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## Home Schooling and Future Education in Norway

### Alternative education in Norway

The Norwegian educational system is dominated by the idea of a unified and comprehensive education for all (*Enhetskolen*),<sup>1</sup> which is strongly influenced by populism and local community ideology, both in curriculum and management of schools (Darnell and Høem 1996; Lauglo 1998). This system is characterized as being democratic with a conflict between decentralization of education and a counterprocess of centralization. Paradoxically, more state management and control of schools is due to a demand for protecting a democratic popular education. Authorities claimed that such a control is necessary for equality in education.

Since the enactment of the first Norwegian school law in 1739, it was determined that parents should have the main responsibility for the education of their children with the assistance of the public school system. This law, however, has not prevented children from the right to an alternative education outside the public system. This right has been perceived as a *rural rest-category*.<sup>2</sup> Reasons for such perception are Norway's relatively late urbanization, the geographical location of some municipalities—far away or difficult access—and, quite often, the less favorable economical situation of rural areas. As a consequence, up to the mid-1960s, children from the countryside were in schools only three days a

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week. The special geography and history of Norway are important reasons for the absence of a historically rooted national upper class and the weak tradition of private upper-class schools. Education outside the public school system has happened mainly in the form of home schooling, in Christian schools, or in some special types of private schools.

At the primary and lower secondary level, education is built on either religious beliefs or ideological reasons for special-interest groups. As Norway has a Lutheran state church, the teaching of religion in school has been based on this faith. However, during the last thirty years, Lutheran hegemony has decreased and several Christian groups as well as other religious groups have worked to establish their own private schools. According to Vestre (1999) and Habermas (1995), these groups base their arguments on human rights as stated by the international conventions of UNESCO (1960) and of the United Nations (1948).

After a long political conflict, a law for private schools was enacted in 1970 and renewed in 1985 (*Privatskoleloven* 1985). This law allowed the establishment of private schools based either on religion or on alternative pedagogical methods and entitled them to receive state support at a rate of 85 percent of the cost of a public state school. Up to the late 1980s, only Christian and Rudolf Steiner schools had their applications approved by the state and granted permission to open their doors to the public. Following this trend, the first Montessori schools have appeared during the last decade.

### **Home schooling**

Although some home schooling has existed in Norway since 1739, there are only rough estimates of numbers. In 1993–94 the “modern” home-schooling movement entered the scene in Norway. Since then, strong feelings are being mobilized among both parents and school authorities. The issue is given much attention in the media and a lot of the political debate about education is connected to home schooling. In some extreme cases “*gründer* families”<sup>3</sup> were reported to the police and to the Social Security office. These families have been treated as “suspects” for challenging the system and not allowing their children to receive a school-based education. Since 1995, three home-school cases have been judged by the court system. In 1996, 50 children were home schooled. In 2001, this number rose to more than 500. There appear to be different reasons for the rapid increase in the interest in home schooling. While

some reasons are well known, others are more particularly Norwegian and rooted in the scenario outlined below.

1. In 1997, the school-entrance age was lowered from seven to six. The majority of the population was against this reform. Some parents with a six-year-old child home schooled instead of sending them to school.

2. Protests against the new religious subjects in school.<sup>4</sup> Parents chose home schooling for religious reasons.

3. There were protests against violence and bullying in school.

4. There were conflicts with school and educational specialists.

5. Parents in small rural communities choose home schooling as strategy when school authorities close their community school for financial reasons. In the past twenty years, hundreds of such schools have been closed.

6. Some families start home schooling due to pedagogical reasons. They believe in learning that occurs in a natural setting (de-schooling) away from the formal school environment.

In the development of home schooling in Norway, until 1998 this phenomenon was observed mostly in rural areas. However, in the last three years, there has been a strong and steady increase of this form for schooling in urban areas. Figures indicate that there are today about 500 children being home schooled in Norway.

Both the history of Norwegian schools and the new school law enacted 1 August 1999 are based on the principle of “obligation to education,” not an “obligation to schooling” (*Opplæringsloven* [Educational Law] 1998). This law contains two paragraphs of special importance to home schooling. Section 2–1 states three ways to fulfill the mandatory first ten years of education: public schools, private schools, or home schooling. Parents have the right to home school their children, but they get no financial support from society to support teaching at home. Usually they get free textbooks and other school materials if the local school authorities decide to do so.

Section 14–2, called the “control paragraph” in the law, states that local school authorities are obligated to assure that home-schooling programs are adequate and are authorized to test home-schooled children to document the quality of their education. The following sentence in particular has been the subject of much discussion and is the reason for serious conflict between national and local authorities and supporters of home schooling: “The community can demand that the child attend school

if the conditions for home schooling according to the School Law are not fulfilled.” While authorities interpret the sentence as a requirement that home schooling plans be approved before home schooling can begin, supporters of home schooling interpret the same sentence as a demand for documentation that home schooling be valid and good enough.

The Mosvik case is an example of one such conflict (Beck 2000). In 1995 during the Christmas season a boy was forced to take part in the school’s dance lesson. The parents, conservative Lutherans, had previously asked several times to have their son excused from such participation in school. Failing this, they took all their children out of school and started home schooling. The following day this became the major topic in the national media. When the case came to trial, another dissenting family removed their children from the same school in support of the defendants. Both families were taken to court by the state, seeking to make them comply with the school.

In November 1998, Inderøy Herredsrett (the lowest court level in Norway) returned a verdict of two to one against the two home-schooling families. Each family had to pay a fine of NOK 10,000 (about \$1,100) for not sending their children to school without reason. This case developed along two lines. The authorities felt the case demonstrated that parents had not fulfilled the conditions for home schooling. They regarded the right to home school as an exception from the obligation of compulsory school attendance. The supporters of home schooling and their lawyer wanted the case to demonstrate the validity of home schooling. Having lost at the lowest court level, the parents appealed at the next level of judiciary review (Lagmannsretten), where they won their case. A unified court saw the case from the parents’ point of view.

The school authorities appealed to the highest court level (Høyesterett). In February 1999 this court handed down a verdict of 3 to 2 in favor of the school authorities. According to Norwegian court procedure, the case then went back to the second-level court for reconsideration. However, one week before the case was to be reheard, it was withdrawn by the school authorities “because the proofs are inadequate.” As a consequence the Mosvik case was closed.

Something of importance happened as a result of this development. The case had been raised by the authorities to confirm and strengthen their control over home schooling. The general opinion is that the case ended with the opposite effect. The parents’ rights to determine the education of their children had been supported.

### *Small-scale education and home schooling*

The Norwegian educational system is expensive, with a high teacher–pupil ratio. In special education, for example, the expenditures amount to \$550 million a year (\$950 per pupil/year). At the same time test results indicate a decrease in performance toward a middle OECD level (OECD 1998). Such results suggest that efficiency must be improved and the costs lowered. The government wishes to rationalize and modernize the educational system without changing the ideology of a unified and comprehensive education. Norway is sparsely populated, with many small schools. It was possible to reduce the number of schools.

There are 3,300 primary/lower-secondary schools in Norway, of which 100 are private and 3,200 are public. Of the public schools, 1,200 have less than 100 pupils; most are in rural areas and all confront the threat of closure. Whether the reason for closing in each case is the bad economy in the county or a national policy for economic efficiency is unclear. Generalized as a national case, the effect of large-scale closing of schools points to an intentional policy. If it were not, closing forty to fifty schools a year over many years would not seem rational. In 2001, 162 schools were threatened. Schools in the periphery of small municipalities are in particular danger. In the municipality of Herøy, nine out of twelve schools have been closed.

Local and national authorities consider the ideal school size to be between 200–300 students, an optimal size for economic and educational efficiency. Taking into account costs of busing, special education, and the “shadow costs” of a community without a school and a local center for cultural enthusiasm, the logic of the authorities’ economy of education is false.

Educationalists today agree that small-scale pedagogy has the same quality standard as large-scale education. Small-scale education has been an urban postmodern fashion, a development that is not a coincidence. The concept “local” needs renewal, not least in urban areas to balance the dysfunctional effects of globalization and internationalization (Baumann 1999). The concepts of knowledge and education are universal and have no national borders. At the same time, knowledge is personal and needs concrete social connection and attachment, a locality, in the broad sense of the word.

Modern parents may provide their children with primary education, if they want to and have time for it. We find a new postmodern concept

of local community based on geography as well as religion, common cultural values or interests, where childhood and education is important. This development may offer a better opportunity for personal growth, elevate the population's level of knowledge, and increase social integration in society. Politicians on county governing boards usually encourage small rural public schools. I believe they find it painful to vote in favor of closing. Still, they do so, against the will of parents and the community. It is hard to find any right or left political pattern for closing. Political parties in a county with a more general majority-alliance vote more often for closing.

In recent years parents and communities have refused to close schools. An increasing number of communities continue to fight. When public schools closed, other possibilities in the Educational Law were used. In Norway, young people need ten years of *education* (primary and lower secondary), but not all ten years of *schooling*. Students can fulfill the demand for compulsory education in private schools or as home schooling. Accordingly, communities have developed a three-point strategy:

- (1) Have education inside the community
- (2) Try to establish a private school
- (3) Establish home schooling until private school is a reality.

Mjøsdaalen and Bjoa, two communities on the west coast of Norway, used this strategy successfully. The Mjøsdaalen primary school was closed before the 1999–2000 school year. Parents, teachers, and the rest of the community participated in a home-schooling collective. In September 1999 local elections (for municipalities and counties) took place; in Osterøy municipality, where Mjøsdaalen is located, the small-school issue was important. Political parties in favor of small schools won the election. In January 2000 all five schools in the municipality that had been closed were reopened.

In Bjoa, the lower secondary school closed in August 2000. The community chose the same strategy as Mjøsdaalen and continued as a home-schooling collective in 2000–2001. They applied to the authorities to establish a Montessori private school. The Montessori School is the private school that is most often officially approved and most similar to a Norwegian public school. Officially approved private schools are entitled to financial support of 85 percent of the cost of a similar public school. The Ministry of Education normally responds to such applications a year after they have been submitted.

Both cases were featured in national media, and in major discussions of national educational politics. In spite of being counteracted by local and national school authorities, these and other home-schooling collectives not only survive; from despair and stagnation, they gave parents and communities new enthusiasm and conviction. They also succeeded in creating a new pedagogy with project work, entrepreneurship, and “pupil firms.” Their test results in school subjects were good. The climate of cooperation between community and school and between school and parents was excellent. These local enthusiasts had managed to achieve what school authorities had only dreamed of for the public schools. They turned community schools from residual entities to front-line pedagogy in educational development work (Beck 2000 and 2001).

## **Education and the future society**

### ***Family and school***

The dissolution of the modern family has created new educational challenges in schools. Social direction and identity and cultural formation have become more important aims of the education program. Because of this development, teachers and education specialists have been entitled to take legitimate pedagogical action in more private areas, where individuals, parents, and families traditionally used to be autonomous. However, many parents, teachers, and others are protesting against this new regime of educational control; they want to keep more parent influence in education.

### ***Globalization***

Large-scale migration patterns, communication possibilities, and the new information technology have serious implications for internationalization and globalization. The universality of knowledge for all people independent of ethnicity, culture, and nationality has become more obvious. Mathematics, English, computer science, and human rights are relevant for everyone. Therefore it must be wrong to build a school knowledge curriculum based in a strong national cultural regime. The relevant knowledge is more global, more valid, and simultaneously anchored in a local context.

### ***The welfare state and the politics of knowledge***

A national educational policy as a way to create more social equality in society has had both positive and negative effects. In Norway such a welfare-state policy has been a success in reducing gender differences and partly in reducing differences between rural and urban areas, but it has not been successful in reducing differences between social classes. In spite of a modernization program and a much higher general level of education, including for the working class, economical and other social inequalities have increased over the last years. It seems fair to assume that social inequality should have been handled more directly and education policies should have been related more to pure educational and knowledge aims.

### ***The multicultural society***

Large-scale migration and mobility all over the world have given rise to a new multicultural situation in almost all countries, including Norway (Darnell and Höem 1996, Bauman 1999). Human rights issues are in conflict with the state school system based on one state church religion, as in Norway. Muslims, atheists, and Christian groups want to have their own schools and religious freedom, or they choose home schooling. Maintaining compulsory religious education in school without freedom and full access to an alternative religious education, in accordance with parents' beliefs, seems problematic.

### ***The postmodern society***

If there were a more open and universal situation in terms of access to knowledge, there would be greater opportunity for individual choice and direction in educational matters. A very strong national control over education may actually act against human rights, against individual knowledge efforts, and against the nation's need for professional knowledge in the future. From this angle, the establishment of multiple educational possibilities and freedom in educational choice ought to be encouraged.

Central issues in education always challenge and demand a balance between community rules and personal freedom (Macintyre 1995, Giddens 1991, Bauman 1997, Habermas 1995). Without an effort in



community maintenance, postmodern societies may fall apart. On the other hand, too much community power, evidenced in detailed control and administration, oppose personal engagement in knowledge and education. Modern and rich countries often stress too much state control for education. On the other hand, without such control both society and education might collapse. In modern societies, large-scale private financial funding of education could make mass public education impossible. However, the state's funding ought to be controlled mostly by parents, in a way that gives them free choice of schooling for their children.

The state is needed to finance education, to make and administer laws of education, and to set minimum standards and set regulations about degrees and exams, according to legal principles. Within such a framework, however, good education depends on personal choice, local organization, open communication, and a democratic society.

### **Concluding remarks**

Oil money has made Norway a rich nation, which can afford a large and expensive educational system. But the system is stagnating and quality is in decline. Today, the Comprehensive Unified School is excessively characterized by national management and bureaucracy. Pedagogical practice is increasingly reduced to pedagogical techniques (Weber 1982). In spite of its intentions, this can lead to a pedagogical result that creates more human alienation. Such trends can create an environment for exaggerated use of techniques expressed in national curricula and methods for learning. Such trends are accelerating. As part of globalization, the new curriculum for social and special education includes children's identity formation as well as aims of society. Such state-directed pedagogy may, beyond a certain limit, hamper necessary personal and social freedom in education and alienate ongoing education from the personal motivation to learn. To counteract such dysfunctional development, new pedagogical movements that believe in "unschooling" and natural growth are increasing (Gatto 1992, Illich 1971).

When access to knowledge is open and universal there is a strong need for individual choice in education. Too much national control with educational policies and curricula may act against human rights, against individual efforts to gain knowledge, against new postmodern communities and against the nation's need for professional knowledge in the

future. Multiple educational possibilities and freedom in educational choice ought to be encouraged. The Norway of today seems to have too little and too weak alternative educational opportunities for future needs. This has to be changed. Parents have a fundamental right to choose a type of education for their children. There are, of course, limits to home schooling. Sometimes it must be stopped, such as when evidence indicates that this is necessary to avoid serious trouble for the children. However, thus far in Norway, it is obvious that the actors behind home schooling and small-scale community groups for education have become entrepreneurs for a relevant future education.

## Notes

1. *Enhetsskolen* is the compulsory, comprehensive/unified schooling in Norway, comprising age groups 6–16, grades 1–10.

2. “Rural rest category”—the label indicates that this has been an opportunity surviving historically mainly in rural areas.

3. “*Gründer* families”—parents who take initiatives to test the legal room for action in establishing home schooling or private schools.

4. Hoping to satisfy both the strong Christian lobby and the state’s integration needs, a new subject was created, “KRL” (Christianity, religions and “life views,” e.g., human ethics).

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