De-scandalisation and international assessments: the reception of IEA surveys in Sweden during the 1970s

Joakim Landahl

Department of Education, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract
This article is concerned with the early phase of international large-scale assessments. Drawing on media discussions before and after the release of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) surveys of 1973, the chapter discusses the relationship between international assessments, scandalisation, and de-scandalisation, with a specific focus on the interpretation of the comprehensive school reform in Sweden. The first section of this article deals with the early years of the 1970s, a time in which international data on education played a minimal role in educational discourse, creating space for other ways of discussing the perceived quality of schooling. The second section covers the effects of the IEA surveys released in 1973, whose positive results took Sweden by surprise, leading to what could be called a de-scandalisation. Finally, the implications of the emergence of international testing are analysed in terms of what de-scandalisation meant in this particular historical phase, and what it tells us about the nature of large-scale assessments.

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that international comparisons of educational systems can result in crisis rhetoric. Classical examples like the Sputnik crisis of 1957 or A Nation at Risk from 1983 demonstrate that international comparisons have often created self-doubt over educational performance in a given country. More recently, national educational systems across the world have suffered from a series of crises related to large-scale assessments. The introduction of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000 resulted in discussions about the dire condition of schools in a number of countries, including Japan, Norway, New Zealand, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany (e.g., Sjöberg 2015; Takayama 2008; Waldow 2009). It is tempting to describe our current times as ‘the century of the PISA shocks’.

However, previous research has paid less attention to the opposite phenomenon: how nations with a history of poor results suddenly succeed in international large-scale assessments, or how a previously negative national self-image might turn into a positive one; that is, how a scandalised educational system becomes de-scandalised. This omission has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the nature of international assessments, not least when it comes to understanding the dynamism of international hierarchies and national self-images. Steiner-Khamsi (2003) noticed that international assessments can result in three extreme types of policy reactions: scandalisation,
Scandalisation and glorification are opposites; the former is about highlighting the weaknesses of one’s own educational system as a result of comparison, and the latter is about highlighting the strengths of one’s own educational system. While it is reasonable to think about these reactions as opposites, this article is interested in the dynamism of how an educational system can be valued, and how opinions on education in a country can shift from scandalisation to glorification and vice versa.

In order to emphasise this transformational aspect, I have chosen to speak about de-scandalisation instead of glorification. The use of de-scandalisation highlights the phenomenon of crises that either cease to exist or are reversed; in the case of this article, the crisis has to do with transformations in the perception of the quality of schooling. This kind of phenomenon can be studied both in contemporary society and in the early history of large-scale assessments. This article adopts a historical perspective on the issue of how international comparisons relate to the perception of crises. The article explores processes of de-scandalisation by analysing media debates on education in Sweden during the 1970s, when international large-scale assessments started to play a major role in public discourse for the first time. The article also attempts to shed light on a critical juncture in the history of education, characterised by the emergence of a new way of measuring education. It looks quite closely at the role of a significant actor: the IEA. Comparing educational discourse before and after the release of the IEA’s Six Subject Survey in 1973, the article discusses the impact of large-scale assessments on perceptions of crises in education.

The IEA was a pioneer of international large-scale assessments; it began as a network in the 1950s at the UNESCO Institute for Education and continues to be a major actor in international large-scale assessments today, responsible for, among other studies, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). In contrast to the OECD’s PISA, which has been well studied by outsiders, the IEA is an organisation whose history has primarily been described by insiders, that is by researchers who have been active in the organisation themselves (e.g., Husén 1979; Papanastasiou, Plomp, and Papanastasiou 2011; see also Pettersson 2015; Morgan 2009).

By going back to the early history of large-scale assessments, it is possible to see both recurring patterns and changes in terms of how international tests shape perceptions of education in a given country. Focusing on the early 1970s in Sweden, this article is concerned with a phase in history in which two major educational projects emerged; on the one hand a national process: the Swedish comprehensive school reform (Paulston 1966), and on the other hand an international process: the emergence of international large-scale assessments as conducted by the IEA. These processes coincided: the first curriculum for the comprehensive school was released in 1962 and the IEA published its first pilot study in 1962 (Foshay et al. 1962). The fact that the two processes coincided made it possible to see the IEA surveys as a kind of evaluation of the comprehensive school reform, which at the beginning of the 1970s had finally been completed in Sweden. The comprehensive school reform in Sweden was a gradual process that spanned decades. The beginnings are usually traced to the School Commission of 1946, which proposed that a common nine-year school should be established, replacing older forms of secondary education such as grammar schools, girls’ schools, and vocational schools. In the 1950s, a pilot project which experimented with comprehensive schools started, and in 1962 the first curriculum for the comprehensive school, grundskolan, was released. This curriculum allowed for pupils to choose different educational tracks in the final school year, Year 9. The tracking system was, however, abolished in 1969, when the second curriculum for elementary schools was introduced.

There are two reasons why the early 1970s is an interesting time period for studying the relationship between crisis perception and international assessments. First, the 1970s was a time in which the IEA consolidated its status as a major international organisation with expertise in international assessments. Certainly, the organisation had been active before. It had already, in the 1960s, produced two studies: a pilot study covering several subjects (Foshay et al. 1962) and a more ambitious mathematics study (Husén 1967a; 1967b). But it was in the 1970s that the organisation started to
publish a wide array of reports, on different subjects. A major project was launched, the Six Subject Survey, in which approximately 258,000 students and 50,000 teachers from 9700 schools in 21 different countries participated. The chairman of the IEA, Torsten Husén, described the project as unprecedented: ‘A study of this magnitude was a gigantic task larger than any previous study in the social sciences’ (Husén 1973a, 10). Thus, the early 1970s is an interesting phase in the evolution of early large-scale assessments. The second reason for focusing on the 1970s, is that it was also a period in which the influence and role of large-scale assessments was more irregular and at times played a very restricted role in public discourse; this stands in contrast to the practice of continual and regular surveys that has emerged in the twenty-first century. There is a stark contrast between the early years of the 1970s, when there were few references in Swedish educational research to what happened in other countries, and the period from 1973 to 1976, when the release of the Six Subject Survey resulted in Swedish education suddenly being discussed from an international perspective. By covering both periods, this article compares a time when international large-scale assessments did not influence educational discourse to one when international large-scale assessments started to have influence, thus revealing a significant shift in the role of international large-scale assessments in educational reform.

The article is divided into two main sections. The first section deals with the early years of the 1970s, a time in which international data on education played a minimal role in educational discourse, thus creating space for other ways of assessing the perceived quality of schooling. The second section covers the effects of the IEA survey released in 1973, whose positive results took Sweden by surprise. Finally, the implications of the shift towards international testing are analysed in terms of what de-scandalisation meant in this particular historical phase, and what it tells us about the nature of large-scale assessments.

2. Data and methods

The main sources used are articles from Swedish newspapers during the time period 1970–1977. The newspapers include two morning papers: the conservative Svenska Dagbladet and the liberal Dagens Nyheter, and two tabloids: the liberal Expressen and the social democratic Aftonbladet. There are two reasons why the sources are relevant in this context. The first is that the IEA was an organisation that showed an interest in communicating with the press, for example with press conferences and press releases. The second is the central role that the media in general tends to play in crisis discourses. Media plays a fundamental role in constituting all kinds of crises (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle 2012; Katz and Liebes 2007). This means that the media can not only construct but also deconstruct crises; apart from scandalising, the media can also de-scandalise social phenomena.

The selected newspaper articles were accessed at the Royal Library in Stockholm, which recently digitalised several national and local newspapers and made them digitally searchable. Search criteria were used to find two types, or categories, of articles. For both categories, the time period was 1970–1977, making it possible to compare whether and how the crisis discourse was affected by the release of the IEA survey in 1973. The first category is articles describing some sort of crisis or decline in comprehensive schools. In order to identify such articles, the word kunskapsstandard (academic standards), was used. The second category is articles about the IEA; the search terms used to identify these articles were ‘IEA’; ‘evaluation of educational achievement’; and ‘Torsten Husén.’ Taken together, these two categories of articles make it possible to analyse if and how the understanding of educational crises in Sweden were affected by the release of the IEA reports.

Identifying articles using search terms has its limitations. The Optical Character Recognition (OCR) technique still has some flaws when it comes to reading older newspapers and relying on search terms always involves the risk of missing vital information (Jarlbrink, Snickars, and Collander 2016). Nonetheless, there are advantages in using digitalised newspapers, since it becomes possible to search a great number of newspapers, national as well as local. One interesting fact is that local newspapers at that time did not seem to cover the IEA, while major, national newspapers devoted
much space to the reports, including large articles on their front pages. This indicates that large-scale assessments were beginning to make a footprint in the national media, but that they were still not established enough to be picked up by local newspapers.

3. The era of reforms: discussing the comprehensive school without international data

The first years of the 1970s in Sweden were characterised by rather intense discussions on the standard of education. These discussions seldom referred to developments of education abroad, but rather to the national past. Instead of comparing Swedish education to what was happening in other countries, it was the Swedish education of preceding decades that tended to be invoked. The condition of education at the time was related to its historical precedents, and the question was: is education in Sweden developing or deteriorating? This question left room for subjective projections on the past in order to make it fit a narrative of development or decline. The background to this debate about academic standards was that Swedish education had changed significantly during past decades. The most important change was the introduction of the comprehensive school reform, which meant that the old, more selective school system was gone, and a new kind of school for all pupils up to the age of 15 was created. The first curriculum for the comprehensive school was introduced in 1962, and in 1969 a new curriculum was introduced with an even more inclusive structure, where nearly all students attended school together until Grade Nine. Other recent changes in the school system included the abolition of the six-day school week and of the final exam in the gymnasium, the studentexamen. The origins to the reforms can be traced back to the 1940s, when the 1946 Royal School Commission formulated the blueprint for a nine-year compulsory comprehensive school. The struggle towards a more inclusive, democratic school system had thus been a long process, and the early 1970s were the time to pass judgement on school reforms that resulted from this process. Discussions on Sweden’s educational reforms were held both in Sweden and abroad.

In 1972, The Guardian described the changes in Sweden as overwhelming: ‘For British education reformers the Swedish school system is like a Swedish Christmas tree loaded with presents – it has so many reforms it is difficult to know where to begin’ (September 19, 1972). Swedish education was also actively marketed abroad. A selected bibliography of books and articles about the Swedish comprehensive school reform from 1966 lists 60 titles, mostly in English, and primarily written by Swedish authors (Paulston 1966; see also Nilsson 1987). This list indicates that the Swedish school reform was an international trademark that also benefitted individual careers. Torsten Husén, professor of pedagogy and chairman of the IEA, wrote extensively on the Swedish school reform and his international networks were stimulated partly by the fact that he represented a country that was considered interesting in other parts of the world. However, the reform was not seen as a clear-cut success across the world. As Husén (1989) argued in a subsequent paper, Sweden had been ‘exemplary both ways.’ That is, it had been used both as a positive and a negative example. Some saw it as a Mecca for school reformers, whereas others presented it as a bad example (see also Greveling, Amsing, and Dekker 2014). An article in the Daily Mail from 1972 expressed serious doubts over Swedish education. The article ‘Don’t let them tell you schools like this are right for us’ suggested that Sweden’s reform had exercised an influence abroad, but that the Swedes themselves were having second thoughts about it:

The Swedes led Britain in building giant comprehensive schools. They led in encouraging pupil power, raising the school leaving age and giving sexual freedom to their children. Now they are beginning to wish they hadn’t. (September 18, 1972)

The Swedish school reform was thus seen as an interesting example abroad, albeit not uncontroversial, and opinions on it were divided. In a way, this polarisation mirrored a wider polarisation of the image of Sweden abroad (Tomasson 1970; Huntford 1971), but it was also a result of the lack of international standards for comparing systems of education. In the absence of international
assessments, no organisation or entity had managed to monopolise the image of what characterised the Swedish education system, or any national educational system.

Also in Sweden, the comprehensive school reform was controversial among some groups. The conservative press, together with teachers in secondary schools connected to the traditional more selective school system, as well as some researchers (most notably Sjöstrand 1960), expressed criticism and doubts over the new school system. This criticism was partly centred on the concept of academic standards. In the early 1970s critics of the new, comprehensive schools argued that Sweden had witnessed a decline in academic standards. It was, for example, claimed that pupils were bad at writing and that the allocated time for important school subjects had decreased (Expressen, May 18, 1972). Support for the claims of a decline in academic standards was often based on what groups outside of the compulsory school system were said to have reported; people from universities or from working life were cited as dissatisfied with the knowledge of the newly-educated pupils. (Dagens nyheter, January 15, 1971; Svenska Dagbladet, March 31, 1971; Svenska Dagbladet, August 9, 1971).

However, this idea of decline was not shared by all. There was no consensus regarding how the development of Swedish education could be described, and some argued that schools had developed over time. One of the proponents of the ‘new school’ was the Minister of Education, the Social Democrat Ingvar Carlsson. At the Nordic school meeting in Stockholm in 1970, he gave a speech in which he defended the country’s educational reforms. He questioned the idea of a decline, arguing that the average pupil in the new system had more knowledge than his or her peers in the old system. It was ‘beyond doubt’, he said, that 16-year-olds, on average, had ‘significantly better’ knowledge than 16-year-olds had 25–30 years ago (Tjugonde Nordiska skolmötet, 1970, 19). Carlsson admitted that the average level at upper secondary school had declined a little, but that was, he claimed, due to the significant rise in ‘medium talented pupils’ now taking part in that level of education. He also claimed that assertions about the decline in academic standards were based partly on certain kinds of values about what counted as knowledge. While he admitted that knowledge in Latin had declined since 1930, he was convinced that knowledge of civics during the same period had developed. Carlsson’s speech signalled an optimistic view of education that was underpinned by ideals of social cohesion and equality. The conservative newspaper Svenska Dagbladet, on the other hand, argued that Carlsson’s view of Swedish schools was naïve. Commenting on his speech, the newspaper described Carlsson as the educational equivalent to Pangloss in Voltaire’s Candide, ‘sitting among the ruins of the Swedish educational system, saying that we are living in the best of possible worlds’ (Svenska Dagbladet, August 9, 1970). In order to support this assessment, the newspaper referred to two professors and an associate professor, who were cited as saying that the university students of the day knew less than students had previously.

Another example of the different ways of understanding education in Sweden at the beginning of the 1970s is represented by the competing perspectives of the Swedish National Board of Education, Skolöverstyrelsen, and the leading right-wing party, Moderaterna. Skolövertyrelsen was cited in 1971 as saying that it was meaningless to claim that Swedish education had experienced a decline unless such claims were supported by criteria of what counted as knowledge. This was exemplified by the issue of how to balance a decline in spelling with a development in the ability to express oneself both in writing and in speech (Expressen, August 26, 1971). This issue led to a debate between the party leader of Moderaterna, Gösta Bohman, who accused the board of being too loyal to the ongoing reforms (Svenska Dagbladet, September 8, 1971) and the director of the National Board of Education, who insisted that it was perfectly reasonable to defend the Swedish school reforms (Svenska Dagbladet, September 30, 1971).

In other words, the question of whether Swedish schools were getting better or worse at the beginning of the 1970s was answered very differently by different people. However, everybody seemed to agree that major reforms had been introduced, and that Swedish education was undergoing significant changes. This was an era of reforms, but the controversial issue was whether it was also an era of improved academic outcomes. When it came to the question of how the reforms could be assessed, there was considerable disagreement. One possible way of explaining this polarised climate is the
limited role that international large-scale assessments played in the discussion. Arguments about the quality of schooling were mainly based on anecdotal examples, with no substantial international data. The IEA had released results from an international survey in 1967, but they were based on just one school subject (mathematics) and were seldom referred to in the discussions in the early 1970s.

4. The era of international data and the de-scandalisation of Swedish education

The lack of international, quantitative measurements for education started to change in 1973, when the IEA released its first reports from the Six Subject Survey. The survey, which covered 21 countries, included results on student achievement in civic education, reading comprehension, English as a foreign language, French as a foreign language, literature education, and science. The results were presented in nine volumes between 1973 and 1976. The project represented an ambitious attempt to make large parts of schooling comparable. In effect, the survey provided new information on national school systems that could be used in discussions about the performance levels of schools in different countries.

In order to understand the role of the IEA in the evaluation of the Swedish school system, it is important to note some of the organisation’s features. Arguably, the IEA studies were compatible with the idea of a comprehensive school reform in the sense that they did not focus only on the elite. International comparisons of any kind of performance can, generally speaking, come in two forms. On the one hand, there are comparisons based on the performance of the elite, and on the other hand there are comparisons based on statistical averages of whole populations. Formal competitions, such as sports, typically belong to the first category, whereas a large number of metrics, such as gross domestic product (GDP), exemplify the second category. International comparisons of school performance can also come in both of these forms. When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, it contributed to a discussion on education which to a large extent was based on an elite perspective: the ability of a certain country to produce successful engineers (e.g., Rickover 1959; Clowse 1981: Landahl 2017a). Similarly, the rise of the International Science Olympiads (Lövheim 2016), exemplifies how the competitive abilities of the elite were used to assess the quality of national school systems. As an evaluation of a comprehensive school reform, such methods were completely misplaced. The education of elites is not unimportant for a comprehensive system, but it is not the only aspect of a comprehensive system. Since the goal of the comprehensive school reform was to give education to all, it had to be assessed in an inclusionary fashion. Thus, the Six Subject Survey covered more people than just the elites. The survey included three populations: students at age 10, students at age 14, and students in the final year of upper secondary school. Only the third population, students approaching university level, could be seen as the elite.

In May 1973 the results of three of the studies from the Six Subject Survey were released: literature education, reading comprehension, and science (Comber and Keeves 1973; Purves 1973; Thorndike 1973). The dissemination process can be described as a co-production (Jasanoff 2004) that involved two major actors: the IEA and the media.

The IEA chose to make careful presentations of the data to the media. Ambitious press releases of all the individual studies were written, giving detailed information on the results. Assistance in how to write press releases was offered by a journalist from the *Times Educational Supplement*, who was in Stockholm in May 1973. An international press conference, held in Stockholm, was also organised, in which the three reports were presented. The press conference, which lasted almost a full day, from 10 a.m. to 16:30 p.m., represented a significant meeting between science and the media; the authors of the individual reports had come all the way to Sweden to present the results in front of the press. Researchers from New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States had travelled to Stockholm to participate in the event. Also present were the chairman of the IEA, Torsten Husén, and his collaborators Benjamin Bloom and Neville Postlethwaite (*Hoover Institution*, vol. 362). The press conference was thus primarily a scholarly event, giving detailed presentations of the main
results for an audience consisting of the international press. It was not aimed at emphasising the competitive logic between nations. In general, the IEA often expressed scepticism about over-interpreting the results from international assessments, and they repeatedly condemned the view of international assessments as ‘competitions’ or ‘Olympic games of knowledge’ (e.g., Husén 1967a, 20; Husén and Hansson 1973, 201f; Husén 1979, 378; Postlethwaite 1975, 8). Nonetheless, there was a degree of self-contradiction in the IEA’s attitude, since its surveys included cross-national comparisons, which made it possible to see the results as an evaluation of educational policy in a given country.

It immediately became clear that the IEA’s dismissal of competition did not harmonise with the logic of the media. A journalist quoted Husén saying that the IEA was not about being in competition, and added, ‘well this is a pious wish, but the starting shot of the competition has already been fired. We are good, why can’t we be the best?’ (Aftonbladet, May 25, 1973). The same day, Dagens Nyheter published an article with similar rhetoric. The IEA survey was called ‘the knowledge Olympics’ and the article was illustrated with a drawing of pupils running on tracks marked with the words ‘physics’, ‘chemistry’, and ‘biology’ (May 25, 1973). Svenska Dagbladet also joined the competitive rhetoric, with the headline ‘22 countries in knowledge Olympics. Swedish 10-year-olds at the top’ (May 25, 1973).

In the Swedish press the results were presented as a positive surprise. One of the leading tabloids, Aftonbladet, exclaimed, ‘we are better than we ever thought! Swedish 10-year-olds are best in the world!’ (May 24, 1973). The newspaper also called education minister Ingvar Carlsson to hear his opinion on the results. Three years earlier he had defended the Swedish school reform, and now, still a minister, he had every reason to feel that he was, in a sense, on the winning side. In the interview, Carlsson expressed relief. He said that he looked forward to not having to hear arguments such as ‘Sweden is like a developing country when it comes to education’ or ‘the pupils know nothing’ (May 24, 1973).

The tabloid Expressen addressed the pupils in their article on the IEA results with the line, ‘congratulations all Swedish 10-year-olds. You are best in the world in reading and understanding. You are second best in biology, chemistry and physics’ and commented that the results would have a lasting effect on the Swedish debate on schooling. While there were also less positive results in the study, the overall result was clear:

The whining about the Swedish school has been exaggerated: the academic standard is not at all as low as many claim, on the contrary we are on an internationally high level; our talents have not fallen behind, the Swedish elite in upper secondary school is as good as the foreign. (Expressen, May 24, 1973)

In an opinion piece, Aftonbladet commented that hopefully, the results could change the debate about the quality of schools. The newspaper described the poor reputation of Swedish schools as merely a result of an unsubstantiated campaign from the political right, headed by the leading right-wing party.

An important result of the IEA survey is that this campaign has proven to be completely hollow. It has simply no basis in reality. Now that this has been disclosed one might hope that the debate about schooling will be about more important things than the vulgar right-wing propaganda. (May 26, 1973)

The positive results of the IEA survey had effects on educational discourse in Sweden, at least in the short-term. This is exemplified by the fact that newspaper articles about kunskapsstandard (academic standards) decreased during the following years. A search of digitalised newspapers show a decrease from 38 articles from 1970 to 1973 to only 10 articles from 1974 to 1977. The debate about the crisis of schooling came to a temporary halt. Politically, this silence was exemplified by the fact that the election campaign of 1973, in contrast to the election of 1970, did not feature discussions about a decline in academic standards in schools (Husén 1975, 9; Aftonbladet, September 11, 1973). To portray the Swedish school reform as a disaster, creating a scandalous decline in performance, became more difficult, given the data that seemed to claim the opposite. In other words, a
process of de-scandalisation occurred. The reputation of the reform was suddenly more positive, as the reform was backed by results in international assessments. This interpretation has also been presented by the researcher Sixten Marklund. A decade after the release of the 1973 reports, he argued that the criticism of the Swedish school reforms, formulated by high school teachers and the conservative press, was ‘almost completely silenced’ after the release of the IEA survey in 1973. According to Marklund, this gave ‘policymakers and school authorities a welcome breathing space in their task of consolidating and developing the new schools’ (Marklund 1983, 8).

The Six Subject Survey was seen as a confirmation that comprehensive schools, available for all children up to the age of 15, actually worked. Elite education was not a condition for international competitiveness. This was also illustrated by analyses of top performing students in each country. Analyses were made of the science data and of the earlier mathematics data. According to Husén, these data showed that the most able students did as well in egalitarian, as in more elitist, school systems (Husén 1987, 37f).

This is not to suggest that Swedish education was seen as altogether flawless. In fact, two problematic issues were highlighted in the discussion following the Six Subject Survey. These two aspects are quite interesting examples of what weak performance might mean in different contexts. One aspect of the Survey that received a negative evaluation was ‘understanding of and interest in literature.’ This aspect might surprise today’s readers, since current large-scale assessments do not tend to focus on literature. However, at this time, assessing literature education was considered a pioneering venture, albeit controversial among some of the IEA staff. Some were sceptical as to whether it was possible to statistically study aesthetic reactions. By contrast, the IEA’s chairman Torsten Husén wrote in his foreword to the report on the subject that the project had broken new methodological ground in measuring student response to literary works. Husén argued that the report demonstrated ‘that it is in fact possible to identify and measure important dimensions of aesthetic response’ (Husén 1973b, 9).

According to the study, Swedish pupils aged 14 and in secondary schools were less interested in literature than pupils in any other participating countries. Gunnar Hansson, the literary scholar who had written the Swedish report on the project, reported the result in one of the major newspapers, in an article called ‘The school doesn’t teach children to appreciate books.’ The article included an illustration of a pile of books, to which was attached the question: ‘Do schools ruin the lust for reading?’ (Aftonbladet, November 15, 1973; see also Aftonbladet, November 17, 1973; Svenska Dagbladet, June 17, 1973).

The second negative result had to do with well-being at school. Swedish students were reported as the ‘best in the world in disliking the school’ (Dagens Nyheter, May 25, 1973). The IEA results described Swedish students at comprehensive schools as less happy at school than students in any other country. These results were presented in the media as ‘a serious sign’ and ‘hard to explain’ (Svenska Dagbladet, May 25, 1973). Expressen speculated, in a somewhat optimistic fashion, that the results could be interpreted as an expression that the new schools’ goal to foster critical thinking had succeeded, but at the same time the newspaper described the results as ‘alarming’ and argued that the National Board of Education had to do something about the situation (Expressen, May 24, 1973).

These two aspects, interest in literature and well-being at school, received some media attention, but should not be exaggerated; they were not portrayed as major scandals, nor did they give rise to a new wave of criticism towards the idea of comprehensive schools. Rather these two aspects are interesting as expressions of the wider focus of the Six Subject Survey, which made it possible to problematise or praise specific aspects of schooling more so than a more modest study would have been able to do. Overall, the Six Subject Survey resulted in positive depictions of the state of Swedish education.

5. Conclusion: de-scandalisation and the nature of large-scale assessments

Paying attention to processes of de-scandalisation has the potential to provide a more nuanced view of the nature of large-scale assessments. Their way of measuring performance resembles a zero-sum
game: when one country experiences decline in the league tables, another experiences development. Good news and bad news are thus merely opposite sides of the same coin. This basic fact reveals an interesting feature of the nature of crises in the realm of education, especially in relation to globalisation. Other societal crises tend to spread across the globe almost like a virus. Whether we think of the environment, diseases, the economy, or terrorism, crises tend to become augmented by the fact that they can reproduce themselves, that they can multiply in a chain reaction where the whole of the globe becomes the scene of a potential catastrophe. Crises in education, at least the ones that receive public attention, tend to follow a different logic. The rise of league tables in education has made it very hard to think of educational crises as spreading across the globe. Rather than being spread internationally, they tend to be identified internationally, and this identification always involves winners as well as losers; top performers presuppose the existence of low performers and upward mobility necessarily coexists with downward mobility. Over time this means that international large-scale assessments produce a condition of permanent crisis, in the sense that there is always a crisis somewhere. But the individual positions of the respective countries are subject to change. Some countries experience development, others decline. As individual countries see their relative positions in the league tables change, they can also go through different phases of policy reactions: scandalisation may turn into de-scandalisation, which may be transformed into re-scandalisation, and so on.

This article has dealt with an early chapter in the history of international large-scale assessments. It has demonstrated how IEA’s Six Subject Survey was received in the Swedish press and how it changed discussions on Swedish education. Before the release of the studies, discussions were polarised and narratives about decline and development co-existed. In the absence of international data about school performance, opinions about education diverged starkly. With the release of the first reports of the IEA survey in 1973, the discussion was altered. The results were presented as a positive surprise, and critics of the Swedish school reform were temporarily silenced. This process has been described in terms of de-scandalisation; the particular reform which was de-scandalised was the comprehensive school reform.

It is worth mentioning the temporary nature of this de-scandalisation. It did not take many years before a crisis rhetoric resurfaced. As the 1970s drew to a close, opposing ideas in educational discourse re-emerged, as the so called ‘knowledge movement’ was born. The knowledge movement originated as an association, ‘Föreningen för kunskap i skolan’, (The Association for Knowledge in Schools) which spoke about decline in academic standards in Swedish schools. The movement managed to gather support from intellectuals and the cultural elite, although it was a controversial movement, criticised by, but also made visible in, the press (Lindelöf 2015; Dagens Nyheter, July 31, 1979). Thus, the knowledge movement exemplifies an attempt to turn de-scandalisation into re-scandalisation. The de-scandalisation that this article has described should, in other words, not be seen as a permanent transformation, but rather as a temporary change in the ways in which educational policy is discussed and understood.

Processes of de-scandalisation are shaped by the historical period in which they occur. They differ in terms of what issues are at stake and which forces determine whether there is a crisis, or not, in education. The case that has been explored in this article is distinguished by two features. The first has to do with what issues were at stake. The system of comprehensive education in Sweden in the 1970s was a historical novelty that still needed to be legitimated. De-scandalisation in this context was more or less synonymous with a strengthened legitimacy for the overall reform of schools that had been going on for decades. The second characteristic was the lack of a continuous system of international large-scale assessments prior to the IEA studies of the 1970s. This meant that there had been no universal, unanimous idea of what constituted a general crisis of education prior to the release of the reports. Rather, there were opposing views and when education was de-scandalised, it was thus a process where one image of reality triumphed over another.

A study of processes of de-scandalisation in today’s society might reveal a different pattern. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the contemporary situation, one may make a few speculations. Based on the fact that assessments today are conducted on a regular basis (e.g., in
the case of PISA, every third year), the conditions for changes in the perception of performance in a country have been altered, as compared to the earlier history of more irregular international assessments (Landahl 2017b). Due to this change in the temporality of assessments, de-scandalisation nowadays can be both a more all-encompassing and a more gradual process. The process is more all-encompassing in the sense that images of decline or development in education tend to be more broadly shared in a society defined by PISA results, meaning that changes in performance tend to be more evident for all parties, irrespective of political loyalties. The process is more gradual in the sense that changes from poor to better results might be less dramatic given the increased frequency of assessments. An interesting topic for further research would be to explore how such processes are interpreted in different national contexts today.

Notes
1. This article has been developed in two research projects: “From Paris to Pisa: Governing Education by Comparison 1867-2015” and “A School in Crisis: Changing Crisis Discourses and Unchanging Figures of Thought, 1950-2020.” Both projects are funded by the Swedish Research Council.
2. The participating countries were Australia, Belgium (Flemish-speaking), Belgium (French-speaking), Chile, England and Wales, the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, France, Hungary, India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Romania, Scotland, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding
This work was supported by The Swedish Research Council [grant number 2017-03506, 2014-1952].

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