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Active citizenship in public and nonprofit schools – the case of Norway

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ABSTRACT

Countries increasingly out-contract public education to private providers to inspire competition and development, but there is limited research on the consequences. This article compares the parents' room for active citizenship in public and nonprofit compulsory schools in Norway. It analyses a large-scale parental survey by multi-level regressions (OLS) of school-choice, internal empowerment, external participation in governance, and satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration, while controlling for school- and municipality-level factors. Parents' reasons for choosing free schools are mainly perceived quality, profile, or previous dissatisfaction — not location as in public schools. Although parents are in general satisfied, there is a small but significantly higher level in free schools related to internal empowerment. Thus, stakeholder influence makes a difference, even in a society promoting active citizenship more broadly. The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training conducted the survey in 2018–2019, targeting more than 20,000 parents in 160 public and 25 free schools.

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Active citizenship; free schools; nonprofit organization; privatization; public schools; school-choice; compulsory education

Introduction

There is a trend of outsourcing schools to private providers in many Western countries (Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2016). This trend has penetrated the Nordic countries, but with a particular rationale behind the reforms: using choice to empower the citizens (Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2016, 67). An important argument is to improve the quality and relevance of education by making parents more powerful, i.e. increase the potential for active citizenship. In one way, this is a natural continuation of a regional emphasis on empowering service users by granting them active citizenship through influence over services (Andersen and Hoff 2001; Andersen and Rossteutscher 2007). On the other hand, user choice represents something new as public funding follows each user to non-public welfare providers, and such quasi-markets are expected to provide a higher degree of responsiveness and pluralism among providers which would enable real choice (Dovemark et al. 2018). However, we do not know of studies from the Norwegian context that examine why parents choose a particular school for

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their children or if alternatives to the public schools result in more empowerment or satisfaction.

This raises the question if ownership and governance structures really make a difference. A key rationale for the establishment of nonprofit service provision is that stakeholders' interests are protected by this organisational form (Salamon and Toepler 2015; Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen 1991).

Compulsory education in Norway includes primary schools (year 1 to 7) and lower secondary schools (year 8 to 10). Private schools are not allowed to transfer profits to owners if they get public support in accordance with The Independent Schools Act (Fris-kolelova 2003, § 6-3). We refer to such schools as 'free schools'. They get 85 percent of the funding that public schools get and can only add up to 15 percent from tuitions, to keep economic thresholds low. Most of them are private foundations with a board of directors, where parents are the main stakeholders, along with teachers (Trætterberg 2018; Seggaard and Saglie 2017; Seggaard 2018). Notably, earlier qualitative work has shown that parental influence is greater in free schools in Norway as compared to public schools, and that this may be part of the motivation for why parents choose these schools (Trætterberg 2018, 2017). Also in public schools, Norwegian parents have, comparatively speaking, wide formal influence on schooling and their children's situation at school through the parents' working committee (FAU) and different forms of parent-school cooperation (Helgøy and Homme 2007, 2017). Yet, studies have questioned to what degree it is possible for parents to exercise their formal rights to influence their children's education (Bæck 2019).

Active citizenship is an analytic concept we use to evaluate how much control citizens have when they become users of public services. To control their lives as users of public services, citizens need to have influence. Since real influence is challenging to obtain for pupils (Thornberg and Elvstrand 2012), parents or other legal guardians will represent them in meetings with the state and its institutions such as compulsory schooling.

The main research question is whether parents use and experience active citizenship differently depending on whether their children attend public or nonprofit compulsory schools in Norway. To answer this, we compare parents' survey responses regarding school-choice, internal empowerment, external participation in governance, and satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration. The statistical analysis is based on a large-scale survey carried out in 2018–2019 by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, targeting more than 20,000 parents or guardians of pupils in 160 public and 25 free schools in 45 municipalities.

Theoretical approach

The concept of 'active citizenship' is inspired by theories about how users of welfare services are able to exercise 'everyday power'. Active citizenship is exercised by citizens, in this case users, as they assume control over their own situation in face of public sector institutions that frame their daily life. Active citizenship thus depends on two main features. The individual resources of the citizen, in our case parents or guardians of children in school, and the openness in the public institution to users' efforts to assume control (Andersen 2004). While the children are the users of compulsory schools, the school system is constructed with institutional features that enable parents to advance their

interests. To capture the ‘everyday power’ of the users we must thus examine the role played by parents. The concept of active citizenship reflects that there are three main actors involved in deciding the content of a welfare service when a citizen becomes a user: the user, the institutional staff and administrators, and local public authorities. The user can influence a public service by changing institution, through internal communication with staff and institutional leaders, or through external communication with actors such as leaders at the municipal level. We thus identify three dimensions of active citizenship: *choice, empowerment, and external influence* (Trætteberg 2017). ‘Choice’ means selection of a school with expectation of better quality or more suitable profile, ‘empowerment’ means the ability to get adjustments in line with individual needs and preferences through direct, internal communication like contacting staff, teachers or management, while ‘external influence’ means achieving changes through channels like user boards, or by contacting politicians, lawyers or media.

Active citizenship is of particular importance in compulsory education since parents in Norway have a legal obligation to educate their children, and they are therefore highly dependent on the public education system. They may choose a different municipal school or a free school with public funding if it is practically possible. However, for most people, private schools without public funding or home education are not realistic options because of costs and time constraints (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2013).

Based on theories about nonprofit organisations and a ‘civil society’ type of collaborative governance (Trætteberg 2015; Thøgersen 2017), we expect the parents in free schools to have used the room for active citizenship, i.e. choice, empowerment and external influence, to a larger extent than parents in the public schools. Civil society type of governance involves commitment to certain values and an identity that sets these apart from alternative providers (Billis 2010, 55). A strong position of stakeholders, such as members and users, may enable these to interact with the institution’s staff and leadership by voicing opinions that help steer developments at the institution (Hirschman 1970). This effect can be stronger in free schools that are not attached to the hierarchical governance structures that dominate public sector (Hill and Lynn 2005). Additionally, external stakeholders may influence school governance for example when a church supports a christian school or a Waldorf community supports a Waldorf school (Mullins 2006, 16).

Furthermore, we expect that those who have used the room for active citizenship are more satisfied with dialogue and collaboration at the free schools. This would indicate, not only that they see a need for improvement or prevention of deterioration of conditions and actively use available means to do something about it, but also that the experience with dialogue and collaboration makes parents at the free schools more satisfied. These expectations are in line with theories assuming that nonprofit organisations, because they have a form of ownership without external owners and less subordination to the government, to a larger extent take the users’ values and interest into account because they are one of the central stakeholders (Enjolras 2009; Ben-Ner, Hamann, and Ren 2018; Salamon and Toepler 2015). In addition, the board of directors or other governing bodies are guided by inclusive social norms and values stated in the nonprofit organisation’s statutes. Furthermore, the users’ position as stakeholder may be strengthened by representation in boards, councils and committees as part of the formal organisation-structure, or by inclusion in more informal decision-making processes through a ‘civil society’ style of governance.

The first part of the paper presents previous research, theoretical perspectives and the legal and institutional context of the Norwegian case, the second part presents the analytical and methodical approach, and survey findings, and the concluding section discusses if the findings line up with the theoretical assumptions.

Central steering and local autonomy in the Scandinavian model

Scandinavian compulsory schools have for decades operated in the tension between central steering and control, and local influence by teachers, students, and parents (Telhaug and Mediås 2003, 441). Over the last couple of decades, this tension has been accentuated by strategies to make schools an arena for social investments with centralised learning goals, which has added to debates about privatisation and the traditional model of empowering citizens' use of active citizenship in public services.

Schools are a service area at the core of the social investment agenda (Morel, Palier, and Palme 2012) that is currently prevalent in Scandinavian societies (Pedersen 2011). This is not unique to Scandinavia; it is currently a global phenomenon where performance, competitiveness, and a social investments agenda are challenging local stakeholder influence in schools (Arnesen and Lundahl 2006; Jenson 2013; Van Lancker 2013). In Norway, this broad trend manifests itself in new technologies aiming to increase the efficiency of teaching and learning (Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017). Some argue that over the last couple of decades, Scandinavian schools have been absorbed in international trends that weaken their particularity through enhanced emphasis on efficiency (Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017); a process that has been accelerated when external shocks such as low PISA scores have created room for change in school governance (Møller and Skedsmo 2013). A prominent example of this trend is the major reform 'Kunnskapsløftet' (Knowledge Promotion) from the 2000s. The reform included the combination of national tests and monitoring efforts with increased responsibility for the municipalities (Aasen et al. 2012). These tests are typically interpreted as part of a global trend with standardisation through adaptation of OECD standards and 'represents a strong indirect means of centrally regulating and coordinating the school system' (Paulsen and Høyer 2016, 93).

In a review of Norwegian reforms in the early 2000s, Aasen et al. (2012) find that the school principals had been empowered through the reforms, something that represents real devolution of power, but that there is no further systematic spread of influence to other stakeholders such as parents. According to Dovemark et al. (2018), the actual devolution of power in the school sector is unique for Norway in the Scandinavian context.

Regarding the role of parents, Helgøy and Homme (2017) find that street-level discretions at schools lead to different approaches in parent-school collaboration. Moreover, this differentiation between NPM-inspired steering and collaborative strategies was directly tied to the government models guiding the schools. Yet, Björk and Browne-Ferrigno (2016) find that this formal diffusion of power is not what one can observe in the actual practices when it comes to parental involvement in schools, suggesting that the current role of parents is not settled in the literature. These were all public schools, and one can thus envision that a free school with different governing models with less external pressure also has different approaches to active citizenship.

The emphasis on efficiency and social investments in schools is balanced by a tradition of public services being a local responsibility in the Nordic countries (Grønlie 2004; Loughlin, Hendriks, and Lidström 2011; Kjølørød 2005). Additionally, since education is compulsory and schools play a dominant role in the life of adolescents, it is a democratic right of parents and children to have a certain level of influence and thus exercise active citizenship (Andersen and Hoff 2001). This perspective penetrated Scandinavian welfare thinking to the extent that Scandinavian citizenship was coined as a concept to describe democratisation of the welfare state at the levels closest to the user (Hernes 1988). In a research tradition established by the Scandinavian ‘power studies’ 30 years ago (Andersen 2004; Petersson, Westholm, and Blomberg 1989), small scale democracy, the local interactions between user and service provider at the output side of the democratic process, is examined. Active citizenship is a concept developed in this context to examine the tension between central control and user control in the light of the available routes of action for citizens as users when they are not satisfied with the quality or content of services. Comparative studies show that citizens in the Scandinavian countries to a higher degree than citizens in other European countries believe they have ample room to influence services (Andersen and Rossteutscher 2007). For the school sector, this is in practical terms understood as aspects of the collaboration between schools and parents (Helgøy and Homme 2017). Because of the opportunity to exit schools, this service area is the policy fields where user find themselves to have the most influence of the services studied by Andersen (2004). Qualitative work has suggested free schools may better enable empowerment of parents than public schools, underlining the relevance of such a dimension. Room for adapting to user preferences is better in smaller organisations, detached from the public sector (Trætteberg 2018). Furthermore, a distinctive characteristic prominent in the literature on Scandinavian citizenship is that it ‘fuses individual interests through participation in community activities, whether they are work, neighbourhood, or welfare-related needs’ (Janoski 1998, 20). This includes formal arenas, such as parents’ working committee (FAU) and different forms of parent–school cooperation, set up in order to facilitate parental influence outside of the daily routine between the teacher and the children and parents and the responsiveness of more informal external forums.

School choice, private providers and social inequality

For our purposes, any inherent differences between public schools and the free schools in providing room for active citizenship is of interest. All free schools receiving public funding in Norway are nonprofit entities that may be expected to have their own governance logic for parental involvement — a civil society type of governance.

The most prominent involvement of parents in the school system in Norway and elsewhere is, arguably, the selection of school. Municipalities allocate children to their local, public school, but some are less restrictive on school choice. However, all parents of children in free schools have chosen a different school. In a review of US-based studies, Holmes Erickson (2017) finds that academic quality is the number one selection criteria for parents choosing private schools, but that other factors such as religious affiliation may also play an important role. Due to the different nature of Scandinavian schooling, it is not pertinent to transfer such findings directly to the Norwegian context. A more

relevant comparison is Sweden where Thelin and Niedomysl (2015) find that presence of friends and especially geographical attributes are more important than quality aspects in school choice. Yet, a certain level of grade inflation also suggests that signalling academic attributes is also important for user choice (Wennström 2020). The Swedish school market is markedly different from Norway (Lundahl 2016) since all parents have to choose a school actively and do not get a public default alternative. Additionally, private schools have a larger share of the pupils, there is a much lower threshold for establishing schools in competition with existing public schools, and there are no limits on transfer of profit to owners (Segaard and Saglie 2017). It is therefore not possible to make any direct inferences to a Norwegian context.

Parental engagement in schools is likely to be associated with socio-economic resources. We are not aware of studies of this association in the school sector in Norway, but a Finnish study finds that the parents' level of education was associated with their satisfaction with home-school collaboration, and that the schools' socio-economic affluence level in addition was associated with satisfaction with school culture (Tikkanen 2019). This is in line with several studies relating school choice to educational inequality and social reproduction (Barrett DeWiele and Edgerton 2016), marketisation (Meier and Lemmer 2019) and unequal distribution of students (Schneider and Buckley 2002), linking parental school satisfaction to school reputation (Oplatka and Nupar 2012). A study using data from three Norwegian schools find strong relationships between school reputation, parent satisfaction and parent loyalty, where views of schools as having a parent-orientation, is an especially important explanation (Skallerud 2011).

The Norwegian case

The Scandinavian countries, despite their common histories and high welfare ambitions, have developed very different systems for involving private schools in compulsory education. In Sweden, the share of pupils in non-municipal schools has increased from 3 to 16 percent in just over 20 years (Swedish National Agency for Education 2021), of which 72 percent went to schools owned by limited companies in the schoolyear 2019–2020 (Friskolornas riksförbund 2021). Denmark has for a long time had the largest share of pupils in nonprofit, free schools, with 18 percent in recent data (Ministry of Children and Education 2021), while Norway has just 4.2 percent of pupils in free schools (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2021). Different roles and sizes of the private schools before the nineties, have contributed to the transformation of multinational privatisation trends into very different educational reforms in the Scandinavian countries (Lundahl 2016; Imsen, Blossing, and Moos 2017; Sivesind 2017).

Marketisation and growth of private schools is a strong international trend that has not had full effect in Norway. Private schools have been legal since 1848, and they have been drivers of important innovations and reforms. In the postwar period, public schools were regarded as the main instrument to achieve education for all; reducing the role of private schools to supplementary and experimental alternatives. However, in the 1990s private schools and freedom of choice with market-liberal motivation gained support from the conservatives, and a legal reform in 2003 removed the requirement that private schools should have alternative pedagogies or views of life. In 2005, a

center-left coalition won the election, and the new government reversed the reform before it had substantial effects. This shows how politically contested the role of private schools has been in Norway (Thuen and Tveit 2013; Tuastad 2008).

Norway, compared to the other Scandinavian countries, has implemented strict requirements for the establishment of new schools. There is an opening for private initiatives to establish new schools if they can get approval by the Directorate for Education and Training. In practice, this means educational alternatives to the public schools, i.e. schools with Waldorf and Montessori pedagogies, a Christian view of life, or with a cross-national dimension. The parents' or guardians' right to choose schools was reinforced by a proposition from the conservative minority-government to the Parliament regarding The Independent Schools Act, citing the UN Declaration of Human Rights article 13-3 (Prop.84 L 2014-2015, 8). In this perspective, a minimum of private schools with different profiles is necessary to respect the liberty to choose.

The number of pupils in private, free schools in primary and lower secondary education more than doubled from 2009 to 2019 and the number of schools increased from 113 to 261 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2021). In many cases, these schools are not new, but rather small schools that the municipalities have closed down because there are too few pupils in the area. The conservative-led governments from 2013 to 2021 seem to have implemented a less strict interpretation of the regulations, which has resulted in the establishment of some large new schools as well.

Both free schools and public schools are subject to national regulation by the ministry and a directorate. Public schools are the responsibility of municipalities, and there are formal arenas for parental influence (Telhaug and Mediås 2003). Furthermore, recent policy initiatives seek to strengthen collaborative forms of governance in public schools (Helgøy and Homme 2017, 2016). Free schools are not part of the municipal governance structure and use their own systems for management and communication. However, if they receive public funding, they have to follow national regulations and core curricula, and they may be inspected by the Directorate for Education and Training, just like the public schools (Segaard and Saglie 2017).

Norway thus represents a good case to examine our research question. The public regulation ensures that the free schools are based on an alternative mission and there are no big, business-like actors pushing corporate strategies that may lead to mission drift and undermining nonprofit distinctiveness (Maier, Meyer, and Steinbereithner 2016). Norway is thus a place where nonprofits are well situated to develop governance structures that give parents as stakeholders influence. At the same time, it can be seen as a tough test for the free schools' ability to stand out from public providers, as stakeholder engagement is a priority also in the public school sector. Moreover, the parents that select the private free schools may have done this in order to have better control over the schooling of their children. They can therefore have higher expectations for active citizenship than parents in public schools do, which may result in lower rating in the surveys. Methodically, it is difficult to control for all potential differences between parents in public and private schools.

Data and method

The main purpose of the statistical analysis is to compare if there are differences in the use of the room for active citizenship in free schools and in public schools, and if actions to improve conditions result in satisfaction with the dialogue and collaboration at the school. To measure active citizenship, we examine the action of parents, and how these are met, in three steps. First, they must recognise a need for change; second, they choose to do something about it or not; and third, they may be more or less satisfied with the outcome (Andersen and Rossteutscher 2007). In the survey-analysis, attempts to improve conditions are measured by questions about reasons for choice of school, and about using internal and external channels of influence to improve or prevent deterioration of conditions at the school. To what extent parents feel that they succeed in carrying out changes is measured by an index of survey-questions about satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration at the schools.

We rely on a large-scale survey, carried out during the school year 2017–2018 by The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Udir), targeting approximately 25,000 parents and guardians of pupils in 230 public and free schools in Norway. We analyze responses from 160 public and 25 free schools in 45 municipalities. The sample includes 19,357 and 1,323 respondents respectively in each school type, with information on all relevant variables, suggesting a response rate of about 80 percent.

The survey contained standardised items enabling the construction of an index measuring parents' satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration with schools. In addition, we were allowed to include items measuring why parents had chosen a particular school, and whether they had engaged in some way to improve or prevent deterioration of school conditions (see below for variable description). To get approval to include our selected set of questions, we sent an invitation-letter to all school-owners, i.e. educational administrations of municipalities and managers of private schools. Those who accepted the invitation received our questions as a part of Udir's standard survey.

The dataset has a three-level structure, with individual responses (parents/guardians) nested in schools and municipalities. In order to control for possible contextual effects across schools and municipalities, we therefore estimate three-level multilevel models, with control variables on individual, school and municipality-level.

The main research question is if nonprofit or public models for governance of schools result in different uses and experiences of the room for active citizenship. It will be analyzed empirically by two sub-questions: First, are there differences between free schools and public schools in the share of parents that have used the room for active citizenship, i.e. choice, empowerment and external influence? CHOICE is measured by the percentage that for different reasons have selected a particular school. EMPOWERMENT and EXTERNAL INFLUENCE are measured by the share of parents that during the last 12 months have used different internal or external means to improve or prevent deterioration of school conditions. The second sub-question is: are there differences between free schools and public schools in the level of satisfaction with the communication and collaboration associated with having used the room for active citizenship? This analysis uses as dependent variable an index measuring SATISFACTION WITH DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION.

We first analyze descriptively variables measuring aspects of active citizenship, i.e. CHOICE, EMPOWERMENT and EXTERNAL INFLUENCE, before including them as

independent variables when analyzing satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration. CHOICE is based on a survey item asking respondents about the main reason for choosing the school their child attends. They could choose between five responses (school district where the child belongs/location; the profile of the school; perceptions of school quality; dissatisfaction with previous school; other). EMPOWERMENT and EXTERNAL INFLUENCE are based on a single survey item asking respondents if they during the past 12 months had engaged in improving or preventing deterioration of school conditions. EMPOWERMENT includes those responding that they had contacted teachers or other staff at the school, or the school management. EXTERNAL INFLUENCE includes those responding that they had contacted the parents' working committee (FAU), public authorities, politicians, lawyers, or the media.

Our main dependent variable is SATISFACTION WITH DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION, which is an additive index (mean scores, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$) consisting of six survey items: 'The communication between home and school is good', 'The teachers show interest in my views on my child's learning and development', 'The teachers follow up on my views on my child's learning and development', 'I am received in a good way when I contact the school', 'I can quickly get a meeting with the contact teacher if needed', and 'I can quickly get a meeting with the school management if needed'. All items were answered using a five-point scale (Totally agree – totally disagree).

The main independent variable on the school level is provider, which distinguishes between public and free schools. On the school level, we also include three control variables: school type (primary or lower secondary schools), school size (the number of students at each school), and the educational level of the parents (percentage of parents at each school with higher education). These variables are included because other studies suggest that higher educated parents more actively engage with schools (Bæk 2010), and that school size may influence the level of parental involvement (Walsh 2010).

On the municipality level, we control for size (number of residents in the municipality). This is because the large municipalities may use other and more formal systems of school-governance, which affects the ability of parents to influence (Møller et al. 2006; Aasen et al. 2012). For example, larger municipalities may establish elaborate systems of management by objectives that make teachers, school staff and headmasters occupied with externally determined activities, tests, and reporting, while schools in smaller municipalities may be more decoupled and have more collaborative styles of governance.

Descriptive statistics on the main dependent variable as well as contextual independent variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Descriptive statistics on CHOICE, EMPOWERMENT and EXTERNAL INFLUENCE are presented in the next section.

Table 1 shows that the dependent variable is highly skewed. A mean score of 4.4 on a 1–5 scale suggests that the vast majority of parents are satisfied with dialogue and collaboration. This is important to keep in mind when reviewing the results; we are analyzing variations between generally satisfied parents. The sample includes 58 percent primary schools, 19 percent lower secondary schools, and 23 percent schools that have pupils on both primary and lower secondary level. Regarding school size, the average is 254 pupils, with a minimum of 22 and a maximum of 576 pupils. There is also large variation across schools in the share of parents with higher education, ranging from 29 to 89 percent, and an average of 56 percent. The municipalities range from 983 to 673,469

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<i>Main dependent variable</i>					
Satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration	20,680	4.41	0.72	1	5
<i>School characteristics (level 2)</i>					
Free school	185	0.06	–	0	1
School type (primary school)	185	0.58	–	0	1
School type (lower secondary school)	185	0.19	–	0	1
School type (primary and lower secondary school)	185	0.23	–	0	1
School size (number of pupils)	185	254.41	127.11	22	576
Share of parents with higher education	185	56.48	10.96	29.46	89.02
<i>Municipality characteristics (level 3)</i>					
Size (number of residents)	45	43,243.9	106,290.1	983	673,469

residents. These control variables reflect that there are many small municipalities and schools in Norway, and some remote districts based on fishery, farming and small enterprises with low levels of education. However, they also show that we have included some relatively large schools and cities in our survey.

Table 2 further shows descriptive differences between public and free schools in the sample. Compared to public schools, the table shows that free schools are more often combined primary and lower secondary schools, they are on average smaller (119 vs. 203 pupils), have a higher share of parents with higher education (60 vs. 54 percent) and are located in larger municipalities (75,063 vs. 30,700 residents). As the large standard deviation suggests, however, outliers affect this latter statistic. The main reason is that in Oslo, the capital of Norway, only one school participated in the survey – and that school was a nonprofit. If we consider the median instead of the mean, the differences in municipality size between public and free schools are negligible (22,452 vs. 23,017 residents). As a robustness check, we estimated all statistical models excluding the school located in Oslo. The results from these models were virtually identical to the results presented in the next section (results can be retrieved upon request).

Results

The results are presented in two steps: First, we describe parents' main reason for choosing a particular school (CHOICE; Table 3), and whether parents had engaged in improving or preventing deterioration of school conditions (EMPOWERMENT and EXTERNAL INFLUENCE; Table 4). These analyses are estimated with a series of binary regression models for each type of choice and for each type of empowerment and external influence, controlling for relevant factors. In the second step, by means of linear regression models, we

Table 2. Characteristics of public and free schools. Mean (standard deviation).

	Public schools	Free schools
School type (primary school)	64.4	16.0
School type (lower secondary school)	18.8	20.0
School type (primary and lower secondary school)	16.9	64.0
Size (number of pupils)	203.3 (121.4)	118.7 (94.6)
Share of parents with higher education	53.8 (10.9)	59.5 (15.1)
Municipality size	30,700.5 (20,968.8)	75,063 (144,416.9)
<i>N</i> (parents)	19,357	1,323
<i>N</i> (schools)	160	25

Table 3. Main reason for choosing this particular school (choice). Predicted means from OLS and multilevel models.

	School district where the child belongs / location		The profile of the school		Perceptions of school quality		Dissatisfaction with previous school	
	Logistic	Multilevel logistic	Logistic	Multilevel logistic	Logistic	Multilevel logistic	Logistic	Multilevel logistic
Public	91.0	89.8	1.3	1.3	3.5	3.7	0.9	0.9
Free school	8.3	15.0	37.0	38.7	40.1	25.9	10.0	10.9
Control variables (school type, school size, share of parents with higher education, municipality size)	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Bold entries, $p < 0.01$. Number of observations: (I1) 20,680, (I2) 185, (I3) 45.

study the relationship between these variables and the index measuring parents’ SATISFACTION WITH DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION (Table 5). Are there differences between public and free schools? One should avoid using inferential statistics (p -values) when analyzing non-random samples (Hirschauer et al. 2020). Although our sample is probably not representative of all schools, parents or municipalities in Norway, we still report statistical significance (p -values) to gauge for non-response bias in the analyzed sample. Thus, the analyses are based on the assumption that the sample is representative of all parents in the participating schools (the population).

Table 3 displays the main reason parents gave for choosing the school their child attends. The table reports predicted means from two regression models for each reason. The logistic models are simple bivariate regression models with ‘main reason’ as dependent variable and ‘provider’ as independent variable, thus, the predicted means from these models are similar to the real answer distribution. The multilevel logistic models are three-level hierarchical logistics regressions, with ‘school type’, ‘school size’, ‘share of parents with higher education’, and ‘municipality size’ as control variables.

Table 4. Engaged in improving or preventing deterioration of school conditions (empowerment and external influence). Predicted means from OLS and multilevel models.

	Empowerment		External influence		Other		No engagement	
	Logistic	Multilevel logistic	Logistic	Multilevel logistic	Logistic	Multilevel logistic	Logistic	Multilevel logistic
Public	37.0	36.8	4.0	4.1	2.0	2.0	56.9	57.0
Nonprofit	39.6	43.8	3.0	3.3	2.0	1.8	55.4	51.4
Control variables (school type, school size, share of parents with higher education, municipality size)	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Bold entries, $p < 0.1$. Number of observations: (I1) 20,680, (I2) 185, (I3) 45.

Table 5. Satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration. Predicted means from OLS and multilevel models.

	OLS (1)		Multilevel (2)		Multilevel (3)	
	Public	Free school	Public	Free school	Public	Free school
Choice						
School district where the child belongs / location	4.4	4.6	4.4	4.5	4.4	4.5
The profile of the school	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6
Perceptions of school quality	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6
Dissatisfaction with previous school	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5
Other	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.3	4.4
Engagement						
Empowerment	4.3	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.3	4.5
External influence	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.5	4.2	4.5
Other contacts	4.4	4.4	4.4	4.3	4.4	4.3
Have not engaged in improving or preventing deterioration of school conditions	4.5	4.7	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.6
Control variables	None		School: school type, share of parents with higher education, school-size		School- and municipality: school type, share of parents with higher education, school- and municipality size	

Bold entries, $p < 0.05$. Number of observations: (I1) 20,680, (I2) 185, (I3) 45.

The table suggests that parents with children in public and free schools report vastly different reasons for their school choice. Whereas 91 percent of parents with children in public schools based their choice on geography (school district where the child belongs/location), almost 80 percent of parents with children in free schools based their choice on either the perceptions of the profile of the school or of the school quality. In addition, 10 percent of these parents based their choice on dissatisfaction with a previous school, indicating that they had actively *changed* school. When controlling for contextual factors, we see one dramatic change: the predicted mean of choosing a free school based on perceptions of school quality drops from 40 to 29 percent. This change is driven by municipality size, which is the only significant contextual variable. This suggests that parents in larger municipalities are more competitive and to a larger extent choose schools based on perceived quality.¹ This can be because that in a tighter labour market, a higher level of education may be necessary to get a good job. In smaller municipalities with lower general level of education, this may seem less pressing, and there may be other career opportunities related to employment in the agriculture, fisheries, and local industries and services. This is in line with previous research comparing municipality-cases of different sizes, showing that the larger municipalities use the opportunity to change school to display identity, reputation and progress (Kvåle, Elstad, and 2008, 167–171).

Next, Table 4 reports similar models as Table 3, but with measures of engagement as dependent variables. Overall, the results suggest that more than half of the respondents had *not* engaged in improving or preventing deterioration of school conditions. Close to 40 percent had contacted teachers, other staff, or school management (EMPOWERMENT), whereas only three to four percent had contacted parents' working committee (FAU), public authorities, politicians, lawyers, or the media (EXTERNAL INFLUENCE). The differences between public and free schools are negligible (at best, statistically significant at the

10 percent level), but when including control variables at the contextual level (multilevel models) we see increasing differences between users of public and free schools when it comes to empowerment (users of free schools more likely) and no engagement (users of public schools more likely to not have engaged at all).

Overall, however, these differences are not dramatic, and, so far, the results suggest that parents with children in free schools distinguish from parents with children in public schools primarily when it comes to the main reason for choosing a school (CHOICE), and less so when it comes to engagement (EMPOWERMENT and EXTERNAL INFLUENCE).

Table 5 summarises results (predicted means) for the index measuring SATISFACTION WITH DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION, which is the main dependent variable. The table displays three models: model 1 shows results from OLS-models only controlling for school provider (public/nonprofit), whereas models 2 and 3 take account of the nested structure of the data, stepwise. Model 2 includes control for the school level and adds variables measuring the share of parents with higher education in each school, school type (primary, lower secondary or combined), and size of the school (number of pupils). Model 3 additionally controls for the municipality level and adds a variable measuring the size of the municipality (number of residents). Bold entries indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between public and free schools.

Table 5 (model 1) shows that parents with children in free schools have a higher (but negligible) level of satisfaction with dialogue and collaboration when choice of school is based on ‘school district where the child belongs’. This difference is, however, not significant in model 2 or 3 when controlling for school and municipality characteristics. None of the other reasons for school choice (i.e. profile, quality, dissatisfaction, other) are associated with differences in satisfaction between nonprofit and public schools that are statistically significant in any of the three models.

Looking at ‘engagement’ in Table 5, there is higher satisfaction among parents with children in free schools if they contacted teachers, other staff or management in order to improve school conditions or prevent deterioration, i.e. EMPOWERMENT. There are no differences in satisfaction related to using EXTERNAL INFLUENCE, i.e. contacting the parents’ working committee, public authorities, politicians, lawyers and media, after controlling for school and municipality characteristics in models 2 and 3. Furthermore, there are no significant effects in any of the models related to using ‘other contacts’. Interestingly, there is higher satisfaction in free schools associated with *not* engaging in improving or preventing deterioration of school conditions, even after controlling for share of parents with higher education, type and size of schools, and size of municipalities in models 2 and 3 of Table 5.

Altogether, the only significant findings are that engagement through internal channels to improve school conditions, but also non-engagement, make parents in free schools slightly more satisfied with dialogue and collaboration. This indicates that in free schools parents experience somewhat better communication with school-staff through internal channels but also if they do not engage in improving school conditions at all. A possible explanation is that there are established joint understandings of goals and values that makes such engagement unnecessary.

Concluding discussion

The main research question of this paper is if parents use and experience the room for active citizenship differently when their children attend public or nonprofit compulsory schools in Norway. A first observation is that parents are content with dialogue and collaboration across variables and schools (See [Table 1](#)). This may indicate that the majority of parents does not share concerns raised in the public debate regarding centralisation of power and too detailed objectives in schools, that may reduce the impact of parents' engagement (Løvlie 2020). Moreover, the generally high level of satisfaction may make it difficult to detect differences between public and free schools. When public schools score close to the top of the scale, one can hardly expect free schools to develop governing strategies that can produce much higher scores.

The statistical analysis focuses, first, on differences in the share of parents that have used the opportunities for school choice, internal empowerment, or external influence to improve or prevent deterioration of conditions at the school. Second, it focuses on satisfaction with communication and collaboration related to using these opportunities for choice and engagement.

Interestingly, the analysis shows that parents report very different reasons for choosing the school their child attends. In public schools, 91 percent based the choice on the school district where the child belongs, while in free schools, 80 percent based the choice on perceptions of the school's profile or quality, and 10 percent were dissatisfied with a previous school (See [Table 3](#)). For those who make an active choice to go to free schools, the opportunity to select provider seems to be an important aspect of controlling their lives as users of publicly funded services.

When it comes to the parents' engagement for improving or preventing deterioration of conditions at the school, we find small differences between public and free schools after controlling for variables on school-level and municipality-level. There is a statistically significant lower share in public than in free schools that used internal channels of empowerment, i.e. contacted teachers, other staff or school management (EMPOWERMENT: Public schools 36.8 vs. free schools 43.8 percent. Predicted means after controls. See [Table 4](#)). There is no significant difference in share that used external channels of influence, i.e. contacted parents' working committee (FAU), public authorities, politicians, lawyers, or the media (EXTERNAL INFLUENCE: Public schools 4.1 vs. free schools 3.3 percent). Thus, this does not indicate any differences in active citizenship large enough to tip the scale in favour of one school type or the other.

Nonetheless, we find that parents in free schools are marginally more satisfied with dialogue and collaboration, even if the levels of satisfaction are high in general. After controls, there are significantly higher levels of satisfaction in free schools, but only related to empowerment of the parents within the school organisation ([Table 5](#)). There are no statistically significant differences related to channels of external influence. This may be because the external channels are essentially similar in public and free schools. All schools have a parents' working committee (FAU) through which parents by law have a right to get information and to take up matters of concern with the school principal. There are common laws and regulations, and the Directorate of Education and Training is supervising authority for all schools. In recent years, several reforms to encourage collaborative governance may have

reduced the differences (Helgøy and Homme 2016, 2017). This may have dampened the effects of public schools being part of a more bureaucratic and multi-levelled municipal governance structure, while free schools typically are small foundations with more autonomy.

Furthermore, there are no significant differences in satisfaction with dialogue and information between public and free schools related to any of the alternative reasons for selection of school, as the statistical analysis using three-level OLS-regressions shows (Table 5). This indicates that school choice may be less important for the parents' satisfaction with communication and collaboration than expected from NPM-theory (Hood 1991). The reason for introducing market-emulating forms of governance, including user choice, is to make welfare service providers more responsive in order to increase the users' satisfaction. However, the system of school choice in Norway does not encourage competition about pupils in the same way as in countries with school-vouchers, low thresholds of establishment, and for-profit companies owning schools, such as Sweden (Rönnerberg et al. 2021; Thøgersen 2017). The main intention behind the Norwegian Independent Schools Act is to allow free schools with different profiles from public compulsory schools, regarding pedagogies, views of life, or a cross-national dimension (Prop.84 L 2014–2015, 8).

Overall, the most important difference between nonprofit and public schools of relevance for active citizenship, in addition to the reasons for school-choice, seems to be a higher level of satisfaction with dialogue and communication for those who engage through internal means of empowerment. Surprisingly, also those who are *not* engaged in improvement or prevention of deterioration of conditions at school are also more satisfied with dialogue and communication in free schools (Table 5). This may indicate that they are more satisfied even though they do not see a need to use any internal or external means of engagement. This could be because free schools, due to the form of ownership, regard parents as central stakeholders with the right to information and influence. An alternative hypothesis could be that free schools tend to be smaller and have parents with higher education, which gives an advantage when it comes to collaboration. However, this is not supported by the statistical analysis that controls for the number of pupils and educational level of parents at the schools.

While the generally high level of satisfaction indicates that both public and free schools promote participative governance, parents in free schools seem to have more bottom-up influence through direct communication with teachers, employees or management, which is indication of a 'civil society' type of governance with both formal and informal links to decision-making processes (Trætterberg 2015; Thøgersen 2017). This suggests that ownership and governance structure of free schools make a small but significant difference for active citizenship, but mainly through internal empowerment.

The Scandinavian societies have over time pursued strategies to enhance active citizenship for the users of public services (Andersen 2004). As another approach to reach this goal, free schools are established explicitly to safeguard the interests of stakeholder, in these cases the parents (Ben-Ner 1986). The difference in aspects of active citizenship between public and nonprofit schools found by this study illuminates how these strategies both are relatively successful. This indicates that stakeholder influence makes a

difference, even in a society promoting active citizenship more broadly in the welfare services like Norway.

Moreover, the ability to choose a different school seems to be valuable in itself for parents, even if it does not increase satisfaction with communication and collaboration. As our study shows, reasons for choice of free schools are mainly perceived quality, profile or, to a lesser extent, previous dissatisfaction. This indicates that the opportunity to choose school is of great significance for those who use it, although the share of pupils in free schools (4.2 percent) is comparatively small in Norway. In a compulsory education system with a unitary preamble, that is still valid after several major reforms, free schools that represent distinctive alternatives add real choice, and this increases the room for active citizenship.

Note

1. This finding was not changed by excluding the nonprofit school in Oslo from the analysis as a check of robustness.

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