

Mechanisms of Persisting Inequality – Case Studies of Norwegian Daycare Facilities for Children

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Abstract: In this paper, we analyse mechanisms of exclusion in Norwegian daycare facilities for children (“Skolefritidsordning – SFOs), which provide after-school care. Such mechanisms are analysed and discussed as unanticipated consequences of reform policy initiatives or simply as accepted trade-offs left to the SFO staff’s discretion. The data are taken from a re-analysis of a national evaluation of Norwegian SFOs. The results show several examples of new exclusion mechanisms occurring as old inequalities are addressed through social policy reforms. Examples from case studies are used to highlight and discuss the staff’s reactions and actions when faced with dilemmas of meeting demands from the system while taking care of demands from the children.

Keywords: unanticipated consequences, reform policy initiatives, inequality, inclusion, exclusion

Introduction

Inequality in education is a persistent problem and remains a relevant topic for research. This also holds true for extended education provisions, as they are instrumental in fighting social and educational inequalities in many countries (Bae & Stecher, 2019). However, recent research (e.g. Entrich, 2021) points out that the relation between inequality and different forms of extended education is not straightforward, and empirical and theoretical clarifications are needed in order to shed light on the relation. In this article, we re-analyse a large qualitative dataset gathered as part of the results of a national evaluation of Norwegian daycare facilities for children (Skolefritidsordning – SFOs) (Wendelborg et al., 2018). Informed by the sociological concept of unintended consequences (Merton, 1936), we aim to identify how different mechanisms of exclusion work despite an inclusive mandate. The policies themselves, intended to result in more equality, create new divisions and demarcations instead, contributing to the subtle processes of exclusion of linguistically, culturally and socioeconomically diverse (LCSD) students in schools (Paniagua, 2017). For children, these subtle exclusions potentially mark them as visitors to the community of children in an SFO, not its members (Antia, Stinson, & Gaustad, 2002), leaving much work to the SFO staff to deal with the consequences. The main research questions addressed in this article are as follows:

1. Are there visible exclusion mechanisms in Norwegian SFOs?
2. Are there unintended consequences of the policy initiatives taken to deal with the exclusion mechanisms?
3. If so, how do the SFO staff deal with the unintended mechanisms of exclusion resulting from the policy initiatives?

As we see it, Norwegian SFOs constitute an interesting case for addressing questions of inequality. The Norwegian education sector has long been given the responsibility for a large variety of tasks, of which promoting social equality and providing equal opportunity are two of the most important tasks, as stated in the Education Act (1998), as well as in government white papers and research for decades. However, Norwegian SFOs have been paid less attention although they are formally organised under the responsibility of school leaders and the municipality. Studying mechanisms of inequality in Norwegian SFOs not only adds to the empirical, international body of literature on inequality in extended education but also sheds light on extremely relevant policy issues when further developing the national educational system in Norway.

Norwegian Daycare Facilities for Children and the Inclusive Mandate

Norwegian SFOs were first established in the 1950s but were developed in their modern form in the late 1980s. An SFO provides school children in grades 1 to 4 with a place to stay before and after regular school hours, as the parents leave for work or other activities. In 1997, the starting age for compulsory school was lowered from seven to six years, creating an increased demand for providing care for the youngest school children. This was evident in the participation rates, which increased from about 50% of the first graders in 1999 to 82% in 2019–2020 and from 50% to 76% for the second graders (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2021b). For third and fourth grades, the increase was smaller, from 40% to 59% and from 25% to 31%, respectively. The growth highlights an SFO as now more or less part and parcel of the start of school for most children in Norway.

The law (the Education Act) obliges all municipalities to provide daycare facilities for children from first to fourth grade, but the curriculum content, organisational setup and staffing are left to the municipalities' discretion. Until the fall of 2021, there have been no national curriculum guidelines, and different municipalities have chosen different ideological directions for the content, on a continuum ranging from emphasising school preparation and support to emphasising children's autonomous decision making and play, by simply providing the children with a place to stay between the end of the school day and their parents' work day (Wendelborg et al., 2018). Furthermore, the cost of using the daycare facilities varies from 4250 NOK (slightly more than 400 euro) per month, 20 hours per week in one municipality, to nothing at all in another, with an average cost of 2263 NOK per month (230 euro).

There are neither national competence demands nor established educational programmes to qualify the staff for employment in Norwegian SFOs, although a degree in a vocational programme in Child Care and Youth Work (upper secondary school) is regarded as the preferred qualification in many municipalities. However, this group of vocational programme graduates only comprises one-third of the SFO staff. In 2018 a little less than 30% held different bachelor's degrees and national equivalents, but they did not necessarily have a pedagogical/educational background (Wendelborg et al., 2018).

Moreover, inclusion is listed as a fundamental principle of the Norwegian government's work to improve the educational system, together with early intervention and well-adapted provision (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019). The national framework plan for an SFO states: