Crisis as a discursive legitimation strategy in educational reforms: A critical policy analysis

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Abstract
Around the mid-2000s a crisis discourse emerged in educational policy-making in the EU and in Sweden. Using the EU and Sweden as empirical references, this article explores how this crisis discourse has been and is employed by politicians and NGOs. Discourse Institutionalism is used as an overall theoretical framework focusing on how the crisis discourse is coordinated among powerful policy actors and communicated to the public, while critical discourse analysis is used for the systematic analysis. The crisis discourse implies that action has to be taken immediately and that there is no option other than to act, and the result shows that this normative discourse is becoming an important and powerful instrument in the hands of both national and transnational actors seeking public legitimacy for extensive reforms.

Keywords: educational reform, legitimation strategy, risk, crisis, discourse

Introduction
The rise of a global neo-liberal agenda has accentuated questions of how to understand and conceptualise the governing of the field of education. New infrastructures have been built alongside old ones and the influence of transnational and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in national educational reforms has increased. The nation-state has become destabilised as the natural site and scale of educational reforms and transnational policy actors governing at a distance have come to play an important role in shaping the area of education (Pettersson 2008; Sellar & Lingard 2013). This does not mean that the nation-state has lost its significance for policy-making; rather, it has become relativised when embedded in transnational spaces, constituted by different rationalities that are more complex, non-linear and open-ended in character (Lingard 2009; Rizvi 2009). Put differently, the transnationalisation of the field of education has meant a redistribution of power from the national government exercising legal power over the education system to transnational actors who have to rely on governing practices exercising discursive power to coordinate national policies (Lange & Alexiadou 2010), a ‘soft governance’ based on practices such as “negotiation, persuasion and voluntary agreed performance” (Lawn 2011, p. 264).

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In the case of Sweden, a shift towards governing through goals and objectives took place in the early 1990s when decentralising the education system. What could be described as ‘spaces of trust’ were thus created between the government and educational actors at different levels, including professional teachers when they were suddenly required to find their own ways to meet the centrally-set objectives in the national curriculum with very little guidance from the government, and to the market forces when state power was relocated to various non-governmental organisations. However, by being embedded in a highly competitive context such as the European Union the too many different ways that emerged soon came to be seen as problematic, jeopardising the political efforts for an equivalent school. This soon resulted in a shift from focusing on goals to focusing more on learning outcomes and results that can be easily measured, a rationale based on competitiveness and measurability that has permeated the education system in Sweden ever since. When speaking of trust in this article, it is thus not a diagnosis of the present relationship between the Swedish government and other actors involved in education, but a way to conceptualise the basic premises for governing the educational sector in a decentralised system. Although one could argue that the current governing rationale is characterised by spaces of mistrust rather than trust, it is still a discussion within the context of a decentralised education system where trust is fundamental, even if it is considered to be misused. In a decentralised education system focused on learning outcomes it is thus relevant to speak of an inherent tension between variation and standardisation caused by the constant need for comparability between nations, organisations and individuals. Power (1997 p. 138) states that “With trust there is always risk ...” and points to the inherent uncertainty that characterises the neo-liberal society due to its relocation and depoliticisation of state power to non-governmental actors. Seen from this perspective, soft governance becomes the management of risks exercising “persuasive power” with strong normative elements (Lawn 2011). Concepts like ‘community’ and ‘civil society’ are being reconstructed by the state, appealing more to citizens’ duties than citizens’ rights (Power 1997). Normative power is exercised through the communication of deterrent and necessary future scenarios, hopefully powerful enough to coordinate the future actions of organisations, groups and individuals.

This leads to three basic premises:

a. Education policy-making is not bound to national boundaries but takes place as part of a complex, dense and multidirectional transnational exchange.

b. The movement from government to governance within education creates ‘spaces of trust’ when state power is transferred to NGOs at different levels.

c. Due to a lack of legal power, normative discourses are becoming central for NGOs to govern the field of education.
Given these premises, this article explores the ways in which the crisis discourse exercises its normative power in both the transnational and national arena in order to legitimise educational reforms using the EU and Sweden as empirical references.

In the first part of this paper the methodological points of departure are elaborated. In the second part, the conception of the general development towards a neo-liberal “risk society” (Beck 1998; Power 1997) is focused on, paying special attention to its implications for education. The third part considers the Lisbon Process from the year 2000 onwards where EU member states for the first time agreed on a common overall goal to make the EU the most competitive knowledge-based economy with sustainable economic development, more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion (European Council 2000). The fourth part examines the two latest compulsory school reforms in Sweden while, finally, the article concludes with a cohesive discussion summing up the main points of the article.

**Methodological points of departure**

The overall theoretical framework of this article is inspired by a strand of neo-institutionalism labelled Discourse Institutionalism (Schmidt 2008, 2010). The neo-institutional analysis initially grew out of dissatisfaction among scholars at Stanford University who argued that the institutional theory had until then been too occupied with analysing organisations in terms of efficiency, thereby overlooking important aspects that had to do with culture. “Organizations such as schools and colleges, the Stanford argument went, are held together more by shared beliefs – ‘myths’ – than by technical exigencies or a logic of efficiency” (Meyer & Rowan 2006, p. 5). Instead of thinking about institutions as objective structures, they saw socially agreed norms and principles as the building blocks of institutions. Maintaining public legitimacy by conforming to norms and values thus became crucial for understanding the life of institutions. Meyer and Rowan (2006, p. 6) put it like this: “The emphasis in the new institutionalism, then, is on how people actively construct meaning within institutionalized settings through language and other symbolic representations”. One of the most influential strands of this new institutionalism is historical institutionalism that elucidates historically-developed institutional structures and practices focusing on regularities and path-dependencies. In spite of its contribution to understanding the evolutionary life of institutions, historical institutionalism has had difficulties in explaining institutional change (Schmidt 2008). Discursive institutionalism is hence an attempt to complement historical institutionalism by concentrating on “ideas conveyed through discourse following a meaning-based logic of communication” (Schmidt 2008, p. 3). While institutions are looked upon as external to agents serving as constraints within historical institutionalism, discursive institutionalism recognises that institutions, at the same time, function internally both as constraints and as constructs for agents creating and changing these institutions. Agents are thus at the same
time shaped by and shaping institutions through their communicative action. By concentrating on the substantive ideas developed and conveyed by ‘sentient’ agents in discursive interactions that inform their policy-oriented actions which, in turn, serve to alter (or maintain) institutions, I argue that discourse institutionalism takes a more dynamic view of change (and continuity) than, for example, historical institutionalism (Schmidt 2008, 2010).

Discourse institutionalism distinguishes between two aspects of discursive interaction, coordinative and communicative, which function as overarching theoretical concepts in this study. The coordinative discourse has to do with policy actors such as government officials, policy consultants, experts, lobbyists and others coordinating policy ideas as members of transnational epistemic communities sharing a set of cognitive and normative ideas of education. The communicative discourse, that takes place in the public sphere, involves “the presentation, deliberation and legitimation of political ideas to the general public” (Schmidt 2008, p. 310). Discourse matters, so to speak, because it elaborates ideas and persuades others of the necessity and/or appropriateness of a given course of action. Discourse institutionalism thus builds on previous strands of neo-institutionalism, but takes ideas and discourse more seriously into the analysis of institutional change and/or continuity, ideas that are not geographically bound but evolve in the communication between actors at different levels within as well as beyond national borders. National reforms therefore need to be interpreted in relation to this wider communicative context. Meyer and Ramirez (2003, p. 112) express it like this:

To explain national educational developments one must go beyond ‘national traditions’ and situate nation-states within a broader nation-state system. Only then does the world institutionalization of education emerge as a major dynamic to be analyzed.

Apart from being an educational actor itself and analysed in this study, the EU also functions as the wider communicative context to which Swedish educational reforms relate.

In order to examine these context-dependent discursive practices taking place within the EU and Sweden, Critical Discourse Analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Wodak, 2002, 2008; Reisigl 2008) is used for the systematic analysis. While discourse institutionalism contributes with a theoretical framework enabling an understanding of how ideas are communicated and legitimised within institutional settings, critical discourse analysis puts more emphasis on the analysis of specific texts as materialised expressions of such discursive interaction. Texts are part of discourse and thus part of social practices continuously making and remaking institutions. Critical discourse analysis also contributes with an understanding of discursive interaction, and thus also policy texts, as ‘sites of struggle’ where actors, ideologies and positions struggle for dominance (Wodak 2002). As mentioned,
this struggle is not bound to national borders but takes place within a wider transnational context. Looking into texts from actors at different levels and arenas thus becomes central when analysing coordinative and communicative discourses. In order to identify the strategies used to coordinate educational ideas within and between the EU and Sweden and to capture how they are communicated, I use Reisigl’s (2008) four different categories of discursive strategies when analysing the texts. The first strategy is nomination and refers to how different people, groups and/or phenomena are described. The second one is predication and has to do with the positive and/or negative attributes given to these discursively-constructed persons and/or phenomena. Argumentation involves which kinds of arguments are used to legitimise and/or delegitimise different positions. Perspectivation focuses on the starting points upon which the three above strategies are based.

The analysis builds on a close reading of official policy texts produced within the EU such as the Lisbon Strategy (European Council 2000; European Commission 2005), the Kok Report (Kok 2004), Europe 2020 (European Commission 2010) and the joint interim reports following the Education and Training 2010/2020 process (European Council 2004, 2006, 2008) and in Sweden such as the two latest national compulsory school curricula (Swedish National Agency for Education 1994; Swedish National Agency for Education 2011) and the government bills that preceded them (Swedish Government Official Report 1992; Swedish Government Official Report 2007). Following the principle of empirical triangulation proposed by Wodak (2008), empirical references are also made to newspaper articles as well as radio and television programmes in order to strengthen the argument of this article. These references are seen as complementary and thus not analysed in detail. They contribute to the wider socio-political contextualisation of the policy texts analysed. Including contextual material makes it possible to identify inter-discursive connections between different fields of action and provide a more detailed picture of the context in which the texts are communicating (Wodak 2008).

**Risk and education in a ‘space of trust’**

The 1990s was the decade when the neo-liberal agenda came to permeate the public sector, thereby challenging the traditional Keynesian form of the state. Aspects of government the welfare state had viewed as a political responsibility were now to be transformed according to market principles, and economic entrepreneurship replaced regulation as a guiding principle at an individual level (Rose & Miller, 1992). Put very simply, this entailed an ideal that sought to replace what was considered an inefficient and hierarchical bureaucracy with the presumed effectiveness of the market (Power 1997). Decentralised forms of public administration changed the topography of the policy-making landscape and created new and more distant forms of governance. Although policy-making in the neo-liberal and globalised society means more actors are involved in the policy-making process,
it does not mean that the presence of the state is less significant in the provision and regulation of public services, as Dale (2000) rightly points out. The state also plays an important role in the ways the global agenda set by influential NGOs become recontextualised and interpreted within specific national policy agendas. Or, as Bonal (2003, p. 160) states: "Institutional and national factors play a crucial role in determining the state legitimation strategies in education as well as in other policy fields". Transnational policy flows in education and other public sectors are thus not just a question of transfer but also a question of legitimacy. Since the nation-state has legal authority over the education system, policy flows of different kinds have to be processed within the specific political, cultural and economic context provided by the nation-state. Although it is still a central policy actor, Power (1997) shows that the nation-state’s role has shifted. The decentralisation of power has led to “a transformation of inspectorial style with ambivalent democratic credentials which demands trust in auditing” (Power 1997, p. 138). The space of trust created due to the decentralisation of state power within the neo-liberal setting thus calls for new forms of governing at a distance. Power talks about an “audit explosion” where an audit has become a guarantee that the trust placed in the hands of nations or professionals such as doctors or teachers is not misused. Auditing has thus become the management of possible risks. Although useful, audits themselves have inherent risks, Power continues, since they are not neutral with regard to individual and organisational performance. Instead, audits help shape and reshape performance and are themselves thus becoming in need of audit. Putting trust in audits to manage risk is thus becoming a risk itself since they cannot be considered to be neutral units but function as performative agents. Power (1997) thus points to a double risk embedded in the audit society that has to do with trust. First of all, the risk that arises from the decentralisation of state power by trusting the good intentions of the market and, secondly, the risk of putting trust in audits and the companies performing them.

These risks are not just imaginary risks. Beck’s (1998) notion of a “risk society” complements the picture given by Power by pointing out the future dimension embedded in the concept of risk. Risks are, by definition, something that is in the future. By speaking of the globalisation process transforming society and reflexive modernity, he directs attention to the human production of risks. Modern innovations have begun to provide answers for humanity in terms of risks such as pollution, starvation and climate change. The point here is that risks are not external to reflexive modernity but internal, defining the very nature of that society. Taken together, Power and Beck provide an image whereby risks and the management of risks are considered central for understanding and analysing today’s society.

Historically, educational policy-making has played an important role in the national management of future risks, while the mediation of the knowledge, competencies and values needed to cope with an uncertain future has been a core
issue and national school systems have been powerful tools in the hands of
governments. By decentralising state power, risk management has been ‘outsourced’
in the neo-liberal society, creating new spaces of trust that are not territorially bound
to national borders, but which still want to influence education taking place within
them. The EU has come to play an important role as a transnational arena for
education in Europe, where the Lisbon Council of 2000 has been described as a
turning point in the development of common standards coordinating education
systems in Europe (Grek & Lawn 2009). Taking the EU as an example shows how
these transnational policy spaces are actively contributing to the redefinition of
education (Alexiadou & van de Bunt- Kokhius 2013). In the EU case, this has meant
a discursive shift from having emphasised social aspects to a one-sided focus
on education supporting economic growth due to the demands of the competitive
neo-liberal state (Nordin 2011).

The neo-liberal agenda has thus meant a redistribution of power that is creating
new spaces where the educational agenda is set. Powerful actors such as the OECD,
the World Bank and the EU have become involved in the definition, structuring,
monitoring as well as the audit of education and through the use of ‘soft governance’
tools such as goals, objectives, bench marketing and ranking lists they can
coordinate the thinking and acting of nations, organisations and individuals.

A European structural crisis

The prosperous Europe

In March 2000 the European Council held an extra meeting in order to unite the
member states around a new common strategic goal to make the EU the most
competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. The aim was to strengthen the
work towards increasing employment and economic reforms. The Lisbon European
Council Conclusions were characterised by a positive belief in the EU’s ability to
meet these high expectations.

The forthcoming enlargement will create new opportunities for growth and employment.
The Union possesses a generally well-educated workforce as well as social protection
systems able to provide, beyond their intrinsic value, the stable framework required for
managing the structural changes involved in moving towards a knowledge-based society.
Growth and job creation have resumed (European Council, 2000, p. 2).

Europe is regarded as prosperous and well prepared for both internal and external
pressure. The so-called Open Method of Coordination (henceforth OMC) is be-
coming the main instrument in governing the intensified work of coordinating
the different policy sectors, including education, a ‘soft governance’ tool that relies
on the persuasive power exercised by standards, indicators and benchmarks in
order to coordinate the policy initiatives among the member states (Lawn 2011),
Europeanising education through the use of comparisons and communicated through numbers (Grek & Lawn 2009). Although transparent due to the need to monitor progress through the publication of different tables, the OMC offers a “significant degree of discretion in the implementation of the Lisbon goals, in order to allow different states a degree of accommodation to their existing national policy goals” (Alexiadou & van de Bunt-Kokhuis 2013, p. 351). Thus, it is the ‘soft power’ exercised through the OMC that is supposed to guarantee a certain speed and direction of travel for the common European project.

In February 2004 the Council and the Commission wrote a joint interim report on the progress of implementing the work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training (European Council 2004). In the report they were still very optimistic about the possibility of education and training in Europe becoming “a world-wide quality reference by 2010” (European Council 2004, p. 4), while also calling for urgent reforms. Focusing on reforms and investments in key areas, making lifelong learning a reality in all member states and establishing a Europe of Education are mentioned as the three main challenges for achieving the objective of becoming a world-wide quality reference for education. The Council and the Commission here show a great deal of trust in the capability and willingness of the member states to engage in this extensive policy work.

An emerging European crisis discourse

To complement the planned 2005 mid-term review of the progress of the Lisbon Process, the Commission established a high-level group headed by the former prime minister of the Netherlands Wim Kok to perform an independent review. The group was put together by a limited number of people representing politics, trade unions, employers and the economy. In the report published in November 2004, the language is quite different from the first joint interim report, even though it was although published in the same year. Already in the second paragraph of the document, their discontentment becomes visible with the performance of coordinating policy initiatives among the member states.

External events since 2000 have not helped achieving the objectives but the European Union and its Member States have clearly themselves contributed to slow progress by failing to act on much of the Lisbon strategy with sufficient urgency. This disappointing delivery is due to an overloaded agenda, poor coordination and conflicting priorities. Still, a key issue has been the lack of determined political action (Kok, 2004, p. 6).

Three aspects are brought forward as responsible for the lack of progress. The first is structural and refers to external factors out of reach of the member states’ influence. The second one we might call internal and refers to the overload of sometimes conflicting agendas between the transnational and national arenas as well as within the national context. The third and last aspect has to do with the understanding of
soft governance as creating ‘spaces of trust’ decentralising responsibility. The Kok Report directs its criticism to both the EU and the member states: The EU due to the lack of coordination, with OMC not being effective enough as a governance tool, and the member states due to the lack of commitment to the common agenda, and for misusing the trust given to them by the EU. But the criticism also points in a more individual direction. The Kok Report states: “Greater focus is required to build understanding of why Lisbon is relevant to every person in every household in Europe” (Kok 2004, p. 7). The Lisbon Strategy is thus meant to operate at a transnational, national, organisational and individual level and therefore responsibility has to be exercised at all of these levels. Drastic measures have to be taken, according to the Kok Report, to prevent a catastrophe: “At risk – in the medium to long run – is nothing less than the sustainability of the society Europe has built” (Kok 2004, p. 16). Further, the report states that there is no time to lose in Europe, “Must act now” (Kok 2004, p. 17). This new crisis rhetoric is then followed up in the planned mid-term review of the Lisbon Process.

Today, we see that progress has at best been mixed. While many of the fundamental conditions are in place for a European renaissance, there has simply not been enough delivery at European and national level. This is not just a question of difficult economic conditions since Lisbon was launched, it also results from a policy agenda which has become overloaded, failing co-ordination and sometimes conflicting priorities (European Commissions 2005, pp. 3-4).

The quotation reveals the Kok Report’s importance in interpreting the present situation for the European project. The main focus in the mid-term review is set on the structural aspect of the crisis where economic growth and jobs are the core issues in order to be competitive with other parts of the world. “Europe’s performance has diverged from that of our competitors in other parts of the world” (European Commission 2005, p. 4). The confident tone of the Lisbon Strategy and the first joint interim reports on education and training is by the mid-2000s replaced by the imaginary one of the EU being in a serious crisis. Robertson (2008) argues, “A sense of crisis now permeated the European agenda demanding a new kind of imaginary and action”. This was a crisis discourse that later became even stronger due to the impacts on global finances and politics of the September 2008 bankruptcy of the American investment bank Lehman Brothers (Nordin 2012).

**Crisis calls for urgent reforms**

The Joint Interim Report in 2006 reports that the gap between the EU and other competitor countries such as the USA continues when it comes to key knowledge-economy sectors and that countries like China and India are catching up. The crisis had revealed several structural problems, for instance the average growth rate was below that in comparable countries, a smaller share of the population was employed
and the declining population starting in 2013/2014 were mentioned as especially important problems. The report argues that the serious situation in Europe calls for urgent and more effective reforms and that the “pace of reforms must be accelerated” (European Council 2006 p. 8). While the 2006 report mainly focuses on the implementation of lifelong learning strategies in national education policy and synergies between education and the labour market, the next report published in 2008 broadens the reform focus to include pre-primary school. It reports that reforms have been made in member states by reconceptualising the knowledge content to be taught and learned and also an extension of compulsory schooling to parts of pre-primary schools. Including the pre-primary level can thus be seen as an expression of a European ‘schoolification’ of pre-primary schools based on the same structure, content and design for the central monitoring of primary schools. Although progress is reported in several areas, almost all of them are described as areas falling behind when compared to other countries or continents. “Implementation is now the challenge. In many cases, this has just started. The credibility of the strategies depends on linking them to policy measures” (European Council 2008, p. 14). Eight years after the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, the Council concludes that the implementation process in many cases has just started and must therefore accelerate. In order to achieve the Lisbon goals, the pace of educational reforms needs to speed up and they need to cover more areas of education and they also need to enhance standardisation and central monitoring.

When in 2010 the Commission launched a new growth strategy for Europe (Europa 2020), the financial crisis due to the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers was a fact. The Commission concludes, “The crisis has wiped out years of economic and social progress and exposed structural weaknesses in Europe’s economy” (European Commission 2010, p. 5). Further, the Commission states the exceptional magnitude of the financial crisis “The recent economic crisis has no precedent in our generation” (p. 7). José Manuel Barroso makes the following statement in the preface to Europe 2020.

The crisis is a wake-up call, the moment where we recognise that ‘business as usual’ would consign us to a gradual decline, to the second rank of the new global order. This is Europe’s moment of truth. It is the time to be bold and ambitious (European Commission 2010, p. 2).

In a very fateful tone, Barroso makes it clear that the crisis holds no options but to speed up the pace of reform, “business as usual” is not an option he says. In response to the crisis, the Commission sets out a whole range of comprehensive reforms centred around three main priorities:

1. Smart growth: developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation.
2. Sustainable growth: promoting a more resource-efficient, greener and more competitive economy.
3. Inclusive growth: fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion (European Commission 2010, p. 5).

Within these prioritised areas, seven flagship initiatives supposed to catalyse progress are put forward. In addition to the flagship initiatives, the Commission emphasises the need for stronger monitoring by launching a dual governance structure. First, the thematic approach following up the progress in each of the initiatives and, second, a system of country reporting where each member state presents its present policy work and then receives recommendations from the Commission on how to proceed. The reform programme also strives for a closer connection between the thematic reforms and the EU’s overall fiscal policies.

Thus, the crisis discourse that emerged in the mid-2000s and was further strengthened due to the financial crisis in 2008, exercises its persuasive power permeating a ‘no-alternative rationale’ in the European reform discourse giving the member states no option but to act, and to act now.

**A Swedish professional crisis**

*From trust to mistrust in Swedish compulsory school reform*

In the Swedish Government Official Report 1992 (SOU 1992:94) that preceded the national compulsory school curriculum in 1994 (Lpo 94) different reasons for a new curriculum were discussed. One of the most prominent was that of a changing environment. The present compulsory school curriculum was a product of the 1960s’ school reforms and considered to be out of joint with the times. Central to the report was the changing living conditions for children due to these changes. Four aspects were mentioned in the report, the first being the changing family constellation where the conjugal family was said to be losing ground in favour of children living with only one parent. Some of the former responsibility of parents, the report argued, had thus moved to the school and the professionals. The second aspect was the diversification and internationalisation of Swedish society due to the growing number of migrant workers and the third aspect involved the challenges caused by technological advances and the human effect on climate change. The fourth and final aspect mentioned in the report was the ongoing decentralisation within companies as well as the public sector. Although the report identified these fundamental changes in society, it was confident that the challenges they brought with them were manageable if planned for wisely. In 1991 responsibility for the Swedish school’s organisation and finances was decentralised from the state to the municipalities and in the curriculum reform for the compulsory school that followed in 1994 the former principle of governing through subject content was replaced by a more decentralised way of governing through goals and objectives. This was a time of extensive educational reforms characterised by a positive tone when it came to managing...
future challenges. In addition to a more decentralised school system, the Committee working with the report (SOU 1992:94) also tried to enhance democratic attitudes to citizenship by emphasising ethical and moral aspects as central to the school curricula.

In 2006 the Swedish government decided to appoint a special investigator to investigate how the goal-oriented system launched ten years before was actually working. In the Swedish Government Official Report 2007 (SOU 2007:28), handed over to the minister responsible, the failure of the Swedish school was considered to be a fact. The ‘space of trust’ created as a result of a decentralised system, where teachers themselves should select and organise the content to be taught, had led to what the report called “a fuzzy school”. The report also criticised the compulsory school curricula for being too ideological. Values and principles had become more important than the actual knowledge content, the report argued, and the goal system guiding teachers’ work too vague and imprecise for the teachers to understand. Altogether, this had created “a fuzzy school” with teachers unable to uphold a nationally equivalent school. Between the two curriculum reforms there is thus a significant discursive shift that can be described as a movement from trust to mistrust in the educational discourse both when it comes to the overall school system, the national curricula and the teacher’s capability.

Politics and media in a discourse coalition around the Swedish school crisis

In addition to the criticism contained in the report, the public debate at the time had started to focus on the declining Swedish PISA results. Although important, the PISA results had seldom been made the core issue, instead it remained in the background as a ‘factual basis’ for the discussion making them unquestionable and therefore not to be discussed. In other words, the PISA results brought ‘hard evidence’ strengthening the taken-for-granted point of departure concerning the Swedish school being in a serious crisis. Since Sweden then had a right-wing government, the fuzzy school was at first labelled a social democratic school, but after a while it came to function as the very description of the Swedish school crisis used by both right- and left-wing sympathisers. The fuzzy school was contrasted with the school proposed by the right-wing parties talking about the need to reintroduce knowledge content, a dualistic conceptual framework that came to permeate much of the public and political school debate at the time. The ideological appropriation of the debate was strengthened even more due to the discourse coalition formed by politicians and the mass media on both the school crisis itself and on how to conceptualise it. In two leading Swedish newspapers (Dagens Nyheter and Svenska Dagbladet), the term “fuzzy school” [flumskola] turns up for the first time in 2002. A search in December 2011 using the term produced 24 hits in Dagens Nyheter and 32 hits in Svenska Dagbladet. Searching for the term in one of the main tabloids (Aftonbladet) at the
same time yielded 29 hits. These papers sympathise with both right-and left-wing parties and show the broad acceptance of use of the term “fuzzy school” as an interpretative concept to describe the present state of the Swedish school. Although emphasising different aspects, there is a political consensus in describing the school as being in a serious crisis.

Apart from the emerging crisis discourse in political debate and in leading newspapers, several programmes on radio and on television started to debate the school situation in terms of crisis. During 2011, the public service radio prepared a series of programmes on the theme, for example, one programme was called “Crisis in school” [Kris i Skolan], and another “The unjust school” [Den orättvisa skolan]. Television offered a series of programmes called “The world’s best crap school” [Världens bästa skitskola]. Dagens Nyheter published a series of articles in the same year under the heading “Home to school” [Hem till skolan] where the many problems of the Swedish school were scrutinised. Those articles had a great impact on the Swedish debate and became the obvious point of departure for most public debates discussing school matters. There is thus an extensive consensus in the Swedish debate among the political parties as well as the mass media in describing the school situation in terms of a crisis taking off in 2002 and accelerating from the mid-2000s onwards.

Reform explosion in the wake of the crisis

In response to the crisis discourse that permeated the Swedish school debate a whole battery of reforms was launched in 2011. A new national teacher education, a new school law, new curricula for the compulsory school and the upper secondary school, a new and more differentiated grading system for the compulsory school, and an increased number of national tests starting in grade 3 instead of grade 5 together made it the most intense reform period in Swedish school history. The principles underlying the reforms were a need for simplification and a more centralised governing system. The possibility for teachers to interpret the steering documents in different ways had to be reduced. The curricula should be written in an easier language using fewer words and the national tests performed in grades 3, 6 and 9 should guide teachers’ assessments in a more direct way than before. In spite of this reform explosion in 2011, the crisis discourse would not go away for it had already become institutionalised in the public school debate in Sweden. As an example of this, an article was published in Dagens Nyheter online on 10 May 2013 (Kärrman 2013) where the Social Democrats state they want to take immediate action against the school crisis, that the reforms had contributed to an overload of bureaucracy for teachers, revealing a different angle now discussing the 2011 reforms as part of the problem but still using the same vocabulary. Regardless of the political position and/or angle discussed, the crisis discourse had thus permeated the debate
such that the crisis discourse had become a taken-for-granted assumption whenever the Swedish school is being discussed.

**Concluding remarks**

*From trust to mistrust*

Both within the European and the Swedish arenas there is thus a crisis discourse emerging around the 2000s (Nordin 2012). The arguments for the crisis gain their power through the use of ‘soft governance’ practices built on comparative data (Grek & Lawn 2009). Due to the ‘spaces of trust’ created in the decentralised public sector, quantitative measurements of progress are becoming a central instrument for governing education and, at the same time, an important part of the normative discourse communicating what course of action is considered desirable. The soft governance exercised by the EU and other NGOs hence rests on two aspects. First, the tools produced especially for coordinating the agenda between different policy actors and, second, a normative discourse (where, for example, comparable data are becoming an important element) able to persuade the actors to perform in a similar way. In the case of the EU, the OMC was launched as such a governing tool intended to coordinate policy-making among the member states. But as Power (1997) points out, tools for monitoring and auditing are by no means neutral, they are designed for a specific purpose and driven by specific ideals about quality and progress. The OMC launched in 2000 was built on the idea of member states comparing and inspiring each other in a positive and mutual process and thus governing member states, organisations and individuals to act consistently in accordance with the common objectives formulated in the Lisbon Strategy. But relying on soft governance without the possibility of exercising legal power also means taking a risk if those who are governed do not adjust to the ideas that are communicated.

Although similarly communicating mistrust, the crisis discourses emerging in the EU and Sweden are constructed somewhat differently. In the European case, the crisis was mainly seen as a structural problem where both member states and their citizens were held accountable. In the Swedish case, the crisis was instead seen as a professional problem. It was the teachers not being able to uphold an equivalent school that were to be blamed. They were the ones to be held accountable for the falling figures in the PISA surveys. Although constructed in different ways, the solutions proposed to solve the crisis are quite similar. In both cases, rationalisation and central control are put forward as coordinating principles. The crisis discourse thus drains the educational practice of trust, demanding expanded and strengthened monitoring.

In the wake of the crisis discourse both arenas launched extensive reforms, which shows its normative power to legitimate such initiatives. While the risk society calculates possible risks in a distant and unknown future, the crisis discourse calls
for immediate action in response to a situation already known (at least for those powerful actors communicating the crisis), changing the time horizon for those involved in the policy-making process in a more reactive direction.

**Policy-making as crisis management**

One of the fundamental statements underpinning the concept of globalisation is that the present time is undergoing a major transformation. Although interpreted in various ways, there is an understanding of today’s society as radically different from previous ones. The understanding of today’s society as very different from those before, as argued by the EU and the Swedish government, relegates previous experiences of education and policy-making to the historical landfill. If we combine the lack of historical experience embedded in the globalisation concept with the lack of future perspective embedded in the crisis discourse, a picture emerges in which neither history nor the future has any relevance in the policy-making process. Policy-making thus runs the risk of becoming a narrow-minded enterprise of problem-solving instead of historically informed planning for a future society always different but still recognisable. Put differently, the notion of time thus collapses in the context of a globalised society when people act out of a sense of crisis and the only rational thing to do is to run for the emergency exit. As much as the term crisis implies a lack of time, it implies a need for powerful action as well, legitimating extensive reforms by responsible politicians and NGOs.

**Pedagogical practice in a context of crisis**

The crisis discourses as communicated in the EU and Sweden thus give pedagogical practice quite a special framing. Due to the mistrust permeating the educational space in the wake of the crisis discourse there is a demand for strengthened monitoring and auditing. Standardised procedures like national tests and more grades instead of teachers’ judgements are expected to bolster equality. Steering documents with fewer words and simpler language are supposed to guarantee more uniform teaching across the nation, a crisis discourse characterised by a ‘recentralisation of trust’. Although the crisis discourse can to some extent be seen as an ontological description of a harsh and brutal reality caused by a financial crisis and pollution for example, this paper has explored how the crisis discourse simultaneously has an epistemological approach coordinating ideas and exercising persuasive power when communicated by powerful policy actors such as the EU and national governments and the media. The crisis discourse has been given wide social legitimacy for telling the ‘truth’ about the EU as a global competitor and the current state of the Swedish school.

From a pedagogical point of view, reforms enhancing measurement and mistrust seem like a passable measure driving out the concern for what constitutes good education and replacing it with instrumental short-term thinking. Demonstrating
decisiveness and strength among stakeholders is becoming more important than long-term and sustainable planning due to the stress brought by the crisis discourse. Without neglecting that the crisis is generating real problems for real people, the critical challenge pointed out in this paper is to show how at the same time the crisis is being used by powerful actors to guide human thinking and action in a certain direction.

Finally, it is worth remembering that for a long time in the history of education crisis has also been discussed as an important aspect of human cultivation, something that is not mentioned in the policy texts. In a time of short-termism and narrow-minded ideas of what education could be about, revitalising historically-rooted ideas and concepts stands out as one of the more progressive things to do in order not to lose sight of the broader picture. Unlike what is communicated, trust and reflection seem more important than ever in a time of crisis and mistrust, and producing alternative interpretations a way to take on a more profound form of responsibility than asked for by politicians and NGOs, linking the crisis to human growth instead of economic growth.

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