

Accountability measures in Oslo's public schools

Standardising curriculum, pedagogy and inequality?

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Decentralisation and political stability gave the conservative city council in the Norwegian capital the opportunity to implement stronger marketisation within the public school system. The “Conservative party school” combined school choice, per-capita funding, an expanded testing system and publication of schools’ test results. Schools may be affected in different ways by accountability measures, depending on the school’s pupil composition and market position. Basil Bernstein’s three message systems (curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation) are used to analyse teachers’ experiences of accountability measures in “marginalised” and “privileged” school contexts. The teachers reported very similar curriculum and pedagogic priorities, with strong evaluative rules, leaving them and their pupils limited opportunities in their curriculum work. Thus, the accountability measures may threaten the intention behind the curriculum reform to improve adapted teaching for a diversity of pupil needs.

Keywords: Basil Bernstein, Norway, marginalised schools, privileged schools, accountability, socioeconomic background.

Introduction

[C]urricula reform emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice. Thus the bias and focus of this official discourse are expected to construct in teachers and students a particular moral

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disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices (Bernstein 2000, p. 65).

Michael W. Apple (2018, p. 685) argues that “neoliberal, neoconservative, authoritarian populist, and new managerial forces [are] increasingly occupying the space of real policies and practices...”. He argues that this hybridisation of interests has strengthened the focus on traditional values and knowledge, market control through individual choice, restoration of morality and quality improvement through testing (Apple 2006). In this, the audit is a much used government instrument, where the role of testing is to facilitate distance governing through the construction of evaluative grids, such as competitive league tables and performance charts where institutions and individuals can be ranked (Shore & Wright 2000). Changes in forms of control at the same time change discourses on professionalism. Julia Evetts (2009) finds that a historical discourse based on collegial authority is competing with a discourse characterised by hierarchical structures and decision-making.

Norway is part of a special tradition, namely “the Nordic education model”. In this approach (and differing from the UK and USA, both of which have emphasised scientific curriculum, national aims and measurable outcomes), the focus has been on equality, equity, democratic participation, inclusion and nation-building (Imsen et al. 2017). Ove K. Pedersen (2011) states, however, that the welfare state is being reorganised, and a “competition state” is being established, where the latter is characterised by being more dynamic and internationally oriented. Bearing this in mind, how conservative and neoliberal policies might challenge basic values and represent important changes in the Nordic model’s characteristics has been questioned (Prøytz & Aasen 2017; Lundahl 2016; Pedersen 2011).

In the Norwegian education reform *Kunnskapsløftet* (2006) local municipalities and schools were granted more autonomy with the intention of improving adapted teaching to accommodate diverse pupils’ and local needs in a better way (Imsen et al. 2017). One measure used to provide more autonomy was to have a goal-oriented and less detailed curriculum and autonomy in methods, and then combining this with national testing (Imsen & Ramberg 2014). Through this decentralisation, it was possible for the conservative city council (governing from 1997-2015) to create what they referred to as “Høyreskolen” (henceforth: Conservative party school) (cf. Oslo Høyre 2019) in the Norwegian capital. A stronger marketisation policy within the public school system was introduced by combining school choice, per-capita funding (the money-follows the pupil), tighter control on schools’ and pupils’ work through a more expanded testing system and publication

of the schools' results and characteristics of the pupil body on the *minosloskole.no* website (see more details in Bjordal 2016; Haugen 2019).¹ The implementation of these elements has been based on different arguments, such as the aim to ensure equal treatment in all primary and lower secondary schools in Oslo through school choice, to have high ambitions for all pupils regardless their backgrounds and to educate pupils who can compete in the international arena (see Bjordal 2016).

The Oslo School has received much attention nationally and has become an inspiration for Danish cities due to its good results (cf. Politiken 2017). However, recent research finds that the schools in Oslo are increasingly segregated along social and ethnic lines (Bjordal 2016; Hansen 2017; Haugen 2019) and that they are in negative/positive recruitment spirals that are classed, raced (Bjordal 2016, Haugen 2019) and, in upper secondary education, also gendered (Haugen 2019). When it comes to the curriculum, school principals in elementary and secondary schools state that they emphasise more teacher-centred instruction, with more focus on the basic subjects and basic skills, preparations for tests and more standardised teaching at the cost of the schools' cultural activities, native-language instruction and practical-art subjects (Bjordal 2016).

In this context, attention will be paid to teachers' experiences on all school levels. Teachers are especially interesting here both because they are important policy stakeholders (Bernstein 2000; Ball et al. 2012) and because their experiences of how accountability measures affect their practice may differ from what the school principals see (cf. Lundahl et al. 2014).

The growing segregation in Oslo's public schools serves as the point of departure. It has been found elsewhere that high-stakes testing affects minority pupils more (Au 2009, Lipman 2004). Additionally, it is argued that different market positions may lead to different forms of strategic response (Ball 2003).

Bearing all this in mind, the following research question has been addressed: How do teachers working in schools with different pupil compositions and market positions experience that accountability measures in the Conservative party school affect curriculum and pedagogic priorities?

Accountability and impact on curriculum and pedagogy

The effect of accountability measures on curriculum and pedagogy may be difficult to foresee due to contextual features (Ball et al. 2012), and depending on whether they are seen as high-stakes or low-stakes in the accountability system. A test can be described as high-stakes when “its results are used to make important decisions that affect students, teachers, administrators, communities, schools and districts” (Au 2007, p. 258). Additionally, tests can be high-stakes if the results are reported to the public, as well as used to categorise and rank schools, teachers and children (Au 2007; see also review in Polesel et al. 2014). Here the impact of the test results on a school’s reputation is found to be especially important when school choice is part of the system, where a “white flight” from low socio-economic schools is linked to the publication of results (Howe, Eisenhart & Betebenner 2001).

While there is much research on the impact of high-stakes testing emphasising such effects as a move towards more teacher-centred pedagogies, teaching to testing and a narrowing of curriculum (Polesel et al. 2014; Ravitch 2010; Apple 2006; Koretz 2017), one qualitative metasynthesis concludes that the results are contradictory, finding both a contraction and expansion of content, fragmentation and integration of knowledge and an increasing use of both teacher-centred and pupil-centred pedagogies (see Au 2007). Another complication in predicting effects from accountability measures on curriculum and pedagogy is that whether stakes are regarded as high or low can vary within the same system, depending on the performance of the school, where those serving low-income pupils of colour are more affected (Lipman 2004; Au 2009).

In the Nordic countries, the form and degree of marketisation vary, where Norway is considerably stricter than Denmark and Sweden when it comes to opening comprehensive and upper secondary education to the markets, where the private school market is still strongly regulated (Dovemark et al. 2018). Additionally, school choice has not been implemented at the national level in Norway, but varies between municipalities (Imsen et al. 2017).

Comparing the discourses of educational experts on comprehensive school quality assurance and evaluation in four Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland), it is found that although discursive practices differ between the countries, they all were found to highlight the traditions of Nordic egalitarianism in order to stem the tide of the market-logic approach in education (Wallenius et al.

2018). Specifically in Norway, Elisabeth Hovdhaugen, Nils Vibe and Idunn Seland (2017) find the national quality assessment framework to have low-stakes accountability, as this accountability is combined with relatively high levels of professional trust and collaboration. Thus, the accountability measures may have less impact on curriculum and pedagogy than what is found elsewhere, and this may differ between the Nordic countries.

In Sweden it is found that tests are being used as a substitute for the national curriculum (Jonsson & Leden 2019), and that they have had increasing impact over time (SNAE 2016). For Denmark, it is found that tests have helped to shape curriculum and pedagogy, but that professional judgement still dominates and teachers deploy pedagogical approaches in what they think is in the pupils' best interests (Kelly et al. 2018). For the Norwegian context, it is found that the national tests are being used more as performance management and controlling tools than pedagogic tools, and this has led to increased emphasis on what is tested in the teaching (Allerup et al. 2009). Furthermore, good results are regarded as important for the schools' reputation, and the national testing is found to establish strong premises for schools' development work (Mausethagen, Skedsmo & Prøitz 2019). Additionally, it is found that even though there are conflicts between teachers relating to their views on national testing, there is still moral pressure to perform well, where it is not acceptable to have weak results over time (Mausethagen 2015). In other words, accountability measures may have important impact on curriculum and pedagogic work, but at the same time their impact may differ due to decentralisation and differences in local management (Møller 2011). Bearing this in mind, a narrowing of the curriculum and less pedagogic variation are described in two of the large cities (Eide 2021; Haugen 2021), and it is found that teachers still experience heavy pressure in municipalities where marketisation is weaker and where local authorities place relatively low pressure on results (Haugen 2018; Theodorsen 2017).

Testing and accountability in Oslo's public schools

In Oslo, the work to improve quality has been described as the *balanced scorecard approach*, a "hierarchical, top-down management model" (Johnsen 2007, p. 146). In the balanced scorecard approach, the organisation's purpose and strategies are translated into a comprehensive set of performance indicators, where trust is based on whether the subordinate satisfies expectations (Johnsen 2007).

Utdanningssetaten [the Education Authority] is responsible for the operation of primary, lower and upper secondary schools, where the schools are divided into groups, each led by a regional director who is responsible for the follow-up and guidance of the schools in his or her group (Oslo local authority 2019). In this system, the school principals work with accountability measures that can be attached to their personal input, including both goals for the pupils and a focus on how to achieve these goals (Bjordal 2016). The managerial contracts the principals signed for the conservative-run city council had a number of measures: for example, results from national testing and examinations, the pupil survey, number of special education pupils, completed and passed rates in upper secondary school and grading according to one's loyalty to the expectations (for more details, see Sarwar 2013).

The primary, lower and upper secondary public schools in Oslo have four different "test packages", where two are national and two are specific to Oslo. *Mapping tests* in arithmetic, reading, English and digital skills, and *national tests* in reading, arithmetic and English are national requirements. The *Oslo tests* in science, reading, and digital skills, and *transition tests* are specific to Oslo, and were obligatory during the conservative city council's reign. The Oslo tests, designed especially for the schools in Oslo, follow the template for the national tests, whereas the *transition tests*, made by the Education Authority in Oslo, are meant to strengthen the transition between years four and five, and between years seven and eight (Oslo local authority 2018). For upper secondary school, Oslo has National mapping tests in reading and English, and Learning support tests in arithmetic. Additionally, there are Oslo tests in reading/Norwegian and in arithmetic/mathematics. The national mapping tests are obligatory at some of the schools on agreement with the Education Authorities (Oslo local authority 2015/2016).

Test and accountability data are communicated to the public through the *minosloskole.no* website. For primary and lower secondary school the website compares each school's results in national testing, the pupil survey, and pupils' results on examinations in maths, Norwegian and English against the Oslo level and national level. Moreover, information showing the characteristics of the pupil body, such as the number of pupils with special Norwegian language instruction, the number of minority pupils, and the number of special education pupils, was made available during the conservative city council's time in power. For upper secondary schools, the *minosloskole.no* website provides information about results on examinations in Norwegian, English and maths compared with the Oslo and national levels.

Furthermore, results on completed school and passed rates, the pupil survey and admission points are provided (see minosloskole.no for more details).

The results are found to form an important part of how the school principals are evaluated (Majid 2013), they are used to help set the wage levels of teachers and school leaders (Ertesvåg 2015).

Theoretical and methodological framework

Formal education knowledge can be considered to be realized through three message systems: curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Curriculum defines what counts as valid knowledge, pedagogy defines what counts as a valid transmission of knowledge, and evaluation defines what counts as a valid realization of this knowledge on the part of the taught (Bernstein 1975, p. 85).

The first message system, *curriculum*, is defined as “the principle by which units of time and their contents are brought into a special relationship with each other” (1975, p. 86). As the curriculum is the result of a jockeying for influence between groups (Bernstein 2000), the specific interest in this context is to investigate how teachers experience that power works through the accountability measures. More specifically, here we are talking about the status identity of the content, that is what is given high and low status in terms of being prioritised or de-prioritised in *time* at the schools, and what is considered obligatory and optional.

Framing is used as a tool for analysing the second message system, *pedagogy*. “Frame refers to the strength of the boundary between what may be transmitted and what may not be transmitted in the pedagogical relationship” (p. 88). This boundary can be described as strong or weak (+/-F), as it refers to the “range of options available to teacher and taught in the *control* of what is transmitted and received” (pp. 88-89). Basil Bernstein points out different elements to focus on in the framing: the control teacher and pupil have over *the selection, organisation and pacing* of the knowledge. If the framing is weak, there are many options for the teacher and pupil in the selection of the communication, its sequencing and its pacing, whereas the opposite is the case when the framing is strong. The framing can be described as both internal and external, where external refers to “the controls on communications outside that pedagogic practice entering the pedagogic practice” (Bernstein 2000, p. 14). External framing is especially

relevant in this context as it refers to how the accountability measures influence the transmission of the knowledge that is in focus.

The third message system, *evaluation*, controls “what counts as valid realization of this knowledge on the part of the taught” (Bernstein 1975, p. 85). In this context the analysis of evaluation treats whether the accountability measures’ represent strong/weak external control across schools. The evaluation criteria can be clearly or vaguely framed (+/-F) depending on the curriculum and pedagogy characteristics. For the context here, this means that if the curriculum priorities and pedagogic practices are characterised by similarities across the different school contexts, this may be an indication that the evaluation criteria derived from the accountability measures are strongly framed, whereas if the curriculum and pedagogic priorities are characterised by difference, this may be an indication that the evaluation criteria are weakly framed.

Data material and analysis

The interest behind the study was exploratory, with the intention of gaining insight into how teachers experienced working in the Conservative party school. As primary, lower and upper secondary schools are based on the same governing system, the aim was to hear voices from all these levels to look for important themes across levels, subjects or schools. An open letter inviting teachers to participate in a study of how they experienced their everyday work was distributed through social media by a teacher who had a wide contact base in Oslo’s schools. The sample of participants was based on accessibility, where six women and six men signed up for the study, representing a wide range of subjects, and having between five and 40 years of teaching experience (see Tables 1 and 2). Six teachers work in marginalised and six in privileged school contexts, representing all three school levels (primary, lower and upper secondary education) in the two groups. The strength of this data is that the teachers together represent a broad sample of voices from Oslo’s public schools. However, it should also be stated that due to the low number of informants, the findings are first of all relevant for addressing themes that will require further research.

The first group was interviewed in late autumn 2015 and the other in early spring 2016, that is to say just after the conservative city council had handed over the reins of power to a socialist coalition. The teachers appear for the most part to be quite critical of the governing system, but it should be mentioned that it is difficult to know whether

the teachers that signed up for the study were especially critical of the Conservative party school or not. Even though they are critical, the teachers communicate different opinions, both positive and negative, on national testing, the use of standardised methods in pedagogic work and relations to authorities in the organisation. They say that for the most part they enjoy their work with colleagues and pupils, although some also find their professional situation too challenging. Being older and having extensive experience could, however, affect their critical view on the strong marketisation of school (cf. Lundahl et al. 2014, Haugen 2021, Mausethagen 2015).

The interviews, lasting from one hour to one hour and 45 minutes, were recorded and transcribed fully verbatim. It should also be pointed out that the teachers sometimes reported broader experiences from having their own children in a different school, and from having worked at different schools or having insight into other schools' work through union representation. While the teachers' experiences from school choice, collaboration with parents and the school organisation have been treated in other papers (Haugen 2019; Haugen 2021), the content that is examined in this paper is related to the classroom practices in terms of curriculum and pedagogic work: their experiences of change/current teaching and knowledge situation, curriculum prioritising and de-prioritising, focus on tests and results, autonomy and control, pupils' responses and concerns about the current practice.

The first step in the analysis was to group the schools according to having a high proportion of pupils from lower versus higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The pupil composition represents an important distinguishing signifier of context as it both addresses the potential role of pupils' backgrounds in the curriculum (cf. Au 2009; Lipman 2004) and the school's market position in school choice (Bjordal 2016; Haugen 2019). The categorisation of the schools was based on different socioeconomic-background indicators. The initial grouping was based on the percentage of minority language pupils in primary and lower secondary schools, as pupils with minority backgrounds often have parents with a low income level (cf. Hansen 2017).² For upper secondary school, grade intake levels are indicators of socioeconomic backgrounds, where the level of segregation is highest in schools with the lowest grade intake levels (cf. Hansen 2017). These indicators of social background were compared to the teachers' own descriptions of what characterised the pupil-body composition at their school. One primary/lower secondary school was difficult to categorise because it had about 50% minority language pupils. In addition to the teacher's description of the pupil composition as a "relatively resourceful pupil

and parent group”, performance indicators in terms of examinations and grades in lower secondary school were also considered (cf. Hansen 2017 on the relation between grades and parents’ economic and educational background). Finally, the geographic location of the schools at the primary and lower secondary level were indicators of the pupils’ socioeconomic backgrounds (cf. Ljunggren & Andersen 2017).

The pupil composition is also related to the school’s market position in school choice. When exploring school choice based on the interviews with these teachers it is found that that the schools with a high proportion of pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are marginalised on a number of issues, whereas the schools with a high proportion of pupils from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are privileged on a number of issues. The “marginalised” schools with a high proportion of pupils from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have a weak market position as they are losing white, privileged pupils, often do not fill up their capacity, have a poor financial situation, have few extracurricular activities and social events, experience more unrest among the pupils, have pupils with more learning difficulties, and the minority pupils find it increasingly difficult to connect to the Norwegian language and identity. The “privileged” schools having a high proportion of pupils from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are “winner-schools” in school choice with too many applicants, they have a stable (but not always good) financial situation and several extracurricular activities, pupils show signs of stress and psychological problems due to the high pressure for good results, and they have motivated and often ambitious pupils, where different ethnicities are represented (Haugen 2019). Based on these characteristics, the schools are henceforth referred to as “marginalised” and “privileged” schools.³

The analysis was based on a comparative approach, looking for similarities and differences both between and within the two school categories. In order to avoid a biased/too simplistic reading and presentation of the material, attention was paid to both variations and contradictions, and what were experienced as typical and non-typical curriculum and pedagogic priorities, as well as resistance (cf. Souto-Otero & Benito- Montagut 2016).

Moreover, as the teachers are representatives from such diverse contexts, each teacher is represented by a number (T1-T6 = marginalised schoolteachers, T7-T12 = privileged schoolteachers) to make it possible to see which teacher has reported what. Although it gives little meaning to give quantitative information with such a low number of informants, the tables summing up the analysis (Tables 3 and 4) still provide information about which themes were raised across the schools, and which were unique.

Teacher	Marginalised schools	Years	Experience
T1	80-85% minority pupils	Years 1-7	5 years
T2	90-95% minority pupils	Years 1-10	14 years in lower secondary
T3	75-80% minority pupils	Years 8-10	19 years
T4	30-35 admission points	Upper secondary	23 years
T5	30-35 admission points	Upper secondary	18 years
T6	30-35 admission points	Upper secondary	7 years

Table 1: Teachers working at the marginalised schools

Teacher	Privileged schools	Years	Experience
T7	15% minority pupils	1-7	27 years
T8	10% minority pupils	1-7	20 years
T9	15% minority pupils	1-7	25 years
T10	50% minority pupils, high results exams, grades	1-10	20 years in lower secondary
T11	45-50 admission points	Upper secondary	40 years
T12	45-50 admission points	Upper secondary	13 years

Table 2: Teachers working at the privileged schools

Analysis

Curriculum in marginalised and privileged schools

At both marginalised and privileged primary and lower secondary schools the teachers state that the tests influence the relation between subjects, where what is tested and accounted for is given high internal priority. This is seen when it comes to which subjects have high competence in the staff, where the economic resources go in terms of high teacher density, where substitutes are prioritised if a staff member is sick or what is given attention in school meetings and school projects. It also influences what counts as obligatory activities, where teachers experience being instructed to talk about the national test results for each pupil at parent-teacher meetings, and teachers are obliged to

give pupils written assessments in Norwegian, maths, English and science. The priorities are reported to *narrow the curriculum* so that practical-art subjects, social sciences and religion in primary and lower secondary schools are especially affected.

There's a high focus on the common core subjects...One loses the competence in social sciences, KRLE (knowledge of Christianity, religion, philosophies of life and ethics), and the practical and art subjects (T1).

If the school's results go down in Norwegian, English, maths, then measures will be taken...They have taken away extra hours in arts and handicrafts... and given them to maths (T10).

In upper secondary school, the tests seem to have less direct influence on the relation between subjects as the schools are being held accountable on the measure to “complete and pass school”, where all subjects are important. However, the main subjects are reported to be given more attention by the Education Authority in creating common assessment practices, and teachers experience that the main subjects are given more attention through the testing and in discussions at the school. Additionally, across subjects, teachers reported a strategic effort to focus on reading and writing in all subjects in both marginalised and privileged schools.

Elements that are reported as influencing the status *between* the subjects more directly are the school's market position and the pupil composition. These aspects are found to have different implications. At two of the marginalised upper secondary schools the teachers experience that subjects that are popular among high performing pupils are given higher priority. The reason for prioritising these subjects is explained by the school's need for more pupils and the hope that prioritising these pupils' interests can help to build a good school reputation so it can attract more high performing pupils, which is important for becoming more popular when it comes to school choice (cf. Haugen 2019). One of the upper secondary teachers has experienced the opposite, and is therefore concerned about exactly how the school might have trouble attracting high performing pupils:

I had two different levels that I had to merge together last year. Two different approaches in the same class. This school focuses [instead] on the hard science subjects, because if they don't offer them, what does the school have to offer (the high-performing pupils, my comment)? (T5).

This year they cut out all the heavy science subjects because there were too few pupils... The pupils who choose the heavy science subjects are often the pupils who are quite smart in other subjects as well, they are in a way the pupils we would rather keep (T4).

Whereas the high performing pupils' interests are experienced as important priorities in upper secondary school due to school choice, teachers on all three education levels find that the educational situation for special education pupils and ethnic minorities is undermined through low priority of competence and internal redistribution of hours. This theme is mentioned by teachers across marginalised and privileged primary and lower secondary schools, but is only found in marginalised upper secondary schools:

Special education classes have become a lot larger, and we have less resources for special education...They need basic Norwegian instruction...Norwegian has been deprioritised in this way [for pupils with poor Norwegian language skills] (T3).

For many years pupils with [right to special education] have been placed in normal classes without being offered special education ...You can never replace a fully trained special educator with Norwegian in our faculty. Or an expert on pupils with minority backgrounds (T6).

The narrowing of the curriculum and deprioritising of the needs of bilingual pupils and special education is reported to have lowered the quality of adapted teaching for many pupils. The teachers express concern that the narrow priorities affect the pupils' experiences and knowledge, which also creates a more difficult situation when trying to provide arenas and knowledge where pupils facing problems mastering the theoretical material can in fact experience the joy of mastering something:

[We] would have really liked to have had more cultural events (T1).

[T]he school's humanities responsibilities disappear in the focus on results (T6).

We now have a strong test regime, many have dropped activities we used to do. Excursions, going to museums, being out in the countryside, playing (T9).

Summing up, we see that across the schools, what is tested and accounted for is prioritised, and in upper secondary schools, subjects that are popular among high performing pupils are sometimes given higher priority. Teachers experience that the priorities especially affect special education pupils and ethnic minorities' needs, as well as pupils who are struggling with the acquisition of academic knowledge.

	Marginalised school-teachers	Privileged school-teachers
Prioritised curriculum Obligatory High competence Economic resources Teacher density Substitutes if sick Getting hours from other subjects Priorities from Education Authority	Main subjects (English, maths, Norwegian) (T1,T2,T6) What is tested (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6) Written assessment in Norwegian, Maths, English, Science, social competence (T1) Subjects popular for high-privileged studies (T5, T6) Writing, reading in all subjects (T5, T6)	Main subjects (T9) What is tested (T7, T8, T10, T11, T12) Written assessment in Norwegian, Maths, English, Science, social competence (T9, T10) Writing (12)
De-prioritised curriculum Voluntary Low competence Few economic resources Low teacher density No substitutes Losing hours	Social sciences, KRLE, practical and art subjects (T1,T3) Special education (T1, T3, T6) Native language (T2) Norwegian as a second language (T3, T6) Extra-curricular content (T1, T6) Sciences (too few pupils) (T4)	Practical and art subjects (T7, T10) Special education (T9, T10) Extra-curricular content (T9)

Table 3: Teachers' experiences of how accountability measures affect the prioritising and deprioritising of curriculum in marginalised and privileged schools. The left column describes how, the other two columns refer to which content is de-/prioritised.

Pedagogy in marginalised and privileged schools

Selection

When it comes to the first element of the pedagogic message system, one central characteristic that teachers experience as decisive for the *selection of content* is that the selection is specifically related to *visibility*. Visibility is front and centre both in framing the communication between teacher and pupil, and between the school and external authorities in both marginalised and privileged primary and lower secondary schools. The teachers report that they are obliged to undertake explicit and visible framing of the teaching by stating learning goals on the blackboard at the beginning of each class, and through written assessments in Norwegian, maths, science, English and social competence, something teachers were obliged to do from years 1-7 during the Conservative party school. The goal orientation and documentation of the degree of goal attainment of the pupils compels teachers to prioritise what can easily be made explicit and measured, leading to fragmentation of the teaching (+F):

These goals give a very strong direction for the teaching... They are comprehensive goals and you have to teach towards them and this has to be documented. This is difficult, and a high goal to shoot for (T1).

So you sit there and write about some narrow goals that really feels like a waste of time... there's pressure on goal attainment (T9).

The teachers sit... and make very special exercises where they break the competence goals down into learning goals... Goal-criteria, goal-criteria... (T10).

Two of the teachers express concern over how the explicit evaluations may influence pupils' mental health:

Children have to evaluate themselves on every little thing they do... and I don't think that children benefit from that, from all the stress. Very big on goal attainment. I don't think it's good for the pupil or the teacher. It's about the way we see and understand people, right? (T9)

In the long run, [I'm] worried about their mental health... all the time this focus on what is wrong. Visibility (T3).

In addition to documenting goal attainments, displaying improvements in results on tests and examinations to the external authorities is reported as a key concern in framing the selection of content in the classroom in all the schools. This applies to both national standardised tests and the standardised Oslo tests, and there is also a focus on improving the statistics relating to both pupil intake level, exams and pupils who “complete and pass” upper secondary school. The teachers report feeling stressed to improve results regardless of whether they work in marginalised or privileged schools, and regardless the school level, as they experience pressure from a goal of constantly improving results regardless of school context. This is reported to have different implications. The school leaders’ concentration on demonstrating improved results to the authorities is sometimes experienced as the tests and accountability measures having more to say for the selection of content than the curriculum. A stronger focus in the teaching on practising on old national tests and selecting content that will be tested is reported on all school levels.

Early in the fall, right before the test, oi, then suddenly reading is the main area in Norwegian. And then we use old national tests, we have to do that, then it’s practice time. But we don’t call it practising...(T2).

A colleague made a completely identical test...mapping test... they are the same from year to year...[destroyed] the whole testing grounds, validity...But the headmaster thought it was okay (T8).

No headmaster will admit that they practise for the national tests or even cheat on them, but this happens on a large scale (T7).

The hunt for accountability is really more important than the real needs the school has. At our school the pupils are really satisfied, there are few things that we need to address. Our principal said we have to lift every stone so we can find something we can focus our efforts on. We have to make it visible to the regional director...If the Oslo test deviates from the curriculum, the Oslo test rules... I notice that the exam and the Oslo test are setting the standard more than the subject curriculum (T12).

Summing up, we see a strong external framing that delimits both teachers’ and pupils’ options in the selection of content. This is due to the demand to make explicit and visible goals for pupils’ learning

and to document goal attainment in the tested subjects. At the same time, teachers' control over the selection of content is experienced as delimited by strategies to improve results and make them visible to document achievement and improvement on accountability measures to the Education Authority.

Organisation

When it comes to the second element of the pedagogy, *organisation*, teachers on all levels in both marginalised and privileged schools experience interference from both the Education Authority and school principals (+F). Teachers report that they are losing control over the organisation and sequencing of the communication in the classroom through being instructed to follow standardised procedures and methods. There is an extensive focus on standardised methods on all levels and in both marginalised and privileged schools:

There is intense pressure on people to standardise the teaching... [Y]ou should be able to open the door to any classroom... and then the next classroom and the same thing should be happening there...completely transparent, permeated with exactly the same practice...Templates about how you welcome the pupils, how fast they get started on the teaching, what happens in transition situations, how you motivate the pupils (T8).

Expressed by the school leaders: methodological freedom is something we no longer have (T12).

However, not all teachers do as they are instructed when it comes to the organisation of the lessons, and demonstrate their resistance:

Many of these methods that have come now are of course good...but then they always say that, we're asked to follow them to the letter, but we have to shape them according to our own ways (T7).

The former headmaster did his rounds to check that I wrote the goals on the board. But I don't do that !... You can't divide things into small pieces...you can't reduce complex knowledge to a set of goals you have to go through (T10).

The stated reason for not following instructions is that the goal orientation makes it difficult to take pupils' voices into account, leading to what is referred to as "mechanical teaching", with little room for spontaneity, joy, sense of wonder or talking about the things that

arise spontaneously. Teachers contrast such a pedagogic approach to earlier practice, where the teacher was in control over the development of the teaching:

When you introduce a control regime, with measuring, controlling, roadmaps and templates all over, then you remove the teachers' focus from what they should be doing, teaching good lessons. See the pupil, follow up each individual. Not treat everybody the same way, but according to their abilities and needs... (T11).

It's just so sad, because an evidence-based approach is the complete opposite of how we worked in the 1990s and the start of the new century. Then we were to make projects, develop something completely new (T10).

One of the marginalised upper secondary teachers, however, differs from the others, experiencing a more autonomous situation (-F) at his school with no standardisation or control over the organisation from the school principal.

The teachers also experience that the organising of the classroom is affected by the tests, where the grouping of pupils is used as a strategy to improve the results of both tests and grade setting at the school. The grouping of pupils according to levels is not only related directly to the testing, but also to the focus on standardised level-based methods.

So far we organise the teaching so that some level 3 pupils will be cooperation partners with someone on level 2 in maths. A concrete example for helping them climb up, right? So what we're doing is organising the school according to the national tests ... Even the headmaster...can go around during the national tests, where the weaker pupils are sitting in a separate room and they get help to solve the tasks (T7).

They also cheat with the results, send a group with those types of [weakly performing] pupils on a trip the day of the national tests...yeah, we try to do it correctly, but this is a volatile topic (T10).

If I have a pupil with an ethnic-minority background who is not good in Norwegian, not because he doesn't speak Norwegian, but because it's not the subject for him, then I can sign him up for Norwegian as second foreign language, so he gets a good grade... and then we get very good results and congratulate ourselves... (T4).

Teachers in marginalised upper secondary schools experience that the school's market position in relation to school choice also affects how the grouping of pupils in their schools is sometimes based on results, where high-performing pupils (and their teachers) are given higher priority and are in their own classes, at the same time as the financial situation makes it difficult to offer all subjects when few pupils are assigned to some of them:

[Minority pupils] are in their own classes for the most part. And some classes are purely ethnic Norwegian actually... They fill up classes on the first admission round with pupils with high scores. And then comes the second admission round. Then all types of pupils come in, typically minority pupils, who are placed in their own classes... They are so preoccupied about the reputation of the school that they focus on satisfying pupils in some of the classes very much to improve the reputation of the school... [The most popular teachers] always get... the strongest classes... While other teachers have to take the most demanding and weakest classes... There are completely absurd differences between teachers' [salaries] with similar experience and education (T6).

I had two different levels I had to merge together last year. Two different approaches in the same class (T5).

Summing up the framing over organisation, we see that teachers' work is experienced as increasingly technicised through the externally imposed standardised procedures and methods, and pupils are sorted/grouped according to their (expected) results to comply with external expectations. Increased segregation based on performance within the schools and classes is described as a strategy to cope with the competition for pupils and high performance expectations from the Education Authority.

Pacing

When it comes to the last topic area of the pedagogy, *pacing*, the teachers in both marginalised and privileged schools at all levels experience that external demands and expectations regulate to a high degree the pacing in both teachers' and pupils' work. The teachers report that a high workload (higher than before) stems from various demands for documentation, reporting, preparation and following up tests and results, and some of them also experience an increase in the number of pupils per class. The generally high workload is combined with

what they experience as often too high and intensifying performance expectations from the leaders in all school categories:

You want to get good results. It's stressful for the first-year pupils, to get them to learn the letters so they are ready for years two and five (T9).

Clear expectations, they come first and foremost from the school leaders: reading speed, mathematics, Norwegian, reading...Higher expectations, yeah, there has been a sharp curve there (T8).

What happened after the PISA shock was that that we changed the number on the textbooks... for example, in year 3 English, we use a book for year four, even though we put the number 3 on them. So, it's an absolutely meaninglessly high level (T7).

The teachers explain that often, the performance goals are supposed to be met without the provision of extra resources. Heavy pressure is thus put on the teachers to comply with external demands, at the same time as many of them experience little room for problematising the expectations or the results, or to take pupils' aptitudes or needs into account:

Every time we go through the national tests, we know who we are concerned about and discuss measures, but we don't get to do anything with the measures. We don't have the extra teacher to give a reading course, extra hands, we therefore only discuss dumb measures (T1).

Pupils who come here, short residence period in Norway, that they should complete school and pass is unrealistic ...There are some resources for this, ...a little amount, but far from enough to believe that this will lead to significantly better results (T6).

We have pupils who are so weak that they can hardly write or read in their native language, or English or Norwegian. Still, they're supposed to complete school and pass. Either I'm supposed to solve the problem, or I have to cheat (T5).

Teachers report that the number of expectations they are supposed to satisfy is leading to more superficial learning as well as lower quality teaching since they have less time to plan, give guidance and undertake good assessment practice. The teachers are concerned that what they sometimes describe as a fabrication of too high results

creates a fake image of the learning and knowledge situation of the marginalised pupils:

But what's the problem with these tricks they play with?:
practising, focusing on these tests: yepp, they get a few weak pupils to do more than they would normally manage to do (T7).

To make sure that everything works, you lower the requirements...
The knowledge level in the school is lowered (T11).

Summing up, we see that teachers experience that their own and their pupils' control over the pacing is limited by the external demands and expectations. Teachers experience unrealistic expectations which sometimes leads to fabrication of too high results, with the consequence of disguising the real needs and learning situation of their pupils. The high pacing expectations have led to less variation in the teaching and more superficial learning, and at the same time learning is increasingly decontextualised from the pupils' aptitudes, interests and lives.

Pedagogy	Marginalised schoolteachers	Privileged schoolteachers
Selection +F: Visibility Documentation What can improve results Core areas from the Education Authority	Goals, fragmentation (T1, T2, T3, T5) Teaching to testing (T2, T3, T4, T5, T6)	Goals, fragmentation (T9, T10) Teaching to testing (T7, T8, T12) Initiatives that can be measured (T12)
Organisation + F: External decision on methods/ evidence-based practice Performance-based grouping of pupils Test-based sequencing	Standardised methods (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5) Group pupils to improve test results (T1, T4) Group pupils to make high-performing classes (T6) Testing what they have not learned (T1)	Standardised methods (T7, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12) Group pupils to improve test results (T7, T8, T10)

<p>Pacing +F: External documentation External result expectations</p>	<p>High workload, work faster (T1, T3) Time bandits (tests, reporting, documentation) (T1, T2) Improve results (T1,T2, T3, T5, T6) Too high, not adapted to the pupils (T1, T3, T4, T5, T6) Less time for each topic (T1) Less time for preparation, follow up, relations, good assessments, less joy and wondering (T2, T3, T4)</p>	<p>High workload, fuller classes (T7, T8, T9, T11) Time bandits (tests, reporting, documentation) (T9, T10, T11, T12) Improve results (T7, T8) Too high, not adapted to the pupils (T7, T8, T11, T12) No time for other activities (T9, T10) Less time to give good lessons, follow up (T11)</p>
<p>Organisation -F: - Autonomy in methods</p>	<p>Not instructed on methods (T6) Ignore instructions (T3)</p>	<p>Form methods according to one's own choices (T7, T9) Ignore instructions (T10)</p>
<p>Pacing -F: Adjust expectations to the pupils</p>		<p>Lower expectations to improve results (T11)</p>

Table 4: Teachers' experiences of how accountability measures affect pedagogy in marginalised and privileged schools. The left column shows what is decisive for the pedagogy, the other two columns refer to characteristics.

Evaluation criteria

As stated above, the analysis of curriculum and pedagogic priorities forms the characteristics of the evaluation criteria. When schools with very different pupil populations and very different market positions have similar priorities in terms of knowledge and pedagogy, this indicates that the accountability measures of the Oslo schools introduced strong “rules” for what counts as legitimate realisation of the

curriculum (cf. Bernstein 1975) and that the accountability measures are experienced as “high stakes” (cf. Au 2007) across marginalised and privileged school contexts.

The similarities in teachers' experiences at the marginalised and privileged schools indicate that the evaluation criteria in the Conservative party school were characterised by strong external framing (+F) for all school levels. However, as stated above, due to the low number of informants, more research is needed to provide clearer conclusions on how the accountability measures are experienced and may impact marginalised and privileged schools differently.

One larger study combining different sets of data (interviews with school principals, teachers, parents, school documents) of elementary and lower secondary schools in Oslo follows up research on the marketisation in the Oslo schools in relation to a number of issues (cf. Bjordal & Haugen 2021). It supports the finding that accountability measures are stressed and have important impact on curriculum and pedagogic priorities in all schools. However, there are no conclusive findings as to whether pupil composition and market position also play a role in how accountability measures still may affect marginalised schools and pupils more than others.

The impact of pupil composition and market position for curriculum and pedagogic priorities should also be followed up in research on upper secondary schools. Attention should especially be paid to the internal priority and provision of different subjects in marginalised schools, as well as to the degree to which internal segregation based on performance is found in the schools. Both themes could have important impact on educational opportunity and quality for low-performing pupils compared to their high-performing peers.

Discussion

As stated above, “curricula reform emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice,” and construct different pedagogic identities (Bernstein 2000, p. 65). The national curriculum policies and the local policies in Oslo reflect a reinforced neoconservative position that has increased emphasis on traditional values and knowledge in main subjects and on testing of basic skills in the national and local test regime. Bernstein (2000, p. 67) describes such orientation as a prospective pedagogic identity oriented to “*deal with cultural, economic and technological change*”. What is especially interesting in relation to the priorities is how contradictory neoliberal values related to decentralisation inherent in

the marketisation and management strategies in fact work to cement the neoconservative position (cf. also Apple 2006). This is related to how marketisation affects the school's conditions for survival and orients the schools and pupils towards satisfying external competitive demands.

This in turn contributes to the creation of new rules of social order (cf. Bernstein 2000). The social processes involved in neoliberal policies are changing the purposes and processes of education as well as teachers' subjectivities (cf. Lipman 2009). The teachers' experiences of management of professionalism in the Conservative party school can be related to what Evetts (2009) describes as *organisational professionalism*. This form of management is characterised by rational-legal forms of authority and hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision-making, where externalised forms of regulation and accountability are important, involving increased standardisation of work procedures.

Apparently, the combination of neoconservative and neoliberal positions has led to the opposite of the stated intention of the curriculum reform: to provide schools and teachers with more autonomy to improve the adapted learning of a diverse pupil body. Bernstein states that “[w]here the external framing is strong, it often means that the images, voices and practices the school reflects make it difficult for children of marginalised classes to recognize themselves in the school” (Bernstein 2000, p. 14). That the marketised policies may be unsuitable for improving equity and rather widen the disparity gap has also been demonstrated in recent research in the Oslo schools (Hansen 2017). At the same time, the effects of the policies could be related to what Wayne Au (2009) argues is the hidden curriculum of high stakes testing, namely the (re)production of socioeconomic and educational inequality through sorting of pupils according to the inequalities in society. In Oslo we see the sorting effectuated by test results as an indicator of quality in school choice, but according to the teachers, the tests also serve as a legitimator of internal segregation in the schools and in the classes (cf. Haugen 2019). Whether the experiences the teachers have reported are relevant for other Norwegian municipalities should be a question for further research.

Notes

1. For elementary and lower secondary education, pupils are given a place at a school near their home but can apply to a different school and be admitted there if the school has open places. For upper secondary education, pupil intake is based on their grades.

2. At minosloskole.no (my Oslo school) the term “minority-language pupils” refers to pupils who have a different mother tongue than Norwegian.
3. The terms “privileged” and “marginalised” schools are influenced by Bjordal’s categorisation (2016).

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