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# Mission and mandates: school leaders' and teachers' professional discretion in enacting education for democracy

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has contributed to the literature on what constitutes school leaders' and teachers' democratic practices in both high- and low-stakes accountability contexts, but less is known about how they interpret, legitimize, and translate the democratic purpose of education in a low-stakes, 'soft-regulation' system. The current study used Norway as an example, and examined this issue via a qualitative case study design with interviews as the data collection method, while theories of policy enactment, professionalism, and democratic leadership functioned as analytical approaches. The findings suggest that interpretations and legitimizations are cross-curricular based on an internalized code of ethics; there is a large discretionary space for teachers but the schools experience – in their dialogs with parents – tensions between a thin democracy representing an individualist and self-centered project, and a deep democracy aiming for the public good. A main argument is that instrumental approaches to education and an increased focus on individual rights may undermine a broad interpretation and translation of the democratic purpose of education over the long term.

## Introduction

New managerialist ideas and accountability measures have introduced systems of quality control and performance management that affect education systems worldwide (Camphuijsen et al., 2020; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). Under these policy influences, school leaders and teachers are expected to enact national policy directives (e.g., Ball et al., 2012). As such, they are held accountable for their school's performance in a hierarchical system characterized by centralized monitoring (Gunter et al., 2016) while also being expected to promote a democratic purpose (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Horsford & Anderson, 2019; Møller, 2017). Consequently, educational professionals experience considerable tension between the democratic purpose of education on the one hand, and managerial accountability measures and logics of governance, such as new public management (NPM), on the other (Camphuijsen et al., 2020; Gunter, 2016; Møller, 2006; Thomson, 2009). A vital question thus emerges regarding how school leaders and teachers interpret and translate policy expectations relating to the democratic purpose in an age where accountability policies prevail.

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This article employs Norway as a national context to examine these tensions with the aim of contributing to scholarship on how global policy initiatives intersect with national settings in which democratic values and objectives, such as equity and solidarity, have a long tradition (Møller, 2006; Telhaug, 2006), particularly in primary and secondary education (The Education Act, 1998). In recent decades, Norway has been subject to accountability-based policies, especially after the Knowledge Promotion reform launched in 2006 (Karlsen, 2006; Mausethagen et al., 2018). Nonetheless, compared to Anglo-Saxon countries, Norway retains a ‘soft’ or ‘reflexive’ accountability system (Maroy, 2015; Verger et al., 2019) – i.e., a low-stakes system in which school leaders are not sanctioned to the degree they would be in a high-stakes system. In contrast, the affective dimension of Anglo-Saxon education may be overshadowed by the instrumental, cognitive objectives and policies of regulation through high-stakes, ‘hard’ accountability, which may undermine autonomy in decision making and risk a redefinition of professionalism, thereby raising ethical questions (Maroy, 2015). Thus, this article examines what characterizes professional discretion in enacting education for democracy in a low-stakes, ‘soft-regulation’ system.

Norwegian education policy directives and recent reforms have granted much leeway in working with education for democracy, with school leaders’ and teachers’ professional discretion positioned as a decisive factor (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), albeit mediated by school contexts. Professional discretion implies accountability, as professionals are expected to justify their decisions (Molander, 2016, p. 21). Accordingly, three research questions are addressed: (1) How do school leaders and teachers interpret and legitimize the democratic purpose in education? (2) What characterizes school leaders’ and teachers’ professional discretion when translating the democratic purpose in education? (3) How do school contexts play into school leaders’ and teachers’ stories of enacting democracy in schools?

Through a qualitative design, I analyzed data based on interviews with school principals and teachers. The analysis was framed by three theoretical frameworks. First, the theory of policy enactment, which implies interpreting and translating policy expectations (Ball et al., 2012; Coburn, 2005). Second, theories of professionalism, including the distinction between occupational and organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009), and the theory of professional discretion (Molander et al., 2012). Third, Woods’ (2005) theory of democratic leadership, which guided the analytical approach.

In this article, I make two assumptions. First, I assume that leadership is distributed within an organization (Spillane, 2006). Second, although this article assumes that those in formal leadership positions have a particular responsibility in promoting democratic schools, it is an empirical question whether or how leadership in a distributed perspective contributes to democratic leadership. Woods (2004) distinguishes between distributed and democratic leadership. His main argument is that distributed leadership is merely a descriptive approach, while democratic leadership serves a moral purpose (Woods, 2004).

The article is organized as follows: I begin by reviewing relevant literature on social justice and citizenship education, after which I present the theoretical framework, the Norwegian context, and the methodology. The research findings are then discussed, followed by some conclusions aimed at highlighting the study’s implications for enacting education for democracy.

## Research on education for democracy and related fields

Educational leadership is a contested concept and has been studied from numerous perspectives. Hence, many definitions of the concept have flourished. Over the last 30 years, accepted definitions of the concept have entailed actions of influence in order to achieve organizational goals (James et al., 2020). In this article, I distinguish between two understandings of educational leadership; leaders and leadership. The former understanding involves professionals in a formal role as educational leaders, while leadership is directly linked to educational purposes and entails practices that are distributed (Lingard et al., 2003). I anchor this article in the assumption of leadership as distributed, and I primarily review studies using this assumption as a point of departure.

Extensive international research in fields related to education for democracy, such as social justice and citizenship education, has been conducted, especially in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Both social justice and democracy constitute moral purposes of schooling and like Furman and Shields (2005) I argue that social justice leadership cannot be understood without related understandings about democratic leadership because theories of social justice and democracy are integrally connected. Citizenship education is not a monolithic concept, and is indeed practiced differently in distinct national contexts (Peterson et al., 2016). In this article, I define citizenship education according to the tripartite definition (and respective dimensions) of democratic participation given by Stray (2010): education about (knowledge), for (attitudes and values), and through (participatory skills) democracy. As the terms ‘education for democracy’ and ‘democratic purpose’ are used interchangeably in this work, they both pertain to the three dimensions.

Four strands of research relevant to the present work can be identified. The first relates to the empirical character of large-scale surveys (e.g., Arthur, 2011; Schulz et al., 2018). Such research has investigated student knowledge, perceptions, attitudes, and activities in relation to civic and citizenship education and students’ opinions of specific subject areas, such as social science. This research has demonstrated the importance of ‘teaching by example’ for students’ value development (Arthur, 2011). In the 2016 International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS), a nationally representative sample of more than 6000 Norwegian 9th-grade students were tested on their knowledge of civic principles, civic society and systems, and were surveyed on their civic identities and participation. The findings showed that of the OECD countries, Norwegian students ranked fifth on the civic knowledge test and demonstrated high levels of trust toward democratic institutions (Huang et al., 2017; Seland, 2019). Similarly, in Mathé’s (2019) investigation of Norwegian students’ perceptions of democracy, politics, and citizenship preparation, the students valued the theme of democracy and politics in social studies with respect to citizenship preparation, and their level of enjoyment and facets of instruction were close indicators of their perceptions regarding citizenship preparation.

A second research strand has examined the relationship between policy contexts and the promotion of social justice and democracy in schools. More specifically, such research has explored what constitutes successful leadership and the policy context for citizenship education, as well as how principals make sense of leadership with the aim of promoting social justice and democracy (e.g., Trujillo et al., 2021; Møller, 2006). One study based on qualitative data from two international principal exchanges examined

how school leaders make sense of social justice and democracy in their practice in two distinct settings: high-stakes testing (the USA) and low-stakes testing (Norway) (Trujillo et al., 2021). The analysis underscored the significance of contextual conditions in developing what leading education for democracy means in practice. Specifically, as opposed to low-stakes testing, high-stakes testing was shown to create obstacles for promoting democratic schools. Further, acting in accordance with democratic values was shown to set the foundation for distinguishing leadership as successful in Norwegian schools. Møller (2006) found that leadership enactment of democratic values involved establishing open communication between staff and students, creating opportunities for student decision making and deliberation, being personally committed to making a difference in students' lives, and establishing an ethics of care for individuals as well as a concern for the common good.

The third research strand is aimed at unpacking how school leaders and teachers lead and work value-based with education for democracy (e.g., Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Apple & Beane, 1995; Brown, 2004; Woods, 2005). Several factors have been proposed to promote leading education for democracy: free flow of ideas, irrespective of popularity; faith in the capacity for decision making among both individuals and groups; critical reflection and analysis concerning ideas, problems, and goals; care for the welfare of individuals and the community; and ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of individuals and minority groups (Apple & Beane, 1995; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016). Other researchers, such as Ryan and Rottmann (2009), have also argued that administrators who value inclusion and relationship building in diverse school settings tend to bypass democratic options and draw instead on hierarchical, bureaucratic power to ensure greater student enrollment. Based on these findings in high-stakes setting they argue that administrators' positioning within a hierarchical system suggests little room for professional discretion in pursuing the democratic purpose.

A fourth strand of research has paid particular attention to the role of formal leadership in promoting democracy and social justice in schools (e.g., Alviar-Martin et al., 2008; Szeto, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). Studies within this strand have critiqued the largely conceptual nature of existing studies on the enactment of social justice in schools (Berkovich, 2014; Szeto, 2020), and have addressed practices of leadership in the work with social justice. For example, studies have demonstrated that during turbulent socio-political times, teachers experience difficulty addressing controversial issues and thus tend to avoid controversial topics, especially when school leaders lack a clear vision of citizenship education (Alviar-Martin et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2020). Moreover, a study by Szeto (2020) has demonstrated how principals' practices of democratic leadership occurs through responding to social justice challenges by cultivating an inclusive school environment to ensure equitable participation in school activities, fulfilling the needs of every student, motivating teaching teams' potential at different levels of hierarchy in the school, as well as establishing a mutual understanding with community stakeholders based on their personal morality and professional ethics.

In sum, previous research has contributed insights into students' knowledge, skills, and perceptions of education for democracy, as well as different approaches to democratic practices in both high- and low-stakes accountability contexts. Still, it remains unclear how educational professionals interpret, legitimize, and translate the democratic purpose of education in a low-stakes, 'soft-regulation' system. Insights in this regard may

extend our knowledge about how school leaders and teachers construct and legitimize their promotion of democracy in practice and increase our understanding of the interplay between curriculum standards, accountability, and professional discretion in a low-stakes accountability context. Accordingly, in this article, I present empirical insights into this phenomenon.

### Analytical approach

To address the research questions, literature and theories of policy enactment, professionalism, and democratic leadership were employed. In the theory of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012), policy is encoded in texts and translated into action via interaction and interconnections between actors, texts, talk, technology, and objects. Policy is made sense of, mediated, and struggled over. School leaders and teachers engage in sense making, interpreting, adapting, and re-configuring policy expectations, and in deriving meaning from environmental information while simultaneously assimilating new information into preexisting worldviews (Coburn, 2005; Weick, 1995). In this article, I primarily use the following key concepts as part of policy enactment: interpretation, legitimization, and translation of policy.

Second, I employ theories of professionalism, specifically the analytic distinction between organizational and occupational varieties of professionalism (Evetts, 2009, 2011), which must be understood as ideal forms incorporating elements of continuity and change. Organizational professionalism is manifested by a *discourse of control* and incorporates rational-legal forms of authority and hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision making, as well as standardized practices, external regulations, and accountability based on performance reviews. Conversely, occupational professionalism is characterized by collegial authority and relationships based on trust. Authority dominates over control, and there is space for discretionary judgment. According to Evetts (2009), ‘such authority depends on common and lengthy systems of education and vocational training and the development of strong occupational identities and work cultures’ (p. 248). These notions of professionalism may relate with two forms of accountability. While organizational professionalism may relate with managerial accountability, whose main focus is on reporting and accounting for results within a hierarchical system, professional accountability adheres to professional standards. In the latter, teaching is seen as a moral endeavor with an integrated code of ethics. This notion of professionalism emphasizes the centrality of student needs as well as collaboration, knowledge sharing, and improvements of practice (Sinclair, 1995). In this article, this distinction in accountability contextualizes how school leaders and teachers work with the democratic purpose.

I also draw from the literature on professional discretion (i.e., Molander, 2016; Molander et al., 2012). Although the Norwegian Education Act and Curriculum guidelines regulate school actions, there is space for discretion in professional work. Molander (2016, p. 60) argues that discretion entails accountability, as school leaders and teachers must be able to account for their judgments and decisions, especially in their interactions with parents and students, who may be well-informed and knowledgeable about their rights, and local educational authorities. Structural measures of accountability constrain discretionary spaces through the specification of rights and rules, thereby holding to

account those charged with discretionary power. If the discretionary space is narrowed with predefined procedures and legal standards, then the profession holds little discretionary power. Conversely, fewer standards and procedures grants the profession considerable discretionary power. Accordingly, it is important to unpack the ways in which curriculum guidelines and legal norms are translated into social practices and how school leaders and teachers legitimize their work to ensure the fulfillment of children's right to education (The Constitution, 1814, § 109).

Third, my understanding of democratic leadership is inspired by Woods' (2005) conceptualization. In democratic leadership, one of the main responsibilities of educational leaders is to promote democratic values in both the school and the community (Woods, 2005). This conceptualization of leadership is based on a developmental conception of democratic practice (Woods, 2005, p. 12) that involves four rationalities, each with its own distinctive focus and priorities: *decisional*, concerning the right to participate; *discursive*, concerning the possibilities for open debate; *therapeutic*, concerning the creation of positive feelings of involvement, social cohesion, and shared leadership; and *ethical*, concerning aspirations to truth and distributions of authority (Woods, 2005, pp. 11–15). Notably, in combination, these rationalities express a view of human potentiality congruent with the developmental model of democracy (Woods, 2005). In line with Furman and Shields (2005) I will also distinguish between *thin* and *deep democracy* when discussing findings. *Thin democracy* is based on individualism and self-interest, and *deep democracy* refers to Dewey's ideas about 'lived democracy' (Dewey, 1916; Møller, 2006). The way education for democracy is explained in our National Curriculum demonstrates expectations promoting deep democracy.

### The Norwegian context

As a social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1989) espousing equity and participation, Norway supports the equal distribution of goods and services, especially in its educational system, and regards social democracy as an integral political ideology.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, neoliberal reforms gained ground internationally, including in Norway. New policies emphasizing performance measurement, improved learning outcomes, and accountability-based practices were launched (Skedsmo & Møller, 2016). The '*what works* agenda' advanced an NPM platform borrowed from the private sector, one which fundamentally clashed with the traditional social democratic ideology. Educational professionals found themselves positioned in increasingly hierarchical structures and had to report results (learning outcomes) to local educational authorities (e.g., Ministry of Education and Research, 2008) through the National Quality Assessment System (NQAS). Simultaneously, they were expected to improve academic results and ensure a healthy learning environment for all students within their schools. Although managerial elements have challenged traditional egalitarian values, studies at school level have demonstrated that there is still a significant space for professional discretion among principals and teachers. The school seems mainly in control of their quality work (Karseth & Møller, 2018). New expectations of public reporting and external accountability may create both challenges and dilemmas for school leaders, but how these affect the work of school leaders very much depends on the local organizational work contexts. While Norwegian principals and teachers are well aware of a strong focus on



test results by politicians and bureaucrats, these test results seem to be of little consequence at school level (Trujillo et al., 2021).

The Education Act and the National Curriculum comprise a binding framework within which, however, local educational authorities, schools, and teachers have room for discretionary power and decision making. Although numerous rules regulate Norwegian schools and educators must know and understand the law to attend to their roles as civil servants, the interpretation of legal standards is often highly situational (Karseth & Møller, 2018). After schools began working with the new General Curriculum in 2017 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), a renewed focus on education for democracy in Norway emerged. The General Curriculum has the status of a legal document, and schools are required to work on 'Democracy and Citizenship' as a cross-curricular theme; it is therefore expected that students will participate and engage in democratic practices, particularly in regard to the following:

The education shall provide the students the knowledge and skills to face challenges in accordance with democratic principles. They shall understand dilemmas inherent in recognizing the rule of the majority as well as the rights of minorities. They shall be trained in their ability to think critically, learn to handle different opinions and respect disagreements. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, author's translation)

This policy expectation reflects what I refer to as democratic practices. Both universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offer professional development programs aimed at boosting the competence of leaders and teachers in the domain of education for democracy. For example, the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies offers curriculum texts and teaching materials intended to promote critical thinking, democratic citizenship, and inclusion (Lenz & Geissert, 2016). A program called *Democratic preparedness against racism and anti-Semitism (Dembra)* is also offered. Some schools have prioritized education for democracy in their agenda and employ resources offered within the Dembra program, which focuses on the professional development of teachers. The program seeks to raise awareness and cultivate competences among school staff and leadership regarding education for democracy, and aims to prevent prejudice and racism.

## Data and methodological approach

The present study is part of a larger investigation into how education for democracy is being enacted after recent education reforms in Norway. A qualitative case study design was employed, which increased the duration and depth of the study of accountability in relation to policy enactment (Gawlik, 2015; Yin, 1984). The data were derived from 11 individual and focus group interviews, including 21 informants from four lower secondary schools located in two regions of Norway (East and West). The two regions are geographically and socio-politically distinct, thereby supporting data variation. Purposeful sampling was used to select individuals (Tansey, 2007) who were involved in professional training provided by a local NGO. More specifically, snowball, i.e., 'chain-referral,' sampling was used to first recruit a relevant set of interviewees, who then suggested other potential interviewees within the schools who were in some way engaged in education for democracy. To provide greater insight into school leaders' and



teachers' professional discretion in enacting education for democracy, I selected four schools that have collaborated with the local NGO for some time. Common to these schools was their prioritization of education for democracy as part of their professional training via the Dembra project. Ultimately, 14 teachers and seven school leaders (including principals) were recruited.

The data collection method comprised semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2012), which were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed. Principals were individually interviewed whenever possible and appropriate according to their schedules. As sense making is not an individual process (Weick et al., 2005), I used focus group interviews with mid-level leaders and teachers to elicit their interpretations and translations of policy in a communicative, organizational setting (Weick et al., 2005, p. 413). This method is preferred when interactions among participants are believed to yield the best information concerning a particular subject (Bryman, 2012; Cresswell, 2007).

School selection was assisted by the local NGO that administered the Dembra program in the two regions. This strategy facilitated access to the schools, where I met with educators who were willing to share their thoughts and experiences in addition to reflections about how they enacted the democratic purpose. Table 1 provides an overview of the schools, geographical locations, and participants (anonymized).

The interview guide was methodologically structured in light of the tripartite categorization and dimensions of education for democracy: education about (knowledge), for (attitudes and values), and through democracy (participatory skills). As this framework is also mentioned in Norwegian White Papers (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016), it may be regarded as a policy expectation. Questions included school leaders' and teachers' democratic practices as defined in the new General Curriculum and the cross-curricular theme 'Democracy and Citizenship'.

A qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2012) guided by analytical concepts drawn from professionalism and combined with policy enactment theory and notions of democratic rationality was performed. First, the interviews were inductively analyzed to identify emerging themes informative of how school leaders and teachers enact education for democracy. NVivo software was used to code for emergent themes and identify instances in which school leaders and teachers discussed interpretations and translations of policy and professional work. The interviews with leadership teams (including the principal and school inspectors), department heads, and teachers were treated as separate datasets, permitting a comparison between schools as well as highlighting variations between group interviews at each school. Two of the interviews with principals (Valley and Road) were individual interviews. Second, the interview transcripts were deductively analyzed according to the concepts outlined in the framework. The following analytical concepts were deductively employed: organizational and occupational professionalism; professional, managerial, and structural measures of

**Table 1.** Overview of selection.

School name (anonymous)	Geography	Number of interviewees
School 1, Valley	West	4 teachers, 2 leaders, principal
School 2, Hilltop	East	4 teachers, 1 counselor, principal
School 3, Crown	East	3 teachers, 1 leader, principal
School 4, Road	West	2 teachers, principal

accountability; and conceptions of democratic rationalities as outlined in the analytical approach.

## Findings

This section reports the findings on what characterizes professional discretion in enacting education for democracy in a low-stakes, 'soft-regulation' system. The initial subsection answers the first research question concerning how school leaders and teachers interpret and legitimize the democratic purpose in education. The following two subsections answer the other research questions.

### *Finding # 1: interpreting and legitimizing education for democracy*

#### *A cross-curricular approach to democracy*

Across the schools, interpretations of democracy aligned with a cross-curricular approach to teaching. At all four schools, there was a consensus that democracy could be part of many subjects, the most common of which were social sciences, Christianity and ethics, and history and language, particularly English and Norwegian (both include history). The degree to which the schools had undertaken a cross-curricular approach to education for democracy differed.

Valley had a more sophisticated cross-curricular understanding compared with the other schools. Here, a holistic understanding of democracy was explicitly mentioned:

At this school, there is a common understanding that teachers should cooperate across subjects and display a cross-curricular interest, and that it should be in the best interest of the students. At other schools, it may be that teachers become their own little 'islands,' and then it becomes more difficult to think holistically about citizenship, democracy, and participation. (Teacher 3, Valley)

From this quote, it can be observed that cooperation between teachers is a precursor to thinking holistically in educating students for citizenship and democracy. This understanding largely reflects The Education Act (1998) and the overall democratic purpose in the Norwegian context (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The principal of Valley also concurred with this view:

I welcome the idea of interdisciplinary themes, and I believe it's important to see connections between important subjects. It's also stated in the purpose clause. I think it's more clear and explicit in the new General Part of the Curriculum than in the past [...]. (Principal, Valley)

This quote illustrates the principal's cross-curricular approach at Valley. Interestingly, the principal referred to the purpose clause in The Education Act (1998), alignment with which is evident in how the principal and teachers at Valley approach education for democracy. This approach differed somewhat in comparison to the other schools, where little or no reference was made to policy or legislation in interpreting education for democracy. However, none of the interviewees commented on being accountable to their superiors.

### *Established practices and internalized codes of ethics*

The centrality of established practices was common across the schools in terms of how school leaders and teachers legitimized their work with education for democracy. That is, educational professionals drew on preexisting knowledge and experience in their interpretations of the democratic purpose (cf. Coburn, 2005).

At the schools, a wide range of established practices were relied upon to legitimize work, including annual excursions and the construction of religious monuments in order to encourage cooperation among students from different backgrounds. At Hilltop, for example, teachers mentioned special ‘theme days’ on which they worked with attitudes about relevant topics, such as conscientiously using the internet and social media:

We have, especially in the last three years, implemented days where there is awareness raising of how to use the internet, what responsibilities we have, and how we speak about each other online [. . .]. So we set off time for these theme days to such topics, but we have to review these topics regularly because the students are affected daily by social media and things we can’t control. (Teacher 2, Hilltop)

This quote illustrates the role of an established practice to legitimize working to create healthy attitudes regarding internet and social media use. It also suggests that the teachers have inherited values anchored in an internalized code of ethics. They did not, however, refer to outside procedures, policies, or legislation as part of professional ethical norms. It seems as being professional accountable is taken for granted.

The school leaders and teachers at Valley described a variety of teaching approaches as part of established practices: cross-curricular work and cooperation, excursions, anti-bullying programs, and established procedures for handling conflicts among students. At the formal leadership level, established leadership norms were emphasized in which diversity and a common vision of schooling played a key role:

In the leadership team, we accept differences, and we are a team consisting of people with different strengths. So, we complement each other with our individual differences, but we do have a common vision that enables us to be a well-functioning team. And I think that is important. If we had different visions of education or a different view of the students, that would have made things more difficult. (Department Head 1, Valley)

This speaks to a form of shared leadership evoking a therapeutic rationality (cf. Woods, 2005). Shared leadership presupposes a common vision of schooling as a means of legitimizing education for democracy. Of particular interest at Valley, however, was the tension between the teachers’ established professional norms and the students’ expression of opinions in the classroom:

There are many different classes, and that plays into how teachers systemize their teaching [. . .] the teacher has a large impact on the class, and there is a difference between classes. Some teachers emphasize ‘this is the way it is and the way we do things around here,’ while other teachers continuously push the students to have their own opinion that affects [the teaching situation]. (Teacher 4, Valley)

This statement demonstrates how some teachers draw on professional norms (‘the way we do things around here’), whereas others encourage the students to express their own opinions. This could mean that teachers’ established norms of practice leave little room

for students to have their own opinions. Also, it seems as the teachers refer to individual norms, not necessarily collective professionalism.

At Oak, the school leaders' and teachers' established practices revolved around their work in formal subjects and emerging cases in the Student Council. Unlike at the other schools, teachers at Oak expressed concerns over how to 'evaluate' practices or skills related to the new interdisciplinary theme relating to the democratic purpose, for which they had no clear evaluation forms or standards: 'we do need assessment, we are expected to assess' (Teacher 1, Oak). This statement indicates that some teachers find it difficult to assess education for democracy.

Other forms of established practices largely revolved around the notion of respecting diversity, which was framed differently across the schools, ranging from being good role models for students to ensuring the students' voices were heard. At Hilltop, the teachers expressed the importance of role-modeling:

I think that we demonstrate great leeway and we show [to the students] that we are different. We reach the same goals but we do it differently. (Teacher 3, Hilltop)

Grown-ups are in general amazingly bad role models for the students, and those I hang out with on social media receive one shock experience after another. (Teacher 2, Hilltop)

These quotes are clearly contradictory. Still, Teacher 3 was describing school performance, whereas Teacher 2 was discussing general social tendencies. At Road, role-modeling through mutual respect was highlighted, as illustrated in the following quote:

[...] The freedom of expression and taking others' perspectives, and learning about differences, is a very important competence in order for us to have a well-functioning democracy. Agreeing about disagreeing and still respecting each other's viewpoint, that is the foundation of a democratic system. But it starts already earlier than that. For respecting people's differences, that begins the moment they step through the door. We model, and we say that we can't demand respect from someone just by the role of being a teacher. (Teacher 1, Road)

This observation seems to be based on a sense of internalized ethics as part of occupational professionalism. Without referring to outside documents or expectations for working with education for democracy, the teachers illustrated ethical principles when legitimizing their work with education for democracy. Such internalized ethics resonates with the notion of ethical rationality, whose key aim is espousing values representing goodness (Woods, 2005, p. 13).

In sum, these findings suggest that school leaders and teachers interpret and legitimize education for democracy mainly through their own established practices and internalized codes of ethics. In contrast, little reference was made to policy or legal documents or to external accountability.

## ***Finding #2: key facets of professional discretion***

### ***A large discretionary space***

A large discretionary space characterized school leaders' and teachers' translation of the democratic purpose. Noticeably, scant attention was paid to policy expectations or accountability measures in work with education for democracy, and hence translation

appeared mostly aligned with professional norms. The following excerpt from the focus group interview with teachers at Valley illustrates this point:

*Interviewer:* What does education for democracy and citizenship look like in this school?

*Teacher 1 (Valley):* It occurs in vastly different ways. On the one hand, you have to teach what democracy is, and on the other hand, you ask the students to communicate what democracy means to them. Perhaps one has to talk about institutions, but simultaneously, it's also about subjects such as democracy in practice, where the education is mostly about students being active participants in a democracy, one way or another.

Through this key quotation, it can be seen that the teachers employed multiple approaches to education for democracy at different levels, including teaching about democracy, which speaks to intellectual knowledge, and enabling students to experience what democracy means in practice (cf. Stray, 2010).

At Hilltop, unlike the other teachers, the school counselor was granted a great degree of autonomy and trust in working with education for democracy. The counselor had the discretionary power to develop educational initiatives aimed at addressing, e.g., substance abuse and bullying. The leadership team recognized this, noting that the counselor was a key figure in facilitating dialogue between students involved in conflicts and in negotiating their resolution, emphasizing how conflict managing was part of education for democracy.

At Road, which enrolls a large number of students with minority backgrounds, the importance of trust and delegation of responsibility regarding the inclusion of all students was especially highlighted. The excerpt below demonstrates how one teacher at Road perceived his work with minority students. The following statement reinforces the interpretation that teachers are trusted by the principal in their work and are granted large discretionary space in educating for democracy:

Regarding our responsibility as teachers of minority classes, I believe we have a greater degree of autonomy than the rest of the school. And [we are granted] trust that we can do the job. But we are also (...) two teachers with much experience in building [education for democracy] at this school. (Teacher 1, Road)

For the teachers at Road, teaching youth is accompanied by special challenges to conflict management, and as such these teachers value the trust granted to them by the principal in their work, especially on the basis of their extensive professional experience. At the other schools, trust was connected to the notion of developing an inclusive school community and to the delegation of responsibility within the school.

At Oak, the principal mentioned the importance of delegating responsibility in order to handle emerging tasks and allocating more time for developmental tasks, which reflect notions of shared leadership (Woods, 2005). School leaders and teachers endorsed a wide range of practices related to education for democracy. Examples of democratization were included in the curriculum, especially concerning the theme of 'freedom fighters,' such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. A program was also developed in each subject with themes related to climate, elderly care, the fur industry, gender equality, etc. Making teaching relevant and relatable was repeatedly mentioned, with one teacher remarking 'Recently, there was an election in the United States, so I can't have social

studies and not mention it.’ The teachers agreed that the classroom represented a democracy ‘in miniature,’ and that small elections could thus be held in the classroom to simulate democracy on a larger scale. This practice illustrates the exercise of a wide professional discretionary space, one which adheres to principles of democratic agency, particularly therapeutic and decisional rationality (Woods, 2005).

### *Balancing acts of leadership and care for the community*

The findings indicate that school leaders’ and teachers’ discretion was characterized by attempts to between balance decision making as acts of leadership on the one hand, and caring for the broader school community on the other. This occurred at the professional community level as well as in interactions with students in the classroom. A key point made at the schools was that all teachers and leaders should have their voices heard and included when decisions are made. This echoes Sinclair’s (1995) notion of professional accountability, particularly collaboration.

Nonetheless, when involving staff in decision-making processes concerning the discretionary work of inclusion, the leadership team faced challenges:

[...] I think that it is important that we listen and try to involve people in processes. It is important that we anchor all processes involving development to ensure that everything isn’t bottom-up all the time, but that we in the leadership team are willing to act [...]. At least we try to be process-oriented, and [...] involve those who are affected by [the process], which is also a part of the education for democracy for the grown-ups. (Principal, Oak)

This quote reflects the dilemma of negotiating the typical leadership role of making decisions and ‘acting’ while also including those affected by the decisions. It appears that ‘living with’ such circumstances should be part of education for democracy for the adults, and that subordinates would occasionally have to accept that decisions would be made for them. Discretion in a school democracy occurs not just among those in the classroom but also among anyone affected by decision-making processes.

At Hilltop, the leadership team faced the same dilemma. Numerous arenas were arranged for meeting with department heads to plan instruction for minority students as well as to allocate resources for students with special needs. Still, the principal at Hilltop emphasized leadership dilemmas in a democratic school despite the arrangement of meeting arenas:

I believe we are very open to listening and involving everyone [...] We cooperate with different services, including counselors and advisors, and meet with them once a week. So we have created arenas where everyone may express their views, and we support that. Of course we do have a future goal, but we try to govern in a way that brings everyone on board without just making decisions and settling them. (Principal, Hilltop)

This can be interpreted to mean that although the leadership team had a clear vision of governing, including the staff in all decision-making processes was especially important, even though doing so would affect this vision.

The leadership team also noted there might be tensions between caring for the students’ well-being (cf. Woods, 2005) and on learning if they focus too much on learning outcomes.

Two of the schools (Valley and Oak) imposed restrictions on mobile devices in order to keep students engaged and focused. Meanwhile, the other schools stressed the

challenges posed by mobile devices to educational processes and democracy-related issues. Valley introduced a ‘mobile-free school,’ mandating all students to relinquish their phones during the school day. This policy was enacted in response to a couple of unfortunate incidents, one of which two students had deliberately provoked and filmed teachers. The mobile device restriction at Valley was reached by consensus among the leadership team and teachers. Despite this, one teacher acknowledged that the restriction ‘wasn’t a particularly democratic way of doing things’ for the students. At Oak, the decision was less streamlined, with the principal referring to the decision as ‘brave and tough.’ The restriction was heavily opposed by the students, and possibly also by some parents and teachers. According to the school inspector at Oak, ‘We listened to what the Student Council had to say, but we can’t go for it, either because we are hindered either by the Law or by pedagogical discretion which makes it impossible.’ Procedurally speaking, the restriction was a structural measure of accountability (Molander, 2016).

Across schools, the informants mentioned various challenges related to mobile phones, but particularly social media. At Hilltop, social media, social pressure, and the experience of anarchy were interlinked:

I think our answer to that is that it’s challenging. The students experience intense pressure when using social media, and they take that pressure into school (Teacher 3, Hilltop) . . . yes, there is a greater experience of anarchy than democracy on social media, which creates challenges. (Teacher 4, Hilltop)

The use of mobile phones and social media appears to have created a special arena over which the schools have little control. This clearly poses challenges and stokes tensions in the schools, prompting the leadership team and teachers to seek to regain control by narrowing the discretionary spaces for students and professionals alike in the classroom. This is an example of how acts of formal leadership creates space for democracy through introducing rules, procedures, as well as structural mechanisms of accountability.

As already mentioned, the profession is granted considerable discretionary power and spaces. These spaces are organized and arranged by local schools in the formal and informal work occurring daily. Teachers especially emphasized, to a great extent, the challenges that arise in the classroom. Whatever they do can be perceived as wrong. For example, one teacher mentioned a situation that involved students making racist statements:

I had a white male student who was reasonably upset because he thought he was the victim of another student’s racism. I then talked to the one who had made these racist comments [. . .] Then you get into a situation that is a little tricky to handle in 8th grade; to explain to them that bullying has to do with power and power relations, and the white man has in a way a different position from the minorities in this country. . . . it’s a bit like a minefield after all. Suddenly, you say something that is perceived badly by someone else (. . .). (Teacher 1, Valley)

Likewise, a similar occurrence at Hilltop also highlights the difficulties teachers face:

There are themes that teachers struggle with. They think it’s difficult to talk about hijabs in a classroom when you have three girls wearing the hijab. How does one handle that? Does one dare to? (Teacher 1, Hilltop)



These quotes demonstrate how teachers think they must speak and act very cautiously, knowing that their own statements can inadvertently support racist statements. Some teachers might feel that the increased focus on individual rights has problematized otherwise mundane topics, which are now viewed as representing a ‘minefield.’

The teachers also reflected on their own situation and behavior, e.g., they did not always behave democratically toward students when they were tired, even though they were genuinely concerned with their students’ independence, interests, and commitments. As one teacher at Valley remarked:

When I’m really tired and . . . Maybe I’ve just had a really tough class with complicated things, then I’m not always so flexible that [pinch] I come up with a new idea. The interaction between teacher and students is there all the time. Sometimes I am a complete dictator and say ‘No, we will do it that way’ and off to ‘What do you want? We’ll do that today!’ (Teacher 1, Valley)

In addition to classroom events, teachers at Valley also discussed more informal work, such as preventing a poor debate culture and monitoring student behavior in school corridors.

### *Including students and the importance of attending to their individual needs*

Across schools, a gap between the state of democracy as perceived by the teachers and the experiences as reported by students could be observed. For example, according to one teacher at Hilltop, some students had allegedly expressed not having a ‘real impact’ on what they wanted:

We struggle a bit to get the students on track [...] and we work with that, and we get feedback from the students that they don’t feel they have a real impact on everything they want [...] so it is one of our most challenging areas, and it is probably to a large extent how we manage to meet them at their maturity level. (Teacher 4, Hilltop)

This statement underscores the challenge of including all students by understanding their needs, i.e., keeping the students ‘on track.’ Likewise, a counselor and a teacher at Oak noted the difficulty identifying struggling students who are not as ‘visible’:

[It is] very easy to help those who are very visible or who are coming to us. But noticing everyone is perhaps a little bigger challenge. But as a school counselor, I notice that there are some who are extremely much better at it than others. (Counselor/Teacher, Oak)

These statements reflect that some teachers feel they lack the capacity to enact parts of the democratic purpose, particularly students’ right to be seen and heard regardless of one’s visibility in the classroom. Furthermore, teachers may be impeded from helping students to make a real impact on vital decisions because they also think they have to ‘teach to the test’ when an exam is approaching. The following quote captures this point:

I noticed that for my own part, the possibilities were downgraded when we closed in on the last semester of the last grade, and I said ‘ok this is what we will have to learn’ and ‘you have to know this because there is an oral exam coming up.’ Now . . . It’s a bit of an unsettling feeling, and external pressure, and I feel I then get less space [to enable real participation]. (Teacher 1, Valley).

This statement illustrates teachers' perceptions of a restricted professional discretion as an exam becomes imminent. It appears, then, that less space for enabling students' participation represents the 'one best' option for the teacher. But it also quite clear how this puts the teacher in an uncomfortable position. It is possible to understand this as a form of organizational professionalism, whereby the reporting of test results assumes center stage (Evetts, 2009).

In sum, the findings indicate multifaceted translations of education for democracy involving dilemmas between acts of leadership and caring for the community and illustrating a large discretionary space in translating policy expectations. Broadly speaking, this evokes notions of collaboration as a main constituent in occupational professionalism, although indications of practices related to organizational professionalism are also evident (Evetts, 2009).

### ***Finding # 3: enabling and constraining factors in policy enactment***

#### ***Increased focus on individual rights and education as a private good***

Concerns were raised across the schools about increased individualism in society. These concerns were related to individual rights and the current policy debates about free school choice, allowing parents to decide which school their child should attend. For example, standing firmly on individual rights, such as the right to special instruction, was highlighted. Below, one teacher explains how the increased focus on individualism in society could undermine the best interests of the community:

[...] we weigh between [individual rights] and the interests of the community [...] that is a challenge we have in today's society, we are moving towards more and more individualism and maybe at the expense of the community [...]. so we work a lot with that balance [...].  
(Teacher 4, Hilltop)

These rather general remarks reflect teachers' concerns over increased individualism in society at large. In contrast, the principal at Road made more specific points about increased individualism:

[...] This focus on 'my own rights,' the focus on what society should do for me and what I have the right to get out of the municipality and state and everyone around me, that focus, instead of what I can contribute. I feel that is a wrong development in society. (Principal, Road).

I am terrified of those schools that are more streamlined, and I am very skeptical about the idea of free school choice in high school, where you get classes with students who have a very similar background [...] that the students with the upper class backgrounds distance themselves from others. I think that is a problem for democracy. (Principal, Road)

These statements address both an increased focus on individual rights seen broadly, as well as concerns regarding a concrete policy – in this case, free school choice at upper secondary schools. Hilltop also expressed concern about the effects of free school choice:

At the Eastern side of the city you have the poor people who choose certain schools, while in other areas, in a neighborhood nearby, you get elite schools consisting of students who don't know those pupils [from a lower SE background] who live just across the street. (Teacher 1, Hilltop).

These remarks exemplify concerns over how the policy of free school choice at upper secondary level, which has been implemented in certain urban areas in Norway, creates segregation between children from different socio-economic backgrounds even when living in close proximity. The free school choice policy approaches education as an individual right and a private good, rather than as a common good, as the goal of education (see Englund, 1994). Moreover, the principal at Road commented on parents' increased motivation to stand up for their rights as individuals:

So we try to bring in the student voice. [...] Constantly we experience that parents stand firmly on behalf of their own children and demand one-to-one instruction. [...] In other words, *they stand firmly on what rights they have as individuals*. They are not always interested in listening to the school's arguments regarding participating in a community that we believe works better. So, it is something about the individual focus in society that has gotten increasingly stronger [...]. (Principal, Road, author's emphasis)

Statements such as these exemplify leaders' and teachers' concerns about the increased focus on individualism and individuals' rights, regardless of geographic location. However, as both Hilltop and Road are situated in low socio-economic areas, these concerns may reflect this context

### *The professional community and education for democracy*

The findings indicate that interactions between school leadership and teachers may facilitate opportunities to work on, for, and, in particular, through democratic participation. Education through democratic participation means that students experience what democracy means in practice (Stray, 2010). The relationships between school leaders and teachers, and between teachers, should serve as role models for students to follow, providing them with experiences of what democracy looks like in a community. Examples from across the schools demonstrate the importance of established norms and practices in providing such democratic experiences for students. Take Hilltop, for example:

There is a very positive climate in the teachers' room, one that dominates this school. It's a highly inclusive environment. We have a vision that there shall be great leeway and positive feelings of involvement, and that vision has been formulated in accordance with the attitudes we display in the teachers' room, and not the other way around. (School counsellor, Hilltop)

This speaks to the notion of institutional empowerment (Woods, 2005) and, in particular, to shared feelings of positive involvement, both aligned with the vision of caring for the community as expressed by the leadership team. At Valley, the teachers underscored the established practice of cross-curricular cooperation, and cooperation between teachers, in working with democracy, citizenship education, and participation. The principal reiterated how important it was for the leadership team to set a good example for the students to follow:

I believe it's important that we as a leadership team set a good example, and that we demonstrate great leeway. We also have certain 'friendship rules.' They have been here in the past, too. Those rules have been co-created by the students, teachers, and leaders. The rules may encompass behaviors such as making others feel well, meeting everyone with a smile, and that we are all here to learn. A healthy learning environment doesn't come

automatically, we have to constantly work on it. I emphasize that the students not only have rights, they also have duties. And that's important in a citizenship perspective. (Principal, Valley)

Here, the principal emphasized the significance of the professional community as an enabler of education for democracy and the function of friendship rules as a reminder of the values that should penetrate all levels of the community – among students, teachers, and the school leadership. It stresses how students should experience what democracy means in practice through the creation of healthy learning environments, and that the leadership team should set a good example in this regard. In this respect, it is a prime example of therapeutic rationality, encompassing feelings of positive involvement and shared leadership (Woods, 2005). In addition, support from the leadership can also function to encourage education for democracy, with statements such as ‘the principal’s door is always open’ serving to exemplify the support available to students to share their concerns or ask questions about specific practices. This open-door policy, as well as feelings of positive involvement, appear to promote the free flow of ideas and enable their critical reflection (Apple & Beane, 1995). In all four schools that participated in this study, it is reasonable to argue that the attitude of the leadership teams were crucial in creating such a sharing culture. As such, the findings also demonstrate how leadership matters in promoting education for democracy.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore what characterizes professional discretion in enacting education for democracy in a low-stakes, ‘soft-regulation’ system. The three main findings presented in the previous section are discussed below in light of relevant research.

### *A broad conception of democracy and the prevalence of occupational professionalism*

Although school leaders’ and teachers’ interpretation of education for democracy differed across the schools, consensus was reached on a cross-curricular approach. It was commonly agreed that several subjects should be included in educating for democracy. This position was mostly in alignment with the democratic purpose in the Norwegian education system (cf. Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

Critics have raised concerns regarding equity when it is understood as closing achievement gaps on standardized test scores across different groups of students rather than eliminating the economic and social structures that sustain inequality, thereby ensuring quality education for all (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The interpretations of equity reported in the current study appear to address the latter understanding, which encompasses notions of equity involving human and civil rights as part of inclusion (cf. Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This understanding aligns with central notions of the democratic purpose in Norway (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), which emphasize that the education system should guarantee respect for diversity and enable students to solve conflicts peacefully.

Although policy documents include tensions and conflicting purposes (Larsen et al., 2020) it seems as the study's participants only to a small degree highlight this as a problem. The school leaders and teachers draw from established practices and internalized codes of ethics in legitimizing their work in a low stakes, 'soft regulation' system. Accordingly, their interpretation of the democratic purpose of education is anchored in professional standards, which in turn indicates the prevalence of occupational professionalism (Evetts, 2009). Neither legal nor policy expectations are frequently mentioned, with few exceptions, thus suggesting that regulations are not actively employed in practices pertaining to education for democracy. This calls into question the role of regulations. A large space for interpreting the democratic purpose may activate school leaders' and teachers' professional norms, but it requires that professional work is based on discretionary reasoning and justified decisions. Both school leaders and teachers are accountable to parents, superiors, and the public for what they are doing (Molander et al., 2012). Participants in the reported study seem to take this aspect of professionalism for granted. In a Norwegian context, this may relate to the high degree of trust in the teaching profession.

### *The challenge of discretionary power and accountability*

School leaders' and teachers' professional discretion is key to balancing between the inclusion of individuals on the one hand, and the strengthening of the community on the other (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). However, the data do reveal tensions between acts of leadership and care for the community. Although there were some indications that discretionary spaces were narrowed, particularly for formal leadership, this was likely due to attempts to include staff in decision making, which speaks to facets of occupational professionalism, such as collegiality and collaboration (Evetts, 2009), as well as to shared leadership (Woods, 2005). Including department heads and teachers in decision-making processes and delegating responsibility both reflect existing research on democratic practices (cf. Apple & Beane, 1995; Møller, 2006; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2016; Woods, 2005). In the reported study, the principals open up for shared leadership and as such, it provides an example of how leadership matters in two ways. First, it displays traits of what Furman and Shields (2005) have labeled 'deep' democracy, where notions such as participation, inclusiveness and solidarity are reflected in the leadership teams' caring for the community by ensuring every voice is heard. Second, it portrays how formal leadership is an enabler of an inclusive school environment that ensure equitable participation in activities where the aim is fulfilling the needs of every student (cf. Szeto, 2020).

While previous research has identified narrow discretionary spaces in bureaucratic school systems or 'high-stakes' settings (e.g., Trujillo et al., 2021; Ryan & Rottmann, 2009), the current study revealed considerable space for professional discretion for school leaders in a low-stakes, 'soft-regulation' system. Accordingly, occupational professionalism appeared to dominate in the study context, with little influence from the structural measures of accountability.

School leaders' and teachers' use of both inclusion and restrictions suggest the prevalence of considerable professional discretionary power (Molander, 2016). This power entails a high degree of responsibility, which includes caring for all students and ensuring that their needs and right to be heard are fulfilled. Previous research has underscored the

importance of high-quality instruction in citizenship education (Mathé, 2019) and the establishment of an ethics of care for all individuals (Møller, 2006). This study suggests that some teachers admit a lack of the requisite capacity to identify all students' needs, and consequently to ensure that the students' right to have a voice is honored. Such a lack of capacity may impede these teachers from fostering an ethics of care for all students and prevent them from ensuring high-quality instruction. This self-reported deficiency may be exacerbated before examination periods, indicating the interference of organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009) in enacting the democratic purpose. It raises the broader issue of how applicable democratic practices are in pre-exam periods, especially in situations where students feel their voices are going unheard. This in turn begs the question of whether there can be too much space in professional discretion. It may be that greater regulation and professional accountability in teachers' work is in fact advisable to ensure all students' right to be heard, especially prior to exam periods.

Overall, the present study suggests flexibility in professional discretion and democratic agency in responding to the democratic purpose of education. There are, however, also indications of regulatory measures and organizational professionalism. Restrictions placed on mobile devices represent one such structural measure. Finally, legal accountability may constrain professionals' discretionary responses to controversial topics in the classroom. The principal at Road expressed concern that parents are increasingly holding the school to account for their children's rights, and that this may eventually narrow discretionary spaces for school leaders and teachers. As such, the current study indicates that it is not so much the political context that narrows the discretionary space (cf. Wong et al., 2020) in the Norwegian context but is instead the community and the stakeholders closer to the schools, such as parents.

### *The risk of re-configuring and narrowing understandings of democracy*

My analysis expanded the existing literature by suggesting that increased individualism in society represents a possible constraining factor in schools. The findings indicate changes similar to those that occurred in Sweden in the 1990s, when there was a discursive shift from perceiving education as a social and collective right to viewing it as an individual and civil right (Englund, 1994). This was evident in parents' increasing concerns over their children's rights, reflecting a narrow understanding of democracy (Møller & Rönnerberg, 2021), or what Furman and Shields (2005) call a 'thin' democracy. Norwegian principals and teachers nonetheless expressed concerns over the increased focus on individual rights, which exemplifies the risk of re-configuring democracy as a consumer democracy, following the argument of Woods (2005). In such a re-configuration, focus is reoriented toward self-interest at the expense of students acting as mutual resources. One potential consequence of this narrowing focus on individual rights is that teachers may become ever more cautious so as to avoid reinforcing racist statements related to issues of liability.

The professional training received by interviewees through the Dembra program may have inculcated certain modes of democratic thinking. In this respect, Dembra may have broadened some interpretations of what democracy means for some of the participants. The analysis suggests that Norwegian teachers are offered a large discretionary space for both interpreting and translating the democratic mandate. This illustrates that the

teacher and leadership professions in the Norwegian context have a long tradition of cooperation and autonomous decision making, and that the influence of structural accountability measures may, to a small degree, downplay this tradition. As such, occupational professionalism represents a counterweight against the influence of neo-liberal, managerial policies through 'soft' regulation of the welfare state. Therapeutic and decisional rationalities seem to dominate interpretations of education for democracy (Woods, 2005). Little attention is paid to other, but nevertheless important, features of democratic agency and leadership, such as ethical rationality. Furthermore, my study showed that some concerns were raised regarding teachers' lack of capacity to attend to students' needs; the absence of real participation for students approaching exams; and the increasing focus on individuals' rights. In particular, my study suggests a possible challenge for democracy whereby teachers feel they are forced to 'teach to the test' when exams are imminent. In this respect, it is possible that a focus on performance indicators related to basic skills (Larsen et al., 2020) may undermine a quality of education for all (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Thus, managerial measures of accountability focusing on achievements on tests run the risk of undermining the softer dimension of education for democracy by overshadowing its importance. Corroborating the above, broader ethical values and aspects central in a developmental democracy may be undermined. One risks narrowing the meaning of democracy, thereby ignoring the broader democratic mandate, which involves adhering to ethical values and aspiring to truths over the long term. This may pose future challenges for the Norwegian education system, whose educational narrative so far, is dominated by low-stakes accountability.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine what characterizes professional discretion in enacting education for democracy in a low-stakes, 'soft-regulation' system by asking: (1) How do school leaders and teachers interpret and legitimize the democratic purpose in education? (2) What characterizes school leaders' and teachers' professional discretion when translating the democratic purpose in education? (3) How do school contexts play into school leaders' and teachers' stories of enacting democracy in schools? The findings suggest that interpretations and legitimizations are cross-curricular based on an internalized code of ethics; there is a large discretionary space for teachers, but schools experience, in their dialogs with parents, tensions between a thin democracy representing an individualist and self-centered project, and a deep democracy aiming for the public good.

This study highlighted the importance of awareness raising among practitioners regarding the nature of understandings foundational to democratic practices in professionals' work, especially in a context in which performance indicators influence the educational narrative (e.g., Larsen et al., 2020) in a 'soft' regulation system (Maroy & Pons, 2019). In the selected schools, there seem to be a coherent understanding of the importance of shared leadership in promoting democratic schools. The formal leaders' empowerment of the professional community stood out as a key enabler in the teachers' stories of education for democracy. My study demonstrated the importance of professional communities sharing a common vision of a cross-curricular approach and cooperation across subjects in realizing the democratic purpose.



It showed that the professional community according the study's participants, enables students to experience democracy *through* democratic participation (see Stray, 2010).

The current study added empirical knowledge of professional work with democracy and demonstrated a wide range of interpretations and translations of the democratic purpose in education in a low-stakes context of accountability. Furthermore, it lent support to studies claiming that performance reviews may undermine softer dimensions of education (e.g., Maroy, 2015). This article also expanded on previous research on education for democracy and added that an increased focus on individualism and individual rights may confront or challenge the wider interpretation and translation of the democratic purpose, as recalled in the testimonies of the interviewed participants. A main limitation of this study was that it only captured the stories of the participants involved and did not explore their practices through observations. Future research could provide more in-depth descriptions and undertake large-scale studies of professionals' work concerning the democratic dimensions of education.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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