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Why Quality in Education – and What Quality?  
– A Linguistic Analysis of the Concept of Quality in Swedish Government Texts

Andreas Bergh*

Abstract
This article analyses why the concept of quality has become such a central theme in Swedish education policy, and what quality or qualities successive governments have pursued between 1990 and 2010. The analysis is based on a close reading of a collection of policy texts from the late 1980s onwards. With a linguistic and historical perspective, the theoretical approach is inspired by Quentin Skinner (1988a, 1988b) and speech act theory. The study shows that certain “criteria of application” long associated with education have gradually been challenged and partly marginalised by criteria highlighting results and relating to market and system needs. As a consequence it can be argued, with support from speech act theory, that use of the concept of quality has led to an acceptance of new social perceptions in education.

Keywords: education, concept of quality, educational policy, speech act, Sweden

Introduction
Historically, the concept of quality has been used in different contexts, including, to some extent, that of education. Since an explicit emphasis was put on quality in the Swedish government’s development plan for education in 1997 (Skr 1996/97:112), the concept has spread quickly within and between different arenas in Sweden’s educational system.

The two questions discussed in this paper are why the concept of quality has been introduced and become such a central theme in Swedish education policy; and what quality or qualities – i.e. quality in what sense or senses – successive governments have pursued in the last two decades. There are several reasons for asking these questions. To begin with, since the late 1990s the concept of quality has become a central issue in education policy in Sweden. In a way, it is hardly surprising that a concept such as quality has spread so rapidly, as few people are likely to contest the importance of good quality education. However, the concept in itself says nothing about what is educationally desirable. Although by definition a positive and attractive concept, it nevertheless appears intriguingly lacking in content – at least at first sight. Another
characteristic of the quality concept, which makes it somewhat unique, is its ability to
be combined with many other words, as in quality work, quality monitoring, quality
report and so on.

Throughout history, the concept of quality has been used in many different contexts,
with a variety of meanings. Its roots can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy
(Liedman, 2007) and it became a central concept in Japanese industrial production
after the World War II (Axelsson and Bergman, 1999). Today, the quality concept
has gained a prominent position in many countries and is commonly used in various
social contexts, in private and public sectors alike (Bergh, 2010). In Swedish educa-
tion, the concept is used by many different actors: not only in the formal national and
local arenas but also by different interest groups, such as the Swedish Association of
Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting, 2009), the Con-
federation of Swedish Enterprise (Svenskt Näringsliv, 2010) and the teachers’ trade
unions (Moberger, 2005). Quality is also a central concept in international policy
development. For example, the Lisbon Strategy, in which the EU in 2000 formulated
the need for Europe to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based
economy in the world” (Presidency Conclusions, 2000:2), was followed two years later
by a detailed work programme whose objectives included “Improving the quality and
effectiveness of education...” (Council of the European Union, 2002:15).

Looking at international research, it also becomes clear that use of the concept of
quality in education is widespread. Developments similar to those seen in Swedish
education in the last two decades are reported from several other countries around the
world (e.g. Biesta, 2004; Broadfoot, Osborn, Planel and Sharpe, 2000; Ozga, 2009).
Already in the early 1990s, Alfred Oftedal Telhaug (1990) notes the introduction of a
new way of talking about education in educational policy (cf. Englund, 1996). From
a European standpoint, it is further reported that travelling policies and policy dis-
courses, with quality assurance and evaluation as their main instruments, have spread
across Europe (Grek, Lawn, Lingard and Varjo, 2009; cf. Segerholm, 2009). In addi-
tion, to make clear that the quality concept is not limited to either Sweden or Europe,
an example can be mentioned from South Africa, where Peliwe Lolwana (2007), in
the light of apartheid, writes that it is hardly surprising that high quality education is
highlighted as a citizenship right in the country’s legislation. At the same time as this
illustrates that the concept of quality is shaped by national and local conditions, her
question “Does quality assurance improve the quality of education?” simultaneously
points to structural similarities between countries: written local quality reports were
for example one of the instruments introduced by the Swedish government in 1997
(Skr 1996/97:112).

The methodology used in this article is based on Quentin Skinner’s speech act
theory (1988a, 1988b), a theory which in a wider sense can be understood in relation
to the “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967). The endeavour to shift attention from the
object of language to language itself, which was brought into the limelight in a reader
Why Quality in Education – and What Quality?

edited by Richard Rorty (1967), is prompted by an idea earlier formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely that many philosophical questions are ultimately questions of language (Jordheim, 2003). In very general terms, the linguistic turn can be said to have taken place in different ways within at least three traditions: besides speech act theory, also in hermeneutics (mainly German) and in structuralism and post-structuralism (mainly French), with Reinhart Koselleck and Michel Foucault as central names. For this article, and for the questions asked, I find speech act theory and its interest in the rhetorical use of concepts useful.

Skinner (1988a) has developed speech act theory into a theory of language as a medium for use in concrete political conflicts, where groups with contradictory views seek to control language. Since concepts with performative functions such as quality or equivalence (Englund and Quennerstedt, 2008) not only describe but also value and create, they can be used with separate and contradictory intentions by different language users. To understand what a speaker or writer is doing in a specific situation, with what intention he or she makes a certain “move in an argument” (Skinner, 2008:651), Skinner mainly directs his interest towards what is termed the “illocutionary” aspect of the speech act:

to be able to characterize a work in such a way, in terms of its intended illocutionary force, is equivalent to understanding what the writer may have meant by writing in that particular way. It is equivalently to be able, that is, to say that he must have meant the work as an attack on or a defense of, as a criticism of or a contribution to, some particular attitude or line of argument, and so on (Skinner, 1988b:76).

In this article, by linking Skinner’s interest in the arguments to the question of why the concept of quality has been introduced, my intention is to identify the problem, or problems, quality was meant to resolve, and thereby to understand why quality has been introduced and become such a central theme in Swedish education. The question of what quality or qualities Swedish governments have pursued over the 1990–2010 period stems from a linguistic and historical urge to understand change in the light of earlier tensions between different educational ideals, and the varying meanings that the concept of quality has been given in other social contexts. However, instead of merely analysing the meaning of a concept, Skinner suggests that analysis should focus on how the concept’s criteria of application (i.e. the terms for using it) are struggled over rhetorically. According to Skinner, we might disagree about one of at least three different things, not all of which are self-evident disagreements about meanings:

about the criteria for applying the word; about whether the agreed criteria are present in a given set of circumstances; or about what range of speech-acts the word can be used to transform (Skinner, 1988a:123).
The text that now follows is divided into four parts. Starting in the period when the issue of quality became a governmental concern, I first contextualise it to the 1980s and early 1990s. Next, focusing on the development plan of 1997 (Skr 1996/97:112), I turn to the period when quality, as a solution to educational problems, made its first concrete appearance in the field of education. After that, the analysis examines how the concept of quality is used in government texts from the last two decades, and highlights changes in its criteria of application. The final discussion concludes the analysis with reference to the three potential areas of disagreement identified by Skinner (1988a), as cited above, which will give us the answers to the two questions: why quality in education and what quality/qualities?

**Quality becomes a concern of the Swedish government**

Although the government’s development plan (Skr 1996/97:112) can be seen as an official starting point for quality thinking in Swedish education (Bergh, 2010; Nytell, 2006), the question of quality was at that time far from new at the governmental level. As early as 1984, the Ministry of Industry was made aware of the problems faced by domestic industrial companies which were struggling to keep up with international competition, especially from Japan (Hasselbladh and Lundgren, 2002). Two years later the National Committee for Swedish Quality was founded, chaired by HRH Prince Bertil and including representatives of both the government and the industrial and public sectors (SIQ, 2010). The Ministry of Industry launched an inquiry with the aim of gaining a greater insight into research on quality and identifying activities that could meet the need for improved training in quality control (Hasselbladh and Lundgren, 2002). Another inquiry, initiated by the predecessor of today’s Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, focused on the country’s universities and suggested that all students of economics and engineering should take at least one course in basic quality management. In 1990, a more permanent organisation, the Swedish Institute for Quality (SIQ), was founded. The SIQ took over the National Committee’s role of actively promoting quality development in all sectors of Swedish society. One of the early ambitions was to develop a Swedish quality award, and in 1992 “Utmärkelsen Svensk Kvalitet” (The Swedish Quality Award) was awarded for the first time.

The concept of quality also appears in government texts from the late 1980s, in reports on current international trends in education (Prop. 1988/89:100). At this time, though, the quality problems observed in other countries still seem remote from a Swedish vantage point. On the contrary, the government maintains that standards in Swedish schools are not only high in general, but also equally high across individual schools. One of the concerns reported from other countries is that too many students are leaving school with inadequate knowledge, impairing their future working lives and their opportunities to participate in society. In a broader perspective, there are also concerns that education is not a sufficient driving force for societal development and economic growth. The latter especially appears to be a major issue in OECD
debates, according to the government. Those debates also include discussions and suggestions concerning evaluation, stemming from a perceived need to assess how well schools perform.

A few years later, the picture has changed. Far from being distant trends, of no immediate relevance to Sweden (Prop. 1992/93:220), the same concerns are now becoming increasingly influential in the Swedish education system as well. The government concludes that there is an established causal link between educational quality, knowledge and economic growth. Education is an important factor in global competition, and Swedish education has to be among the best in the world. This, according to the government, is an inescapable fact, regardless of any reservations that may be made with reference to problems in measuring the quality of schools and determining the relevance of different forms of knowledge. Looking to the future, the government asserts that new demands will be made on teachers, school leaders and schools, demands that may occasionally seem contradictory.

Thus, when the concept of quality becomes a concern of the Swedish government in the 1980s, it is primarily promoted by arguments about economic growth and international competition. As a consequence, when the concept gradually takes shape within education, it is already loaded with specific criteria of application.

**Quality as a solution to education problems**

Given the widespread use of the quality concept in various social contexts, it is in a way hardly surprising that it was eventually introduced in Swedish education as well. From that perspective, the relevant question is *when*, rather than *if*, it would be introduced. Whether there were educational problems or not, the concept of quality brought a solution that needed a problem to address (cf. Furusten, 2002). That said, several arguments of differing character are nevertheless put forward by the government when the concept of quality is introduced and emphasised in 1997 (Skr 1996/97:112), arguments that will now be presented.

Besides international competition, other motives are expressed, such as a need to direct local attention towards qualitative goals and the necessity to counteract any segregation that might result from increased freedom of choice within the education sector (Skr 1996/97:112). Other motives have to do with goal achievement and results, especially with reference to international tests, but also because the new system of grades reveals results in a much clearer way than before. Individual and societal development is also discussed in relation to both democracy and working life. Increasing differences between students and schools raise concerns, and the importance of a good quality education for all is stressed. These problems are considered with regard both to overall societal development and, specifically, to the education taking shape at the local level.

Further, it is recognised that the educational reforms of the 1990s have coincided in time with reduced economic resources at the municipal level (Skr 1996/97:112).
References are made to different bodies whose inquiries and evaluations have reported shortcomings. The National Agency for Education, for instance, has drawn attention to problems in local governance, and the predecessor of the present Swedish National Audit Office has stated that supervision by the Agency for Education must be given priority. The government has also rejected a proposal presented in the Swedish Parliament for an independent audit institute, i.e. independent of both parliament and government. In response, the government declares that the supervision and audit of large societal sectors such as education are responsibilities that cannot not be left to independent institutes or private actors.

Summarising the arguments presented in the development plan (Skr 1996/97:112), I conclude that the government was under pressure, both through international educational co-operation and from different groups and interests within the country. The various criteria applied to the concept of quality at this time reflect a tension between democratic societal ideals and an ambition to make Sweden more competitive. In Skinner’s (1988a) terms, this can be understood as a linguistic struggle in which groups with contradictory views are seeking to control language. In this perspective, disputes over interpretation can be understood as a question of gaining precedence in defining the concept of quality in order to be able to take advantage of its performative function.

Use of the concept of quality over two decades

The following analysis, which examines how the quality concept has been used in a succession of Swedish government texts, illustrates how the criteria of application have changed over time. Although the analysis is mainly concerned with the period from 1997 (Skr 1996/97:112) to 2010 (Prop. 2009/10:165), there are also some references that refer back to the late 1980s. As an appropriate starting point, I have chosen the following passage from the government’s development plan:

Schools must provide high-quality teaching... The government gives priority to the quality of education. Steps must now be taken to improve and secure the quality of education. Quality control must therefore be developed at all levels... The teacher’s role has become more difficult as well as more important... The role of the National Agency for Education needs to be developed... (Skr 1996/97:112, pp. 3-5)

With these words in mind, we will now take a closer look at the manner in which quality is discussed in relation to education, national school authorities and teaching.

Education for democracy – education for economic growth

During the period analysed, speech acts concerning the relationship between quality and education increasingly come to focus on goal achievement and emphasise Sweden’s future role as a leading knowledge nation. These intentions are quite different in character from the government’s ambition in 1989 to give all citizens a good general education, thus turning education into a social equaliser (Prop. 1988/89:100).
Although the criteria applied to the concept of quality in 1997 (Skr 1996/97:112) vary in character, the importance of goals such as justice and democracy is emphasised. It is also stressed that evaluations by local school authorities must be given priority, as a way to secure an equivalent education of the quality described in the objectives:

Without quality, equivalence is emptied of substance, and without equivalence the quality discussion leads away from the objectives of justice and democracy. Evaluations must ensure that students receive an equivalent education of the quality stated in the objectives (Skr 1996/97:112, p. 8).

A few years later, the tension between democratic ideals and the need to strengthen Swedish competitiveness is still there (Skr 2001/02:188). Yet there is a shift in what receives most emphasis. The government declares the need to intensify national efforts, to speed up development and to raise the quality of education. So, what quality or qualities does the government have in mind at this time? The message is clear: action must now be taken to remedy deficiencies that prevent goal achievement. This is expressed even more clearly in the government’s quality programme published the following year (Regeringskansliet, 2003). In that programme, democratic motives are no longer mentioned, but have been replaced by an emphasis on individualisation, knowledge and the need to develop straightforward information and quality control. “Sweden must be a leading knowledge nation,” according to the government (Regeringskansliet, 2003:2). The ideal is a “knowledge school” for all:

Such a school closely monitors each student’s development and has a clear dialogue with the student and the home about the results achieved at school. To succeed, schools must closely monitor, review and evaluate their own performance and their own work in relation to the objectives. The deficiencies which emerge must lead to concrete action (Regeringskansliet, 2003:1).

Thus, during the period studied the criteria applied to the concept of quality, in relation to education, change: from arguments advocating development in education as an answer to the needs of both individuals and society, with reference to both democracy and working life, to a more one-dimensional emphasis on results and goal achievement, springing from the ambition to transform Sweden into a leading knowledge nation.

National school authorities: between development and control

The expectations directed towards the national school authorities, through the concept of quality, can in overall terms be described as an ambition to develop a stricter and more efficient system for controlling quality in schools and local school authorities. Yet there is a change over time in how these arguments take shape linguistically.

In 1997 the government (Skr 1996/97:112) calls for the National Agency for Education to be more active than before in using and drawing conclusions from the results
obtained from follow-ups, evaluations and statutory supervision. By intensifying activities of various kinds, the Agency is expected to influence the development of and contribute to a societal debate about education.

Five years later, the government (Skr 2001/02:188) decides to split the National Agency for Education in two in order to separate the controlling function from support for development. More resources are now made available and a new department is created for educational inspection, leading to stronger national control. Despite this outcome, only another five years later the government decides to reorganise the national school authorities again (Prop. 2007/08:50). This time, the change is prompted by the need to clarify the respective roles of the two new national authorities, the Agency for Education and a new Schools Inspectorate, and to make them more predictable and efficient. The reorganisation is also a central part of a larger reform project, with increased sanctions for schools not complying with the regulatory framework, and actions to enhance the achievement of goals:

In order to improve goal achievement, moreover, the government intends to clarify objectives, syllabuses and other governance documents and to strengthen the monitoring of students' knowledge and results, among other things through increased use of national tests. As part of this work, the government sees a need for an authority structure that supports this increased focus on supervision and follow-up of knowledge (Prop. 2007/08:50, p. 38).

The expectations placed on the national school authorities change during the period studied. From 1997 onwards, the need for stricter, stronger and more efficient exercise of authority is communicated (cf. Rönnberg, 2011). Not only are the arguments for more control put forward in increasingly resolute terms, but economic resources for the purpose are also considerably increased. The intention that the national school authority should contribute to a societal debate was soon discarded and replaced by more and more one-sided language stressing the importance of goal achievement, legal safeguards, and identifying shortcomings.

**Teaching as a tension between local autonomy and being part of a national system**

Parallel to the changes in the criteria applied to the quality concept, in relation to education and the expectations directed towards the national school authorities, there were also changes in the comments on teaching, and in views of the role of teachers.

The earlier expectations of teachers are, among other things, related to welfare motives (Prop. 1988/89:100), with an emphasis on the social, theoretical and pedagogical competence of teachers (Skr 1996/97:112). It is also pointed out that a teacher’s work requires perspectives on knowledge, learning and teaching which cannot be governed by national regulations, and that it “is, rather, the interplay between teachers’ theoretical knowledge and the practical activities undertaken that is crucial” (Prop. 1992/93:220, p. 18). From 2002 (Skr 2001/02:188) onwards, the
character of speech acts changes as the focus shifts towards questions of international competition and economic growth. There is also an ambition, built around the concept of quality, to introduce management by objectives and results as a tool in teaching practice. Playing a decisive role in the education system, teachers are expected to realise the ambitions formulated in the curriculum and, with the help of the tools that are developed, to continuously follow up and evaluate, so as to ensure a high level of goal achievement.

These changes also determine what criteria of application the concept of quality is given in relation to teaching activities. In the early 1990s, the government stresses that it is important that teaching does not become limited to a set of skills that fit neatly within subject boundaries (Prop. 1993/92:220). Instead, emphasis is placed on students’ own reflections and thinking, and also on the importance of creative, aesthetic and ethical dimensions being incorporated into school work. Further, the concept of “Bildung” is discussed, as well as motives related to democracy and values (Skr 1996/97:112):

Students must learn to change perspective. The ability to change perspective is essential in a democracy. Seeing with the eyes of others, empathising with others’ situations and understanding others’ arguments are all crucial to a capacity to feel solidarity. This is ultimately what the fundamental values of the curriculum are all about (Skr 1996/97:112, p. 21).

In later texts these intentions are hardly mentioned. The ambition now is to build an education system and make Sweden a leading nation:

For Sweden to be a successful country in the 21st century, world-class education and research are required, and an education system that has the capacity to see the potential in every pupil and student (Prop. 2008/09:87, p. 7).

To sum up, the expectations regarding teaching and teachers’ roles expressed in government texts up to the late 1990s can be characterised as an emphasis on local autonomy, on the basis that teaching activities cannot be governed by national regulations. From the early 2000s onwards, when the focus shifts towards the aim of building an education system, there is a linguistic change as arguments about teaching and teachers become more instrumental in character.

**Final discussion**

**Concluding analysis**

To analyse the tensions between different criteria of application, the three potential areas of disagreement highlighted by Skinner are a useful tool to illuminate conceptual struggles. As mentioned in the introduction, Skinner (1988a:123) argues that we might disagree about one of at least three different things: “about the criteria for applying the word; about whether the agreed criteria are present
in a given set of circumstances; or about what range of speech-acts the word can be used to perform”.

My analysis reveals a tense relationship between different criteria of application, with some becoming dominant while others are challenged and/or marginalised. The criteria of application that are challenged to varying degrees are, generally speaking, those that have been used in education for a long time, whereas partly “new” ones become dominant. While some criteria that have ”traditionally” been used in education decrease in prominence (e.g. welfare and “Bildung”), others (e.g. knowledge) remain with a strong linguistic force, but with a tension between different interpretations and a tendency to challenge and marginalise earlier meanings. A criterion of application that becomes increasingly dominant is goal achievement. Other dominating criteria are competition, growth, education system, legal safeguards and efficiency.

The tension between different criteria of application can also be understood in relation to the second of Skinner’s (1988a) areas of disagreement, with a focus on different circumstances in which the concept of quality is, or once was, used. According to my analysis, the criteria of application that can be understood in relation to an earlier educational discussion gradually become less prominent. Instead, criteria that had been used in other social contexts, such as international policy, quality systems and law, increases in significance. Examples of the last two are the various steering instruments introduced and/or strengthened through regulation during the period studied, such as quality reports, national tests, individual development plans, quality reviews and inspections.

Skinner’s (1988a) third area of possible disagreement directs our attention to speech acts and to how language is used to make “moves” in an argument. While the speech acts performed by Swedish governments in the late 1980s and for some years after that (Prop. 1988/89:100; Prop. 1992/93:220) signal some hesitation about the possibility of measuring and evaluating quality, this is something that changes over time. When the government states in 2010 that “an equivalent education requires that legal safeguards and quality in schools can be assured”, and that, for the students’ sake, it is of “the utmost importance to observe and draw attention to shortcomings early on” (Prop. 2009/10:165, p. 538), these arguments are put forward as having unchallenged status. The message is completely different in character from two decades earlier, when the government highlights the concept of “Bildung” (Prop. 1992/93:220) and emphasises that education should not be merely a planning instrument to meet the demands of contemporary society.

**Why quality in education – and what quality?**

We will now return to the two opening questions of this article: *why* the concept of quality was introduced and has become such a central theme in Swedish education policy, and *what* quality or qualities successive governments have pursued in the last two decades.
Beginning with the question *why*, one could argue that it can be answered in several different ways, or rather with a combination of many explanations. From a broader perspective, however, we can discern two different lines of argument. First, that the question of quality is connected with a global trend that would very probably have arrived in Swedish education, whether there was a need for it or not. The second line of argument takes into consideration all the different reasons given by the government in the development plan (Skr 1996/97:112) described above.

The many arguments formulated in 1997 to explain why quality needed to be given priority in Swedish education reveal that the concept of quality was at that time given several different criteria of application. However, it is important to note that, in the years that follow, the criteria applied to the concept gradually changes. The earlier criteria, which relate to a greater degree to what can be called a traditional educational discussion, gradually make way for criteria used in other social contexts. With reference to the international policy arena, criteria such as goal achievement, results and competition are stressed. A similar attitude is based on market-inspired thinking, as for example when the government states that competition between different local school authorities will improve the school system (Prop. 2009/10:165). Proceeding from an ambition to build an education system, other criteria, referring to areas such as law and quality systems, are given prominence.

To answer the question *what* quality or qualities governments are pursuing during the period analysed, *four concluding criteria of application* can be formulated. Although they can be abstracted analytically into four different categories, when used in concrete contexts they are interwoven.

The first concluding criterion of application can be termed *educational quality*. This, however, should not be understood as a set of uniform interpretations without inner tensions, but as a way of drawing together different meanings that have long been linked to education. Some examples are meanings such as knowledge, democracy, “Bildung” and, in a wider sense, questions about goals and content which historically have been discussed and debated for quite some time in relation to education. Further, to say that the concluding criterion educational quality is challenged and partly marginalised does not mean that it disappears. It is more correct to say that some meanings more or less disappear, while others are strengthened with support from the dominant criteria of application.

The first of the dominant concluding criteria of application is *results-based quality*. By choosing the expression “results-based quality”, rather than “goal achievement quality”, I want to stress the dominant use of the quality concept. “Goal achievement” refers in a wider sense to national goals, including qualitative goals such as democracy and various social and communicative processes that are part of daily school life. “Results”, on the other hand, are limited to those aspects that can be measured, such as grades and the level of goal achievement in different school subjects.
The concluding criterion of application that I call *market quality* includes meanings that can be understood in relation to discussions referring to international policy and market needs, such as competition and economic growth. The shift in the use of the concept of goal achievement, from an emphasis on goals to an emphasis on results, occurs at the same time as the ambition to make Sweden a leading nation is formulated. Simultaneously, the national school authority is reorganised and the new national education inspections begin.

Finally, the last of the three dominant concluding criteria of application can be referred to as *system quality*. It consists of meanings such as education system, efficiency and legal safeguards. This concluding criterion can also be understood in relation to the different structures that are developed, such as national quality monitoring, inspections, local quality reports, individual development plans, written assessments and national tests.

Broadly speaking, the use of the quality concept by successive Swedish governments can be described as a change in three steps: (1) Before the term quality is used more frequently, the concluding criterion educational quality is dominant; (2) from the late 1990s and a few years after that, there is a tension between educational quality and the challenging criteria of results-based quality, market quality and system quality; and (3) at the beginning of the new millennium, educational quality is marginalised as speech acts are increasingly dominated by results-based quality, market quality and system quality.

**Final remarks**

With support from speech act theory (Skinner, 1988a), it can be argued that use of the concept of quality has led to an acceptance of new social perceptions in education, as a result of which the concept has been applied with unchanged meanings from its earlier use in other contexts. As a consequence of the linguistic change, earlier criteria for what was considered or argued to be educationally desirable have been weakened in their linguistic force. To what extent this change, emerging from an analysis of government policy texts, has also had an impact on educational practice is an empirical question that requires further exploration. However, my own dissertation (Bergh, 2010), which includes studies of three local school authorities and schools, points to distinct similarities in the way the concept of quality takes shape linguistically, but also shows a clearer tension between different criteria of application in local arenas than is the case in national policy texts.

Finally, it is important to point out that the changes institutionalised through the concept of quality are clearly influenced by what is happening in the rest of the world. International educational co-operation, global market pressures and the ambition to develop a system of management by objectives and results have a very significant impact on the Swedish school system. Using Skinner’s (1988a, 1988b) linguistic and historical approach, as in this article, we can achieve a distance from our own time.
and its hegemonic ideas of timeless truths. This knowledge highlights our freedom to challenge the normative language which in our own period holds education in place. What education will be like in the future is partly an open question.

Andreas Bergh (PhD) is a research fellow at the School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University. His research interests relate to education policy and curriculum studies. A current project includes an analysis of how different promotion and prevention programmes are being used in Swedish schools.
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Endnotes

1 This quotation, like others in the article, has been translated from Swedish by the author.
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