

Introduction

On May 4th 2002 the leading Norwegian daily, *Aftenposten* had as headline: “The Conservative Party’s annual meeting abandons the Unified School”. After the general elections of September 2001, the Conservative Party took charge of the Ministry of Education. The Minister has since repeatedly announced principal changes of Norwegian education policies. Distinct steps to abolish the flagship of Norwegian education for more than hundred years have been taken, and a series of initiatives for differentiation and privatisation has been launched.

The Unified School is closely associated with a legacy of educational policies for equality¹ and democracy² in a nation with political independence only from 1905. A peak of success was reached in the third quarter of the 20th Century. Everybody got the opportunity of secondary and tertiary education free of charge. In the last quarter of last century, however, indications of serious problems appeared. The Unified School was claimed to be producing inequality in learning conditions, achievements and opportunities. These dysfunctions may be seen as unintended effects of stressing the social dimension of schooling more than the academic role the school traditionally had had. National school policies have increasingly been putting priority on the students’ socio-cultural integration, at the cost of keeping up academic standards. Although there obvious is a strong connection between education policies and social effects in a society, Norway may prove an example of a

¹ By ‘equality’ is meant: provision of the same resources and opportunities for all students, independent of their socio-economic and cultural background.

² The Unified School was assumed to contribute to ‘democracy’ in two ways: equal opportunities for self-realisation in society, and, the school itself, in its organisation and practices should reflect a democratic community.

country where education policies as social policies have turned counterproductive for the qualification needs of the country.

The aim of this paper is to try to answer two questions: *Why has the Norwegian Unified School Model now come to be seen as invalid? What are the consequences for individuals and nation?* Assumptions are, firstly, that the Unified School's curriculum theory base and management have become inadequate, because of ideological and motivational changes from the 1990s onwards, and because of the economical, social and cultural effects of the Information Age. Secondly, a consequence is assumed to be the emerging of a new educational policy to meet the quest for competition and quality at individual, national and international level. The Information Age seems to require individual, differentiated, competitive learning "just in time", in order to be seen as relevant for producing competitiveness in the global economy.

These assumptions are attempted underpinned by three types of data: public opinions, two empirical studies of implemented policies and two different political strategies for problem solving. The analysis takes as frame of reference, Castells' theory of the Information Age (Castells, 1996). In order to illuminate the Unified School as 'a paradise of school equality', a historical backdrop is given before presenting indications of serious problems and attempts at solving them. After discussing the changes in relation to the Information Age and global capitalism as a new national context, reflections are made about the consequences for individual and nation – in terms of achieving quality of competence, quality of competitiveness and quality of equality.