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Legitimizing private school policy within a political divide: the role of international references

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ABSTRACT

Researchers are increasingly emphasizing the importance of international actors' influence on defining education policy in different contexts. The article argues that referencing international organizations is a way of legitimizing changes to private school policy. Using Norway as an example, the article investigates how international references are used by the political divide: first, a centre-right government liberalized private school policy. This was reversed by the successive centre-left government, before the successive centre-right government again liberalized private school policy. The study draws on content analysis of policy documents from 2002 to 2018. The analysis displays the eclectic nature of how international references are used to (de)legitimize private school policies. Different governments have used similar international references either to legitimise the liberalization of private schooling policy, or to delegitimise such policy. However, the analysis also shows that concepts like free choice, diversity and competition are central in legitimising private school policy. The study of international referencing in the education field indicates several consequences for the Norwegian education welfare state ideal, such as emphasising a stronger market-orientation. This study shows that analysing how actors position political arguments is important when understanding how nation states, as proactive entities, negotiate meaning and evidence from international references.

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Introduction

This article explores recent policy changes concerning the privatization of education in Norway at a time of comprehensive reforms in the public and private education sectors. Policy changes are understood as the changes in the legal framework that regulates who is eligible to establish private schools as well as the terms for regulating financing and curricula for private schools. Other studies have focused on the regulations and funding to examine the governing of private schooling (West & Nikolai, 2017). In the field of educational policy, researchers are increasingly questioning what type of knowledge policy-makers use as evidence to legitimize education reforms (Baek et al., 2018; C. Lundahl & Serder, 2020; Ozga, 2019; Wiseman, 2010). Drawing on international and comparative policy studies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002; Waldow, 2012), the main thesis of this article is that international references are used to legitimize contested education reforms, as, for example, the liberalization of private schooling. Studying the use of references in education policy-making provides insight into mechanisms of legitimacy production (Ringarp & Waldow, 2016; Steiner-

Khamsi, 2002; Takayama et al., 2013; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014).

The aim of the study is to investigate how successive Norwegian governments have produced legitimacy for contested policy reforms, such as the privatization of education. Within this policy debate there are two main positions which can be recognized as a political divide. First a position arguing that the privatization of education should be limited and regulated, and a second position arguing that privatization of education can contribute positively to the quality of the Norwegian education system. From 2002 to 2019, the number of pupils attending Norwegian private schools more than doubled, growing by 135%, from 11 535 to 27 027 pupils. As of 2019, there are 261 independent schools with 27 027 pupils, and 2538 public schools with 609 223 pupils (primary and lower secondary school) (Statistics Norway, 2019). These trends have placed Norway in a global education context with reforms that are advancing school choice or privatization of education. However, recent studies have shown that the phenomenon of privatization and pro-privatization policies unfold and affect countries differently depending on their political, social, cultural and

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economic configurations (Koinzer et al., 2017; Verger et al., 2017). In the Nordic context, privatization of schooling has been highly contested for centuries as education is valued as a universal public good. In particular, Norway has been less inclined than Sweden and Denmark to follow market-oriented approaches when it comes to schooling, instead preserving its emphasis on public comprehensive schooling (Dovemark et al., 2018; Sivesind & Saglie, 2017).

The study focuses on the period from 2002 to 2018, a time when three private school reforms were introduced by three different governments. First, the centre-right government's school reform from 2002–2003 made it easier to establish private schools. Next, the centre-left government's school reform from 2005–2006 reversed the centre-right policy by reintroducing specific requirements for establishing private schools. Finally, the school reform from 2014–2015, introduced by another centre-right coalition government, again liberalized the private school policy, allowing for more alternative private schools and schools offering a distinct profile. In the past, Norway has made few central policy changes to revise the regulations for private schools, however, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, such revisions have increased. These recent policy developments and the growing number of private schools and students in these schools indicate that the more traditional public and political opinions regarding private schooling in Norway are shifting. Education is highly regulated by the state in Norway as part of the public welfare system. Policy changes in the direction of liberalization of private schooling can as such be an early sign of changes in the social democratic Norwegian welfare state ideal and a movement towards a more market-oriented approach. An investigation into these policy changes might provide important insights into the policy legitimization of such developments.

Bearing this in mind, the article scrutinizes the recent policy developments towards privatization of education in Norway through a document and content analysis of government propositions and the parliamentary processing of the governments' proposals. In particular, the aim is to investigate policymakers' use of references in policy documents and how the policy changes that regulate private schools are legitimized, as initiated by each of the governments in a period characterized by comprehensive reforms dealing with the decentralization and efficiency of education. The research question of the study is: *How are policy changes that regulate private schooling legitimized by successive governments in a period of comprehensive reform?*

Context of the study

After World War II, the Nordic countries began to place even greater value on education and dedicated a larger share of their state's budget to education and the promotion of nation-building, common values and social equality in a comprehensive public school (Telhaug et al., 2006). The focus on a strong public school is reflected by the concept of the comprehensive school for all – which represents the ideals of the free, public, comprehensive school model accessible to all (Imsen et al., 2017). Norway has been able to maintain this focus on equality, for instance, through the social-democratic-oriented policies of the 1970s and due to a fairly high level of agreement between the political parties (Wiborg, 2013), and various Norwegian governments have aimed to have an educational system that avoids social inequality and social segregation (Lauglo, 2009; Volckmar, 2018). Most private schools¹ are in fact highly subsidized by the government, which currently covers 85% of student expenditures. The policy reforms related to private schooling in 1970 and in 1985, however, only granted funding to the private schools that presented an alternative approach to schooling, either as a pedagogical alternative, such as the Waldorf schools, or as a faith-based alternative, such as Christian schools.

In the last 15 years, however, school policy reforms have extensively changed the education sector, focusing less on the 'school for all' (Aasen, 2007; Imsen & Volckmar, 2014; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). These policy developments are usually understood in light of increasing influence from international actors and international education policies. For example, recent educational reforms have shifted their focus towards clearer accountability measures through monitoring the quality of education and using an outcome-based approach with greater focus on individual performance (Prøitz, 2015a). One of the most indicative policies that has followed this trend is the Knowledge Promotion Reform of 2006 that affected primary and secondary education (Aasen, 2007, 2012). However, the recent focus on individual performance, which envisions education as vital for successful competition in the global market, did not explicitly encourage the introduction of for-profit and business actors in tax funded education/schools, as is the case in the Swedish school system (L. Lundahl, 2002).

Studying policy legitimization

A growing number of studies have focused on how the international actors and international policy trends in education are used to legitimize or delegitimize the politics of national education (C. Lundahl

& Serder, 2020; Ringarp & Waldow, 2016; Tveit & Lundahl, 2018). The international aspect, also understood as an educational phenomenon observed from elsewhere, may be used to scandalize the situation, thus justifying the need for policy change. In particular, this can be used to legitimize national reforms that are perceived as controversial at home (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). The study of the complexity of education policy requires an understanding of the different political forces that compete to define goals, problems and solutions for the education project at the system and classroom level. These forces have been proven to work concurrently in the Norwegian education reforms, across time and with varying external influence (Aasen et al., 2014). The study investigates the legitimization of the liberalization of policy for private schooling, a controversial reform due to national characteristics.

The article argues that the references to international organizations or other countries' policies function as a way of legitimizing such contested education reforms as the liberalization of private schooling. To examine policy legitimization, the study is inspired by the interpretative framework often adopted to analyse the borrowing and lending of policy in education (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). In the past decades, research on educational policy borrowing has attempted to understand why and how educational ideas and practices are transferred across national contexts. Recently, within the field of comparative research, borrowing can be more generally understood as policy influence across countries (C. Lundahl & Serder, 2020) and as a part of the process of legitimation or delegitimation of educational ideas in the national reform contexts, with international references (Waldow, 2012). In this paper the international references are considered to be in line with Steiner-Khamsi's conception, where, rather than looking at borrowing, the focus is on the use of international references as a part of a 'domestic induced rhetoric' (2012).

The interpretative framework, developed for the purpose of this study, makes it possible to identify and analyse how a country can legitimize its policy agenda by using selective references from other national education policies or international organizations (Waldow, 2012). International references are understood as 'references to other countries and international organisations (IOs) or data, material, recommendations, etc. produced by other countries or IOs' (Ringarp & Waldow, 2016, p. 1). International references can be seen as the consequence of the complexity that the educational system is experiencing. This complexity places higher demands on the legitimization of educational policymaking (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002), meaning there might be a need for an additional authority to justify current educational

reforms and decisions (Schriewer, 1992). However, an international reference does not automatically imply external influence or that some content, practice or idea has been borrowed. The international references in this case, are not an external force, 'but rather a domestically induced rhetoric mobilised at particular moments of protracted policy conflict, to generate reform pressure and build policy advocacy coalitions' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). It is important to note that the actual reference can provide legitimization for education reform just as much as when the original source (of the international reference) is left unreported (Waldow, 2009, 2012).

Nonetheless, other educational systems or other international trends are not the only types of references available to policymakers. References to science can be used in a political argument to prove the effectiveness of a reform, for instance, through cross-national research (Waldow, 2012). In particular, IOs such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) play a key role in identifying effective education systems through international standardized tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Steiner-Khamsi, 2003). The publication of PISA results presents powerful models for justifying contested reforms. Legitimacy can also be produced by referring to values, for example, when reforms are justified as representing a set of values, e.g. social justice, equality and equity. Since education is connected with power and ideology in multiple ways value-based ideologies are often found to advance policy agendas (Aasen et al., 2004). Reforms can also be legitimized by drawing attention to the countries' great history and past achievements, projecting this on to domestic solutions that are considered to have worked previously. Usually, such references can indicate that the influence from abroad is reduced (Schulte & Wermke, 2019). The references presented are usually found in policies, either alone or combined. However, international references combined with references to science can help value-based policymaking to gain more legitimacy. It has been showed in fact, that these references, such as PISA, are used as authoritative evidence even when they are not providing actual evidence for the reform (C. Lundahl & Serder, 2020; Tveit & Lundahl, 2018). All the different types of references presented in this section provide education policymakers with several opportunities to legitimize or delegitimise educational agendas.

Materials

The data for this study comprise an extensive body of policy documents that function as a regulatory framework for private schooling (see Table 1 for an

Table 1. Overview of the policy documents included in the study.

Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 state budgets from 2002/2003 to 2017/2018 • 6 propositions • 1 report to the parliament
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2002–2003 parliamentary processing of the government's policy proposal for the Independent School Act (Ot. prp. nr. 33) • 2006–2007 parliamentary processing of the government's policy proposal for Changes to the Independent School Act (Ot. prp. nr. 37) • 2014–2015 parliamentary processing of the government's policy proposal for Changes to the Private School Act (Prop. 84 L)

overview of the document corpus of the study). It is important to note that the documents presented are different in nature. The documents that are the result of government processes constitute the policy, whereas the documents stemming from the political debates and, hence, the political parties' views on the matter represent the political aspect (Dahler-Larsen, 2003). The results of the political debates are reflected in the parliamentary processing² of the government's policy proposal (Stortinget, 2020).

Document analysis was used to gain insight into the underlying meanings, values and accounts developed by the policy documents (Cohen et al., 2011; Fitzgerald, 2012). Policy documents are produced by the government: the Proposition to the Parliament³ or the Report to the Parliament. Propositions to Parliament present the proposed resolutions and legislation that need to be discussed and approved by the Parliament, often in terms of judicial or fiscal concerns. Reports to the Parliament present issues often related to a particular topic of development and potential new legislation. The government submits these propositions and reports to the Parliament, where they are dealt with by the appropriate standing committees.⁴ In the standing committee, remarks and recommendations are submitted to the Parliament for the parliamentary processing of the proposal. The parliamentary processing of the policy proposals comprises publicly available documents, such as official reports from the Parliamentary sessions. These documents are treated as official policy documents because they are part of the Norwegian democratic process of transparency. The parliamentary processing selected for this study focused on the propositions that debated policy changes for the regulatory framework of private schooling in 2003, 2007 and 2015 (Table 1).

Another document presented in the Parliament is the national budget, which is the annual budget proposition presented in the parliament's autumn sessions by the Minister of Finance, who presents an overview of the national economy and justifies the government's priorities and budget proposals (Prøitz, 2015a). The budget has more or less the same format

every year, making the annual budgets comparable across time. Each budget reflects the economic goals, priorities and intentions for the coming year by sharing appropriations between the various sectors and ministries. Furthermore, each ministry, for example, the Ministry of Education and Research, produces its own economic plan with its own priorities and goals for the year in question. Because the documents are 'an updated source of political priorities at the time' (Prøitz, 2015a, p. 278), they are expected to provide solid indications of how priorities are legitimized, which is highly relevant for the present study.

Searches for relevant documents were conducted in the archives of the official government website with search queries used in Norwegian to refer to private schools and related policy: private schools, free schools, free school policy and private school policy. The documents identified by the searches were downloaded in PDF format. In the first phase of skimming through the texts, documents that dealt with changes in private schools' legislation were selected for further analysis. Through this search, 35 governmental documents produced by the Ministry of Education and Research were identified, all of which – in different ways – dealt with the financial or legislative aspects of private schools in Norway. Documents with a scope outside the research question of the current study were excluded from the analysis.

Analysis of the material

The analysis was based on the concept of references. The aim was to investigate how different references can figure in the policy documents of successive governments, providing legitimization for changes in the private schooling reforms. There were two phases in the content analysis. The first was a word search drawing on both theory and previous studies to identify words and categories of references to map the prevalence of relevant words in the ways they were used to support arguments for private schooling. For instance, values such as freedom of choice are likely to appear in policy agendas that attempt to justify the privatization of education policies (Arreman & Holm, 2011; Ball, 2007). Examples of word search strings used are: (a) reference to values, for example: freedom of choice, (b) international references, for example: Finland and (c) reference to scientific results, for example: PISA's cross-national research. This method provided an overview of the types of references used by the different governments and also the sections of the extended documents where these references were applied.

As the documents consist of sections that were not relevant for this study (such as those considering particular financial aspects or legal issues) not all

Table 2. References from the entire database.

Types of references	Word search
Reference to values	freedom of choice, parents' rights to choose, right to choose, school choice, human right(s) diversity, alternative, different, diverse, competition, challenging equality, equal
International references and scientific results	International conventions, International commitments Human rights Act United Nations Sweden/Swedish Denmark/Danish Finland/Finnish OECD PISA/International studies/ results

the sections of the policies were relevant for the mapping of the words used. The parliamentary processing instead represents a debate on whether the policy changes proposed are legitimized through a visible political process of 'interests, representation, bargaining, negotiation, power bases, alliance formation, decision making, etc'. (Dahler-Larsen, 2003, p. 2). Thus, the entire document is relevant for the study.

In the second phase of the content analysis, an in-depth reading of the identified relevant sections was undertaken, then leading to further investigation (Prøitz, 2015a). The references identified as linked to the value of choice, for instance, displayed several references in the documents (see Table 2 for example).

Findings

In the following, the role of references used by successive governments to legitimize policy changes for private schooling is highlighted. The findings are structured chronologically and follow the three periods during which the governments in office introduced the policy changes into legislation. Extracted statements from the material in each period are shown to exemplify some of the different legitimization strategies used to promote policy changes for private schooling.

Bondevik II Government (2001–2005)

The right-centre coalition government under Prime Minister Bondevik's second government (Bondevik II) consisted of three parties: the Conservative Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. As mentioned above, this government facilitated the establishment of private schools.

Private schools: market-oriented values and international references

The Bondevik II government legitimized the liberalization of private schooling by using references to values of choice and diversity. Furthermore, these values were found to be supported by such international references as the international conventions of the United Nations. In several policy documents, the core argument was that increased autonomy for schools, combined with increased freedom of choice for students and parents, would lead to a more diverse education system that would be more meaningful for the students (Ministry of Education, 2005, 2006; Ministry of Education and Research, 2003a, 2004). According to the coalition government, private schools were an important way of ensuring 'diversity' and 'school choice', and 'challenging public schools', thereby improving them. This is exemplified in the extract below, where it is argued that private schools would improve the diversity of the educational system by providing a more varied educational programme.

The point of strengthening the public school is that it must be developed. New things must be tried out. Within the boundaries of the public school, it is not always possible to try new things (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2003, p. 574) (Author's translation).

The reference to choice can be considered to belong to a market-oriented language (Ball, 2007). Diversity, however, usually refer to the meaning of a variety and co-existence of many different elements (values, ideas, races, cultures etc.) which are not necessarily market-oriented. In this case, following the government's arguments it can be argued that diversity in this case also is related to market-orientation since it is strongly linked with choice.

Furthermore, to justify the liberalization of private schooling, the Ministry of Education argued that the establishment of private schools is a democratic right, emphasizing the importance of 'freedom of choice' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2003b, p. 7). This is a reference to a specific set of values based on the human rights discourse promoted by the United Nations. Going even further, the government linked the parents' freedom to choose a school with their moral and religious beliefs – directly referencing the UN's International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2003b, p. 7).

While the references to choice and diversity is here linked to a market-oriented language (Ball, 2007), the reference to the human rights framework falls into the category of international references as the convention document has been produced by an IO.

Moreover, in additional instances the values of choice and diversity are supported by an international reference, as in the National Budget of 2006, where the international reference to the ICESCR and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provided supplementary authority to the pro-privatization argument, as illustrated in the following extract:

This (human rights) convention has the premise that parents should be able to choose an education for their children based on their own religion or belief system, something that must be able to be achieved through the establishment of private schools. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007/2006, p. 84) (Author's translation from Norwegian)

Another international reference used to strengthen the references to choice and diversity values and thereby legitimizing the government's liberalization policies is the reference to Sweden and its liberal private school policy. In fact, politicians from the coalition government referred to Sweden as a successful combination of private schools and free school choice. They argued that this combination had reduced social segregation in Sweden because pupils living in areas with a high proportion of immigrants could choose to attend better schools. Because of free school choice, parents did not have to move away from the catchment area to attend the school of their choice (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2003, p. 578). The reference to Sweden is used to prove that private schools can be instrumental in promoting social justice while at the same time increasing competition between schools.

The Bondevik II government appears to use values that are common to a market-oriented language by importing ways of thinking from other areas than the education sector (Waldow, 2012). The observed referencing uses a certain logic of causality based on a market-oriented vision, where increased diversity and choice will increase competition between schools, that will then in turn raise quality and benefit the entire education system. Moreover, these market-oriented value references were accompanied by international references, as for example, the human rights framework, or other similar education policies liberalizing funding for private schooling (the case of Sweden). These were quite possibly used because market-oriented values were more difficult to justify in the Norwegian education policy as they break with the belief in the welfare state ideal. A market-oriented language could be more in line with the education policy of the Anglo-American tradition whereas, in the Norwegian tradition, these market-oriented arguments for reforms need to find legitimization through an external and higher authority, as for example, a supranational organization. Using international

references, however, does not mean that the Norwegian education system is now entering on a liberal welfare ideal path or putting its faith in a quasi-market approach. Schools are not allowed to be run as businesses, but are allowed, within the state regulations, to compete with public schools to raise the quality of educational standards. In this case, the reference allows the government to open for mechanisms of market-oriented education whilst maintaining a highly state-regulated education system. It appears that the key values promoted by the government are those of diversity and freedom of choice, the emphasis of which, in line with recent education policy, aims at raising the quality of education and its standards. Furthermore, the government used international references to obtain additional authority to legitimize changes in the private schooling regulatory framework, which opened for more market-oriented values within the Norwegian education welfare state ideal.

Stoltenberg I and II Governments (2005–2009 and 2009–2013)

The coalition government under Prime Minister Stoltenberg's first and second governments (Stoltenberg I and II) was composed of the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party. The coalition changed the policy that liberalized private schools by reintroducing the regulations first introduced in 1985.

Private schools within the social-democratic tradition: values of equality and international references

In the Stoltenberg I and II coalition governments, references to the values of equality and the social democratic tradition of one school for all (the comprehensive school) are key elements in the policy for legitimizing stricter regulations for private schooling. The new policies were an adjustment away from the market-oriented values of the previous government.

When presenting a new plan for private school policy for 2007, the Stoltenberg government declared that the main goal was to strengthen the public school system since 'the vast majority of Norwegian children and youth will receive education in public schools, reflecting the diversity of Norwegian society' (Ministry of Education, 2007b, p. 10) (Author's translation). In line with the new government's vision for the Norwegian school, public schools were represented as an important priority because they could ensure the equality of learning outcome amongst the diverse groups in society. The government, here, referenced its own social democratic tradition of

one school for all and equality values to legitimize a new private education policy based on stricter financial requirements for the establishment of private schools.

In the documents produced during the two periods of the so-called red-green coalition, references to the social democratic tradition of the comprehensive school are recurrent. It appears that to preserve the value of equality, the government's aim was to stop the growth of private schools. References to the value of equality and to the social democratic tradition were used to legitimize the re-introduction of regulations that would limit the growth of private schools and re-establish the importance of the comprehensive school. These references appear in several instances (Ministry of Education, 2006, 2007c, 2007a), as is also evident in the following extract:

An important pillar in Norwegian society has been that everyone, regardless of background, goes to the same school, and learns to work together and respect each other. The school is the most important venue for building fellowship in Norway, helping to reduce differences and equip students to function in a diverse society. The public comprehensive school has room for everyone and an eye for the individual, regardless of social and cultural backgrounds, skills and values. The responsibility of society is to ensure that everyone is given equal opportunities so that the right to education is genuine. Education should therefore be a public responsibility under democratic control and accessible to all. (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 7) (Author's translation)

Within its policy propositions, the government acknowledged the international commitments that Norway was obligated to follow, for example, giving parents the right to choose other schools according to their religious or belief systems. To legitimize private schools, the Stoltenberg II government made several references to IOs, such as the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights. The government noted, however, that Norway was not obligated to contribute financially or otherwise to the operation of these schools.

As with the previous government, international references were also used in parliamentary processing to re-establish the importance of the comprehensive school, for instance, referring to an OECD report on the effects of free school choice and private schools, thereby supporting this government's argument that free school choice and private schools led to segregation and lower than average test results (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2007, p. 651). The document produced by the IO framed this problem through quantitative research evidence providing scientific legitimacy to the government's argument. The nature of the evidence-based data provides high legitimation since it is perceived to be more accurate and trustworthy

(Wiseman, 2010). The government also used international references addressing the educational systems of Sweden and Denmark. However, these references were used to prove that the liberalization of private schooling can lead to school segregation (Denmark, cultural segregation) and lower pupils' competencies (Sweden), in contrast to the previous government's opposite argument. In the case of Sweden, competition might have stimulated schools, but also reduced the quality of education by offering choices in the school sector that were disconnected from genuine job opportunities (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2007, p. 644). On the other hand, Finland was referenced because of its PISA results and its very few private schools (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2007, p. 644). The international references, combined with scientific evidence from large-scale assessments and evidence-based research, further served the new government's vision for school by promoting the importance of school as a common good, thus, the value of one school for all.

The main focus of the government's position was to re-establish the importance of the comprehensive school and in doing so legitimize policy changes to restrict eligibility for private school funding. For instance, the government argued that only private schools that offered a religious or pedagogical alternative were eligible for school grants since it was argued that these schools did not create inequality. Based on the references to equality and international references, the government legitimized the reintroduction of the regulations first introduced in 1985. Furthermore, these references support a causality approach based on a social democratic tradition where a school for all is the best way to treat students and avoid the risk of developing inequality.

Solberg government (2013 to present)

The government under Prime Minister Solberg is a centre-right coalition of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party.⁵ It was supported in Parliament by the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party through a cooperation agreement. In 2015, the government liberalized private school policy by accepting new types of private schools.

Private schools: diversity, choice, freedom and healthy competition

Through this policy change that liberalized private schools, the government pointed to the importance of giving more freedom to private schools so they could offer a special profile that opened for the implementation of diverse teaching approaches. The new types of private schools that the policy change

aimed to approve made it possible to direct special academic attention on one subject or facilitated the implementation of a pedagogical approach that differed from what was used in public schools or other private schools, as described in the following extract:

By proposing a profile school as the new basis, the ministry aims to open for approval of schools that wish to offer something beyond the scope of the Knowledge Promotion reform (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 24) (Authors' translation)

The value of freedom can also be understood in line with a market-oriented approach, where liberalization can allow the system to improve and grow. The focus of this policy change was to allow private schools to implement their specific profiles and to create a genuine alternative to public schools.

Compared to the previous governments, from 2015 to 2018 there has been a shift in the use of international references to legitimize the liberalization of private schooling. In the parliamentary documents, international references, in particular those that refer to other countries' approaches, are not used to justify the new regulatory framework which would allow for more state-subsidized private schools. The reference to Sweden, for instance, seems to have lost its authority, possibly due to the fact that it has been depicted on several occasions by the previous government and current opposition as one of the OECD countries that had experienced the largest decline in students' achievement-test results, i.e. the PISA results for all subjects (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2015, p. 4084). Moreover, the international references might have lost their legitimizing effect because the opposition had used evidence-based research during parliamentary proceedings to argue that threats to inequality and segregation are present in the Swedish context (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2015, pp. -4079–4084).

The reference to the UN convention (ICESC) (Ministry of Education, 2015), on the other hand, appears consistently to support the argument that the right to choose is a human right. In the parliamentary debates, such international references were only mentioned to note that the policy changes would ensure that Norway is committed to the human rights conventions.

At the same time, and similar to the Bondevik II government, the Solberg government's standpoint on promoting policy changes was supported consistently through the references to the values of diversity and choice. In fact, according to the government, additional state-subsidized private schools could increase diversity and learning amongst schools while, at the same time, it could ensure the individual's

opportunity to choose a private school, thereby benefitting students (Ministry of Education, 2015; Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2015). Here, diversity is understood both as a diverse profile of schools and diversity of choice. Furthermore, the government coalition more explicitly advanced the argument that diversity would lead to competition between schools, which would improve the quality of the entire education system (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2015, p. 4082). Following the government's argument, more private schools will create quality and incentivize teachers' development work. It thus appears from the referencing observed that more market-oriented values have resurfaced with a keener emphasis on competition. In fact, the values of diversity, freedom of choice and competition are concepts found together as part of the supply (competition) and demand (choice) approach of education quasi-markets (Ball & Youdell, 2009; L. Lundahl, 2002). This finding indicates that market-oriented values have been reintroduced from the era of the Bondevik II government. The difference between the new and previous government is that these market-oriented values are not combined with international country references, such as Sweden. In the parliamentary processing, however, it is repeatedly noted that international education plays an important role for Norway. International in this case is associated with a specific international curriculum developed by a well-known global actor: the International Baccalaureate. According to the coalition governments, schools like the International Baccalaureate create 'healthy' competition for public schools and also benefit Norway when competing in the global market (Standing Committee on Education, Research and Church Affairs, 2015, p. 4089). The extract below exemplifies through one concrete case how an international private school can stimulate healthy competition and private schools can stimulate healthy competition between public school Y and international school X:

(X international school) (.) is widely accepted as one of the country's very best [private] schools. Not many metres away is (Y public School) upper secondary school. Should we believe the Left, this school should be so strongly threatened by the scary private school that it should barely be able to cope – yes, almost ready to fall. The opposite is the case. (Y public School) upper secondary school is the country's largest upper secondary school – a modern school with happy students, good results (.) (Ministry of Education, 2015) (Authors' translation)

The references to values of *diversity*, *choice*, *freedom* and *competition* were used as vehicles to legitimize policy changes. These legitimizing strategies differ from the previous governments because they do not

appear to be combined with references to other countries with similar educational policy for private schooling. Instead, a more appropriate international reference can be found in a global pedagogical actor who is recognized worldwide as a 'gold standard' in education (Resnik, 2012).

Discussion

This article has focused on how successive governments have legitimized policy changes for private schooling in Norway from 2002 to 2018. The main argument of the study has been that international references were used to legitimize a contested reform: the liberalization of private schooling. Below follows a discussion of how the successive governments made use of international references (UN conventions and references to other countries) and what role they played in legitimizing the policy changes that regulate private schooling.

The eclectic nature of the role of international references

International references are consistently present when legitimizing private schooling across successive governments. The analysis reveals two different preferred international references. First, the human rights framework and the UN conventions functioned consistently throughout the studied period (2002–2018) as all three governments used them as an international source for legitimizing private schools. This includes the centre-left governments (Stoltenberg I and II), which 'passively' legitimized private schooling by referring to the international commitment to human rights and UN conventions, but at the same time questioning whether actively providing economic support to private schools is a human right.

Particularly interesting is how similar references to other countries' educational systems, such as Sweden, are used for accommodating different political ideas for the legitimization and delegitimation of the desired policy changes concerning the regulation of private schooling in the Bondevik II and Stoltenberg governments. The origin of the proposed policy liberalizing choice and diversity was inspired by the Swedish equivalent (Wiborg, 2013). Thus, the references to the neighbouring country of Sweden served as an effective reference for the centre-right coalition (Bondevik II, 2001–2005) because it reflected the desired liberal policies for private schooling and the introduction of market-oriented values. In fact, the country is portrayed as a good example from abroad in terms of greater freedom of choice and similar social democratic traditions.

At the same time, Sweden is an effective reference also for the succeeding centre-left government (2005–2013), because of Sweden's declining results in the PISA ranking tests. This reference is then combined with other countries' positive results, such as Finland. Their performance was then associated with the countries' educational policies for private schooling. These international references in combination with references to science (PISA results) allowed the centre-left to delegitimize Sweden as an educational model. Sweden in fact represents an unwanted scenario at home, e.g. social segregation and low academic results, while Finland represents the preferred politics of the party, with almost no private schooling combined with high performing public schools. By displaying Sweden as a low-performer country through international large-scale assessments (reference to science), the Stoltenberg government changed the status of Sweden as an international reference for Norway.

Finally, references to Sweden do not appear in the Solberg government's argumentation. According to Waldow, politicians can deliberately silence the international references if they are not perceived as effective legitimizing strategies (Waldow, 2009). It is therefore possible that even though Sweden was the country that inspired Norway's policy for private schooling, references to Sweden have now, in the Solberg government, been 'silenced' due to the shift in how Sweden is perceived in relation to its performance in the international comparative studies (PISA). Another explanation for Sweden losing its legitimacy status might be that Sweden has gone too far in its marketization and privatization project, and in the Norwegian educational context it might not be acceptable to be influenced by one of the most liberal school systems in the OECD.

The analysis displays how the reference to Sweden has been an effective reference within the political divide, and how the reference has been silenced when it no longer provides legitimization. The use of international references could be interpreted as a temporary policy strategy that serves the purpose of legitimizing ideas and practices in education, especially if those ideas and practices are contested (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). According to Steiner-Khamsi, when an educational reform has been internalized, international references are removed. The shift in the use of these legitimizing strategies may thus imply that liberalization of the policy for private schooling has become less contested across the studied period and has been now internalized (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). These findings show a gradual tendency in Norway towards liberalizing policy for private schooling, in line with a market-liberal knowledge regime (Aasen et al., 2014). Under the influence of this regime, having more private schools

is seen as a way to boost competition, increase the quality of education and incentivize teachers' development work. In line with this reasoning, the IB curriculum is a good example (often provided by private schools) as, according to Resnik (2008), it aims to give students the competencies needed to deal with the growing demands of the global job market.

The tension between long-standing ideologies

Research on education policy also shows how it is difficult to see the political process of legitimization through dichotomies (Dahler-Larsen, 2003). Together with other studies (Aasen et al., 2014), the findings highlight the arguments for reforms where Norwegian policymakers have appeared to simultaneously incorporate contradicting elements from their different values. For instance, even if the centre-right may be critical of public comprehensive schools because of their lack of diversity, they still consider their primary goal to be to strengthen public schooling. Furthermore, they do not support the idea that private schools can make a profit; they must be not-for-profit institutions. In the referencing observed, however, the centre-right governments use selected international references to support a market-oriented vision, where increased diversity and choice will lead to more competition amongst schools, and through this competition, quality will be improved to the benefit of the entire education system.

Through the study of references, it is possible to see how the centre-left has apparently accepted that private schooling is a human right, and the state is responsible for offering an alternative education to the comprehensive school. At the same time, it is clear that the party still draws on the social democratic tradition as a fundamental building block, where the school for all is seen as the best solution to threats of social inequality. Drawing on the interpretative framework of this study, reforms can also be legitimized by drawing attention to the countries' great history and past achievements, projecting this on to domestic solutions that are considered to have worked in the past (Schulte & Wermke, 2019). There is a tension identified in both the long-standing ideologies within the social aspects of education, i.e. shifting from the collective to the individual good, and from ensuring equal opportunities for all to diverse education for all.

Private schools are growing probably because they aim to offer something that public schools are not providing. The liberalization of private schooling which concurs with the process of diversifying the quite monolithic Norwegian model allows for more than the one school for all system to be accepted. For example, the IB programme challenges the

Norwegian model through its results and its advanced curricula, and the Waldorf approach to education is a source of inspiration for national education policies through its learning theories. The former model is based on the Anglo-Saxon educational tradition and the latter is the German model modified to fit the Norwegian model. Other types of private schools with a particular profile are also introduced and open to international influence and differentiation of the Norwegian culture. On the one hand, this study gives insight into how private schools are increasingly seen (through a diverse pedagogical approach and more competition) to enhance the policy and practice of the Norwegian public school model. On the other hand, the study sheds light on the importance of the contextual political configurations in the choice of references, highlighting both contradicting elements and the political tensions in contexts where education is considered a public good.

Concluding remarks

This article has examined how a political divide has used international references to legitimize policy changes that regulates private schooling. First, the analysis displays the eclectic nature of the role of international references, e.g. Sweden which has shown to be an effective reference that can accommodate both sides of the political divide. This can be seen in how the first government emphasized the Swedish example to liberalize policy for private schooling while the next government used the same example to delegitimise such policy. Second, the article shows how the Solberg government silenced the reference to Sweden when the reference no longer provided legitimation. However, the analysis also shows that concepts like free choice, diversity and competition are central in legitimising private school policy. The implications of this analysis raise important reflections about the actual authority of international references, as it has been shown here that the very same example can be used for very different and even contradictory legitimizing purposes. As previous research (Prøitz, 2015b; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), this study shows that analysing how actors position political arguments is important when understanding how nation states, as proactive entities, negotiate meaning and evidence from international references. This policy legitimation process is central to understand the meaning making in national education policy. Furthermore, the analysis indicates several consequences of studying international referencing, such as highlighting a stronger market-orientation within the Norwegian education welfare state idea. In fact, the analysis has found how the policy for liberalizing private schooling is gradually gaining more acceptance interpreted by the fact that previous

used international references are no longer visible in the policy documents and thereby indicating no need for such referencing to make the argument.

Finally, the analysis has illustrated that in the private schooling debate today there is a cross-party understanding that diversity is a key element for enhancing the quality of education. In particular, policymakers of the Solberg Government have emphasized the importance of increased freedom, both within the national curriculum and in the private schools' operation. Whilst these are policy assumptions based on the expectations of linearity amongst system levels, policy needs to be further 'translated from text to action – put into practice – in relation to history and to context, with the resources available' (Ball et al., 2012, p. 3). An important finding in this study is the need to further investigate whether the increase in the number of private schools actually leads to differentiation of the school system reflected in a diversity of pedagogical choices and practices that can meet the needs and wishes of different students.

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Notes

- 1 In Norway there are two types of private schools, one type receives state funding and is regulated by the Free School Act, and the second type does not receive state support. This study focuses on the former type, which is more representative of the private schools in Norway.
- 2 The parliament processes the government's policy proposal through a recommendation (*innstilling*) from the parliament's standing committee which is consequently debated in the parliament (the so-called First and Second Readings).
- 3 The Norwegian Parliament is called *Storting*.
- 4 The Church, Education and Research Committee is a cross-party committee consisting of members of Parliament. From 2017 Church affairs were moved to another ministry and today the name of the committee is Education and Research.
- 5 The Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party entered the government in 2018 and 2019, respectively, while the Progress Party exited the government in 2020.

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