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THEMATIC SECTION

Children’s rights at 21: policy, theory, practice
Children’s right to equitable education: A welfare state’s goal in times of Neoliberalism

Guadalupe Francia*

Abstract
This article employs Social Representations Theory as a theoretical instrument to analyse the right of children to an equitable education. It analyses how social representations of students and students’ performances can be used by political actors as an interpretation system to manage contradictions in the equity education policies implemented in Sweden. A textual analysis of website propaganda of eight political parties produced for the Swedish electoral campaign in 2010 is used as research methodology. It is suggested that social representations of students and student performance in the Swedish 2010 electoral campaign function as an interpretation system that enables political parties to deal with the contradiction between the goal of equitable education for all children and the goal of developing diversity and free choice. The absence of a critical perspective about the negative impacts of market-oriented strategies on children’s right to equity characterised the analysed texts. Further, the dominance of representations of students as individuals with a right to an individualised education according to their own capacities, interests, learning times and styles makes it difficult to critically question the neoliberal model based on the vision of “one school for each student”.

Key words: children’s rights, equity, educational reforms, decentralisation, individualisation, privatisation, social representation, globalisation

Introduction
The Swedish welfare society has long-standing experience with education policies to guarantee the right of children to a qualified and equal education. These days the egalitarian education policy aims to guarantee the right to an equitable education for all children. This right includes both the claim of an equal knowledge standard for all and respect for differences (Francia 1999; Francia 2011a).

Children’s right to equitable education is guaranteed by Swedish school steering documents that clearly stipulate that all education must be equitable irrespective of gender, geographic residence and social and financial circumstances. They even stipulate that the national goals define the rules of equity for all pupils in the Swedish school, without distinguishing religion, social or cultural backgrounds. These steering documents also stipulate that equity means paying attention to each pupil’s special needs and circumstances. Education must always be adapted to the circumstances
and needs of pupils as well as their different learning styles (Francia 1999, 2011a). At the same time, implementation of a neoliberal education model focusing on privatisation, decentralisation and individualisation in the Swedish school system in the last two decades has reduced the welfare state’s responsibility to develop equitable education for all children.

Despite still having one of the most equitable education systems in Europe (Mons 2007, Dupriez & Dumay 2004; Swedish National Agency of Education, 2010a), Sweden has registered an increase in inequalities regarding education standards and performances among municipalities, schools and pupils. For example, the percentage of Swedish students not achieving the goals required for basic eligibility for national programmes at upper secondary school also grew from 8.6% in 1998 to 11.8% in spring 2010 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2008; 2010b). Further, an analysis of the results for Pisa 2009 shows an increase in differences concerning reading performance between high and low performing students as well as differences between high and low performing schools. In addition, “a student’s socio-economic background has become more important in determining performance, and is now more important in Sweden compared to other OECD countries” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010a). Moreover, the decentralisation of economic resources from the state level to municipalities and schools has led to an increase in school segregation and inequalities concerning teacher resources at the municipal level since 1992. Schools in highly segregated municipalities have fewer possibilities to provide quality education according to the children’s rights declaration (Gustafsson 2006, 2007; Swedish National Agency for Education 2006). Twenty years after having introduced this neoliberal education model that aimed to develop equity through the development of diversity, both scientific research (Gustafsson 2006, 2007) and statistics (Swedish National Agency for Education 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b) show that the right to an equitable education for all children still poses a challenge to the Swedish welfare society.

In order to discuss the right of children to an equitable education in the Swedish welfare state in the 2000s, this article presents a study based on an analysis of social representations concerning students and student performance in texts produced by political parties for the Swedish electoral campaign in 2010. I discuss how social representations can be used by political actors as interpretation systems in order to manage the contradictions between the welfare state’s goals for equity in education on one hand, and the goal to develop individualisation and free choice in the neoliberal Swedish education system on the other. Whilst this analysis is based on the Swedish experience, it is hoped that insights arising from this case might contribute to a better understanding of neoliberal education policy impacts on equity in other contexts.
The defragmentation of education systems in welfare states

The globalisation of the economy and social life is linked to a redefinition of the state’s role in order to reduce its social functions and to increase its surveillance role (Hill 2011; Bauman 2007; Ball 2003). This process has adversely affected nation-states’ legitimacy and stability because it has reduced their powers to regulate their national economies in order to protect their citizens from the negative impacts of globalisation. Even the most generous welfare states have suffered a reduction of the public sector and social costs in order to deal with the downsides of globalisation (Castell 1997).

According to Bauman (2007), inter-state and supra-local institutions work together with global capital to systematically combat all resistance against the free movement of capital and market liberty. By instituting free market reforms, the early ambition of welfare societies to improve the standard of living of all citizens via the development of common values, common experiences and cooperation has been replaced by the goal to guarantee competitive individuals who are expected to be “hunters” of their own success in global economies and societies. Moreover, the defragmentation of common values and experiences that such reforms have brought has increased individualisation and the development of borders and frontiers between different social, religious and ethnic groups in societies (Bauman, 2007). The lack of state policies to develop common goals and strategies to protect citizens has increased the feeling of insecurity and the fear of “others”. In addition, these “others”, often represented by migrants, refugees and citizens belonging to other ethnicities and religions, are the object of ever more sophisticated mechanisms of exclusion (Castell, 1997; Bauman, 2007).

Moreover, the defragmentation of welfare societies has particularly affected those social groups without access to the benefits of the globalised economy and communication. At the same time as urban elites have become more and more global, these socially underprivileged groups are reduced to unemployment and isolated and fragmented local and ethnical ghettos (Castell, 1997; Bauman, 2007).

Globalisation of the economy and the defragmentation of welfare societies also have impacts on education. Across the world, neoliberal education reforms based on reducing the value of education to economic utility have been implemented in order to increase performativity and efficiency (Apple, 1988, 1993; Ball 2003). In this neoliberal model the early democratic political goal to educate the “citizen as [a] political being with reciprocal rights and duties” has been replaced by the economic goal to educate individuals to successfully compete in the global marketplace (Apple 1988:285). At the same time, the long-standing dominance of equality-goal policies for all children has given way to educational policies for diversity, flexibility and individual competition.

The process of the defragmentation of welfare states by globalisation has even affected the Swedish welfare state. As I already pointed out, the long dominance of egalitarian education for all children was interrupted in the 1990s by a neoliberal reform that introduced decentralisation and privatisation as strategies to promote efficiency and flexibility in the global economic market.
Consequently, this neoliberal education policy has put in question the Swedish welfare state model based on a highly standardised vision of equality and the monopoly of the state in the education sector. Simultaneously, goal and result steering, free choice and the individualisation of learning have been introduced as instruments to ensure diversity and local democracy. The new political equity discourse has instead focused on diversity, individualisation and free choice as central strategies to guarantee the right of all children to an equitable education (Francia 1999, 2011b).

This neoliberal education policy is based on a far-reaching critique of the role of the “one school for all students” education model that has characterised the post-war Swedish welfare state. In 1962, the public common compulsory school model was introduced as an instrument to reduce social, cultural and gender differences in education. Based on the vision of “one school for all students” the Swedish public common compulsory school was characterised by strong central steering, the monopoly of the public school and highly standardised equality goals. According to Ulf Shullerqvist (1994), the dominant political discourse during the post-war years was always related to the claim of no segregation, social equality, state responsibility as well as the development of a common citizen able to participate in lifelong learning, the labour market and democratic life.

However, the introduction of Neoliberalism into the political arena at the end of the 1980s radically changed the political education discourse of Swedish politics. The political consensus concerning educational discourse in the post-war period was challenged by the Moderaterna Party (Conservative Party) which began to criticise the public school in the mid-1980s. At the end of the 1980s even the Liberal Party of Sweden and the Social Democratic Party began questioning the role of the public school system as the unique provider of equitable education for all children. Further, during the 1987–1991 period the staunch resistance that had characterised the Social Democratic Party’s attitude to independent schools disappeared. The Social Democratic Party capitulated and accepted the case for funding independent schools with public resources.

Individual freedom, parents’ responsibility for their children’s education, efficiency, competition (economic and pedagogical) as well as individual competence appear as central values in the neoliberal discourse that has characterised Swedish education political documents since the 1990s (Schullerqvist, 1994).

It is interesting to note that it was the Social Democratic Party which introduced neoliberal reform in Sweden by decentralising the school system and the withdrawal of the welfare state concerning its responsibility to implement the goal of equitable education. This responsibility was instead transferred to municipalities, schools, private actors, parents and pupils at the end of the 1980s.

Further, the Conservative Alliance Government that held power in Sweden during the 1991–1994 period intensified this neoliberalisation of education by introducing new policies that aimed to increase free choice and the percentage of independent
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schools. When the Social Democratic Party took power again in 1994 it continued with the marketisation of the Swedish education system in line with its electoral promise to stop free choice in the 1994 electoral campaign (Francia, 1999; 2011b).

The increase in free choice following the introduction of a new funding system (a student voucher system) and a school choice option has resulted in stronger privatisation of the Swedish education system. Statistics from the Swedish Association of Independent Schools (2009, 2011) show that the share of compulsory school students attending independent schools rose from 2.7% in the 1997/1998 school year to 12% in the 2008/2009 school year. The share of compulsory independent schools also increased from 3% in the school year 1997/1998 to 16% in the school year 2010/2011. Concomitantly, this development in privatisation has led to a decrease in economic resources for public schools.

Statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education (2003) indicate that already in 2002 the number of independent primary schools had risen by 53 schools, while at the same time 20 primary public schools were closed down.

Social representation of inequalities in welfare states
But how is it possible that the Swedish welfare state with such a long tradition of education policies for equity can accept the growing inequalities seen among pupils and schools over the last 20 years?

To understand how the Swedish welfare state can both accept and even legitimise the increase in educational inequalities among municipalities, schools and individuals, I propose to make use of Social Representations Theory as a useful theoretical starting point for understanding the Swedish welfare society in neoliberal times.

In line with Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1998), I argue that the analysis of social representations gives relevant knowledge about how groups and individuals construct, communicate and share different versions of the world. Social representations are values, norms and knowledge systems that enable individuals to orientate themselves in their social world (Moscovici, 1984, 2000, 2001). These representation systems function as common explanations of the real world constructed and shared by members of a social group and are communicated through words, media images, objects and behaviours. Social representations are socially shared practical knowledge that aims to steer social behaviours and communications. This practical knowledge system helps individuals act in the complex social world (Jodelet, 1989).

Michel Gilly’s (1989) research on social representation in the school sector is a useful theoretical starting point for my analysis of political parties’ texts during the Swedish 2010 electoral campaign. According to Gilly (1989), social representations function as an interpretation system that enables individuals and groups to deal with contradictions in relation to equity policies in education. In order to find coherence in a deeply unjust school system, school success or failure is often justified in terms of individual or intelligence differences. In educational contexts, the analysis of social
representations helps educational actors understand a reality that has many contradictions between goals and practices. They offer individuals common shared knowledge explaining these contradictions but without changing them. For that reason, social representations aim to guarantee some level of coherence in a contradictory, unequal and unjust school world (Gilly, 1989).

Educational research (Gilly, 1989; Gama & Meyrelles de Jesus, 1998) based on social representation theory needs to make visible the role of social representations in the construction and reproduction of social inequalities and injustices. Differences in students’ profiles, personalities and talents are often seen as determining student performance without questioning social hierarchies in the school system and society. School failure is therefore portrayed as a result of individual differences and the strategy recommended to address this is often based on the development of diversity in pedagogical forms in order to deal with these differences.

Starting from social representation theory (Gilly, 1989; Gama & Meyrelles de Jesus, 1998), I argue that the representations of students and student performance presented in the political texts of the 2010 electoral campaign function as an interpretation system that enables political parties to deal with the contradictions between the goal of equal quality education standards for all and the goal of developing diversity and free choice. Social representation theory functions in my research as a useful theoretical starting point for the analysis of political parties’ texts during the 2010 Swedish election campaign. I argue that social representations can function as an interpretation system that enables political parties to deal with contradictions in relation to welfare equity goals in the neoliberal education policy implemented in the 2000s.

The 2010 Swedish electoral campaign

This article presents a study based on an analysis of texts produced by political parties participating in the Swedish electoral campaign in 2010. This analysis includes the following political parties:

- Centre-right parties taking part in the conservative coalition “Alliance for Sweden”¹: Moderaterna Party (Moderaterna); the Centre Party (Centerpartiet), the Liberal Party of Sweden (Folkpartiet), the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna)
- Political parties taking part in the Red-Green Coalition²: Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna); Swedish Green Party (Miljöpartiet de Gröna); The Left Party of Sweden (Vänsterpartiet)
- Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna)

These political parties were chosen because they were already in Parliament (Alliance for Sweden parties and Red-Green Coalition parties) or because they had a good chance of entering Parliament at the 2010 election according to pre-election surveys (Sweden Democrats).
In 2004, the Moderaterna Party (Moderaterna), the Centre Party (Centerpartiet), the Liberal Party of Sweden (Folkpartiet), and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) built a conservative Coalition called “Alliance for Sweden”. The Alliance was presented as a new political alternative to the Social Democrats which had at that stage held power since 1994. Promising active policies against unemployment and marginalisation, this political Coalition came to power in the 2006 national election with a majority of parliamentary seats (178 seats in parliament, with the opposition parties holding 171) (The Local 2010a).

In 2010 the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna), the Green Party of Sweden (Miljöpartiet de Gröna), and the Left Party of Sweden (Vänsterpartiet) built the political left-centre alliance “the Red-Green Coalition” in order to take on the conservative coalition at the 2010 elections. Both the Left Party and the Green Party had previously supported the minority Social Democratic government during the 1998–2006 period. During the 2010 electoral campaign the Red-Green Coalition promised a modern welfare policy guaranteeing both welfare benefits and employment. It criticised the Alliance for its implementation of a tax-cutting agenda that had led to greater inequality and poverty in the Swedish welfare society (The Local 2010b).

The Sweden Democrats were founded in 1988 but entered Parliament for the first time after the elections in 2010. During the 2010 elections this party proposed as central political questions the limitation of immigration for refugee and migrant families, the fight against criminality, and an improvement in care policies for old people. The party considers multiculturalism a risk to the Swedish welfare society (Sweden Democrats 2010a, 2011b). It has roots in the neo-Nazi movement, specifically the Keep Sweden Swedish (Bevara Sverige Svenskt) group, although during the last few years the party has toned down “its more extremist elements in an attempt to attract a broader base of support outside of its core of young working class males” (The Local 2010c). The party’s ideology features a strong nationalistic discourse which is against immigration and multiculturalism and for the construction of a culturally homogenous Sweden. As regards education policy, it is against intercultural and mother tongue education and for the transmission of the Swedish cultural heritage and the Judeo-Christian tradition as the central goal of the school system. According to Hellström & Nilsson (2010), the Sweden Democrats strong monocultural and nationalist messages have become more widely accepted in the Swedish welfare society.

The 2010 election had a high turnout level of 84.63% of Swedish citizens with the right to vote. This turnout was 2.4% more than at the 2006 election. Ultimately, the Alliance won with 48.6% of the votes (30.6% for the Moderaterna Party; 6.56% for the Centre Party, 7.06% for the Liberal Party of Sweden and 5.06% for the Christian Democrats) (Valmyndigheten 2010). The 3% increase in votes cast for the Moderaterna Party may be interpreted as citizens’ approval for the work of Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfelds’ government.
The Red-Green Coalition only received 43.6% of the votes (30.66% for the Social Democratic Party, 7.34% for the Green Party of Sweden and 5.60% for the Left Party of Sweden). This election represented a considerable failure for both the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party of Sweden. The Social Democratic Party experienced one of the worst election results in its history, with a 4.33% drop in its share of the vote compared with the 2006 election. In the Red-Green Coalition only the Green Party experienced considerably stronger voter support with 2.9% more voters than in 2006 (Valmyndigheten 2010).

However, the real winner of the 2011 election was the Sweden Democrats that managed to enter Parliament for the first time since the party had been created in 1988. 5.70% of Swedish citizens voted for the Sweden Democrats, an increase of 2.77% of votes compared to the 2006 election.

The 2010 election meant that neither the Alliance nor the Red-Green Coalition had won an overall majority of seats in Parliament. As a consequence, the Sweden Democrats hold the balance of power, with both political blocs becoming ever more dependent on this far-right nationalist party in order to achieve a consensus for their political proposals in Parliament. The result of the 2010 electoral campaign can be interpreted as approval by more than 48% of Swedish voters for the neoliberal political work of the conservative Alliance. At the same time, the arrival of the Sweden Democrats suggests that nearly 6% of voters are against globalisation and immigration in order to defend a vision of a culturally homogenous Sweden.

Reading the political parties’ texts

The growth in inequality in the Swedish education system that has followed implementation of the neoliberal reform agenda (Swedish National Agency of Education, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Gustafsson 2006, 2007) has even been widely discussed in both research and media in recent years. None of the political parties’ participants in the 2010 electoral campaign could ignore this negative development concerning all children’s rights to an equitable education in Sweden. Therefore, I argue that an analysis of the texts produced by political parties during this electoral campaign helps in better understanding the current education policy for equity of these political parties. At the same time, the analysis can provide new knowledge about the education strategies suggested by these parties for the future and their possible impacts on the welfare state’s responsibility to guarantee all children the right to an equitable education.

Both the texts produced by each party separately and the texts produced by the conservative Coalition Alliance for Sweden and the Red-Green Coalition are included in this study. Thirty one documents included in these political parties’ websites during the 2010 electoral campaign were selected. They were chosen because they include political proposals concerning the school and child care sectors. The documents include political programmes, press releases and electoral propaganda.
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The texts were analysed by posing the following questions:

- Which social representations of pupils are present in the education policies/strategies suggested in these texts?
- Which social representations of student performance are present in the education policies/strategies suggested in these texts?
- Which social representations of equity are present in the education policies/strategies suggested in these texts?

In relation to these questions, the reading of the texts focused on the following aspects:

- How are pupils described and represented in the political texts? Which terms are employed to describe pupils?
- How are pupils’ performances described? Which descriptions of possible determinants of school success/school failure are presented? Which factors are considered as determinants? Which reasons are offered by the political parties to explain inequalities in pupils’ performances?
- Which kinds of arguments legitimise education policy for equity? Which strategies are suggested as solutions to deal with inequalities and to improve the Swedish school system so as to increase equity?

I first read each party’s document separately, and then in relation to the other documents produced by the parties in order to better understand each political party’s whole political manifesto for education. With the intention of understanding possible political compromises among different parties in the same bloc, I read each party’s own political texts and the texts produced by all parties belonging the same political bloc (Alliance for Sweden or the Red-Green Coalition).

The social representation of students as individuals with different needs

In the analysed material for the Swedish 2010 electoral campaign students are often represented as individuals with the right to receive a differentiated education according to their talents, interests and learning styles. This vision of students as individuals with different needs is dominant in all parties with the exception of the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna).

The Centre Party will have flexible and individually adapted schools. We need one school ... in which each student is considered unique with possibilities to learn...(Centre Party, 2010 [My translation])

In the analysed texts these individual differences are often described as “natural” characteristics of the children. At the same time, most of the texts lack a discussion of the role of socio-economic and gender structures in the construction of children’s differences in profiles, talents, learning times or needs. Further, the recognition of
and respect for individual differences are described in these electoral campaign texts as a form of children’s rights that the education system is obliged to guarantee.

... We need clear goals and teaching forms that suit each student. We know that children are different and learn in different ways. Therefore, schools must pay early attention to children with special needs. The school system must have clear values based on respect for the fact that people are different, while having the same human value (Christian Democrats, 2010a [My translation]).

This recognition of differences also includes the representation of a student’s achievement as a result of individual differences. Performance differences are articulated and expressed in terms of differences concerning children’s talents and learning styles. Both school practitioners’ knowledge and scientific knowledge are used by political parties to legitimise performance differences as a result of individual differences.

Children have different talents and interests. Some children are more theoretically-oriented, others are more practically-oriented. This is self-evident for all people working with children. Research claims that the development of different intelligences is an essential condition for the development of each individual. But the school system has developed in a more theoretical direction. We Christian Democrats believe that school work must be characterised by the understanding of difference (Christian Democrats Party, 2010b [My Translation]).

The social representation of student performance as a result of differences among students is often presented in political proposals arguing for an increase in individualised educational strategies in order to deal with individual differences. For example, the Swedish Green Party proposes to abolish the compulsory national timetable for each academic subject as a strategy to pay attention to different individual learning times.

The time schedule stipulates exactly how many teaching hours each academic subject will have.

But people are different. Some individuals needs more time to achieve the goals for Mathematics; others need more time to achieve the goals for Swedish. Without the compulsory timetable, teachers and students have more opportunities to organise teaching forms that suit each student (Swedish Green Party, 2009 [My Translation]).

Moreover, the Red-Green Coalition (Swedish Green Party, the Left Party of Sweden and the Social Democratic Party) stated in a joint political document that an adjustment of the national timetable concerning each academic subject in line with differences among schools and students is a necessary condition to guarantee students’ successful achievement. This adjustment means that “… the number of teaching hours per academic subject must vary from individual to individual in order to adapt school work to ‘what each student needs in order to achieve the academic subjects’ goals’” (Social Democratic Party 2010a).
The Swedish Green Party (2009) considers the continued decentralisation of the already strongly decentralised Swedish school system as an effective instrument to develop diversity and improve students’ successful achievement. In addition, this party suggests reducing the national central steering of the curriculum, the syllabus and the grade system. Further, it argues for the development of local steering for public schools and the introduction of a local curriculum and syllabus, instead of the current national compulsory arrangements and syllabus. The individualisation of the education system proposed by the Swedish Green Party even includes the possibility of schools applying to be exempted from implementing the national grade system stipulated by the steering documents for Swedish schools.

The conservative coalition “Alliance for Sweden” (the Moderaterna Party; the Centre Party; the Liberal Party of Sweden and the Christian Democrats) proposes to increase the number of school types, programmes and curriculum contents as an instrument to guarantee the right of children to equity in the Swedish school system. The increase in diversity in the school system is legitimised in terms of an adjustment to children’s desires, needs and learning times.

Certain students can proceed quickly and others need more support and help. Some go to university studies and others directly into the labour market. Each pupil and each student is a unique individual with their own goals and interests. Pupils and students cannot be expected to follow already established patterns (Alliance for Sweden, 2010).

Defining each student as “unique”, the conservative coalition the Alliance for Sweden proposed “one school for each student” in its electoral campaign texts. Focusing upon the singularity of each student, the conservative coalition claims for each student the right to self-development as long as it is possible and according to each individual’s own capacities.

The vision of one school for each student is presented by the conservative coalition the Alliance for Sweden as the only successful strategy to guarantee the right of children to an equitable education. This coalition considers the early school model of “one school for all” as having been unsuccessful because it could not avoid the development of social exclusion and inequalities in the Swedish education system. According to the Alliance for Sweden, instead of striving for the disappearance of differences in the school system, education policy and practices must instead aim to respond to each student’s unique and special needs by diversity and variation strategies in a market-oriented school context.

It is interesting to note that the one of the slogans used by the Social Democratic Party for the electoral campaign in the city of Stockholm was the following:

Children will be allowed to choose schools but the schools will not choose children (Social Democratic Party 2010b).

This slogan can be interpreted as revealing the absence of any questioning of market-oriented mechanisms. Based on supply and demand principles, the market-oriented
school system involves acceptance of the fact that a number of children cannot access the most popular school, even if they choose it. Further, this political slogan represents children as independent actors who choose schools themselves. In this way, the slogan neglects the central role of parents and families’ social backgrounds in school choice.

Even in cases where political parties propose standardised education strategies to guarantee all students’ rights to an equitable education, the representation of students as different individuals is present in these proposals. Strategies targeted at all students are conceived of in the context of a market-oriented school vision which aims to guarantee individual learning as well as individual knowledge development. For example, the Social Democratic Party used the title “One knowledge school for each student” to introduce strategies to guarantee all children the right to achieve the compulsory education goals and to receive an education from qualified teachers with a formal education. Use of the term “for each student” instead for “all students” can be interpreted as indicating a strategy to focus on individual development as well as students’ singularity. The use of “for each student” (Social Democratic Party 2010c) can also be interpreted as a political demonstration that the education model proposed by the Social Democratic Party will guarantee equity by diversity. Whilst the Social Democratic Party (2010c) proclaims in its electoral campaign to be against a market-economy in schools and to defend the vision of one school for all of the welfare society, the strategies suggested do not call into question the free choice, decentralisation and individualisation strategies introduced by the neoliberal reform at the end of the 1980s and start of the 1990s.

Examples of strategies suggested for all students in order to maximise the individual development of each student in the context of a market-oriented school vision include the following:

- An increase in economic resources for schools (Liberal Party, Red-Green Coalition)
- Greater economic resources for school building (Social Democratic Party)
- The development of teachers’ formal education (Conservative Coalition Alliance of Sweden and the Red-Green Coalition)
- The focus on Judeo-Christian values in the curriculum as an instrument to combat bullying at the school level (Christian Democrats)
- The systematic following up of student truancy (Christian Democrats; Liberal Party of Sweden)
- Dropping out registered in the grade report (Christian Democrats; Liberal Party of Sweden)
- Clear rules and a system of sanctions regarding school behaviour (Christian Democrats)
- Systematic discipline measures/control of student behaviour (Christian Democrats)
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- An increase in evaluation strategies (Conservative Coalition Alliance of Sweden)
- An increase of guaranteed teaching time (Christian Democrats)
- A focus on basic knowledge (Conservative Coalition Alliance for Sweden)
- The return to centralised steering (Liberal Party of Sweden)
- Limitations on exceptions regarding compulsory courses/subjects (Liberal Party of Sweden)
- Compulsory school from 6 years of age (10-year compulsory school) (Moderaterna Party, Centre Party)
- Abolition of the grades system (Left Party)

While some of these strategies can be considered as opposite to the development of “one school for each student”, they co-exist – often simultaneously – with a focus on individual differences as the basis of education policies for equity. For example, the Liberal Party’s proposal to return to centralised steering co-exists with the dominant representation of students as individuals and of diversity as a strategy for equity in the texts produced by this party. It is also of relevance that the proposal to return to a centralised steering model suggested by the Liberal Party is not present in the common political texts produced by the conservative coalition of which this party is a part. Another interesting example of co-existence is the Christian Democrats’ call to focus on Judeo-Christian values. This exists parallel to the neoliberal school system model proposed by the conservative coalition that proclaims free choice and emphasises respect for students’ differences, even religious differences.

Students as representatives of Swedish cultural heritage

While the social representation of students as individuals with the right to receive a differentiated education according to their backgrounds, talents, interests, needs and learning styles is dominant in the analysed documents, another alternative representation is also present. The Sweden Democrats depicts students, first of all, as heirs to Swedish cultural heritage. According to this representation, the goal of the school is to transmit the Swedish cultural heritage, norms and values to the new generation. Instead of emphasising differences, this party proposes homogeneity in the school education system. Focusing on the Swedish language, the Christian ethic and the nuclear family model, the Sweden Democrats is against the development of diversity and multiculturalism in the Swedish school system. As strategies to increase students’ standards of knowledge, this party proposes a return to centralisation, the restriction of free choice, as well as an increase in school work steered by teachers (Sweden Democrats 2010a, 2010b).

At the same time, by conceiving of diversity as a problem and by proposing only one model of Swedish culture and values in the education system, the Sweden Democrats risk totally neglecting Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). This article stipulates that the education of all children must be oriented to:
The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 29 (c).

From “one school for all” to “one school for each student”

Twenty years after implementation of the neoliberal reform introduced by the Social Democratic Party at the end of the 1980s, the vision of “one school for all students” no longer exists in Sweden; nor is there a welfare state that aims to guarantee a qualified education level for all children by developing the public school. Following the examples of other welfare states in the Western world, the role of the Swedish welfare state in the education sector was strongly reduced. By employing an argument to increase individual freedom, parents’ responsibility for children’s education and efficiency, the central goal of the Swedish education system, has been transformed to educating individuals able to compete in the globalised economy and labour market. As Bauman (2007) suggests, the globalisation and marketisation of the economy has obliged individuals in welfare states to become active hunters for their own success instead of becoming active citizens in democracies. The very comprehensive defragmentation and individualisation of welfare states that both Bauman (2007) and Castell (1997) have denounced is a present-day reality in Sweden. By replacing the vision of “one school for all” with a vision of “one school for each student”, since the end of the 1980s the dominant neoliberal political discourse has legitimised the transfer of the responsibility to provide an equitable education from the welfare state to local and private actors.

However, this neoliberal education policy based on economy utility, performativity and efficiency has not increased equity. Instead, the inequalities among municipalities, schools and pupils have grown. The fact that a “student’s socio-economic background has become more important in determining performance” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010a) is problematic for the Swedish welfare state which simultaneously calls for the right to an equitable education for all children.

The negative effects of 20 years of a neoliberal education policy on equity can be considered a good reason for the political parties to have included the issues of the marketisation and individualisation of schooling in the 2010 electoral campaign. Instead of questioning the fragmentation of the Swedish school system, most parties aim to continue and even intensify this orientation. The above analysis shows that the representation of students as individuals with increased needs for individualised education as well as the description of student performances in terms of differences concerning children’s talents, learning times, learning styles, needs, interests and background are dominant elements of these texts. The absence of a critical perspective concerning the negative impacts of a market-oriented strategy on the right of children to equity in the analysed documents provides strong grounds for arguing that the analysed political parties neglected questioning of the neoliberal model based on
the vision of “one school for each student”. Further, based on the dominance of the representation of children’s differences as “natural qualities” or “cultural/ethics qualities”, I argue that these documents avoid a discussion of the role of socio-economic and gender structures in the construction of difference. On this basis, I claim that by legitimising the model of “one school for each student” in the name of children’s rights to difference, without questioning the negative impacts of this model on equity, the conservative coalition and the Red-Green Coalition tend to explain the inequalities produced by socio-economic and gender structures as a result of individual differences.

Further, an intensification of neoliberal education strategies is proposed by the majority of political parties without questioning whether this intensification would further accelerate the defragmentation process of the Swedish education system introduced by neoliberalism. On one hand, these neoliberal strategies based on the intensification of differences tend to neglect the need to guarantee some equality of education standards for all children at the national level. The education strategies concerning the introduction of a local curriculum, local syllabus and local evaluation criteria proposed by the Swedish Green Party, or strategies for the development of different school types for different talents and profiles as the conservative coalition propounds, are examples of educational strategies that risk the breakdown of the Swedish school system. On the other hand, the Sweden Democrats’ strongly homogenised education model, based on the representation of students as heirs to the Swedish cultural heritage, completely neglects the recognition of diversity stipulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the equity goal included in the Swedish school steering documents.

At the same time, we can interpret the Sweden Democrats’ policy against globalisation and immigration in order to defend the vision of a culturally homogenous Sweden as a consequence of globalisation of the economy characterised by both Castell (1997) and Bauman (2007). The clear absence of state policies to develop common goals and strategies to protect citizens from globalisation of the labour market in Sweden has increased the feeling of insecurity and fear of “others”, in particular groups that are not in a position to take advantage of globalisation. Therefore, the Sweden Democrats’ anti-globalisation political discourse appeals to most young working class males without the education level required to become competitive hunters in these times of globalisation.

However, the model of a school based on the hegemonic cultural and social vision proposed by the Sweden Democrats offers an even more simplistic explanation of inequalities because it refuses to question the role of socio-economic differences in the production of cultural differences as well as the effects of the global economy. Instead, migrants, refugees and citizens belonging to other ethnicities and religions are considered a risk for the future of the Swedish welfare society.

As Bauman (2007) argued, we can observe that the defragmentation of common values and experiences and the intensification of individualisation have resulted in the
development of borders and frontiers among different social, religious and ethnical groups in societies in the 2010 Swedish electoral campaign.

Consequently, I argue that the description of pupils as different individuals with different school performances as natural reasons without questioning the social-economic reasons for those differences in the analysed political documents supports my argument that social representations function as an interpretation system that enables political parties to deal with the current Swedish welfare state’s contradictions in relation to equity goals. By describing pupils as different individuals with different talents and interests, both the Alliance and the Red-Green Coalition avoid any questioning of the negative consequences of the marketisation and individualisation of schooling for equity. The same occurs when the Sweden Democrats describe differences in students’ academic results as a result of a different cultural heritage and blame multiculturalism for the negative effects of neoliberal policies in education.

I also argue that social representations of pupils as individuals with considerable differences in their talents and interests give political parties the possibility to intensify the marketisation and individualisation of the Swedish school system without questioning the growth in inequalities concerning education standards among different pupils and schools. Consequently, inequalities in education are portrayed as a natural phenomenon instead of a social and political construction.

Finally, I argue that this analysis of the social representations of students and student performances presented in the Swedish 2010 electoral campaign can contribute to understanding why the right to an equitable education for all children still poses a challenge in Sweden and in other welfare states around the world.

Guadalupe Francia is an Associate Professor at the Department of Education at Uppsala University. Her main research interest is comparative education research on equity policies, education reforms and children’s rights. She is an expert in the Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training for the EU Commission, NESET.
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**Endnotes**

1. The Conservative Alliance was composed of the Moderaterna party (Moderaterna), the Centre Party (Centerpartiet), the Liberal Party of Sweden (Folkpartiet), and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna). In 2004 these four parties built a new political alliance, the Alliance of Sweden, that won the elections in 2006 and 2010.

2. The Swedish school system has a national timetable for each school subject which schools are obliged to follow. This national timetable stipulates at the national level how many compulsory teaching hours correspond to each academic subject. It was introduced during the 1990s as an instrument to guarantee some kind of national education standards within the strongly decentralised school system.
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