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Rerouting: Discipline, Assessment and Performativity in Contemporary Swedish Educational Discourse

Joakim Larsson*, Annica Löfdahl, Hector Pérez Prieto

Abstract
As Sweden drew nearer to the 2006 national election, two themes emerged in the educational debate: a concern for order and discipline in schools, and the ambition to raise educational levels of achievement. The objective of this article is to locate these two themes within a broader framework of understanding by: 1) discussing examples of how the reinforcement of disciplinary power in schools was introduced, justified and deployed by right-wing constellations during this time; and 2) to relate these policy changes to both a Foucauldian theory of power and to current discussions on performativity, assessment and governmentality. Considered as attempts to locate students, teachers and schools within networks of performativity, thereby strengthening the image of Sweden as a “performing knowledge nation”, we argue that these policy changes have a much closer relationship with the art of “perception management” than with any genuine interest in education for human proficiency.

Keywords: discipline, assessment, governmentality, PISA

A new call for order
One of the core issues in the Swedish General Election of 2006 was, arguably, the future development of educational policy and, as far as the Swedish right-wing alliance was concerned, it really needed regulation. Referring to results of international assessment programmes such as PISA¹ and TIMSS², the alliance (spearheaded in educational policy affairs by the Liberal Party) took lengths to assert that the Swedish educational system had lost its momentum – and they were the ones to put it back on track. For instance, the Liberals outlined their future intentions regarding school policy in the 2006 report Long Live The Cram School! [Leve pluggskolan!] (The Liberal Party, 2006). The report is referred to in the 2006 edition of Education at a Glance in which the OECD furthers the analysis of its PISA 2003 study, and where Sweden clearly appears in the lower ranks in terms of time spent at school by students, as well as in terms of hours spent at home doing homework. Further, it is also referred to in the 2003 TIMSS study where Swedish schools are reported to also suffer from considerable absenteeism problems – and where the mean scores for Swedish children in terms of, for instance, mathematics performance have decreased since the...

* Department of Educational Science, Karlstad University, Sweden. E-mail: joakim.larsson@kau.se.
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TIMSS 1995 report. It is contended that the Swedish school system is running well below full capacity; certainly a doubtful state of affairs when – as argued in *Education at a Glance* – “Europe and the United States are increasingly outperformed by countries in East Asia” (p. 1). For the Liberals, the solution was obvious: to utilise hidden potential, we must make the wheels run a little faster:

We do not believe that Sweden lags behind in terms of knowledge because Swedes are more stupid than others. Our contention is instead that Sweden, in many regards, has set its ambitions too low (Liberal Party, 2006, p. 3, our translation).

Raising the level of ambition clearly stands out as the prime directive for the Liberal Party. Suggestions in the 2006 report *Long Live The Cram School!* include, for instance: 1) to increase the time students spend in class; 2) to cut down the amount of gaps between classes; 3) to increase the amount of homework; 4) to come to terms with absenteeism; and 5) to increase order in classes – a suggestion to be further concretised in March 2007 when the government presented bill 2006/07:6: *Enhanced order, safety and peace in school* [*Förbättrad ordning, trygghet och studiero i skolan*] (Ministry of Education, 2007e). In this proposition, it is contended that the current implementation of rules of conduct in Swedish schools simply stops short at providing the necessary conditions for an educationally fruitful environment and, consequently, that it is crucial to make more explicit demands concerning the factors required for maintaining order in educational environments. An integral part of this policy in the making, it is argued, must involve making the levels of authority bestowed upon teachers and headmasters explicit in order to allow them concrete possibilities of forceful intervention and restoration of an orderly environment. One proposes, for instance, the possibility of teachers confiscating certain objects of a disturbing nature (such as cell phones) when used in class; and the possibility of transferring and relocating disorderly students to other schools.

It is our conjecture that this extended emphasis on control and coercion marks the initiation of a Swedish “disciplinary turn”. First, it was effectuated by way of its entry into the media space as a problem of significance – that Swedish schools were substandard due to a lack of ambition, order and discipline. Subsequently, when power shifted in favour of the right-wing alliance we reached a platform from where liberties could be revoked and restricted – within a liberal frame of reference – in homage to accelerated demands for accountability and assessment.

In this article, our purpose is to illustrate how such policies of control, regulation and discipline were introduced as viable solutions to Sweden’s declining educational performance. In so doing, we will discuss the following questions.

1. Which implications can be expected as policies of discipline are implemented in our schools, in terms of:
   a consequences for the social relations between the agents in our educational environments; more precisely, between students and teachers; and
b consequences for our conception of knowledge itself.

2. Paradoxically, these policies are being championed by liberal representatives. How may we understand this paradoxical development:
   a in terms of a theory of power, such as Michel Foucault’s works on discipline and governmentality; and
   b in terms of current discussions on assessment and performativity?

However, we first provide a short overview of contemporary educational politics in Sweden.

The setting of educational politics in Sweden – a light briefing

From the late 1980s onward, Swedish society has taken some firm steps away from its traditional aims of “equality for all” politics, heading instead towards a greater emphasis on the decentralisation and privatisation of public services. As a result, responsibilities for educational systems have shifted from state to municipal levels of governance, opening new possibilities for private schools to emerge; new options for parents to consider regarding their children’s educational patterns, and new possibilities for individualisation and market-orientation discourses to gain prevalence (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 1999; Lindblad, Lundahl, Lindgren & Zackari, 2002; Lindblad, Johannesson, Ingolfur & Simola, 2002). These system changes have been described in terms of a “divergence from a long-term, successively built up educational system, public, common and equal for all” (Englund, 1995, p. 13, our translation); as a restructuring in favour of “post-welfare-education” where economics and market-orientation are guiding principles (Lindblad, 1994, p. 200). Surely, these changes are not exclusive to Sweden and hence not isolated phenomena at all; rather, they may be regarded as belonging to a family of restructurings on a more global scale, where neoliberal/neoconservative refractions of educational discourses seem to form an essential part (see Halsey et al. 1997; Lauder et al. 2006; Apple 2005; Ball, 2008). In Sweden, these restructurings were instigated by social democrats, then further radicalised by right-wing governments during the 1990s, and once again administered by social democratic governments up to the general election in 2006 when power shifted in favour of the right-wing alliance.

Alongside these fluctuations in political discourse, it is possible to discern changes in the imagery surrounding children and childhood: images of the active, competent and independent child have surfaced in national and global documents (Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann, 2004; James & James, 2004). In Sweden during the 1990s, when economic resources for preschools and schools were decreasing, these constructions of children fitted like a glove. In the spirit of letting children be able and responsible for their own learning, “the competent child” turned out to be a key concept when large groups of children are to be managed by relatively few adults. In addition, earlier conceptions of children whereby children were natural and immanent, evil even, whose development one is to await, or whose heads one is to fill with the suitable
knowledge to sustain a future life, were now exchanged for the conceiving of children as beings, important in the present tense, being as they are. Yet the question remains of whether the earlier conceptions are still found in several traditions of educational politics and practices. When neoconservative and neoliberal agendas are brought to the forefront of national politics, more often than not the traditional conceptions are dusted off for a new round, blending with discourses on the competent child.

**Transfigurations of Power, and Governmentality**

The concept of governmentality, as discussed by Foucault (1991), is one of many relevant facets. In our work, we understand the concept as “the conduct of conduct” – a means to “structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, cited in Gillies, 2008, p. 420); a technology fusing “the governing of the self with the governing of other entities like the state, the nation and the local community” (Petersson, Olsson & Popkewitz, 2007, p. 55).

Tracing the main themes of Western governmental thought is, as Foucault (1977/1995; 1991) and many others have shown, to follow a line of intricately interwoven developments on the European continent – developments of a religious, scientific, economic, agricultural and demographic nature. Therefore, as governmentalities evolve, manifesting new thinkings and linkings of the state, the individual and power, they do so successively, in temporal order. In his own genealogical studies, Foucault traced this line from the pastoral power of early Christianity across sovereign power in feudal society, disciplinary power structures emerging during the techno-scientific revolution and, finally, landing in the mechanics of modern liberal governance. However, as pointed out by Gillies (2008) and Andersson (2006), Foucault never saw these models as somehow displacing or superseding each other; instead, they gradually came to coexist, forming a flexible “triangle of power, comprising the sovereign, discipline and governance” (Andersson, p. 62). In order to discuss the interlockings and interactions of these power relations today, we will proceed by sketching out some characteristics of the main subsystems.

**Sovereign power**

This is the power of the feudal king, the monarch, the Machiavellian Prince; it is undisputed and undisputable. As it reigns, it reigns supreme, commands all, threatens and punishes with physical pain. It is the power of the spectacle; surplus power, always visible; it is power that “individualises ascendingly”: the higher up in the hierarchy of power you move, the more you are made into an individual. No one is more individual than the king – the top of the pyramid (Foucault, 1977/1995).

**Discipline**

Since 17th century Europe stood at the “threshold of discipline”, conditions have changed dramatically. Growing populations, expanding industries, rising numbers of
children in need of training and education, bigger armies with increasingly devastating firepower, and ever more patients in need of hospital care – these were the requisites, the requirements, to which sovereign power no longer proved to be the answer. As disciplinary power had to bring order into chaos, it had also to fulfil the demands of the principle of economy: first, it had to increase the usefulness and efficiency of the subparts pertaining to the system in question; second, it had to do so by way of relatively gentle means; not in terms of the spectacle, not by displaying surplus power but subtly, almost invisibly, carefully so as not to awaken resistance. Therefore, it “individualises descendingly”. Real power is not visible here, its exponents are not made into individuals, power diffuses; while on the other side of the hierarchy, where power is weak, it individualises fiercely. In disciplinary society, as Foucault pointed out, no one is more individualised than the deviant; the prisoner, the unhealthy.

As disciplinary power is crucial to our discussion, we will (based on Foucault, 1977/1995) sketch its core mechanisms beginning with: 1) the partitioning of space: “Each individual has his own place; and each place its individual” (p. 143). Discipline always needs to establish an analytical space, needs to introduce a mapping of all inhabitants in a certain space, in order to avoid “distribution in groups; break up collective dispositions; analyse confused, massive or transient pluralities /…/ eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation” (p. 143.). Also, it employs: 2) the partitioning of time: controlling the chronology of particular actions, making sure that their unfolding in time follows well-defined phases, efficiently, according to a timetable. 3) Surveillance. To operate, power has to make certain that every cog in the disciplinary machinery can be made an object of observation, an object of knowledge at any time – it establishes a panoptical position from which it is possible to see, but not to be seen. 4) It needs normalising judgement. Desirable behaviour must be explicated and rewarded, while punishments are installed to avoid deviations; to be corrective in relation to a “conformity that must be achieved” (p. 183). Finally, there is 5) Examination. Here, at the intersection of surveillance and normalising judgement, power and knowledge unites into one of its strongest compounds. By way of examination, in terms of investigation as well as trial, individuals are situated in “a meticulous archive /…/ a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (p. 189). Examination strives to measure, to quantitatively assess deviation, and to make the individual “linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the ‘marks’ that characterize him” (p. 192).

**Liberal governance**

Liberal forms of governance, epitomising decentralisation and the ideal of governing by governing as little as possible, were just as natural an answer to contemporary societal demands as disciplinary power was some centuries earlier (Andersson, 2006). Fitting the demands of late 19th century social life, mercantilism and the developing bourgeoisie,
it established the right to lead based on “personal competence, high moral standards, reason and effectiveness” (Andersson, 2006, p. 63). This is also the birth of the welfare state, assuming responsibility for its citizens and expressing commitment through “city planning, a minimum wage and child labour legislation, social reconstruction of the countryside, zoning laws, housing projects” (Petersson, Olsson & Popkewitz, 2007, p. 52). Here, the “conduct of conduct” folds back upon more pastoral forms of control as the citizens are to be made capable of “problem-solving, autonomous thinking, rational behaviour, and participatory behaviour” (Dahlberg & Bloch, 2006, p. 107), for their own sake. Proper conduct is achieved when the citizen aligns himself with the intentions of the state and, in so doing, he also finds the most efficient way to achieve his own goals. In neoliberal framings, of course, we find this governance being taken one step further: we see “the constitution of the market as a form of truth” (Peters, 2007, p. 170); the citizen becoming the customer; together with “responsibilization discourses” (Lindblad, 1994, p. 107) transferring more accountability, and risk, into the hands of the individual subject (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Apple, 2005).

“The conduct of conduct of conduct” – Conduct³

As another “mutation” of liberal governmentality, Gillies (2008) discusses the concept of conduct³ – conduct to the third power. While “the conduct of conduct” concerns governance, the power to influence the conduct of others; conduct³ instead emphasises the art of governance presentation, and the winning of public consent. According to Gillies, this is indeed a main concern today; politics is increasingly becoming performance, becoming a media strategy, becoming “perception management” (p. 418). Seeking to maximise output, conduct³ works by “cosmetic packaging and selective emphasis so that the effects, or even costs, of some political initiative are presented in a positive way” (p. 419). Clearly, it is a type of governance that maintains liberal ideas since “considerable effort is made to ensure that government is exercised in a way which suggests openness, participation, partnership because these are seen as appealing to modern views of democracy and so as attracting public approval” (p. 420). But, as Gillies argues, the very preoccupation with appearance may cause other parts of the political apparatus to lose transparency and openness instead and, just as bad, to invite public distrust and cynicism at the same time. While admitting that matters of appearance and public relations are not brand-new subjects in politics, Gillies invites us to see that conduct³ enables a new way of dealing with them. It makes them “much more an issue of control and manipulation, a much more consciously managed process rather than an open system. It seeks to remove doubt and uncertainty from the equation by providing the voice-over, the narration for the political action as it unfolds” (p. 421). This control, this unwillingness to leave public opinion to chance, together with its willingness to revive the power of the spectacle, is what lends conduct³ its sovereign qualities. This makes it, as Gillies puts it, “an illiberal weapon in a liberal regime” (p. 421).
Performativity in Education: Some Notes on Earlier Research

Having a close relationship with the characteristics of conduct\(^3\), we find the concept of *performativity* to be another important analytical resource in the following discussion. The concept was originally taken up by Lyotard (1984) and has been further elaborated by Ball (2006, 2003) to describe “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation, /.../ that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of control” (2006, p. 692). According to Ball, we encounter the demands of performativity in all contexts where we, as individuals or as organisations, are summoned to excel, to stand out, to become “adept in the studied art of convincing exaggeration” (p. 699). This has indeed become the modern panopticon: surveillance not in terms of the penitentiary, but reforaged in the form of “the database, the appraisal meeting, /.../ promotion applications, inspections” (p. 693). As Perryman (2006) argues, this state of “panoptic performativity” is also a fitting description of an educational inspection regime where “teachers and pupils feel as if they are constantly being observed, and perform accordingly in order to escape the regime” (p. 155).

However, despite the fact that excellence and performance are objectives in cultures of performativity, Ball argues that we may encounter the exact opposite effect. As more and more energy is consumed for monitoring and assessment and, consequently, in the art of presenting the most favourable version of oneself, or one’s organisation – which Ball refers to as “second-order activities” – less energy is available for “first-order activities” which, in the context of education, might include the art of teaching itself, of maintaining healthy relations, and the stimulation of the student’s interest in the actual subject. That is, instead of concentrating on the process of learning, we busy ourselves with *fabrications*, signs and symbols enacted to assure our environments that everything is proceeding according to plan. In current works, Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto (2009a; 2009b) argue that this logic of performativity and presentation is very much operative in Swedish preschool activity today – resulting, for instance, in a loss of transparency and less time “to work directly with the children” (2009a, p. 405). Needless to say, this logic stimulates plasticity instead of authenticity – the “exteriorization of knowledge”, in Lyotard’s words (Ball, 2006, p. 699). As all of these works indicate, the chances are that the demands of performativity may come at a high price as we pay for them with a loss of authenticity, self-worth and meaning.

Knowledge Assessments and Performativity

An important ingredient in the rationalisation of disciplinary action in Swedish education was our allegedly poor performance in PISA and TIMSS. As shown by Grek (2009), Petterson (2008) and Benveniste (2006), it is not uncommon for international data sets to function as a justification for certain directions of educational policy – like wielding a bat in the political game of legitimising one’s own policy direction, or repudiating another’s. That is, together with the more obvious rational-functional motivations, it is fair to assume that symbolic-legitimational ones are also in opera-
tion (Benveniste, 2006.). Thus, the data obtained through knowledge assessments are not always as important as their ability to be turned into powerful points of reference, utilised in national political contestation. Or, as Benveniste points out, as “merit points” in the international marketplace:

Countries’ ability to attract foreign capital and remain competitive in the global marketplace is considered to pivot on their capacity to have a ready supply of highly qualified labor. The demands of this new institutional environment have prompted nations to shift governmental concern away from mere control over the resources and contents of education towards a focus on outcomes (Benveniste, pp. 802-803).

As a result, the arenas of educational debate are sometimes weight-shifted – as in Germany, where the “PISA has led to the growing importance of principles such as outcome control, competence orientation and external assessment” (Ertl, 2006, p. 619; also see Pongratz, 2007). One may therefore also want to consider international assessment programmes as “transporters of ideology” (Petterson, 2008.), insofar as their impact on current educational affairs can be regarded as powerful contributions to the culture of performativity (Ball, 2006). According to this point of view, it may not be fruitful to consider the PISA as “just” a neutral instrument, which just happens to be put to the service of different actors with different motives. Rather, we must “… reverse the view: it is the global strategic situation that codes our perception through the PISA lens” (Pongratz, 2007, p. 58). This does, of course not, disqualify the PISA and other international assessment programmes from being excellent tools in the political game of “perception management” – exponents upon which to conduct the conduct of conduct.

**Specifying the Purpose of this Article**

Numerous reports today take an empirical or theoretical stance on issues of performativity and assessment (on national and international scales) in education. Often we find very elucidating discussions of these topics, for instance concerning their relation to market-oriented discourse, neoliberal agendas, and decentralisation. However, we have not been able to localise appropriate research for comprehending the current convolutions in Swedish educational discourse. Here, the procedures of coercion and control place themselves like a superscription in a way that seems awkward to fit into a scheme of liberal governance. Rather, as we find the image of the independent, active learner being put into the shade we seem to be moving back into modes of disciplinary and sovereign governmentality, very much in accordance with Gillies’ (2008) discussions of conduct. This seems to be the development at hand in Sweden today; it is a sparingly discussed problem; and it is the area we wish to start uncovering in this article.
Disciplinary Discourse in Swedish Educational Policy: Cutting Pieces

Notes on the Material and Method

From a relatively large collection of documents mainly dating from 2006–2007 (the period immediately before and after the governmental power shift) – all related to discourses on discipline, disorder, evaluation and assessment in Swedish Education, and belonging to a wide variety of genres such as news articles, debate articles, press releases, election manifestos etc., we selected a number for further analysis and discussion. Our primary criteria for selection were that the text implements any of the five fundamentals of discipline sketched above, in order to effect changes: a) regarding social relations between agents in educational environments; or b) regarding conceptions of knowledge. We selected the following texts:

- The government bill 2006/07:6: Enhanced order, safety and peace in the school [Förbättrad ordning, trygghet och studiero i skolan]
- The official report SOU 2007:28: Explicit goals and knowledge demands in compulsory school – Suggestions for a new goal and assessment system [Tydliga mål och kunskapskrav i grundskolan - Förslag till nytt mål- och uppföljningssystem]
- Five debate-like articles in the leading liberal Swedish Newspaper “Dagens Nyheter”, dating from 2004–2007, authored by Leijonborg (leader of the Liberal Party 1997–2007; Minister of Education 2006-2007) and/or Björklund (leader of the Liberal Party 2007– ; Minister of School 2006-2007; of Education 2007–)
- The 2006 joint election manifesto of the right-wing alliance regarding educational policy: More knowledge. A modern educational policy [Mer kunskap. En modern utbildningspolitik]
- The 2006 report Long Live the Cram School! [Leve Pluggskolan!] by the Liberal Party, containing future suggestions for educational policy
- Four press releases from the Ministry of Education, dating from February to April 2007

When analysing these texts, it was our aim to make interpretations concerning the possible outcomes of their implementation, taking a departure in our theoretical framework. Agreeing with Fairclough (1995; 2003) that texts carry great potential to effect changes regarding social relations and identities; to influence what is “structurably possible”, we acknowledge that “the relation between what is structurably possible and what actually happens, between structures and events, is a very complex one” (2005, p. 23). Knowing this, we of course do not claim that our interpretations will stand out in terms of correctness or completeness. On the other hand, we intend them to be “alternative interpretations”, critically coloured contrasts to the interpretations and intentions in which they were framed at the point of reaching the media space.
Discipline of Students and Teachers

The right-wing attempts to raise Swedish educational performance involved, as we argued at the beginning of this article, establishing the current educational situation as a matter of discontent. In newspaper debates, representatives of the Liberal Party stated clearly and frequently that any improvement must begin with the establishment of order in Swedish classrooms. In fact, it was claimed – referring to the results of *Education at a Glance* – that Sweden is in the lead in terms of disorderliness issues (Liberal Party, 2006). For the purpose of ending kid-glove treatment, government bill 2006/07:69 finally arrived with suggestions for new mandates for teachers:

The school must be given opportunities to create a good and safe environment for study, for all students. Preventive measures, as well as legal possibilities to forcefully intervene in the case of a disturbance to order must be central to the work of securing a good environment for study (Ministry of Education, 2007e, p. 8, our translation).

Two concrete examples of such forceful interventions are suggested: 1) the apprehension of potentially disturbing objects in class; and 2) the relocation of bullies to other schools – without the parents’ consent, if necessary. As shown in the bill itself, the results of comment circulation led to quite serious criticism of these suggestions. For instance, some commentators pointed out that the apprehension of deleterious objects involves matters of *punishing* and *policing*, and we already have a public authority for such affairs – the police. Bestowing police-type authority upon teachers, it is feared, may in fact be counterproductive for “democratic aspirations” in school (p. 10). Regarding the relocation of disturbing *students*, reservations aim for instance at the risk of arbitrariness – how are we to determine that a student is disorderly enough to motivate a relocation? (p. 12). We of course acknowledge the need to protect all students from offense and violation. However, in the relocation of disorderly students we also recognise the powerful attempt to uphold partitionings of space – to avoid “unusable and dangerous coagulations” – and the separation of some students from others. When taken in context with other “special manoeuvres” designed for deviating students, this pattern seems to stand out even further. For instance, in a press release from 21 April 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2007d) we are briefed on the intention to re-emphasise special teacher education. In that press release, Minister Björklund points out that when special teacher education was discontinued by the Social Democrats in 1990 it was feared that the presence of special teachers “pointed fingers” at the weak students. As this was a misguided decision, according to the Minister, it had to be corrected at once. Apparently, the expectation for students to perform also comes with the expectation that *quite a few of them may not be able to* – perhaps these are the ones who need extra attention, special attention, as soon as possible. Here, we see a normalising sanction at work; raising awareness of the obligation to perform – and the stakes to be lost for those who do not.
Another, perhaps more fundamental attempt to partition space we can date to 11 October 2006, one month after power had shifted in favour of the right-wing alliance. In *Dagens Nyheter* on that day, Björklund (2006a) announced that the Swedish secondary school would be divided into three parts: 1) theory-based programmes preparing for college and university; 2) programmes aiming at craftsmanship; and 3) apprentice programmes for students who prefer to do their studying in the workplace rather than in a classroom. In a governmental press release from April 2007, the Minister of Education further clarified the rationale behind this policy when assuring that “[n]ot everybody can become academics, not everybody wants to become academics and Sweden does not work if everybody becomes academics” (Ministry of Education, 2007c, our translation). Not discouraging any attempts to hold craftsmanship education in higher esteem, it is nonetheless possible to regard this division of secondary schools as a powerful partitioning of life-spaces as well. As the Minister makes clear, academic life is not for everybody, it is by no means a birthright, rather, it would serve society and the student in question well to set the proper course as early as possible – in effect, perhaps, by a partitioning of possible life-trajectories into sets of early options for a future career.

Turning to another salient feature in the educational debates prior to the 2006 election, we would like to discuss the topic of assessment and gradings. There could have been little doubt that the Liberal Party (and the right-wing alliance in general) intended to transform these into prime tools for educational reform, and in their joint manifesto for education *More Knowledge!* we learn that:

First, national tests in all theoretical subjects in grade nine are necessary in order to guarantee the quality of final grades. Second, it will become the task of the School Inspection to regularly examine the gradings of each school. Third, teacher training programmes are to be given the explicit mission to train the teachers’ ability to assess the students’ knowledge in relation to the goals (Alliance for Sweden, 2006, p. 13, our translation).

The same intention was subsequently elucidated after the election:

In order to offer help and support at an early stage, we must find the students who risk falling behind. The national testing of reading and writing abilities in third grade will guarantee that no one will pass unseen through school (Ministry of Education, 2007b, our translation).

In these documents, the examination, quantification and surveillance of pupils as well as teachers through measurement statistics stand out as key concepts. We can also identify the partitioning of time, the need to control the “chronology of learning” and, certainly, the establishment of “a meticulous archive”, carefully recording the progress of each student. And as children are prepared to successfully pass through knowledge control stations, they are to be rewarded for their work: secondary school students who take extra classes in language and mathematics are, for instance, rewarded with points of merit, giving them a head start when applying for college
It seems to be the challenged, the motivated and the hard-working child, the performative child, who comprises the norm; and it is made clear that sidestepping will result in higher visibility. Here, we can recognise a powerful sanction and a normalising judgment in itself, by way of a thorough examination made all the more efficient through earlier and better testing procedures – such as nationwide tests “constructed for the purpose to determine whether each student has achieved the national curriculum goals or not” (Björklund, 2006a, our translation).

In this tightening matrix of assessment and evaluation, we may of course expect the role of the teacher to transform accordingly. As we have tried to argue, these transformations will reflect upon the teacher’s examination of others – but they will also influence the manner in which the teacher is examined. For instance, in a 2007 article in Dagens Nyheter Ministers Leijonborg & Björklund advocate a governmental system for teacher authorisation, contributing “to teacher’s professionalism by clarifying the demands on teacher’s competence and development” (Leijonborg & Björklund, 2007, our translation). It is also suggested that complementary education is to be provided for unauthorised teachers and, once again, that teachers must be given extended disciplinary authorities. “No student should be afraid of their teacher, but the students should have respect for their teachers” (ibid.). Certainly, the roles conferred on the teacher in such modes of power are manifold. Among many other things, he/she must now become a more powerful node in the disciplinary network, must be a receiver and transmitter of disciplinary power, a maker and administrator of labels (orderly/disorderly/diligent/problematic etc.), a supervisor of timetable compliance, a distributor of normalising judgment and a monitor of proper order – as he/she himself is disciplined and characterised as a certificated/non-certificated, teacher/pre-school-teacher/special needs teacher and indirectly assessed by the same token as his/her students are assessed in terms of satisfying their requirements.

Discipline of Knowledge

Turning to the content aspect of education, we have clear signals that some subjects are more in demand than others – core subjects such as language and mathematics, as shown by the discussion on merit points given in upper secondary school. At the same time, efforts have been made to limit the individual student’s freedom to choose their own subjects. In the joint right-wing election manifesto for educational policy, we learn that:

> It is time to greatly reduce the number of choices in upper secondary school. Cooking and pop music must give way to language and physics. /…/ Universities must send clear signals to secondary school students regarding what subjects are important (Alliance for Sweden, 2006, p. 10).

In this joint production involving both conservative and liberal parties, we are told that Swedish students have enjoyed too many liberties – and for too long. Perhaps this
restriction, and normalisation, of educational possibilities owes credit to the presence of conservative elements (see Apple, 2005); however, the same opinions were ventilated by the liberal representative Björklund, then minister-to-be, in Dagens Nyheter on 6 February 2004. It appears that a consolidation of state power is at hand and the tendency is obvious in other, equally profound areas. In our last example, we will try to cover one such area tending towards regulation and centralisation.

Taking its departure in the ambition to make educational goals more explicit, the official report SOU 2007:28: *Explicit goals and knowledge demands in compulsory school – Suggestions for a new goal and assessment system [Tydliga mål och kunskapskrav i grundskolan – Förslag till nytt mål- och uppföljningssystem]* brought heavy criticism of the national curriculum Lpo94 (effective from 1994). Due to a lack of clarity, it made the evaluation of goal fulfilment a highly arbitrary matter and, to exemplify this, the report highlights certain problematic phrases expressing the ambition for the student to:

... develop the ability to draw conclusions and to make generalisations as well as to explain and to argue for one’s thinking and one’s conclusions /.../ develop the ability to reflect and consciously consider different options regarding the use of natural resources /.../ make use of linguistic and mathematical skills in concrete and meaningful contexts, where feedback is rooted in the student’s own actions and perceptions (Ministry of Education, 2007f, p. 30, our translation).

Doing away with ambiguity and enhancing measurability is the cure, as we can also see in other texts. In the debate pages of Dagens Nyheter (29 November 2006), where Minister Björklund discusses the aim to introduce standardised levels of attainment in reading, writing and mathematics from grade three, he makes clear that these “goals are to be distinctly and explicitly designed, to eliminate large possibilities for interpretation in Swedish schools” (Björklund, 2006b). Alongside with the urgency to make future curricula more explicit and more subject-oriented, it nonetheless seems urgent to offer pointers regarding which subjects are a priority and which ones are not. It seems to us that a judgement has been passed concerning the nature of “real” knowledge as well. Not to say that interpretation procedures are completely absent when assessments of skills in language and physics are made, but they are probably indispensably present when assessing the manner in which students value knowledge, reflect upon it in the context of their own actions and perceptions. Possibly, the ambition to eliminate ambiguity may come with the drawback of having to discredit those school subjects that do not easily fit into a scheme of quantitative assessment and examination, those that are not so easily defined in terms of a clear objective and a slick timetable on the way to achieve them.
Conclusions

Judging from observations made in national (and international) domains, Swedish educational policy seems to have experienced a “disciplinary turn”. The changes in the discourse concerning education and its objectives that we have noted mark a distinct break with discourses on the self-regulating, responsible, active and competent child. Thereby, they also seem to move away from liberal governance that “co-opt(s) the creativity of participants by recruiting their desires and motivations” instead of “suppressing the agency of participants” (Schutz, 2004, p. 17; also see Foucault, 1983; Peters, 2007). How then is one to interpret this “rerouting” towards disciplinary power? As our research shows, discipline is depicted as the longed-for fuel for the educational engine. Based on the assumption that Sweden, like other nations, must rally forces in the pursuit of hot-seats in the global economy, of shares in a global market where the Asian “tiger economies” are increasingly powerful actors, discipline is the means to bring Sweden to a new level in the global competition, igniting new sparks of excellence, mustering new forces for the future – and bringing latent, dissipating ones back into coherent wholes. Paradoxically, to engage in this free market also involves a fallback upon centralisation and sovereign power – “illiberal” elements within a liberal regime (Gillies, 2008).

For many students, this fallback will indeed result in some restriction of liberty, for instance, in terms of their chances to influence their own educational routes. It will also, no doubt, have consequences for the teacher. As a relay station in the disciplinary network, will he/she not have to transfer some attention from “first-order” to “second-order” activities? Will we not force him/her to spend more valuable time on “performance monitoring and management” (Ball, 2003, p. 221) rather than on “direct engagement with students, research, curriculum development” (p. 221)? The risks are, we feel, quite obvious – we may entrench ourselves in a well-organised system for performance and perception management, while doing a disservice to our educational institutions and to our own ability to advance knowledge.

As we have tried to show, discipline and performance do forge a strong bond in contemporary Swedish educational discourse. The individual teacher, the individual student, highlighted and high-powered, all are required to perform, to be performative. Now, this performativity is naturally in the individual’s own interest since it will safeguard him/her through all levels of knowledge requirement, assuring that his/her learning/teaching process is on schedule. In case of deviation, disciplinary power is standing by for action, for coercion, as any student, any teacher, or any school bordering on underachievement runs the constant risk of a normalising sanction. In the game of perception management, these are all manoeuvres deemed necessary for the promotion of the “knowledge economy”. But, of course, it could be argued that what is in demand here is not the individual student’s acquisition of knowledge at all – and certainly not the kind “rooted in the student’s own actions and perceptions” – it is knowledge acquisition as such, knowledge as a collective performance,
as a commodity, as a means to prove one’s own ability to play the “knowledge game” well. Indeed, in the context of international assessment programmes, the performativity of the individual makes the most sense when regarded as a contribution to the performativity of the state. In this setting, discipline makes a perfect companion. In the national knowledge factory, as in traditional factories, the wheels roll faster when no questions are asked. Energy is saved and efforts are directed, all leading up to the examination of the student, the examination of the teacher, the examination of the school, the examination of the state. Clearly, international knowledge assessments, as the pinnacle of educational performance ratings, play a major role in this context. As they are administered, and the students take their seats, much is at stake for this is the examination of the state, of the Minister of Education as well. Pass or fail? The consequences may be dire.

Joakim Larsson is a doctoral student of Education at Karlstad University, Sweden. His main research focus involves analysing ongoing changes in educational policy from the viewpoint of educational philosophy, using a variety of theoretical resources such as process philosophy, ecophilosophy and poststructuralist discussions on governmentality. Interested in the grounds and rationales for disciplinary policy on more fundamental levels, he also attempts to understand such changes in terms of their relations with epistemological and ontological assumptions. joakim.larsson@kau.se

Annica Löfdahl is a Professor of Educational Work at Karlstad University, Sweden. Her current research interests include educational policy, preschool children’s play, peer cultures and interactions and social processes among children in preschool. annica.lofdahl@kau.se

Héctor Pérez Prieto is a Professor of Educational Work at Karlstad University, Sweden. He was previously a researcher in education at Uppsala University. His current research interests encompass educational policy and narrative studies. hector.perez@kau.se
Notes

1 The PISA (“Programme for International Student Assessment”) is administered by the OECD and concentrates on mathematical literacy, problem solving, reading literacy and scientific literacy, and does so in “terms of general competencies, that is, how well students can apply the knowledge and skills they have learned at school to real-life challenges”; namely, it does not “test how well a student has mastered a school’s specific curriculum” (http://www.pisa.oecd.org/document/53/0,3343,en_32252351_32235731_38262901_1_1_1_1,00.html). The tests are administered to between 4,500 and 10,000 fifteen-year-olds in each country, and 57 countries participated in the PISA 2006 study.

2 The TIMSS (“Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study”) test cycle is administered by the IEA (“International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement”) and concentrates on science and mathematics achievement in the fourth and eighth grades, and endeavours to reflect the curricula of participating students. 67 countries participated in the 2007 study (Martin & Mullis, 2008).
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