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Soft privatization in the Norwegian school: cooperation between public government and private consultancies in developing ‘failing’ schools

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ABSTRACT

Even though Norway is one of the Nordic countries that has been hesitant when it comes to implementing privatization policies, the influence of market-led reforms has facilitated an educational landscape where private companies increasingly serve public education. In this article, the interrelation between marketization and privatization is analysed as a process of soft privatization. Focusing on a school development project in Oslo, soft privatization is investigated in relation to how the public authorities actively facilitate private participation. This is especially related to how the framing of educational problems within a market-led context serves private interests and public-private cooperation. While arguing that marketization facilitates private-sector participation, the article also suggests that private actors reinforce the ideas that constitute the premises for their participation, thus confirming public policies. A consequence of this is not only a situation where market-led policies facilitate private-sector participation, but a situation where the two reinforce each other and where public and private actors develop mutual dependency.

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Introduction

Norway is one of the Nordic countries that has been hesitant when it comes to implementing privatization policies. Compared to Sweden and Denmark, national politicians have emphasized strong central control and public education, resulting in a relatively small private education sector (Dovemark et al., 2018). Even though Norway stands out in a Nordic context with respect to privatization, marketization policies have made inroads since the turn of the century (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014). This is apparent in the way national politicians for the last two decades have stressed the need to reorganize public education in line with New Public Management principles, emphasizing output, choice and competition (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Karlsen, 2006; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). While the introduction of market-led policies has impacted public education in several ways, it has also paved the way for increased public-private cooperation. This is especially evident in the ways performance management and standardized testing have exposed ‘failures’ within education and thus laid the foundation for a market where private actors generate public solutions (Mellingsæter, 2012; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019).

This article explores the issue and mechanisms of what is referred to as *soft privatization* (Cone & Brøgger, 2020), and especially examines how market-led policies may stimulate and legitimize

public-private cooperation. More specifically, it addresses how marketization policies and mutual interests between public and private actors establish a market where private consultants are invited to fix failing public schools. The article is based on the analysis of a school development project entitled *Flerårig skoleutviklingsprosjekt i utsatte områder 2012–2016* [Multi-year school development project in vulnerable areas], abbreviated SKU, where the Oslo educational authorities invited Ernst & Young and Oxford Research AS, in collaboration with the Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University (AU), to help identify ways to improve and develop schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. While the project was initiated as part of the municipality’s commitment to raising the living conditions in two specific city districts and had improvement of the educational situation for children from disadvantaged backgrounds as its ostensible aim, it was designed in a way that reinforced market-led policies and private-sector participation. In this article, I investigate the process of soft privatization by looking at how the formulation of educational problems constitutes an important part of the policy process. This approach has been informed by Bacchi’s (2009) perspective claiming that all policies represent an answer to a problem and that the formulation of the problem is relevant for

understanding the policy. By illuminating the case of the school development project in Oslo, the article seeks to shed light on some of the discursive mechanisms that are of importance in the privatization process. The aim is thus to investigate the following research question: In what ways are problem representations relevant in the privatization process?

Theoretical perspectives on the relationship between public governance and private-sector participation

Building on the concept of soft privatization, this article addresses the way the state, within a neoliberal context, takes on a new role as facilitator for the market (Cone & Brøgger, 2020; Karlsen, 2006), and the way new soft modes of governance have enabled and legitimized network alliances between public and private actors. In contrast to the notion of privatization as a phenomenon creating tension between public and private interests, where the ‘movement of ownership and responsibility away from the purportedly withering state’ (Cone & Brøgger, 2020, p. 386) threatens public education, soft privatization refers to privatization as a blurred process where public and private interests converge, and privatization must be seen in relation to or as a part of public governance (Cone & Brøgger, 2020).

We conceptualise the notion of soft privatisation as a particular mode of governance in which private sector participation is highly integrated in, rather than a break from, public governance of education. Soft privatisation, we suggest, describes how this embedding takes place, enabling the delegation of public operations to non-state or autonomous quasi-state agents while retaining the principally public status of institutions. (Cone & Brøgger, 2020, p. 375)

According to Cone and Brøgger (2020), the concept of soft privatization is intricately linked to a wider process of public restructuring where new forms of soft governance have been introduced and where hierarchal government structures have been replaced by new ways of governing at a distance. Within education, soft governance has materialized through New Public Management (NPM), a global reform movement where decentralization policies emphasizing market mechanisms and parental control have been combined with centralization reforms that emphasize educational output, centrally imposed standards and quality criteria (Gunter & Fitzgerald, 2013), along with ‘standardization of the educational product and accountability through performance regimes’ (Moos, 2009, p. 398). Within this context, management by numbers and the introduction of standardized tests have become important means for providing governments with data on the level of

quality within education and for detecting and preventing social inequalities in education. Disregarding the history and empirical evidence of how standardized tests have been actively used to ‘sort and rank human populations by race, ethnicity, gender, and social class’ (Au, 2016, p. 5), tests providing statistical data on student performance have been granted status as reliable and neutral means of detecting and promoting equity through education (Apple, 2006; Au, 2016). This is evident in the ways (big) data on student performance have laid the foundation for educational reforms and school development projects in several countries in the global north (Breakspear, 2012; Hovdenak & Stray, 2014; Prøitz, 2021; Steiner-Khamsi, 2003).

While NPM has introduced new ways of governing at a distance, it has also opened public education to private influence (Ball & Youdell, 2008). This is especially evident in the ways in which the introduction of performance management, accountability policies and outcome-based education have facilitated an educational industry with an extensive ‘production of devices designed to compare, measure and monitor implementation and progression of established goals’ (Cone & Brøgger, 2020, pp. 384–385), and where systems for ‘assessment and student testing’, national testing, data management and ‘curriculum development work’ are contracted out and delivered by private computer companies and consultants (Ball & Youdell, 2008, p. 23). VanGronigen et al. (2020, p. 1) refers to the mobilizing of private and public actors for school improvement as part of a new ‘school improvement industry’. According to Au (2016), alliances between public authorities and private providers gain prominence when it comes to documenting and handling inequality within education. In this context, standardized tests are not only a principal tool for framing educational ‘failures’ but also for legitimizing which rectifying efforts are to be made. This means:

[...] high stakes, standardized testing constructs which children (and communities) are identified as “failures” by the tests, how such “failure” is used to justify neoliberal conceptions of individualist educational attainment and the denial of structural inequalities (Meritocracy 2.0), and, subsequently, what policies and practices are to be enacted on those children and communities identified by the test as “failures.” (Au, 2016, p. 4)

Following Au’s (2016) argument, the idea of failing students or failing schools is one of the key constructs of the neoliberal project that welcomes NPM and private-sector participation. The latter is related to how the visible labelling of low-income students of colour (as well as their teachers and their schools) as failures generates demands for services, programmes and competences that can help public authorities

respond to educational challenges (Au, 2016, p. 52). In this context, public and private interests might become intertwined and hard to separate (Ball, 2018).

Building on the concept of soft privatization (Cone & Brøgger, 2020) and the perspectives on how NPM has introduced a link between market-led policies and equity in education (Apple, 2006; Au, 2016), the entangled relationship between public interests, formulations of educational problems and public-private cooperation constitutes the complex field this article addresses. In the following section, the analytical approach and empirical material of the study are presented.

Methods and Empirical Material

This article has been inspired by a critical policy tradition where structural and post-structural perspectives are combined to illuminate the material and discursive elements of policy and the mutual influence between the two (Ball, 1994; Olssen et al., 2006). Inspired by Foucault's (1999) perspective on policy as discourse and discourse as a form of power that constitutes material social practices, the focus here is on how formulations of educational problems are of importance in the (soft) privatization process (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Cone & Brøgger, 2020). To identify how educational problems are constructed within and thus reflect specific political or ideological interests, in addition to having 'real-world effects' (in relation to soft privatization), this article is inspired by Bacchi's (2009) approach, 'What's the Problem Represented to be' (WPR). The underlying assumption in Bacchi's approach is that producing problems is a key governmental practice for what are seen as strategic responses and practices. By critically examining how specific problems are produced, the 'underlying goal is to make the politics involved in these productive practices visible' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 14). Bacchi (2009, p. xii) has developed a framework with six analytical questions to guide the analysis of specific policies: 1) What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy? 2) What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'? 3) How has this representation of the 'problem' come about? 4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? 5) What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'? And 6) How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended?

To illuminate the intertwined relationship between problem formulations and the process of facilitating private actors, the school development project in Oslo has been investigated in relation to five of the questions in Bacchi's (2009) framework (Q1-Q5). As the

questions are interrelated, the presentation of the analysis concentrates on three main questions. The first, related to the core question: 'What is the problem represented to be?', is investigated in relation to the logic and assumptions that underpin the development project, focusing especially on what challenges were identified and given status as in need of change. The second question, 'How has this problem representation come to be?', refers to how the specific problem representation has been produced, focusing on mapping practices that have enabled the production of problems that are given authority. Of special interest here is the wider political context that has informed the local project. The third question, relating to the real effects of this specific problem framing, focuses on how the municipality's definitions of educational problems have paved the way for private companies offering solutions to public problems. The following discussion is centred on how the design of the project appears to have reinforced NPM and private-sector participation and how this facilitation has effectively contributed to silencing questions relating to the negative consequences of these various forms of privatization.

The empirical material comprises official documents and reports describing the school development project chronologically. This includes nine documents describing the background of the project, the role of Ernst & Young and its contribution through the implementation of a 'Point of View analysis' (PoV) (Oslo Kommune, 2012, 2013), the results of the PoV analysis in specific schools (Ernst & Young, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e) and the evaluations of the project by Oxford Research AS and Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University (2014, 2017), which included a prescription for a school development model. Whilst the documents have a chronological order, the analysis has focused on the interrelation between them and the way they inform each other. This means that even though different documents are linked to different parts of the project, they have all been analysed in relation to the same analytical questions.¹ In the following section, I briefly describe the school development project before presenting the analysis.

The school development project in Oslo

The multi-year school development project in vulnerable areas, abbreviated to SKU, was introduced in 2012 as part of a larger project where the municipality of Oslo, with support from the state, was attempting to improve the living conditions in specific areas of the city (specifically Groruddalen and Søndre Nordstrand). While the larger project was established to strengthen integration and inclusion, improve

public health and solve challenges related to environmental living conditions (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2014), SKU was initiated as a development project with special emphasis on helping schools to tackle the complex challenges that come with being situated in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. This project, running for five years from 2012 to 2017, and with 13 participating schools, was designed in two phases, where phase one consisted of acquiring more knowledge about the schools and the unique challenges they were facing through a 'Point of View analysis' (PoV analysis). In phase two, measures based on the PoV analysis and newer research were developed and implemented to help the schools deal with the identified challenges and to expand the project and the municipality's² further work in schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The overall objective of the project was thus to create 'lasting change' within the project schools and to generate knowledge that could be adopted in the municipality's future school-development efforts (Oslo Kommune, 2012, p. 5).

What's the problem represented to be? The municipality's definitions of problems and solutions in schools in vulnerable areas

When the school development project was initiated under the umbrella of the larger project, it was explained that even though previous initiatives to strengthen schools in the two areas had succeeded, they had not led to sufficiently stable performance development (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 4). This means that the variations in student performances between schools situated in the same area and with similar student compositions were considered too high and too unstable from year to year (Oslo Kommune, 2012, p. 4). Describing this as a challenge to the schools' abilities to achieve social mobility and academic and personal advancement, the municipality, by the Education Agency, narrowed the initial focus (of the larger project) from realizing social mobility, improving living conditions and reducing poverty, to enhancing 'stable school development that provides continuous and documented improvement of students' academic achievement and with respect to learning environment and students' school careers' (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 9). More specifically, it referred 'to student performances, particularly within Norwegian and mathematics' (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2017, p. 35).

Narrowing the project down to academic performances has been important for the project's further development and the solutions proposed to help the schools. This has also been decisive for what has been

given attention and what has not (Bacchi, 2009). When the project was initiated, the selection of the 13 project schools was based on sociodemographic criteria, their locations in disadvantaged areas and the schools' performance developments over time (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 6). However, even though contextual criteria formed the basis for the selection of the schools, the documents reveal no further recognition of the relevance of the schools' or students' contextual, structural and social conditions. This becomes apparent as information about how students' social and cultural backgrounds are of importance in education (Bakken & Elstad, 2012; Hansen, 2017) is lacking in the description of the schools. Also lacking is information and insight into how the municipality's parental choice policy in combination with per-capita funding negatively affects schools' institutional conditions, for example, disparities in resources (Bjordal, 2016; Bjordal & Haugen, 2021), thus impacting their abilities to respond to current 'policy technologies' (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 309). Rather than focusing on how contextual and structural conditions are pertinent for the situations of schools and students, the local authority's definitions of problems seem to be constrained within a 'colour- and class-blind' perspective where predefined standards and assessment practices are taken for granted as neutral and fair instruments. According to Thrupp and Lupton (2006), this ignoring of external contextual conditions, combined with a 'one-size-fits-all' perspective, reflects the assumption of NPM theory 'that social change can be engineered through organisational change and through more efficient, market-oriented public service delivery' (p. 312). This perspective, and especially the focus on internal organizational change, is a key part of the municipality's prescription for turning around low-performing schools (Oslo Kommune, 2013).

Challenges [...] must find their solution in school. Students spend one-third of the day at school. It is therefore absolutely crucial that significant efforts are made here. For the 'vulnerable' students, school is often the only stable point in life. This may be where they meet predictable and consistent adults for the first time. It is crucial that these students meet a school that has ambitions on their behalf and believes that they can master the school subjects every day. The school's efforts can help to reverse the negative development of the individual student. [...] The most important contribution to social mobility is ensuring that all students, regardless of background, acquire basic skills and reach the competence goals in the curriculum. (Oslo Kommune, 2013, pp. 5-6)

In line with the assumed necessity to focus on internal organizational matters to combat inequality, and the ambition to 'enhance the performances in the

most challenging schools' and be an innovative project, the municipality's Education Agency determined that the project should concentrate on the following four areas: 1) quality in teaching, 2) management at all levels, 3) student behaviour, and 4) school-home collaboration (Oslo Kommune, 2013, pp. 6–7). To this aim, the project was designed to deliver standards for teaching, standards for student behaviour and standards for school-home collaboration, and all of this was to contribute to the ultimate ambition of developing a model for intervention in schools in socio-economically vulnerable areas (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 14).

How has this problem representation come about? The SKU project in a wider political context

The formulation of educational problems in Oslo is related to how since the millennium national governments have restructured public education in accordance with NPM (Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Karlsen, 2006; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). While the restructuring, primarily initiated by a conservative coalition government in 2001, has been realized through the establishment of a national quality assessment system and the introduction of an education reform (the Knowledge Promotion Reform in 2006) with greater emphasis on outcome-based curriculum, accountability and devolved decision-making (Hovdenak & Stray, 2014; Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Volckmar & Wiborg, 2014), it has also influenced national discourses on equity (Aasen, 2004; Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Haugen, 2010). This is evident in how initiatives to improve students' knowledge by focusing on basic competencies and testing have been linked to promoting equity (Haugen, 2010) and in how social mobility through education has been defined as dependent on the 'right' internal organization (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007).

The Ministry believes that future efforts to level out social differences should focus attention on factors within the education system, which can promote better learning for everyone, rather than on external circumstances which the education system can do little about. (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, p. 15)

Oslo is one of the municipalities that has excelled in implementing and developing the national market-led restructuring (Hansen, 2017). Since the millennium, the municipality has introduced performance management, accountability, devolved decision-making, performance-related pay, per-capita funding, publication of performances at the school level and parental choice (Bjordal, 2016; Bjordal & Haugen,

2021). In line with the previously mentioned national equity discourses, performance management, standardized testing and high ambitions for students have been articulated as important means for promoting social mobility through education (Oslo Kommune, 2010).

Notwithstanding the rejection of a causal link between NPM and the achievement of social mobility (Hansen, 2017), an assumed relationship between the two has reinforced the collaboration between public governments and private actors. At the national level, the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results in 2001 formed the basis for the then conservative government's collaboration with private consultants in developing what became the Knowledge Promotion Reform (Ministry of Education and Research, 2002). In Oslo, the Education Agency has initiated collaboration with several private and public companies offering evidence-based and standardized programmes in its attempt to close the achievement gap and solve behavioural problems (Oslo Kommune, 2016; Oslo Kommune, 2018; Palm & Stokke, 2013).

The way public authorities facilitate private sector participation is also evident in the school development project. In the next section, I illuminate how the local authority's definitions of educational problems within the NPM context effectively set the stage for public-private cooperation, thus opening for soft privatization as a result of mutual interest between public and private actors.

External 'experts' realizing public interest

The local education authority's narrowing of the development project's aim to raising student performances and improving internal conditions to enhance schools' abilities to provide effective learning environments has been important for the privatization perspective in two ways. First, it has maintained and strengthened the notions of performance management, accountability and standardized testing as key elements for realizing equity through education, and second, it has paved the way for public-private cooperation, in particular here, the municipality's collaboration with Ernst & Young, Oxford Research AS and Danish School of Education (DPU).

Ernst & Young's contribution – confirming public policies

Ernst & Young (EY) is an international company with expertise in assurance, consulting, strategy and transactions, and tax services. Established in 1989, the company has its headquarters in London but operates in 150 countries, with 30 offices in Norway (Store Norske Leksikon, 2021). For the last 20 years, EY has

provided a range of services to the Oslo municipality and Oslo schools, and an overview of the municipality's use of the consultants shows that from 2008 to 2018, EY delivered services totalling NOK 26,500,000 (Oslo Kommune, 2018).

When SKU was established, the municipality's Education Agency was clear about the need to bring in external specialists to identify and look more closely into some of the challenges the selected schools were facing. Based on its description of the schools' main challenges, a mini competition was announced for qualified professionals 'with specific competence in analyses' to carry out a Point of View (PoV) analysis focused on four areas: 1) quality in teaching, 2) management at all levels, 3) student behaviour, and 4) school-home collaboration (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 7). EY won the competition through its 'thorough approach to the PoV analysis which, among other things, involved extensive observations of teaching sessions' (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 7). A *PoV analysis* is described as an instrument that 'combines outcome measures and descriptive data about cultural and social issues in the reflective processes of a school's staff' (Ottesen, 2018, p. 182). When EY conducted the PoV analysis in Oslo in the fall of 2012, it involved 140 classroom observations in 13 schools; observations of meetings; interviews with staff and school leaders; and reviews of the schools' governance documents, performance developments, student compositions and teacher-to-student ratios (Oslo Kommune, 2012, 2013). In analysing the schools, Ernst & Young (2012) emphasized the need to identify particular issues and to implement analyses of 'root causes' (p. 13) in collaboration with school staff. According to Ernst & Young (2012a), 'root causes is used as a concept to clarify that there is a causal relationship and to ensure that symptoms of one situation are not to be confused with the cause of the same' (p. 13). In other words, the essential task is to identify and work on the 'right problems' and thus develop solutions adapted to the 'individual schools' needs' (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 7). In EY's reports from the individual schools, the local authority's focus on organizational change and EY's emphasis on root causes are reflected in the schools' ambitions to provide 'high and stable learning pressure' (Ernst & Young, 2012c) and in their prioritization of internal issues centred on the development of common practices and standards, 'effective planning' and elimination of 'the bad teaching sessions' (Ernst & Young, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d, 2012e). This is also reflected in the Education Agency's summary of the findings from the PoV analysis:

The Point of View analysis has documented significant quality differences in teaching. The schools

came out with different profiles in relation to strengths and areas for improvement. But a common main finding is that there is too much variation in the quality of teaching sessions internally in schools. This quality difference is documented. The schools have therefore prioritised measures that are aimed directly at teaching in the classroom. (Oslo Kommune, 2013, p. 7)

When it was decided to bring in external specialists to implement a PoV analysis, the aim was to provide 'facts' about the situation in the selected schools that could inform the municipality on where to focus developing the project further (Oslo Kommune, 2012, p. 6). As a result, EY was formally assigned an explicit and important role in defining which measures to focus on and implement. However, even though EY was hired as necessary expertise with a view to determining the way forward for the project, its specific contribution or impact is difficult to trace in the knowledge produced about the schools and also in the municipality's further strategies. On the contrary, rather than presenting new knowledge or perspectives on the schools that could help guide the project in a new direction, the PoV analysis seemed to confirm the municipality's current policies. This is evident as the Education Agency used the PoV analysis as justification for a continued strengthening of the same four areas that it had initially decided the PoV analysis should have in focus. In this context, EY's participation appears first and foremost to have strengthened the democratic legitimacy of the project. This is especially related to how the PoV analysis facilitated a process where challenges and measures first defined by the municipality's Education Agency, then appeared to emerge from the schools themselves.

Oxford Research AS and DPU's contribution: 'Bringing education back into education'

A feature of the blurred landscape of soft privatization is the network alliance between researchers, politicians and private consultants (Ball, 2007; Cone & Brøgger, 2020). In SKU, the global consultancy company Oxford Research AS, in collaboration with the Danish School of Education (DPU) at Aarhus University, was hired to evaluate the project. The evaluation was related to the second phase of the project, where the aim was to 'create change during the project period' and to give the schools and the education authority in Oslo more knowledge and experience to apply in the improvement work at several schools (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2017, p. 26). This means the evaluation had a performative mission in adjusting and developing the project further and in strengthening the municipality's capacity and

competence in developing schools in socio-economically vulnerable areas (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2017, p. 8).

The analysis of the evaluations shows that the municipality and EY's framing of challenges in the schools in Oslo has been a key aspect in the further development of the project by Oxford Research AS and DPU. This is especially evident in how the narrowing of problems to academic performances effectively keeps questions related to contextual and structural conditions out of the discussion. Based on what is referred to as a 'programme theoretical approach' and Viviane Robertson's model of 'Student-Centered Leading', Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University (2017) describe their ambition as 'bringing education back into education' (p. 27). Or, in other words, turning the focus from external challenges (e.g. related to students' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds) to goals (improving student learning outcomes) and measures to achieve them (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2017, p. 10). Within this theoretical framework the assumption is that school development centred on student learning outcomes will only succeed if schools focus on measures they can influence, specifically those related to enhancing 'student performances, especially within Norwegian and math' (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2014, p. 11). In the first evaluation report from 2014, the need to focus on 'the right measures' is illustrated as follows:

Given that the goal is raising student performance, while one of the challenges is that the children come to school hungry. Initiating measures to meet the challenge of hungry children will not necessarily lead to goal achievement. The problem will be that if the teaching remains poor, the school performance will not be improved on the basis of the measure. (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2014, p. 10)

Within this theoretical framework, 'it is not primarily breakfast [...] in the class that is the solution' (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2014, p. 10) but making sure the students are given 'standardised' (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2014, p. 12) and 'effective teaching' (Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, 2017, p. 13). Following Robertson's theoretical assumption on what constitutes good schools and contributes to raising student performance, Oxford Research AS & Danish School of Education, Aarhus University (2017) advised the municipality to further narrow the project to three areas: 1) management and

'student-centered leading' stressing how 'the right way' of leading is important for student learning outcomes; 2) strengthened goal-orientation; and 3) strengthened focus on Norwegian language for students with Norwegian as their second language (pp. 24–25). All these elements have formed the basis for Oxford Research AS and DPU's creation of a school development model and for the municipality's further work with schools in socio-economically vulnerable areas.

Discussion

In real life, public-private cooperation has contributed to a blurred landscape where public and private interests have become intertwined and hard to separate (Ball, 2018). This again has led to an environment where 'business works with and against the state, at the same time' and where a role is created for 'new knowledges and for those with expertise in those knowledges to become significant in the development and enactment of neoliberal governmentality' (Ball, 2018, p. 588). These public-private relationships have also recast governing activities as 'non-political and non-ideological problems that require technical solutions' (Ball, 2018, p. 588). This is evident in the way assessment systems producing big data about education are represented as 'neutral' devices helping schools realize public interests (Ottesen, 2018). By analysing SKU through the lens of soft privatization and taking into account how framing of educational problems constitutes a key part of the policy process, the aim of this article has been to shed light on the links between public governance and private sector involvement in education and contribute empirical evidence showing how privatization in education may take place (Cone & Brøgger, 2020). Even though the analysis, focused on the relevance of problem representations, cannot say anything about the translation and negotiation of policy at the school level (Ball et al., 2012), it does, however, point out how discourses have 'real-world effects' and constitute material social practices (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1999). Two conditions in particular illustrate how discursive mechanisms are of importance in the privatization process.

First, the analysis shows that the framing of educational problems is a key part of reinforcing not only the government's NPM policies but also private-sector participation (Ball & Youdell, 2008). This is evident in how the municipality's definition of problems – based on its emphasis on outcome-based learning, performance management and accountability policies – has facilitated a market for private services, thereby stimulating public-private cooperation. Whilst this market has paved the way for private consultants delivering

competence, digital solutions and evaluations, it has also strengthened public governance. This mutual benefit is evident in the SKU project, where the municipality's formulations of educational problems have invited EY and Oxford Research AS and DPU's participation, while at the same time their participation has confirmed the municipality's own education policy (Bacchi, 2009). While the former is related to the fact that the municipality's definitions of educational problems and solutions are framed in a way that makes the competences and services provided by the external private companies relevant and needed, the latter is related to how the public-private cooperation has facilitated a process whereby the municipality, by the Education Agency, (through its specific orders and competitive tendering) has strengthened its control over the knowledge production within the education field. Additionally, bringing in external expertise (private and public) that confirms the policies and the municipality's goals may be seen as strengthening the legitimacy of the project (Ball, 2007). This is closely related to how the PoV analysis, involving staff in school development, can be seen as informing the project with ideas and practices as an objective result of maintained deliberation (Ottesen, 2018).

The other discursive effect that the formulations of problems seem to have, is the way the confirmation of current political trends maintains neoliberal conceptions of equity and silences questions related to structural injustice. This is evident in the SKU project, as challenges in socio-economically vulnerable areas are reduced to questions about student performances and internal organizational matters, whereas contextual and structural factors that affect the abilities of schools and students to perform according to 'neutral' standards are omitted. Pointedly, this is related to how the municipality's 'class- and colour-blind approach' has contributed to a lack of questions relating to how students' backgrounds are relevant in education, and bearing this in mind, no attention has been given to how the municipality's market-led policies have affected schools and students. While the school development project seems to reflect NPM premises that equity in education depends on the implementation of performance management, accountability, devolved decision-making and choice policies, any negative consequences of the same measures are left in silence and unremarked.

By omitting these questions from the project, claims about the link between neoliberal policies and equity are maintained. Moreover, leaving the current political trends unquestioned might also lead to the impression that the premises and the initiatives (including the involvement of private

actors) in the project are non-political in the sense that they simply represent the right instruments or measures for tackling the current crises (Ball, 2018; Ottesen, 2018). While this is important in relation to Ball and Youdell's (2008) perspective on how privatization often appears as a hidden process, it is also of importance in relation to the essentialisation of problems and the construction of 'failing schools and students' (Bacchi, 2009), especially when the unquestioned policies constitute important measures when students with low social status systematically fail in education (Au, 2016; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Pihl, 2010). One effect of this may be what Au (2016) suggests: that systems, such as SKU, appearing to change social problems in schools and close the achievement gap, rather contribute to the opposite, preserving and maintaining systems that effectively suppress social groups.

Concluding remarks

In this article I have analysed how formulations of educational problems play an important role in the policy process and especially in relation to the process of soft privatization. Rather than focusing on privatization as representing something that challenges public governance and public decision-making, I have focused on how privatization may emerge as a consequence of mutual interest between public and private actors. By analysing a school development project in Oslo focusing on schools in socio-economically vulnerable areas, I argue that the way governments formulate problems is critical to the process of privatization both of and in education (Ball & Youdell, 2008). This is related to how defining problems within a market-led educational context facilitates a market for private services and how private suppliers reinforce the ideas that constitute the premises for their participation. The consequence of this, I suggest, are not only a situation where market-led policies facilitate private sector participation, but also a situation where the two reinforce each other and where public and private actors develop mutual dependency. While the process described in this article may be termed hidden privatization and a soft form of privatization that often avoids public attention (Ball & Youdell, 2008), I would argue that the consequences of this hidden process may be severe, not least for those students and schools defined as failures.

Notes

1. The reports are in Norwegian; all extracts used in this article have been translated by the author.
2. The project was directed by the Education Agency in the municipality of Oslo

Disclosure statement

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