

Knowledge Regimes and Contradictions in Education Reforms

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Abstract

The article outlines a theoretical framework for understanding education policy and education reforms based on the concept of knowledge regimes. The concept refers to understandings and definitions of governance and procedural aspects, manners of governing and curriculum issues, thus it comprises contents, structures, and processes of education policy and governance. The article discusses how the concept may be helpful in understanding the complexity and ambiguity of education policy and development. The article argues that the concept of knowledge regimes enables us to gain a better understanding of education policy, the politics of education, and the political in education. Greater awareness of knowledge regimes can also help us to better understand both the circulation of national policy documents and technical and administrative plans, and the situation of those involved in education practice.

Keywords

educational policy, educational reform, policy formation, public education

Introduction



In this article, we will outline a theoretical framework for understanding education policy and education reforms based on the concept of *knowledge regimes*. We will discuss how this concept may be helpful in understanding

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the complexity and ambiguity of education policy and development. Our interest in knowledge regimes emerged from studies of comprehensive education reforms in elementary and secondary education in Norway (Aasen, 2003; Aasen, 2007b; Aasen et al., 2012; Møller, Ottesen, Prøitz, & Aasen, 2010; Møller, Prøitz, & Aasen 2009; Sandberg & Aasen, 2008, 2010; Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2004, 2006).



As the ambition of this article is to use the concept of knowledge regimes to outline a theoretical framework for education policy analysis, it is important to say a few words about how this theory is understood and applied in this particular context. As researchers we work “with” and “through” theories (Apple, 2003). Working “with” theories in education policy studies implies the importance of using conceptual lenses to make sense of the complex political and educational topography under investigation. To work “through” theories means employing theories to uncover and give meaning to empirical findings and also to reflect on those theories to see where they are adequate or need modification. Ultimately, working “with” and “through” theories should contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of reality and accordingly an improved knowledge base or set of premises for policymaking and education practice.

Ideology, Power, and Education

Education is connected to ideology and power in different ways (Aasen, Foros, & Kjøl, 2004). The Danish social scientist Peter Dahler-Larsen (2003) has described these relations by using the three concepts *policy*, *politics*, and *the political*. A *policy* is typically described as a principle or rule to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). Policy refers to the *what* and the *why* generally adopted by governance bodies within the public and private sector. A policy can be considered as a statement of intent or a commitment. While law can compel or prohibit behaviors, policy can only guide actions toward those behaviors or actions that are most likely to achieve a desired outcome.

Thus the concept *policy* or *education policy* refers to decisions made by bodies with legal and legitimate authority. Education policy is constituted of legislation, regulations, curricula, and framework plans. In Norway, the national parliament and government define the goals and decide the framework for the education sector. The Ministry of Education and Research and the Directorate for Education and Training are responsible for carrying out national education policy. The latest national, comprehensive reform of the compulsory school and upper secondary education and training in Norway,

initiated in 2006, is an expression of education policy. It introduces certain changes in substance, structure, and organization, from the first grade in the 10-year compulsory school period, to the last grade in upper secondary education and training. Education policy in Norway is not, however, entirely determined by central government. Norway has a two-tier system of local government, and together with the state, the regional level (19 counties) and the local level (430 municipalities) complete the political-administrative apparatus and shape education policy.

Regional and local levels are essential in the implementation of national policies, but also provide additional, autonomous political agencies. To a certain extent, counties and municipalities are self-governed, with authority and certain powers formally delegated from the state. This gives them some ability and responsibility to constitute and authorize education policy as well as implementing central policy. The principle of local autonomy is a vital part of the Norwegian political system, and the appropriate balance between central and local governance, or central control and local sovereignty, is continuously debated. The recent educational reform reinforced deregulation and pushed policymaking authority downwards in the education system.

While mapping such policy changes and structures is vital the relationship between education, ideology, and power cannot be understood if we limit our interest to decisions that define ambitions, goals, and legal, financial, and pedagogical measures. To understand these relationships we also need to focus on disagreements and conflicts of interests in the policy making process and in the implementation of education reform at the school level. Thus, the relationships in question must also be characterized in terms of *politics*. Politics involves the processes by which groups of people make collective decisions. The term is generally applied to the art or science of running governmental or state affairs, but politics can also be observed in other group interactions and settings, including corporate, academic, and religious institutions. Politics, in this broader sense, consists of social relations involving authority or power and refers to the regulation of affairs within a political unit, and to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy. The concept of politics draws our attention to processes that determine “who gets what, when, and how.”

Policy and politics are important concepts in the development of education at both the system and practice level. However, to fully understand the relationship between ideology, power, and education, Dahler-Larsen also adds the term *the political*. This goes beyond decisions made by governing bodies or policymaking processes, and implies an understanding of education

as an inherently political act. Thus, the political in education refers to the fact that education procedures and practices—the questions of the “what,” the “how,” the “where,” and the “when” in education—constantly draws upon priorities, decisions, and assumptions that determine the answer to questions about who ultimately gains the most from the ways that schools, the curriculum, and practices are organized and operated.

Conservative Restoration

During the past two decades the American critical education theorist Michael Apple has investigated a powerful process of conservative restoration in the U.S. education policy, described in several volumes (Apple, 1993, 1996, 2001). Apple has been studying the causes of the rise of the New Right and its impact on education policies and identified four major social, political, and ideological movements, which he refers to as the “hegemonic alliances of the New Right.” These four movements include neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists/religious conservatives, and managerialists within the state bureaucracy. Apple (2001, p. 11) writes:

The first group is what I call neoliberals. They are deeply committed to markets and to freedom as “individual choice.” The second group, neoconservatives, has a vision of an Endemic past and wants to return to disciplines and traditional knowledge. The third group is what I call authoritarian populists—religious fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals who want to return to [their] God in all our institutions. And finally, the mapmakers and experts on whether we got there are members of a particular fraction of the managerial and professional middle class.

Apple suggests that although each movement has different and often conflicting political and ideological interests, they form a “hegemonic alliance” when it comes to opposing progressive forces on the political left. This hegemonic alliance, Apple explains, combines dominant economic and political elites intent on “modernizing” the economy, white working-class and middle class groups concerned with security, family and traditional knowledge and values, and economic and cultural conservatives. It also includes a fraction of the new middle class whose advancement depends on the expanded use of accountability, efficiency, and management procedures which are the basis of their own cultural capital. This coalition has partly succeeded in altering the very meaning of what it is to have a social goal of

equality. The idea of all citizens as “free” consumers has replaced the notion that citizens must be positioned in and act within structurally determined patterns of power relations. Thus any idea of the common good is now to be regulated exclusively by the laws of the market, free competition, private ownership, and profitability.

In his work, Apple focuses on how these different movements form an alliance or a new hegemonic accord and thus generate what we might call a *policymaking regime*. This regime has introduced *conservative modernization* or a *conservative restoration*, including education reforms and forms that constitute schools as a new form of knowledge-production-regime. Here neo-liberals, who according to Apple are the most powerful element within the conservative restoration, have been proponents of markets and a shift from any view of education as a public or common good toward it being a private good. Accordingly, schooling is increasingly seen as providing opportunities for children to develop the appropriate traits they possess innately and use them for their own betterment. Students are viewed as human capital and public schools are criticized for not providing adequate results. The argument runs that a market-based, choice-driven, consumerist policy for schooling will lead to education being more efficient and able to respond effectively, both to individual needs and the economic demands of society.

Understanding Policy Reforms

Apple’s analysis of the United States and how different positions can develop into hegemonic ideas that reshape education policy offers inspiration for approaches to policy analysis and understanding policy changes. His insights into social movements within the New Right may well be useful in settings beyond the United States, for example in understanding the ideological struggle over the nature of schooling and knowledge within recent education reforms in Scandinavia and elsewhere.

This article sets out with the assumption that it is vital for research on national education policy to examine policy making processes and ongoing conflicts over state policy in a way that attends to the subtle ways in which dominant international economic and ideological influences are mediated and partly transformed. In Scandinavia, and particularly in Norway and Sweden, social democratic policy had powerful effects in the postwar period (Sejersted, 2005) leading the education system to be widely regarded as an instrument for individual and collective emancipation, social inclusion, social justice, and equality. However, as in many other countries in the Western world, there have been major transformations in the Scandinavian countries’

education policy and practice (Aasen, 2003; Ball, Goodson, & Maguire, 2007; Rotberg, 2009). We can identify tendencies in Scandinavian education reforms that undoubtedly point toward the kind of conservative modernization or restoration described by Apple. In outlining a theoretical framework for understanding education policy we will draw upon his analysis of the conservative policymaking regime and how social, political, economic, and cultural movements on the political right have succeeded in forming a “hegemonic alliance” to influence and reshape policies in the United States.

While taking inspiration from this analysis of the U.S. case, we also acknowledge the insights of Foucault (1972) in stressing the importance of understanding objects for what they are within their particular location, rather than as symbols of some grand theory. Within the political and education discourse in Norway and Scandinavia, neoconservative, neoliberal, managerialism, and to a certain extent the authoritarian-populist positions and measures are definitely present. However, following Foucault, we argue that we cannot fully understand the Norwegian or Scandinavian education discourse over the last 20 years if we isolate different elements and simply interpret them as evidence of a universal conservative restoration. On the contrary, in Scandinavia we can identify elements of the state/knowledge/education nexus that point in quite different and often divergent directions. Hence, in this article we will identify political elements that provide evidence of a conservative restoration, but will also recognize elements or “artifacts” pointing in quite different directions, indicating continuity, and renewal in social democratic progressivism.

Apple focuses on social movements involved in the politics of policy making and investigates the causes of the rise of the conservative alliance by drawing upon Antonio Gramsci’s elaboration on the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). The concept refers to the ability of the dominant groups in a society to establish what is “common sense”; the self-evident descriptions of social reality that normally go without further explanations or arguments. The concept of hegemony enable us to ask how alliances are formed and what effects such alliances have on establishing legitimate definitions of social needs and authoritative definitions of social situations. We believe that we can extend our understanding of education policy in general by combining Apple’s Gramscian approach and his focus on the politics of policymaking, with an focus on the different and often contradictory knowledge regimes that are embedded in education reforms. These regimes or ideological forms work simultaneously and introduce tensions or contradictions in both the understanding of the political in education, in education policy, and in the politics of policy implementation at the school level.

Knowledge Regimes

When we use the concept of knowledge regimes, we are indebted to the Norwegian social scientist Rune Slagstad and his historical and theoretical studies on professions and knowledge regimes (Slagstad, 1998). Drawing upon the Norwegian historian Francis Sejersted (1988), Slagstad has traced the metamorphoses of Norwegian reformism during the last two centuries. While Sejersted sheds a clear light on the tension between laws and politics, between democracy and constitutionalism, and between the political and legal institutions in modern Norwegian history, Slagstad underlines that Norwegian reformism has also been a process of scientific reformism. Knowledge regime is the fundamental concept Slagstad employs to capture the different forms of knowledge underpinning the Norwegian modernization project. The term refers to constellation of understandings of political power and authority, legal normativity, the social fabric, power relations, and knowledge.

Slagstad's interpretation of the Norwegian modernization project is not intended as a hermeneutic history of ideas from above, or as documenting the history of changes in mentality from below. His foothold is at the intermediate level, in the ideologist of action. These can be seen as versions of *knowledgeable agents* in Anthony Giddens' (1979) sense. Giddens distinguishes between tacit stocks of knowledge which actors draw upon in the constitution of social activity, and discursive consciousness, involving knowledge which actors are able to express on the level of discourse. Slagstad's ideologists of action, however, are knowledgeable agents in a stronger sense. The term refers to creative producers of society who are bearers of a political, active ideology. In an adaptation of Mary Douglas' (1986) "thinking institutions" they might be called "institutional thinkers," with reforming force. While Slagstad's project is to analyze and identify how shifting knowledge regimes are mediated via institutional thinkers, our ambition is not to identify shifting knowledge regimes through ideologists in action, but rather to use the concept of the knowledge regime as a lens to make sense of education policy and reform documents. Thus, our aim is not to identify ideologists in action but to identify ideologies in action by identifying their social imageries in education policy and the political in education. The concept of knowledge regimes, as we use it, refers both to understandings and definitions of governance and procedural aspects, manners of governing and curriculum issues; thus it comprises contents, structures, and processes of education policy and governance.

In Norwegian education reforms after World War II, we can identify four ideologies in action which can be interpreted as competing knowledge

regimes: a Social-Democratic knowledge regime; a Social-Critical knowledge regime; a Cultural-conservative knowledge regime; and finally a Market-Liberal knowledge regime (Aasen, 2007b). The four regimes are constituted of different perspectives on the relation between education and society and the goals and organization of the education project. In examining education they define different problems as requiring action and prescribe diverse solutions at the system as well as the classroom level. The regimes take different views of the knowledge base for education policy and practice. Furthermore they have different answers both to Herbert Spencer's powerful question: *What knowledge is of most worth?* (Spencer, 1859) and to Michael Apple's even more provocative question: *What counts as official knowledge?* (Apple, 1993)

The Social-Democratic Knowledge Regime

In Norway, and in Scandinavia as a whole, we can trace the Social-Democratic knowledge regime back to the decades after World War II and to the political context and ambitions that shaped the special characteristics of what is often referred to as the *Nordic model of education* or the *Nordic school model* (Telhaug, Mediås, & Aasen, 2004, 2006). This model was intrinsically linked to the development of the social democratic welfare state model in Norway and Scandinavia.

The particularly characteristic feature of classical social democracy was the transformation of a relatively passive bourgeois state into an active, strong authority engaged in national planning. Such an expansion of the state and the public sector was based on the view that it was the particular responsibility of the state to promote the collective values and interests of society. The social democratic welfare state model stresses the redistributive role of the state, to promote social inclusion through equality of accesses and equality of outcomes in education. While the former addresses the responsibility of the state to provide equal opportunities to participate, the latter is concerned with whether children from different social groups actually take advantage of that access and are successful in doing so. From this perspective, simply providing the same opportunities is not enough as children with different economic, social, and cultural backgrounds will need different kind of opportunities and support to be successful. However, working for equality of results does not imply that every child should reach the same level or receive identical end results, but aims at reducing those differences children and youth possessed when entering school. In this way the pupil's merits should emerge regardless of their social background. If children from different backgrounds are going to have similar chances in life, they will therefore have to be treated

differently. Hence, education policy introduces different provisions ensuring actual participation/enrolment and a substantial degree of success across social and cultural groups. Differences in outcomes that are attributable to differences in characteristics such as geographical background, gender, wealth, income, power, or possessions should be limited and worked against. In policy approaches to improve equity when it is defined as equality of outcomes, the state must play a crucial role in ensuring that all citizens have real, and not only formal, access to the resources necessary. Equality of results is accepted as necessitating inequality of provisions and resources.

In Scandinavia, the public schools' role as vital elements of the welfare state was firmly established in the public consciousness and on the political agenda after World War II. By the 1950s Norway used a greater proportion of its gross national product (GNP) for public education than any other country in Europe, and teachers had high status in society, both socially and financially, not only because of their idealism but also because of the strong position of the teachers' unions and high standards of recruitment into the profession. The political circumstances in general and education policy in particular favored national standardization within an egalitarian and comprehensive school system. A structure was implemented where, instead of different types of schools existing in parallel, the aim was a common school for all children and young people extending as far up the education system as possible. School was seen as an instrument for social inclusion. Education was defined as a common good and children and youth as students were regarded more as the state's responsibility than as parental sole responsibility.

The radical extension of the comprehensive school system in Norway and in the other Scandinavian countries is based on two primary objectives. The first is an economic or instrumental objective, based on the assumption that there is a clear association between the general level of education in the population and economic growth. Supporters of the comprehensive school system also maintain that this form of school organization is more able to uncover and develop any hidden talent among the population, with better potential than varied parallel schools for acting as an effective "head-hunter." The second objective is social inclusion. This was the main objective when the comprehensive school system was introduced. The Norwegian social democratic school reformer and minister of education Helge Sivertsen underlined this position when the Norwegian parliament debated the introduction of a 9-year comprehensive school in 1959: "The entire basic philosophy underlying the reform is the social aspect" (Telhaug & Mediås, 2003, p. 165). When immigration toward the end of last century led the Scandinavian countries to become multicultural nations, this objective of defining a common cultural

base and ensuring integration was strengthened. The school is expected to serve as a social melting pot where children from different backgrounds meet and work together. The structure of the comprehensive school system with its unstreamed classes is also expected to create the foundations for a social community within schools. In this way schools should promote social equality and democracy and overcome social barriers. In the words of Olof Palme, former Swedish Prime Minister and Minister of Education: “The school system is, and remains, the key to abolishing a class-based society” (Richardson, 2004, p. 14).

The Social-Critical Knowledge Regime

The Social-Democratic knowledge regime was originally based on a vision of a homogenous society and a rather simplistic definition of the common good. Thus, the regime endorses a policy that combines standardization of subject matter and knowledge with individualization of instruction and learning. In Norway, the policy of standardization was contested as the general climate of education discussions shifted toward the political Left during the 1970s. Thus, the Social-Democratic knowledge regime was challenged by a Social-Critical knowledge regime focusing on conflicts of interests and the struggle for power.

The Social-critical knowledge regime underlines the role of the school as a preparatory institution for political participation in a pluralistic democracy. The aspiration is not to reconcile, but to understand the divisions that exist between ethnic cultures, social classes, linguistic communities, and gender-based identities. It criticizes equity based on a common cultural heritage and minimum standards as involving cultural domination and hegemony. The Social-Critical regime instead makes a claim for human equity by reasoning that children and youth have different, legitimate interests due to their social or cultural position.

In a multicultural, pluralist society, common goals and the common good are not self-evident. Questioning the ways in which struggles over social meanings are connected to the structures of inequality in society is seen as essential (Aasen, 2007a). Accordingly, the Social-Critical knowledge regime places the contents of education or the subject matter on the political agenda. Within the Social-Critical regime knowledge is not viewed as value-neutral. Knowledge is regarded as power, and the circulation of knowledge is therefore important to the social distribution of power. Within this regime questions about how official knowledge is defined and whose knowledge is taught in the school is essential in the political discourse. Concepts such as

“hegemony,” “resistance,” the “hidden curriculum,” and “local, community-based curriculum” are also introduced.

The Social-Critical knowledge regime opposes policy that emphasizes national economic growth and efficiency. In contrast, communalism, solidarity with the Third World, peace education, the global environment, awareness of social inequality, consciousness formation, and the potential for social change through political activism are introduced in the curriculum debate and are subjects for more investigative approaches in the schools.

In these ways, the Social-Critical knowledge regime introduces a more critical, conflict-oriented perspective on education. Classical social democracy is regarded as an authoritarian society and the regime argues for the sovereignty of social and cultural groups and individual emancipation. The regime puts different issues on the political agenda, including child-centered approaches and whole-learning arrangements, learning through cooperation, problem- and project-centered methods, process-oriented, situated and constructive learning activities, and critical thinking.

The Cultural-Conservative Knowledge Regime

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Cultural-Conservative knowledge regime became more dominant in Norwegian education policy. Education reforms in this period become more concerned with academic performance and a standardized curriculum with a greater focus on cultural heritage providing common ground and the basis for a collective consciousness. This regime advocates the role of the school in disseminating a common national cultural heritage. The school's obligation is associated with communicating high quality knowledge, as opposed with the dissemination of mass culture or popular culture. Within this regime schools are seen as transforming agents for “real” or canonical knowledge, basic skills, morality, Western and national traditions, high culture, and a common national identity. The Cultural-Conservative knowledge regime is determined to enforce a standardized national curriculum and high academic standards. Thus the regime proposes detailed national curricula and a “return” to high standards. Like the Social-Democratic knowledge regime, the Cultural-Conservative knowledge regime is guided by a vision of the strong state. This ideal of a strong state is visible in the demand for control over legitimate knowledge and methods, and in the regulation of teacher autonomy. The regime expresses distrust of teachers, of professionalism in education, and of teachers' unions. Allowing schools a large degree of freedom in determining curriculum content is expected to result in “trivializing” the substance of education. Accordingly,

local authorities and individual teachers are given a limited degree of freedom. Thus, the Cultural-Conservative knowledge regime reflects political positions that closely correspond with positions identified by Apple in the neoconservative movement in the United States.

The Market-Liberal Knowledge Regime

The influence of the Market-Liberal knowledge regime can be seen to have had a stronger influence in Swedish education reforms in the 1990s and education reforms being implemented in Norway during the last decade. This regime is guided by an ideal of a weak central state, which leaves the development of society to the dynamics of local public or private initiatives; the dynamics of the market. Within this economic rationality, efficiency is measured in term of the opportunity individuals are given to maximize their own position or benefits. The ideal role of the citizen becomes that of a purchaser. Democracy is transformed into an economic concept where consumer choice within a free-market system is the guarantor of a just, self-regulating society.

The Market-Liberal knowledge regime promotes an individual and merit-oriented education system. While the Social-Democratic knowledge regime advocates state intervention to create equality between different social groups, the Market-Liberal knowledge regime anticipates and accepts that young people have different interests and ambitions. In Margaret Thatcher's (1987) words: "There is not such a thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families . . . and people must look to themselves first." Accordingly, education should supply opportunities for the free individual to choose from, and offer adapted or tailored education to suit individual preferences and talents. To meet these diverse individual demands, the regime argues for more flexible curricula and freedom to establish private or independent schools. Thus the Market-Liberal knowledge regime reflects many of the ideological positions identified by Apple in the neoliberal movement in the United States and elsewhere.

An essential element of the Market-Liberal knowledge regime is the stress placed on education's contribution to the nation's economic competitiveness in a globalized economy. Qualifications that meet the demands expressed by the business community are therefore essential. This alignment of educational programs with the particular skills required by the business community is accompanied by increased attention to international education policy and recommendations from supra-national organizations with strong economic profiles, such as the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD). Education is primarily defined as a process of developing “human capital” to be invested in production and turned into economic profit. Consequently, the Market-Liberal knowledge regime stresses the utilitarian value of the school and cognitive-instrumental competence. The regime regards education more as a matter of commodity exchange through a commercial body than as an agent of social and national integration or a sacrosanct academic institution. While the Social-Democratic and the Cultural-Conservative knowledge regimes promote input-based steering of education, the Market-Liberal knowledge regime emphasizes output-based steering, with national testing as a central steering device.

Recent Education Reforms in Scandinavia

In Norway and the other Scandinavian countries, all four knowledge regimes have influenced education policy. The four regimes work across historical periods and political parties, but have had variable influence in different historical periods and within different political parties. While education policy in Norway was dominated by the Social-Democratic and Social-Critical knowledge regimes during the four decades after World War II, education reforms in the 1990s were more influenced by the Cultural-Conservative knowledge regime. Reforms implemented during the last decade are more influenced by the Market-Liberal knowledge regime and neoliberal positions (Aasen, 2003).

Viewed from an *inside perspective*, it is obvious that more traditional social democratic education policies have been contested since the early 1980s in both Norway and Sweden. Increasingly, education policy documents express worries and displeasure with students’ lack of proficiency in major subjects, leading to demands for greater effectiveness concerning the school’s obligations in imparting knowledge and raising standards. More weight is placed on the school’s accountability for pupils’ individual merits. When it comes to the means employed in educational processes, the key contemporary concepts in school ideology are: quality and standards; competence and skills; diversity and variation; decentralization and deregulation; flexibility and individuality; local and personal autonomy and responsibility as well as accountability; freedom of choice; and user or customer control. When the Norwegian centre-right coalition government introduced the so-called Knowledge Promotion Reform in 2004, it was presented as a fundamental change of the Norwegian education system. The social democratic school model was regarded as unsustainable. Thus we can observe elements of the internationally dominant economic and

ideological positions having an influence on education policy in Scandinavia over recent decades.

In spite of these ideological changes and recent education reforms, when viewed from an international or comparative perspective Norway has continued the policies of a public, comprehensive education system characterized by standardization and social inclusion to a considerable extent. Hence, from an *outside perspective* it is still possible to identify a particularly Nordic education philosophy, entrenched in the Nordic model of society. To a lesser extent this is also the situation in Sweden, although the neoliberal position has been stronger and more influential on recent reforms. The Nordic model is based on cooperation and compromise, with a characteristic balance between the state, labor unions, private sector, the market, and civil society. The basic institutions of Scandinavian societies have shown a remarkable ability to combine economic efficiency and flexibility with social inclusion and security, and thereby the ability to simultaneously meet the demands of international market competition and to sustain public support. Even though the latest PISA test for 15-year-olds found that Norway languishes at, or just above, the OECD average, with Sweden below the average, the Nordic model has performed strongly overall, even in periods when it has been under pressure. A number of indexes that rank nations on the basis of social and economic criteria demonstrate that the Scandinavian countries have developed welfare societies with considerable competitive status. Compared to most other countries, intergenerational income mobility is far greater, occupational destinies and education attainments are substantially less determined by luck of birth, and cognitive abilities depend less on parental background (Esping-Andersen, 1996, 2005).

Ideological changes and the shifting impact of the different knowledge regimes in Norwegian education policy are clearly influenced by international policy trends; however, these shifts must also be understood in light of changes in national material and social conditions. As we have seen, the legacy of the Social-Democratic knowledge regime is based on a vision of a homogenous society with clear common interests. Within the framework of a global economy, cultural emancipation, secularization, growing relativism, migration, and multicultural pluralism, Norway finds itself in a new, complex, and often contradictory situation. “The other” is more visible inside today’s society.

As a consequence of economic globalization and the free flow of information and migration, there has been a collapse of the distinction between “inside and outside.” The rapid advance of technological innovations continually redefine the nature of social relations and alter the conventions of material

production in a manner that renders many aspects of everyday life ephemeral, if not completely unpredictable. The aspiration is no longer to reconcile, but to understand divisions that exist between ethnic cultures, social classes, linguistic communities, and gender-based identities. The distinctions found within and between such groupings should not only be tolerated, but be celebrated.

To put it differently, the Social-Democratic knowledge regime that followed from Work War II in Norway asserted human equity by reasoning that everybody is equal and alike. From the 1990s on, cultural liberalism and pluralism emerged, to assert human equity by reasoning that everybody is different. This posed a challenge for educational policy and schools. In a multicultural, pluralist society, common goals and the common good are not self-evident. In the 1990s, a great challenge for educational policy was to redefine and reconstruct the common good and the modernist quest for certainty, security, and predictability. Furthermore, in a society of abundance, the welfare state had, to a large extent, lost the basis for its ideological and moral support. Accordingly the notions of the welfare state as a necessary safety net and comprehensive education based on a common culture both came under serious internal pressure. Once the “other” was visible inside society, the Social-Democratic knowledge regime lost legitimation and received less support.

The Social-Democratic knowledge regime strongly advocates education as a measure to further social justice through schooling as a common good, standardization, and through equality of results between social and cultural groups. Recent developments in Norwegian educational under the influence of the Market-Liberal knowledge regime, have redefined equity in educational policy as equivalence. The concept of equivalence in this setting refers to an individual’s right to a solid education that aligns with their interests and improves their basic skills. Schooling is therefore understood as an individual, private good. Rising standards are still seen as important for the national economy, but also for individuals, enabling them to compete in the global labor market. In addressing issues of social and cultural complexity and diversity, equity—understood as fellowship, communality, and social inclusion—and the notion of a shared common culture attract less attention in recent policy documents. We can interpret the introduction of the term equivalence as a political attempt to seek public support for an educational system endorsing both equality and diversity, and attempting to reconcile these aims. Equivalence does not imply that the curriculum or the academic level in compulsory schooling should be identical for all children. The term acknowledges that young people, as well as their parents, have different interests, ambitions, preferences, and talents. Furthermore, the concept of

equivalence is used to justify decentralization of educational authority, more flexible curricula, and the freedom to establish subsidized private or independent schools (Aasen, 2007a).

In his analysis of the causes of the rise of the conservative restoration in the United States, Apple draws upon Gramsci's concept of the *common sense*, and attributes the rise of the New Right to its ability to change the meaning of commonly held beliefs and the views of people of the social world (Apple 2001, p. 9):

One of the most important objects of the rightist agenda is changing our common-sense, altering the meanings of the most basic categories, the key words, we employ to understand the social and educational world and our place in it. In many ways, a core aspect of these agendas is about what has been called identity politics. The task is to radically alter who we think we are and how major institutions are to respond to this changed identity.

Apple's Gramscian approach sheds light on the equity discourse in Norwegian educational policy. The politicians on the right, but also those on the left, have definitely taken into account former United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's (1981) devise: *Economics are the method; the object is to change the soul*. However, as we have seen, the achievement of conservative modernization within the equity discourse of educational policy in Norway cannot be fully understood in strictly ideological terms, as a result of the New Right's success in changing conceptions of the world. Changes in educational policy cannot simply be explained with reference to how distorted conceptualizations become seen as common sense. The analysis of education policy must combine investigations of alterations in the common sense with analysis of social and material structural changes. These changes have challenged previous conceptualizations of society and thus entered education policy as struggle between more fundamental knowledge regimes.

Concluding Reflections: Tensions and Contradictions in Education Reforms

In this article, we have combined two kinds of conceptual frameworks to gain a better understanding of education policy. Our theoretical framework combines Apple's studies of how different social movements can form a hegemonic block that has generated a new policymaking regime in the United States over the last three decades, along with the Norwegian social

scientist Rune Slagstad's studies of how different forms of knowledge can be found underpinning the Norwegian modernization project. The core concept in this theoretical bricolage is the knowledge regime. Through this concept we identify different political ideologies in action and their social imageries in education policy. The concept of knowledge regimes refers to different understandings and definitions of education, governance, procedural aspects, and curriculum issues; it therefore comprises issues related to subject matter, structures, and measures in education.

In Norwegian education reforms after World War II, we have identified four ideologies in action, or competing knowledge regimes: a Social-Democratic knowledge regime; a Social-Critical knowledge regime; a Cultural-Conservative knowledge regime; and a Market-Liberal knowledge regime. The four regimes work simultaneously and are constituted of different perspectives on knowledge and education, different understandings of the education project and the relation between education and society. The concept of knowledge regimes enables us to gain a better understanding of education policy, the politics of education, and the political in education.

By applying the lenses of various knowledge regimes in studies of recent Norwegian policy documents introducing reforms in compulsory and upper secondary education, different elements, and changes in education policy become more visible. Even though these recent education policies and reforms in Norway from an *outside perspective* can be interpreted more in terms of continuity than interruption and reorientation, applying a theoretical framework based on the concept of knowledge regimes gives clear indications of the strengthened position of conservative modernization or restoration and the fading hegemony of the Social-Democratic knowledge regime. Accordingly, recent reforms have strengthened and introduced new, or at least clearer and stronger, contradictions in education policy.

There are always contradictions embedded in education reforms (Ball, 1994; McNeil, 1986, 2000; Whitty, 2002). Through the lenses of various knowledge regimes we can observe such tensions or contradictions on several dimensions. On *the social dimension* we witness strains between education as individual good and education as common good, between equity as equality and equity as equivalence, and between the importance of early intervention and a more patient approach to learning. On *the governance dimension* we observe tensions between input- and output-based steering, between national steering authorities and locally elected political bodies' ability to act autonomously, and between decentralization in terms of delegation and decentralization as devolution. On *the systemic relation dimension* we observe tensions between central, detailed control and state

steering at a distance, by empowering local authorities. The central state demands for extensive documentation is often interpreted as a form of “feeding the beast,” while local governments and schools ask for national support.

On the *knowledge base dimension* there are tensions between evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence, between research-based solutions and experience-based reasoning, between efficient intervention and professional reflection, and between knowledge directed at *what works* and knowledge focusing on *when and whom it works for*. On the *school contents or subject matter dimension* there are tensions between knowledge and competence, between competence and skills, and between focusing on learning processes and the demand for documented learning outcomes. And finally, on the *accountability dimension* there are tensions between professional teachers, school leaders, and managerialism, and tensions between trust in professionals and an increased administrative technocracy.

However, our studies of the implementation of reforms show that these contradictions in education policy also work within education practice, at the school and classroom level. The contradictions present challenges experienced by local authorities, school leaders, and teachers in the classrooms. At the local and school level they can generate ambiguity and frustrations. Thus, we can observe demands for a return to stronger and clearer hierarchical guidelines and mechanisms. However, we can also observe more proactive and autonomous actions by school leaders and teachers who are finding creative ways to occupy the openings and spaces created by these contradictions. Accordingly, the concept of knowledge regimes and the awareness of contradictions in education are important, not only to understand the circulation of national policy documents and technical and administrative plans. The awareness of knowledge regimes working simultaneously and thus generating contradictions can help us to better understand the situation of those involved in education practice; such insights are vital as education policy must be understood as being continuously remade in use, with schooling ultimately being built from the ground up.

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