Norway

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Introduction

Overview of Education System

Norway has a centralized curriculum covering all subjects for Grades 1 to 13. Parliament approves the curriculum (and any revisions) through a process initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research that involves expert groups. Since 2004, the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training has served as the executive agency for the Ministry. Within the frameworks of the curriculum, local schools and teachers have great autonomy to make their own choices regarding textbooks, instruction methods, and organization.

Every child above age 1 has the right to attend preprimary school. The attendance rate is 92.8 percent.[1] Preprimary education is not free, but national targeted subsidies are available for low-income families.

Children enter first grade in August of the year they turn 6 years of age. Ninety-six percent are enrolled in public school; private schools play a minor role. School in Norway is divided into three main stages: Grades 1 to 7, Grades 8 to 10, and Grades 11 to 13. All stages are free. The first two stages constitute compulsory education, referred to as basic school. There are few alternative programs and no streaming; almost all students are taught together in inclusive classrooms. It is a widely agreed-upon political goal that school should contribute to reducing differences among children.

Grades 11 to 13 constitute upper secondary school. All students have a statutory right to attend upper secondary school, and the majority of the youth cohort attends. Students can choose among a variety of programs qualifying for tertiary studies, or they attend vocational programs leading to various job certifications. Students who choose the latter can attend an extra year to prepare for tertiary studies.

Since 2006, the curriculum (LK06) highlights reading as a basic skill (along with four other basic skills: writing, numeracy, oral skills, and digital skills). Across grades and disciplines, all teachers must support students achieving basic skills. There are competency goals that include reading in many subjects.

A new curriculum for all subjects and grades was introduced in 2020: *The Renewal of the Disciplines* (*Fagfornyelsen*, LK20) builds on the previous curriculum, *The Knowledge Promotion*

(*Kunnskapsløftet*, LK06), but has a stronger focus on in-depth learning, critical thinking, participation, engagement, and environmental awareness.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Norway has participated in all PIRLS cycles: 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021. Norway also participates in TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), ICILS (International Computer and Information Literacy Study), TALIS (Teaching and Learning International Survey), and other international studies.

These international studies have received attention from both stakeholders and the public, and have had an impact on education policies and reforms. The so-called "PISA shock" at the beginning of the 2000s (when results from PISA 2000 and PIRLS 2001 indicated that too many Norwegian students had reading skills that were unsatisfactory) led to several changes in education policy. These included white papers, an increased focus on improving reading skills and motivation in school and in society as a whole,[2] screening tests in the lower grades, and mandatory national reading tests for Grades 5, 8, and 9. In 2004, the National Centre for Reading Education and Research (University of Stavanger) was established, responsible for offering resources and support for preprimary education, schools, educational psychological services, and teacher education. Last but not least, in 2006, a new curriculum (LK06, *The Knowledge Promotion*) was introduced, with reading as one of five basic skills. Since LK06, the curriculum in Norway has been skills-based rather than content-based.

International studies also have raised awareness of supporting all students in accordance with their potential. This is demonstrated in the ambitious Language Tracks strategy described in the Special Reading Initiatives section below.

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

The Norwegian language arts subject carries the main responsibility for developing students' reading, writing, and oral skills. The subject consists of six "core areas": text in context, critical approach to text, oral communication, written text creation, language as a system and possibility, and linguistic diversity. Norwegian is a key subject for cultural understanding, communication, education, and identity development. The curriculum emphasizes that the Norwegian subject should provide students access to texts of diverse genres and linguistic diversity, and contribute to students developing language for thinking, communicating and learning, and participating in democratic processes. The Norwegian subject shall give students insight into the language and cultural heritage, strengthen students' critical thinking and participation, provide literary experiences, and give students the opportunity to express themselves creatively.

Students receive their reading instruction in one of the two Norwegian official written languages (parents decide first and second choice): Bokmål or Nynorsk. These are close varieties of Norwegian, however. Both are used in television and radio. Children are expected to listen to and understand both varieties of Norwegian by the end of second grade and read both by the end of fourth grade. Students should explore writing both by the end of seventh grade. Students with Sámi as their first language receive their reading instruction in one of the three Sámi languages. However, these languages are used in only a small number of schools, and therefore, no children in Sámi schools participated in PIRLS.

The curriculum emphasizes that reading—as part of the Norwegian subject—means reading both on paper and digitally. It means being able to read and reflect on fiction and nonfiction, to master reading strategies adapted to the reading purpose, and to be able to critically evaluate texts. Reading in Norwegian also involves reading multimodal texts. Reading in Norwegian covers the span from basic decoding skills to reading, interpreting, and reflecting on texts in different genres, for different purposes, and of different lengths and complexity.

In primary school there are overall competency goals for all subjects at the end of Grades 2, 4, and 7 (not for fifth grade, which is Norway's target grade for PIRLS). For the Norwegian subject, these are as follows:

- After second grade, the student is expected to be able to:
  - listen to and talk about fiction and factual prose in both Bokmål and Nynorsk;
  - borrow and read books from the library;
  - express perceptions of texts through play, singing, drawing, writing, and other creative activities;
  - talk about and describe how the words we use can affect others;
  - play with rhyme and rhythm and listen to and identify the various speech sounds and syllables in words;
  - combine letter sounds into words when reading and writing;
  - read with coherence and comprehension on paper and on-screen and use simple strategies for reading comprehension;
  - listen, speak in turn, and give grounds for one's own opinions in conversations;
  - describe and tell orally and in writing;
  - write texts using pen and paper and using a keyboard;
  - use uppercase and lowercase letters, periods, question marks, and exclamation marks in texts and in conversations about one's own and others' texts;
  - create texts that combine text and pictures;
  - explore and talk about the structure and meaning of words and expressions; and

  - explore one's own spoken language and talk about differences and similarities between spoken language and written language.
- After fourth grade, the student is expected to be able to:
  - read and listen to stories, fairy tales, lyrics, factual books, and other texts in Bokmål and Nynorsk and in translation from Sámi and other languages, and talk about what the texts mean to him or her;
  - choose books from the library based on one's own interests and reading skills;
  - read texts with fluency and comprehension and use reading strategies focused on learning;
  - explore and present texts through conversation, writing, play, movement, and other creative expressions;
  - talk about the difference between opinions and facts in texts;
  - give oral presentations with and without digital resources;
  - combine various forms of expression in multimedia texts;
  - follow up on input from others in dialogues on subject-related matter and ask questions to clarify and elaborate;
  - describe, relate, and reason both orally and in writing and use the language creatively;
  - write texts with functional handwriting and with the use of a keyboard;
  - use commas and other punctuation marks in texts;
  - use grammatical terms about syntax, verb conjugation, and declension of nouns and adjectives in conversations about language and one's own and others' texts;
  - reflect on how our use of language affects others and how we adapt and change our language to different situations;
  - compare words and expressions in Norwegian and other languages;
  - explore and talk about linguistic variation and diversity in the local environment; and
  - explore the differences and similarities between written Norwegian first-choice language and written Norwegian second-choice language.

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Norwegian teacher education used to be equivalent to a bachelor's degree, consisting of four years of study combined with periods of practical training. Since 2017, teacher education takes five years, concluding with a master's degree in one self-selected discipline, e.g., a subject like mathematics, Norwegian, or English, or a cross-disciplinary topic like special needs education.

In 2005, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research launched an initiative to strengthen professional development programs for teachers. This initiative has been implemented in several stages and is still ongoing as of early 2022.[3,4,5,6,7] The programs are developed and offered

by universities and university colleges. Such studies give teachers opportunities to build on and extend their formal education by earning additional European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points. Many programs have been offered in the field of reading. However, teachers can only apply if their employers agree. Teachers receiving funding to attend these government-supported part-time study programs have a reduced teaching burden, but still have to invest some of their spare time to qualify. Most teachers attending the programs are highly motivated.

In 2015, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research launched the National Strategy for Language, Reading and Writing 2016–2019, comprising free online resources for Kindergarten and school teachers. This on-the-job professional development strategy is described further in the Special Reading Initiatives section below.

A state-funded Decentralized Competence Development model (*Dekomp*) was introduced in the 2018–2019 academic year and is still in use.[8] This model requires local and county municipalities to work systematically to improve the learning environment and students' learning outcomes through collaboration with universities and university colleges. All schools and teachers must participate at some point. Most schools have 2 to 3 hours a week for common planning time, where school-based development such as *Dekomp* can be included, estimated at a total of 50–60 hours per year. In addition, the teachers have six planning days annually, where professional development can also be included.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

The curriculum prescribes continual formative assessment. No grades (or marks) are used before eighth grade (first year of lower secondary). At the end of second grade, teachers must observe each student's language in play and interaction, his or her understanding of text experiences, and his or her early reading and writing competency. For Grades 1 to 4, the curriculum emphasizes that the teacher must facilitate participation and stimulate the desire to learn by letting the students "move, play, wonder and use their senses." It also emphasizes that teacher and student talk about the student's competency development.

There are national screening tests in reading for use in Grades 1 and 3, delivered by the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (and developed by the University of Stavanger). The tests detect students who need extra support and provide information about those who score around or below a predefined follow-up threshold in reading. The tests are voluntary in first grade and mandatory in third grade.

Students take a mandatory national test of reading comprehension (as well as mathematics and English) in the autumn of fifth grade of primary school (and in Grades 8 and 9 of lower secondary school). The theoretical foundation of this national reading test relies heavily on the frameworks of PIRLS and PISA. It is published by the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (but developed by the University of Oslo). Its function is to support teachers' formative assessment of

student learning, to facilitate adapted instruction, and also for municipalities and schools to assess and ensure quality in education.

Other material includes the School Start application (*Skolestart-appen*) (developed by the University of Stavanger), a tool for examining students' reading and writing skills at the start of school. This app can also be used for retesting if teachers suspect that a student does not benefit sufficiently from ordinary teaching. A widely used commercial test is Logos (developed by Logometrica), which is designed to map reading skills among struggling students and to diagnose dyslexia.

Special Reading Initiatives

As mentioned, the National Strategy for Language, Reading and Writing 2016–2019 (named *Språkløyper*, Language Tracks) was launched in 2015 by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. The National Centre for Reading Education and Reading Research (University of Stavanger) led and still owns the Language Tracks strategy for on-the-job professional development of teams of teachers. The strategy originally consisted of three elements: (1) annual regional meetings for participants from preprimary education and schools, (2) online professional development resources for use in preprimary education and schools,[9] and (3) financial support for local professional development.[10] The ambitious aim of Language Tracks has been to improve the language and literacy competency of all Norwegian children and students through updating and improving the expertise of schools and preprimary education teachers regarding children's language development, reading, and writing. The strategy targets all children and students, with particular attention paid to children and students with language difficulties, students with difficulties in reading and writing, boys, children and students from minority language homes, and high achieving students.

The free online resources are still widely used and have been revised and updated according to the new curriculum introduced in 2020. These include a large number of resources organized as thematic courses ranging in content from how to use picture books in preprimary education for language development to how vocational education and training (VET) teachers can apply reading strategies in their instruction of vocational subjects. The courses include research-based academic texts, filmed examples of educational practices, questions for use in group discussions with colleagues, and exercises to try out in the classroom and discuss with colleagues afterward. The online resources are also sometimes used in teacher education, in the above-mentioned Decentralized Competence Development model (*Dekomp*), and as a dissemination channel for a number of research projects.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Many schools had to close physically at least once in the 2020–2021 academic year.[11,12] Nationwide school closure occurred in spring 2020 (from March 13 until May 11). Since then, school closures have been local or regional according to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Following this policy, 25 percent of primary and lower secondary schools had to close completely or partially at least once between January 4 and March 15, 2021.[13] When entire schools had to be closed, they were closed for an average of only three days. In contrast, when only students from some grades had to stay home, the closure lasted for an average of six days. There were large geographic differences in how many schools had to close in winter 2021. In Oslo, 60 percent of primary schools were closed completely or partially at least once, whereas 11 percent of schools closed in the more remote region of Møre og Romsdal. During closures, teachers provided remote instruction via Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Nearly all Norwegian families have computers/laptops and internet access. However, children in some families likely had to share digital resources for schoolwork.

Only children whose parents served critical social functions and children with special care needs were allowed to attend daycare facilities and schools during periods when schools were closed. This amounted to a total of 5 percent of children and students.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

Some research has been published concerning the impact on student learning. A group of researchers[14] conducted a survey on homeschooling (n=4,642 parents) near the start of the pandemic (April 20–27, 2020), when all daycare facilities and schools were fully closed. Parents reported that it was difficult to follow up on students' schoolwork while also looking after younger children and performing their own work. The researchers also found that students in the younger cohorts communicated less with their teachers during this period than older students.

This is confirmed by a 2020 survey[15] conducted from April 14–21, 2020 (involving 1,001 respondents, of which 349 were parents with school-age children), that concluded that digital teaching had gone well considering the circumstances, but still noted that only 8 percent of parents felt that children learned more, while 25 percent felt that their children learned less during this initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the two aforementioned surveys reported on the first lockdown during spring 2020, a third group of researchers[16] collected data from August/September 2020 through January 2021. These researchers found that ICT conditions were relatively good during the COVID-19 lockdown: 75 percent of school leaders reported that digital infrastructure was adequate, and approximately 80 percent of parents and students agreed that students always had access to a computer or tablet. Around 16 percent of parents and 11 percent of students fully or partly

disagreed with this. As with the earlier research, this research also found that students spent less time on schoolwork and that the perceived support from teachers was significantly reduced. The same was the case for students' perceived learning. There were about as many students who preferred remote learning to ordinary school as there were students who responded that they did not enjoy remote learning. In addition, students who normally receive good support at home reported even more support during the remote learning period. This finding supports data from the earlier survey conducted from April 14–21, 2020, indicating that the pandemic appears to have widened the divide between student groups. Finally, it should be mentioned that the third report found that parents of children requiring adapted instruction felt they received far less follow-up at home than what they needed. Corroborating this finding, 56 percent of educational psychological service leaders stated that they disagreed that special needs students were appropriately provided for during the pandemic.

Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

The planned test period for PIRLS 2021 was weeks 15–18 (May 13–June 5). Two hundred and seventeen schools with a total of 7,625 students had been selected to participate, of which a total of 56 schools (1,772 students) would complete paperPIRLS (bridge), and 161 schools (5,853 students) would complete digitalPIRLS.

Due to the relatively high COVID-19 infection rate and strict infection control measures at many schools (particularly in Oslo/Eastern Norway), the test period was extended until the start of the summer holidays (June 18). Nevertheless, PIRLS testing was completed. Ultimately, only one school (with two classes) was unable to complete PIRLS as a result of the pandemic. One additional class was unable to participate due to a teachers' strike.

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