From ‘silent borrowing’ to the international argument – legitimating Swedish educational policy from 1945 to the present day

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The article analyses how education policy-making was legitimated in Sweden in the time period 1945–2014, focussing particularly on international points of reference and using reports of government committees (‘Statens offentliga utredningar’, or SOU) as an indicator for the policy-making discourse. The article detects a shift in how policy agendas were justified that ca. 2007. Before the shift, international reference points were hardly ever used as an argument for reform in policy-making, despite the fact that Sweden in many ways participated in the international education policy-making mainstream. This changed around the year 2007, when the ‘international argument’ became prominent in the education policy-making discourse as a legitimatory device and justification for change. The article argues that this shift is connected to declining Swedish PISA results and a changed perception of these results in Sweden.

Keywords: Sweden; policy-making; international references; legitimacy; externalisation

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The use of international references in debates about education and particularly education policy-making has long been a central area of interest for specialists in the field of Comparative and International Education (see e.g. Zymek, 1975). Again and again, researchers have been able to show that one important function of international references lies in legitimating education policy agendas (Waldow, 2012). By ‘international references’, we mean references to other countries and international organisations (IOs) or data, material, recommendations etc. produced by other countries or IOs. In the last 20 years or so, the easy availability of international comparative data that are rankable, such as the data produced by large-scale assessments, has added a new dynamics to the way in which ‘the international argument’ is used (cf. Grek, 2009; Steiner-Khamsi, 2003). Researchers have demonstrated how international education comparisons in policy documents have shifted during this time period from Europeanisation to globalisation (Nordin, 2014; Wahlström, 2014), and that Sweden has always been engaged in both internal and external policy import (Waldow, 2008).

In the following, we will analyse how international points of reference have figured in the education policy-making discourse in Sweden over the last 70 years. As an indicator for the education policy-making discourse, we using reports of government committees (‘Statens offentliga utredningar’, or SOU). Our main focus is on the time period from the year 2000, as we argue that there has been a shift in the patterns of how education policy is legitimated in Sweden in this period.

Over long stretches of the post-war period, education policy-making in Sweden to a large degree followed the international mainstream; that is, in terms of the policies pursued, Sweden did what many other countries were doing at the time. However, the fact that Sweden followed international discursive swings in education policy-making did not become visible in the ways in which education policy was legitimated during this time. In the recent past (i.e. the last decade), this changed: international points of reference started to play a major role, especially in the shape of references to international large-scale assessments. We explain this shift as a reaction to changes in the perception of how effective different legitimatory resources and strategies are in different situations. The rise in importance of international comparative data was a major factor influencing this development. However, there are also continuities in how education policy is legitimated: for example, reference to the fact that reforms were supported by ‘scientific’ evidence was popular throughout the whole period (and still is).
Building in part on Max Weber’s (1922) sociology of domination, ‘legitimacy’ has become an important concept in organisational sociology. Organisations need to be perceived as legitimate by their environment in order to survive (cf. Brunsson, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In a widely cited article, Mark Suchman (1995) defines organisational legitimacy as a ‘generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions’ (p. 574). The concept of legitimacy cannot just be applied to organisations, but also to policy agendas and social structures; they, too, need to be legitimated as ‘desirable, proper, or appropriate’.

A conceptual tool that is particularly well-suited to analysing and comparing different patterns and strategies of legitimising policy agendas is Jürgen Schriewer’s (1990) ‘externalisation thesis’, which he developed building on Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (cf. Luhmann & Schorr, 1988). Luhmannian systems theory conceptualises the education system as a self-referential system of communications building on and connecting to each other. The system is ‘operatively closed’, meaning that communications within the education system cannot connect directly to communications outside other functional sub-systems (such as law or politics). However, the education system can seek points of reference in its environment, that is, outside the education system. Luhmann calls such external points of reference ‘externalisations’ (cf. Luhmann & Schorr, 1988). The ‘external’ in ‘externalisation’ therefore refers to the boundary of the education system in relation to its environment, not to political or geographical boundaries, as is often erroneously supposed in the literature.

Externalisations can be seen as rhetorical formations that are particularly suitable for creating legitimacy for education reform agendas, that is, for making them seem, in Suchman’s (1995) words, ‘desirable, proper, or appropriate’. Externalisations can have different points of reference. One important point of reference is ‘scientificness’ (Wissenschaftlichkeit), that is, the rules of scientific method and results of scientific research (Luhmann & Schorr, 1988). This occurs, for example, when education reforms are being labelled as ‘evidence-based’; that is, they supposedly have been shown to be effective with the help of scientific methods. Another point of reference (i.e. type of externalisation) is values such as ‘justice’ or ‘equality of opportunity’. A third type of externalisation is what Jürgen Schriewer (1990) calls ‘externalisation to world situations’, that is, referring to conditions in other countries, international benchmarks etc. This is the type of externalisation this article is mainly interested in.

We will now apply this conceptual tool to the Swedish education policy-making discourse of the years 1945–2014. Building on Achim Landwehr’s (2001) work, we conceptualise discourse as ‘what can be said’ at a certain time. According to Landwehr (2001), historical discourse analysis takes the observation as a starting point that at a certain time, only a limited number of things can be said about a certain topic [. . .]. The discourse regulates what it is possible to say on a certain topic, the discourse organises what can be said and what can be thought. Against this backdrop, historical discourse analysis aims at investigating the rules and regularities of discourse, its possibilities of creating reality, how it is socially embedded and how it changes over time. (7, translation by authors)

In this vein, we will investigate how the education policy-making discourse in Sweden changed since 1945 with respect to the utilisation of international references with a legitimatory purpose. As was mentioned above, a particular focus will be on the period since 2000.

As an indicator for the education policy-making discourse that is available for the whole period we are investigating, we utilise reports by government committees (SOU). These committees have been an important actor in policy formulation in Sweden. The government sets them up ad-hoc to deal with certain pressing questions and to prepare reforms. Their members can comprise of politicians, members of parliament, scientists and scholars or representatives of certain interest groups. Committees can also be made up of one member (ensamutredare), a possibility that has been used increasingly in recent years. The committees are an important arena of consensus-building, and their reports often have had a pre-determining effect on the political decisions that are actually taken; at least this was the case during large parts of the period studied here (cf. Johansson, 1992; Pettersson, 2013; Zetterberg, 1990). The committees’ role in the policy-making process changed during the period of time we are looking at in this article (cf. Pettersson, 2013). However, in this article we are not primarily interested in the committee reports’ function in the political process, but using them as an indicator for the education policy-making discourse, and arguably they can serve this function throughout the whole time period under investigation.

In the time period 1945–1999, the ministry of culture and educational affairs (Ecklesiastikdepartementet, until 1967) and the ministry of education (Utbildningsdepartementet, from 1968) published a total of 413 SOU reports.1 In order to keep the number of reports to be analysed manageable, four shorter focus periods were selected for analysis, resulting in a total of 61 reports to be analysed. The focus periods chosen are periods when education reform intensity was particularly high (on the choice of the focus periods, see Waldow, 2008). The periods chosen are 1945–1948, 1958–1963, 1973–1978

1This figure does not include a small number of reports exclusively concerned with highly specialised research issues without relevance to the education system.
and 1990–1999. 1945–1948 was the key period concerning the comprehensive school reform. This included the publication of some important SOU reports. The period 1958–1963 allows a glimpse into the high time of the ‘Swedish model’ and social engineering. The period 1973–1978 falls into a time when some of the central tenets of the classic post-war Swedish model were beginning to get under attack. 1990–1999 finally marks a period characterised by sweeping reforms in the name of decentralisation and marketisation.

In order to get a more detailed look on the period in which the shift towards an increased utilisation of the international argument took place (including the years immediately preceding the shift), for the time period 2000–2014, all 21 reports issued by the ministry of education during this time were analysed.

The reports were analysed in a hermeneutic–interpretative way. The texts of the reports were scanned for legitimatory passages that can be interpreted as externalisations, paying special attention to passages referring to ‘the international’, that is, other countries, IOs and international large-scale assessments.

1. The education policy-making discourse, 1945–2014

1.1. 1945–1999: From the introduction of comprehensive schooling to devolution and marketisation

The first 50 years after the end of World War II can be characterised as a period of expansion for the Swedish education system. During the 1950s and 60s, schooling was successively comprehensivised, starting with the primary and lower secondary level. Comprehensivisation was prepared and accompanied by the work of several government committees. The most important of these were the School committees of 1940 and 1946 and the School committee of 1957, all of which produced numerous reports (for the main reports from the government committees mentioned above, see SOU 1944:20; SOU 1948:27; SOU 1961:30).

Education for democratisation was an important aim of this wave of reform, but democratisation rhetoric was closely intertwined with an insistence that the education system contributes to economic effectiveness (Telhaug, Asbjørn Medisås, & Aasen, 2006). Education and psychological research is seen as key in determining the shape of education policy-making contributing towards these goals, as the School committee of 1946 points out in its main report:

> Scientific research and practical experimentation produce the best recommendations on which pathways lead to the goals that have been determined. In problem areas where comprehensive and thorough scientific investigations have been carried out, the word of psychological and education research should be decisive. (SOU 1948:27, 86)

Scientific research was also seen as an important foundation for education policy-making in the next focus period (1958–1963). In the 1960s, education policy-making in Sweden as in many other countries is characterised by the conviction that it is possible and desirable to plan the future, including adjusting the education system to economic and social needs. Scientific and technical subjects are seen as key in this context. Planning optimism in this period is connected to the beginnings of thinking in terms of human capital. A prime example for the social planning approach is the work of the Upper secondary school committee of 1960, 1960 års gymnasieutredning (SOU 1963:15; SOU 1963:22; SOU 1963:41; SOU 1963:42; SOU 1963:43), which acted according to the premise that ‘long-term assessments of the need for individuals with an upper secondary education [should in principle] build on a plan for development of the whole or at least a large part of the labour market’ (SOU 1963:42, p. 164). This task is best placed in the hands of the central state, as the Committee of 1955 on the central steering of vocational education and a part of teacher education (1955 års sakkunniga för yrkesutbildningens centrala ledning och viss lärarutbildning) points out:

> Only the state can through its organs acquire an overview over the whole area of working life and assess on the one hand the needs for certain skills, on the other hand the need for people with certain qualifications in certain lines of industry or areas of work. (SOU 1962:28, p. 126)

Planning is to be carried out with the help of advanced scientific–statistical methods, and the reports are full of mathematical models and projections of future growth (e.g. SOU 1963:22; SOU 1963:42). Both social planning euphoria and the introduction of human capital thinking are widespread phenomena across many countries at this time.

In the next focus period (1973–1978), social planning euphoria has decreased somewhat; attention shifts to the inner workings of individual schools and increased local flexibility and autonomy in the name of ‘democratisation’. These new discursive trends become particularly apparent, for example, in the work of the ‘Committee on the inner workings of the school’ (’skolans inre arbete’, short SIA; see SOU 1974:53; SOU 1974:58; SOU 1978:4). The SIA committee is much more cautious than, for example, the Upper secondary school committee of 1960 when it comes to long-term planning: ‘Long-term planning needs to be adjustable – so that it can quickly react to needs and expectations of its environment’ (SOU 1974:53, p. 82). The idea that detailed central planning gives way to the idea that local, decentralised planning is the way forward (cf. e.g. SOU 1974:53). What later would be called ‘lifelong education’ makes an entry into the discourse at this time, partly connected to the idea that individuals need to
be able to react to a changed environment that cannot be planned in detail (cf. SOU 1975:9). This, again, is in accordance with international discursive trends at the time, where school autonomy, decentralisation and democratisation receive increasing attention.

During the 1980s and 90s, the Swedish education system again underwent fundamental changes. The Swedish welfare model, including education, increasingly came under ideological pressure, with increasing demands for more individualisation and effectivisation (Lundgren, 1999; Ringarp, 2011). In the early 1990s, responsibility for schooling was decentralised to individual municipalities (Regerings Proposition 1988/89:4, 1990/91:18), education standards were introduced (SOU 1992:94) and the possibilities to set up private schools (with public money) were vastly increased (Svensson, 2013) and market elements such as education vouchers were introduced into the Swedish education system (Regerings Proposition 1991/92:95, 1992/93:230). The planning optimism of earlier decades has vanished, as is evident in this quote by Bo Helgesson and Jan Johansson in a supplement to the report of the Committee on competence requirements for teachers in vocational subjects in upper secondary school:

What will the working life of tomorrow look like? It is impossible to predict what will happen in 20 to 30 years. History has shown that things never turn out the way one expected them to. (SOU 1994:101, supplement 4, p. 172)

Compared to the 1960s, beliefs concerning the steering of the education system have made a U turn: Optimism concerning the possibility of central planning has been replaced by planning scepticism and a widespread belief in the market as superior steering mechanism. Again, Sweden is not alone in discussing and implementing education reforms in this spirit; decentralisation and marketisation were international trends at the time (see e.g. Ringarp, 2011).

Thus, many of the reforms conducted in the time period 1945–1999 follow relatively closely what was ‘en vogue’ in education policy-making internationally during that time. In some areas, Sweden was indeed a pioneer (e.g. in introducing comprehensive schooling), in many others (such as 1960s style education planning or the focus on the development of individual schools and lifelong learning in the late 1970s) it was not. Sweden was perhaps particularly radical in introducing education markets in the early 1990s, but it certainly was not the only country doing so (Ringarp, 2011).

From the point of view of the legitimisation of education policy, it is interesting to note that the committee reports tend not to dwell extensively on the fact that Sweden was following international trends in many respects. For the marketisation reforms of the 1990s, Lisbeth Lundahl has offered the following explanation why this is so:

‘One reason for the fact that referring to other countries was not seen as politically expedient during the decentralisation reforms of the 1980s and 1990s may be that reference to ‘the Reagan, Thatcher or even Blair administrations would hardly have gained major popularity in Sweden, where a majority of people supports the traditional welfare model’ (Lundahl, 2005, p. 160). While Lundahl’s explanation is plausible, it can probably be extended: it is not just in relation to the marketisation reforms that references to foreign countries are strangely absent from the Swedish discourse as it can be found in the committee reports. Generally speaking, compared to later time periods, in the time period from 1945 to 2000, foreign countries and international conditions are rarely invoked in the committee reports for purposes of legitimating education policy. Education reforms are usually legitimated from a Swedish ‘inside-perspective’. The dominant pattern of legitimisation is reference to the scientific basis of education reforms, that is, externalisation to scientificness (cf Lundgren, 1999; Ringarp, 2014). Unlike the period from about 2007, externalisation to world situations does not play an important role yet.

This raises the question why imports into the education policy-making discourse remained largely ‘undeclared’ and why policy borrowing to Sweden often took the shape of ‘silent borrowing’ (Waldow, 2009). One possible line of explanation is that this is connected to the perception of how useful different forms of externalisation are for purposes of legitimisation in different situations. After the Second World War, Sweden was not just considered a model nation in the fields of education and welfare by many other countries (Nilsson, 1987), the dominant perception in Sweden, too, was that Sweden was a pioneer in these areas (cf. Ruth, 1984). This made it difficult to use externalisation to world situations for legitimisation purposes: What should the pioneer learn from those that are behind? At the same time, other legitimatory strategies appeared as more promising. The myth of ‘scientificness’, which includes the belief in rational decision-making on a ‘scientific’ basis, carries strong legitimatory power in the entire Western world (cf. Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003), particularly so in Sweden (cf. Etzemüller, 2010). Therefore, externalisation to scientificness promises particularly large legitimacy gains; externalisation to world situations, on the other hand, does not appear as a promising legitimatory strategy for education policy.

1.2. 2000–2014: Continued marketisation and PISA

In the beginning of the 21st century, the Swedish education system had gone from being a very centralised, state-based system to being one of the most decentralised and marketised education systems in the world. The first decade of the 21st century was also one that was characterised by attempts of the EU to make Europe more...
competitive through strengthening education (e.g. via the Lisbon process) (Lawn & Lingard, 2002; Ringarp, 2013).

In the beginning of the 21st century, the situation with regard to the ‘international argument’ was similar to the immediately preceding decades. That is, there are few legitimate references to other countries (cf. Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). On the few occasions when other countries are named, this is done in a rather sweeping fashion such as in SOU 2004:104:

Swedish efforts to reorient education so that it reflects the perspective of sustainable development must be designed in close dialogue with other countries and take place within the framework of the ongoing international processes. (SOU 2004:104, p. 142)

It is the relation to cooperation and contacts between individual countries as well as IOs such as EU and OECD, which is pointed out.

This changes around the year 2007. After 2007, other countries and international large-scale assessments are referenced more and more frequently in the committee reports. Despite the fact that they focus on different topics, they arrive at similar conclusions: The bad results of Swedish pupils are due to unclear learning goals and the low status of the teaching profession (in comparison to other countries such as Finland).

The new orientation with relation to referring to foreign countries and international large-scale assessments first becomes manifest in the report Clear goals and requirements in grundskolan (Tydliga mål och kunskapskrav i grundskolan). This is the first report where the decline of the Swedish results in large-scale assessments, especially Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), is pointed out explicitly in the text. The expert Leif Davidsson states in this report that the large-scale assessments created problems of curricular validity, since they are not adapted to the Swedish curriculum documents; nevertheless, they are a ‘valuable complement to Swedish studies; it is good to be able to compare the level of Swedish pupils with that of pupils from other countries’ (SOU 2007:28, p. 254, 286).

In the following year, 2008, the declining results are again being discussed. The reports are particularly concerned about the results in mathematics and science, giving rise to the fear of falling behind in technical and economic development (SOU 2008:27, p. 283). In order to turn this development around, massive efforts are seen to be necessary.

The results of the OECD’s latest Assessment of 15-year-olds in school (Program for International Student Assessment, PISA), the IEA study of knowledge in mathematics and science for Swedish pupils in upper secondary school leavers (the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS) and the National Assessment of primary school (NU-03) give clear signals that serious efforts must be made to reverse the trend in a positive direction. (SOU 2008:52, p. 294)

The importance of comparison with other countries is also stressed more and more. SOU 2008:109 states the following: ‘Comparing one’s own education system with that of other countries makes it possible to let what is nation or local specific become clear and to understand it […] Internationalisation contributes to a raising of education quality and enhances cultural understanding’ (SOU 2008:109, p. 195).

The report that most clearly takes the large-scale assessments as its point of departure is It takes time (Det tar tid) from 2013. The committee writing this report had got the task of investigating when the Swedish school reforms of the years 2008 ff. would have an effect on Swedish results (SOU 2013:30). The committee was convened by the centre-right government (in government 2008–2014), and during this period several comprehensive reforms were instigated in the schools (such as new certification of teachers, a new curriculum, changed educational goals etc.). In the preface to the report, expert Per Thullberg (former director general of the National Agency of Education, Skolverket) writes that it is very difficult to measure the causal relation between school reforms and improved education and that the committee had decided to measure these effects via the results of large-scale assessments, as these are according to the committee the ‘only performance assessments of schools that are constructed in a way to make it possible to measure trends’ (SOU 2013:30, p. 15).

In several reports, Sweden now appears as a country that has moved from being a pioneer showing others the way to being a country in decline. At the same time, a lot of reports underline that it is important to not fall behind in education, not least because of the increased international competition that has evolved between countries. One way of improving the Swedish results is seen in improving teacher education. SOU 2010:67 argues that international comparisons have shown that good results of pupils often go together with high status and large professional freedom of the teaching profession.

The report A sustainable teacher education (En hållbar lärarutbildning, SOU 2008:109) again and again returns to the importance of the status of the teaching profession for a good school that reaches good results. Finland’s good results are seen here as partially a result of the fact that teacher education as well as education as a subject have been enjoying a high status in Finland for a long time (SOU 2008:109, p. 146, 257). For foreign observers, the fact that Swedish reports invoke Finland as a model may not seem particularly remarkable, since Finland became a model nation in many countries in the wake of PISA 2000. For Sweden, which for a long time saw itself as a pioneer country in educational matters also in relation to its
Nordic neighbours, the intention to emulate Finland in certain aspects of education constitutes a real paradigm shift. Besides the Finnish education system and teacher education in Finland, some reports make comparisons with Canada, Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore (cf. SOU 2008:52; SOU 2013:30). According to SOU 2008:109, these comparisons should be made with countries that are perceived as culturally close to Sweden, such as Canada and Finland (SOU 2008:109, p. 102, 141).

Finally, how do the committee reports view the future development of the Swedish school with regard to internationalisation? The most recent report analysed in this article, Evaluate in order to develop from 2014 (Utvärdera för utveckling, SOU 2014:12), discusses the three largest large-scale assessments PISA, TIMSS and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). According to this report, Sweden should continue to participate in all three studies. The report also makes clear that these periodically repeated studies have also become interesting for policy-makers. This has led to the National Education Agency preparing to participate in ‘in principle all’ large-scale assessments and consider these as a part of the national evaluation of schools (SOU 2014:12, p. 272f).

2. Conclusion
This article has tried to reconstruct how education policy agendas were legitimated over the course of the last 70 years in Sweden, especially the years since 2000. It has particularly focussed on how the ‘international argument’ has figured in (or been absent from) the education policymaking discourse.

In relation to the introduction of comprehensive schooling, Sweden was a pioneer country. Therefore, it is not surprising that we find few explicit references to other countries in the discourse in relation to this reform. But even in the following reforms, international reference points were hardly ever an argument for reform, despite the fact that Sweden in many ways participated in the international education policy-making mainstream, became a member of the EU and participated in various international large-scale assessments. This only changes in the years around 2007, when the ‘international argument’ suddenly becomes prominent in the education policymaking discourse as a legitimatory device and justification for change. We argue that this shift is connected to declining Swedish PISA results and a changed perception of large-scale assessments on the other: Germany had perceived herself as an educational leader, but this was apparently contradicted by the below-average PISA results. A similar argument can be made in relation to the Swedish case: as long as PISA results were above the OECD average and therefore were in accordance with self-perception as a pioneer country, PISA did not receive a lot of attention among the Swedish public and policy-makers. However, when results moved towards being average and later below average and a substantial gap emerged between self-perception and PISA results, Sweden, too, experienced a PISA shock. Self-confidence as a pioneer country was undermined, which made externalising to world situations more attractive as a legitimatory resource. In this context, large-scale assessments may appear particularly attractive as a legitimatory reference, as referring to them combines externalising to world situations on the one hand with externalising to scientificness on the other. Thereby, two powerful sources of legitimacy are tapped at the same time.

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