School Leaders’ Autonomy in Public and Private School Contexts: Blurring Policy Requirements

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ABSTRACT
This study responds to calls for more nuanced research on school actors’ autonomy in contexts characterized by multiple governance configurations. It investigates school leaders’ autonomy when enacting policy requirements in public and private school contexts, with Norway as an example. The study draws on qualitative data from eight leaders in diverse school contexts, revealing how the increased standardization of competence and assessment requirements challenges school leaders’ autonomy in private and public schools. Using the idea of gap management (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017), we find that there is little overall difference between state-funded private schools and traditional public schools. However, we did find variation in how standardization challenges school leaders’ autonomy. The variation in school leaders’ autonomy seems to lie within the visions of the schools and school leaders.

Keywords: education policy, school leaders, autonomy, standardization

Introduction
Recent research has emphasized that autonomy is becoming increasingly central in educational policy trends, in relation to results-based accountability (Verger et al., 2019). This study responds to calls for more nuanced research on school actors’

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autonomy in contexts characterized by multiple governance configurations (Finnigan, 2007; Wermke et al., 2018). During the last few years, research has repeatedly shown the complexity of autonomy in practice, and how its influence varies according to actors’ perspectives, schools’ cultural characteristics, and modes of control (Cheng et al., 2016; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Salokangas & Wermke, 2020). Autonomy has often been highlighted as important for teachers’ professionalism and work (Mausethagen, 2013; Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). To a lesser degree, the autonomy of school leaders has recently received attention in educational research (see Nordholm et al., 2022; Wermke et al., 2022). With regard to leadership autonomy, research has indicated positive correlations among leadership autonomy, strategic decision-making, and student performance (see Fuchs & Wößmann, 2008), as well as between increased autonomy and curricular changes that improve student results (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013). Often, educational leaders must work with hybrid governance systems characterized by a hierarchical political model with top-down decision-making, and a bureaucratic model for municipality administration (Moos et al., 2016). Different local governance systems have different impacts on a school leader’s autonomy, and studies have shown that perceived autonomy can differ within a single municipality (Saarivirta & Kumpulainen, 2016). More empirical research on school leaders’ autonomy has been called for, for example, to conceptualize leadership’s cultural autonomy in relation to control (Cheng et al., 2016; Nordholm et al., 2021). Building on previous studies and with the aim of furthering these discussions, this article explores Norwegian school leaders’ autonomy in various school contexts, with an emphasis on policy requirements and how school leaders handle, interpret, understand, and enact such requirements in public and private school contexts.

Specifically, this study focuses on assessment and continuing professional development (hereafter CPD), as perceived, interpreted, and enacted by school leaders in different school contexts, and how this affects these leaders’ autonomy, with the Norwegian setting as an example. The study includes an analysis of the data in relation to what might be expected based on related research. An emphasis on assessment policy requirements was chosen as a focal point for the study, as assessment has long been high on the policy agenda, as can be seen through varied regulations and guidance related to school practices (Mølstad & Prøitz, 2018; Smith, 2016). CPD was chosen as the other policy requirement due to emphasis on and expectations for schools and teachers to take part in CPD over the last decade. These policy requirements affect schools by redefining educational quality, and the required qualifications, and are therefore relevant focuses for a study of school leadership autonomy.

The current study
The Norwegian educational system is especially interesting, since it exemplifies an ongoing tension between policies of differentiation (understood here as policies aiming at pedagogical diversification) and standardization, with regard to the regulation of public and private schools (Dieude & Prøitz, 2021). The differentiated demands reflected in the policy framework regulating private schooling emphasize that private
schools are to be pedagogical alternatives, which supplement public schools in order to be eligible for funding and meet the needs of a diverse student population (Dieudé, 2021; Volckmar, 2018). A report from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2011) notes that, like public schools, private schools are held accountable to national and municipal governing bodies for their assessment practices. A major challenge for leaders in private schools is showing evidence of success (to the municipality, the state, the private school owner, and parents) in national assessments, while following their own curricula with diverse learning outcomes that characterize their specific pedagogical nature (McTighe, 2004).

The aim of this study is to explore how school leaders in various school contexts perceive, interpret, and enact autonomy under government requirements for standardization and differentiation. To guide the analysis, we ask the following research question: How do school leaders in public and private school contexts perceive, interpret, and enact similar policy requirements? To examine this research question, this study draws on interviews with eight school leaders in different contexts, as well as notes, informal meetings, and local school documents.

Context of the study
Norwegian municipalities are obliged to provide education in accordance with the Norwegian Education Act, the national curriculum, and national assessment regulations for both private (state-funded) and public schools. Private schools are also required to follow the regulations of the Education Act, but they have more autonomy as to whether to follow the national curriculum. However, they must ensure an equally good education. Historically, in the area of assessment, governments in the Nordic countries have been inclined to reduce and prohibit formal grading. Nevertheless, since the beginning of 2000, several measures have been implemented to strengthen evaluation and assessment in the education sector. Similarly, attempts have been made to strengthen the quality of school actors by raising initial qualification standards. Two main types of CPD available are formal courses (e.g., master’s degree) and informal courses which are not accredited.

Since 2009, Norwegian universities have offered national educational leadership programs, a process that was accelerated by an OECD comparative study during the period 2006-2008, showing that Norway was the only country in the study not to have clear requirements for school leaders’ formal education (Møller, 2016). In addition, several reforms have been implemented to ensure the quality and national standardization of education (e.g., new national teacher education frameworks). In most cases, these frameworks are legitimized based on OECD standards (Smeplass & Leiulfsrud, 2022). To further enhance quality and performance in education, and to inform educational authorities on different levels, comprehensive government projects were initiated, such as the introduction of a quality evaluation system in 2005, and the promotion of formative assessments (Helgøy et al., 2007; Tveit, 2014). Assessments in public schools are regulated by the national curriculum.
In this study, the focus is on national policy requirements implemented by school leaders in both private and public schools, such as Assessment for Learning (AfL), the quality assurance framework, and CPD. These policy tools represent more traditional ways of governing (through laws and funding), as well as softer approaches, such as pedagogical and ideational governing through guidance material and education (see Ansell & Torfing, 2016).

Standardization of assessment and CPD in Norway

An educational policy shift has occurred in Norway, from the use of input-oriented policy instruments to a more output-oriented policy for governing and control purposes. This reflects changes in the control of educational outputs through national curricula, quality control, assessments, standardized testing, and evaluations, encouraging the control of school actors’ performance (Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). Greater emphasis has been placed on assessment, partly through the introduction of nationally conducted tests, but also through revisions of assessment regulations that emphasize students’ rights to formative assessments and the AfL program (Mølstad & Prøitz, 2018; Prøitz, 2015). In particular, AfL, with its prescribed principles, is expected to be enacted in all schools to enhance student learning and improve assessment practices, as it is regulated in the Education Act (Hopfenbeck et al., 2015). Historically, formal assessment has been viewed with skepticism in Norway (Lysne, 2006). Today however, the country seems to have an increased focus on tests and data use (Mausethagen et al., 2018), which has been legitimated through international developments in the EU and the OECD (Pettersson et al., 2017), as well as national reforms and recent developments in performance-based accountability. These types of policy instruments have been adopted as ways to ensure equity and quality standards, indicating a distinctive Norwegian approach to performance-based accountability, which emphasizes control of school actors through bureaucratic regulation (Camphuijsen et al., 2020).

In parallel with assessment developments, another form of governing, reflected in Norwegian policy developments, is the standards for teachers’ and school leaders’ educational qualifications across different sectors (public and private) and levels (primary, secondary, and higher education). School leaders have been emphasized in political documents as being important for the introduction and implementation of the comprehensive 2006 educational reform (Prøitz et al., 2019). This reform was accompanied by changes to school leaders’ responsibilities and tasks, as well as comprehensive competence-building measures aimed specifically at school leaders, such as rector schooling (Karseth et al., 2013; Møller, 2009). In addition, a growing number of reforms have been introduced to improve teacher education and teacher quality, and ensure the national standardization of education (Smeplass & Leiuflsrudd, 2022). The standardization strategies examined in this paper, defined as intended measures toward uniformity and shared standards (Waldow, 2012), focus on regulating policies amended by the parliament and government between 2003–2015, as these were the ruling regulations at the time of data collection.
Previous research

Autonomy is a multidimensional phenomenon that can change according to school governance structures and contexts (Salokangas & Wermke, 2020; Wermke & Forsberg, 2017). In this regard, private schools are usually associated with higher levels of school leader influence and autonomy, because they are not subject to the same regulations as public schools (Chapman & Salokangas, 2012; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Other examples of non-public schools, such as charter schools or English academies, are often assumed to have more freedom, since they are deregulated and operate as “loosely coupled” bureaucracies (Oberfield, 2016; Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). School leaders who respond to requirements from multi-level governance are affected by the degree of school control (Finnigan, 2007; Gawlik, 2008). In the Swedish context, for instance, which has a higher proportion of independent schools than Norway but similar governance, there has been greater control over school leaders’ work in relation to national standards (Rönnberg, 2012).

Until recently, few but growing numbers of studies have investigated the similarities and differences between school leaders in public and independent schools, with regard to how they depict their degree of autonomy (Nordholm et al., 2021). Empirical studies on this topic have presented the role of school leaders’ decision-making in public and private education, encouraging theoretical debates about their autonomy (Gawlik, 2008; Jorgenson, 2010; Nordholm et al., 2021, 2022). These studies, which are mostly from Sweden and the US, reach similar conclusions based on surveys and, to some extent, qualitative data. The findings indicate slightly higher degrees of autonomy in private school contexts, although similar degrees of central influence affect the autonomy of both public and private school leaders. When focusing on charter and traditional school leaders’ perceptions of autonomy, Gawlik (2008) found greater principal autonomy in private (charter) schools, where principals enjoy greater degrees of freedom, for instance, with regard to innovating and tailoring programs to students’ needs. However, state influence is negatively related to school leaders’ autonomy in both contexts, and principals perceive an increase in accountability combined with unclear messages.

The positive role of districts in influencing principals seems to balance the negative effects of central standardization (Gawlik, 2008). In Sweden, recent studies (Nordholm et al., 2021, 2022) have examined how school leaders make sense of the relationship between autonomy and control in different contexts. Nordholm et al. (2021), drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, showed increased levels of perceived autonomy for school leaders, as well as increased accountability in both public and independent schools. Leaders in independent schools seem to experience slightly more autonomy, based on clearer assignments regarding the pedagogical direction of the school and school development work. As a result, school leaders in hybrid public–private contexts of governance (charter, independent, and public) seem to diverge from public school contexts, in that they have slightly higher degrees of autonomy to control the pedagogical orientation and direction of their schools. However, several
studies have shown that greater autonomy is also accompanied by greater control through internal and national accountability requirements (Montelius et al., 2022; Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). Furthermore, several authors have indicated a need for more nuanced discussions on the politics of the public–private by removing a loaded dichotomy (Brighouse, 2004; Mikhaylova, 2022). Building on these studies, the current article intends to further the discussion of school leaders’ perceptions of autonomy and control in various contexts in the face of increased accountability demands.

**Policy as a social practice and instrument approach**

This study employs a sociocultural practice approach to policy that reframes the static conceptualization of policy texts, by looking at the policy process as a complex set of interdependent sociocultural envisioned and enacted practices (Levinson et al., 2009; Schulte, 2018). Such a definition implies that policy presupposes a normative view of how things should be. Thus, policy defines reality, guides behavior, and can (eventually) distribute resources accordingly (Levinson et al., 2009). In line with the conceptualization of policy as a social practice of power, this study conceives policy instruments as carriers of values, organizing the relationship between the governing and the governed (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007). These policy instruments include a certain understanding of who school actors are and what roles they play, as well as their autonomy and accountability. Therefore, studying centrally directed standardization strategies, and how school leaders enact them, sheds light on their positioning between policy objectives from above and policy enactment from below.

**School leaders’ autonomy through the gap management dimension**

To illuminate and operationalize the impact of policy instruments on school leaders and their autonomy, we focus on how school leaders perceive, interpret, and enact regulations emphasizing assessment and CPD standards. School leaders’ policy interpretation is argued to be characterized by complex political and power relations, in which different actors influence each other to advance their own interests or agendas (Spillane et al., 2002). While school leaders are not first-line practitioners and must relate to their teachers, their role is distinctive due to the control and power they have over elements of their work and the school organizational overview (Gawlick, 2008). It follows that school leaders’ autonomy, which is inextricably linked to the ways that education has historically and socially been organized, can be understood as the capacity for decision-making and how decisions are controlled (Wermke et al., 2018). Similarly, Wohlstetter et al. (1995) defined autonomy in the context of school policies as independence and self-determination in a school’s external and internal relations.

However, recent studies have concluded that research on school leaders’ autonomy should pay more attention to aspects of cultural autonomy and control (Cheng et al., 2016; Nordholm et al., 2021). In line with Ball et al. (2012), this study focuses on the cultural aspects of schools, considering the complexity of their institutional environments in which policies are perceived, interpreted, and enacted. Moreover, in contexts
where high autonomy and greater accountability have traditionally been granted to school actors through licensing, the concept of a gap manager is relevant to discussing school leaders’ autonomy further. In this view, the role of school leaders often lies between guaranteeing centralized requirements based on standards and goals and ensuring local school freedom (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017). In this sense, gap management refers to governance strategies aimed at narrowing the gap between expected results, and what is measured by important international actors (Sivesind & Skedsmo, 2020). The concept of gap management serves as an important analytical lens to identify potential gaps between standardization pressures related to policy requirements for assessment and CPD, and differentiation through schools’ freedom to ensure their pedagogical ambition. In particular, the introduction of performance-based accountability instruments has consequences for school leaders accountable for implementing a curriculum which was not developed locally (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017). Therefore, in the contexts of increasing accountability, gap management is a new function defined by addressing school mandates (bildung, pedagogical freedom) and state-based administrative requirements. This requires school leaders to expand their positioning, as both controlling and controlled agents. Within this analytical framework, school leaders are seen to succeed if they manage the gap between the external expectations of schooling and developing strategies to respond to local challenges of their school (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017).

**Methods**

The data used in this article are part of a larger research project on changes in educational policy regarding learning outcomes and assessment in schools (Prøitz, 2016). School leaders from five schools (three public schools and two private schools) were selected based on differences in geographical location (rural, rural/urban, and urban), student population, assessment practices, governance, and funding. Table 1 contains further information about the participants, including to which schools they belonged. Three principals belong to three different public schools, while two belong to two different private schools. Other school management actors are from one public school and two private schools. The letters that appear before each participant represent how they will be referred to later in the text (i.e., School Leader D).

**Table 1: Overview of the participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL GOVERNANCE</th>
<th>PRINCIPALS</th>
<th>OTHER SCHOOL MANAGEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PUBLIC</td>
<td>(A) Principal at public school North</td>
<td>(F) Inspector at public school West</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(B) Principal at public school East</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(C) Principal at public school West</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIVATE</td>
<td>(D) Principal at Waldorf school</td>
<td>(G) Previous principal at Waldorf school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(E) Principal at IB school</td>
<td>(I) Curriculum coordinator at IB school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7
We used a maximum variation sampling strategy (Larsson, 2009) to ensure diversity relevant to the research question in the small sample of participants. The diversity of schools allowed us to employ gap management conceptualization for both public and private school contexts. In particular, the private schools we chose—the International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Waldorf schools—represent high variation in relation to their educational and ideological practices. This study investigates the perceptions, interpretations, and enactment of policy requirements through three cases that are similar in terms of being subject to the same national regulations, but differ along several dimensions regarding governance, curriculum content, and assessment practices. In the following section, the similarities and variations for each case are presented.

The three schools: Formal education of school leaders and requirements for assessment and teachers’ CPD

Waldorf school
Waldorf colleges and the Waldorf Federation are an organization of independent schools and instructors who follow Rudolf Steiner’s educational ideas. While these organizations offer courses for continuous development in leadership, at the time of the study only four higher institutions in Norway were recognized as leadership preparation program providers (Møller & Ottesen, 2011). The Norwegian Waldorf Federation politically and legally supports the work and conditions of Waldorf schools. For instance, it offers courses on developing Waldorf pedagogy, in line with national policy requirements (e.g., a decentralized competency development project), to teachers and school leaders. Since recent reforms, Waldorf pedagogical principles and traditions, such as the principle of adapted learning, have been built around a curriculum that follows a framework oriented toward learning outcomes and outputs in line with the curriculum framework for public schools (Mathisen, 2014). Waldorf schools do not use grades, apart from an overall achievement mark at the end of middle school. At the end of lower secondary school (10th grade), students receive a written graduation certificate with a final assessment grade, to ensure the possibility of admission to a public upper secondary school.

IB school
The IB offers educators and leaders certificates through a network of universities to implement and sustain IB programs at IB-certified schools. IB educator certificates are offered at universities all around the world. Although they are optional, the IB recognizes holders of these credentials as having fulfilled the professional development requirements related to the IB’s program. The international school in this study follows the IB Middle Years Programme (IBMYP), which is designed for the 11–16 age range, and has a heavy focus on teacher assessment (Hayden, 2006). At the end of the IBMYP, grades are aligned to match the national system, and students receive a competency certificate based on grades from upper secondary level.
1 (Vgt). Globally, the IBMYP is the least popular of the programs offered by the “IB Organization” (IBO). As a result, a new assessment model for the IBMYP has been implemented (a final, personal project externally validated by the IB) to increase the academic credibility of the IBMYP, and thus improve the school’s enrollment rate (Wright et al., 2016).

Public schools
The three public schools follow the same national assessment and CPD policies. However, they have different contextual characteristics. Public school North is a new lower secondary school in an urban area with a high percentage of pupils having a minority background. The school leader has been heavily involved in the planning of this new school (hiring teachers and general planning). Public school East is a longstanding school in a rural/urban area. The school includes both a primary and lower secondary school, and has its own introductory program for immigrant pupils. Public school West is a lower secondary school located in a rural area with a homogeneous population. The school leader and the teachers are innovative in their work, and the school has received national attention for its innovative work with feedback-based assessment, rather than grade-based.

Data collection
Data collection took place between 2017–2019 and included interviews with eight school leaders. The informants were recruited for holding or having held a management position in a school that has influence over teachers’ work (see Table 1). This study relied on in-depth interviews and notes from single meetings with each one of the school leaders, supplemented by documents produced on the macro and micro levels of the different schools, describing and defining which of their assessment and CPD practices affect school leaders (see Appendix 1). The meetings were used to present the study to the school leaders and were conducted before the interviews. They represented a sort of unstructured interview, where school leaders were free to bring up topics that they viewed as relevant in relation to the study. These meetings were helpful in adjusting the semi-structured interview guide. The collected school documents had limited circulation because they were institution specific, but they constituted a significant record on behalf of each institution, including detailed information on everyday practices and the schools’ values (Cohen et al., 2011). Examples of documents defining schools’ assessment practices are the Assessment Policy in the IB school, and the Parental Handbook in the Waldorf school. The interview guide for school leaders in management positions was divided into four major sections: the first section focused on leadership education and organizational tasks; the second section related to the use of policy documents and national guidelines; the third section investigated the organization’s work with curriculum and assessment; and the final section asked about relationships with the school owner and sponsors/networks (see Appendix 2).
Analysis
To analyze school leaders’ perception and enactment of policy requirements in various school contexts, we asked the following analytical question: How does gap management occur in public and private school contexts?

Positioned within a qualitative paradigm, we analyzed the data through organic and recursive coding processes, as well as through deep reflection on and engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After directly transcribing the interviews and meeting notes, the first inductive phase of the analysis was to familiarize ourselves with and reflect and focus on select aspects of meaning within the data. In this phase, the coding process of the interview materials was conducted descriptively to map the school leaders’ work. Here, we discovered a recurring pattern in the analysis: school leaders’ emphasis on what they perceived to be a source of tension between their internal schoolwork and national accountability demands. In the second phase, the analysis was conducted in dialogue with the policy instrument approach to identify how the policies were perceived to shape the actors’ work with assessment and CPD tools. According to the school leaders, the tensions uncovered in the first phase stem from policy initiatives for standardization, including learning assessments, formative assessments, national tests, and CPD for school leaders and teachers. Therefore, these became the themes representative of the findings, which further structured the analysis. When relying on a small-scale, in-depth qualitative study, there are some limitations as to how prevalent these categories can be in other contexts. However, the transferability of our findings can be discussed in terms of pattern recognition and context similarity (Larsson, 2009). In the following section, the findings are organized into three sections, one for each school type (the Waldorf school, the IB school, and the public schools).

Findings
Drawing on the idea of gap management (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017), we present the school leaders’ perceptions, interpretations, and enactment of policy requirements for the formal education of school leaders, assessment, and teachers’ CPD in the different private and public school contexts. In line with previous research (Nordholm et al., 2021), there is little overall difference between state-funded private schools and traditional public schools. However, we found variation in how the standardization of competence and assessment challenges school leaders’ autonomy.

Continuing Professional Development: Varied degrees of autonomy
The findings of this paper indicate that the perception, interpretation and enactment of similar standardization strategies regarding CPD affect school leaders’ autonomy differently in Waldorf schools than in public and IB schools. Public and IB school leaders perceive a similar capacity to manage the gap between state-based regulations and local school needs.
Because of the 2006 Knowledge Promotion Reform, Waldorf schools were required to establish a leadership structure, moving from a “flat” leadership structure to a managerial one. Since the reform’s implementation, all school leaders have been trained accordingly. According to School Leaders D and G, there have always been various management courses, but Waldorf schools did not historically have structures for management, so this was a significant change in the school’s pedagogical structure. Within this school, the transformation has been received mostly positively, though also with some degree of unease. According to the interviewees (D and G), the policy changes have helped the school move toward a new modernization phase. Thus, the characteristics of the role of school leadership are a recent development, in both personal leadership education and the organizational and cultural settings of the school. Furthermore, based on the accounts of School Leader D, it appears that participation in rector schooling led the principal to create a network with public school leaders, supporting collaboration in a positive way. This interviewee described how, as the leadership structure changed, school leaders were confronted with national requirements that challenged Waldorf’s previous school structure, which was flatter and more democratic.

Another example of ongoing standardization is the policy requirements for CPD, which aim to increase learning quality by requiring a set number of qualifying study points in certain school subjects (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015). School Leader D perceived the policy requirements to be difficult to manage in relation to the schools’ internal orientation. This interviewee seemed to be highly affected by these new measures. To some extent, the national requirements collide with Waldorf’s pedagogical ideas of teacher education and training. To bridge these national and internal requirements, the school leader receives help from the Waldorf organization to interpret and implement these changes, while staying true to Waldorf pedagogy. However, the interviewee admitted that the organization lacks the same capacity and manpower as the central agencies. Consequently, “We have to pick our battles, and it shows” (School Leader D). Moreover, the Waldorf school principal perceived discrepancies and ambiguity between the policy messages from the different governing bodies, and the scope of action for enacting the policy requirements for teachers’ CPD. The following quote exemplifies such a challenge: “I must relate to the municipality, to the county, and to the central management, and then it turns out that many of these ideas [CPD policies] that come from the various agencies around me are not consistent at all, and I must steer the course between these” (School Leader D). Therefore, Waldorf school leaders perceive the enactment of CPD policies as challenging.

In contrast to the Waldorf context, IB school leaders (E and I), perceived fewer challenges with the national CPD initiatives, which did not impact their autonomy on several levels. First, as an international school, it often happens that the school leader hires teachers with an international education background. To be approved by educational agencies and representatives, these teachers are required to conform to the national qualifications of teacher education (e.g., by having study points or a master’s
degree in their teaching subject/pedagogy). This process is not perceived as challenging (School Leader E). On the contrary, School Leader E felt supported by educational agencies with regard to ensuring the right qualifications so that teachers “could tick that box.” Second, the IB school leader did not undergo the same rector schooling process as the Waldorf school leader. This could be explained by the fact that, due to the unique nature of IB schools and the diversity of student and teacher populations in terms of language, culture, nationality, and religion, the IB has developed its own leadership development programs, which are recognized by central educational agencies. As members of a global community that strives “to develop inquiring, knowledgeable, and caring young people,” it is natural that IB school leaders, like their students, are required to have the qualities outlined in the IB Learner Profile (International Baccalaureate Organization, 2014). Moreover, the participants from the IB school (E and I) shared the Waldorf school leader’s perspective on the need to work with school boards on pedagogical development. It appears that private school boards are not sufficiently involved or visible in the schools’ pedagogical work.

Like the IB principal, the public school leaders did not emphasize the impact of CPD on their educational qualifications. Other aspects were considered to be more significant, such as actors and networks that contributed concretely to the school leader’s professional development. For instance, public School Leader North minimized the significance of CPD aimed at enhancing school leader competence, and claimed to value collaboration with school actors from the municipality, which supported and influenced their career:

I was able to participate the first year they started the program at XX University. ... It was a kind of a trial year where I did not have to write an assignment. I said that I could not bear to write the assignment in the spring. ... More importantly, I have also been very lucky with the municipal management because they gave me something to take with me later on. (School Leader North)

Similarly, public School Leader East mentioned the local government as an influential actor supporting their administrative work at school. However, with regard to pedagogical development, support from the schools’ municipalities was considered by all three public school leaders to be an area needing improvement. This support was highly welcomed, as it is perceived to be difficult to balance daily workloads and school development demands.

**Assessment policies: Similar impact on school leaders’ autonomy but different challenges**

Compared with CPD, assessment policies have a similar impact on school leaders’ autonomy. Particularly with regards to standardized assessment, school leaders from diverse contexts (public and private) perceive a gap between national tests and local school needs. However, school leaders in this study perceive the challenges of managing the gap between centralized policies and local school needs differently.
In general, national tests were perceived to be unsuitable for their educational environment and unimportant for school development work by all of the public school leaders who were interviewed. All four public school leaders viewed national tests as something they were required to do. However, while the school leaders had different reactions to whether they were personally affected by their school’s performance on national tests (stressed, disappointed, etc.), a commonality was the perception of accountability pressure from the municipality to continuously improve student performance. When asked about assessments, public School Leader West perceived assessment regulations to affect school practices by being time and resource consuming:

> When it comes to the final grade, it must be correct, it must. So, we spend time on that. Teachers set final achievement grades; we have discussions, both in the leader teams and collectively about the assessment regulations, because it (the grades) must be right. (School Leader West)

Not only time and resources, but also the importance of the reliability and accuracy of assessment practices were emphasized. In addition, when discussing assessments, School Leader C noted a lack of interest from the local administration in the school’s trialing non-graded assessment methods. Moreover, School Leader F explained that during meetings, the local authorities were more concerned with results than with improving assessment practices. This, in turn, seems to create tension between school leaders’ internal focus on school development, and local authorities’ requirements for accountability.

Adding to the complexity of interactions with governing bodies, IB School Leader E found local authorities to be skeptical of the IB school. However, this did not seem to be a real concern, since the interviewee explained that the school’s performance benefits the entire community. This implies that the IB school leader viewed national tests positively, since they represent a source of legitimation for the school within the community. The interviewee’s accounts are in line with common IB promotion strategies, in which IB students’ outstanding performance in most subjects in International School Assessment studies are advertised on IB websites and local media. However, School Leader E was critical of national tests, as they were perceived as representing a misleading way of measuring students’ achievement levels in math and English, because the IB has different curricula for those subjects.

A different story emerges when managing the gap between requirements for standardization and Waldorf’s pedagogical ideals of assessment. In fact, the Waldorf organization has applied for a dispensation from national tests (Stabel, 2016) every year without success (School Leader G). The Waldorf school leader shared the challenges this has created for the school, from facing shame and blame in the media, to parents’ ideological resistance (School Leader G). Despite these disagreements, particularly with regard to the participation of 5th graders in national testing, the Waldorf school leader explained that the results are incorporated into school practices, and used as an internal tool for school development (School Leader D).
In the case of both private schools, the curriculum offered is equally good but structurally different, and with different learning outcomes, which makes national tests inconsistent. However, School Leader E from the IB school claimed to be able to incorporate national accountability demands for learning outcomes into the school’s scope of action. In fact, despite belonging to a different educational system, the principal is able to take advantage of national assessments, as this quote shows: “We do national assessment tests; we do the math, the English, and the Norwegian. I think they are ridiculous. I find only the Norwegian one useful, because it shows how we are doing nationally in the mother tongue of the country” (School Leader E).

Not all central regulations contrast with Waldorf pedagogy. For example, School Leader D believed that formative assessment regulations and AfL align well with the school’s pedagogical orientation: “When the assessment regulations came, there was an outcry here. ‘How are we going to handle all this?’ But teachers did it, that’s what they do every day, because we are so close to the students here.”

In fact, the assessment vision for Waldorf schools has always been characterized by an emphasis on formative assessments, especially since the schools adopt a grade-free approach, and high demands are placed on the quality of both oral and written feedback (School Leader G). The students must receive descriptive feedback that expresses their competence and shows direction in their schoolwork. Formal and informal assessments are given regularly for each subject (The Norwegian Waldorf Federation, 2019). Thus, formative assessment requirements are perceived to align with Waldorf school practices, and after the new regulations’ initial interpretation, they were enacted as part of the assessment of the school’s pedagogical orientation.

With regard to formative assessments, the IB has different criteria for all subjects. In math, for example, there is knowledge and understanding, investigating patterns, communicating, and investigating mathematics in a real-world context. These criteria for assessment are derived from a framework from the IBO. Assessment is based on feedback for better performance, and according to School Leader I, students have multiple tries to achieve the same criterion based on formative assessments. Also, students receive feedback throughout formative assessments in preparation for the summative assessment.

IB school leaders seemed to be affected by national requirements only to a small degree. To a greater extent, these requirements seem to fit the IB school’s internal goals, such as similar parental attention and assessment practices. This, in turn, creates fewer challenges for school leaders with regard to filling the gap between national requirements for accountability and local school needs. Being more in line with current educational trends in general, focusing on learning outcomes and assessment appears to be advantageous for this private school.

Standardization through national assessment seems to create greater challenges for Waldorf school leaders, especially when having to balance the gap between accountability and alternative pedagogical demands. It also appears that public school leaders were affected by the standardization of assessment strategies, but not to the same
degree as private school leaders. However, public school leaders, like private school leaders, are involved in fulfilling national regulations, which have changed schools’ assessment practices and the related workload. Here, the municipality is regarded as a somewhat important actor, and high expectations for national testing, and an emphasis on student performance, have become causes of tension. It seems that public school leaders, in managing the gap between the national emphasis on assessment regulations and internal school development work, struggle with balancing the demands for development work (which come from national expectations) and municipalities’ accountability requirements.

**Discussion**

Private schools are subject to the same laws, regulations, accountability system, and national curriculum as public schools in Norway. At the same time, they are required to represent an alternative educational offering (Dieudé, 2021). This creates different expectations within a similar accountability system. The findings of this paper indicate that standardization strategies regarding assessment and CPD affect school leaders’ autonomy to varying degrees. In addition, to some extent school leaders’ capacity to manage the gap between state-based regulations and local school needs is challenged. In line with previous research (Nordholm et al., 2021), there is little overall difference between state-funded private schools and traditional public schools. However, we found variations in how the standardization of competence and assessment challenges school leaders’ autonomy. These variations seem to be determined less by private–public differentiation, and more by the schools’ and school leaders’ visions. The analytical framework outlines two types of gap managers: 1) those with limited space for self-governance, which present greater challenges with regard to standardization pressures related to CPD/national assessments and schools’ diverse educational goals; and 2) a gap manager with extended self-governance when combining national requirements, such as CPD/national assessments, and internal school visions. While the former is represented by the case of the Waldorf school leader, the latter is exemplified by the IB, and (some of the) public school leaders (in public schools North and East), who perceived fewer challenges in dealing with national requirements and internal school visions. Both IB and public school contexts are characterized by a greater emphasis on assessment and learning outcomes. While this has always been the case for the IB school’s vision, public schools have dealt with an increasing number of policy initiatives related to formative assessments, assessments for learning, and national assessments during the last 20 years, which clearly impact school leaders’ work. For example, the IB school leader enacted the national requirements for national tests, which may conflict with the internal standards required by the IBO. Nevertheless, this policy tool was incorporated, “ensuring legitimacy by using the vocabulary of the reform and showing that their school meets the norms that are demanded of a modern organization” (Knapp & Hopmann, 2017, p. 249). Similarly, the Waldorf school leader deals with national requirements that contradict the school’s values. However, behind
the reform talk, the local pedagogical autonomy of the school is ensured. Whether such assessment tools affect state-funded private schools’ practices further may be an interesting topic for future research.

It is important to stress the imbalance between how the requirements for assessment strategies and CPD have impacted school leaders’ autonomy. In their accounts, the IB and public school leaders seemed to be less affected by the national CPD initiatives than by the strategies for standardizing assessment. Conversely, the Waldorf school leaders were similarly affected by the standardization strategies for both assessment and CPD. It seems that it is more complex for the school leader from the Waldorf school and the public school leaders (C and F) to manage the gap, as the school’s pedagogical views can influence assessment practices and school content to a greater extent. Still, Waldorf schools are allowed to maintain their alternative educational profiles, free of grades, and with a significantly alternative pedagogical offering.

In terms of school governance, it could be argued that while there is little overall difference between state-funded private schools and traditional public schools, school leaders in state-funded private schools find themselves in a parallel system with similar accountability. This system is characterized by parallel laws, a parallel funding system, a parallel understanding of curriculum, and parallel assessment practices or cultures. Because school leaders in state-funded private schools perceive policy requirements as not fitting into this parallel system, they utilize gap management strategies to deal with the dual contract of differentiation and standardization between state-funded private schools and the state. Previous studies, conducted in contexts such as Sweden and the US, have shown that school leaders, in particular in state-funded private school contexts, experience higher degrees of autonomy (Gawlik, 2008; Nordholm et al., 2022). However, when considering studies on autonomy in the Norwegian public school context, ideas of teacher autonomy have been found to be challenged after the introduction of a more product-oriented curriculum (Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020; Mausethagen & Mølstad, 2015). In line with these studies, this paper sheds light on how increased standardization of competence and assessment challenges school leaders’ autonomy to some extent. Thus, school leaders turn to gap management strategies to reduce the differences between desired performance and actual results.

Interestingly, when combined with previous research on private and public schools’ diverse practices for instructional planning (Dieuđé & Prøitz, 2021), these findings raise the question of whether the standardization strategies examined in this paper conflict with policymakers’ differentiation policy rhetoric. Although there are still differences in what Waldorf schools and the IB provide in terms of curriculum, the analysis presented here shows how the emphasis on diversity, as key to enhancing education quality through increased freedom of pedagogical offerings, is challenged. Policy studies differentiate between levels of policy talk and policy enactment, assuming a loose coupling between envisioned and enacted reforms (Cuban, 1998). Two reasons may explain the blurring of policy requirements between standardization and
differentiation. On the one hand, differentiation policy rhetoric, aligned with international trends, may serve to increase the growth of private schools, while on the other hand it is calibrated to existing local values and practices (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Further, standardization could represent a deliberate political move to preserve the one-school-for-all model (Volckmar, 2018). In both cases, policymakers may face tension, entailing gap management. This occurs at the policy level too, where they are unable to bridge the gap between their own policy requirements for differentiation and standardization. The implications of this policy gap, and the implementation of a culture of common standards may result in uniformity.

Over the last few years, research has repeatedly shown the complexity of autonomy, and how its influence varies according to actors’ perspectives, cultural characteristics of school contexts, and modes of control (Cheng et al., 2016; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Salokangas & Wermke, 2020). Adding to the research on autonomy in practice, with attention to school leaders’ policy perception, interpretation, and enactment, this paper reveals tensions and resulting gap management differences between schools, in relation to standardization instruments. Another important observation is that these gap management differences seem not to lie between public and private school contexts, but across schools. Also, the variation in school leaders’ autonomy seems to lie within the visions of the schools and school leaders. However, more research is needed to compare differences and similarities of private and public schools’ implementation of new educational policy, for instance by focusing more attention on the multiple relationships between school actors and the issues of teacher agency.

References


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Appendix 1
Supplementary Documents
IB:
Local document/collected during meeting with school leader: “Assessment policy: Guidelines for members of the primary, middle and high school community"
Waldorf school:
Local document/collected during meeting with school leader: “Parents Handbook”
Waldorf Organisation: “Essential document for assessment in the Waldorf primary and lower secondary school”
Public schools:
National KL06 curriculum and guidelines to local school policy and instruction material

Appendix II
Extract of interview guide
General on leadership and organization:
What is your professional and educational background?
Do you have any formal education in leadership?
Is any course or education required in order to be principal of an X school?
Experience as a teacher?
How long have you worked here? How long have you worked as a principal?
What are your most important tasks?
What do you use most of your time on?
What are the biggest challenges as principal?
What does the organization structure look like?
Could you draw it?
Organization of work with curriculum and assessment:
How does the school work to operationalize the curriculum?
Who is responsible for working with the curriculum?
How is management involved in this work?
New curricula were introduced in 2020. Is this something you are concerned about?
Are you following the progress of producing a new curriculum?
How does the school work with assessment?
Who is responsible for assessment work?
How is management involved in this work?
How do you work with grading and exams?
Can you tell me how you work with grading here?
How is management involved in this work?
School owner, sponsors and networks:
Who owns the school?
How do you experience collaboration with the school owner?
How do you experience that the school owner is supporting your pedagogical work?
What does it take for this collaboration to work?
Who sponsors or supports the school?
What is their role?
How do you experience collaborating with them?