

# Approaches to spatial inequalities in a Nordic welfare state – the case of Norway

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## Abstract

In this article, the position of the core ideas of equity and equal opportunities within the Nordic model of education today is problematized, using Norway as the case of interest and spatial dividing lines as the main variable in question. I am specifically preoccupied with geographical education differences as part of the ‘unequal opportunity problem’ in Nordic education. Focusing on spatial inequalities in education, something that is rarely addressed by educational authorities, brings light to the assertion that aims that used to be the foundation for the Norwegian education system, are harder to see as guiding principles in education policy today. Through highlighting this, the aim is also to contribute to a discussion of how research related to education in rural areas is situated in the Norwegian context, viewing this in light of Norway as a representative of the Nordic model of education. In the article understanding the agential doings behind the paradox of the Nordic education equality ethos on the one side and the persisting and empirically documented spatial education inequalities on the other, represents the analytic intake.

## Keywords

Rural education, spatial inequalities, Nordic model

## Introduction

The Nordic welfare state model is a well-established construct, defined as a social-democratic project of providing universal welfare, independent of individuals’ backgrounds and resources (Esping-Andersen, 1985, 1996). Education plays a key role in this universal welfare system, put forward as an essential tool for promoting processes leading

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to welfare, economic growth and to democratization and social equity (Blossing et al., 2014a, 2014b; Bæck, 2012b; Telhaug et al., 2006), that is, both economic and social motives (Blossing et al., 2014a). The solution for how to reach these goals has been the development of a comprehensive school system, or a School for All, as it is often referred to in the Nordic context (*enhetskolen*). In this article, Norway serves as a representative for the Nordic welfare state model and the Nordic model of education. According to the OECD, many features of Norway's education system favour equitable outcomes, such as a long period of compulsory education, delayed tracking, limited ability grouping and limited school choice, and it is generally highly equitable (OECD, 2020). At the same time, research show that Norway still have a long way to go when it comes to battling inequalities (Hansen, 2005, 2015), and as noted by Blossing et al. (2014b), a School for All is still a goal in progress.

Within the sociology of education, inequalities in educational opportunities are primarily related to economic, cultural, ethnic and gendered dividing lines. As pointed out elsewhere, there is a strong urban bias in education research and a corresponding lack of studies explicitly focusing on rural schools and rural education (see also Arnold et al., 2005; Barley and Beesley, 2007; Hargreaves et al., 2009). There is, however, an international body of research that shows spatial differences in educational performance, trajectories and accessibility at all levels of education (e.g. Alston, 2005; Bowlby, 2005; Green, 2013; Green and Corbett, 2013; Hardré and Hennessey, 2010; Thomson et al., 2012). Such differences are also documented in Norway (Bæck, 2015; Hargreaves et al., 2009; Vibe et al., 2012). The research documents that rural students are underperforming compared to their urban counterparts and that rural young people conduct educational choices that differ from those conducted by young people residing in more urban settings. As shown elsewhere, these differences between rural and urban settings are documented on a number of measures of educational success throughout the education system, including 5th and 8th graders' test scores on standardized national tests in mathematics, reading and English, and educational attainment in upper secondary education (Frøseth et al., 2008; Vibe et al., 2012).

In this article the aim is to investigate the continuing persistence of geographic disparities in educational access and outcomes among students in rural and urban areas in Norway. In doing so, I explore whether and in what way national education policy in Norway seeks to ensure equitable education across different geographic regions, and also whether obstacles for taking space into account are present. To understand the relationship between national education policy and its practical implementation on this area, a critical realist approach is employed that examines the impact of agent actions, or *agential doings*, across various analytical levels.

## Education in Norway

Compulsory schooling in Norway starts at the age of 6. Prior to that, around 90% of 1-6 year olds will attend kindergarten. For the age group 6–19, the system is divided into three different levels: primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school. Primary and lower secondary school, years 1–10, are compulsory for students aged 6–16, and based on

the principle of one comprehensive school for all. There is no segregation or streaming, and all pupils, including those with special needs, are integrated into the same comprehensive school system. Upper secondary school is not compulsory, but more than 90% of the students graduating year 10 will continue straight to upper secondary education. In upper secondary education there is a choice between 3-years general/academic study programmes *or* three or 4 years of vocational study (depending on whether one chooses to do all the 3 years in school *or* 2 years of schooling and 2 years of in-company training in order to complete a journeyman's certificate), with 40% of the students choosing the latter.<sup>1</sup> The Norwegian education system is mainly public, with less than 3% of the students attending private schools. Compared to many other countries, the Norwegian state allocates considerable funding to the education system, and even private educational institutions receive most of their funding from public sources. Public education is free, from first grade and throughout higher education. In kindergarten, parents pay a fee with a maximum cost set by the Norwegian authorities.

In Norway, the education sector is largely guided by a national core curriculum. This is a focal point in order to understand the dynamics of spatial education differences in this national setting. The Norwegian Parliament (*the Storting*) and the Government define the goals and decide the framework for the education sector. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for carrying out national educational policy. National standards are ensured through legislation, regulations, curricula and framework plans. The state bears the overall responsibility for the Education Act including regulations, content and the financing of primary and secondary education and training. However, even though national legislation and regulations, including the National Curriculum, form a binding framework, municipal and county authorities, schools and teachers can influence the implementation of education and training within this framework. This means for example that there is considerable local autonomy when it comes to methods of instruction, choice of learning materials, curriculum development and organisation of instruction.

## Rural education research in the Norwegian context

As show elsewhere, regional differences in educational attainment have been well documented, but less researched in the Norwegian context. A range of statistics have documented regional differences on different measures on academic success in Norway, for example Vibe et al. (2012), and a rural/urban categorisation accounts for a lot of this variation. The spatial differences are present at different levels of the educational system (Bæck, 2019). Even so, educational authorities have given these issues relatively little attention and they have not been investigated thoroughly by educational researchers. As also pointed out elsewhere, research relevant for the rural education research field, does not necessarily go under the label of rural since it does not have rural issues as an explicit research problem. In quantitative studies, regional or spatial or geographical variables are often included as control variables, with findings barely commented upon, since they fall outside of the scope of the aim of the study (e.g. in Vibe et al. (2012)).

The geographical differences in academic attainment have been attributed to several factors. One intake is the influence of social and cultural processes taking place in rural

contexts and their effect on academic outcomes. There is a line of research suggesting that rural students' cultural and social capital differ from that valued by school, affecting their preferences and school trajectories (Bæck, 2012a; Edvardsen, 2011; Heggen et al., 2001; Hoëm, 2010) – a departure that renders relevant other background factors, such as SES, gender and ethnicity. When it comes to gender, research shows that boys are tied closer to the local communities than girls, which may be relevant for educational choices and success. For higher education, fewer boys than girls, both in rural and urban areas, plan to attend higher education, but the gender difference is bigger in rural areas (Bakken, 2020; Eriksen and Andersen, 2021).

As stated by Adedokun and Balschweid (2008), rural adolescents' educational outcomes are shaped by the dynamics of the social interactive processes taking place within their social environments. The teacher-student-parent triangle is therefore central to understanding barriers related to these processes. When it comes to teachers, research shows that in more remote areas there is typically greater staff turnover, higher resignation rates, a higher percentage of new teachers, and younger and less experienced staff than in other locations (Bæck and Rød, upcoming). This situation indicates that rural teachers may have other kinds of work experience than urban teachers, which may influence their ability to create fruitful learning environments for the students. When it comes to rural students, their encounters with the educational system may be more challenging than for urban students. This due to differences in attitudes and motivations regarding school, learning strategies or beliefs about their own abilities. But also due to local school structures, having to move away from home with subsequent loss of social capital etc. When it comes to parents, parental involvement has a strong effect on education outcomes, but the school-parent link in rural areas has not been thoroughly investigated. Findings from Bæck and Rod (2010) indicate, however, that rural teachers express more need for institutional support in home–school cooperation, suggesting challenges for the parent-teacher relation in rural settings.

In the next paragraphs I will elaborate on another intake to understanding geographical education differences, focusing more on governance and management in the educational sector.

## **Understanding spatial inequalities in education through agential doings**

As already stated, the problem posed in this article has to do with the continuing persistence of spatial education differences within a context known for its focus on equal opportunities for all, independent of social, cultural *or* geographical background. Having given a brief overview of the state of rural education research in Norway, I will now focus my discussion on the way the education system is governed through several governance levels and how this may explain the question at hand. In order to grasp the dynamics behind how the system functions, it is relevant to focus on the relationship between these different levels.

As stated by Archer (2020), nothing social, whatever its origins, is self-sustaining, and this is one of the (many) things that distinguishes the social from the natural

world. According to Archer, only a myriad of agential ‘doings’ keep any given higher level social entity in being and render it relatively enduring - including agents’ thinking, believing, and imagining. In her work on the social origins of education systems (Archer, 2013), Archer uses the centralized French education system as an example, and shows how every step leading towards its centralization depends on agential doings. In this article understanding the agential doings behind the paradox of the Norwegian education equality ethos on the one side and the persisting and empirically documented spatial education inequalities on the other, represents the analytic intake.

Agency theory comes in many forms, and common for the many different strands of agency theory found in different academic disciplines, for example in economics where agency theories have been particularly widespread (see e.g. Jensen and Meckling, 1976), is, as pointed out by Kivistö and Zalyevska (2015), that they describe the relationship between two or more parties, in which one party, designated as the principal, engages another party, designated as the agent, to perform some task on behalf of the principal. Furthermore, according to Kivistö and Zalyevska (2015), agency theory assumes that when principals delegate authority to agents, the principals will often have problems controlling the agents. This is because there is often a discrepancy when it comes to the goals of the agents and of the principals and because agents often have better information about their capacity and activities than do principals. Agency theories have also been used within education policy studies, for example in the work of Levačić (2009: ‘s) on institutional arrangements governing the work of teachers, and in Vanhuyse and Sulitzeanu-Kenan’s (2009) work on the political power of public school teachers. The work of Fulge et al. (2016), to which I will return later, is an example within my own research field of rural education.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will focus on the intentions found at the policy level, as they are expressed in the national curriculum. I will then address some aspects relevant for understanding the persistence of spatial education inequalities and discuss this in terms of agential doings. The agents I am focusing on are those influencing education policy and thus creating a foundation for the functioning of the education system.

## **Does education policy in Norway take space into account?**

The national core curriculum and the policy documents guiding and supporting the core curriculum are central documents in order to gain an understanding of the most important principles and focal points in education policy in Norway. The national core curriculum from 2006, the Knowledge Promotion Reform (K06) (the Core Curriculum for Primary, Secondary and Adult Education in Norway), is the most central document guiding policy in the education field. The principles for teaching according to the Knowledge Promotion Reform are elaborated on in a separate document (“Principles for the schooling”). These principles summarize and elaborates on the provisions from the Education Act and the other laws and regulations in this field. These principles shall clarify the school owners’

responsibilities for providing education in accordance with laws and regulations, human rights and also adapted to local and individual preconditions and needs.

Location and local community perspectives are mentioned several times in the 22 page-long document that constitutes the general part of the K06 (in addition there are instructions for each subject). In the introduction to the general part of the Knowledge Promotion Reform, it is stated that a fundamental starting point for pupils' upbringing is their personal preconditions, social background and local belonging. The teaching should therefore be adjusted to the individual pupil and take these background factors into consideration. To promote increased equality when it comes to the results of education, it is regarded necessary to provide different efforts directed at the individual pupil. The core curriculum also emphasizes that the development of the identities of the individual students has to do with familiarizing them with ways of behaving, norms and codes of conduct, handed down over generations. Teaching therefore has to attend to and deepen the pupils' knowledge of national and local traditions. Knowledge about indigenous Sami languages and culture is emphasized as especially important, since it is part of our shared inheritance, and Norway and the Nordic countries have a particular responsibility to protect and preserve the Sami culture.

The core curricula as a pedagogical platform, a foundation for learning, takes as a starting point that new knowledge is best developed if it is founded on what we already know; the already familiar concepts are crucial for what can be perceived and learnt. This means that knowledge, skills and attitudes are developed in interaction with familiar notions and concepts and new impressions. The teaching therefore should be attached to the pupils' previous experiences and observations. The skills to act, to make new experiences and interpret them, must take as its starting point the conceptual world that individuals bring with them when they enter the educational system – which includes both local experiences that they have gained, the language of their immediate local environments but also common impulses that they for example get through mass media. In this sense, the core curriculum takes into account and emphasizes the importance of what the pupils bring with them into the school setting, also in terms of local culture. The role of the teacher when it comes to supporting this process, going from the familiar to the unknown, is also emphasized.

The core curriculum states that even in Norway with its relatively homogenous culture, there are considerable variations between individuals, according to their social backgrounds, gender and local environment, concluding that “what may be a fitting example or image for one student, may be completely empty for another.” What pupils bring with them from home, place of residence or previous schooling decide which explanations and examples that create meaning for them. In this way, the core curriculum takes into account that pupils who have grown up in different settings may have made different experiences, and that this is relevant in a school setting.

When it comes to the teachers' role, the core curriculum emphasizes that the teachers need to cooperate with parents, local labour markets and authorities, and that teachers need to be open to and trained for engaging parents and local communities in order to support the goals of the school. It is also interesting to note that the core curriculum makes a connection between swift changes on the one side and the need for emphasizing

historical attachment, national distinctness, and local variation on the other, in order to consolidate identity.

The core curriculum includes a paragraph entitled “A broad learning environment - student culture, parent involvement and local community”. The learning environment of the school stretches beyond the formal teaching and the relationship between teacher and pupil. A broad learning environment includes the interaction between all adults and pupils, as well as local community. It is emphasized that a good and growing/nurturing learning environment is founded in a joint understanding between the parties of the school’s goals. The curriculum states that local community, with its nature and working life, in itself is a vital part of the learning environment of the school. According to the curriculum, young people will on their own collect impulses and experiences from the local community, that the teaching needs to relate to and enrich. It is also emphasized that the teaching needs to make use of the resources that are present in the school’s surroundings. “The school shall be active as a resource-, power- and cultural center for the local community, where closer contacts are connected, not only between adults and young people, but also to local working and business life.”

In sum, the core curriculum and its related documents demonstrate awareness of the differences when it comes to culture and traditions connected to local variation and place of residence. When it comes to the goals of the teaching, for example, it is clearly stated that knowledge of local traditions is important in order to preserve distinctiveness, while at the same time enable students to encounter other cultures with a sense of openness and to enjoy diversity. In other words; the problem of spatial inequalities in education in Norway does not seem to originate from a lack of attention towards this topic in the national curriculum. Instead, in order to understand this question, it is necessary to look towards other parts of the education governance level and the influences that are central in the process from intention to end result.

## **Processes of centralization and standardization**

My assertion is that processes existing alongside the National Core Curriculum serve to counteract its ideals and principles. A starting point for an investigation into why such processes have leeway in the Norwegian education system is to understand the system according to its centralized or decentralized characteristics. In OECD’s Education Outlook 2021, it is stated that there is a long-standing tradition of decentralization to the local level in the Norwegian schooling system, a tradition that still persists. According to the report, 29 % of education decisions in 2017 were taken at the local level, compared to an OECD average of 13 %. Furthermore, the report points out that many municipalities transfer tasks such as budget allocations, staff recruitment, and pedagogical planning to the school level, but the percentage of decisions taken at the school level was, in 2021 lower than the OECD average. However, when we consult existing research on the area, making firm conclusions about the state of the Norwegian education system along a centralized-decentralized axe, is not as clearcut. In the research literature, dominant characteristics such as detailed and binding framework plans, rigid administrative regulations, control systems, evaluations and sanctioning systems, are highlighted to

demonstrate the centralized nature of the Norwegian education system (Aasen, 1999, 2013; Karseth et al., 2013; Møller et al., 2013; Skinningsrud, 2012, 2014, 2019; Telhaug et al., 2006).

As shown above, the national core curriculum opens up for taking pupils' local backgrounds and local communities into consideration in the teaching, and as a result it also opens up for incorporating local contents into the teaching. At the same time, however, the assessments that are being made of the students, including national test and final exams, are highly centralized. These assessments are nationally provided and identical for all pupils, meaning that pupils are only tested in the more standardized parts of their syllabus. Thus, national tests and nationally given exams are not designed for taking local conditions into consideration, and rests on the presupposition that schools are level playing fields. The playing field is, however, influenced by local conditions having to do with lack of economic resources, shortage of qualified staff, or that the pupils are more distant to what schools represent in terms of standards and expectations.

The centralized testing regimes inevitably impact the teaching that takes place in schools, leading to a standardization of the contents of the teaching itself. Researchers have pointed out that central demands communicated through such regimes will limit the space for local adaptations, and that generic, standardized modes of teaching and assessment (continue to) predominate (Dale et al., 2011; Hodgson et al., 2012; Sivesind, 2012). Skinningsrud (2014), Blossing et al. (2014a), Imsen et al. (2016) and Volckmar and Wiborg (2014) are among those who have focused on the international influence behind this development in education in Norway. Fulge et al. (2016) show that this is an international phenomena, and that while education policies traditionally used to be under the firm control of the nation state, they are now becoming more and more susceptible to international initiatives that have become important triggers for the reformulation of education policies.

## **Agential doings and new players in education policy**

As mentioned above, the developments described above can be understood as a result of agential doings. Fulge et al. (2016) employ *principal-agent theory* in order to understand such processes, with local or national governments as the principal and international bodies as the agents. They describe the relationship between national governments and international initiatives as a principal-agent relationship in which governments delegate authority to international actors. This implies that authority is granted from a principal to an agent so that the latter is empowered to act on behalf of the former (Hawkins et al. 2006, 7, referred to in Fulge et al., 2016). They claim that with the introduction of international initiatives as new players in education policy, governments have begun to delegate agenda-setting power in order to achieve their policy goals. International initiatives have the power to shape national debates and have therefore, according to Fulge et al. become successful policy entrepreneurs in their own right. "Equipped with expert knowledge and external legitimacy, international initiatives may compel their principals into extending their competences, further strengthening their role in the discourse or even influence what principals deem to be the optimal outcome of delegation.» (2016:457).

The power of such international initiatives has consequences for the geographical/spatial aspects of education. An example is the OECD's PISA, that has been central in shaping recent debates about quality in education to the extent that high quality more and more has come to mean high PISA-scores (Bæck, 2022). One of the unintended consequences is that schools spend time prepping their students for these tests. And, as stated above, the national and international standardized tests do not take spatial variations into consideration. The test batteries are given to all students, irrespective of background factors such as place of residence. This also means that even though the schools may work well and make an effort for developing and implementing local curricula, as long as it is the centralized tests that are the goal, local curricula may be overlooked and neglected.

Fulge et al. (2016: 456) describe how principals' and agents' preferences are seldom perfectly congruent, and that agents can also work as actors in their own right, pursuing their own interests within the constraints imposed on them by their principals. For example, the goals and preferences of local administrators are not necessarily consistent with the interests of state governments or with international education policy organs such as OECD. Agents can even surpass the constraints set by their principals, as described by Hawkins et al. (2006: 8) in their concept of *agency slack*, defined as independent action by an agent that is undesired by the principal. Agency slack is enabled by lack of control mechanisms opening up for independent action on behalf of the agents. This will in the long run, according to Fulge et al. (2016) make it likely that agents produce outcomes that are unintended and unanticipated by the principals.

Following this, municipal governments or school administrators can be understood as principals, with state governments or initiatives from international bodies such as the OECD as agents. Not surprisingly, their concerns may differ fundamentally from each other. While the latter may be preoccupied with economic competition in global markets and the crucial role brain power plays in that regard, the significant concerns of the former may have to do with sustainability of local communities, survival of local industries and prevention of depopulation and dwindling of rural communities. According to Fulge et al., policy preferences of the agents may also change or change more rapidly than those of the principals, rooted in the local community – making them not in-sync. They describe how agents can dedicate their resources completely to the task they have set out to accomplish, while principals are occupied with many tasks at the same time, creating information asymmetries between the two parties. Information asymmetry may lead to power asymmetry, when agents are in a position where they can develop expertise that they in turn can use to influence the future preferences of their principals; for example, through lobbying or spreading norms (Fulge et al., 2016, 456). Fudge et al. state that agency slack therefore may not only lead to deviations from the original mandate, which in itself may be vaguely formulated and thus afford agents room to maneuver, but it may re-define the outcome intended by the principals completely. Nordkvelle and Nyhus (2017) has pointed out similar concerns. They claim that traditional values of the Norwegian education system, such as emphasizing its responsibility for the overall education of the students, have gradually been displaced by a technical-economic or cognitive-instrumental rationale, where controlling the output through testing and grading plays a crucial part.

However, it is not all bleak. As pointed out by [Leuze et al. \(2008\)](#), although international organizations apply different governance instruments in their quest to influence national education policy making, the degree to which nation states will respond to these international stimuli is likely to be mediated by national transformation capacities that have the potential to modify the impact of the agents described above. According to [Fulge et al. \(2016\)](#), the guiding principles of education are part of a country's ideological background, and therefore represent the interpretative framework governing domestic discourse about education policy and specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong ([Fulge et al., 2016](#)). According to [Nagel et al. \(2010\)](#), they are deeply engrained in the history of nation states and serve as national schemes of reference when the plausibility of policy proposals from international organizations are being judged.

From a Norwegian point of view, the nationally rooted ideas of education can be seen as one of the most interesting modifiers. In Norway, the ideological basis of the educational system has been deeply rooted in an identity project, stemming from a young nation's need for nation building after having won its independence during the nineteenth century. This is visible in the new Education Act from 1860, that brought with it a secularized state driven education system for the whole country ([Slagstad, 2015](#)). State intervention would ensure that the education system was socially modernizing and nationally integrating – that is, *Bildung* as nation building (*ibid.*). The School for All as a nationally integrating, socially equalizing and socially reconciling project, was established by law in 1920. Since then, this ideology has been deeply ingrained in the ethos of education in Norway. It can be argued that compared to many other European countries, as well as the other Nordic countries, the education system in Norway has largely continued to insist on the School for All ethos, with an exceptionally low number of private schools as an example. As stated by [Fulge et al. \(2016\)](#) with reference to [Nagel et al. \(2010\)](#) and others, the guiding principle of education as a means to achieve social cohesion certainly yields a different set of beliefs about education policy from a guiding principle emphasizing education as a means to boost individual productivity. When guiding principles embedded within the institutional structure of a nation state are different from those propagated by international initiatives, incorporation of new prescriptions are therefore expected to be contested and ineffective ([Fulge et al., 2016](#)).

## Final remarks

In this article, a main aim was to direct focus towards a less researched part of the problem of unequal opportunities within the Nordic model of education, namely geographical education differences. Focusing on spatial inequalities in education, is something that is rarely addressed by educational authorities, despite the existence of empirical evidence ([Bæck, 2015](#)). My aim has therefore been to investigate the paradox between on the one side Norway's commitment to educational equality as a representative of the Nordic education model and as a national context known for its focus on equal opportunities for all, and on the other, the persistent, empirically documented spatial disparities in education within the same context. In doing so, I explored whether and in what way national education policy in Norway seeks to ensure equitable education across different

geographic regions. Overall, the national curriculum acknowledges cultural and traditional variations linked to local variations and places of residence. For instance, the curriculum explicitly values local traditions, while at the same time preparing students to engage with other cultures openly and appreciatively. Thus, the issue of spatial educational inequalities in Norway does not appear to stem from negligence in the curriculum regarding these aspects. To comprehend the persistence of these inequalities, one must examine other facets of educational governance and the influential factors that shape the journey from policy intent to actual outcomes. This brought me to the question of whether obstacles for taking space into account are present. The centralized testing regimes in Norway represent one such obstacle, which seem to significantly influence classroom instruction, leading to a homogenization of teaching content. Such centralized directives constrain opportunities for local curricular adjustments, resulting in a prevalence of uniform teaching and assessment practices. As shown above, several researchers ([Blossing et al., 2014a](#); [Imsen et al., 2016](#); [Skinningsrud 2014](#); [Volckmar and Wiborg 2014](#)) have emphasized the existence of international forces driving these educational changes in Norway.

Even though national education policy in Norway aim to achieve equitable education across diverse geographic regions, there are barriers to incorporating spatial considerations. In understanding the contradiction between policy intentions for educational equity and the challenges related to geographic disparities, I have focused on underlying agential doings; an intake inspired by Margaret Archer and critical realism. The attention has been directed towards understanding this paradox through a focus on the governance and policy levels, pointing to tensions between a more and more dominant education rhetoric coming from powerful international education agents on the one side and locally embedded ‘principals’ who seem to have surrendered to testing regimes and accountability demands on the other. As pointed out by a number of Norwegian scholars, there is little doubt that international influence on Norwegian education policy is considerable (among others [Aasen, 2013](#); [Skinningsrud, 2014](#)). We have also seen the political parties moving closer together when it comes to the rhetoric on education, to the extent that it has become hard to distinguish between education ministers from liberal, conservative and social-democratic camps. This is in accordance with [Fulge et al. \(2016\)](#) who point out that when discursive authority is transferred to the international level, domestic conflicts are much less pronounced than they would have been otherwise. As shown above, the National Core Curriculum of the Knowledge Promotion Reform in Norway does take space into account in the sense that issues connected to local culture and local communities are integrated into the learning and teaching principles of the curriculum. At the same time, research continues to show the existence of spatial differences in education, suggesting a tension between the intentions of the National Curriculum and mechanisms pulling in other directions. Whether nationally rooted ideas about education in Norway, previously so central in the creation of a School for All, still hold enough power to work as a modifier of the influenced from powerful agents with different agendas, remains to be seen.

The assertions that I have highlighted in this article illustrates a paradox within the Nordic model of education; a model based on the vision that the education system should

contribute to social justice, equity, equal opportunities, participative democracy and inclusion, as those are pivotal values in Nordic welfare state thinking. However, the principles behind this approach to education are under pressure. According to [Volckmar and Wiborg \(2014\)](#) many social democratic governments have to a large degree conceded to right-wing pressures when it comes to education, thereby “foregoing principles in the hope of retaining a bigger prize without seemingly noticing its inevitable diminution”. And as noted by [Mortimore \(2014\)](#), it is somewhat ironic that it is in those countries where the noble idea has best succeeded that its dissolution is being most thoroughly discussed.

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1. Currently under revision.

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