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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A new regime of understanding. School leadership in Norwegian education policy (1990–2017)

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ABSTRACT

Analyses of policy documents and interviews with three Norwegian politicians revealed differences in how school leaders were described, positioned and ascribed responsibility in Norwegian education policy between 1990 and 2017. While how politicians positioned school leaders changed substantially during the period, a stable trait was vague descriptions of school leaders' responsibility. In 1990, school leaders were envisioned in a managerial position, above teachers, as employers. A more recent White Paper, from 2017, positioned school leaders closer to the teaching profession. The interviews showed that after the PISA-shock in 2001, politicians united across party lines in a 'new regime of understanding', downplaying traditional conflicts between Norwegian politicians. While Parliamentary politicians rhetorically disagreed, there was, underneath the policy discourse, a growing realpolitik consensus in questions of education policy. The study investigates policy descriptions of school leaders after 1990, when Management by Objectives was introduced in education. To position Norway in the international policy context, we draw on Stephen Ball's concepts fabrication, managerialism, magical solutions and neoliberal performativity. Three periods, with simultaneously appearing residual and emerging tendencies were identified. In conclusion, we question an apparent lack of ambitions for school leadership in Norwegian education policy. The article contributes with new insights into education policy fluctuations.

Introduction

Researchers have for years questioned frequent shifts in educational policy. Sarason (1990) referred to the predictable failure of educational reforms and Cuban (1990) warned about the consequences of reforming again and again. Fullan (1994) argued that we need a more sophisticated blend of top-down and bottom-up strategies, as neither of them 'work'. Later, Burch (2007) argued that *indirect* effects of reforms must be considered, and Braun et al. (2010) highlighted the paradox that schools and teachers are expected to implement policies planned by others, while being held accountable for the results. Based on the assumption that frequent policy-shifts impact school leadership, we have studied how policy documents over time position school leaders in relation to the teachers.

Through an analysis of how school leaders are positioned in relation to the teachers over a period of almost 30 years, the article contributes with new insights into abrupt fluctuations in education policy. As shifting Governments have emphasized the dual mission of the school differently - Bildung versus measurable learning outcome, the so-called Pisa-shock paved the way for a new regime of understanding.

In previous top-down initiatives, facilitated by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (DET), school leaders were expected to implement externally designed programs. The Decomp strategy, however, positioned school leaders closer to the teaching profession and expected schools to improve their practices in collaboration with local universities and university colleges (Jensen & Ottesen, 2023). This repositioning of school leaders inspired our investigation into how Norwegian policymakers, the last decades, have formulated their expectations on school leaders. We anticipated that policy texts would reflect on the different competences school leaders need when they implement externally designed reform packages versus when they collaborate with teachers.

The question guiding this study is therefore how school leaders have been described, positioned and ascribed responsibility in Norwegian policy documents since Management by Objectives (MbO) was introduced in 1990 (White paper no. 37 (1990–1991)). With MbO followed expectations on increased performance and improved results. As our analysis aims at eliciting policy expectations on school leaders' tasks and duties after 1990, we

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combine research on school leadership and educational policy research.

The article is structured as follows: We first briefly present development trends in the research on school leadership and how international policy trends between 1990 and 2017 influenced Norwegian educational policy. Having described the Norwegian context, we outline the study's theoretical and methodological framework, followed by discussion and conclusion.

Research on school leadership

Bush and Glover (2003, p. 7) identified a 'plethora of alternative and competing models of leadership', and Leithwood and Riehl (2005) found no single agreed-upon definition of educational leadership. In a review of research on school leadership, Pont (2020) found much research on school leadership, but little research on policies to support and strengthen school leaders' roles in school improvement. Gumus et al. (2018) noted, in a systematic review spanning the years 1980 to 2014, that educational leadership was primarily studied as generic *models*, not practices. Having mapped trends in school leadership research over the last decennia, Harris (2005) concluded that while the school leadership literature is vast, its empirical base remains underdeveloped. She identified four, partly overlapping, perspectives (see table 1): *managerial, transformational, interpretive* and *instructional leadership*.

The changes indicate that recent research is more focused on what school leaders *do*, how their activities (indirectly) affect students' learning outcomes. As argued by Elmore (2000), the skills and knowledge that matter for school leaders are those that can be connected to, or lead directly to, the improvement of instruction and student performance.

International policy trends

The report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) signalled a fundamental distrust in the school system, educational leaders, teachers and teaching, that rapidly influenced the international education policy discourse. The distrust was, along with suggested 'new' remedies, such as more homework and the training of basic skills, quickly picked up, circulated globally (Popkewitz, 1996) and borrowed by politicians who want to be on top of complex problems with no simple solutions (Halpin & Troyna, 1995). Private market principles of choice, competition and accountability were adopted. The conservatives' strategy in England, was to delegitimize teachers and their unions through discourses of derision (Ball, 1990) with governments rendering teachers increasingly subservient to the state, resulting in de-professionalization (Beck, 2008).

The new reform package, argued Ball (1998b), offered ideological and 'magical solutions' to generic problems, based on a) neoliberalism (market ideolo-

Table 1. Perspectives on school leadership (Harris, 2005).

Managerial	Transformational	Interpretive	Instructional
Organizations are hierarchical systems that leaders use to realize goals	The focus is on people, not structures; cultural, not structural change	Dynamic understanding of leadership as practice, such as distributed leadership	Focus on how teachers engage in activities that affect students' growth

The development is from positioning school leaders as administrative managers in the school hierarchy with stable structures, to increased awareness of the dynamics of relations between people in the school organization. In two studies, Leithwood et al. (2008, 2020) reviewed school leadership research and made seven 'strong' claims. In 2008, they claimed that next to teaching, school leadership is the most important influence on student learning. Successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of practices; are responsive to context, attentive to the learning environment and improve teaching and learning by motivating staff. While distributed leadership improves practices, personal traits explain much of the variation in leadership effectiveness. Later, Leithwood et al. (2020) nuanced four of the seven claims as shown in table 2:

gies), b) new institutional economics (rational choice), c) performativity (be operational (commensurable) or disappear), d) public choice theory and e) new public management (introducing business management and excellence in public sector institutions). Public education was positioned as outdated, bureaucratic, slow and inefficient, compared to the adventurous and individualized new solutions, filled with opportunity.

In Scandinavia, the post-war era was characterized by social democratic governing and development of the welfare society, with education for all as a central goal (Pettersson et al., 2017). International trends have undoubtedly, albeit to a lesser degree than in other countries, influenced Norwegian educational policy. Wiborg (2013) found that cross-party consensus on the benefits of a strong welfare state and

Table 2. Claims on school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020).

Claim	2008	2020
1	School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning	School leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning
4	School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions	School leadership improves teaching and learning, indirectly and most powerfully, by improving the status of significant key classroom and school conditions and by encouraging parent/child interactions in the home that further enhance student success at school
5	School leadership has a greater influence on schools and students when it is widely distributed	School leadership can have an especially positive influence on school and student outcomes when it is distributed
7	A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness	While further research is required, a well-defined set of cognitive, social and psychological 'personal leadership resources' show promise of explaining a high proportion of variation in the practices enacted by school leaders.

public education made it harder for neo-liberal policies to manifest in Norway, particularly with regard to private schools.

Research on school leadership in Norwegian policy documents

A dissertation on how school leadership is described in policy documents (Valle, 2022), showed that systematic searches in databases (ERIC, ProQuest and Web of Science) generated few relevant studies on this topic. While educational policy is currently more research-informed than before, few studies have examined how school leaders are described and positioned in Norwegian education policy documents after the introduction of MbO in the education sector. However, several researchers have published articles on Scandinavian leadership models (Møller, 2009) or on issues regarding school leadership and educational policy. Abrahamsen, Aas & Hellekjær (2015) and Abrahamsen & Aas (2016) investigate, respectively, how principals make sense of school leadership in Norway and how international policy discourses influence Norwegian policy documents and conclude that school leadership is a central topic in educational policy. Also, researchers have studied school leaders' and teachers' work with national test results (Gunnulfsen, 2017), and responsibilities and competence need of middle leaders in school (Lillejord & Børte, 2020a). These articles constitute a research context for this article.

Policy developments in Norway 1990–2017

An early mention of the international trends was a 1988 Official Norwegian Report, titled *Knowingly and Willingly*, from a committee chaired by Professor of Sociology, Gudmund Hernes, appointed Minister of Education in 1990: 'The main challenge for Norwegian knowledge policy is that the country fails to get sufficient expertise out of the population's talent' (ONR, 1988: 28, p. 7). Compared to

international standards, the report argued, the Norwegian population risked being undereducated, and research institutions understaffed.

In 1990, Management by Objectives (MbO) developed for private businesses by Drucker (1954) was introduced as a new steering system in Norwegian Education (White Paper no. 37 (1990–1991)). Peter Drucker is often credited with 'inventing' management by objectives (Greenwood, 1981). He himself never claimed this, but it can be assumed that Drucker was first to publish the term. Ideally, politicians should formulate vision goals; administrators should interpret and explain the goals to employees and oversee the implementation. Schools were, however, ill prepared for the reporting of results; an initially under-communicated part of MbO (Lillejord et al., 2018). The White Paper described a weak tradition for school leadership, referred to principals as teachers with additional tasks, and argued that school leaders' responsibilities needed clarification as: 'The school leader's ability to realize educational goals will be even more crucial', 'The school leaders' formal employer role must be clarified and strengthened' and 'The principal must take on employer responsibility' (White Paper no. 37 (1990–1991, p. 27)).

With a strong tradition of local self-governance, modern Norway is a wealthy oil nation with 5,4 million inhabitants and a multi-party system.[1] Early 2000, the Norwegian public sector underwent radical changes (Aasen et al., 2014), with more responsibility for education provision and quality development delegated to municipalities (kindergartens and primary schools) and counties (secondary schools). When the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)-shock (Lundgren, 2011) hit Norway in 2001, national policymakers, according to Helsvig (2017), wholeheartedly embraced the OECD's policy analyses and suggested remedies attached to figures and numbers (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

With reference to Petterson et al. (2019), we showed how social facts can be made measurable and contribute to manage expectations. Numbers,

such as PISA-results, became a new way of 'seeing' education. A 'comparative' turn made PISA a new political technology of governing by numbers (Grek, 2009) and numbers became the preferred mode of 'telling the truth' about schooling, teachers, pupils and their relation to society.

Since 1990, Norway has had majority and minority rule, with both 'red-green-' and 'centre-conservative' coalitions. Politicians from all nine parties represented in the Parliament (Storting) tend to see education as integral to district policy (Kyvik, 2005).

Wiborg (2013) noted a radical policy-shift in 2001 when Minister of Education, Kristin Clemet (The Conservatives) had gathered cross-party support to introduce the Knowledge Promotion reform, with national tests, and a national framework for quality assessment. This development resembles how Conway and Murphy (2013) described Irish politicians' reactions, when the *rising tide* (accountability) met a *perfect storm* (Irish results from PISA 2009). In both countries, results below politicians' expectations had long-term ramifications for the education system.

When conservative rule ended in 2005, the first majority government since 1985, the red-green coalition, (the Labour Party, Socialist Left and the Centre party) took office. After 2013, Norway has had majority and minority conservative governments, and from 2021, a red-green minority government.

While Norwegian politicians tend to disagree rhetorically, education policy has, the last two decades, been characterized by bargaining and compromises. Aasen et al. (2014) noted a tension between a social democratic and a market-liberal knowledge regime in Norway. Petterson, Prøitz & Forsberg (2017), however, argued that Sweden, more than Norway, has introduced neo-liberal policies that have substantially increased the number of private schools, and Wiborg (2013) found that Swedish social democrats supported privatization as eagerly as the conservatives.

Except in the question of private schools, there have been few ideological battles over Norwegian education policy in the last decades. Statistics Norway shows that in 2020, 4.2% of Norwegian pupils went to private primary schools (SSB, 2020). Political debates over private schools have centred less on market politics and consumer choice, and more on 'identity politics' as the Christian Democratic party argued for parents' right to pursue religious or pedagogical alternatives (Wiborg, 2013).

Expectations on school leadership

Leading and managing at the local level, argues Greany (2020), requires new leadership skills and qualities from leaders. He calls for creative system thinkers and boundary spanners, who facilitate contributions from multiple stakeholders across complex adaptive system. The recent Norwegian policy initiative 'Decentralized competence development' expects local districts and schools to enhance their quality development skills in partnerships with universities. Throughout the period investigated, school leadership has been emphasized in Norwegian education policy as 'crucial' for the pupils' learning outcome. At the same time, the positioning of school leaders differs substantially over the years. To better understand policy expectations of school leadership, the analysis of documents and interviews with three politicians, was guided by the question how school leaders were described in policy, positioned and ascribed responsibility from 1990 to 2017.

Historically, school leadership in Norway was the principal as *Primus Inter Pares* (Møller, 2009), in parallel to elected principals at universities. A respected teacher with 'sufficient' seniority and the trust of the peer group was elected principal. Central to this leader competence was years of experience as a teacher, knowledge about the school culture, the school organization and pedagogy. A recurring argument in the Norwegian policy debate during the 1990ies, was that a leadership model based on collegiality was outdated and insufficient. A modern state needed professional leadership. In 2004, the Minister of Education, Kristin Clemet, argued for a law requiring formal leadership training for principals, but this was rejected by the Parliament.

Policy documents from early 2000 stressed the need for explicit and strong school leadership (Valle, 2006), but systematically avoided exemplifying what this entailed. As Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000) showed, a major difficulty in studies of governance is the unreflective incorporation of politically produced categories, often presented as binaries. Symbolic and value-laden concepts indicate what is missing or 'wrong', wanted and unwanted. While this opens for individual interpretations of, for instance, what is 'explicit' and 'strong' leadership, it provides little direction for practitioners. Symbolic concepts are, however, rhetorically successful as they propose simple solutions to complex policy problems (Ball, 2012).

Theoretical approach

The article combines research on school leadership and education policy and draws on a historizing perspective of periods with residual and emergent tendencies (Clarke, 2007, Diem, 2017, Williams, 1977). While there are numerous conceptual models that support the analysis of historical epochs, there is no singular or definitive method or conceptual framework for doing so (Rudd & Goodson, 2017). Clarke (2007) argued, with reference to Williams (1977) that epochal designations, such as *feudal* or *bourgeois* risk losing sight of the co-presence of multiple tendencies in historical moments. Because it matters, in policy analyses, whether events are simultaneous or

Table 3. Overview of selected policy documents, governments, ministers and central themes.

White paper	Central theme	Government, minority/majority, prime minister	Minister of education
White paper no. 37 (1990–1991) *Organization and steering in the education sector*	Steering, management and leadership	The Labour party (LP) *Minority* **Gro Harlem Brundtland**	Gudmund Hernes (LP)
White paper no. 30 (2003–2004) *Culture for learning*	The PISA-shock and learning outcomes. National tests were introduced Quality system	Conservative coalition Christian democratic party (CDP), The Conservatives (C), The Liberals (L). *Minority* **Kjell Magne Bondevik (CDP)**	Kristin Clemet (C)
White paper no. 31 (2007–2008) *Quality in school*	Reducing and adjusting tests Establishing educational programmes for principals	Red-green-coalition The Labour party, The Centre Party (CP), Socialist Left (SL). *Majority* **Jens Stoltenberg (LP)**	Øystein Djupedal (SL), Kristin Halvorsen (SL), Bård Vegar Solhjell (SL)
White paper no. 28 (2015–2016) *Subjects – Deep learning – Understanding. Renewing the Knowledge Promotion Reform*	Curriculum development Evaluation reports on school leadership programmes	Conservative coalition The Conservatives (C), The Liberals (L), The Progressive Party (PP). *Minority* **Erna Solberg (C)**	Torbjørn Røe Isaksen (C)
White paper no. 21 (2016–2017) *The joy of learning – early intervention and quality in schools*	Responsibility through investing in decentralized competence development and the teaching profession	Conservative coalition The Conservatives (C), The Liberals (L), The Progressive Party. *Minority* **Erna Solberg (C)**	Torbjørn Røe Isaksen (C)

sequential, he suggested *authentic historical analysis*, attentive to the dynamism of governance strategies, political discourses and practices. This allows us, he said, to see the present as composed of multiple overlapping temporalities, patterns of fixity and flux. In all epochs, there will be residual elements from previous epochs and emergent tendencies heralding the next – significant both in themselves and in what they reveal about the dominant trends. Clarke's analysis applies to findings in this study, as demarcation lines between 'left and right' in Norwegian education policy, were increasingly blurred after 1990. Drawing on Ball's analytical concepts (Ball, 1998b, 2012), the article seeks to understand how Norwegian education policy has contributed to shaping school leaders' anticipated roles.

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives allow us to combine policy descriptions of school leadership with research on school leadership. Stephen Ball emphasizes generic problems which constitute the contemporary social, political and economic conditions for education (Ball, 1998a), Williams (1977) and Diem (2017) are pairing a critical policy analysis approach with a policy implementation framework. Through this emerges underlying patterns of importance for the development of school leadership. The empirical and theoretical contribution of the study emerges in the intersection between research on school leadership and research on educational policy. The article also contributes methodologically with new insights through combining policy document analysis with how previous top-level politicians in retrospect talk about school leadership in interviews.

As the discussion will show, throughout the period from 1990 to 2017, our data revealed multiple and simultaneously present perspectives on school leaders in documents and interviews, with both residual and emergent tendencies.

Method

To answer the research question: *How are school leaders described, positioned and ascribed responsibility in the Norwegian education policy discourse between 1990 and 2017*, five policy documents were selected for analyses, and interviews with three former Parliamentary politicians conducted. We first present how documents were selected and the data extraction process. Then, the procedures of identifying politicians for interviews, the interview process and analysis of the interviews are described. We finally show how the two data sources (documents and interviews) inform each other and contribute with new knowledge.

Policy documents

Selection criteria were that the White Papers signalled a broad ambition with consequences for organization and leadership in schools and impacted the political debate and the education system. Table 3 shows central themes in the documents, which Government presented them, and under which Minister of Education:

A content analysis technique was used to categorize information with relevance for the research question. According to Roumell et al. (2019), content analysis of policy documents can follow an inductive or deductive approach. While a deductive approach applies an already established model of coding systems to selected content, we used an inductive approach, to identify patterns, themes, or narratives with the intention to develop thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973).

Documents were read several times to understand how they described, positioned and ascribed responsibility to school leaders. Based on the following keywords: *School leader(ship), principal, administrator and head teacher*, NVivo 11 was used to identify text extracts in the White Papers. Frequency of key terms was recorded, along with any derivatives, as well as the context in which they appeared.

The five White Papers chosen for analysis were published between 1990 and 2017 and selected because of their broad scope and influence on educational policy and practice. The first, White Paper No. 37 (1990–1991), introduced Management by Objectives (MbO) in the Norwegian education sector (Labour government). The second, White Paper no. 30 (2003–2004), responded to the so-called PISA-shock in 2001, introduced national tests and a quality portal (Conservative coalition government). The third, White Paper No. 31 (2007–2008), adjusted and reduced the number of tests introduced by the conservatives (Labour and Socialist left government) and the fourth and fifth, White Paper No. 28 (2015–2016) and White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017), both by Conservative coalition governments, focused on curriculum reform, decentralized competence development and the teaching profession.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted between November 2018 and January 2019 with three top-level politicians. Informants were chosen because they were centrally positioned in early 2000, represented opposite poles in Norwegian education policy, and were no longer engaged in national politics. Kristin Clemet (The Conservatives) initiated the Knowledge Promotion reform as Minister of Education (2001–2005). Bård Vegar Solhjell (Socialist Left) was Minister of Education (2007–2009). Rolf Reikvam (Socialist

Left) was the Leader of the Standing committee on Education and Church affairs (2001–2005). It is worth mentioning that Solhjell and Reikvam can be perceived as opposites in a right-left axis within The Socialist Left.

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide with questions about school leadership, based on the five White Papers. The intention was to get behind the policy documents, to gain background information about political discussions in the process of writing the documents, specific phrases and/or 'symbolic concepts' used in the documents. Each interview lasted approximately 45 min and was conducted at each informants' workplace. All participants received written information about the study and gave their consent before the interviews. They read and commented on the transcripts and gave permission to publish the article with their full name.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by both authors through a content categorization aligned with the research question (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, Westrheim & Lillejord, 2007). Text extracts were grouped, categorized and compared to identify tensions or contradictions – within and between interviews. The two data sources (interviews and documents) were finally compiled and condensed to facilitate a comparison of document texts to how the politicians, more informally, talked about school leaders in the interviews. Extracts that included 'school leadership' were categorized. Krippendorff (2004, p. 18) described content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid interferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use. To gain

insight and understanding, we treated both interviews and documents as text, and the analysis is performed as a document- and text analysis (Asdal & Reinertsen, 2020). The next sections present findings from the analyses.

Findings from document analyses and interviews

This section presents the analyses of the documents in three periods, 1990–1997, 1998–2006 and 2007–2017. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that analysing, reviewing and interpreting printed and electronic documents is the best method for producing rich descriptions of a topic. While our ambition was to gather rich descriptions of school leadership from policy documents and interviews, the result was surprisingly thin descriptions, due to unclear descriptions of school leadership in the documents, and that the three politicians were quite evasive when asked about school leadership and school leaders. While the two datasets differ, wage description of school leaders and school leadership was a common denominator. The analysis is based on an *authentic historical* analysis (Williams, 1977) that allows us to see the present as composed of multiple overlapping temporalities and patterns. As the document analysis serves as a foundation for the interviews, the analysis consists of two parts: the document analysis is categorized in three historical periods, and the interviews serve as political retrospective 'snapshots' that confirm the vague and thin descriptions in the documents, a core finding in the article. Figure 1 below gives a per page overview of the frequency of mentions of school leaders in the five White Papers:
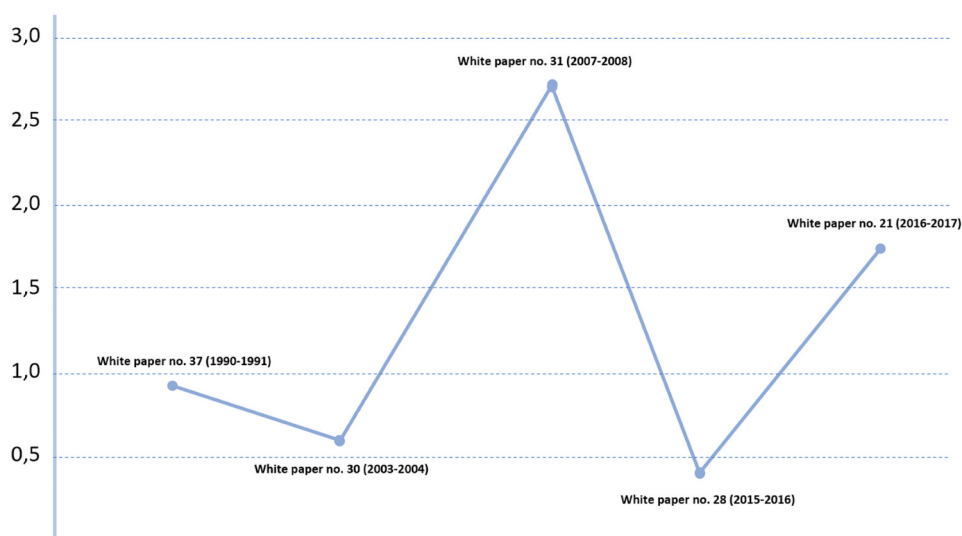
Figure 1. Overview of how mentions of school leaders and school leadership (per page) varied in the five policy documents.

Table 4. Overview of main findings from the first period.

First period (1990–1997): Managerialism and strengthening the school leaders' role		
Emerging		
• *mistrust* in the teaching profession and its leaders • *neoliberalism* and schools as responsible for students' learning outcomes • a move *from* primus inter pares to school leaders as managers		
Residual		
• education is about *provision*, regulation and steering • schools are a good place to be and to learn		
How are school leaders described?	*How are school leaders positioned?*	*How are school leaders ascribed responsibility?*
The principal has, traditionally, been perceived more as a teacher with additional functions, not an employer with authority	School leaders are hierarchically above the teaching profession	The principal must take real employer responsibility; clear boundaries must be drawn between the school's employer representatives and the school's employee representatives

First period (1990–1997): managerialism and strengthening school leader's role

The first policy document analysed was White Paper no. 37 (1990–1991) *About the organization and management of the education sector*. Gudmund Hernes, Minister of Education (1990–1995) used this White paper to introduce Management by Objectives (MbO) in the education sector, and the document drew on official Norwegian reports and an OECD review of Norwegian education policy (OECD, 1988).

The document positioned school leaders as employers and described them as important actors who *manage* teachers in a system of steering from a distance:

> The formal role of school leaders as employers must be strengthened. While the role is formally clear, each school has a weak tradition for practicing the principal's employer role. The principal has primarily been perceived as a teacher with additional functions, and less as a local representative for the authorities. (White paper no. 37 (1990–1991), p. 27).

By referring to school leaders as employers and distancing them from the teachers, this description marks a radical shift from the primus inter pares-tradition. The White paper clearly positions the school leader as the head, expecting them to act as *managers*. However, this positioning is confused by the following argument, on the same page:

> It should, however, be emphasised that school leadership is not only exercised by the principals. Modern management is teamwork that relies on staff to exercise different leadership functions in the organization. This must be taken into consideration when planning leadership training (ibid.).

This ambiguity provides an unclear direction, and the following suggestion on the next page adds further confusion: 'As school leaders are more centrally positioned as representatives for the educational authorities, an element of management should be included in teacher training' (White paper no. 37 (1990–1991). p. 28). While the message is confusing, the overall impression is a significant move away from the principal as primus inter pares towards a positioning of the principal as *manager* in a system of school governance.

The analysis of the first document covering the period (1990–1997) revealed that school leaders were positioned outside the teaching profession and ascribed employer responsibility. The main trends are summed up in Table 4 below:

Table 4 shows residual and emerging tendencies in the period. The repositioning of school leaders from the traditional *primus inter pares* to employer can be seen as an emerging mistrust in the teaching profession and its leaders.

Second period (1998–2006): 'magical' neoliberal solutions to generic problems

The first document in the second period, White Paper no. 30 (2003–2004), *Culture for learning*, responded to the results from PISA 2000, published in 2001, when the PISA-shock hit Norway (Hopfenbeck & Görgen, 2017). The idea was to improve mediocre PISA results by assigning the school leader the responsibility to improve teachers' practice:

> Several international studies emphasize characteristics of school leadership at development-oriented schools documenting good learning outcomes. At these schools, the principals are abreast of the situation, well informed and interested in how teachers work with the pupils … They focus on the students, share power, create a positive climate of trial and error (…) and build the school as a learning organization (White Paper no. 30 (2003–2004), p. 29).

This excerpt shows an emerging tendency in Norwegian education policy. Before 2000, White papers rarely referred to research. Around the turn of the century, they gradually introduced general mentions of 'research' or 'international studies', but without reference to specific studies.

Table 5. Overview of main findings from the second period.

Second period (1998–2006): 'Magical solutions' to generic problems

Emerging

- *fabrications*
- symbolic language, 'double speak'
- binaries are used to 'spin' magical solutions
- competition and accountability, schools are expected to *perform* and increase students' learning outcomes

Residual

- mistrust
- neoliberalism

How are school leaders described?	How are school leaders positioned?	How are school leaders ascribed responsibility?
School leaders are crucial for the development of good schools. Good leaders are competent, engaged and ambitious, with positive attitudes to change and development	School leaders are outside of/above the teaching profession	School leaders are important for development and quality. Teachers and school leaders must collaborate more flexibly and varied

The document also mentioned 'research' when describing poor school leadership: 'Research points to three factors that can hamper the school's culture of learning: forms of organization that do not sufficiently facilitate learning and development, a weak tradition of learning through daily work, and docile leaders' (p. 27). With reference to the weak leadership tradition in Norwegian schools, docile leaders were described in greater detail:

> Docile leaders tend to leave the responsibility to teachers and only reluctantly engage in dialogue on how to perform and improve instructional practices. As docile leaders do not ensure the collective responsibility of developing instructional practices, they risk maintaining traditional educational practice (and subsequently) hamper the implementation of measures needed for change and improvement (p. 28)

Central to this rhetoric is the binary established between docile and explicit school leaders, strategically used to contrast the preferred characteristic of school leaders (explicit) to the unwanted (docile). PISA results below OECD average, can explain why politicians identified school leaders, positioned between the municipality and the teachers, as key facilitators in the realization of national policy: 'School leaders and school owners are in a prominent position to develop and implement good learning within the framework of national goals' (p. 25). Leadership is described as an individual skill and the binary *docile* versus *explicit* is used to fabricate the individual, strong leader as a magical solution. Explicit school leaders, who understand quality enhancing processes, can instruct teachers what to do.

In the documents from the second period (1998 to 2006), school leadership was perceived as *crucial* for the pupils' learning outcomes. The binary docile and explicit was effectively used in policy documents to signal mistrust in school leaders and teachers.

Table 5 shows that the use of binaries such as 'docile' versus 'explicit' school leaders, is an emerging tendency in this policy period. Schools are expected to perform and develop as learning organization and school leaders should lead this process. Residual tendencies are neoliberal ideas and mistrust in the teaching profession.

Third period (2007–2017): neoliberal performance – analytical competence and professional communities

White Paper no. 31 (2007–2008) *Quality in school*, from the red-green coalition, positioned school leaders as mediators: 'To succeed, school leaders need analytical and pedagogical competence, the ability to handle contradictions and conflicts of interest and to communicate with different actors both internally and externally' (White Paper no. 31 (2007–2008), p. 45). This marked a change from personality traits such as strong, explicit leaders, to competence development and leadership training: 'Principals with extensive leadership training appear more competent and confident in their job. They also more readily participate in further education and use available research than principals with less or no formal leadership training' (White paper no. 31 (2007–2008), p. 48).

School leaders' competence is now described as 'pedagogical' and 'analytical', and they develop competence through further education and by keeping continuously updated on research. School leaders are now positioned at the school level, expected to 'answer for their school's results and development to school owners, parents, elected representatives and the larger community' (White Paper no. 31 (2007–2008), p. 44f).

The school leader is no longer an employer or a manager, but closer to the teachers' practice, expected to conduct classroom observations, give

teachers feedback on their work and how they can improve their teaching (White Paper no. 31 (2007–2008), p. 45). School leaders are, as mentors and supervisors, expected to collaboratively engage with teachers in school development processes.

The core ambition in the conservative coalition's White Paper no 28 (2015–2016) was to renew the Knowledge Promotion reform from 2006. A revision of the core curriculum and the quality framework was initiated, to be implemented in schools from 2020. The document clarifies the distinction between school leaders as employers and as employees:

> To avoid confusion about who is responsible for what and which roles the different levels/organisations should have, we use "School owner level" about the municipality and county level, "School level" about school leaders, the professional learning community, and individual teachers. (White paper no. 28 (2015–2016), p. 65).

The school leader is now positioned at level with the profession, with the responsibility 'to ensure that the school develops as a learning organization where the teachers, as a collective, work together to educate the pupils in accordance with curriculum goals' (White Paper no. 28 (2015–2016), p. 67). Collaboration between the school owner (municipality) and the school is based on trust, with a minimum of municipal interference (p. 70): 'Explicit and knowledge informed school leadership is essential to lead the work of renewing the school curriculum' (White Paper no. 28 (2015–2016), p. 71).

The second White Paper from the conservative government was no. 21 (2016–2017) *Desire to learn – early intervention and quality in schools.* This document referred to research documenting quality differences between Norwegian schools and argued for replacing previous top-down national initiatives with decentralized competence development: 'The professional judgement of teachers and school leaders is the starting point for interactions with pupils. Pupils' learning is strongly influenced by the quality of this meeting' (White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017), p. 32). School leaders are positioned as part of the teaching profession, as facilitators and coaches:

> School leadership is particularly important in relation to the teachers' professional practice (…) teachers develop their academic, educational, ethical, and didactic judgment when reflecting on their own practice, and when discussing and interacting with colleagues and school leaders. (White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017), p. 32).

Still, the principal is the formal school leader:

Next to the teachers' competence, school leadership is the factor that impacts the pupils' learning the most. The effect is primarily indirect. School leaders can influence pupils' learning outcomes by developing teachers' work, organizing school activities in a good way, and establishing good relationships with the parents and the community (White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017), p. 27).

The need for training programs is frequently mentioned: 'School leaders who have completed training programs evaluate and assess teachers' work more frequently than leaders who have not participated' (White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017), p. 36). Also, 'research indicates that participation in school-leadership programmes promotes a stronger instructionally oriented leadership' (White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017), p. 36). In 2008, initiatives were taken to develop national leadership programs. The Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (UDIR) is currently authorized to administer these programs and to specify programme requirements. Having compared two programs, Møller & Ottesen (2011) argued that they differed substantially in profiles and knowledge bases. As both were acknowledged as national leadership programs, higher education institutions appear to have a high degree of autonomy in deciding what school leaders need to know and learn.

To sum up, the analysis of five Norwegian policy documents revealed significant changes in how school leaders were described, positioned and ascribed responsibility between 1990 and 2017. In 1990, they were positioned as employers, expected to *manage* teachers. In 2003, they were positioned as antagonists to the teachers, envisioned as *explicit*, not docile leaders. Based on studies that documented best-practice, explicit school leaders should build schools as learning organizations. This changed in 2017, when they were positioned as part of the teaching profession and ascribed responsibility as facilitators of and contributors to teachers' professional learning communities.

The repositioning of school leaders from managers to contributors in the schools' professional learning community is a radical change, but in accordance with the research on school leadership presented in the introduction (Harris, 2005, K. Leithwood et al., 2008, 2020). The main policy trends are summed up in Table 6.

An emerging tendency is the trust in the teaching profession. Residual tendencies are the school leader as primus inter pares (albeit appointed, not elected) and the emphasis on leader-teacher collaboration. The strong belief in the professional learning communities and trust in the teaching profession might indicate that 'softer' forms of governance based on

Table 6. Overview of main findings third period.

Third period (2007–2017): Neoliberal performance and professional communities		
Emerging		
• from top-down to bottom-up • signalling trust in the teaching profession • strengthening teacher education • increased access to data and information about how schools and districts 'perform'		
Residual		
• increased accountability/responsibility at the local level • increased pressures on schools to 'perform' • an apparent return to primus inter pares, now related to teacher professionalization		
How are school leaders described?	*How are school leaders positioned?*	*How are school leaders ascribed responsibility?*
Explicit and professional school leadership is crucial for the schools' work. Next after the teachers, school leaders matter the most for pupils' learning. School leaders are pedagogical and organizational leaders.	School leaders belong to their own profession, next to or integral to the teaching profession.	Teachers and school leaders, the main professions in the school, are crucial to pupils' learning outcomes. Professionalism presupposes collaboration between school leaders and teachers who take a more active and strategic approach in the complex field of educational knowledge

information and guidance are as powerful as more direct control methods (Hudson, 2011).

The next section presents interviews with three Norwegian politicians, conducted to supplement the document analyses, and better understand how politicians – in hindsight – interpret the political negotiation processes they participated in and intentions behind education reforms with relevance for school leadership.

Education policy development – a retrospective perspective

Two former Ministers of Education, Kristin Clemet and Bård Vegar Solhjell and former leader of the standing committee of Education and Church affairs, Rolf Reikvam, were interviewed in 2019. At the time of the interviews, Norwegian education policy centred around the 'Quality knowledge promotion' ('Fagfornyelsen'[2]). The ambition was to renew the curriculum for all subjects in primary and secondary school and thereby 'modernize' the Knowledge Promotion reform from 2006. Kristin Clemet (The Conservatives) former Minister of Education (2001–2003), had these reflections:

> When I took office in 2001, The Conservatives and The Socialist Left were the 'school parties', taking opposite positions in the debate. The Socialist Left wanted the 'cosy-school', and the Conservatives wanted the 'rote learning-school'. This was how they caricatured [sic] each other in the debate (Kristin Clemet, The Conservatives).

Her reference to caricature was a slogan used by Jon Lilletun, former Minister of Education (1997–2000), who described his ideal school as: 'A good place to be and a good place to learn'. Those in favour of a 'cosy' school emphasized the social aspect of education and paid insufficient attention to students' learning outcomes.

Former leader of the standing committee of Education and Church affairs, Rolf Reikvam (Socialist Left), has a similar reflection, but explained it differently:

> After all, early 2000 was the return of positivism. A strong belief in weighing, measuring and control. New Public Management with its control systems, and main goals and means were defined. And then schools should carry this out. And I think it was very negative (Rolf Reikvam, Socialist Left).

He added: 'Much of this was driven by mistrust in the school staff. Mistrust in teachers, Mistrust in school leaders' (Rolf Reikvam, Socialist Left).

While Reikvam interpreted the change as the return to positivism, Bård Vegar Solhjell, former Minister of Education (2007–2009) from the same party, argued: 'It was the beginning of a new regime of understanding, including what education is and how we should understand key educational issues. I think our understanding of the Norwegian school changed during that period' (Bård Vegar Solhjell, Socialist Left). He continued:

> It was in a way a paradigm shift in the Norwegian educational debate. We received surveys about Norwegian schools that supplemented the PISA findings and confirmed the picture. In 2003, the educational debate was changed, and everybody said 'Yes, we have a problem. Something must be done'. Everybody acknowledged it. (Bård Vegard Solhjell, Socialist Left).

Characteristics of the paradigm shift, Solhjell referred to, were the increased use of international studies in policy documents around 2000, and how comparative large-scale studies, such as PISA, altered the political debate across party lines.

Kristin Clemet, from the Conservatives, argued along the same lines: 'If you don't understand the problem, then the reform becomes the problem. But we agreed that we had problems and what

the problems were' (Kristin Clemet, The Conservatives). Rolf Reikvam, also from the Socialist Left, however, saw things differently: 'I think that the so-called PISA-shock affected many politicians. They were scared to death, you know. Are Norwegian schools really that bad? Something must be done. And there was a growing belief in scorecards and control systems' (Rolf Reikvam, Socialist Left).

While the two former ministers (Clemet and Solhjell) agreed that there were problems that needed attention, they understood the driving forces differently: Bård Vegard Solhjell (Socialist left) said: 'First and foremost, I think the need for the reform was not politically driven, but by research'. He continued:

> The way I see it, the Knowledge Promotion reform was not primarily run by the Conservatives, as it was later assumed. But it became a 'right-wing-project' because the Conservatives gave it attention, wrote about it, used it, and had the will and ability to *own* it (Bård Vegar Solhjell, Socialist left).

With reference to the debate between the left-wing parties' 'cosy-school' and the right-wing parties' 'rote learning-school', Kristin Clemet from the Conservatives said: 'From a party-tactical point of view, it was a disadvantage for the other parties that they agreed on the need for a "knowledge-school"' (Kristin Clemet, The Conservatives).

When asked about how she perceived school leadership, Kristin Clemet answered:

> After all, the school belongs to one of the professional cultures that traditionally didn't have leadership or felt any need for leadership. I often say, if you bring in a great symphony orchestra and you ask them to play, it will be pretty good without a conductor. And even with a bad conductor it will go well. But it is much better if they have a good conductor.

While Kristin Clemet compared the school leader to a conductor of a symphony orchestra, Rolf Reikvam questioned the emphasis on school leadership:

> We probably picked up the importance of school leadership from abroad (…) it was identified as something important. It was a consequence of the belief in leaders as crucial, and the need to identify someone with the responsibility.

Central to Clemet's and Reikvam's arguments are influences 'from abroad'. A 'good conductor' of a symphony orchestra is a great performer who meets the requirements. The opposite of a good conductor is a bad conductor, who should skill up or seek other employment. This individual perspective on leadership neglects or overlooks that early 2000, leadership was increasingly seen as a distributed team effort.

The above extracts confirmed the document analyses. While there is a vocal mistrust in traditional school leadership (bad conductors), strong school leaders (good conductors) are idealized. None of the informants talked about how school leaders should be positioned, nor what they were expected to do. With the use of binaries and labels such as 'the cosy school', 'the return to positivism' and 'a professionally driven development' the politicians fabricated arguments meant to confront, argue for stability or change, to secure context control towards new policy initiatives (Ball, 2000).

The document analyses revealed a radical policy shift in how education should be managed from the top down (in 1990) to how teachers and school leaders (in 2017) are expected to collaboratively engage in professional learning communities. The analyses of documents and interviews show that the Norwegian debate about school leaders has been shifting in accordance with research and international policy developments. We found residual and emergent tendencies throughout the periods. While the White Papers stress the importance of school leadership, they vary considerably in how they describe and position school leaders and ascribe them responsibility. In documents and interviews, descriptions of school leadership are generally normative, intentional and vague.

A new regime of understanding.

The question how school leaders were described, positioned and ascribed responsibility in Norwegian educational policy from 1990 to 2017 frames the discussion of findings from the documents and interviews.

The article's starting point was the launch of *A nation at risk* (1983) that initiated a global change in the education policy discourse and influenced White Paper no. 37 (1990–1991) launched under Minister of Education Gudmund Hernes. He led the work on the Official Norwegian Report, which stated that Norway did not sufficiently exploit the talents of its population (ONR, 1988: 28, p. 7).[3] This is rooted in the human capital belief that investment in individual yields societal profit. It also reflects neoliberal ideology, a set of practices organized around an understanding of the 'market' as a basis for the universalization of social relations (Ball, 2012, Shamir, 2008). While weighed differently by different governments and individual politicians, residual neoliberal assumptions resided in the Norwegian educational discourse, but faded towards the end of the second period investigated in this article, thus confirming (Wiborg, 2013).

The analyses of the White Papers from 1990 to 2017 showed that in 1994, school leaders were positioned as employers, and that they, after the PISA-shock in 2001, were gradually being moved closer to the teaching profession. A variety of normative claims were found in the documents, for instance that school leaders should be well informed, interested in teachers' work, communicate well, act upon national curriculum goals and feel responsible (White paper no. 30 (2003–2004), White paper no. 31 (2007–2008), White paper no 28 (2015–2016)). When describing the problem of *docile* leaders, White paper no. 30 (2003–2004) referred to the 'weak tradition' of school leadership in Norway. Docile leaders leave classroom decisions to the teachers and lack authority. This was contrasted to the preferred *explicit*, strong school leader, who confronts teachers and feel responsible for the school's results. With reference to 'international studies' and the binary *explicit* and *docile* school leaders, the policy aims at 'context control' (Lyotard, 1984). According to Ball (1998b), fabrications of this kind are for external consumption: 'they provide a focus for the gaze of quality and accountability; they are there to be viewed, evaluated and compared'.

Management by Objectives used *vision goals* to serve a similar function. Visions, binaries, symbolic language and metaphors are used to fabricate imaginaries and prepare for future policy initiatives to maximize outputs (benefits) and minimize input (costs) (Ball, 2000). With reference to Foucault, Ball (2000) claims that purposefully produced fabrications are not 'outside the truth' but neither do they render true or direct accounts. They effectively influence our perception by positioning traditional practices as outdated and weak, while new solutions are promising, strong and timely.

White Paper no. 31 (2007–2008), launched by the red-green coalition described responsible school leaders as leaders who are accountable for results and quality development, indicating a managerial perspective on school leaders. A marked shift was, however, noted in 2015, when school leaders were re-positioned to the 'school-level'. Now, school leaders were expected to both administer schools and follow-up the professional learning communities. The flexible school leader is part of neoliberal policy strategies, along with the managerial leadership model, emphasizing output, quality development and performance (Ball, 2016).

Throughout the period investigated (1990 to 2017) there was a growing policy interest in *instructional leadership*. When traits of successful school leadership programs were emphasized, the relation between teachers and school leaders was central, and school leaders described as the active and 'explicit' party,

expected to persuade (assumed unwilling) teachers in reform implementation. While the documents during the second period (1998–2006) positioned the principal as the responsible leader, a perspective on leadership as *distributed* (Spillane, 2006, Tian et al., 2016) gained momentum. Reform implementation became a team effort (White Paper no 21 (2016–2017), p. 37), and the focus on team leadership in the documents indicates policy borrowing (Halpin & Troyna, 1995). Distributed leadership is an emergent tendency (Diem, 2017). Nevertheless, these perspectives never gained foothold as a 'valid' leadership practice in public administration. A residual tendency was to define the principal as the 'real leader' in school. When she used the metaphor of a symphony orchestra in the interview, Kristin Clemet alluded to the team-effort. The focus on pedagogical and didactical leadership was a move away from previous descriptions of school leaders as managers. Arguments that leader initiatives must be connected to teachers' work replaced the perspective on leadership as a generic competence. Leaders were positioned as active participants in development processes, a move that, interestingly, re-introduced the *primus inter pares* tradition, but in a frame of teacher professionalization.

In early 1990, policy documents positioned the school leader as an employer, expected to manage teachers. White Paper no. 37 (1990–91) reflected the vocal distrust in schools that, at the time, circulated globally. School leaders should steer from a distance and, like corporate managers, optimize results. Gewirtz and Ball (2000) claimed that managerialism emphasized the instrumental purposes of schooling – raising standards and performance as measured by exams. This shift entailed, argued Ball (1998a) the destruction of solidarities based upon a common professional identity and trade union affiliation. The implicit assumption was that teachers must be managed and led, assisted by a growing system of control mechanisms, a trend that has been labelled a *managerial drift* in school leadership (Lillejord & Børte, 2020b). Paradoxically, the accompanying policy rhetoric was decentralization and freedom for leaders to organize activities within their institutions.

White Paper no. 21 (2016–2017) repositioned school leaders closer to the school's professional learning community. While they used to be *crucial* for students' results, they were now one of the factors, next after the teacher, that *matters the most* for students' learning (p. 27).

The study has identified 'rhetorical battles' between politicians. When, for instance, the Conservatives early 2000 claimed ownership to the knowledge school agenda, they labelled red-green policy 'cozy school'. Red-green politicians responded by referring to the Conservatives' 'rote learning school'. Underneath

these slogans, the interviews revealed a quite consensual *realpolitik* among two former Ministers of Education, Kristin Clemet from the Conservatives, and Bård Vegard Solhjell from the Socialist Left. This corresponds with Solhaug (2011) and Wiborg (2013) who both noted a remarkable consensus in Norwegian educational policy after 2000, and governments both from left and right essentially followed up on NPM. Although problems were acknowledged across party lines, the interviews revealed tensions between left and right. As Whitty (2002) commented, there are always contradictions embedded in education reforms.

The second period (1998–2006) was influenced by the OECD's PISA study and the emergence of a new educational discourse. Politicians were confronted with how they should respond to results from international studies (Ball, 1998a). When schools should increase students' learning outcomes, the solution was to position school leaders as accountable for results. When Norwegian pupils scored below the OECD average, the Norwegian school was no longer 'the best in the world', famously announced by Bjartmar Gjerde, Minister of Church and Education 1973–1976 (Koren, 2015, p. 63).

Former Minister of Education, Bård Vegar Solhjell from the Socialist Left characterized early 2000 as a 'paradigm shift', as politicians from the left and the right united in 'a new regime of understanding'. Central to the new regime of understanding was a more prominent place for research and evaluation reports from 2001 and onwards. Increasingly, politicians legitimized their policies with evidence from research and international comparisons. This development can be seen as an emergent tendency (Diem, 2017) after the millennium.

Based on the research question, how school leaders are described/positioned/ascribed responsibility, we have compared the three periods in Table 7.

During the period, the positioning of school leaders changed substantially, and Table 7 shows three binaries: 1) The school leader envisioned as employer versus employee, 2) school leaders positioned outside of or as part of the teaching profession and 3) the direct or indirect impact of school leaders on students' learning outcomes.

The document analyses revealed many imageries of school leadership in the documents and vague answers from the politicians. Descriptions of school leaders/school leadership are unclear, their position changes and while they are generally referred to as *crucial*, there are no analysis of the competences they need to fulfil their responsibilities. A question for further research is whether the effect of *the teacher* for students' learning outcomes (Hanushek, 1971) have overshadowed the importance of school leaders in the period investigated.

Examples of distrust in school leadership lingered through the periods, a residual tendency that emerged with A Nation at Risk (1983). White Paper no. 30 (2003–2004) was used to show how the binary between the undesirable docile leader (the generic problem) and the preferred strong leader (the magical solution, Ball, 1998a) was established. The argument was that while docile leaders hinder a culture for learning, explicit leaders promote it (White Paper no. 30 (2003–2004, p. 28)). Based on this claim, training programs for school leaders were suggested. In documents and interviews, school leaders were described as 'important' or 'crucial', positioned above the school or with the

Table 7. Overview of descriptions, positions and how school leaders are ascribed responsibility in the three periods investigated.

First period (1990–1997)	Second period (1998–2006)	Third period (2007–2017)
How are school leaders described?		
The principal was, traditionally, perceived more as a teacher with additional tasks or functions instead of an employer with authority to lead schools.	Good school leaders are vital for the development of good schools. Their attitudes to change and development are positive, and they should be competent, engaged and ambitious	Explicit and professional school leadership is crucial for the schools' work on curriculum renewal. School leaders are both pedagogical and organizational leaders. Next after the teachers, school leaders matter the most for pupils' learning.
How are school leaders positioned?		
School leaders are hierarchically positioned above the teaching profession	School leaders are positioned outside of/above the teaching profession	School leaders are a profession on their own, next to or integral to the teaching profession
How are school leaders ascribed responsibility?		
The principal must take employer responsibility. Distinct boundaries must be drawn between the school's employer representatives on the one hand and the school's employee representatives on the other.	School leaders are important for school development and quality work in schools. Teachers and school leaders must collaborate more flexibly and varied	Teachers and school leaders, the schools' main professions, are crucial for pupils' learning outcomes. Professionalism presupposes collaboration between school leaders and teachers who take a more active and strategic approach in the complex field of educational knowledge.

teachers, and ascribed shifting and unclear responsibilities in relation to the teaching profession.

Conclusion

We asked how school leaders were described, positioned and ascribed responsibility in Norwegian education policy between 1990 and 2017. The analyses of five policy documents and three interviews with key politicians revealed diverging descriptions of school leaders' role, how they are positioned in relation to the teachers and the district level and what is expected of them. Policy documents mention the importance of school leadership in school development, but do not specify *how* school leaders are important. During the period, generic problems were fabricated (Ball, 2012), some coupled with 'magical solutions', for instance the binary between docile and explicit school leaders, and the 'cosy' versus the 'rote-learning' school. In the interviews, politicians were asked how they perceived the school leaders' role. Their responses were quite general and evasive. Our analysis has revealed that when Management by Objectives (Drucker, 1954) was introduced in education early 1990, school leaders were described as managers, ascribed employer responsibility and positioned above the teaching profession. After the 2001 PISA-shock, politicians' main concern was how schools could improve students' learning outcomes, and research that identified *the teacher* as the most important factor for students' learning outcomes (Hanushek, 1971) placed teachers at the forefront of politicians' attention.

The article has shown that how school leaders are positioned in policy documents changed substantially over the almost 30 years investigated. We also find that while politicians apparently disagree across party lines, interviews revealed a 'silent murmur' (Foucault, 2013, p. 30) of consensus underneath their rhetoric battles.

Around the turn of the Century, the traditional binary between the left and the right in educational policy was downplayed and Norwegian politicians united in a 'new regime of understanding'. Interestingly, when politicians no longer hold opposing ideologies about education, it paved the way for an educational policy that supports the professionalization of teachers and their leaders. Following a parliamentary decision, teacher education for primary school teachers was at masters' level from 2017, and teachers are increasingly referred to as a profession. The strategy Decentralized competence development offers an opportunity to strengthen the teaching profession. While school leaders are described as *crucial*, there are, beyond the normative, no policy descriptions of how leaders should contribute to enhanced quality in schools. This can be interpreted as a lack of political ambitions for school leadership which is worrying if it is indicative of political ambitions for education in general.

Notes

1. In a traditional left-right paradigm the parties represented in the Norwegian Storting (2020) are: Red, Socialist Left, the Labour Party, the Centre Party, The Green Party, the Christian Democratic Party, the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Progress Party.
2. https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/lareplanverket/fagfornyelsen/.
3. In the report *A Nation at Risk*, the phrase is 'Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest' (p. 14).

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