

Non-state actors in public education: the experiences of school leaders in Norway and Italy

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In this paper I will compare how school leaders and teachers in Norway and Italy experience the increasing influence from non-state actors in education, with a special focus on social issues. I will draw on experiences from qualitative semi-structured interviews in the respective countries.

The paper contributes to the literature on privatization in public education, following for example Ball and Youdell's (2008) observations of how private firms and consultants are active in selling their services and products to public schools. This kind of research has been carried out to a greater extent in the USA and England than in countries like Italy and Norway, where the literature in this field seems scarce.

The Italian and Norwegian education systems have some similarities concerning for example strong state regulations of schools, and therefore I also expect to see similarities when it comes to how privatization processes are perceived by the actors in schools. Our preliminary results show these main tendencies:

- There seems to be significant differences between schools in the two countries, and a few differences between the countries.
- The way the sector is organized concerning agreements and contracts with non-state and private actors seems similar in the two countries, however the Norwegian school leaders seem to have more autonomy and responsibilities in economy matters than the Italian.
- In both countries schools experience huge expectations of what schools should do, and collaborating with external and private actors can help meet these expectations in matters where the schools feel a lack of competence. This, for example, concerns social inclusion, integration, mental health, drug abuse prevention.
- In both countries, a new school policy that is developed to meet "future needs" opens schools for external actors to come in with their tailored solutions, products, and competence. School leaders talk about schools becoming a market. In both countries schools have experienced some of the private actors as intrusive.
- School leaders and teachers are critical of external actors that come in with their own interests or their own agenda. Schools want to have control of what is taught, assessment of teaching quality and their own development.
- There are differences between the countries concerning digital development, and the Italian schools now experience huge investments in digitalization. Therefore,

schools are now very attractive for private actors offering digital solutions, and schools that are not prepared for development seem to be more vulnerable to external influence. In Norway this has been going on for many years and the schools report that they are more competent and confident in choosing what kind of digital licenses and equipment to buy.

So far, the result of this comparison indicates that there are similarities between the two countries that are tied to “global forces” that influence all schools, however, there are also differences concerning to what extent schools themselves are in control of the development.