

Policy Review on the Norwegian Initiative of Offering Free Homework Assistance in Schools

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Abstract

Purpose: Through reviewing an education policy blueprint in Norway, titled “An Offer of Homework Assistance” (issued by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training in June 2010), the present article aims to shed light on how Norway uses education as an arena to realize social equality and equity.

Design/Approach/Methods: This is an analytical policy review.

Findings: By examining the background, goals, contents, and implementation of the homework assistance program, we have found that the Norwegian government institutes evidence-based policies in education. Although there is criticism concerning the policy and its implementation, empirical evaluative investigations have found that it brings a variety of benefits.

Originality/Value: The present article is useful to understand educational policymaking in Norway and how the country is making efforts to achieve social equality and equity through education.

Keywords

Homework assistance, Norway, policy review

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Although both advantages and disadvantages of homework assistance exist, I think the benefits are more important than the disadvantages. Therefore, it is important to be able to offer homework assistance based on what each individual student's level in the particular subjects is. This means that even though you are good at one subject, you must be able to have the option to be helped (with other subjects). That is why I say yes to the benefit of homework assistance for all students during school hours.

Amalie Nilssen

A pupil from the Rothaugen School
(Authors' translation from a news report¹)

Introduction

In June 2010, the Norwegian Parliament passed an amendment to the Education Act requiring all primary schools across Norway to offer homework assistance to all pupils from Grade 1 to Grade 4. The government covers the cost for all schools—public or private—to offer this service, and all schools are obliged to offer it. However, it is the parents' decision whether to accept this offer. The policy was implemented starting from the school year of 2010/2011. In June 2014, the Norwegian Parliament passed an additional amendment to the Education Act extending the free homework assistance arrangement to all schools of compulsory education (i.e., from Grade 1 to Grade 10).

The present article reviews this policy in terms of its background, goals and values, main content, and implementation evaluation with reference to two research reports produced by Norwegian Social Research (NOVA) and the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research, and Education (NIFU) under the invitation of the government with the aim of shedding light on how Norway uses education as an arena to realize social equality and equity.

Background

Homework assistance originates in the 1980s. At that time, the aim was to help schools with a high proportion of students of minority language backgrounds, most of whom could not get help from their parents due to their limited Norwegian skills. Homework assistance was usually offered by voluntary organizations and was free of charge. This practice was gradually expanded. During the 2006/2007 school year, around 50% of Norwegian schools offered homework assistance to their students. During this period, some schools offered homework assistance as an integral part of the school day or *skolefritidsordningen* (SFO),² while others received help from parent groups or volunteer organizations (Haugsbakken et al., 2009).

During the time of 2006 and 2008, the government submitted two reports produced by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research to the Parliament for discussion, that is, White Paper No. 16 (2006–2007) and White Paper No. 31 (2007–2008),³ which instigated sequential

piloting tests, evaluations, and eventual amendment in the Education Act of offering home assistance in schools. In the White Paper No. 16 (2006–2007) titled . . . *and No One Was Left—Early Intervention for Lifelong Learning*, it was pointed out that a rather large number of Norwegian pupils graduated from primary school with insufficient skills and competencies. The government believed that it was a social responsibility to change this situation. Additionally, the school day for the pupils at primary schools in Norway used to be short compared to other countries. Consequently, the government implemented an extension of the school day from 21 hr to 28 hr per week and proposed universal homework assistance as part of a gradual extension of the school day and to improve the pupils' skills and competencies. As stated in the White Paper, this scheme should enhance the quality of education for all students and be especially helpful to those who receive little help with schoolwork outside school hours. The proposal had been tested for 2 years, from 2006 to 2008, and evaluated by researchers from SINTEF Technology and Society. According to the final evaluation report, homework assistance can be a good tool to increase learning outcomes and reduce social inequality (Haugsbakken et al., 2009).

White Paper No. 31 (2007–2008), entitled *Quality in School*, pointed out that it was important to strengthen education in different subjects, to provide homework assistance and ensure daily physical activity. At the same time, it emphasized the important goal of schools to help equalize social differences through promoting learning, better well-being and health for all students. In response to this, the Norwegian government submitted the Proposition to Parliament 95 L (2009–2010) proposing amendments to the Education Act and Private Schools Act for all primary schools across Norway through which homework assistance was offered to all pupils from Grade 1 to Grade 4. At the beginning of June 2010, the Parliament passed these amendments; section 13-7a of the Education Action read:

The municipality will have a homework assistance offer to pupils of Grades 1 to 4. The offer must be free for pupils. Pupils should be entitled to participate in the homework assistance, but they must be voluntary if they wish to participate.

The policy took effect in August 2010. Commissioned by the Directorate of Education, research institute Norwegian Social Research (NOVA), in collaboration with the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), carried out a multi-method designed evaluation project on the implementation of the scheme from February 2011 to May 2013.

The evaluation project between 2011 and 2013 resulted in two NOVA reports. The first report (Seeberg et al., 2012) was based on two qualitative studies, that is, an analysis of policy documents and planning documents of implementation of homework assistance at schools from municipality educational authorities and a case study in four schools through observation, interviews, and school document analysis. The second evaluation report (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013) was based on

quantitative data derived from a national survey on school principals, a questionnaire survey on parents of pupils attending Grades 1–4, and the results of national exam on Grade 5 pupils from 2 years after the implementation of the scheme at school comparing with those from 2 years before. The evaluation reports presented positive results of the initiative from perspectives of the school principals, teachers, parents, and pupils' learning outcome as well as some negative critics on the scheme and some uncertainty of its effect on student outcomes. Following the publication of the two evaluation reports, the homework assistance scheme was proposed to the Parliament for amendment in the Education Act. A public hearing process with municipal authorities and relevant stakeholder organizations (e.g., parents, student council) and a sequential voting process in the Parliament both resulted in a majority of supporting the proposal. During the hearing process, many representatives suggested that free homework assistance should be available for all pupils in all grades in both primary and lower secondary schools. All these processes were documented in the Proposition to Parliament 68 L (2013–2014) titled *Amendments to the Education Act, the Private School Act, and the National Higher Education Act (homework assistance, etc.)* (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2013). Having been passed in Parliament, from August 1, 2014, the eight hours of homework assistance have been mandatory and all pupils from Grade 1 to Grade 10 have the right to receive free homework assistance at school if they wish to. The amendment in Private School Act states that municipalities and private schools have the flexibility and freedom to decide for themselves the homework assistance arrangement according to local conditions and assessments.

The goals and values of the policymakers

As stated by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research in the Proposition to Parliament 95 L (2009–2010), the homework assistance policy initiative has the following goals: to support pupils in their learning process and to encourage feelings of mastery and independent work. In addition, homework assistance should also help narrow social inequality gaps in education. Moreover, one can observe that the stated goals are at the individual and societal levels. Ideally, if the goals at the individual level are achieved, the societal goal of social equality will be reached as well.

Equality and equity are among the Norwegian core values. In Norway, school is seen as having a central role in social equalization and a place that lays a foundation for people to have a better life. The Kindergarten Act and Education Act states that education must be based on and promote fundamental values, such as equality and solidarity (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 1998a, 1998b). Norway is committed to an education system that supports the development and learning of all its students (OECD, 2019). These ideas are explicitly stated in different policy documents:

The Norwegian school system is based on the principles of equality and adapted learning for everyone within an inclusive environment. All students should develop key skills, and in the course of their education they should both face challenges and experience a sense of achievement. (European Commission, 2019)

In another policy document, it is stated that children and young people must have an equal right to education, regardless of where they live, gender, social and cultural background, or any special needs (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, p. 5). The Homework Assistance Program is one of the measures taken by the government to reduce differences caused by the impact of parents' education on student achievement by focusing resources on the youngest pupils and enabling more of the learning process to take place at school (OECD, 2015).

Norway is known as a welfare state with high levels of public social expenditures, priority being given to education. In practice, Norway is making efforts to achieve the basic precept of Norwegian educational policy—education for all—through its high public expenditure on education at all levels and different education policies and reforms targeting the improvement of education quality (OECD, 2019). Although parents must pay some fees at the preprimary level, education at other levels is free of charge. These efforts are also reflected in the government's generous funding of private educational institutions—which, similarly to public institutions, get most of their funding from public sources—at all levels.

Main contents

As mentioned above, public and private educational institutions enjoy the same funding from the government, although they are ruled by different laws. Public primary schools are run by municipalities, while private schools are owned by individuals or private organizations. Norway has a public-funded education system with only a few private schools (9% of the total number of schools) offering religious or pedagogical alternatives that receive public funding as well. Currently, only 4% of the pupils at 10-year compulsory primary and lower secondary education levels in the country attend private schools (Statistics Norway, 2020). In the policy analyzed in the present work, although the same content applies to both sectors, the responsible stakeholders are different. Municipalities take the responsibility of public primary schools, while private schools are themselves responsible for implementing the policy. As a result, when referring to certain matters, this article will use the term “municipalities/schools.”

The policy covers mainly two aspects—the obligations of municipalities/schools and the rights of pupils and families. According to the policy, it has been obligatory for municipalities/schools to offer homework assistance from Grade 1 to Grade 4 from August 2010 to July

2014 and from Grade 1 to Grade 10 since August 2014. They are responsible for how to organize the assistance and are obliged to inform the parents of their right to homework assistance and the arrangements. The municipality should also ensure that pupils have a good psychosocial environment for homework assistance, one which promotes health, well-being, and learning. Homework assistance should be offered at least 8 hr per week, with at least 1 hr per grade per week. The municipalities/schools decide at what time of the day this assistance should be offered and the ratio of adults to pupils. More importantly, the assistance must be free for the students. If homework assistance is organized as part of the SFO, the municipality/school cannot charge for the time during which homework assistance is received. This also applies to those pupils who do not participate in SFO but need the assistance. Additionally, homework assistance should help students with schoolwork and should not be considered part of the education but should be viewed in the context of it.

Furthermore, families have the right to know that there is a homework assistance offer in place and how the offer is organized. They are entitled to participate in the assistance scheme, and the participation is voluntary. They also have the right to request measures that promote the psychosocial environment if they find it is not appropriate.

Implementation of the policy

In this section, we draw on the findings of two evaluation reports mentioned in the “Background” section and of a journal article which was written based on the first report to explore the implementation of this policy.

The legal status of the homework assistance reform makes it compulsory for all primary schools to implement it. In practice, the policy is indeed implemented in all primary schools across Norway. Differences do exist in terms of how many pupils take part in the homework assistance program and how the municipalities and schools are arranging this assistance. The reports found that the municipalities and schools went a long way to follow the state’s instructions for the program (Seeberg et al., 2012). It should also be noted that Norway is a decentralized country. The Ministry of Education and Research sets the goals and frameworks leaving decision-making to counties and municipalities as well as private schools on how the homework assistance should be provided. This partly explains why the implementing bodies went a long way to adhere to the Ministry’s recommendations. According to OECD (2015), an imbalanced governance and the inefficient use of resources make implementation challenging as long as there are no clearly defined implementation strategies for education reforms that are adapted to Norway’s decentralized framework.

As stated in the policy, municipalities and schools can entrust the homework assistance offer to different organizations. In practice, schools, SFO, parent groups, and voluntary organizations are

providing this assistance. According to the report, just below half of the 1,008 investigated schools offered the program within the auspices of the school, one third used a combination of SFO, the school and other organizations, while one sixth used a combination of SFO and others (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013). Since there are no specific requirements for the competence of the people who help pupils with the homework, the available expertise varies. The report indicated that only 11% of the schools employed persons with pedagogical competence as homework assistants, while 55% of the schools did not. The rest used a combination of the two types of instructors (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013).

In terms of who chose to use the homework assistance, public statistics showed that just above half of the pupils in the target group participated in the program since the reform was implemented (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013). Family backgrounds seemed to influence the use of this offer. Specifically, Backe-Hansen et al. (2013) found that homework assistance was used least by families from Norway or other Nordic countries in which both parents lived with the child and who had higher levels of education. Meanwhile, the program was used most by single parents from African or Asian countries who had low levels of education. The participation rates were also higher at schools where many of the parents had immigrant backgrounds. Moreover, Seeberg et al. (2012) found that children with learning proficiency tended to be more able to use this assistance. One of the possible explanations could be that less-advanced students need more pedagogical help, which a large number of the instructors who offer the assistance do not possess.

As with the implementations of any policy/reform, there are positive and negative perspectives. The quote at the beginning of this article indicates that some students who used this offer think it is necessary to get help with their homework. Seeberg et al. (2012) found that some of the pupils who benefit from the assistance are able to do more of their homework, do it better or more thoroughly, which increases self-esteem, provides a sense of mastering schoolwork, and positively contributes to learning and wanting to learn more. As such, the intended goals of the policy have been partly achieved. The evaluation team and the reports also found a positive relationship between the use of homework assistance and the improvement of performance in national tests.

One of our main findings was that schools which did not offer homework assistance prior to the reform, but introduced a programme with large participation rates when the programme became mandatory to offer, had shown a more positive development over time on national test results than schools with low participation rates. (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013, p. 127)

Those with negative views of the policy take a different perspective. For example, there are doubts about who really benefits from the program. More precisely, many school principals and owners as well as parents question the usefulness of homework assistance for first-year pupils. However, parents whose children did participate in the scheme were pleased with it. There is also

criticism on offering too little help to children with special needs and, according to Backe-Hansen et al. (2013), on benefiting proficient students more than less proficient students. This may lead to even larger gaps among pupils. In addition, Seeberg et al. (2012) pointed out that a scarcity of highly qualified homework helpers means that pupils who need more help than others and of better quality cannot get it, which in turn causes them to lag further and further behind. This means that neither the goals at the individual level nor the goals at the societal level would be fully achieved.

Other opposing voices claimed that the homework assistance program confused pupils and/or the public regarding what homework means. Traditionally, homework meant the assignment given by teachers to the pupils to finish independently or with some help from their parents at home. However, the introduction of homework assistance has given homework another meaning: “Through introducing homework assistance at school as a universal programme for pupils in year 1 through 4, homework has become a more integrated part of the school day and thus part of a more integrated whole” (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013, p. 126).

As mentioned in the background, starting from the 2014/2015 school year, the mandatory eight hours of homework assistance extended to all pupils from Grade 1 to Grade 10, who now have the right to receive free homework assistance at school if they wish to. All municipalities and schools are arranging this according to their local conditions. At present, homework assistance is an article of the Education Act. And there is no evaluation or empirical research on the implementation of this revised policy.

Concluding remarks

This policy is an example illustrating that Norway designs evidence-based education policies, which means that policy decisions are following scientific evidence from research (Parkhurst, 2017). Research and higher education are highly regarded and given priority to develop to meet the different challenges in Norway (OECD, 2017). The policy of universalization of homework assistance in primary schools across Norway was based on the evaluation of SINTEF Technology and Society, while the amendment was made with reference to the reports of a 2-year comprehensive evaluation on the implementation of the policy. Policies based on systematic evidence seem to produce better outcomes (Sutcliffe & Court, 2005). Nevertheless, they are not enough. It is also important to make good use of the evidence (Parkhurst, 2017).

As a social democratic welfare state, Norway is generous and dedicated to achieving equality through the universal provision of social services (Mehra, 2020). Universalism is thought as a way to support national cohesion or unity and increase the functional capacity of citizens (Mehra, 2020) as well as prevent marginalization. Besides, Norway is internationally recognized as a country with long egalitarianism tradition (Abram, 2018) and Norwegians need to know that they are treated the same to feel equal (Gullestad, 2001). Universalization of homework assistance is

reflection of this. It is a good practice to offer this universalization of homework assistance also because it makes it possible that all students can get help if they need any. As what Amalie Nilssen (quoted at the beginning of this article) has mentioned, a student academically good at one subject or more still may need to have some assistance in doing homework. This also avoids stigmatizing the students who seek assistance as academically weak ones.

“Equality, defined as all students receiving the same, is insufficient in ensuring positive outcomes for all learners . . . an equal education may be inherently unequal” (Cramer et al., 2018, p. 484). Universal access to all students connotes more equality than equity as it was reflected in the evaluation report (Backe-Hansen et al., 2013) that the scheme might increase the achievement gap in learning outcomes when high achievement pupils receiving the assistance would become more so and low achievement pupils would be left more behind. This has led us to recommend paying more attention to equity in implementing this policy. Equity here means the provision of personalized resources needed for all individuals to reach common goals (Latta, 2019).

If the government wishes to achieve the set goals at both the individual and societal levels, the homework assistance scheme should be implemented according to local conditions and needs. To this purpose, the amendment implemented in 2014 has given municipalities and schools more autonomy and freedom to decide how to implement this policy. As pointed out by Mehrara (2020), a balance between equity and equality could be achieved through the collaboration of service users, service providers, and policymakers in reevaluating policy measures and devising a more nuanced application of universalism in accordance with the diversifying needs of contemporary Norwegian society (p. 143).

More importantly, to achieve the goal of helping pupils falling behind with schoolwork, it is important to employ pedagogically competent people, which may require a higher monetary investment. It might be a good idea to use student teachers who can make good use of this opportunity to put into practice what they learned in the classroom. Additionally, it might be beneficial for both parties to exploit peer help; peers could come from the higher grades or from secondary schools. However, this form of assistance should be offered in rather small groups and to the more proficient students who do not require that much help. Giving students the opportunity to work as mentors can also enhance their confidence and interest in learning. They might also be able to understand their peers’ learning difficulties and struggles and know in what aspects to help since they have recently gone through the same experience. Furthermore, learning from peers may make pupils feel relaxed and, as mentioned in the quotation at the beginning, although students might do well in one or several subjects, they may need help in other ones, which offers an opportunity to establish learning communities.

Although the private tutoring industry is popular around the world, it may increase the disparities in the students’ achievements, future education, and career and, thus, further increase

social inequality. Private tutoring is rare in Norway, especially during the 10-year compulsory education period. In this context, universalization of homework assistance scheme in Norway might be a better and more efficient way to ease social inequality. Abram (2018, p. 88) points out “the reference to policy analysis is perhaps particularly important, since its consequences can be profound in terms of new policy introductions in other countries and the material impact this may have on the lives of very many people.” We are aware of this and wish that this policy analysis can be of some inspiration for new policy introductions in other countries. At the same time, we want to emphasize that Norway has its unique traditions and resources to make and implement this policy, and other countries need to consider their own conditions to introduce similar policy. We conclude this article with a quote from Norwegian White Paper No. 25 (2012–2013) *Sharing for prosperity*

The Nordic model . . . It has evolved through a historical process of conflict and cooperation and cannot necessarily be transferred to other countries. Each country must find its own solutions, and for some, the Nordic model can serve as useful inspiration. (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, p. 21)

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1. Nilssen (2016). Er leksehjelp løsningen? [Is homework assistance the solution?] [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.ba.no/rothaugsbloggen/blogg/sandviken/er-leksehjelp-losningen/s/5-8-280169>.
2. *Skolefritidsordningen* (SFO), literally translated as “school free time arrangement,” is a program offered by municipalities. It provides care and supervision before and after school hours to pupils in Grades 1 through 4 and to pupils with special needs from Grade 1 to Grade 7. SFO should facilitate play and cultural and leisure activities in a safe place. Parents need to pay if they want their children to be in the program.
3. White Paper No. 16 (2006–2007) in English is accessible here: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/report-no.-16-to-the-storting-2006-2007/id441395/>; White Paper No. 31 (2007–2008) in Norwegian only is accessible here: <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-31-2007-2008/id516853/>.

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