

(Re)configurations of public education: Marketisation, teacher professionalism, and individual rights of students and educators in Norway and Sweden

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Abstract

This article studies the (re)configurations of ‘public education’ in Norway and Sweden by empirically unpacking connections between marketisation, teacher professionalism and schools’ mandate to secure the individual rights of students and teachers. These countries share considerable common cultural and political history; however, they display varying trajectories and configurations in both educational policy and practice. This makes these cases particularly useful for comparing how ‘publicness’ and ‘public education’ are (re)configured in the two Nordic welfare states. This comparative exploration is framed by four dimensions of public schooling regarding national policy set-ups expressed through control, access, funding, and teaching. The data includes official policy documents, such as legislation and government reports. We unpack and discuss commonalities and differences by relating them to multiple issues of (re)configured ‘publicness’ and its implications. Moreover, we argue that the differences in the degrees to which inflows have shaped the Norwegian and Swedish education systems (despite their similarities) offer valuable opportunities for exploring (re)configurations of the notion of publicness.

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Introduction

The notion of ‘publicness’, the state of being possessed by a central, regional, or local authority, has varying connotations and meanings across legal jurisdictions. This suggests that, in many senses, the conceptual and empirical distinctions between public and private are often blurred (Rönnerberg et al., 2021). Moreover, as pointed out by Mockler et al. (2021), in recent decades, the widespread idea of ‘what characterizes a school as public has been challenged by structural and political reforms’ (p. 198). In this article, we seek to contribute empirically and conceptually to the fundamental and ongoing discussions of the role of ‘public’ education and ‘publicness’ using two country cases: Norway and Sweden. Public education is in multiple policy contexts under threat (Gunter, 2018), also in the Nordics. The cases of Norway and Sweden are both interesting and relevant in understanding how such threats are navigated.

Both countries have a strong ideological tradition of emphasizing the role of educational institutions in the making of civic society and the period from 1945 until about 1970 is often referred to as the golden era of social democracy. School access for children from all socio-economic groups has been considered very important, and the school “was considered to be an extension of the state’s duty to provide equality of opportunity for all members of society” (Telhaug et al., p. 251 – 252).

In both countries, public education is still mainly a responsibility of the state and primarily state-funded. However, these Nordic states have, as we will demonstrate in this study, chosen different paths in building, maintaining, and reforming their public and private primary and secondary education systems in the post-war era: Norway by maintaining a strongly politically supported public school system (Prøitz & Aasen, 2018), and Sweden by opening up for considerable privatisation education delivery, in which the so called free-schools are increasingly operated as profit-making businesses. The latter movement has been

especially prominent since the 1990's (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019). This is not the case in neighbouring Norway, however, the penetration of market forces is still evident, for example in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision (Haug, 2014; Haugset, 2021). In the Norwegian case, as presented in our analysis, the distinction between public and private schooling has moreover become blurred, due to for instance the influx of private enterprises such as edu-business companies in publicly funded and run schools (Lunde & Gunnulfsen, 2021;). In the Swedish case, such patterns are also evident, at the same time as privatisation has had considerable impact, in particular (but not only) in upper secondary education in various ways (Lundahl, et al., 2013).

Thus, even though the two nations share considerable common cultural and political history, their education systems display varying trajectories in policy and practice (Helgøy & Homme, 2007; Møller & Rönnberg, 2021). This distinction, we argue, makes these cases particularly useful for a comparison regarding how publicness is (re)configured in what used to be classified as social democratic welfare states, where the promotion of 'a school for all' (Blossing et al., 2014) has differing outcomes. This article unpacks and discusses commonalities and differences between the two nation states by relating them to issues of (re)configured 'publicness' and its implications, drawing on the conceptual work by Mockler et al. (2021). We argue that the varying degrees and forms to which New Public Management (NPM) has penetrated the Norwegian and Swedish education systems, present valuable opportunities for exploring the re(configurations) of the notion of publicness.

The aim of this article is to explore the (re)configurations of 'public education' in Norway and Sweden by empirically unpacking connections between marketisation, teacher professionalism and schools' mandate to secure the individual rights of students and teachers. Our focus is thus on key shifts in the (re)configuration of education policy from the 1990s until the present day in the two Nordic states, asking the following research questions:

- RQ1. How are (re)configurations of ‘publicness’ and public education expressed in policy in the Norwegian and Swedish education systems?
- RQ2. In what ways are the narratives of promoting public education linked to marketisation, teacher professionalism, and students’ rights?

Inspired by the typology of Mockler et al. (2021) on varieties of provision of public education, we further investigate how publicness is expressed in a purposive selection of official policy documents and literature from the respective national settings. In short, the typology (which will be elaborated more below) entails ‘a conceptual tool that could represent the complexity of schooling provision beyond the (simplistic) public-private binary’ (p. 199) and is based on four dimensions; control, access, funding, and teaching (p. 201). However, the typology has primarily been elaborated and developed within Anglo-Saxon education contexts, and Mockler et al. (2021, p. 208) identify ‘an urgent need for further research’. As a response to this, we apply this typology on two Nordic states, with varying as well as common policy orientations on ‘public education’. In addition, when it comes to the teaching dimension, we further seek to supplement and nuance the typology, drawing on Evetts (2013) and her understanding of professional and organizational logics in changing occupational contexts (cf. Evetts, 2013; 2009).

Marketisation, juridification and teacher professionalism

Marketisation is considered a broad umbrella concept to capture ‘a series of policy logics that aim to create quasi-markets’ (Hogan & Thompson, 2017, p. 2), in which privatisation can be seen as a policy tool to promote and advance marketisation, opening up for private delivery of educational services in various ways (c.f. Fredriksson, 2009). Previous studies have shown that education has increasingly been exposed to marketisation, thus erasing the previously clear distinctions between what is ‘public’ education and what is (more) privately run, the

latter often funded through a mixture of public expenditure and private financial schemes (Carlbaum, 2016; Carrasco & Gunter, 2018; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Keddie et al., 2023; Rönnerberg et al., 2021). Less is comparatively done on the notion of ‘publicness’ and ‘public education’ across the two Nordic states. This article thus seeks to add new knowledge to understand what characterises the two national education systems when it comes to influx of forces challenging education as a public task, through the four dimensions of public schooling (Mockler et al., 2021).

Related to marketisation, another characteristic of is the increased, multifaceted juridification of the education sector (Bergh & Forsberg, 2023; Teubner, 1987). Juridification includes a heightened focus on the legal dimensions, where activities which were formerly considered to be (merely) pedagogical now have legal implications; and through this process, students’ rights are more in the focus than previously (see, for example Rosén et al., 2021). For example, changes in the regulation of education are challenging for the professionals who are mandated to act in accordance with legal standards (Hult & Lindgren, 2016). Moreover, , tensions arise due to a clash between the rights of students and those of teaching professionals (Hall & Johansson, 2024). Another example of juridification in Scandinavia is the strengthening of students’ rights to a healthy school environment (Lindgren et al., 2021). Moreover, juridification promotes increased focus on the law as, for example, a means for problem solving, including more stress on individualism in public education, expressed through boosted market-oriented influxes in schooling (Carlbaum, 2016; Englund, 2007). Additionally, inclusive education, including a ‘school for all’ with emphasis on schools’ democratic mission are portrayed as key elements of Nordic schooling (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006). For instance, Gunnulfsen et al. (2023) argued that protecting the purpose of education, characterised by ‘equal opportunities, inclusion, and democratic participation for all students’, is an important task for school leadership, both morally and professionally (p. 3).

Students' participation in their own learning environments is thus understood as an important element in fostering inclusiveness and democratic principles in education (Education Act, 2023).

Multiple scholars have investigated how teacher professionalism is enacted in public domains (Evetts, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2007; Ottesen & Møller, 2016). Evetts (2013) investigated how organisational and occupational professionalism can be used to understand the two sides of professionalism in knowledge-based work (p. 788). Organisational professionalism is based on neo-Weberian, rational–legal forms of authority and hierarchical decision-making structures in organisations. By contrast, occupational professionalism focuses on deliberative forms of decision-making and collegial authority. Evetts (2013) refers to Gewirtz et al. (2009), who has critically investigated the role of teacher professionalism in several policy contexts during the last decades. As a main point, teacher professionalism is challenged by the neo-liberal influx during this period, whereas the scholars interestingly point out that the teacher profession has ‘seen an increase in the central regulation of the work of teachers, and an increased role for quasi-markets centred on the ideas of choice and competition’ (Gewirtz et al., 2009, p. 5). In this study, we find these concepts—also adopted by, for example, Ottesen and Møller (2016) useful. Drawing on Evetts (2013), Ottesen and Møller (2016) studied the linkage between professional discretion, legal standards and organisational routines in Norwegian basic education and demonstrated how ‘organizational routines operated as coupling mechanisms between these two different logics of professionalism’ (p. 442).

Conceptualising ‘publicness’: Four typological dimensions of public schooling

To conceptually frame our comparative exploration, we turn to four typological dimensions of public schooling, as outlined by Mockler et al. (2021), pertaining to national policy set-ups regarding control, access, funding, and teaching. The first dimension, *control*, entails the

regulatory and legal steering of public schooling—in short, the leeway which educational entities may utilise to navigate within the set boundaries of the law, connecting to the above discussion on juridification. The second dimension, *access*, points to the opportunities students have to enter education, such as through competition-based systems. As a third dimension, *funding* includes financial support and incentives targeted at schools. Finally, *teaching* includes not only unionisation but also aspects such as accreditation and staffing of schools. Here, we also draw on the work by Evetts (2013) to situate teacher professionalism in changing policy contexts.

Mockler et al. (2021) argue that these four main typological dimensions can reveal the complex ways in which the public–private dynamic can manifest, suggesting that each dimension can materialise in the form of a continuum ‘well beyond the binary of public/private or categorisations that focus solely on issues of school funding and management’ (p. 207). In our study, we link these dimensions to schools’ overarching mandate to foster and promote citizenship in teaching and learning (Larsen et al., 2022), and how teacher professionalism and the rights of both students and teachers are conjoined to the (re)configuration of ‘public education’ in the two case countries. Furthermore, we problematise how marketisation, as one such (re)configuration, conflates with and challenges the overall goal of the core curriculum in the two countries of promoting democratic citizenship and social justice.

The data included in our comparative study covers key regulation and policy documents in the two national jurisdictions, such as the Education Acts (Norway and Sweden), the Act on Free Schools and the Act of Private Schools (Norway), White Papers (Norway and Sweden), and Grey Papers (public reports) (Norway and Sweden), where their respective impact on policy in the studied time period, as well as relevance to inform the research questions served as overall selection criteria for the selection of material. All

documents were accessed and purposely selected from official, governmental websites in each of the two case countries (Patton, 2014). Two such main sources were the websites of the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research^d ('Kunnskapsdepartementet'), and the Government Offices of Sweden and its Ministry of Education^e ('Regeringskansliet' and 'Utbildningsdepartementet'). We also draw on our own and others' previous research on public service reforms in both nations. The analysis was done thematically, initially as a directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) from the basis of the four dimensions and their specified sub-themes in the topology as our overall analytical structuring device. This was followed by a second analytical step in which the research questions were put to the fore, accompanied by a comparative approach to highlight and contextualise similarities and differences in the two national settings.

The (re)configurations of public education in Norway and Sweden

Overall education policy transformations

In both Norway and Sweden, municipalities and local actors such as school leaders have the last decades possessed considerable autonomy in enacting state education policy reforms such as curricula (see, for example, Jensen & Ottesen, 2023). However, due to (re)centralisation processes and the incursion of NPM-oriented ideas, the two systems have increasingly become targets for state initiatives and external evaluations in various ways. The two countries have also witnessed a considerable juridification of schools (cf. Andenæs & Møller, 2016; Lindgren et al., 2021).

In *Norway*, education has undergone multiple changes throughout the 1990s and 2000s. One of the major shifts was the introduction of the National Quality Assessment System (NQAS) in the mid 2000's, including national testing schemes, student surveys, and

^d <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/kd/id586/>

^e <https://www.government.se/>

increased school inspection cycles (Skedsmo, 2011). Furthermore, Møller and Skedsmo (2013) pointed out that, by the turn of the millennium, the education system had been subject to various reform strategies strongly flavoured by NPM-influenced ideas on how to best govern and manage schools. These strategies were targeted at modernising the public sector through, for example, deregulation, liberalisation, market-oriented incentives, and business-like approaches. Currently, the boundary between the public and private sectors is fading through partnerships between public institutions and private enterprises. At the same time, Norwegian education was characterised by a decentralisation process as governance, where local authorities at the municipal and county levels were given more leeway to manage their own entities without direct steering from the state level. Karlsen (2003), among others, termed this movement ‘decentralized centralism’ (p. 536).

In *Sweden*, education policy has also undergone a significant transformation since the 1990s and with decentralised responsibilities to municipalities and alternative, private education providers, that significantly re-shaping the education system (Regeringskansliet, 1991, 1992). This transition shifted Sweden from a predominantly state-regulated and publicly provided education system to one that actively embraced school autonomy, parental choice, and private sector involvement (Lundahl, 2002). The reforms have impacted various stakeholders. Teachers and school leaders are increasingly held accountable to students and parents due to the threat of exit, and school leaders have gained increased autonomy in decision-making, finance, staffing, and evaluation (Holm & Lundström, 2011; Jarl et al., 2012). Concurrently, increased juridification has emerged as a response to regulate the quasi-market (Carlbaum, 2016).

Control

The dimension of control highlights how different aspects of legal regulation are among the main pillars of the governing architecture of schooling. Legislators both regulate actions and create spaces for autonomous control and discretion in professional work in education. Legal regulation of professionals in education has previously largely been achieved by means of normative values and self-regulated motivation. Svensson (2010) described this as control in advance through, for examples, rules and regulations combined with professional expertise and professional socialisation. However, recent decades have witnessed an increased focus on control in retrospect—for example, when professionals are held accountable for outputs or when inspectors assess schools' compliance with legal regulations (Ottesen & Møller, 2016).

In *Norway*, texts produced in preparation for the new Education Act (2023) offer some interpretive directions. For example, it is stated that many of the conditions in the Education Act are formulated discretionally or as legal standards and that the law should not regulate teaching practices in detail (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023, p. 53). Such education regulations serve several purposes: to create a climate of opinion, to put forth requirements for schools to follow certain procedures, and to regulate activities on a more general level. A challenge in the education area is that the overall regulations are perceived as comprehensive, fragmented, and complex (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019, p. 138). The central government requires municipalities to establish a system for evaluating and following up on schools' quality of education and students' academic performance. Principals are recruited and employed by local educational authorities and must have pedagogical qualifications and the necessary leadership abilities. They might be appointed on fixed-term contracts, but lifetime tenure has been more common. In most municipalities, the principal's local autonomy includes recruiting and hiring teachers to the local school, and in such processes, the principal will normally collaborate closely with the school's teacher union representative. Firing teachers is strictly regulated by law.

An intensified (re-)regulation of the (limited) private education sector took place in several stages in Norway—for example, through the Independent Schools Act (2003) with subsequent amendments to the act's title in 2007, 2015, and 2022, depending on the government in office. While the conservative coalition government chose the Independent Schools Act, the red–green coalition preferred the Private Schools Act. The Norwegian state has recently strengthened its grip on the private school sector through centralised financial inspections of private schools carried out by the Directorate of Education and Training. Regular state school inspections were re-instated in 2006 as part of the Quality Assessment System (Hall, 2017). Such shifts in regulation have taken place alongside the increased juridification of education across Europe, including Norway. The amendments of Chapter 9 A of the Norwegian Education Act (1998) implemented in 2017 exemplify this juridification, guaranteeing a safe and good school environment for all students (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). Interestingly, in 1969, this right was originally linked to the individual right of all school staff to a suitable working climate (Hall & Johansson, 2024). However, shifts in 2003 and, more importantly, in 2017 marked a movement towards more emphasis on individual rights for students, arguably diminishing the focus on collective ideals. An evaluation of the Education Act's Chapter 9 A (Government Bill, 2017) shows that more students are receiving help; however, discrepancies persist across municipalities, and school professionals struggle with documentation requirements (Baldersheim et al., 2023).

In *Sweden*, principal organisers can be public (municipalities, totalling 290, with populations ranging from about 2,500 to 1 million inhabitants) or private entities, including for-profit or non-profit companies (approximately 600 in compulsory education, of which about 60% are for-profit) (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2022). These legal frameworks grant both public and private schools significant autonomy in decisions about content, textbooks, and curriculum delivery and organisation. This local autonomy also includes the hiring and

firing of teachers and staff. The ultimate responsibility for important decisions lies with the democratically elected municipal bodies—although in practice, these decisions are often delegated or performed by the school principal. In some cases, tasks are further delegated to middle leaders or teachers with leadership roles. At the same time, despite their obligation to adhere to the same education legislation, private principal organisers do not face the same level of political accountability for their actions. As such, there is a risk that private organisers may evade legislation to maximise surplus value.

Even if Swedish principal organisers have far-reaching autonomy through legislation, the other side of the coin is the expansion of different evaluation and accountability control measures that have also been initiated, primarily in the last two decades. The shift from input to output control, as described in the Norwegian case, is visible in this transformation. An important actor in this regard is the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, assigned to ensure and assess legal compliance. Over time, inspection-based regulatory control has intensified, with inspection measures applicable to both public and private schools and principal organisers (Rönnerberg, 2012). Under the Swedish Education Act (Riksdagen, 2010), legal guardians have the right to influence their child's education. In addition to these legislated 'voice' opportunities, the threat of 'exit' via school choice has also contributed to reshaping relationships between (in particular resourceful) parents and teachers/school management (cf. Carlbaum, 2016).

Overall, while the introduction and expansion of private providers have shifted some components of the control dimension towards the private sector—especially in the Swedish case and regarding private principal organisers—several key control mechanisms remain under public oversight in both Sweden and Norway.

Access

Historically, public comprehensive education in Norway and Sweden has been a significant part of the social democratic welfare system (Telhaug et al., 2006), but during the last 25 years the notion of ‘public’ has been rearticulated and changed by structural and political reforms (Englund, 2010; Møller & Rönnerberg, 2021). In both countries, students have the right to free public compulsory school education from the age of six. Another similarity is that students or parents are not charged any expenses in connection with education, such as the costs of teaching materials, transport during school hours, excursions, or other trips that are part of compulsory education. Yet another common feature is that in both countries, young people who have successfully completed compulsory education have the right to three years of full-time upper secondary education free of charge.

In *Norway*, children’s right to education is protected by the Constitution. In public debates, it has been argued that children should be able to attend school without having to leave their families. As a result, there are many small schools in remote and sparsely populated areas.^f Another argument was that having different socio-economic groups attend the same schools is of great value, enhancing collaboration, solidarity, and national integration in the society (Volckmar, 2019). Regarding access to Norwegian upper-secondary schools, counties may determine local criteria for access. Some educational authorities have established a system of competition based on the final grades from lower secondary school (mainly in larger cities). Consequently, enrolment has become more locally fragmented because those with the best grades are given priority in selecting what is recognised as the best school. Politically, although conservative parties argue that parental choice will promote democracy, the left contends that a market model may benefit some parents and students but disadvantage others.

^f In 2021–2022, out of a total of 2,761 compulsory schools, 789 schools had less than 100 students; by contrast, 192 schools—most of which located in the Oslo area—had more than 500 students (*The Norwegian Education Mirror 2022*, 2022).

In *Sweden*, compulsory education is seen both as an obligation and as an individual right. Since the early 1990s, Swedish parents have had the freedom to choose any school for their child, whether public or privately run, without incurring any fees or extra charges. Almost one out of five children at the compulsory level and about one out of three students at the upper secondary (post-16) level attend private schools (Ekonomifakta, 2023).

Furthermore, this means that all schools, both public and private, are in competition for students and the accompanying public voucher. With their expansion, private for-profit education providers have become strongly embedded in the education system. Despite the theoretical freedom for all parents to choose, such arrangements often come with a cost in the form of increased segregation. This phenomenon has been observed in the Swedish case by the OECD (2015). As a response, the proposed measures include a centralised queue system (at present the private providers control and administer their own queues) or a ‘mandatory school choice’ for all parents (now children are automatically offered a place at a nearby municipal school if parents do not apply for another) (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2017). However, very few measures have been implemented to restrict or balance choices due to challenges in establishing stable political majorities in parliament. Consequently, enrolment and admission are locally fragmented in compulsory education. In upper secondary education admissions, when the number of applicants exceeds that of available places in a particular programme, students are selected based on their final grades from compulsory education. This criterion applies to both private and municipal upper secondary schools. The grades from compulsory school are thus seen as potentially ‘high stakes’, and concerns about the resultant ‘grade inflation’ have spurred more rigorous national testing measures (cf. Skedsmo et al., 2021).

In sum, while both countries emphasise universal access to school, parental school choice has significantly altered relationships and expectations in the Swedish case, impacting

the ‘publicness’ of education. In line with Englund (2010), this may reduce the system’s ability to foster a ‘thick’ democracy and education as a social right, in contrast to parental individual rights and the ‘thin’ democracy they entail. In contrast to Norway, the established features of school choice and competition have positioned the dimension of access in the blurred public/private interaction, with many components of access moving towards—and often also directly benefiting—the private actors.

Funding

When compared to other OECD/EU countries, Sweden and Norway both display very high levels of government spending on education (Eurostat, 2023). Another common feature is that local municipalities play a strong role in school governance and funding. High public investment via municipal taxation and additional state funding to municipalities encourages the goals of a ‘school for all’ and the equity and equality drivers that characterise both education systems and welfare states.

In *Norway*, schools receive a lump sum of money (block grant) from the state, and the funding of schools is not earmarked by the national government. The leadership responsibility at the municipal level is shared between professional administrators and elected politicians. Through this linkage, education is related to broader community affairs. Municipalities finance schools and perform a key role in providing in-service training. However, there is a huge variety across different municipalities based on local tax incomes and priorities made by local elected politicians. Norwegian compulsory education is predominately publicly funded and run. Therefore, privatisation has minimally influenced education, and state authorities and parliament have refrained from opening up for school privatisation. Roughly, around 10% of today’s compulsory schools are run by private providers, most of them being smaller in size than public schools. In short, this means that a mere 4.6% of students enrolled are in private schools (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2022). In

upper secondary education, approximately 9% of all students enrolled are in privately run schools. So far, there is reason to claim that privatisation in general has not widened its grip on Norwegian society. However, due to the rise in global educational technology, private edtech companies have reshaped schools and teaching through a rapid increase in the use of digital platforms and both hardware and software in basic and higher education (Lunde & Gunnulfsen, 2021)

Norwegian private primary schools approved under the Private Schools Act have distinct characteristics. They are entitled to state subsidies that cover 85% of the resources, and parental fees have an upper limit. Private providers are not allowed to take a profit. For a compulsory school to be approved according to Sec. 2-1 of the Private Schools Act, it must operate on at least one of the following grounds: religious and secular world views, recognised educational direction (mainly Montessori and Steiner), or international profile.

A distinct characteristic of the *Swedish* system is that private providers receive complete public funding through vouchers. In 1996, the voucher was raised from 85% to 100%, which means that private schools are fully funded by public taxes and no parental fees are allowed (Regeringskansliet, 1995). At the same time, the private operators are allowed to be for-profit companies. This has enabled the emergence of a national education industry (Rönnerberg et al., 2021). Thus, the inflow from non-public funders is very limited, but the flow of public funding to private actors is significant. This is evident not only in education service delivery via private schools but also in other forms of education commercialisation (cf. Rönnerberg et al., 2021), with the rise of the edtech industry as a notable field.

The controversial issue of profit-making has attracted considerable attention in the Swedish context. The primary aim of the municipally paid voucher is to ensure equal resources for all children, irrespective of the provider. However, this setup poses complications, as school company owners earn significant profits in several cases. Some

company owners have even been involved in designing the reforms, raising concerns about potential conflicts of interest between politics and education companies (Larsson & Plesner, 2023). Explanations for how private providers can profit from the public voucher include private ownership of school premises (housed in a sub-company and rented out), lower teacher salaries, and level of teacher/student ratios. These factors appear to enable private providers to profit from the public voucher, which is calculated based on the average cost for a municipal student (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2022).

While both systems are predominantly publicly funded, the Swedish system notably integrates an evident bias towards the private end of the continuum, resulting in a distinct mixture of public and private policies. The for-profit basis of school operation, along with the full-cost coverage voucher, is a clear distinguishing feature of the Swedish system. In contrast, Norway chose a predominantly publicly funded and run school system, mostly holding back on the influx of market forces.

Teaching

The use of new evaluation technologies by principals and teachers to monitor teaching and student outcomes represents a shift towards ‘organisational professionalism’, which incorporates standardised work procedures and relies on external regulation and accountability measures (Evetts, 2009). This echoes the management discourse promoted by the OECD, where a performance orientation is one of the main pillars, closely connected to output control. These general movements reconfigure the role and function of teachers and teaching in particular ways in both countries. Multiple managerial devices have been introduced to address achievement gaps in both Norway and Sweden, and national testing and performative accountability are increasingly framed as a means to identify and support low-performing students, for instance. To some degree, the public debate about equity and quality has been re-articulated to performance indicators based on national and international tests

(Camphuijsen et al., 2020). In the context of accentuated accountability regimes that put strong expectations on student performance, documentation, transparency, and performativity, professional judgement is increasingly marginalised.

In *Norway*, all counties and municipalities are required by law to establish a system for evaluating and following up on schools' quality of education and students' academic performance (Education Act, 1998, Sec. 13-3e), and the local educational authorities have invested much faith in assessment tools to improve practice. Both national and local levels use results from national testing for benchmarking purposes (Skedsmo, 2011). The need for applying evidence-based research to improve teaching has become almost a buzzword for Norwegian policymakers during the last 15 years. This shift has been greatly influenced by scholars (proposing school effectiveness models), consultancy firms, and supra-national organisations arguing for educational 'best practices' (Møller, 2017). Another characteristic of Norwegian schools is the influx of edtech providers, which bring diverse digital and governance tools. These providers are potentially important actors in steering the governance of schools by 'gathering evidence and identifying what best practice is' (Lunde & Gunnulfsen, 2021, p. 210). Today, most students in primary and lower secondary schools in Norway have access to a personal digital device. This provision stems from collaborations between local and regional school authorities and edtech companies, such as Google and Apple.

In parallel, the concept of professionalism is being reconstructed by Norwegian authorities. This work clearly aligns with the international management discourse, which emphasises goal-oriented management, adherence to standards, result-centric approaches, and external accountability (Evetts, 2009). The authorities' version of professionalism is contested by professional associations, such as the Union of Education Norway and the Association of School Principals. Here, the framing is more closely linked to the classic

professional ideal and logic, which assert that the teaching profession itself can ensure the quality of the education without external oversight (Mausethagen, 2013). At the same time, the way Norwegian teachers have responded to broader societal and political challenges may serve as an example of the ongoing reconfiguration of teacher professionalism. In the legitimization work conducted by the stakeholders in working life, institutional conditions are also reflected in the positions they hold in the school hierarchy. Owing to their solid educational background, teachers have historically enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. Nevertheless, debates about inefficiencies and legitimacy problems are increasing. Such as many other countries (including Sweden), Norway is increasingly experiencing recruitment difficulties and a shortage of qualified and certified teachers, particularly in remote areas.

In Norway, while there appears to be a strong system of national control, schools are still mainly in control of their quality assurance. Moreover, schools, principals and teachers do not experience severe consequences for low performance on national tests, and leadership and teaching for democracy are still an integral part of the mission of Norwegian educational professionals (Trujillo et al., 2021). Professionalism and promoting democracy are also emphasised in the Education Act and the national curriculum launched in 2020. Yet, stories of economic constraints and the pressure to remain within the allocated budget are evident in studies (Karseth & Møller, 2020).

The *Swedish* government has introduced a series of reforms aimed at elevating the standing of teachers (certifications, career advancement, etc.) and increasing interest in teacher education due to fears of teacher shortages (Regeringskansliet, 2010, 2023). A persistent issue in Sweden has also been the discrepancy in employing qualified teachers between private and public schools, evident in the lower proportion of certified teachers and in the level of teacher/student ratios in private schools. Notably, and as a result of privatisation, one out of every five Swedish teachers are hired by private educational entities.

Certain legal differences still exist between public and private employees, particularly regarding sharing documents with the media; teachers employed by municipalities enjoy greater protection in the case of whistleblowing compared to those hired by private principal organisers. It has been argued that private employers may offer attractive flexibility and working conditions to teachers. There exists a tension between professional judgment and the market's demand to cater to the 'customer'—in discussions with parents on grading or teachers needing to market their public or private school under the threat of 'exit'. These tensions are acknowledged in Swedish research, and so is the transition from occupational to organisational professionalism (Evetts, 2009; Fredriksson, 2009; Lundström, 2015). Since juridification has brought greater accountability, it has also introduced excessive administrative burdens and given priority to legal knowledge over other forms—such as professional knowledge (cf. Lindgren et al., 2021).

In light of political reforms, heightened accountability towards students and parents has reshaped the work of teachers and principals, ushering in a more individualised and rights-based approach. In Sweden, the exit option for parents has added to teachers' workload; in both countries, increased accountability demands limit the autonomy of teachers as professionals.

(Re)configurations of public schooling: The 'mixology' of the public–private spheres

To date, we have investigated how the notion of publicness and (re)configurations of the public–private policy landscape are expressed in the analysed material. Through this, we sought to explore the (re)configurations of 'public education' in the two cases by empirically unpacking connections between marketisation, teacher professionalism, and schools' mandate to secure the individual rights of students and teachers. Based on this comparative exploration, we discuss two main issues that emerged from the data. First, we observe clear

tensions between individualism and the collective purposes of education. Second, we discern a significant clash between performativity and education for democracy.

Tensions between individualism and the collective purposes of education

Mockler et al. (2021) point out, ‘the popular notion of what characterises a school as “public” has been challenged by structural and political reforms’ (p. 198). In the Nordics, as a ‘public’ good, education has been subject to multiple coinciding forces of privatisation and marketisation, especially in the case of Sweden. Individual choice has thus been given more space in the public realm at the expense of collective values. One example is ‘education for all’, which used to be a guiding idea for what has been labelled ‘the Nordic model’, with its emphasis on social justice, democracy, and equal opportunities (c.f. Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006; Blossing et al, 2014). The ‘mixology’ of the public–private spheres in the two jurisdictions has consisted of varying blends of policy incentives and regulations; Norway and Sweden have gradually strengthened the grip of the state, and in Sweden, especially as a response to market-oriented configurations (Hudson, 2007; Lundahl et al., 2013; Rönnerberg et al., 2021). As a result of widespread privatisation and market-based provision of education, a considerable number of teachers in Sweden are now private employees.

When it comes to early childhood education and care (ECEC), the story is quite different. In Norway, privatisation of the preschool sector was initialised by the Labour Party–led coalition in the 1990s and throughout the 2000s to accommodate demands to guarantee kindergarten placement for all children aged 1–6. This was made possible through the establishment of public–private partnerships, often bearing progressive pedagogical ideas, such as Reggio Emilia (Haug, 2014). However, in line with the hybrid ideals of the post-bureaucratic state (Maroy, 2012), central authorities upheld their control of the public–private sphere of ECEC through increased regulative measures, both through legislation and through the financial supervision of education providers. In Sweden, central decisions in ECEC

privatisation came somewhat later (in the 2000s), following the model implemented for compulsory and upper secondary education in the late 1990s. Thus, we discern that although the two countries have followed somewhat different reform trajectories, they appear to converge on ‘more marketisation’, especially evident in ECEC in both countries, and in compulsory and secondary education in Sweden. Concurrently, we have also witnessed the return of the state in certain respects in both nations, and we ask: Can the state also be mobilised to be (more) active in curtailing the range of market forces acting on students, school professionals, and schools alike, especially when core democratic values are at stake?

Tensions between performativity and education for democracy

Our analysis reveals a second main point: in the cases of Norway and Sweden, we have experienced rising tensions between student performativity and education for democracy, the latter focusing on the school’s role in the political socialisation of all students as future citizens. This is the case, for example, in Norway, as highlighted by the core curriculum (Larsen et al., 2022). Schools in both countries are mandated to administer a range of local and national tests as part of an accountability system that serves purposes other than merely pedagogical ones (Camphuijsen et al., 2021). The strong focus on outcome measures of academic achievement is also linked to more individualised, rights-based approaches. This also risks pushing schools back into more conservative patterns, since such education policies do not align with other government strategies, such as housing and welfare, to facilitate student success, counteract segregation, etc. (cf. Brandén & Bygren, 2022).

Alongside academic success in a competition-based selective system, the individual rights of youths have increasingly strengthened. In Norway, controlling the delivery of individual rights is manifested institutionally by, for example, the establishment of the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training in the mid-2000’s (Møller & Skedsmo, 2013), and in Sweden, by the the Schools Inspectorate (Carlbaum 2016). Additionally, in

both settings, revisions in the Education Acts have, for instance, strengthened students' individual right to a good school environment, leading to an increase in complaint cases to state authorities. In Norway, this situation has resulted in discontent among teachers, experiencing their professional space as threatened (Hall & Johansson, 2024). Although Chapter 9A of the Education Act (Government Bill, 2017) is considered an important regulation regarding how to act in the best interests of students, for principals and teachers, it entails unreasonable documentation requirements, often stalling other significant work and limiting their discretionary power to some degree after 2017 (Baldersheim et al., 2023). Lasting strikes among teacher unions and their counterparts' failure to meet their demands have recently heightened such tensions. As opposed to Norway, Sweden has an extensively market-oriented education system, high between-school variation (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019), and extensive reliance on for-profit school chains for 'public' education delivery (Rönnerberg et al., 2021). As a result of these configurations, our analysis has highlighted tensions between accountability, performativity, and marketisation rationales and how they permeate teachers and teaching, with implications for the democratic mission and the publicness of education on a broader scale.

Final remarks: Making sense of the public–private blend

The aim of this article has been to explore the (re)configurations of public education in two country cases, and we have asked two questions: First, how are (re)configurations of 'publicness' and 'public' education expressed in policy in the Norwegian and Swedish education systems? Second, in what ways are the narratives of promoting public education linked to marketisation, teacher professionalism, and students' rights?

In our comparative study, we have unpacked the connections between marketisation, teacher professionalism, and schools' mandate to secure the individual rights of students and teachers and how the arguments are linked to democracy. The configuration of public

education has been transformed by restructuring the State and its relationship with teacher professions by giving greater voice to new stakeholders. School professionals often struggle and must make sense of multiple government initiatives and reforms, acting as translators and facilitators and, through this, ensuring that their schools' local policy work is in line with the expectations of national, regional, and local school authorities, as well as those of lawmakers (Holm & Lundström, 2011; Jarl et al., 2012). Paired with increased levels of juridification of the public and private educational spheres, school professionals must understand, interpret, and enact regulations (Andenæs & Møller, 2016; Rosén et al, 2021). Enactment of legal standards has clear implications for these actors' decision-making, regardless of whether their schools are privately or publicly run. It also reconfigures relationships with other central stakeholders, where, for instance, the individual rights of parents and students risk overshadowing the collective and shared notion of 'thick' democracy and education as a common 'public' good to favour a more 'thin' and choice-based version (cf. Englund, 2010).

A final point we wish to highlight thus relates to the problematic concept of democracy as a shared value, where schools are necessarily mandated (through, for example, the core curriculum) to follow up on one of the main principles in education: nurturing future citizens to collectively contribute to upholding democratic norms and values in society. The question is whether the boundaries between what is considered to be 'public' and what we think of as (more) 'private' are blurred through unclear blends of 'publicness'.

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