resistance has contributed to maintaining restrictive legislation and a relatively small private school sector compared to Sweden and Denmark, the right's initiatives to liberalise legislation have contributed to significant growth in the number of private schools (Skrede, 2023, p. 15).

4 Methodology: Investigating privatisation and parental choice in the Norwegian school

The study of parental choice in education is part of a larger research project on privatisation in and of Norwegian education. Within this project, questions related to NPM and the introduction of choice, competition and deregulation in the Norwegian school are being investigated empirically. Positioned within a critical policy tradition, the overall aim of the project is to examine the intentions behind the policies, but also the policy-making process and the 'politics in action' (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 20). This is based on an understanding of policy as both text and process, and not something just 'done to people' (Ball, 1997, p. 270), but something received and enacted in local settings (Ball et al., 2012). In line with this perspective parents' engagement in and negotiation of policies in local settings are assessed as relevant for exploring 'policies in practice' (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 5).

With this position and the aim to illuminate the choice-making process in relation to 'the context of practice' as the point of departure, sixty-one families in one of Norway's largest cities were interviewed about the process of choosing private alternatives. All in all, the families were represented by 64 parents, 45 mothers and 19 fathers. The parents were recruited from private schools approved in accordance with the Private School Act (§ 2-1), which means they have children attending schools that provide primary and lower secondary education on a special basis (religious, pedagogical, international, specific academic profile) and that are subsidised by the government, covering 85% of pupil expenditures (UDIR, 2022). The private schools are required to follow the national regulations under the Education Act but have autonomy when it comes to choice of curriculum and whether to follow the national curriculum that applies to public schools or an alternative curriculum that in some way or another ensure that pupils receive an equitable education (UDIR, 2023). This means public and private schools may have different curricula and different assessment systems. The private schools also have autonomy over the enrolment of pupils and the authority to adjust the admission of pupils according to the school's capacity and budget. Having different regulations in private and public schools means they operate under distinct material and pedagogical conditions, and that they are positioned differently when it comes to external expectations and pressure. As a consequence, the private schools are entitled to oppose the outcome- and competence-based curriculum that the public schools are obliged to follow, and they may adapt national reforms like the Six-Year Reform to the ideology or profile of the school.

To explore experiences from different private school contexts, the parents in the study were recruited from six different schools. The material is thus based on interviews with families attending two religious schools (Christian), two pedagogical alternatives (Steiner and Montessori), one international school and one school with a distinct profile (sports profile). Even though the parents share some social characteristics and reflect statistics when it comes to social background[1], they constitute a diverse group where 50 per

[1] Of the 64 interviewees, 57 had higher education (Master's or PhD degree), 5 had undergraduate education (Bachelor's or equivalent), and 2 had no education beyond upper secondary education.

cent of the families had chosen a private school from the outset, and the other half had moved their children to a private alternative after attending a public school. Even though these two groups are far from homogeneous, we will continue to refer to them as two distinct groups, 'private choosers' and 'transfers', as they share some experiences related to the time of decision making that are of relevance for understanding the choice process. In this way we also illuminate varieties and contradictions in the material. The parents were recruited through a registration form[2] distributed by the school management, whereby the parents signed up for participation directly with the researchers. While there is risk of bias in using an open recruitment of parents who have chosen private alternatives, we found this approach necessary if we were to illuminate different experiences of the school system. The decision to interview parents in private rather than public schools nevertheless limits the study to retrospective descriptions and does not necessarily capture the variation that exists in public-school experiences. However, our goal has not been to map variation in school experiences in general, but to look at school experiences significant for parents' decisions to go private.

The interviews, conducted between 2020 and 2022, lasted approximately one hour each. They were semi-structured and centred on how and why the parents had gone private, and what informed or was crucial to their choice. When analysing the interviews, we followed the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we identified themes in the data using the NVIVO programme. After coding the data corpus broadly, we identified patterns whereby parents related their school choice in different ways to various social, material and political conditions. We then used this to begin categorising the themes in relation to the contextual dimensions described by Ball et al. (2012). This process made it possible to maintain an abductive approach (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2013), where our assumptions about the role of context and theoretical perspectives structured our analysis, while the empirical material informed us as to how the contextual dimensions were relevant to the Norwegian school.

While the analysis reveals differences in parents' orientation along the various school types, our focus has been on issues raised across different school contexts. Below we will thus present what is highlighted by the two categories of parents across the various school types as important for their decision and process of going private and why and how these issues have been decisive. Our analysis shows that the highlighted issues are the result of different conditions, and in the presentation of the findings we illuminate the relation between them, and how local considerations relate to a wider educational context. Extracted statements are presented to illustrate recurring themes in the material. For the sake of anonymity, we only state which group the parents belong to and not the type of school their children attend. Thus, the schools are referred to by number and not profile.

[2] The registration form is *Nettskjema*.

5 Findings

5.1 The issue of school and class size

Since the beginning of the millennium the deregulation of national class-size standards, the closure of small public schools and merging of schools into larger educational entities have been justified under the umbrella of flexibility and efficiency (Reiling, 2023). As a result, the trend is to have fewer, but larger, public schools, often built as open-plan schools that allow for large groups to be gathered in a common area (Skrede, 2023, p. 17; UDIR, 2024; Nørstad, 2019). In contrast private schools are smaller and have fewer children per class than the public schools (Ekren et al., 2024). In the city where the study was conducted, local neighbourhood schools have been merged into larger entities and the municipality is reported to have the highest group size in schools compared to other large municipalities. As a consequence, pupils in some parts of the city are enrolled in large and sometimes oversubscribed schools and classes (Skjesol, 2015). While national policies on school and class size have been underpinned by research claiming few beneficial effects of class-size reduction (Leuven & Løkken, 2017), our analysis shows that parents' concern about the negative consequences of assigning pupils to large educational entities is important for their decision to go private. While the 'private choosers' base their concerns on information from their networks, visits to public schools, and rumours and media reports on how large classes negatively impact the social environment and relationships in public schools, the 'transfers' base their concerns on their experiences of local schools.

> When my son was about to start, we lived on [the south side], and he was going to attend a class with 90 pupils in an open classroom. We were introduced to this at an information meeting at the [neighbourhood school] and that was the nail in the coffin for the public school. […] (Private chooser, private school 1).

> I have a child who has struggled a bit with school refusal and […] It wasn't entirely fortunate for him to go to public school; there were too many children. Too few adults, too unsafe, quite simply. So he wanted to go to the private school he now attends (Transfer, private school 1).

One of the main concerns relating to school and class size is that organising children into large educational entities affects the social relations in the school. The 'transfers' relate this to experiences of how class and school size affect the communication between the different stakeholders in the school, and how the school and teachers have to organise and streamline some of their work to be able to handle large pupil groups. One aspect highlighted is that large educational entities often lead to the organisation of pupils into smaller, flexible groups, which requires children to continuously adapt to new social constellations and to engage with different teachers. For some, this organisation of pupils and the teaching is described as disjointed and stressful, finding the school then to be an insecure social arena. The parents also describe how the organisation of pupils into large classes means more pupils per teacher and less contact with the individual child. As teachers with large pupil groups have limited time for each child, they must prioritise those who are struggling at the cost of those who appear to be managing. This allocation of

teachers' time and presence is described as negatively affecting the children's relationship with the teacher and their sense of being 'seen'. Some describe how they feel that their children are 'disappearing in the crowd' or are 'invisible' to the teacher.

> Interviewer: But what made you choose the [private] school [...]?
>
> Dad: [...] when [daughter] started at [the neighbourhood school], she came home and cried quite often, the whole first grade, because none of the adults spoke to her. They didn't say good morning, and they didn't say goodbye. She hadn't exchanged any words with an adult all day. And we had the impression that there were so many people making noise in the classroom, demanding attention and then getting it, that they forgot to talk to everyone. Then we visited the [private] school, and the teacher seemed very orderly. I noticed that the teacher in the first-year class knew the names of absolutely all the children in the schoolyard. (Transfer, private school 5)

In addition to limited teacher-pupil contact, large schools and classes are described as affecting the school-home collaboration and the school as a social arena in the community. In contrast to the Norwegian Education Act's provision concerning the value of collaboration and the school's obligation to collaborate with parents and the home (The Norwegian Education Act, 1998, § 1.1), the parents experience that contact and communication with the school are at a minimum and standardised level when teachers have large groups to deal with. Large schools and classes that are frequently reorganised as new groups and social entities also affect parents' circumstances and motivation to build social relations with the school and other parents. In contrast to descriptions of how the conditions in smaller private schools contribute to a participatory, inclusive and 'family oriented' social environment, the parents describe the material conditions as a limiting factor for the sense of belonging to the local school.

> That's a big reason why I chose [the private school], socially it's [...] very good to be there, for parent and child. I don't think that about [neighbourhood school], not as a parent and not as a child. It was so big and confusing. You never got to know the other parents. [...] I felt it was very different. This was a big reason why I chose the [name of private] school. Smaller and straightforward. (Transfer, private school 5)

In addition to concern about how material conditions negatively affect the social environment, material conditions have a direct impact on the learning environment and, according to the parents, the public schools' ability to provide adapted and special needs education.

5.2 Adapted education and special needs education

While access to the same economic, material and human resources has been one of the key principles behind the comprehensive school model and for the provision of inclusive education, competitive funding models have led to a "situation whereby differences between the allocations of funds to schools continued to grow" between the municipalities

(Imsen & Volckmar, 2014, p. 45), resulting in underfunding of schools in some municipalities. According to the parents, pupils with special needs become particularly vulnerable within a school system with inadequate material resources. In addition to large educational groups representing a challenging learning environment for pupils with special needs, the underfunding of schools means that these pupils do not necessarily get the special education to which they are entitled (Bergesen, 2021; Barka, 2023). The parents see this as being related to the lack of supply teachers covering for teachers on sick leave and the disjointedness that comes with high turnover, as well as the fact that special needs education is reduced and de-prioritised when resources are limited. For some parents, the absence of special needs education results in a deteriorating situation in which they feel there is no other option than to leave the public school.

> We opted out of public school for both our children because […][daughter] with her cognitive challenges wasn't getting the help she needed; it was never in place. She was always in a small [segregated] group. She was always the one [de-prioritised] when you needed a supply teacher, there was always an excuse for her not getting the follow-up she needed. […] eventually we gave up the fight. […] It's the big question of money that stops everything. But for us, it wasn't an option to continue any longer, it was a matter of life and health. (Transfer, private school 3)

While the underfunding of public schools has severe consequences for pupils with special needs (Bergersen 2021; Barka, 2023), it also affects the learning environment of all children as it limits teachers' opportunities to adapt the education programme. According to the parents, the scarcity of time and resources not only affects teachers' ability to follow up on individual pupils, it also limits their opportunities and capacity to provide varied and differentiated teaching. Here, the parents refer to how a lack of resources constrains learning materials, and the possibility of using alternative learning environments outside the classroom or initiating alternative projects. In contrast to the duty schools have to provide adapted education, the parents describe a more standardised learning environment. They are also concerned that public schools, dealing with constrained budgets and a shortage and high turnover of teachers and school heads, are struggling to build an inclusive social environment and to address the issues associated with diverse pupil groups. While schools are obliged "to act to ensure pupils a good psychosocial school environment" (The Norwegian Education Act, 1998, § 9 A-4), limited resources mean that teachers do not have the time or capacity to work on the social environment or to prevent or deal with bullying and difficult situations that occur, or to follow up children who need extra care.

> We chose to change schools in the end because of the bullying there. […] repeated attempts to sort it out, which didn't lead anywhere, so nothing happened and finally we put our foot down as parents and said: now we have to do something because the alternative is that she doesn't go to school at all (Transfer, private school 3)

> There are three reasons [for changing to a private school], so the third is about my experience as a school employee myself, in the municipality, where I have experienced the lack of resources, […] that a supply teacher isn't brought in, that as a teacher you can end up having a class of 60-70 pupils almost on your own for a whole day, and then you're fighting fires all day, so I thought a smaller school with a different budget might be nice too. (Transfer, private school 2)

According to the 'transfer parents', one result is that much of the schools' work and time must be spent on 'fire-fighting' rather than prevention. On this point, they particularly describe schools located in low-income areas as those most vulnerable and exposed to this situation. Some parents have experienced that conflicts in these schools were escalating and that the schools had limited resources to stop or reverse this development. For some, the limited opportunities to provide adapted education and a good psychosocial school environment are the main reason for seeking a private alternative.

5.3 Pedagogical orientation: narrowing of the curriculum and early intervention

In addition to concerns that inadequate material conditions might have detrimental effects on the learning environment, the parents express mistrust of the pedagogical orientation of the public school. This is particularly related to what Ball et al. (2012) refer to as external contextual conditions and the introduction and consequences of the Knowledge Promotion Reform implemented in 2006 and the Six-Year Reform introduced in 1997, lowering the school-start age for children from seven to six years. While the outcome- and competence-based curricula were introduced as part of the Knowledge Promotion Reform to promote a new 'culture for learning' and improve the academic performance of Norwegian pupils (Møller & Skedsmo, 2013), the parents state that the focus on basic skills and subjects has contributed to a 'poorer' academic school with a narrower view on knowledge and the curriculum. In this context parents who describe themselves as strong supporters of the public school find the private schools attractive because they have the autonomy to resist new and shifting political initiatives and to hold onto pedagogical ideas and values that are not in line with those introduced in public schools.

> There are many political parties pulling in all directions. All in all, this has resulted in the school system we have now. It's clear that the PISA survey, to see what it's like…the type of management by objectives that is so narrow…it makes the teachers, it becomes a performance culture, which is only about that. (Private chooser, private school 5)

In this regard the parents concerned about practical-aesthetic subjects and the education of 'the whole human being' experience that 'they have lost too much of their place in the public school' (Transfer, private school 2), and that they have to go private to ensure the quantity and quality of the teaching of these subjects from a broader perspective.

> There were […] too few practical aesthetic subjects [in the public school], little woodwork and crafts, little music. They sang once a year at the end of the school year. […] The Knowledge Promotion Reform isn't wrong in itself, but what do you mean by knowledge? Knowledge in public schools is only what they can "measure, weigh, count" and the PISA surveys and all that stuff they focus on. I think it's really sad, it makes me sad when I look at public schools, especially at the early years. There's simply too little room for the whole person. […] that's something that's very important at [the private] schools, where a person is more than just an intellect. (Transfer, private school 5)

> There are several reasons why that choice [of a private school] was made. We have a fairly active family […] I think perhaps the public primary school is very inactive. There is a lot of sitting still but children are made to be in motion, […] so that's part of the reason why we wanted, or he wanted, a more active school day. (Transfer, private school 4)

While the private schools' pedagogy is most frequently emphasised by the 'private choosers' who want to give their children an education based on specific values or profiles, the 'transfers' are more concerned about how the public schools' pedagogy has affected their children. One aspect highlighted by the parents is the experience of how the Six-Year Reform and the Knowledge Promotion Reform have increased the academic pressure in the early years at school. In this context the parents describe the choice of private schools who oppose this and provide a more child-centred and flexible learning environment as a strategy for avoiding over-academisation of the early years at school.

> I think the [private] school in general has a much better programme, especially for first graders, than they have at [the neighbourhood school]. I don't have a bad word to say about [the neighbourhood school], but they started extremely early with [...] a lot of homework. So, in both first and second grade she sat for a very long time, every single day, with homework, and had a negative response to it, and cried about the homework. And that's completely unnecessary. Making a 6–7-year-old do homework for over an hour every day is completely unnecessary. By the time you get to university or college, you should still have some desire to learn. (Transfer, private school 5)

Bearing in mind how material conditions influence teachers' work, the parents are concerned about how performance management and outcome-based education influence the professional culture. One highlighted aspect relates to how a competence-based, narrowed curriculum also increases the risk of failing academically, falling behind at an early stage or developing school-related stress. Here parents describe experiences of what some refer to as a 'diagnostic culture' within which children who do not keep up are diagnosed more easily and constructed as a 'problem'. Within this context the parents express that they have more confidence in the professional discretion and 'gaze' of teachers working in private schools anchored in specific values and pedagogical ideals and who have the autonomy to resist the demands and pressure put on teachers in the public school. In line with this, they describe private schools as more predictable and trustworthy than public schools characterised by frequent reforms introducing shifting ideals.

6 Discussion: mistrust of public schools and private schools as a substitute

In Norway the regulation and definition of private schools has constituted one of the most hotly debated topics between the political left and right (Thuen & Volckmar, 2020). Within this political landscape the privatisation of the education sector, with an extensive increase in the number of private schools over the last decade, has been framed as a result of the conservative governments' liberalisation of private school legislation (Ellingsen, 2020; Frifagbevegelse, 2020). However, while conservative policies have undoubtedly changed the educational landscape, the study of parents' process of choosing a private school alternative and 'the context of practice' has illuminated privatisation as a complex phenomenon that cannot solely be reduced to the regulations and provisions of the private market. The analysis found two key issues. The first is that parents' choice of private schools is far more complex than the premise of classic economic theory whereby parents are defined

according to 'the discourse of consumption', pursuing happiness without the slightest hesitation, and preferring "objects which provide [...] maximum satisfaction" (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 37 referred in Bowe et al., 1994, p. 65). In contrast to the economic consumer perspective, the study points out that private school parents are not a homogenous but rather a diverse group with different opinions about school, values, wishes and school experiences. This is evident when they choose schools with different profiles for their children and when they describe what is important for them in education. Variation between the parents is also manifested through the process of choice, where the 'private choosers' often make an informed and planned choice of a specific school, while the 'transfers' are generally less informed and knowledgeable about the different private schools available and more often describe their decision as an act of resignation or necessity rather than choice. For them, the decision to go private is often a result of an unplanned and sometimes ambivalent and conflicted process where they imagine the private school to be a solution to their problems and a necessary exit option to ensure satisfactory educational provision for their children. The latter is related to the second issue, where the analysis shows that although the profile of the private school is important, the choice of private school is closely, and sometimes mainly, linked to conditions and regulations in the public school. Analysed in relation to Ball et al.'s (2012) typology of different contextual dimensions, the study finds that parents' concern about what are perceived or experienced as inadequate material and external conditions is of great importance for their decision on going private. This is particularly related to how national policies on centralisation and deregulation have facilitated a situation where public schools and classes are merged and oversubscribed, and that the underbudgeting of public schools affects their ability to fulfil statutory duties, such as providing adapted and special needs education. Furthermore, the Six-Year Reform and the Knowledge Promotion Reform, introducing performance management and an outcome- and competence-based curriculum with focus on basic skills and early intervention, seem to have led to mistrust in the public school as a pedagogical project. Even though these dimensions explicitly stand out, they are also interrelated and important for parents' level of faith in the public school's professional culture, manifested as mistrust in teachers' discretion and engagement, and for parents' perception of situated factors, such as the pupil composition in the catchment area. The latter refers to how the scarcity of material conditions in public schools contributes to mistrust in their ability to address individual needs, and in their ability to be a 'school for all'. While there is a risk of bias when interviewing parents who have actively chosen a private school, the contextual dimensions highlighted by the parents correspond to concerns raised by educational authorities, trade unions, researchers and school leaders. This is particularly related to how the restructuring of public education in line with NPM principles has contributed to a narrowing of the curriculum (NOU, 2023:1), development of a performance-oriented professional culture (Eide, 2021; Mausethagen, 2013) and a pedagogical culture exacerbating school-related stress among children (Eriksen, 2017; Lunde & Brodal, 2022). Moreover, research also points to the negative effect on the schools' ability to provide for and promote inclusion and social integration (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Bjordal & Haugen, 2021). It also corresponds with international research on how middle-class parents' school choice strategies are related to promoting their children's social-emotional and physical wellbeing and well-rounded development (Slámová & Simonová, 2024; Debs et al., 2023).

The relationship between national policies regulating public schools and parents' decisions on private alternatives illustrates how policies might construct educational needs and preferences for private alternatives (Bowe et al., 1994). When the needs that are constructed, as highlighted in this article, are related to the restructuring of the public school in line with NPM, this confirms the relationship between what Ball and Youdell (2008) refer to as endogenous and exogenous privatisation, or privatisation in education and privatisation of education. A characteristic of the Norwegian case is the fact that the interrelatedness between the different policies contributes to a situation where private schools that are politically regulated and defined as representing a supplement to public education rather seem to represent a substitute for what is perceived and experienced as inadequate public education. In this context private schools outperform public schools, not because they offer an alternative education, but because they provide basic educational conditions that the public schools are meant, but unable, to provide. While the relationship points to the mechanism of privatisation and the relation between different types of privatisation, it also challenges discourses of privatisation as an exclusively political right-wing phenomenon. In a Norwegian context this is a relevant point as social democratic politicians who oppose privatisation of education and argue for universal public welfare services have been promoting privatisation in education and thus have contributed to fostering an educational environment that stimulates parental support for private alternatives and where public schools are outcompeted by private schools (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Sivesind et al., 2022; Volckmar & Wiborg, 2014).

7 Concluding remarks

The complexity of the privatisation process highlighted in this article challenges the ideological basis and rationale for the political right's exogenous privatisation and school-choice policies. The one-sided political explanation particularly voiced by the political left (Ellingsen, 2020; FriFagbevegelse, 2020), stating that support for private alternatives is due to the political right's liberalisation of private school legislation, is also called into question. While the focus of this article has been on the privatisation process and how its mechanisms play out within a context in which the public school has traditionally held a strong position, the findings make it relevant to ask what the consequences will be if citizens lose faith in the public school. This is a pertinent question as equal public services of high quality are important for reducing 'social inequality' and "considered crucial for the legitimacy of a system of welfare services funded by taxpayers" (Sivesind & Saglie, 2017).

References

Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2013). *Tolkning og refleksjon. Vetenskapsfilosofi og kvalitativ metod* [Interpretation and reflection: Philosophy of science and qualitative methods]. Studentlitteratur.

Antikainen, A. (2006). In search of the nordic model in education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 50*(3), 229–243. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313830600743258

Arnesen, A.-L., & Lundahl, L. (2006). Still social and democratic? Inclusive education policies in the Nordic welfare states. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 50*(3), 285–300. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313830600743316

Ball, S. J. (1997). Policy sociology and critical social research: A personal review of recent education policy and policy research. *British Educational Research Journal, 23*(3), 257–274.

Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy. Policy enactments in secondary schools.* Routledge.

Ball, S. J., & Youdell, D. (2008). *Hidden Privatisation in Public Education.* Accessed 15/10/2024, from https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/Education_International_Hidden_Privatisation_in_Public_Education.pdf

Barka, E. H. T. (2023, 10/09/2023). *Pengemangel tvinger skole til daglige lovbrudd* [Lack of money forces school to break the law daily]. Nettavisen. https://www.nettavisen.no/nyheter/pengemangel-tvinger-skole-til-daglige-lovbrudd-veldig-vanskelig/f/5-95-1317177

Bergesen, N. (2021, 04/09/2021). *Mange hundre barn i Trondheim venter ulovlig lenge på hjelp* [Many hundreds of children in Trondheim illegally wait a long time for help]. Adresseavisen. https://www.adressa.no/nyheter/i/nW2n3d/mange-hundre-barn-i-trondheim-venter-ulovlig-lenge-pa-hjelp-en-galopperende-okning

Bjordal, I & Haugen, C. (2021). *Fra fellesskole til konkurranseskole. Markedsretting i grunnskolen – sentrale virkemidler og lokale erfaringer.* [From common school to competition school – policy measures and local experiences]. Universitetsforlaget.

Bowe, R., Gewirtz, S., & Ball, S. J. (1994). Captured by the discourse? Issues and concerns in researching 'parental choice'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 15*(1), 66–78.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Debs, M., Kafka, J., Makris, M.V., & Toda, A. (2023). Happiness-oriented parents: An alternative perspective on privilege and choosing schools. *American Journal of Education, 129*(2), 145–176. https://doi.org/10.1086/723066

Dovemark, M., Kosunen, S., Kauko, J., Magnúsdottir, B., Hansen, P., & Rasmussen, P. (2018). Deregulation, privatisation and marketisation of Nordic comprehensive education: Social changes reflected in schooling. *Education Inquiry, 9*(1), 122–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2018.1429768

Eide, K. (2021). *Kultur i endring. Erfarne læreres beskrivelse av endrede maktforhold i skolen.* [Culture in change. Experienced teachers' description of changing power relations in schools]. [Doktorgradsavhandling]. Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet.

Ekren, R., Stengrundet, A., & Kalcic, M. (2024). Hva kjennetegner private skoler? [What characterises private schools?]. Hva kjennetegner private skoler? Kjennetegn ved private grunnskoler og videregående skoler og deres. Statistics Norway.

Ellingsen, Ø. (2020, 24/09/2020). *10.000 flere barn på privatskoler på ti år.* [10,000 more children in private schools in ten years]. NRK. https://www.nrk.no/rogaland/kraftig-okning-av-private-grunnskoler-i-norge-1.15164428

Eriksen, N. (2017, 11/07/2017). *Sterk sammenheng mellom skolepress og psykiske helseplager.* [Strong link between school pressure and mental-health problems]. https://www.forskning.no/psykiske-lidelser-oslomet-helse/sterk-sammenheng-mellom-skolepress-og-psykiske-helseplager/334970

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). *The three worlds of welfare capitalism.* Polity Press.

FriFagbeveglse (2020, January 15). Ap og SV bekymret over privatskolerekord – krever Sanner inn på teppet [Labour and the Socialist Left Party concerned about private school record – demand Sanner to be held accountable.] Frifagbevegelse. https://frifagbevegelse.no/nyheter/ap-og-sv-bekymret-over-privatskolerekord--krever-sanner-inn-pa-teppet-6.158.672348.935e6f37c3

Hansen, M.N. (2005). Ulikhet i osloskolen: rekruttering og segregering [Inequality in Oslo Schools: Recruitment and Segregation]. Tidsskrift for ungdomsforskning, 5(1), 3–26.

Hansen, M. N. (2017). Segregering og ulikhet i Oslo-skolen [Segregation and inequality in Oslo schools]. In J. Ljunggren (Ed.), Oslo – ulikhetenes by (pp. 257–275). Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Helgesen, M. (2003). *Barns behov eller foreldres særinteresser* [Children's needs or parents' special interests] (NIBR-rapport 2003:8). https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/handle/20.500.12199/5801

Imsen, G., & Volckmar, N. (2014). The Norwegian School for All: Historical emergence and neoliberal confrontation. In: U. Blossing, G. Imsen, & L. Moos (Eds.). *The Nordic Education Model.* "A School for All" Encounters Neo-Liberal Policy (pp. 35–55). Springer.

Lauglo, J. (2010). *Do Private Schools Increase Social Class Segregation in Basic Education Schools in Norway?* https://www.llakes.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Lauglo-Complete.pdf Accessed 06-12-2025

Leuven E. & Løkken, S. A. (2017). *Long term impacts of class size in compulsory school.* Statistics Norway. https://www.ssb.no/en/forskning/discussion-papers/_attachment/299810?_ts=15ac6cfbee0 Accessed 06-12-2025

Ljunggren, J., & Andersen, P. L. (2021). Tillitsfulle vinnere? Klasseforskjeller i tillit blant osloungdom [Confident Winners? Class differences in trust among Oslo youth]. In: J. Ljunggren & M. N. Hansen (Eds.) *Arbeiderklassen* (pp. 411–431).

Lunde, C., & Brodal, P. (2022). Lek og læring i et nevroperspektiv – hvordan gode intensjoner kan ødelegge barns lærelyst [Play and learning in a neural perspective – how good intentions can ruin children's desire to learn]. Universitetsforlaget.

Mausethagen, S. (2013). *Reshaping teacher professionalism. An analaysis of how teachers construct and negotiate professionalism under increasing accountability* [Doktorgradsavhandling] Høgskolen i Oslo og Akershus.

Møller, J., & Skedsmo, G. (2013). Modernising education: New Public Management reform in the Norwegian education system. *Journal of Educational Administration and History, 45*(4), 336–353. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2013.822353

NOU 2023:1 (2023). Kvalitetsvurdering og kvalitetsutvikling i skolen [Quality assessment and quality development in schools]. Ministry of Education and Research. https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/8758c1a973ae4f94ab67e3830c96b9c9/no/pdfs/nou202320230001000dddpdfs.pdf Accessed 06-12-2025

Nørstad, R. (2019, 21/03/2019). Paradoks at de store byene bygger baseskoler [A paradox that the major cities are building base schools]. Skolenes landsforbund. https://skoleneslandsforbund.no/paradoks-at-de-store-byene-bygger-baseskoler Accessed 06-12-2025

Reiling, R. B. (2023). Organisering av klasser og undervisning i grunnskolen. Femte delrapportering fra Evaluering av norm for lærertetthet [Organisation of classes and teaching in primary and lower secondary schools. Fifth interim report from the evaluation of the norm for teacher density]. (NIFU rapport 6/23). Accessed from https://nifu.brage.unit.no/nifu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/3051253/NIFUarbeidsnotat2023-6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Sivesind, K. H., & Saglie, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Promoting Active Citizenship. Markets and Choice in Scandinavian Welfare.* Springer.

Sivesind, K. H., Trætteberg, H. S., & Fladmoe, A. (2022). Active citizenship in public and nonprofit school – the case of Norway. *Journal of Educational Administration and History, 55(*4), 1–20. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00220620.2022.2081135

Skjesol, H. (2015, 19/08/2015). Nye skoler stappes fulle [New schools are stuffed full]. Adresseavisen. https://www.adressa.no/nyheter/i/g090p5/nye-skoler-stappes-fulle

Skrede, E. M. (2023). Privatskoler i Norge. Om økt privatisering av norsk skole, årsakene og hva som kan stoppe det [Private schools in Norway. About increased privatisation of Norwegian schools, the causes and what can stop it]. (FV-notat 03/2023). Accessed from https://velferdsstaten.no/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/231204_FV-Notat-3-2023_Privatskoler-i-Norge.pdf

Slámová, R.S., & Simonová, J. (2024). School choice and parenting strategies among Czech middle-class parents: Implications for social segregation in public schools. *Sociology Compass 18*(8). Article e13248. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13248

Taylor, S., Rizvi, F., Lindgard, B., & Henry, M. (1997). *Eucational Policy and the Politics of Change.* Routledge.

Telhaug, A. O., Mediås, O. A., & Aasen, P. (2006). The nordic model in education: Education as part of the political system over the last 50 years. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 50*(3), 245–283. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00313830600743274

The Norwegian Education Act. (1998). Act relating to Primary and Secondary Education and Training (the Education Act), (2024). https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLO/lov/1998-07-17-61 Accessed 06-12-2025

Thuen, H., & Tveit, K. (2013). Privatskolane – vere eller ikkje vere? Fire hundre år i motgang og medgang [Private schools – to be or not to be? Four hundred years of hard times and good times]. *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning, 54*(4), 493–508.

Thuen, H., & Volckmar, N. (2020). Postwar school reforms in Norway. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education,* 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1456

UDIR. (2022). *The education mirror 2022.* Accessed from https://www.udir.no/tall-og-forskning/publikasjoner/utdanningsspeilet/utdanningsspeilet-2022/?depth=0&print=1

UDIR. (2023). *Privatskoler.* [Private schools] Accessed from Privatskoler | udir.no

UDIR. (2024). Færre og større skoler enn for ti år siden [Fewer and larger schools than ten years ago]. Accessed from https://www.udir.no/tall-og-forskning/statistikk/statistikk-grunnskole/analyser/2024/farre-og-storre-skoler-enn-for-ti-ar-siden

Volckmar, N. (2010). 'En skole for alle' og privatisering. En analyse av de skandinaviske landenes privatiseringspolitikk ['One school for all' and privatisation. An analysis of the Scandinavian countries' privatisation policies.]. *Uddannelseshistorie Fællesskab og elite: Skolen mellem det offentlige og private (44),* 33–49.

Volckmar, N. (2012). Norway. In: C. L. Glenn & J. De Groof (Eds.) *Balancing freedom, autonomy and accountability in education* (Vol. 2, pp. 383–397). Wolf Legal Publishers.

Volckmar, N., & Wiborg, S. (2014). A social democratic response to market-led education policies: Concession or rejection? In: U. Blossing, G. Imsen, & L. Moos (Eds.) *The Nordic Education Model: 'A school for all' encounters neo-liberal policy* (pp. 117–131). Springer.