Datafication and Juridification in Early Years Education: Recontextualizing the Duty to Provide Intensive Training in Reading in One Norwegian School

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Abstract
Internationally, data and legislation have been given an increasing role in the governance of schools. One example is the combination of state-provided mapping tests and the legislation on intensive training in early years education in Norway. Ample room is provided for professional judgment when it comes to how intensive training should be practiced and how data should be used. However, the legislation may still be controversial and may challenge Norwegian traditions by measuring children against given standards.

This paper explores how power and control work in the recontextualizing of the legislation into pedagogical practice in reading in one school. Agents in the school differ when it comes to how they perceive the legitimacy of the tests. However, the high expectations of the school principal in regard to results means that the tests set important premises for what counts as legitimate communication and pedagogical priorities. Gray-zone pupils are prioritized at the cost of special education, and these pupils spend more time on what they are not mastering, work with a narrower curriculum, and lose time and shared experiences with their peer group. The recontextualizing represents a manifestation of the neoliberal discourse emphasizing individualization and trainability at the cost of all-round approaches and pupil kinship in early years education.

Keywords: early intervention; intensive training; Norway; recontextualization; neoliberalism

Introduction
Internationally, early years education has been related to a neoliberal discourse on human capital as the source of future employment in a competitive global economy (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018). The neoliberal approach considers that...
a vital new ability must be developed: ‘trainability’, the ability to profit from continuous pedagogic re-formations, and so cope with the new requirements of ‘work’ and ‘life’. These pedagogic re-formations will be based on the acquisition of generic modes which is hoped to realise a flexible transferable potential rather than specific performances. (Bernstein, 2000, p. 59)

The school’s efficiency in terms of developing these generic modes, often described as “basic skills” or “key competences” (Haugen, 2014), is controlled through standardized assessments in international and national comparisons. With this in mind, data have been given a greater role in the processes of governance (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018) through marketized educational reforms combining the decentralization of control over schools’ and teachers’ work and centralization though collection of data, giving the state the opportunity to control “at a distance” (Bernstein, 2001; Apple, 2006; Ball, 2017). According to Clarke and Newman,

> [t]he logic of managerialism is that managers are accountable for what they deliver, but not for how they deliver it. It is results, not methods, that count, and to achieve good results managers must have the maximum room for manoeuvre in the decision-making process. (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 64)

It has been argued that in the recentralization of control, “juridification” is another feature intertwined with neoliberal education policies (Rosén et al., 2021). However, internationally, little is known about how the increasing use of data and legislation affects roles, hierarchies, and educational practices in early years education (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2018; Rosén et al., 2021). One example of how the combination of data and legislation is used as a centralizing policy tool in early years education in Norway can be seen in Section 1–4 of the Norwegian Education Act (Education Act, 1998). This section states that:

> In grades one to four, the school must ensure that pupils who are at risk of lagging behind in reading, writing or mathematics, quickly are given suitable intensive instruction so that they achieve the expected progress. If it is in the pupil’s best interest, the intensive instruction may be given on a one-to-one basis for a short period. (Education Act, 1998, my translation)

One measure for identifying the pupils who are in danger of lagging behind is to use state-provided mapping tests in reading in the first grade (voluntary) and third grade (mandatory). However, just how the legislation on intensive training is to be put into practice and what role the mapping tests should play is not specified. Ample room is provided for exercising professional judgment in how intensive training should be carried out, and we know little about what is actually done in this regard in the Norwegian municipalities and schools (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019–2020).

In the recontextualization of a policy into becoming a pedagogical practice, ideology comes into play, and it is therefore difficult to foresee its realization(s) (Bernstein, 2000). Bearing this in mind, Bernstein (2000) claimed that there is a struggle between the Official Recontextualizing Field (ORF, dominated by the state and its selected
agents and ministries) and the Pedagogic Recontextualizing Field (PRF, for example, educators in schools and colleges).

If the PRF can have an effect on pedagogic discourse independently of the ORF, then there is both some autonomy and struggle over pedagogic discourse and its practices. But if there is only the ORF, then there is no autonomy. Today, the state is attempting to weaken the PRF through its ORF, and thus attempting to reduce the relative autonomy over the construction of pedagogic discourse and over its social contexts. (Bernstein 2000, p. 33)

What is important in relation to the recontextualizing of the legislation on intensive training is that both standardized data and legislation represent forms of governance that may furnish the state-selected agents outside the school, as well as parents, with a stronger voice in the recontextualization process. This is important as the focus on early intervention can be controversial in the Norwegian context. The increasing influence of Anglo-American traditions in measuring children against given standards may contribute to a narrowing of the norm and challenge the Norwegian-German traditions that emphasize negotiations between actors in school over what are good norms and conditions for a diverse group of pupils (Unhjem et al., 2021), and that emphasize the all-round pupil recognition of diversity, and inclusion (Bjørnsrud & Nilsen, 2022).

With the tensions inherent in the forms of governance (increased local autonomy and methodological freedom and increased centralization through legislation and standardized tests) as the point of departure, the aim of this paper is to investigate how power and control work in the recontextualization of the legislation on intensive training into a pedagogical practice in reading.

State mapping tests and intensive training in early years education in Norway

Norway followed neoliberal trends in the Knowledge Promotion Reform (the then Ministry of Education and Research, 2003–2004) by providing the local authorities and schools with more autonomy when it came to how to run their schools, while at the same time a national quality assessment framework (NKVS$^{1}$) was established to centralize control over output and contribute to marketization through the publication of comparisons of municipal and school data.

The school owner is responsible for the mapping tests and for ensuring that the results are followed up. In examples of how the tests can be used, it has been suggested that they can serve as a point of departure for working on basic skills, revealing the need for academic updating of the staff, and for considering whether the school’s follow-up routines are sufficient. Together with other information about pupils’

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$^{1}$ The NKVS included testing of basic skills in international assessments (e.g. PISA), national testing (in numeracy, English and literacy in the fifth, eighth and ninth grades) and mapping tests designed to focus more attention on early years education (voluntary in reading and mathematics in the first grade, mandatory in reading and mathematics in the third grade).
learning, the results from the mapping tests should provide the basis for adapting the teaching to the pupils. All pupils are obliged to take the tests. However, the school principal can consider exemption for pupils with the right to special education or the right to language training for language minorities. Furthermore, one important difference between the mapping tests and the national tests is that the mapping tests are not designed to compare results between schools or municipalities, and they are not to be reported to the Directorate for Education and Training (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). In other words, the schools and local authorities have great autonomy when it comes to how to use the mapping tests, which makes it difficult to foresee their impact on how intensive training is given across diverse contexts.

Intensive training should be part of the ordinary adapted teaching and should be a short-term and goal-oriented effort for pupils who are identified as being in danger of lagging behind. The local authorities are duty-bound to provide intensive training for these pupils from the first to the fourth grades, but the legislation does not confer corresponding rights to the pupil. The increased attention on early intervention has been related to three main aims: to improve the completion rate in upper secondary education, to enhance learning outcomes, and to reduce the amount of special education within the system. A basic assumption is that early intervention is a tool that can be used to prevent and reduce social and academic challenges and thereby improve equity and the education system’s capacity to satisfy the needs of a diverse group of pupils (Unhjem et al., 2021).

Theoretical and methodological framework

To analyze how power and control function in the recontextualizing of the legislation on intensive training into a pedagogical practice, the concepts of “recognition” and “realization rules” are employed. Recognition and realization rules are what establish the communicative context (Bernstein, 1990, pp. 34–35) (in this case: intensive training in reading at this specific school). Recognition rules refer to power relations and are regulated by the classificatory principle. Classification can refer to relations between contexts, agents, discourses, or practices in the intensive training and indicates how one context differs from another and “provides the key to the distinguishing feature of a context, and so orients the speaker to what is expected, what is legitimate to that” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 17). The classification of the recognition rules of the intensive training can be strong (+C) or weak (-C). Clear criteria for what count as legitimate forms of intensive training indicate strongly classified recognition rules, and the opposite is the case when the criteria for legitimate forms of intensive training are vaguer.

The realization rules regulate the message, or the form of the contextual realization, and are a function of the framing. They establish the rules for what counts as legitimate communication, or legitimate texts, and who controls what in the relation
between transmitter and acquirer. Framing can be strong (+F) or weak (-F), where “the stronger the framing, the smaller the space accorded for potential variation in the message” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 204). Attention in this context is given to four elements (cf. Bernstein, 2000): (1) Selection, referring to the content of the intensive training; (2) Pacing, referring to the rate of expected acquisition; (3) Criteria, referring to how the intensive training is legitimized; and (4) The hierarchy between transmitter and acquirer. A strong framing (+F) over selection, pacing, criteria, and hierarchy implies realization rules with little room for variation in the message, whereas the opposite is implied when the framing is weak (-F). Weak framing of these elements means that the acquirer has apparent control (invisible pedagogy), and strong framing means that the transmitter has explicit control (visible pedagogy). The differences between them are related to an ideological conflict over forms of control (Bernstein, 1977, 2000), where the invisible pedagogies (progressive) (Bernstein, 2000) traditionally have been central in Nordic education, and the visible pedagogies (conservative) (Bernstein, 2000) have been a more typical characteristic of Anglo-American education.

However, although separated analytically, the recognition and realization rules are intertwined. “[A]lthough realization rules establish what counts as a legitimate text, these rules presuppose and are limited by recognition rules, and the classificatory principle these rules presuppose, which determines the limits of the legitimate potential of the communication” (Bernstein, 1990, p. 35). Together, these elements can help to identify the rules of the intensive training in reading.

**Data material**

This paper presents one instrumental case study (cf. Stake, 1995) that forms part of a larger investigation comparing data from different municipalities and schools to explore variations and experiences in the recontextualization of the legislation for intensive training. The school in the case study was selected because it has a long tradition of providing intensive training through reading courses. A high proportion of the pupils at this school come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Agents who were positioned differently in the school hierarchy and in relation to the intensive training of the pupils were invited to participate. The principal, the intensive training teacher in reading, and the mother of a child who had participated in intensive training courses from the first to the fourth grade, wanted to participate. Both the principal and the intensive training teacher have master’s degrees in education and extensive experience of early years education. The mother had completed higher education and worked in the field of symbolic control (cf. Bernstein, 2000). As the informants were differently positioned in relation to the pupils, they could provide different perspectives on and experiences of how the mapping tests and intensive training in reading worked. At the same time, they represented different levels in the school hierarchy, which was also reflected in their concerns and interests in relation
to this specific practice. As the interest was focused on the intensive training in particular, the class teachers were not included in the study. Nor were pupils included due to the difficulties of conducting interviews with children of such a young age. However, not including class teachers and pupils in the study could be considered a shortcoming, as their experiences and descriptions could have provided a fuller picture of the educational situation.

What is important to point out is that all three informants represented a relatively positive stance on the practice of intensive training, and that interviewing other agents with more critical views could have brought attention to other themes. However, as will be demonstrated, the experiences were not only positive as the informants also questioned important aspects of the practices. As is also evident, analyzing only three interviews with selected agents, the main interest of this research is explorative, where the aim is to find themes and concerns that might be of interest to follow up in further research focusing on other contexts.

The interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes, were transcribed fully verbatim. They were semi-structured and, together, they addressed how intensive training was introduced at the school, the follow-up at the local authority level, the role of the mapping tests, the content of and participants in the intensive training courses, communication with parents, pupils’ experiences of mapping tests and courses, how the work was organized at the school, prioritization/deprioritization, and the relation between intensive training pupils and their peer groups. Not all of the informants had relevant information on all of the issues, but when considered together, they provided information on all of the aspects.

The data were first analyzed through a classification process to describe power relations between different categories (state/local authority-school, principal-teachers, intensive training teacher-class teacher, intensive training pupils-peer pupils, school-home, prioritized-deprioritized knowledge/pedagogy). Furthermore, the data were analyzed through framing to describe control over selection, pacing, criteria, and hierarchy. The material was centered around the following themes: perceptions of the legitimacy of the mapping tests, the role of mapping tests in framing communication at the school, the specialization of tasks and responsibility at the school, standardization of the “normal” pupil and legitimizing prioritization/deprioritization, and the collaboration between school and home.

**Results**

*Perceptions of the legitimacy of the mapping tests*

The mapping tests in reading, both digital and adaptive, have four parts. For first grade pupils, the test consists of vocabulary, reading of words, reading of sentences, and spelling. For third grade pupils, the four parts of the test are reading of words, vocabulary, reading of text, and spelling. The reason for choosing to test these areas is that they are regarded as the basis of reading comprehension and as the best predictors
of difficulties in reading comprehension in higher grades (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022).

The informants differed in relation to how legitimate they found the mapping tests to be and thus what role they felt that the tests can/should play in setting the premises for communication at the school. The principal explained that she put great emphasis on the mapping tests, and that they represented important premises for selection of content, pacing, and criteria. She trusted the mapping tests in terms of providing legitimate and relevant measures and said, “There is no good reason to have many pupils below the critical limit.” She set high ambitions for the pupils and pointed to the problem that some of the teachers had too low expectations on their behalf. This was important, as she regarded high expectations to be a precondition for the pupils’ performances: “We know that the expectations we have on the pupils’ behalf are important.”

However, although she put great emphasis on the mapping tests, she stated that other knowledge also needs to be considered in relation to the results when discussing their validity, as a pupil could be having a bad day, for example. She found it important that all children took both the mapping tests and the national tests, and found the discussion about taking children out of testing to avoid difficult feelings to be more of a concern for the adults:

Because I want all the pupils to participate [to find out] which pupils can’t read Norwegian and English and have trouble with mathematics. Most pupils should learn this, so they all should be tested. Feeling of failure. I think that’s kind of an adult thing [to worry about]. That it’s so terrible to sit and...But it’s up to us how we introduce the tests.

The intensive training teacher used the mapping tests in both the first and third grades to assess pupils’ reading, but she had a more problematizing view on their legitimacy in terms of pacing and criteria. She pointed out that it was problematic to rely on the results because they may reflect different aspects/causes. One of them is related to “maturity”: “I don’t think they are conclusive because age often works in favor of the pupils.” The question is, therefore, according to her, whether it is useful to emphasize these results in the first place. At the same time, she experienced that the expectations were unrealistically high for some pupils, and that they did not take individual variations into consideration:

I have trouble with the norm, because from experience I know that the maturity level in the first grade is likely between three and nine years of age. But they wouldn’t listen to us when we said that the six-year-old children should not start school. Because there’s pressure. Learning pressure. How long can a child be him/herself? I think some of the expectations are meaningless.

Additionally, she points out, as does the principal, that the results need to be taken into consideration with other knowledge about the pupil. She has, therefore, made her own tests to evaluate the pupils’ reading that she uses in addition to the mapping
tests. This is also due to the fact that she finds that the mapping tests are contributing to stress and creating anxiety for some pupils:

The mapping tests may create difficult feelings in the first place, as they are often about pacing, taking time. There are pupils who are stressed, some manage them well, and some manage them very poorly. Regardless of the child experiencing anxiety, [it is mandatory for all to] take the test anyway. We’re pretty strict about that. That’s the code at this school: Here are the demands, this is what is expected.

The mother was positive to the use of the tests to map the children. However, she also problematized the use of standardized testing of her child due to too high expectations of pacing. In referring to the national tests, which her child had recently taken, she explained how she instructed her child to “just guess at the answers,” thereby potentially affecting the results. She explained that this was “because she had no chance of reading that text [and] at the recent parent/teacher meeting with the teacher, we were told that she is at the lowest level in Norwegian, English and mathematics.” Thus, she expressed an ambiguity in relation to the use of standardized tests, as they were positive in revealing the difficulties her daughter was experiencing, but, at the same time, not necessarily suitable for measuring her child’s competence.

Furthermore, the mother also questioned whether there might be something wrong with the system, in either the framing of the selection or the framing of the criteria, when so many pupils needed intensive training. She experienced that one of the intensive reading courses was full, so more courses had to be provided to find a place for her daughter:

If that many pupils need reading and mathematics courses, then one should consider whether something has to be done about the way they teach reading, that’s what I think. I’ve been thinking that the whole time. If there are that many who need to take reading courses, then there are too many. Do you follow the logic?

In other words, whereas the principal found that the tests were valid and reliable measures in setting the premises for pedagogical practices, both the teacher and the mother expressed ambivalence and questioned the legitimacy of the tests, especially in terms of how the pacing and criteria were not sensitive enough to the diversity of the pupils.

The role of mapping tests in framing communication at the school

The mapping tests and intensive training were reported to form part of the communication between agents in the school in different ways. The principal reported that the mapping tests and intensive training were given little attention by the local authority, and that it was up to the school to decide what to focus on and how. The principals were asked what they did with the results, but there was no control or follow-up from the local education authority on this matter. The principal said, “There’s a lot of trust in the system, the school owner does not have a very active role [and] it would be quite fair for it to be followed up more closely, really.”
That the tests received little attention at the municipal level did not seem to influence the priorities of the principal. She stated that the tests represented important criteria for the framing of the school’s work. The results of different classes on both the mapping tests and the national tests were presented at the general meeting, and she said that she “nags the teachers that they have to work systematically.” The results in all the classes were also presented and discussed at different class-teacher meetings and by committees at the school. The tests impacted the pacing expectations and formed important evaluation criteria for the pedagogical work. The principal said that she set high and increasing result ambitions: “I see no good reason why the results at this school shouldn’t be much the same every year, and actually a bit better every year.” The principal expected the teachers to work harder, setting higher expectations for their pupils and working more systematically to improve the results in the process, focusing on “what worked and why, and what can be done differently and how.” “We try to work systematically, so now we have made an overview of the content in our general meetings and we remind them about the plans: Remember three times in the semester: mapping and evaluation of efforts.”

She saw no good excuses for having low results or for the results to change over time, although she stated, at the same time, that she did not want the focus on results to create an atmosphere of fear among the teachers. That the result ambitions at this school were high was also emphasized by the intensive training teacher: “There’s high pressure on learning [generally], and I guess we are one of the schools that have put pretty high pressure on learning on the pupils.” In other words, even though the local authority placed little importance on the mapping test results in the follow-up of the schools, the tests still formed important premises at the school in terms of selection of content, pacing, and criteria for pedagogical work, as well as the instructive leader role.

Specialization of tasks and responsibility at the school
The mapping test results contributed to a specialization of tasks at the school, leading to a stronger classification between agents. This school had intensive training teachers with a special responsibility for providing intensive training in reading in small groups that are taken out of the class. The intensive training teachers had a high degree of competence in these areas and, according to the principal, this arrangement was chosen for that reason. She added that giving someone a clear responsibility also ensured the prioritization of intensive training in their daily work. But most importantly, she regarded the intensive training courses as a way of working systematically on basic skills:

Generally, doing things systematically is the great challenge. [Teachers say:] “But I have tried this, and this and this.” [Then I say:] “But you haven’t tried systematically enough! You’ve jumped from one thing to the next and then moved on. For fourteen days you should try this. One thing! Then it should be evaluated.” So that’s our job as leaders: nagging about this. And that’s what’s so good about the intensive courses, how they are. It’s a systematic [way of working], it comes from the outside and in.
However, the relation and communication between the intensive training teacher and class teachers is not always strongly classified; an important part of the collaboration is the mapping of the pupils, identifying who needs intensive training. The intensive training teacher expressed that, apart from this collaboration, she sometimes felt alone with the responsibility for the pupils receiving intensive training as she normally did not have any contact with the teachers in the pupils’ ordinary classes. This made her wonder how the intensive training courses really worked:

I have some pupils now. They have repeatedly been coming to my courses over the years. Then, they have to have a break from these courses from time to time. And it’s really when they come back to the classroom that the effect will show. It doesn’t show here [in the intensive training courses] so much [because] I function as a support for the pupil the whole time. And then they go back to the classroom. Then the class teacher is the one who decides whether we have succeeded or not, that’s what I feel. If they notice a difference. But I think I can say, hand on heart, that all pupils improve their reading from working with me. I think so. But whether this is due to what I do or maturity? Because how is the training followed up in the classroom? I don’t know. Do the pupils really improve their reading?

In other words, the intensive training teacher expressed that the specialization of the teaching of reading might be a problem as she was unsure of how it relates to and communicates with what is going on in the ordinary classroom teaching.

The mother, on the other hand, stated that she had experienced good follow-up from the intensive training teacher and expressed that she was very confident that this teacher knew what was best for her child. She found that the follow-up became almost personal, and that her child was given adjusted reading material and rewards to encourage her in her work. Thus, her child’s needs were clearly influencing the teaching. However, while her child had attended reading courses several times over the years, according to her, the problem had yet to be solved.

Thus, summing up, we see that the intensive training courses were legitimized as a specialized mode of making reading work more systematically, at the same time as the intensive training teacher questioned whether the specialization of this work contributed to improving pupils’ learning once they were back in class. Some of the pupils attended courses repeatedly and experienced that, in spite of the intensive training, they still could not keep up with the pacing expectations, whereas others improved their reading enough to follow the ordinary class, supposedly due to maturity or the intensive courses.

**Standardizing the “normal” pupil and legitimizing prioritization/deprioritization**

The mapping tests contributed to classifying the pupils in different categories, or identities. The principal explained that they distinguished between “ordinary pupils,” receiving teaching in the class, “gray-zone pupils,” receiving intensive training courses, and “special-education pupils” with individual rights. The mapping tests played an
important role in this categorization and for setting the priorities between them, and they also communicated to the parents what the school considered to be “normal.” The mother said:

I think it was related to the mapping tests in the first grade. It was massive, and that she [her daughter] was supposedly far behind. It sounded like she had a developmental disability. So that first conversation [with the school] was kind of provoking. The kid had just started school, but that’s what we were told.

The principal stated that the intensive training was highly prioritized at the school and that this led to other things being deprioritized. As stated above, literacy results were prioritized in the general meetings and class-teacher meetings and by commit-tees at the school, and also prioritized economically, by having teachers with special responsibility for these intensive training courses. She explained that these priorities came at the cost of not fulfilling the “standard for group size” (Education Act, 1998, Section 14–1) and the provision relating to special education (Education Act, 1998, Section 5–1). The reasons or criteria for prioritizing intensive training over special education were based on research, she stated:

Intensive courses are one of the things we do know help. Special education is also important, but we have little research on that. There is not much research evidence telling us that the special education works very well. But intensive courses, reading courses give good results, at least in the beginning.

Bearing this in mind, the mapping tests affected the prioritization of pupils, where those with individual rights to special education were losing priority compared to the gray-zone pupils, and where these choices were legitimized by referring to the evidence of efficiency.

The intensive training was strongly framed in terms of selection. The principal reported that it was unrealistic to prioritize different efforts at the same time: “You have to choose something to have focus on, prioritize, follow up.” She stated that pupils might struggle with different things, also socially, but while they had different struggles, “the basic skills come first [because] they are dependent on using them in everything they will be doing.” However, she also reflected on how this represented a narrow focus on early intervention, “because sometimes, when your only tool is a hammer, then everything becomes a nail. So that’s a risk. Here we have an intensive course, and we hammer everyone with that.” She added, “but the school also prioritizes their work on the learning environment.”

For the reading courses, an important point was that the pupils who received intensive training were not taken out of the Norwegian classes but were given more Norwegian teaching through the intensive training. This means there was a narrowing of the curriculum for these pupils, which, according to both the teacher and the mother, typically affected religion and science. The teacher stated that they tried (although not always successfully) to avoid taking the pupils out of practical-esthetic subjects because they regarded these subjects as important for them. The amount
of time prioritized for the intensive courses was described as typically lasting 8–10 weeks (one course in the autumn, and one in the spring), with one full teaching hour three times a week in the second, third and fourth grades. The same applied to the mathematics courses. Some pupils attended both reading and mathematics intensive courses, sometimes leading to an overlap between them. This meant that some children were out of class to receive more reading and mathematics help up to 40 weeks per year. And some children attended intensive training courses repeatedly. According to the intensive training teacher, the influence of the pupil was limited as the approach in the intensive training courses typically treated the basics in reading:

We go through all the letters, they read for me letter by letter, I work with decoding. I read the sound, and the pupils write the letter. I read a word, then they say what comes first, what comes in the middle, what comes last. Then they get an easy text to read.

In other words, some of the gray-zone pupils were out of class on a regular basis throughout the year, receiving a visible pedagogy addressing the technical aspects of reading, strongly classified from other educational practices.

Even though the mother had some trouble with the testing and how it contributed to a labelling of the child against a norm scale, she was less concerned about whether being out of class was contributing to stigmatization. She regarded the child being given help as more important:

I think it’s ok. I think there will always be stigmatization in one way or another. […] The peers can be so merciless, they can always come up with stuff, and here [at this school] so many are taken out of the class, they have so many groups, so I think it’s fine just to go along with it with some pride.

The teacher was not concerned that the intensive training might contribute to stigmatizing some pupils, although she found that it was a common concern among parents. She explained how she worked to make the intensive courses attractive to the pupils through the use of play and by doing other things than what they did in class, trying to motivate them:

The parents think that it’s great that we provide intensive reading courses, but they don’t think it’s great that we take the pupil out of the class. The pupils think it’s ok. I think many of them actually think it’s ok because their ability to concentrate might not be that good, they don’t understand all that is going on in the classroom, lag behind. So, being in a small group is kind of cozy, having a good environment, doing physical things also.

Thus, we see that the results from the mapping tests played a role in categorizing pupils in relation to different sections of the Norwegian Education Act (1998, Sections 1–3, 1–4, and 5–1) and the priority between them, and that this affected their relations in terms of space and learning experiences, where the gray-zone pupils worked with a narrower curriculum separated from the class on a regular basis.
Intensive training and collaboration between school and home

Being identified as a gray-zone pupil also affected the relation between school and home. The school principal stated that there was sometimes a mismatch between what the school prioritized and what the parents were concerned about: “Generally, parents are not that concerned about results. They are most concerned about their children’s well-being, is my impression. Maybe they demonstrate too little concern about the academic aspect. That’s what we discuss with the parents: Your child’s results.”

The intensive training teacher invited the parents of all the gray-zone pupils to a meeting to talk about the intensive training courses. There she “called a spade a spade” and told them that reading was very difficult for their child, and that the school wanted to “lift” their reading skills. They also specifically classified the intensive courses as different from special education, “so there is nothing to be stressed about.” She said that the intensive reading courses also involved the parents in the sense that the pupils got homework in reading, but just a small piece of reading material. However, over time, the intensive training teacher discovered that homework was very difficult for these families. “Many of them have been sitting with reading work for hours, and it has been a very negative experience.” So now she had decided to reduce the amount of homework because she was unsure whether it had any effect on the children’s learning. She stated that homework in general was something many pupils struggled with, “and we have a lot of homework at this school.” That the intensive training involved the families through homework was found to be a problem by the mother:

Homework, that is often a war zone! What was happening was that we were given additional homework because she was struggling. This was in addition to the ordinary homework which we also had to do. Then she came home with this pile, and the amount was pretty … But then she got a new teacher who said: “Hello! This isn’t how it should be! Homework shouldn’t last for two hours with screaming, yelling, and failing, and no one managing anything, and everyone is frustrated.”

Thus, we see that the mapping tests and intensive training affected the relation between school and home in terms of including the home in the effort to increase the pacing of learning. However, over time, and depending on the teacher, some teachers saw that the pressure and work for the children and families could become too hard and adjusted the work more in line with their needs.

Summary

Summing up the analysis of how power and control work in the recontextualization of the legislation on intensive training into a pedagogical practice in reading, we see that the mapping tests set important premises for both the standardization of expectations and for efforts to increase the pacing for all pupils. Whereas the principal found it important to have high and increasing result expectations at the school, both the intensive training teacher and the mother questioned whether the pacing was
adapted to the diversity in the group of pupils, and felt that unrealistic pacing expectations may actually create problems. The principal’s insistence on the importance of attaining good results led to strongly framed practices where pupils were given more of what they were not mastering and worked with a narrower curriculum. Despite the principal’s trust in this practice being evidence-based, both the intensive training teacher and the mother felt unsure about whether the intensive courses actually improved the learning for all the pupils.

The high and standardized pacing expectations have an important impact on the gray-zone pupils’ school life from a very young age. They are put into test situations where they experience failure, and some experience a high level of stress and anxiety in these situations. The results have important consequences for their identity at the school and their relations to the peer group in time, space, and learning experiences. Furthermore, the high expectations contribute to stress and conflict in the family. Even though the intentions are good, there are obvious problems related to this practice according to the intensive training teacher and the mother. In sum, we see that the recognition rules for early intervention and intensive training are strongly classified as a narrow focus on basic skills separated from other agents, discourses, and practices at the school, whereas the realization rules for the intensive training are clearly anchored in a visible pedagogy, being strongly framed in the selection, pacing, and criteria of what counts as legitimate pedagogical priorities. The relations between principal and teachers in the school were described as hierarchical and instructive, where high result ambitions for basic skills set important premises for what counted as legitimate communication between the agents.

Discussion

As demonstrated above, the intensive training at this school reinforced the neoliberal discourse through a narrow focus on learning standardized basic skills, and with little attention being given to the all-around child, the wider learning context, or how it may affect the child’s self-perception and position in the peer community. Bearing this in mind, it can be related to an increasing trend in neoliberal policies towards individualization at the cost of the social community (cf. Bjordal & Haugen, 2021). This recontextualization is, however, contradictory. While the focus on individuality is increased through tighter control over each pupil’s learning outcome and through legislations for increasing the pacing of each pupil’s learning, the strength of individual rights is weakened at the same time, as seen through the deprioritization of special education. Whether similar priorities are found in other municipalities and schools is an interesting issue to follow up in further research.

As educational reforms and curricula are always the result of compromises and pulling in different directions, the interesting aspect is what wins in the clash between conflicting values. According to Bernstein (2000), the key to pedagogical practice is continuous evaluation, and evaluation condenses the meaning or purpose of the
discourse. This implies that the combination of state evaluative tools (PISA, national tests and mapping tests) with control over the school’s practices through rules and legislation relating to early intervention and intensive training (Education Act, 1998, Section 1–4) may represent an effective way to communicate to the schools what the state considers to be especially important and, in this way, influence school priorities and practices without specifically instructing the schools. According to this, it should not be a surprise that the teaching in early years education in Norway has become more teacher-centered, that the children have less time for play, and that a large majority of the schools have very high expectations, even higher than the goals stated in the curriculum, when it comes to the reading skills of the youngest pupils (Bjørnestad et al., 2022). Thus, it might be that the strongly classified recognition rules and strongly framed realization rules of the intensive training explored here could represent a typical example of how schools recontextualize the political intentions behind early intervention (see also Bjordal & Haugen, 2021). However, more research across municipalities and schools is needed to explore this further.

In 1997, the age for starting school was lowered from seven to six. Djupedal (2022) discovered that one more “year” was added by increasing the number of hours in school for the first four grades. More than half of the additional hours have been dedicated to Norwegian-language teaching and mathematics. This means that all early-education pupils receive much more training in Norwegian than was the case before 1997. As has been demonstrated here, the gray-zone pupils spend even more time on learning reading skills both at school and at home. These new priorities and efforts notwithstanding, there is still a political concern that many pupils are not meeting the pacing expectations and that there is more inequality (Ministry of Education and Research, 2024). Political solutions aimed at improving educational results and inequalities are often centered on increasing centralized control through the use of evaluative tools and legislation, (see, for example, Eide & Haugen, 2022; Haugen, 2010; Ministry of Education and Research, 2024, 2019–2020, 2006–2007). This increasing state control over the recontextualizing field could contribute to explaining expanding use of visible pedagogies in Norwegian schools (see Bjordal & Haugen, 2021; Bjørnestad et al., 2022; Haugen, 2019). How the change in values from invisible to visible (and increasingly level-based) pedagogies may impact the relations between pupils from different social classes, and whether educational efficiency and equality will improve, remain to be seen.

Author biography

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