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User Democracy in Schools? Comparing Norwegian Schools with Nursing Homes

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Abstract

Democratic user control is a hallmark of Scandinavian schools, but also of other services of the Scandinavian welfare states. This article studies variations in parental control and influences in public and non-public schools. In addition, how the use of different governance tools inspired by markets affects user control is analyzed. The empirical investigation consists of matching public and non-public schools and nursing homes in three Norwegian municipalities. The study concludes that there is important variation between public and non-public schools, while there is little variation between public and non-public nursing homes. The organization of the quasi-market is an important explanation for this.

Key words: School democracy, quasi-market, user choice, Norway, Scandinavian model, user influence.

Introduction

Scandinavia has a tradition for democratic user influence in schools (Antikainen, 2006). This article investigates variations in parental influence between public and non-public schools. In addition, it addresses how the use of governance tools inspired by markets impacts parental influence. The core services of the Scandinavian welfare states are financed and regulated by the public. The provision is dominated by the public sector, but for-profit and nonprofit providers can also deliver the service. For schools, fierce debates about which provider should deliver the services and how they are contracted (Telhaug, 2005 p. 73) accentuate the question of how this relates to the tradition with democratic user influence.

In this study, I investigate Norwegian schools as an example of the Scandinavian model. I compare schools with nursing homes, a field that, unlike Norwegian schools, is open also for for-profit actors. By comparing the functioning of quasi markets in the school area with a different welfare field, I am able to identify what is specific to user democracy in schools. The design involves the strategic selection of pairs of public and non-public schools and nursing homes in three Norwegian municipalities. The strategy of matching institutions whose foremost difference is being public, for-profit, or nonprofit, gives leverage to conclusions concerning the importance of this difference. The qualitative analysis aims to answer answers these research questions:

1. What is the relationship between different forms of market organization and user influence?
2. Do users have different influence in public, nonprofit, and for-profit service provider situations?

User democracy means that users enjoy autonomy and control over their own life when they use public services. The level of user control is a measure of the power balance between the user and the public agency (Hoff, 1993; Kumlin, 2004 p. 56). Users do not have complete control over services; the level of their influence is therefore a measure of how the user democracy functions. Moving power as close as possible to the concerned citizens is a tenet of the Scandinavian welfare model and can be observed in various service areas (Andersen & Hoff, 2001; Andersen & Rossteutscher, 2007).

Much of the research on user democracy in schools to date has focused on the students and their ability to influence the schools (Lieberkind, 2015). This is viewed as “democratic training,” something that develops student skills and gives them a positive view on democracy

and democratic processes (Geboers et al., 2013; Mager & Nowak, 2012). This article will, however, study user steering in its own right, not explicitly because it teaches new skills to students, but because it is an important part of having democratic welfare services. Since real influence is challenging to obtain for students (Thornberg & Elvstrand, 2012), I look at parental influence. Studies have also shown that it is questionable how much influence parents have (Bæck, 2007 pp. 104–105; Nordahl, 2003), but that there is variation based on parents' attributes, such as gender, educational level, and family type (Bæck, 2010 p. 559; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). This contribution shifts the focus to the importance of the school being public or nonprofit and the market mechanisms involved.

Scandinavian schools have for decades operated in the tension between central steering and control, and local influence by teachers, students, and parents (Telhaug & Mediås, 2003 p. 441). Currently, performance, competitiveness, and a social investments agenda are challenging democratic user influence in schools (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006 p. 294; Jenson, 2013; Van Lancker, 2013). One widely used strategy in face of this cross-pressure has in many Western countries been to downplay the democratic, user-driven, steering of schools to adapt to internationally recognized models of school governance. (Lingard et al., 2013; Sellar & Lingard, 2014). The challenge of growing expectations to increase the effectiveness of the organization is nothing particular for the school sector, but is something all welfare areas share (Jæger & Kvist, 2003).

One such international trend that has surprisingly broad acceptance in the Scandinavian welfare model, which is supposed to be politics against markets (Esping-Andersen, 1990), is the use of market mechanisms. When the Scandinavian welfare states introduce market mechanisms, they do it while withholding state regulation and state financing makes individual purchasing power less relevant. What they create is thus better described as quasi-markets (Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993). The market mechanisms generally take one of two forms (Anttonen & Meagher, 2013 p. 16). The first is the use of market practices of which outsourcing and user choice are the most important (Meagher & Cortis, 2009; Saglie & Bay, 2005). The second is the welfare provider mix in the provision of services. The division of providers from the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors make up the welfare mix. Research on the importance of welfare mix has documented that providers from different sectors are inherently different (Salamon, 1987; Steinberger, 2006), but it is less clear how these differences matter for democratic user control.

The use of market mechanisms in welfare has been shown to lead to a burden shift, where citizens must assume increased responsibility for services as the state effectively reduces the scope of its obligation (Brennan et al., 2012; Newman & Tonkens, 2011). Studies from the UK have shown how market mechanisms challenge the fairness and consistency in the public sector (Hood & Dixon, 2015). The possible adverse effects of for-profit actors have led Norway to take an active stance on the welfare provider mix in the school area. The Norwegian schools sector is open to nonprofits, but excludes for-profit private alternatives.

Before embarking on the analysis, I present the Norwegian case. Subsequently, I detail the theoretical framework and the research design, before I analyze the empirical findings.

The Norwegian case

The general features of the Scandinavian school model are, to a large degree, based on shared goals concerning universal access, equity, and parental power regarding the education of their children. These aspirations are pursued through public funding and regulation (Volckmar, 2010 pp. 43–44). Yet, the three countries have chosen different paths regarding the welfare mix over the last 20 years (Wiborg, 2013). Sweden has gone a long way in introducing market mechanisms and for-profit schools; Denmark has continued to have a considerable nonprofit sector, while Norway still has a dominating public sector. The latter two have no for-profit alternatives (Sivesind, 2016). By studying the Norwegian school system, I thus enlighten only a part of the Scandinavian reality. Yet, it features important shared aspects of the traditional conception of the Scandinavian school model and the market mechanisms, and market actors found in Norway are present in the other countries as well, albeit in a diverging scale.

I analyze the importance of market organization and the differences between public, for-profit, and nonprofit providers for democratic user influence in the school sector. The backdrop is a situation in which market mechanisms gain prominence in Norwegian welfare (Stamsø, 2009) and where the sector faces increased emphasis on competitiveness and efficiency at the expense of traditional values (Arnesen, 2011). To strengthen the conclusions about these mechanisms, I compare the schools with the nursing home sector. The nursing home sector has a similar welfare mix, albeit with interesting variation, as it is opened to a few for-profit providers and they have an alternative form of market practices, namely public tenders. Since the service area, bar the focus on cost containment, experiences less external pressure for performance, competitiveness, and social investments, it thus mirrors the school area in a way that gives leverage to inferences about the importance of these pressures.

In the primary and secondary school sector, the law allows public funding only for nonprofit schools. All students live in a school district and therefore have the right to attend a local public school. The vast majority also go to such schools. Two of the three municipalities in this study have free choice among the public schools. The nonprofit schools do not fit into the school district system, and parents must therefore actively choose these schools for their children. In the chosen municipalities, 4–5 percent of the students go to nonprofit schools. Nonprofit schools can charge parents 15 percent (but not more) of the cost, as the public funds only 85 percent of the expenses per student.

The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training has the authority to grant a license for a nonprofit school to open, and it only consults the municipality. Private alternatives to municipal schools can open only if the private schools present an approach that differs from public schools, typically in terms of religion or educational orientation. Non-public schools operate fully on the terms of a quasi-market; their funding is dependent on their ability to attract customers in what is, in practice, a voucher system. Funding for the nonprofit school is taken from the public schools that thus have an incentive to hold on to their students. This means that the school sector has market mechanisms in the form of non-public providers and user choice.

In the 2000s, non-public schools were a hotly debated issue. In the run up to the elections in 2005, politicians from the left described the intent of the center-right government to open for more non-public schools as attacking one of the pillars of the welfare state (Telhaug, 2005 p. 73). The current law permitting only nonprofit schools that offer an alternative in terms of religion or educational orientation is routinely attacked by right-wing politicians who want to make it easier to establish different forms of non-public schools.

The school area is compared to the nursing home area because of their important similarities and differences. What they share is a long tradition for nonprofit providers. There are currently around 70 nonprofit nursing homes. For-profit nursing homes are fiercely debated (Vabø et al., 2013), but have gained acceptance, even if there are currently less than 20 in the entire country (Bogen, 2011; NHO Service, 2013). The approach to the welfare mix is thus similar in the two areas, with the interesting exception that there is a modest opening for for-profit nursing homes. It is thus interesting to see if this opening to for-profits can create different dynamics in the local service provision from the nonprofit tradition.

In the same way, the service areas have contrasting use of market mechanisms. In schools, users have choice opportunities, while in the nursing home area public tenders predominate. Users are entitled to “adequate” care, but the judgment of whether a place in a nursing home is adequate is left to the municipality. Only two out of 429 municipalities allow individuals the option to choose (NHO Service, 2012). For nursing homes, the municipalities charge the user the same regardless of whether the provider is public or non-public. The blend of for-profit, nonprofit, and municipal nursing homes is the municipality’s decision entirely. Municipalities give contracts to nursing homes based on public tenders or long-running framework contracts with nonprofits. A core issue for local policymakers that believe market mechanisms can improve services is to choose between the main strategies of user choice and public tenders.

In schools, both the students and their parents can exercise user influence. In this study, I am concerned with the role of the parents who, as legal guardians, exercise the democratic citizenship rights of their children. Due to the health situation of users in nursing homes, the relatives are the ones to employ influence in this service area as well. There is accordingly a next of kin user control in both service areas. It may vary how parents are able to secure the interests of their children, but for nursing home users the variation is greater, as some of these users are unable to look after their interests and have no relatives that help them. These aspects must be considered in the analysis.

Analytic approach to how markets and the welfare mix are related to user control

A central measure of user control is how users obtain change. These changes can take place through the use of various forms of choice and voice (Hirschman, 1970). When these forms of user influence are evaluated, the formal rights and the informal structure of opportunities should be assessed (Andersen, 2004 p. 25). In the following section, I discuss the relations between market practices and user control and then the welfare mix and user control, and their potential pitfalls.

Market practices and user control

In *user choice–driven markets*, providers compete in a quasi-market where public funding goes to the providers able to attract users. The option to exit a provider can be a powerful tool when citizens want changes (Hirschman, 1970). Blomqvist and Rothstein (2008 p. 18) labeled the lack of user power in meetings with public servants the “black hole of democracy” and

promoted user choice as a way to alter the power balance between citizens and street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980).

Choice is an individual option and deals with the user's option to exit an institution he or she is unhappy with or to choose the perceived best institution to begin with. The choice structure has a double effect. First, it empowers citizens simply by giving them the exit options to leave a service when they are not content. Second, the threat of exit is a power available to users who want changes in the institutions (Le Grand, 2007 pp. 42–46).

The governance of a marketized welfare field can influence user control by changing power relations. Expanding the available range of services also promotes user control inasmuch as more citizens can find suitable services for their needs. Economic theories of nonprofit organizations explain how providers from different economic sectors play different roles in creating more complete markets (Steinberger, 2006). In a classical study, Weisbrod (1978) argued that although public providers design services for the average voter and for-profit providers for the biggest market segment, nonprofits often cater to smaller niches that otherwise would not be served. The different types of providers complement each other and thus establish a context in which more citizens get the service they want, and citizens are empowered (Smith & Grønbjerg, 2006 p. 224).

This form of user control can come at the expense of the collective orientation of users if allowing citizens to exit a provider makes them less willing to advocate change for the good of everybody and undermines their willingness to involve themselves in collective action to obtain social change. The responsibilities of the state can also change as responsibility for the service is moved to some extent from the state as the provider to the citizen as a market actor responsible for making choices that make the market work (Newman & Tonkens, 2011). Studies from Sweden have suggested that the choice model can lead to increased segregation (Lindbom, 2010). Moreover, individual choice can be used to limit public funding and thus be privatization of responsibility “in disguise” (Christensen, 2012).

As an alternative, markets driven by outsourcing introduce competition in the coordination of publicly funded services, as some responsibilities are transferred from public authorities to non-public providers. This means that citizens do not necessarily have an exit option as in the user choice model. At the same time, the state retains a stronger regulatory capacity over the operation of non-public providers, and the collective approach to the service remains intact

(Ascoli & Ranci, 2002 p. 10) since the users have incentives to pursue improvements for the collective and not only themselves.

In this model, the competitive context of the institutions may give them incentives to be responsive to users (Le Grand, 2007). Users' discontent may result in the institutions missing contract extensions or having their contracts terminated. Given the considerable problems with measuring quality in human services (Evers et al., 1997), user opinions are important quality measures for the private provider, as they seek to retain their contract in the new tender process.

An additional effect of marketization is a burden shift, as identified by Van Berkel et al. (2007), who demonstrate how the use of market mechanisms can have the effect of moving responsibility for the service from the government to citizens and users. Marketization is sometimes wrapped in the rhetoric of user control at the same time as the realities underpinning the reforms are the substitutability and retrenchment of public responsibility, resulting in the revitalization of bureaucratic structures and not user control (Fotaki, 2011 p. 946).

Welfare mix and user control

Market practices are important for user control. Beyond this, however, inherent differences in the opportunity to obtain change for users of public, nonprofit, and for-profit providers is an indication of user control. Therefore, studying the variations in how users express their voice collectively and individually in these institutions is necessary.

Collective voice is expressed by democratically s(elected) bodies at the institutions set up to give a voice to users. These councils have been commonplace in Scandinavia over the last few decades, and in some service areas, such as schools, are established by law. However, for nursing homes it is up to the municipalities or institutions to establish this channel as a voice for users. The idea is to let those most affected by the operation of the institutions, the users, have their voices heard, and to do this in a representative, democratic fashion (Klausen et al., 2013).

At the same time, the effectiveness of user councils as democratic arenas is contested. They have been criticized for having the potential be a tool for politicians to force responsibility on citizens (Rose, 1999 p. 87; Togeby et al., 2003 p. 251). Moreover, some point to how the councils can undermine local democracy since citizens who are currently not directly

involved with the service are excluded from influencing the implementation of public policy (Rose, 2007).

Individual voice can take the form of day-to-day meetings between users and the staff at the institutions. The room for making changes based on such meetings is decided by the bureaucratic discretion the staff members have to adapt the service (Solevid, 2009 p. 54) and the willingness and attitudes of staff members to amend the service to the wishes of the citizens (Andersen, 2000a p. 76). The capabilities of the citizens can also explain whether they have the confidence and ability to approach the staff members in an effective manner (Andersen, 2000b p. 126).

The lack of an effective voice can be an indication that the opposite of user control is taking place, namely, that responsibility is shifted to citizens, making them not empowered citizens, but citizens held responsible (Newman & Tonkens, 2011). Assessments of individual informal voices can thus reveal whether the institution has limited its service, placing more responsibility on users and their next of kin (Rostgaard & Zechner, 2012).

The research design

The selection of municipalities and institutions

To make inferences for the welfare mix and market mechanisms, I selected clusters of institutions that varied as little as possible in other aspects, such as location, size, and users' socio-economic background. Since elementary schools and nursing homes are the responsibility of the municipality, the municipality makes a natural frame for selecting institutions. I chose pairs of schools and pairs of nursing homes located within the same municipality that resembled each other as much as possible in frame conditions but that varied in terms of the type of provider: one public and one non-public.

The design, therefore, can best be described as the most similar system design within each municipality (Seawright & Gerring, 2008 p. 304). Although Norway has a small population (5 million), the municipalities are diverse. To differentiate better between context-specific aspects of the municipality, I conducted the same investigation in three municipalities, making the study a comparative case study, which is suitable for exploring the relevant diversity (Ragin, 1994 p. 51). All schools were nonprofit, as all primary education is in Norway. However, one nursing home was nonprofit, and the other was for-profit.

The municipalities were chosen based on what Gerring (2008 p. 651) describes as a diverse case selection strategy in which the selection of cases is supposed to capture the full range of relevant dimensions. Therefore, the municipalities vary in terms of size, economic condition, urbanity, and location. In Asker¹, I studied a Waldorf school² and a for-profit nursing home; in Steinkjer, a Montessori school and a Christian nonprofit nursing home; and in Løten, a Christian school. In Løten, I did not study nursing homes since the municipality has only one nursing home. I included the municipality in the study since a religiously motivated non-public school added diversity to the selected schools. In addition, I used similar public institutions in the same municipalities for a comparative background. By matching each private institution with a corresponding municipal institution in the same municipality, I tried to keep other variables as stable as possible to give space for the analysis of the variation between market mechanisms (user choice and outsourcing) and the providers (for-profit, nonprofit, and public). Table 1 gives an overview of the institutions studied.

Table 1: The municipalities and institutions studied.

		Institution	
		<i>School</i>	<i>Nursing home</i>
Municipality	Asker	Nonprofit—Waldorf	For-profit
		Municipal	Municipal
	Steinkjer	Nonprofit—Montessori	Nonprofit—Christian
		Municipal	Municipal
	Løten	Nonprofit—Christian	Not applicable
		Municipal	Not applicable

The data

The analysis was based on three sources of data. First, I obtained relevant documents, such as strategic plans for the municipalities and institutions, decisions by the city councils, the political programs of the local parties, and the contracts between municipalities and non-

¹ The municipalities and institutions all agreed to be named with no process of anonymization. All interviewees received written and oral information about the research, including the process of anonymization.

² A Waldorf school has an approach to pedagogy based on the educational philosophy of the Austrian philosopher [Rudolf Steiner](#). Waldorf schools are also known as Steiner schools.

municipal providers. Second, I gained access to the results of local user surveys in Asker and Steinkjer. They are conducted yearly in Asker and every other year in Steinkjer. The survey was not available in Løten. The surveys make explicit comparisons of what the users think of the different institutions within each municipality but are not useful as a basis for comparisons between municipalities. Third, I interviewed the political and administrative leadership in each municipality; leaders, employees, and user councils in all institutions; and, when relevant, representatives of municipal organizations for the elderly or parents. I met with the interviewees individually or in focus groups. In total, I conducted 55 semi-structured interviews with 91 individuals. I used the same field guide in all interviews with people in the same positions but asked different questions for municipal leaders, institutional leaders, and employees, and the relatives or representatives of users. The interview guides were developed to capture user influence through individual and collective action. The interviews were all transcribed and analyzed. During this process, the data were coded with theme codes (Sivesind, 2007) to facilitate the next steps in the analysis. Based on the data sources, I wrote a report for each municipality documenting the variations between the service area and the sectors and structured the report to conduct a comparative analysis of the municipalities.³

Lessons from the municipalities

I analyze the findings about room for user control in two steps. First, I look at the market practices. Second, I evaluate the importance of the institution being nonprofit, for-profit, or public. Based on the preceding discussion, I assess the differences in user control related to how market practices empower users through:

- Broadening the range of services that make them more complete
- Changes in power relations between users and the institution
- Changes in competitive quasi-markets that make the institutions and staff more receptive

Differences among the public, for-profit, and nonprofit providers are assessed based on what happens at the institutions:

- Collective voice – user boards

³ The reports are written in Norwegian and contain contextual information about the municipalities, details about the issues investigated, and the design of the data collection. They are accessible at: <http://www.samfunnsforskning.no/Prosjekter/Paagaende-prosjekter/Utkontraktering-av-skandinaviske-velferdssamfunn>

- Individual voice – day-to-day contact

In addition, I evaluate the side effects of the markets, such as burden shifts and the incentives for users to partake in collective actions for service improvements.

Markets and user control

Markets driven by user choice

Do more users find services to their liking when they have user choice?

The presence of nonprofit options expands the opportunities for user control when the nonprofit option can offer something different from the public, something more valuable for the individual user. The leadership of the Christian school in this study is explicit about how the possibility of obtaining education in accordance with religious values is valuable for their students: “in the public school, you can no longer freely say what you believe in, Christian faith; it has changed from how it was before. So that is a freedom many people appreciate” (Trættemberg, 2014a). Not only students and families in religious schools see this value-oriented aspect as instrumental for choosing a school. A parent at the Waldorf school also emphasized the uniqueness of the school when he said that “this is one of the few places where one can be a human and be seen as individuals that need different time to develop” (Trættemberg, 2014b). This parent adheres to the teaching philosophy based on anthroposophy, something that could never be found in a public school.

At the same time, strong discontent with public schools is a recurring theme in interviews with users of nonprofit schools. For these students, the existence of the nonprofits is important. One mother said that even if the municipality had offered a change of schools, this would not have been a good option for her daughter since the family had lost all faith in public schools. Consequently, the nonprofit option was the only satisfying alternative for this girl.

The use of choice to opt out of public schools and seek nonprofit schools with different values shows how the existence of non-public options broadens the public service options for citizens and thus broadens the scope for user control. This is relevant for minorities, such as students with religious convictions and those who prefer an alternative approach to teaching. Furthermore, choice is also important for students who do not belong to a minority group of students, but who may not experience “a fit” with the public system. In this way, the nonprofit alternative is a safety valve for the entire population.

Does user choice change power relations?

At the same time, the mere possibility of being able to choose a school can also empower users in their ongoing relations with the public institution. As in the latter example of the student opting out of the public institution due to discontent: Did the threat to leave help the family obtain change at the public institution? This would be the systemic effect of user choice–driven markets. Since only around 5 percent of students attend non-public schools, few students actually benefit directly from the opportunity to choose. Nevertheless, if the opportunity to choose has effects at the systemic level, this would expand the user control to a much larger group of users.

At the public schools, there is little negativity about the nonprofits. Changing anything at the school because of competition with nonprofit schools is not a consideration for any of the headmasters interviewed, and they all express that this idea is unfamiliar. An important explanation is that the schools compete for different segments of the market. The minorities catered to by the nonprofits are difficult for the public schools to serve without losing their appeal for larger groups of students. This represents limitations in public schools' room for adaptation. None of the interviewed parents with children in public schools threatened to change schools to obtain changes in the public school.

This means that the students and their parents do not find themselves empowered by the opportunity to choose. Instead, the students who opt out of public school out of discontent do so because of powerlessness. The opportunity to choose provides a tool for handling the powerlessness but does not empower users in their relations with the public school. It is, however, impossible to detect any weakened collective orientation from the users of non-public schools. In contrast, the users' collective efforts for the institutions are probably more comprehensive than those in public schools, something that I elaborate upon later.

Markets driven by outsourcing

In the school sector, individuals exercise choice, while for nursing homes the municipalities sign contracts with non-public providers. The contract can be given in a competitive tender or a less-competitive long-term contact with a nonprofit provider.

Does the market environment make institutions and staff more receptive?

The two municipalities investigated have different strategies for non-municipal nursing homes. Both use outsourcing, one (Steinkjer) with a contract with a nonprofit and the other (Asker) with a for-profit provider.

Asker uses the open tender strategically. By inviting a *for-profit* nursing home into the sector, the municipality has realized changes in the entire sector. The municipality uses the for-profit nursing home explicitly as a benchmark for the municipal nursing home in a number of dimensions. In particular, the municipality uses the experience the municipality has had with the for-profit provider in setting the budget for all institutions. The municipality thus achieves cost containment through markets. The staff reports that the cost cuttings affect the quality of care and argues that staff members' ability to make changes based on user input depends on the number of staff members at work; I did not find solid documentation of this effect.

The idea with the open tender is, among other things, that the competition gives incentives for the institutions to be more receptive to users' wishes. If achieved, this would be a fundamental improvement in user control. The director of the for-profit company is confident that such an effect exists when she talks about her staff:

My employees feel that they must deliver. If not, it is both I who have not done my job and it is [name of company] that has not done their job. They do not understand that it is possible to agree about something and then return empty handed. They are puzzled that there is acceptance of this among their municipal colleagues.

From my investigation, however, it was impossible to trace any such effects. This investigation was conducted 1.5 years before the service contract expired for the for-profit nursing home, and the municipal administration had begun preparations for a new tender. Still, no respondents at any level expressed any awareness of this. The results from the interviews and the user surveys indicate the same, as the nursing home does not have a systematically different score from the other nursing homes in the municipality.

Steinkjer uses a *nonprofit* nursing home for historic reasons, and the non-public nursing home is not subject to political controversy. Cost containment or reductions are not the reason the municipality uses a nonprofit provider. The interviewed users agreed that they did not notice differences between the services provided by the public and nonprofit nursing homes, something the user survey conducted by the municipality confirms.

The use of outsourcing has potential importance for the municipality if it wishes. Outsourcing can be used strategically to affect the entire care sector, or non-public providers can contribute in the public sector without having a wider impact. For the citizens, I find no difference in the perceived user control when municipalities use outsourcing. It is possible that the sector-changing effect of the public tender has had an impact on the service the users receive, but not necessarily for user control.

Welfare mix and user control

Inviting non-public providers into public services will also affect user control, as there are relevant differences between public, nonprofit, and for-profit providers. Users can use their voices, collectively by the representatives of the users or individually by different users.

Are there differences in user control through collective bodies?

Schools

According to the national law, all schools have a parents association (Foreldrenes arbeidsutvalg) that represents parents from all grades. All municipal schools also have a cooperation council on which the headmaster, teachers, parents, pupils, and a municipality representative participate. Formally, these bodies are advisory, but major issues are debated here, something that gives potential for real influence. However, the real influence these bodies have in municipal schools seems limited. One headmaster pointed out that the members “can ask questions and give signals about what they want, and we hear them. But they have no formal influence...it is perhaps advisory” (Trøtteberg, 2014b), suggesting that the user board members by no means are in charge of the meeting and do not set the agenda.

Even if some potential for influence exists in the user board, the board members seem to have a more important role as a coordinator of the parents’ volunteer efforts. They are responsible for events such as celebrations of Christmas, the national day, and end of school year events. Even if the user board is formed to secure user input in the running of the school (Opplæringslova, 1998 § 11-4), it is clear that the most important function of the body is to administer the parent volunteer efforts at the schools. This is something all user boards mentioned as their primary activity.

In nonprofit schools, the collective forms of voice are more important than in municipal schools. Nonprofit schools do not have a cooperation council, but they have a school board. The board has the right to make the important decisions for the schools such as hiring the

headmaster and approving the budget and is responsible for the school's overall operation. The informants agree that the board is the place for the real decisions. As one parent says:

We recently had a difficult case here where we saw that the board stood up and took responsibility, as they should. It is a good thing that we do not notice them much, that they are not needed, but that when they are needed [...] they are there. (Trøtteberg, 2014c)

Interestingly, the same way the parents in the nonprofit schools have more influence over the schools than in the municipal schools, they also contribute more volunteer efforts. This is particularly notable in the Waldorf School in Asker where the parents clean their children's classrooms and do most of the maintenance work on the building. In addition, the parents have an annual Christmas market that generates about 22,000 euros, money that the parents, through their association, donate to different projects to improve the school environment. Therefore, it seems to be a pattern where parents who have individualistically opted out of the public provider take more responsibility for the service than the parents who stayed in public schools. The benefits of the collective efforts are, however, limited to the parents who made the same choice to have their children in the nonprofit school.

Nursing homes

In both municipalities where nursing homes were studied, they have user boards that consist mostly of users' relatives. Most users have health conditions that make them unable to participate in such forums. There are no significant differences between the public and non-public nursing homes in how the user boards function. However, there is a difference between Asker, which has an open tender every few years, and Steinkjer, which has an infinite contract with a nonprofit provider. For the first municipality, it is instrumental to include issues such as the functioning of the user board in the contract with the private institution. This forces the municipality to make an active decision about what role they want for the user board. In this way, the organization of the market and the activities at the institutions work together to influence the opportunities for user control.

In Asker, the for-profit nursing home has a user board with considerable formal influence. The nursing home leader must consult the board on important issues for the institution. The users themselves sometimes find such debates about the long-term plans of the institution to be less relevant than more pressing short-term details. Interestingly, unlike the schools, these user boards are not involved in volunteer efforts. The user boards function strictly as arenas

for giving voice to users. At the same time, the boards have less influence than the corresponding bodies in the schools.

Steinkjer has a more passive relation to the functioning of the user board and leaves it more to the initiative of the users themselves. The result is that in both nursing homes in Steinkjer the user board has a relatively weak position when it comes to influencing the institutions formally and in reality.

For nursing homes, in short, there is no variation in user influence between municipal and non-municipal institutions as in the school sector. It is striking that in the school sector there are no major differences between how the different actors evaluate the arenas for users' voices. In the nursing homes, in contrast, there is a perceptual gap, as the political and administrative leader consistently finds that the users have more of a voice than what the users experience themselves.

Moreover, the difference in willingness to take on additional tasks by the collective bodies is striking between the service areas. The more empowered user boards in schools also involve themselves in more volunteer tasks in running the schools. There is also an interesting intra-sector difference, as the more empowered boards at the nonprofit schools are also more involved than in the municipal schools. The pattern thus is that more user control goes hand-in-hand with users and their relatives taking more responsibility for the content of the service at the institution.

Are there differences in user control in day-to-day contact?

Schools

In the schools, users express their individual voices in the day-to-day contact between parents and students and schools, and in user surveys. Almost all parents express contentment with how they can obtain change through their informal contact with the schools. There seem to be some differences, however, related to how much the schools depend on using formal written steering documents. The municipal schools are all part of the public administration and are therefore part of a system in which they must document activities and report on politically decided goals. The nonprofit schools must base their activities on an approved curriculum, but aside from this, they have few written plans. This seems to open up space for more bureaucratic discretion for the teachers at the nonprofit schools than the municipal schools. The interviewees at the nonprofit schools agreed that the teachers use this room for maneuvering to make adjustments and changes based on input from students and their parents.

An alternative interpretation of this finding is that the pedagogical thinking of Waldorf and Montessori schools explains the differences between nonprofit and municipal schools.

Doubtless, there are differences between the schools based on the pedagogical approach. At the same time, these differences would not have been able to develop without user choice and non-public provision. The fact that the Christian schools share the same characteristics without sharing the same pedagogical approach suggests that the nonprofit status of the schools is part of the explanation for how they can operate differently from public schools.

When compared to the collective voice, day-to-day contact seems more important, something that has been found in other Scandinavian studies (Andersen, 2000a; Möller, 1996). The user board in Asker explicitly states that when it comes to the core activity, teaching, “the user board in reality has no role. We have no competence to speak out about the teaching, but as parents we do, of course, have every right and duty to follow up on the teaching our own child receives” (Trætterberg, 2014b).

The parents often initiate day-to-day contact with the schools. In the schools, therefore, this is a way for parents to make the schools invest extra effort in their children when the parents see the need to make changes in instruction or other aspects concerning their children. No such effect occurs in the other direction; parents see contact with the teachers as positive, and all concur that such contact is an extra effort from the schools in the home–school collaboration, and not as an attempt to shift the burden for what happens at school to parents.

Nursing homes

Nursing homes have the same two channels for individual voices. Changes based on day-to-day contact are the most important. All users and their relatives in all municipalities point to this as the most important way to obtain change. On the one hand, this is natural since change in this way can be obtained faster and with less bureaucracy than the alternative options.

However, this can be problematic, as many of the users are too sick to formulate their needs, and relatives’ efforts vary. The experience of a user who says, “if you do not say something, you will get no change. No one comes after you and gives you help” is representative of a number of users and demonstrates how individual capabilities in formulating wishes can create inequality in service (Trætterberg, 2014b). Individual user control through day-to-day contact is important for many but creates inequality, as some users are more able to exploit the opportunity than others. This phenomenon is the same in the public and non-public institutions in this study.

Can using market mechanisms threaten democratic user control?

The input, and perceived need for input, in the care situation from the next of kin of the users is also part of the relationship between the user and the institutions. The law sets minimum standards for the content of care, and ideally, no volunteer efforts from relatives or others are needed. However, in one of the municipal nursing homes, the relatives speak of the need to help feed the users:

There are few employees; that is for sure. They do what they can, you know. I am here every other day, and then I make sure I am here for dinner so I can help. They are eight in one section, and often there are only two employees, so to feed them...

That is something we have experienced also [...] they do not have time!

We are several who do it. They are quite sick in that section. (Trætterberg, 2014c)

This may not be representative of elderly care, but it is an example of how efforts by users' relatives compensate for strained resources in the form of a lack of personnel. It is also an important part of the informal contact between users and their relatives and the institutions. The fact that relatives contribute in core care activities is a clear indication that their voice has not worked to get what the relatives regard as adequate care. The relatives express that the staff members at the institutions do their best to adapt to the relatives' wishes, but there are simply not enough staff members. Even when the professional judgement of the staff concurs with the relatives, they are unable to make the requested changes.

There is consensus, however, that nursing homes are the part of the elderly care where relatives have the least responsibility. All relatives report that once users are admitted to a nursing home, the burden on relatives is lifted somewhat. This statement from relatives at the for-profit nursing homes is illustrative:

If you have a single man home with a sick wife, then they come, but not if it is the other way around. If mother is home and can look after father, then it lasts longer [before admittance to a nursing home]. Moreover, if you have a daughter, it is considerably more difficult to be admitted to an institution. That is bad. (Trætterberg, 2014b)

This may be one of the more strongly worded criticisms of the capacity in the nursing home, but all users confirm the general picture. The municipality decides all admittances. Thus, in this respect, there is no difference among municipal, for-profit, and nonprofit providers.

These users and their next of kin have very few tools for changing what they see as an unsatisfactory situation. They have no user choice, the collective body that represents them is weak, and the day-to-day communication does not work as the users want. The relatives therefore have to step up to obtain the care level they see as appropriate.

Day-to-day contact is a way for staff, users, and their next of kin to determine the details of the care situation for the users. In these situations, the users can obtain changes from the staff, or, as I have shown, relatives find themselves forced to take direct responsibility for the care situation. There is thus a stark contrast between schools where such contact tends to lead to changes on the part of the institutions, and nursing homes where the changes can also be in the form of relatives increasing their efforts.

Conclusions—Opportunities and pitfalls for user democracy

There is no room for wide generalizations from these case studies, but they do highlight some mechanisms that are important for understanding the conditions for democratic steering in schools. Findings from the case studies reported here show that it is not possible to speak of a relationship between markets and user control. Instead, one can speak of the relationship between different market practices and providers and user control. The key findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Key findings.

Market mechanisms	Findings
Broaden the range of services and offer a more complete range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User choice encourages the supply of a broader range of services
Change in power relation between user and institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • User choice does not necessarily change power relations
Competitive markets that make institutions and staff more receptive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not possible to detect the effect of any form of market practices
Differences among public, for-profit, and nonprofit providers	
Collective voice – user boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More important in schools than in

	<p>nursing homes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More voice in nonprofit schools than in public schools, but no such difference among nursing homes
Individual voice – day-to-day contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More important than user board in both schools and nursing homes • More important in schools than nursing homes • Arguably more flexibility in nonprofit schools than in public schools
Other aspects	
Burden shift	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More empowered users assume more responsibility • Burden felt more acutely in nursing homes.
How users partake in collective actions for service improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents who have opted out of the public school have a more holistic approach to their school

Table 2 illustrates how the difference between public and non-public providers is more important in schools than in nursing homes. This underlines the central argument that the context within which a quasi-market operates is important for user democracy. Indeed, the user choice model as a basis for nonprofit schools shows how market mechanisms increase user democracy in schools, while the outsourcing model in the nursing homes all but undermines the user democracy in that area—all within the same welfare model that emphasizes the democratic steering of public services (Christensen & Lægheid, 2011).

Compared to nursing homes, parents in schools have more influence over the service their children receive. Lieberkind (2015) recently found that students themselves have poor

participation in decision-making in schools. This study shows how the influence of their parents can somewhat compensate for this, even if parental influence results in less democratic learning among the children. Moreover, these findings suggest that the potential for the influence of parents and students is considerable given the difference between nonprofit and public schools.

Earlier work on user choice focused on change in power relations as the predominant effect user choice has on user control (Blomqvist & Rothstein, 2008; Le Grand, 2007). In this case study, this effect was of little relevance. However, user choice has an important empowering effect as the means to provide more users a service that suits them. User choice in schools empowers families since it gives them a more complete range of services to choose from, which is valuable for those who take advantage of the opportunity. The fact that Norway only has nonprofit and no for-profit schools may help explain why a broadening of the offer to the users is a more prominent effect than changes in the power balance between users and staff members. At the same time, there is an inherent dualism, as a prerequisite for enhanced plurality is that the public takes less responsibility for the content of the service. The parents replace the retrenchment of public responsibility as the public has less oversight over and knowledge about non-public schools. This is the tradeoff: Less public interference means less public responsibility.

User control and burden shifts thus go hand in hand. The users who have been the most empowered also take the most responsibility for the service. When users assume responsibility for aspects of the service, it can be an opportunity to influence the service, but it can also be a burden. This effect is also evident when different types of schools are compared. Nonprofit schools where parents have more influence are also the schools where there are the highest expectations that parents will contribute. User control and increased burdens on users and their next of kin therefore go together when service areas and public and non-public providers are compared. There are important differences between how this is experienced in the service areas since the schools expect more efforts from the relatives of users than nursing homes, but parents in schools do not feel as much of a burden as the relatives of the nursing home users.

Contrary to expectations, user choice enhances a collective approach to user control at non-public institutions. Earlier studies with a Norwegian perspective have suggested that user choice induces citizens to adopt a more individualistic perspective (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006

p. 295; Karlsen, 2002). In this study, however, the evidence suggests that when users can select institutions, they also seem more willing to involve themselves for the good of the institution. There can be a level of self-selection at play here, as parents who want to contribute seek non-profit schools. Nevertheless, that does not change the fact that the nonprofit schools open up an arena for parental influence by giving power to the parents.

Outsourcing means the public retains responsibility for the service, and the differences in the room for individual and collective influence are smaller. Since outsourcing entails the transfer of tasks to a contractual partner, it forces the municipality to be concise about its demands to the providers something that can increase the priority of user influence in the municipality as a whole. Moreover, this market model is useful as a tool for changing power relations within the municipal structure. Without this benchmark, it is harder for the municipal leadership to know what changes are possible within the municipal institutions. A consequence is that the service becomes uniform with less room for diversity and personal adjustments.

The importance of whether the provider is public, nonprofit, or for-profit varies according to which market practices function. In the outsourcing model in which the public administration retains more regulation and control, I find limited differences in user control. There can be indirect effects based on the economic space for the maneuvering of the institutions and the formalization of user input connected to open tenders, but the direct effect is small. In the user choice model, however, there are more differences. The public takes less control and less responsibility, something that gives space for differences in user control. In the school sector, where these differences exist, and where relatives of users are most involved, the distance from ideal to reality is the smallest. In the closely regulated nursing homes, the municipalities and institutions are unable to create a reality that matches the ideal they have set for themselves.

One way to see the overall conclusion is that the potential for democratic user control in schools is great compared to different service areas such as nursing homes. The user control is dependent on how the public chooses to govern the institutions. The public administration can do this through different market mechanisms or traditional bureaucratic processes. What is important is the space public steering leaves for local adaption, whether the institution is public, for-profit, or nonprofit.

The reported findings reveal clear trends in the studied cases. Given their consistencies across the municipalities, the mechanisms are likely not to be limited to these particular cases, but are relevant also in a wider context. Further research can determine the scope. For example, user choice in a more urban context can have different consequences, given that more options are available for citizens within a limited geographic area. These Norwegian cases demonstrate important mechanisms in the Scandinavian school- and welfare model. Further studies in Swedish and Danish contexts that explore the scope of their validity would give an even clearer picture of democratic user influence in the Scandinavian school model.

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