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Learning in the Free Market

A Critical Study of Neoliberal Influences on Sweden's Education System

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Abstract

This paper identifies and critically analyses the key neoliberal policies that have reshaped Sweden's education system over the last two decades and transformed students' learning. Since the 1990s and under the influence of neoliberalism, Sweden has introduced market-oriented policies in education and is currently considered to have one of the most decentralized school systems in the western world. The deregulation of public education in 1991 was expected to lead to a more effective allocation of public funds, as well as the development of innovative pedagogies, increased teacher professionalism and improved teaching methods and learning outcomes (Governmental bill 1991 as cited in Arreman & Holm, 2011). However, the intended goals have not been met and learning has instead been seriously compromised. By critically examining the policies of decentralization, free school choice and privatization, the paper discusses how learning has been redefined in terms of values, content, methods, equal opportunities and students' outcomes. Learning in Swedish schools reflects more and more the ideals of a market-oriented ideology and the overall performance of the system is seriously declining.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, decentralization, free school choice, privatization, learning.

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Introduction

Neoliberal policies on education imply a far-reaching critique of centralized public education and the concept of “one school for all students”. Such a critique is based on arguments that public education is inefficient and bureaucratic, costs a lot of money, promotes inequality and is of low quality. As Fischman (2009) mentions, the role of the state in regulating the private sector and implementing policies of social justice or redistributing forms of social capital like education is rejected as the nanny-state by the advocates of neoliberal politics. Instead, models from the private sector are being introduced in a restructuring process that is changing the mandate, forms of capacity and government mechanism of education sectors (Robertson, 2007). “One school for each student” is the new motto of conservative coalitions, implying that each student has the right to self-development as long as it is possible and according to each individual’s own capacity (Francia, 2011, p. 411).

In Anglo-Saxon countries, the introduction of market-oriented policies was supposed to raise educational standards and reduce inequality (Lauder et al., 2006). With similar expectations, welfare states with a long tradition of democratic and egalitarian education have also introduced marketization and privatization practices in education, expecting an increase in performance and efficiency of the system. Sweden is the most predominant example of a welfare state that has implemented a neoliberal education model envisaging a more effective allocation of public funds, development of innovative pedagogies, increased teacher professionalism and improved teaching methods and student outcomes (Governmental bill 1991 as cited in Arreman & Holm, 2011). However, it is evident that the country is currently underperforming in educational achievements, as indicated by the latest PISA 2012 results (OECD, 2014) and TIMSS and PIRLS 2011 results (Martin, O. M. & Mullis I. V. S., 2013). Therefore, it is worth rethinking how such practices have influenced students’ learning, which is the core of every education system around the world.

This paper examines and critically analyses the effects of neoliberal policies on learning in schools. Even though the study focuses on the Swedish experience, it can comparatively lead to a better understanding of the impact of neoliberal strategies on learning in other European countries as well. The methodology used in this paper includes document and secondary data analysis. Relevant research literature about the effects of neoliberalism on learning and particularly in the case of Sweden is critically presented and cross-examined.

Aim and Objectives

The paper identifies and analyses the connections between market-oriented education policies and their influence on students’ learning. More specifically the policies of decentralization, free school choice and privatization are examined in terms of their impact on schooling and learning. Thus, the objectives of the paper are to: (a) provide the reader with a theoretical background about the relationship between neoliberalism, education and learning; (b) present the major neoliberal education policies that have been introduced in Sweden and identify their influence on learning;

(c) critically analyse how learning has been redefined inside this context in terms of values, content, methods, equal opportunities and outcomes; and (d) provide conclusions that broaden the study's findings in an attempt to understand how these policies could affect other countries.

Learning is a complex phenomenon that has been conceptualized by several theories. This paper examines learning as an internal aspect of schooling and refers to it as the process of acquiring knowledge and skills. The focus, though, is not on the psychology or neuroscience of learning, but rather on its social and educational dimension. Formal learning is closely connected to various factors, such as curriculum, teachers, learning materials and facilities. As such, learning has been more or less neglected by the comparative educational discourse (Kazamias, 2009).

The country is taken as our unit of analysis in order to provide a general framework for understanding and interpreting the interaction between education and society (Manzon, 2007). Sweden is a unique example of a country that has shifted so rapidly in the last 20 years from one of the most centrally regulated and uniform education systems in the OECD countries to one of the most decentralized and market-oriented ones (Lundahl et al., 2013).

Neoliberalism and Education: A Transformative Connection

As a political and economic movement, the dominance of neoliberalism is often attributed to Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s. During that time, Keynesian-inspired state intervention and the power of trade unions began to decline (McLaren, 2009). A successful struggle of the Right to form a popular broad-based alliance led to what Apple (2000, p. 59) refers to as “the conservative restoration”. This rightward turn, which combined neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies, achieved political consent and transformed every kind of educational and social policy.

In terms of development, “the rise of neoliberalism in 1980s was associated with a deepening of internationalization (globalization) and referred to as the counter revolution in development economics”, meaning that development was seen in an economic context and interpreted as “an inherently universal and increasingly global economic process” (Hettne, 2012, p. 8). According to Simon (2012), the essence of neoliberalism is to deregulate markets as much as possible in order to promote free trade. Taxes could be reduced significantly “by selling off loss making and inefficient enterprises and parastatal corporations, and restricting the role of the state to regulation and economic facilitation” (Simon, 2012, p. 87). “New-liberalism” is heading back to the ideas of Adam Smith and David Ricardo and has become a dominant ideology in the Northern hemisphere, but has also been exported to the South by means of aid policies and other measures. Nation-states are becoming interdependent and borders are losing practical relevance, since a form of neoliberal multi-level governance is being established, enacting through domestic law. An economic constitutionalism is taking over from the political one, by treating the market as an entity with its own rules and protecting it from political interference (Olssen, 2006).

Alongside the role of the nation state, education as a term has been redefined through its contribution to the economy. "Education has, in most instances, been reshaped to become the arm of national economic policy, defined both as the problem and the solution" (Blackmore as cited in Hursh, 2001, p. 13). The needs of production and the labour market are seen as the dominant forces shaping schools. Across the world, neoliberal education reforms have been implemented in an effort to increase performance and efficiency, replacing the democratic political goal of education with the economic goal of "educating individuals to successfully compete in the global marketplace" (Apple as cited in Francia, 2011, p. 403). Education has been transformed into a product that individuals can buy and sell; in that sense, lifelong learning has developed in accordance with the neoliberal notion that "the most worthy citizen is a flexible homo economicus" (Ong as cited in Blum & Ullman, 2012, p. 368). Apple (2000) argues that education is becoming increasingly self-regulated by being turned into a commodity through voucher and choice plans. The individual is seen as a consumer who is stripped of race, class and gender.

Moreover, neoliberal discourse maintains that "schools should be apolitical institutions, implementing scientifically verified 'best practices' which will be assessed through standardized testing" (Elmore as cited in Fischman, 2009, p. 5). Such ideas have a clear impact on learning in schools, where standards, assessments and accountability have changed the roles of teachers and students. As McNeil has concluded through her research on standardized testing, "standardization reduces the quality and quantity of what is taught and learned in schools" (McNeil 2000, p. 3). Students' voices and life experiences in classrooms are silenced because of the constant need to compete and perform better on several exams. Neoliberalism has clearly been very influential in changing school practices, but also in determining educational common sense, "what can be thought or imagined about schools" (Fischman, 2009, p. 4).

The case of Sweden: Introduction of Neoliberal Policies in Education

Since the 1990s Sweden's education system has undergone many changes that have fragmented the social-democratic welfare state. Previous social democratic education policies, which aimed to foster citizenship and democratic values in inclusive public school, seem to have been replaced by a neoliberal education model focusing on privatization, decentralization and individualization (Francia, 2011). Swedish independent schools, or "free schools" as they are usually called, attract international attention and even admiration, constituting a "Swedish model" which is internationally considered a role model (Lundahl et al., 2013, p. 499).

When Sweden carried out educational reforms in the 1990s, the country was hit by a deep recession that led to a cut in public expenditure on schools and other institutions. In an attempt to reduce the cost of education and improve the overall quality of the system, the conservative government in power deregulated public education and introduced free market practices in education. According to Skolverket (2009, p. 14), some major characteristics of the reforms were: (a) municipalities were given authority for schooling and further responsibility was given to school districts

and headmasters; (b) new state guidelines took effect leaving a significant space for teachers' own interpretation; (c) increased possibilities for parents and students to choose their school; (d) increased opportunities for setting up independent schools; and (e) a new outcome-based grading system was introduced that set out a lowest possible level of attainment that all students had to achieve. Competition was also established among all schools at municipal and even national level.

Sweden is an interesting case for examining marketization practices in public education, because the education business has recently flourished and many companies have established schools in other countries. Profit-seeking education companies are increasing their profits and even more Swedish teachers are now choosing to work for them instead of traditional public schools (Fredriksson, 2009). Although supporters of for-profit schools argue that they "provide stronger incentives than public schools for increasing quality and reducing costs", it is clear that teachers' behaviour is becoming more market-oriented (Chubb as cited in Fredriksson, 2009, p. 299).

Therefore, it is reasonable to wonder whether this kind of education market is interested more in shares and profits, than in pedagogy and student citizenship (Arreman & Holm, 2011). However, it would be unfair to conclude that the current situation in Sweden is a complete shift towards neoliberal education, since in parallel with stressing the importance of excellence, performance and competition, the values of social inclusion and equality are also stressed, particularly in national curriculum guidelines (Lundahl et al, 2013).

In an attempt to understand better neoliberal influences on Sweden's education system, we will focus our research on a critical analysis of three practices that are critical for the learning process. Decentralization, free school choice and privatization were introduced by the Swedish reform in order to transfer power to individuals and address children's right to an equitable educational system (Francia, 2013). The question that still remains to be answered is whether these practices have actually achieved their intended goals.

Decentralization

Decentralization is the most predominant factor that has transformed the Swedish education system into one of the most deregulated in the western world (Arreman & Holm, 2011). One aspect has to do with the allocation of resources, which significantly impacts students' educational performance (Skolverket, 2009).

The policies of decentralization have essentially given responsibility to municipalities for allocating funds to schools. The main concept behind it has been a more effective allocation of funds, which would be disseminated where mostly needed. In theory, such a policy would have taken into account the needs of students and individual schools. However, it seems that the schools that need more resources do not always receive them in practice. Skolverket (2009) has conducted a study indicating that municipality costs per student vary a great deal. Municipalities tend to

distribute resources based on a per capita fee principle, rather than on students' characteristics (parental level of education, etc.). Schools where pupils have fewer opportunities to reach the expected goals (mainly because of socio-economic difficulties or foreign background) do not receive extra resources for special needs. Similar variation is characteristic of teacher-pupil ratios and numbers of certified teachers. For students' learning and attainment the factor of class-size plays a significant role, especially for pupils with lower academic background and weaker support from home. On the other hand, teachers' competence is more important for pupils with higher educational potential (Skolverket, 2009).

Since the 1990s, schools have greatly increased their influence at the local level. The national curriculum has become a general framework that each school can interpret and readjust in its own way. Individualized curriculum practices have been introduced, but Swedish research (Francia, 2013; Östh et al., 2013) suggests that these have increased differences in academic performance among students. Adjusted curriculum contents and evaluation criteria for students' individual needs and interests seem to benefit pupils with high socio-economic capital, whereas pupils from segregated areas suffer because of the low expectations created by individualized policy and practices. The percentage of inequality in education standards and performance, mainly because of family background, has risen significantly since 2000 and serious arguments question the concept of children's "own" choice. It is obvious that decentralization in Sweden has led to an increase in differences between schools and a homogenization of pupils within schools (Skolverket, 2009).

Free School Choice

Another important measure introduced during the educational reforms of the 1990s was that parents and pupils were allowed to choose between public and newly introduced independent schools. Previously, each student had been assigned to a specific school based on residence. The new model suggested that the state would pay a certain amount of money for students to choose a school of their preference; schools may not charge "add-on" fees in any case. The Swedish term for independent schools is "friskola", which highlights the distinction between independent and private schools. Private schools may charge all or part of their expenses through fees paid by parents, whereas independent schools may not charge such fees (Lindbom, 2010).

Sweden adopted the voucher system proposed by Milton Friedman in a much more "market-conforming" way than in the US (Chubbs as cited in Lindbom, 2010, p. 616). All education remained free of charge for students, and public and independent school agents are paid for each student registered in their school. The concept behind a voucher system is that public funding should be combined with private provision. By promoting choice and competition, there should be greater benefits in terms of efficiency and technical progress, and therefore schools should operate as a private marketplace (Friedman as cited in Levin & Belfield, 2006). Swedish municipalities are obliged to provide the same economical support for independent schools as they provide for municipal ones. According to Lindbom

(2010), this public support for independent schools has led to an increase in independent schools and the number of pupils attending them. In 2008-2009, almost 10% of pupils of compulsory school age attended an independent school, whereas in the US only 2% of all students attended a similar charter school.

The increase in independent schools with the consequent loss of students from public schools has resulted in “fierce competition between schools” (By as cited in Östh et al., 2013, p. 408). Both independent and public schools advertise themselves with a certain pedagogical profile (such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori, etc.) or a focus on a specific school subject like sports, mathematics or languages, in an effort to attract students. Families receive several advertisements from schools and fill in forms based on their children’s school choice (Östh et al., 2013). As a result, many students today attend a school far from their home.

Choice and equivalence are two political ideals in the Swedish school system that the recent reforms have tried to combine. Choice is the opportunity to choose programmes and courses or an independent school; equivalence is the right for all pupils to have an equal education. Research shows though that the earlier the educational choice and differentiation, the stronger the impact of social background (Alexandersson, 2011). The cultural and economic capital of a family determines a child’s choice of school, implying that “free” choice is not so free after all. Unconsciously transmitted, cultural capital receives greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, since the more visible forms of transmission are better monitored and controlled (Bourdieu, 2006). Social mobility studies show clearly that different social groups have different education and career opportunities, whether in Sweden or elsewhere (Alexandersson, 2011).

In sum, freedom of choice is a complicated phenomenon and affects several areas apart from costs and segregation. “Social networks, identity, the vitality of local communities, the notion of good parenthood, and cultural diversity” are only some (Bunar, 2010, p. 13). Östh et al. (2013) argue that school choice in Sweden has not delivered its promised results, nor has a positive outcome been observed in accordance with Friedman’s ideas. Differences between schools have increased and the comparative performance of the country has declined (OECD as cited in Östh et al., 2013). The best students choose the same schools and profit-seeking ideology puts quality at risk (*Economist*, 2013). However, Lindbom (2010, p. 628) argues that “independent schools are not going to be the death of the comprehensive school system in Sweden, and they are not going to be its salvation either”. It seems that there is a general consensus and none of the political parties in Sweden is arguing anymore for shutting down independent schools altogether. The fact though that the most important aspect of residential segregation might be worsened because of school choice cannot be neglected.

Privatization

Neoliberal policies are certainly reshaping the way in which public education is delivered. Blum and Ullman (2012) argue that schooling as a public benefit has been

replaced by the ideology of privatization. Entrepreneurship and individualization have become educational imperatives and educators have lost influence at every level.

Internal privatization refers to the implementation of management techniques in an attempt to make schools business-like. These techniques include “the creation of semi-autonomous units with features including continuous evaluation and assessment, high degrees of accountability and performance-related pay”, whereas external privatization refers to “schools being opened up to business interests, through commercialization, sponsorships, school-industry partnerships, contracts and competition between private and public actors for students and resources” (Ball & Youdell as cited in Lundahl et al., 2013, p. 497-498). Both forms of privatization have changed the role of the learner in Sweden and provided new identities and incentives. Aside from school relationships, privatization in Sweden has also affected the internal life of schools (Lundahl et al., 2013).

Quite an interesting phenomenon in the way in which Sweden has introduced privatization practices in education is the fact that making a profit from schools is legal. While profits from public schools are distributed within municipalities, companies that own a school in Sweden are not obliged to reinvest their profits in schools. According to Arreman and Holm (2011), policies for independent schools have set few limits on profitability. Moreover, less demand has been noticed for teacher qualifications and the number of services provided, compared to public schools. Lack of regulation is probably the reason why independent schools are considered “cost-effective”.

Upper-secondary education is the sector most attractive to corporate interests. The fact that students in upper-secondary schools prepare to enter university or the labour market and the fact that this level of schooling is non-compulsory and therefore less regulated are two prominent reasons for investing in this sector. However, adverse effects of marketization in upper-secondary schools have become evident in recent years. Some companies that owned upper-secondary schools have had to close down due to a shortage of students. As a result, many students that attended those schools have had to change schools in the middle of a year, causing them a great deal of stress and insecurity. One student from the student union of a school that closed down mentioned in a local newspaper that the company had “promised students something they cannot deliver” (*Local*, 2013). For these students, the way to enter university certainly is becoming much more difficult and stressful.

Lastly, privatization practices require school leaders to become managers and teachers to follow instructions from school management. Teachers’ behaviour is becoming market-oriented, meaning that they should espouse their school’s mission and implement its policy in the classroom (Fredriksson, 2009). “The market-oriented teacher primarily perceives students and parents as customers rather than citizens or clients” (Peters as cited in Fredriksson, 2009, p. 301). It is also clear from Swedish research (Fredriksson, 2009; Lundahl & Olson, 2013) that teachers and students are

acting as school advertisers, avoiding giving a negative impression of their school and trying instead to improve its reputation among parents and students.

The Impacts on Learning

Basil Bernstein (2006) refers to the history of education and schools as a constant battle between different perceptions of what knowledge is. Nowadays, the marketization of knowledge is having serious effects on what different individuals and groups can learn, from primary school to university. The stress on measurable skills, vocational courses, specialization and decentralization is creating a new concept of knowledge and relations for those who formulate and use knowledge. “Knowledge should flow like money to wherever it can create advantage and profit. Indeed knowledge is not like money, it is money” (Bernstein, 2006, p. 122). After almost a thousand years, knowledge is separated from the person, becomes a commodity and is dehumanized according to the market principles of the New Right.

Sweden is often characterized as an equitable society; it is true that both the more and less privileged groups have good opportunities to progress in tertiary education in Sweden (Francia, 2011). However, in recent decades there has been a shift from education as a common good to a stress on individual freedom of choice (Alexandersson, 2011). This shift towards individualization has created certain expectations for learning. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2006, p.144) point out, “individualized lifestyles and life situations force people to make themselves the centre of their own life plans and conduct”. Individuals are becoming exclusively responsible for their own success or failure and the state generally plays a less significant role. Such an increase in individual work means also that socio-cultural factors, such as parents’ level of education and cultural capital, are becoming more important than ever (Skolverket, 2009).

Individualization in the Swedish school system has harnessed the learning opportunities of ethnic minorities and socially marginalized groups (Francia, 2013). Individualization strategies assume that children are competent to choose what, how and where to study, without always considering different backgrounds. Moreover, the teacher’s role as facilitator for students’ social mobility has been neglected and schools have been transformed into “therapeutic places” with no clear rules, resulting in a deterioration of school learning environments and lower expectations for children and their professional choices (Frykman as cited in Francia, 2013, p. 18). Individualization strategies need to assure that academic knowledge and standards will be fairly disseminated among all students in order to achieve positive learning outcomes. This is why Francia (2013) suggests that the impacts of neoliberal individualization policies on differentiated curriculum strategies for students of foreign background needs to be re-examined.

As indicated by the policy analysis of free choice and privatization, competition is another crucial factor that has been integrated into the notion of learning. Outcomes are becoming more important than learning itself, because they are measurable and easily advertised. The increased pressure of competition causes

the isolation of individuals within homogenous groups and threatens the equality of people that share a common background (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2006). In this context, it is also evident from the Swedish case that students' influence and participation is becoming less important. In their research in upper-secondary Swedish schools, Lundahl and Olson (2013) argue that the students' voice is neglected with respect to the form and content of regular schoolwork and that teachers do not take student initiatives seriously. Competitive attitudes tend to marginalize the less quantifiable aspects of the curriculum, such as the opportunity to express one's concerns as part of a democratic citizenship that is highly valued in the goals of the national curriculum, at least in theory. Students are seen as marketing representatives of their school, which is why their initiatives involve a risk of being considered obstacles to the school's advertised image.

Furthermore, in a market-oriented school system where student experiences are set aside in favour of performance, pedagogical approaches such as learning by doing or problem solving hardly apply. The ideal of a democratic conception of education implies an education system "which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure changes without introducing disorder" (Dewey, 2006, p. 100). It is obvious, though, that neoliberal education increases segregation; therefore, democratic values like solidarity, collective action and active civic engagement have no place in learning. Group work as a learning method hardly functions in a context of individualization and competition. Classroom practice in Swedish compulsory schooling shows that "group work as a form of classroom practice happens less often and even when pupils do work in groups, the tendency is for their work to lead to individual assignments" (Skolverket, 2009, p. 45).

Students are learning how to pass exams and not how to work together or how to appreciate learning in itself. External motives such as grades, rewards and scholarships are becoming more important than social or personal motives. Such a return to the ideals of behaviourism can be explained by the persistent need for education systems to provide accountability and standards. In the Swedish case, much attention has recently been given to the grading system and the country's national performance in international tests, such as PISA. Standards and accountability are considered mechanisms that can help gather data for the purpose of managing learning outcomes. However, an emphasis on measurement carries the risk of guiding the system to what can be measured instead of the actual objectives set in the curriculum (Desjardins, 2013). Increased accountability has led teachers in Swedish compulsory schools to spend less time on explaining and correcting homework and more time on administrative tasks (Skolverket, 2009).

Conclusions

After comparing the above policies and their influence on a specific education system, we can conclude that learning is significantly affected by the free market. Its content, meanings of transfer, values and outcomes are transformed in a way that reflects the ideals and purposes of a market-oriented ideology.

In the Swedish case, we conclude that the implementation of neoliberal policies in education has resulted in increased inequality, segregation of vulnerable social groups, lower performance, market-oriented teachers and less democratic citizenship. Learning has become individualized, competitive and performance-driven. Creativity and students' initiatives are marginalized and collective methods of learning are hardly functioning. New identities have been introduced, such as the consumer, school advertiser and entrepreneur.

Moreover, parental background and cultural capital have become more crucial than ever and learning has been strongly linked to the family socio-economic status. Social reproduction is maintained, since high performing students tend to choose the same schools, and social mobility is decreasing. However, linking neoliberalism to performance in Sweden is sometimes ambivalent and further research needs to go more deeply into the implications of marketization practices in the classroom.

The lessons learned from Sweden could be useful for other countries. The "Swedish model", which tends to serve as an example for conservative parties around Europe, for example in the UK, needs to be re-examined in the light of recent international findings, which show a rapid decline in students' performance. It is also reasonable to think that if the fragmentation of a welfare state's public education was inevitable due to global trends, countries with a less equitable and socially just system are more vulnerable to the forces of neoliberalism. In Sweden most people are willing to pay even higher taxes in order to improve welfare benefits and eight out of ten Swedes are against profit-making in the welfare sector (Francia, 2011). Therefore, policies could be readjusted in the future, but the same cannot be expected in different national contexts if similar policies are applied.

Learning in the neoliberal era has developed as the foundation for competitiveness, economic growth and improved quality of living. Children are encouraged to become "enterprising selves" and flexible workers who self-regulate and re-educate themselves regularly so as to meet the demands of the marketplace (Blum & Ullman, 2012, p. 369). How, though, can we develop critical thinkers and intellectuals who will promote peace and social justice, when business values are stressed over human ones? Critical pedagogy can offer an alternative.

However, Apple (2006) argues that critical pedagogy cannot occur in a vacuum. If we want to produce a counter-hegemonic common sense, then we need to understand and face neoliberal and neoconservative transformations. Further research is required so that we can understand the social powers that are dehumanizing learning and come up with strategies capable of reversing the tide.

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