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All Nordic educational systems have undergone great changes with regard to their governance. Major changes in education have always been controversial and Norway is no exception. In light of these changes, it is of utmost interest to look back and see how organised education started and how it has developed until today. The book under review, Den norske skolen. Utdanningssystemets historie [‘The Norwegian school. The history of the educational system’], fits into and contributes to Norwegian education history.

The author of the book is Harald Thuen, who is well known for contributing monographs to Norwegian education history. Thuen is professor of Education at Høgskolen i Innlandet, Norway.

Den norske skolen consists of 283 pages divided into five chapters. Each chapter deals with a specific epoch in Norwegian education history. I will summarise the chapters separately and then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the book, as well as the potential readership.

Chapter 1. En skole for kirken 1739–1832
[‘A school for the church 1739–1832’] 
Organised education in Norway dates back to medieval times when cathedral schools were instituted for the training of priests in Trondheim, Oslo, Bergen and Hamar. Most Norwegians were illiterate at this time. However, through the Reformation the literacy rate began to increase. In 1536, Lutheranism became the official creed in all of Denmark-Norway, and the following year, a new church law was adopted in Denmark-Norway.1 This law stated that Latin schools should be introduced for the training of future priests. The law also stated that schooling should be provided for children in cities, and that the parish clerks were responsible for their education. The schooling usually took place on Sundays in connection with mass. Children in the countryside had to wait until 1739 when Norway passed its first education act and the Allmueskolen was introduced with a view to providing them with an education.

Central to the education given in Allmueskolen was reading and learning about Christianity and Lutheran virtues, such as obedience, diligence and veracity. Unlike today, all children used the same textbook, Sandhed til Gudfryktighed. Udi en eenfoldig og efter Muelighed kort, dog tilstrekkelig Forklaring over Sal. Doct. Mort. Luthers Liden Cathechismo [‘Truthfulness to the fear of God. A simple and possibly short, but sufficient explanation of doctor Martin Luther’s Small Catechism’], written by Pontoppidan (1737). The teaching was done by parish clerks, who had
no formal teaching qualifications. Children were not allowed to be confirmed unless they had attended school.

It was not until 1848 that the municipalities were obliged to take financial responsibilities for Allmueskolen in the cities. In the cities, it was mostly poor people, such as workers, servants, beggars and soldiers who sent their children to Allmueskolen. The middle class, e.g. merchants, skippers and craftsmen, sent their children to borgarskolor or vocationally-oriented schools. In contrast to children in the cities, those in the countryside attended Allmueskolen regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Little by little, the dominance of the Church in education diminished as a result of various reforms and new textbooks.

Chapter 2. En skole for det norske 1832–1884
['A school for the Norwegian 1832–1884']
The first school statistics were published in 1837. At that time, there were 2,000 teachers in the allmueskoler in the countryside and about 100 in the cities. 176,000 children (92%) attended allmueskoler in the countryside and about 1% attended private schools. The rest, 7%, did not attend school at all due to either poverty or illness. The proportion was different in the cities, where only 60% of the children attended allmueskoler. Children in the cities who did attend school went to school two or three days a week and were thus given more education than children in the countryside (p. 61). Besides learning to read, children also learnt to write and calculate in this period.

In 1848, Allmueskolen took a step towards equality and the foundation was laid for a school for all children regardless of social background. The school was also to be tuition-free and children who were truant from school had to pay a fine.

Only 12 years later, in 1860, there was a new reform that resulted in a further step towards diminishing the influence of the Church. A central element in this reform was that the selection of the curriculum content should be made according to encyclopaedic principles. Previously, there had been a focus on learning the Bible by heart. Now, a greater focus was placed on children gaining “greater clarity of religious concepts” (p. 66). The reform was influenced by neo-humanism, realism and folk enlightenment ideals. A prominent leader was Ole Vig (p. 68).

Vig wanted to develop Allmueskolen. First, he wanted to create a living and popular content so that the pupils would recognise and understand the content and benefit from attending school. Second, Vig had democratic ideals and wanted to develop a school for all Norwegians
where they would feel like brothers and sisters and experience political freedom, freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of enterprise.

A main challenge for Allmueskolen was the development of a common national identity among children. It was stated explicitly that history education should include not only past but also contemporary history, such as the Constitution (which was adopted in 1814), citizens' duties and law and order. The textbooks were to be the teachers' tools in developing a national identity. A major concern, however, was how to determine what content the textbook should have. There was a significant amount of disagreement on this issue. The point of departure was P.A. Jensen's textbook, *Læsebog for Folkeskolen og Folkehjemmet* ['Reader for the elementary school and the welfare state'] (1868).

The Church protested and was furious about the fact that the textbook would not be dominated by a religious content. Moreover, they criticised the fact that the nation, *Fædrelandet* ['The Fatherland'], and the profane, *Verden* ['the World'], were given precedence over the Church in the textbook. Furthermore, they disagreed with and questioned the presence of folk poems and fiction in the book, such as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's story "En glad gutt" ['A happy boy']. Bjørnson was one of the leading figures in the national movement that was beginning to emerge. Despite the protests, Jensen's book became popular and within a few years, 250,000 copies had been sold.

It is worth noticing that at this time, there was still only one textbook in use for all children. No consideration was given to the children's varying reading skills or to their interests. Moreover, the children had to pay for the book themselves (p. 71).

During this period, many believed that Norwegians should have a written language of their own which was not based on Danish. For this reason, linguist Ivar Aasen (1813–1896) travelled around the country gathering examples from the various dialects. He used these examples to create a new written language called *Nynorsk* ['New Norwegian'].

People in the countryside spoke New Norwegian on a daily basis. Venstre (the Social Liberal Party) demanded that textbooks in all subjects should be in New Norwegian and that resources should be allocated for the purchase of textbooks. The use of New Norwegian in schools had a symbolic value; it was about solidarity and the development of a school system where pupils could identify themselves as Norwegians (p. 95). Another important symbol was the school building.

During this period, school architecture developed. The “regime” stated that a school building should be as easily recognizable as a church.
Uniform building plans were produced with standardised measurements based on the number of pupils in the school.

Chapter 3. En skole for demokrati 1884–1940
[‘A school for democracy 1884–1940’]

Education continued to engage the political parties. Democracy and independence from the Church were cornerstones in Venstre’s education policy, and through its influence, the folkeskole became compulsory in 1889. A decade later, in 1902, a new teacher education act was introduced, which stated that future teachers should have three years of teacher education. This was a turning point in Norwegian education history, as it made teaching more of a profession.

Children started school when they were seven years old, finished when they were about fourteen and were then confirmed in the Church of Norway. However, schooling was not the same for everyone. For example, boys were taught more mathematics than girls, and girls learnt about house cleaning and cooking in order to become good homemakers. However, both boys and girls participated in the subjects of physics and singing, which were introduced during this period.

During this period, too, the nationalist movement continued to influence the school system. Venstre also introduced New Norwegian as the language of instruction, as it was believed that this would make it easier for the countryside to accept folkeskolen, which would otherwise stand out as an institution from a foreign town culture. In addition, had New Norwegian not been introduced, the development of a Norwegian countryside culture would have been hampered.

The textbook Læsebog for folkeskolen [‘Reader for the elementary school’] by Nordahl Rolfsen (1892) was influenced by the nationalist movement. Rolfsen wanted to portray Norway as a cohesive country and, at the same time, demonstrate the diversity of Norwegian culture. Most of this textbook’s content was idyllic and illustrated with beautiful scenery but omitted the hard industrial work, urbanisation and emigration. Sweden had the same debate with Anna Maria Roos’s (1913) idyllic textbook Sörgården [‘The south homestead’], illustrating life in the countryside (Kullberg 1992). An important aspect of Læsebog for folkeskolen and Sörgården was that the child was focus.

During the 1920s, progressive education reached Norway. This resulted in workbooks and more use of teaching materials, such as films and slides. Advocates of this progressive education were opposed to homework as they thought that it hampered the children’s motivation to learn, and for the same reason grades were not given until Year 4.
Although *folkeskolen* was said to be a school for all, this was not entirely true. Thuen draws attention to the fact that there was one exception: children with intellectual disabilities. Schools could refuse to receive children with such disabilities. These children were sent to special schools, as were children with infectious diseases or bad behaviour. Children who were blind, deaf, deaf-mute and intellectually disabled were considered abnormal. According to the Binet-Simon test used in Norway, children with an IQ between 0 and 35 were categorised as “idiots” and those whose IQ was between 35 and 55 as “imbeciles.” It was not until 1975 that the special schools were integrated into the regular school system.

**Norwegian teachers oppose Quisling and Nasjonal Samling**

The 1940s was a hard period for the Norwegian people. As a reader, I really appreciate that Thuen points out how united Norwegian teachers were in their resistance to Vidkun Quisling, founder of the fascist party Nasjonal Samling and Prime Minister of Norway 1942–1945. The teachers’ resistance was organised in *Skolefronten*, [*the Educational Front*] and was based on the following four principles:

1. Rejection of compulsory membership of Nasjonal Samling (The Norwegian Nazi Party)
2. Rejection of Nasjonal samling propaganda in schools
3. Rejection of orders from Nazis
4. Rejection of demands for participation in NSUF (Nasjonal samling’s youth organisation)

About 1,300 Norwegian teachers were arrested in 1942, about 700 of whom were sent to German *Arbeitsdienst* in Kirkenes. The arrests resulted in a shortage of teachers and an illegal resistance organization was set up. During these dark years, the teachers managed to keep Nazi influence out of the textbooks, and textbooks were only to a limited extent withdrawn or replaced with others (p. 131).

Chapter 4. En skole for likeverd 1945–1982

[*A school for equality 1945–1982*]

After 1945, the population grew. There were many discussions about how the educational system should cater for the new generation of Norwegians. Einar Gerhardsson was prime minister and represented the Social Democrats. The 1946 Swedish school commission was a source of inspiration for Norway, and the building of a comprehensive education system began. Thuen repeatedly focusses on the similarities between Norway and Sweden.
Central to the comprehensive school system was the concept of equality, meaning that all children should be provided with an education of equal quality, that is, there should not be any differences between the children of rich parents and those whose parents were poor. Both boys and girls were to be given the same education, no matter where in the country they lived. The educational system had a responsibility to provide financial resources in order to meet the needs of all children in a way ensuring equal opportunities. There was also a focus on equality at the individual level through individualised teaching adapted to pupils’ different learning abilities and needs (p. 139).

A key element in the school reform was that the teaching should be based on research (p. 152). The upper secondary school system and teacher education were also reformed. Historically, a main principle in Norwegian education had been that all teachers should be generally competent to teach at all levels of basic schooling. The idea of a unified school meant that there should be no differentiation beyond the middle years, and in the new system, the education comprised a core of mandatory school subjects with extensive depth.

Another important issue was private schools. The right-wing parties were in favour of such schools, while the Social Democrats were opposed to them. Social Democrat Tryggve Bratteli was of the opinion that any exceptions to the regulations governing the comprehensive school system would be a step in the wrong direction. At this time, about one per cent of schools were private. In 1969, compulsory schooling was extended to nine years. In the final version of the act, it was stated that it was only possible to get financial support for a private school if it was an experimental school founded on religious or ethical grounds and meeting a quantitative demand for education. These were clear limitations.

Chapter 5. En skole for prestasjon 1982–
[‘A school for achievements 1982–’]
Chapter 5 will be given some extra attention, as it is the most extensive of the five chapters, consisting of almost 100 pages. While central regulation was important when the comprehensive school system was introduced, decentralisation became important during the 1980s. Decentralisation is often associated with neoliberalist policies. These ideas advocate the deregulation of the state with the exception of the police and the army. An offspring of neoliberalism, New Public Management (NPM), entered into school politics and administration as a new way to govern schools. Put briefly, NPM implies that schools and other public organisations should
be governed like companies. These ideas advocated the deregulation of the state institutions, with the exception of the police and the army.

One municipality in Norway, Sandefjord, engaged one of the biggest consultant firms in the world, PricewaterhouseCoopers, to develop a new structure. Governance by numbers was a key concept, and the goal was to make Sandefjord the best school municipality in Norway before 2015. Teachers were ordered to fill in a form with the students’ study results in the most important school subjects. 70 questions asked about each pupil were to be used to decide whether they had low, middle or high goal achievement. 500 teachers in Sandefjord protested, but the municipality did not listen. Two teachers who refused to answer the 70 questions were told that they could be fired. They wrote an article that was published in a newspaper and then the case went to court. In 2014, the municipality withdrew their threats of dismissal and declared that the two teachers could keep their jobs. Moreover, the municipality abandoned the scheme. In 2015, the two teachers received the Zola prize for their fight for freedom of speech and accountability.

The OECD report
In a report published in 1989, OECD (the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) examined Norwegian education (OECD 1989). While the report was quite critical, it also stated that Norwegian education had many qualities compared to many other European countries. However, the upper secondary school did not receive a positive assessment. A major problem identified was that Norway lagged behind the top nations in the number of students attending higher education institutions. According to OECD, the problem lay in the fact that young people in Norway could get a well-paying job without a higher education. OECD indicated that if the universities continued to lose students, the number of highly qualified workers and academics would continue to decrease.

Also, higher education in Norway was criticised for not having the same quality as that of other countries. The message this conveyed to Prime Minister Harlem Brundtland (Social Democrat) could not be more explicit, according to Thuen. Harlem Brundtland gave the minister of education, Gudmund Hernes, responsibility for higher education. His work resulted in the Upper Secondary School Reform, R94 (Reform 94), one of the goals of which was that all students should have a certain amount of “general studies,” enough to make them eligible for higher education later. This meant that more theory had to be introduced into vocational studies. Moreover, the reform made it possible for students
to switch from one education path to another without losing too much of the credit earned. In the old system, two years of carpentry would be wasted if you wanted to switch to general education, but in the new system students could keep at least half of the credit earned. Reform 94 was a rights-based reform, a structure reform and a content-based reform. It laid down that all young people between 16 and 19 years of age were entitled to higher education (p. 192). Vocational education was to be coordinated with the labor market, general education was preferred to specialization and basic competence became a key concept. Moreover, the pupils should develop their ability to cooperate and communicate, as well as their creativity and social skills. This content-based reform resulted in a new curriculum.

The Knowledge Promotion Reform
Poor Norwegian results in PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) caused a great deal of debate in Norway (Lie et al. 2001; Solheim & Tønnesen 2003) during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The politicians’ response to the poor results was The Knowledge Promotion Reform for the compulsory school and upper secondary education. The reform was based on NPM (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2006). Central elements of this reform were a strengthening of basic skills, a focus on reading and writing from Year 1, new subject syllabuses in all subjects clearly indicating what pupils were expected to learn, a new distribution of teaching hours per subject, a new structure of available choices within education programmes and freedom at the local level with respect to work methods, teaching materials and the organization of classroom instruction. The reform was initiated by a conservative-led coalition government, but was implemented by a red-green coalition government.

Revisions in 2017 were partly based on criticism from teachers and headmasters and a need for additional content development in order to support teachers’ and students’ learning and understanding. The core elements in the subjects became clearer and three prioritised cross-disciplinary themes emerged, viz. sustainable development, democracy and citizenship, and public health and lifestyle (p. 210).

According to Thuen, the Knowledge Promotion Reform exemplifies consensus-seeking politics in Norwegian education. Both right and left-wing parties have sought compromise and agreement on education reform. However, on one issue there was no consensus, namely, the degree
of privatisation of schools. The Conservatives wanted to make it easier to establish private schools, while the Social Democrats were against it. When the Social Democrats came to power, the law was changed and the approval procedures for private schools were strictly regulated.

During this period, teacher education changed from being provided by teacher training colleges to being integrated into the universities, just as in Sweden. Teacher education has also been made more research-based and is now divided into three domains: content area knowledge, professional knowledge and scientific knowledge.

Conclusions

*Den norske skolen* is an interesting work, but like all books it has its limitations and strengths. I will start with the limitations. One limitation is that there is no discussion concerning methods and data collection. Another is that, although it is a well-written book, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of all the events in the historic development of Allmueskolen in cities and the countryside. Moreover, I wonder how relevant this book is for people in the other Nordic countries. While Thuen every now and then makes comparisons between Norway and Sweden, the book would have benefited from a wider Nordic perspective. Reading the book, I found myself constantly comparing the Norwegian case with the Swedish case. However, one cannot expect all readers to be well-informed about the political history of the other Nordic countries’ educational systems.

Moreover, I cannot help wondering how the Norwegian school system has dealt with a) the ethnic minorities (Sami people), and immigrant children and youths and b) the development of Norwegian as a second language in education and the development of mother-tongue language in education (Dewilde & Kulbrandstad 2016). Furthermore, I also wonder how the Norwegian educational system has responded to the recent waves of refugees.

Given my research interests, I would also have wanted to know whether there was a debate about the textbook deregulation. In particular, I would have liked to read about the growth of the textbook market in Norway, NPM, and the teaching profession. Did the teachers give in to the market forces or not?

In spite of these minor limitations the book has several strengths. One is the focus on teachers’ professional identity. It is important for teacher students to develop a professional identity. A sense of professional identity comes from a common history, education and experience.

Another strength is that Thuen shows how important professional
ethics has been for teachers. Norwegian teachers showed courage and put up resistance against Quisling and his party Nasjonal samling, as a result of which teachers, as a profession, became a moral force in Norwegian politics during the Nazi occupation. This is an historical heritage that today’s Norwegian teachers can take pride in.

A second example is the protests in Sandefjord, where Norwegian teachers took action against the market forces in education. Consequently, Norwegian teachers as a profession have stood their ground against both the state and the market when called for (Freidson 2001).

Many teacher education students question the necessity of studying specific textbooks and other materials, and sometimes even the goals in the curriculum. In such circumstances, students and instructors might benefit from a book like Den norske skolen, which offers a way to make sense of the current curriculum content by placing it in an historical context. My hope is that this monograph will be spread and read, not only by teacher educators and teacher students but also by politicians. In addition, I also believe that the book will find a readership among Nordic educational researchers, political scientists and sociologists interested in the political history of the Norwegian educational system.

NOTES

1 Norway entered into a personal union with Denmark in 1536.
2 In 1997, compulsory schooling was extended to 10 years.
3 Although not mentioned by Thuen, it is worth pointing out that in line with NPM, the deregulation of textbooks occurred in 2000 in Norway and in 1991 in Sweden (Reichenberg 2014; Reichenberg 2016).

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Monica Reichenberg
Department of Education and Special Education
University of Gothenburg
Sweden
monica.reichenberg@ped.gu.se