

The marketisation of education and the democratic deficit

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journals.sagepub.com/home/eer**Carl Anders Säfström** 

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Abstract

This article deals with the question of what has happened to ‘the public’ in the Swedish education system during the last three decades. In our search for an answer we illuminate and discuss how the process of marketisation, together with the learnification and individualisation of education, replaced ‘the public’ from public education with the logic of the market place. To shed some further light on the current discourse on Swedish education, we contrast two principles in education and teaching, the aristocratic principle and the democratic principle. According to the aristocratic principle, education is about fixating and reproducing existing power relations as the cornerstone of a well-ordered society. According to the democratic principle of education, equality is the cornerstone of a well-ordered democratic society. Considering the shift in the very infrastructure of the Swedish educational system, we arrive at the conclusion that the principles in education and teaching are characterised by the aristocratic principle, rather than those we have characterised as democratic principles. The educational message is clear: upcoming generations are to accept the rules of the market economy and play the game accordingly.

Keywords

Public education, marketisation, individualisation, democratic deficit, equality

Introduction

The year 2011 was a year of educational reforms in Sweden that involved new curricula for the entire school system, including pre-school, compulsory school and upper secondary education and a new organisation for teacher education (Beach and Bagley, 2012). These reforms not only implied organisational changes but also entailed a more instrumental view of knowledge and

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teaching, compared to former educational reforms, that would better meet the demands and needs of the market (e.g. Beach, 2012; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Englund, 2011; Hultén, 2019; Säfström and Månsson, 2015). By also advocating a teacher education that better fits the new school structure (Prop 2009/10:89), the government incorporated the largest vocational programmes in universities into the logic of the market place. By educating teachers, teacher education contributes to schools and provides the foundation for a future society. If teacher education follows the structures of the school, the school sets the standard for what the teacher should be and not the other way round (Åstrand, 2020; Sjöberg, 2019). By systematising the entire educational system where societies', and especially the market's, needs are reflected in the school curriculum, and where the demands for future teachers' knowledge base are reflected in the learning outcomes in teacher education, teaching becomes, in this case, a way to transmit the knowledge and the norms demanded by the market (Beach, 2012; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Dahlstedt and Harling, 2017; Ideland et al., 2021; Lundahl et al., 2013).

In this article, we explore whatever happened to 'the public' in public education in an educational system that during the last two or three decades has been driven forwards by neo-liberal market values. By understanding 'the public' in public education as a vital part of the process that shapes human beings into social beings who together form and re-form a common understanding of what it means to live together in a shared world, education becomes more than an act of learning how to read, write and do mathematics, since it embraces the public (Dewey, 1897, 1927). In this study we describe how the publicness of education has gone from part of a democratically controlled state education, financed by public taxes to meet the needs of everyone's education with a clear focus on social shared values, such as democracy, solidarity, equality and equity, to embrace individualisation, learnification and competition as the guiding principles for a good education. In doing so, we start by reviewing earlier research describing the features of the marketisation of the educational system, together with the individualisation and learnification that comes in the wake of this process. Thereafter we discuss the costs of the individualisation and learnification of the school system with a focus on the gap between different schools that leads to increased inequality between schools and students. To shed some further light on the current discourse on Swedish education, we contrast two principles in education and teaching, the aristocratic principle and the democratic principle. By so doing we will then understand that the marketisation of education is not only a threat to public education but to the entire public and democratic society as well. The present study therefore contributes to an area of educational research that, in different ways, investigates the marketisation of education, its characteristics and consequences.

The marketisation of education

To put it simply, modern education has two roles that are intertwined, namely education required to make a life and education required to make a living. On the one hand, education carries a public role through which the student should develop a democratic, responsible and critical attitude towards society and their peers. On the other, it carries an economic purpose that in the end will produce a workforce able to meet the demands of the liberal market (Hargreaves, 1994; Månsson, 2014). These two poles are in one sense contradictory since the social purpose of education is supposed to strengthen our responsibility towards other people (living for the other), while the economic side is supposed to make us competitive individuals to meet the demands of the market economy (being before the other). In another sense, these poles merge since it offers the sole individual a sense of belonging to a social context, which, in turn, strengthens the nation's competitive force in a global world economy (Månsson, 2014). Even though the tension between making a life and making a living is not to be understood as a struggle between either making a life or

making a living, we can see this tension being played out in debates about the purpose, role in society and what constitutes good education in different countries, and Sweden is no exception (Säfström and Månsson, 2015). What particularly can be recognised is a shift from emphasising democracy to stressing the importance of learning and knowledge, and where knowledge is characterised by innovation, specialisation and subject foci, adapted by the needs and demands of the market economy (e.g. Beach, 2012; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Englund, 2011; Hultén, 2019; Lundahl et al., 2013; Säfström and Månsson, 2015).

The reformation of the Swedish educational system, which started in the early 1990s, follows the *zeitgeist* of neo-liberal market reforms (Beach, 2012; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Dovemark and Lundahl et al., 2013; Lundström, 2017; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Ideland et al., 2021). The reform of deregulation, decentralisation and individual choice that followed the municipalisation of schools, together with the implementation of new and goal-related curricula for primary and secondary schools, was intensified in the new millennium and the municipalisation of the school was driven further by a more neo-liberal trend. Through privatisation, competition and ambition to transform citizens into consumers or customers, the market became the dominant educational policy orientation in an education system that was transformed by the governance and organisation techniques of New Public Management (NPM). The increased development of independent schools (where several are organised as profit-driven enterprises funded by taxpayers' money) has also been a driving force in the marketisation of the education system (Dovemark and Lundström, 2017; Gustavsson et al., 2016).

Towards a school of knowledge

The hallmark of the debate on the state of the Swedish educational system (mainly targeting the compulsory and upper secondary school) is the fusion of neo-conservative values and neo-liberal market values (Englund, 2011; Hultén, 2019; Ideland et al., 2021; Säfström and Månsson, 2015). The Swedish educational system is experiencing the full force and effect of marketisation where multinational companies have become major actors in the field. This expansion of market forces is legitimised in the name of free choice, competition and individuality. Parallel to this development, critical voices are being raised about a common, or universal, notion of the good teacher, valuable knowledge, and proper norms and values. Further, the Swedish school is rendered as a school deprived of authority, discipline, clear goals and highly qualified teachers. In sum, both liberals and conservatives are talking about schools in crisis and that more must be done to save the younger generation. The solution to this crisis is deemed simple: re-enter the school of knowledge in order to make the up-growing generation ready for higher education and/or a sustainable working life in a competitive and global market. This answer, where instrumental rationality motivates what knowledge is preferable, is, however, not new, so what is there really to re-enter or reinstall? The Swedish educational system has always been characterised (and still is) by a view of knowledge that is adapted by the needs and demands of the market economy, but without losing its public part (Englund, 2011). The public view is an expression of a school for all, yet schools have become more individualised and competitive than ever. Following the neo-political driven educational policy the Swedish educational system has witnessed in the last decade (Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Hultén, 2019; Ideland et al. 2021), it is clear that the idea of schooling has replaced the idea of public education since the up growing generation are schooled to being before the other, rather than being for the other (e.g. Månsson, 2014). This one-way directed focus implies education is merely for making a living, while its social role – making a life – is to be understood as being of lesser importance for the student's further development and continuing life. In other words, the educational policy system, primarily the

compulsory school and upper secondary, is neglecting skills that are essential to keep democratic and public life alive.

The individualisation and learnification of education

The marketisation of education imposes a model of learning that prioritises the acquisition of key and transferable skills (Säfström and Månsson, 2015). Hence, learning seems to at least have strong links, if not downright being reducible, to the individualisation and learnification that follows from the marketisation of the educational system. This development has been referred to as the learnification of education (Biesta, 2010; Säfström et al., 2015). In other words, it is when everything that belongs to education is defined in terms of learning, such as the learner, learning environment, lifelong learning and so forth. The language of learning re-fashions teachers as knowledge providers and the process of teaching becomes limited to learning outcomes. Those outcomes, in turn, are valued in terms of potential economic productivity in its ideological context, thereby giving meaning to whatever knowledge/outcomes are produced in and by education (Biesta, 2010).

According to this individualistic logic of learning, the educational system is being asked to produce commercially oriented individuals rather than educating publicly oriented persons. In other words, learning is for ‘now’, fit for an economic order of society (e.g. Beach, 2012; Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Dahlstedt and Harling, 2017; Ideland et al., 2021). Education is not about social togetherness but is limited to students equipping themselves to compete against everyone else (Säfström and Månsson, 2015). The trend is clear: the public part of education, even if it is still public, meaning ‘a school for all’, has been ruled out in terms of learning for the individual and is being reduced to a question of results, while the sole focus on learning forms the content and purpose of education by, for example, perceiving learning foremost as an individual, psychological process.

Through the notion that knowledge is contextless and exists outside the learner, packaged and served to the recipient (i.e. the learner) who may be receptive to the knowledge offered, the responsibility for learning is also placed on the individual learner, rather than on some factors that exist outside the learner (Biesta, 2010). This view of knowledge is based on the ontology that knowledge is an image of reality, and the learner is a depersonalised unnamed object whose knowledge is evaluated based on, and limited to, the official definitions of the learning outcomes (Säfström and Månsson, 2015).

The consequences of individualisation and learnification

The consequences of the individualisation and learnification of the educational system, as Gert Biesta (2010) has shown, places the responsibility for learning outcomes on the individual, rather than on contextual factors, such as socio-economic circumstances, parents or guardians, educational background or social network, and catchment area (Månsson and Osman, 2015, 2017). Further, as has been noted by the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2009, 2012), the increased individualisation of learning also places the burden of responsibility on the children’s parents or guardians for their school performance. This development disadvantages low-performing students from homes with low educational backgrounds, since educational background proves to be a very strong factor, stronger than gender and ethnicity, concerning students’ school performances (Osman et al., 2020). This development, where individual students’ school performances are measured and valued without considering any contextual factors, leads to further marginalisation of already low-performing students, and thus the individualisation and learnification are not only a problem for the individual and their school performances, they are also a collective and geographic phenomenon (Månsson and Osman, 2015; Osman et al., 2020).

This development, that merely focuses on the individual student's school performances, devalues the public part of education, such as fostering democracy and social change. One of the foundations of the Swedish school system, 'a school for all', has in other words become 'a school for the individual'. The pursuit of 'the good school' is followed by a standardisation that makes it easy to evaluate the quality of different schools – their routines, rules and learning outcomes – and not just identifying the good school, but also the bad school, the bad teacher and bad school environments (c.f. Benn, 2012; Biesta, 2010; Elstad, 2009). According to the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2016, 2019), this standardisation hardly affects schools that perform well regarding learning outcomes on a national level, but it has a degenerative and segregating effect on schools that are unable to meet the requirements of a good education. In this context, it is important to stress that schools located in socially and economically disadvantaged areas are more likely to fail to achieve national goals than schools located in more socially and economically stable areas (Osman et al., 2020). This means that a school's ability to provide each student with equal access to learning varies, depending on the area of admission, teacher ratio and qualification, parental cooperation and educational background, and student composition. Hence, the learnification and individualisation that follow from the marketisation of the educational system increase school differences rather than erase them, at least if we are going to believe the latest results from TIMMS and PISA (Skolverket, 2016, 2019).

The making of school differences

The latest PISA report (Skolverket, 2018) of students' skills and knowledge in mathematics, science and reading comprehension is a clear example of the continued gap between different schools in different areas (Skolverket, 2019). Even if the results are more positive than the former PISA and TIMMS reports (Skolverket, 2013, 2016), its results tell us that it is already low-performing students who continue to achieve the lowest performance, or fail, on the tests in comparison with previous measurements (Skolverket, 2019). This trend has been apparent for at least a decade. The National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2012) shows in a report that the spread between schools' average results has increased more than the spread between students' results. These differences are partly linked to the schools' catchment areas and partly to the parents' or guardians' educational background. The School Commission (SOU, 2017: 35) draws attention to the same gap between different schools in different areas as the National Agency for Education does, and they believe that this gap leads to increased inequality between schools and students. In other words, this difference not only shows that low-performing schools continue to reduce a school's average results, but it also shows that equality has deteriorated since the Swedish school system failed in its efforts to offer and maintain equal schools, regardless of social and economic background. Further, this deterioration has led to impaired opportunities for students in low-performing schools being able or having the opportunity to participate in society's public life and common affairs as emancipated citizens. In sum, the marketisation of the school system, with its emphasis on individualisation and learnification, not only leads to increased differences among schools but also to increased social and economic segregation that reduces opportunities for public life.

When individualisation and learnification become an ideology where 'learning' becomes a concept to describe different processes in life to be controlled is, according to Dewey (1897), not only a problem for education but also for society at large since it tends to remove the 'public' from public education and lays the very grounds for a repressive non-democratic and divided society. But school is not a place external to life itself, it is part of life and through this life, new ideas are born about the needs of society and the nature of social life. For Dewey, all social institutions have an educational assignment and this certainly applies to the school. This assignment is not only

about the student learning to count, write and read; it is also about learning to be part of society and developing its social and democratic forms (e.g. Månsson, 2014). In other words, Dewey's focus on education is not limited to just teaching and learning processes, it includes a person's social life:

I believe that the individual who is to be educated is social and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. (Dewey, 1897: 78)

Two principles of education and teaching

A consequence of how the ideology of marketised schooling has come to dominate the perception of public education in Sweden is that the publicness of the public is taken out of education, which means that education becomes hollowed out by individualistic concerns (c.f. Dewey, 1927). To expand on this point, let us recall the introduction of educational thought in intellectual history, since what becomes clear then is the absolute difference between two archaic forms of understanding education. Those forms are archaic in the sense that they have established fundamental socio-psychological moods of being as well as forms for organising social life through education and teaching (Bishop, 2011).

The aristocratic principle in education and teaching

The first principle, the aristocratic principle of education, is also the oldest in which embodied culture can only be realised within certain people, since they already supposedly inherit culture by 'blood', by being representatives of the very way in which culture and society have been organised over time (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]: 324–325). To teach according to this principle is to take for granted that the child, the student, has certain capacities within them already, and that those 'abilities and talents' cannot in any substantial way be taught, but can only be *identified and purified* by teaching methodologies. Also, those abilities and talents are such that they are expected to enhance progress in the society in which they are identified (Säfström, 2020). In other words, talents and abilities are not 'neutral' or 'objective' capacities, but expressions of certain ways in which a particular society understands itself (Popkewitz, 2008). In other words, those whose abilities and talents are identified as matching 'institutional expectations' are also considered to be expressions of an 'authentic self' that is fundamental to a particular nation (Härnquist, 1959; Popkewitz, 2008; Säfström, 2020). That is, a nation emerges as a result of socialising citizens with particular talents and abilities in agreement for a certain self-perception, as well as particular skills, needed to progress the economy (Popkewitz, 2008). To have the abilities and talents to progress society is understood as an inherent capacity within certain people rather than others (Härnquist, 1959, 1961; Husén and Bolt, 1973). As such, establishing a foundational distinction between authentic and inauthentic life, a life that matters more or less within a certain nation, makes exclusion and racism possible as a (passive) function of the very essence of the nation in question (Butler, 2020; Fredrickson, 2003).

Schooling, then, according to an aristocratic principle, aims to identify talents within certain people and to purify those abilities and talents to produce authentic citizens who match institutional expectations. The idea that there is something eternal within a certain group of people that needs to be identified and purified has a long history (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]). This idea is ultimately dependent on a distinction, made by Plato, between 'the eternal and the Spatio-temporal' (Rorty, 1980: 307), in which certain people, either by being aristocrats already, philosopher-kings, or, as for Socrates, by being taught, reach another and higher realm, motivating and justifying their distinctive social and political power as well. Teaching for Socrates, though, is of a particular kind, if

still linked to the aristocratic principle, since teaching for him means to be led through a procedure in which one must admit to one's ignorance to be led to insight, an insight already in the hands of Socrates. This means that to be taught one has to admit to a foundational relationship of inequality between the ignorant and the master, to be brought to the same position as Socrates, and in which only Socrates can judge when one is ignorant no more, but rather as equally insightful as Socrates (Todd, 2003: 28–33; Levinas, 1969: 43).

From this follows three things characteristic of an aristocratic principle. First, it means that inequality is considered as the natural starting point, assuming that people who are not taught are ignorant, which tends to be saying that they lack a certain intelligence or capacity (Rancière, 1991). Second, in setting up an absolute distinction between the ignorant and the master, a particular form of inequality is established as the normal form of socialisation, and to the degree this form is understood as natural, a society is produced in which inequality is given natural explanations (Säfström and Månsson, 2004). Third, if one can only escape one's ignorance by taking the same position as Socrates, this means that equality is reduced to sameness and to the equality of the masters. There will still be the ignorant ones, now considered to be distinguishable from the class of masters (Rancière, 1991). Such foundational inequality is what the democratic principle of education objects to, since for democracy to have any meaning, equality needs to be central (May, 2008: Rancière, 2006, 2007). Also, for the publicness of the public to take form, one cannot already anticipate this form as an expression of natural inequality, since such form is restricting the public rather than expanding it, as is happening in the Swedish school system. In the next subsection, we will therefore explore the second archaic form of education and teaching taking shape in early Greek thought, the democratic principle of education.

The democratic principle in education and teaching

To explore the democratic principle in education we return to the split made by Plato between the 'eternal' and the 'spatial-temporal', since it is this split that the early democrats, also called the sophists, objected to. For them, there was no other realm than the spatial-temporal world, and teaching was therefore directed to how to move within the 'reality of here and now'. That is, they did not consider philosophy as a way in which to reach a higher eternal realm of ideas, but rather a response to certain practical matters of living together with others in the 'here and now' (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]: 295–296). For Dewey (1966 [1916]: 331) the sophists exposed 'the fact that the stream of European philosophical thought arose as a theory of educational procedure'. That is, the sophist established educational thought and practice 'before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented "philosophical thinking"' (Rorty, 1980: 157).

For the sophist, then, there is no other realm than the one in which we live, no eternal higher realm of ideas, motivating an absolute inequality between those who reach such realm, either by blood or being taught, and therefore legitimising the belief that certain people have the right to dominate others (Säfström, 2021). For the sophist, equality was not only an assumption of social life but could be found in nature as well; that is, equality was a foundational conception of nature as well as social life (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]). Such equality was also expressed in that anyone could be taught to embody the culture, not just an elite. In principle, since culture was not the expression of a foundational inequality or inner capacity reflecting such inequality, it could be understood as the very way in which one lives one's life together with others. For the sophists, culture was to be understood in terms of *praxis*, rather than as an expression of an eternal organisation of social life reproduced over time (Cassin, 2000, 2014; Jaeger, 1965 [1939]).

The sophists taught how to move within the ethical-political situation in which the individuals found themselves. For the sophists, culture, or *paideia*, was an expression of a practical, ethical and political orientation to life. Such orientation had more to do with what one wanted, with political

will and how one could ethically defend such a will, rather than being based on the reproduction of the powers of the masters, a power that was understood to be based on something outside social life, either by blood and/or natural rights of the strong (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]).

Democracy, says Rancière (1999), is the shocking insight that power has no other justification than power itself. There is nothing 'eternal', as for the aristocrats/elites, resting inside the aristocratic child, and no natural inequality justifying the distribution of power in which a certain class of people dominates all others.

If we apply this reasoning to the Swedish example, we can see that while the school system since the 1940s had democracy as the overall idea for social organisation, the new market-oriented school has the market itself as the regulative idea for social organisation. The main difference between the two is that while both of them are geared towards the schooling of an elite that can drive the economy, they understand the context of schooling quite differently. The former school is set within a wider context of democratic ideals, meaning that a foundational aim of schooling is to learn democratic skills, to identify and purify the 'democratic personality' as well (Herman, 1995). The latter school is set within a neo-liberal market ideology in which certain skills for operating within a market-driven economy and social organisation are to be identified and purified. In consequence this means that the very idea of the role of public shifts, since the latter market-driven school tends to expel 'public' from public education and to exchange 'public' with private interests and skills needed to be ahead of the other in competition. While the school of the 1940s explicitly had to balance being for and being before, the new market-driven school almost exclusively adheres to being before. The latter, instead of stressing the need for educating 'democratic skills', tends instead to stress the need for educating 'discipline and order' (Säfström and Månsson, 2015).

For the sophists, *anyone* could be taught to embody culture and society. Teaching then – instead of being about identification and purification of so-called natural abilities and talents defined by the socio-economic power structure in which an institution exists – serves to extend social relations within an understanding of an ethical-political orientation to social life, which for the sophists was the true meaning of *paideia* (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]: 300). Therefore, what is possible with the sophist is to think of democracy and education as being internally linked (Jaeger, 1965 [1939]), since education for the sophists was not to identify and purify an 'authentic self', which by definition also identifies an 'un-authentic self', but to assume the equality of anyone being taught.

No abilities and talents represent the eternal rights of an aristocracy, and/or represent institutional expectations, that teaching is to identify and purify; rather, teaching is to teach anyone to embody *paideia*. In practice, this means that the ethical-political sphere, which allows the extension of culture to anyone in society, is what makes the publicness of the public essentially democratic. The democratic principle in education, then, as the second and competing archaic form of education and teaching, is characterised by understanding teaching in three distinctive ways: first, as the form through which the publicness of the public takes place; second, by the insight that *areté*, or how culture is embodied, is not 'inherited' but *taught*; and third, that equality is an assumption to be verified within the practice of teaching. Such an archaic model for education stresses the internal link between democracy (as the ideal of equality) and education, and makes us see exactly why the marketised school system is so destructive for a democratic public.

Marketisation of education is threat to education and democratic society

What is clear from the above is that education, as far as we understand Greek thought as the foundation of western culture, has to be considered not as arbitrary, but as the very possibility of culture, of *paideia*, in the first place (Jaeger, 1965 [1939], 1986 [1943]). That is, education is not only to be understood as schooling formed within certain self-perceptions of a particular nation, but as

essentially making that nation or state possible in the first place (Dewey, 1966 [1916]). In other words, within any modern nation and state there is a tension between archaic forms of education, between an aristocratic and a democratic principle of education informing its school system, which also sets certain conditions for the socio-sphere of that society and the public as well. The Swedish school system has experienced this tension during the three last decades. If we consider the two contradictory aims of modern schooling being to foster responsibility towards other people (living for the other) and at the same time aiming to make us become competitive people to meet the demands of the market economy (being before the other), those aims play out differently according to the aristocratic principle of education and the democratic principle of education.

According to the aristocratic principle, being ahead of the other is not only an economic demand but is how power in social relations is understood as well. This implies that certain people have the right by blood or talent and abilities to be in front of others, organising not only how schooling is run but also the social organisation of life itself in terms of competition and comparisons. It also determines who has this culture within them already, which motivates them to (already) be ahead of everyone else, and who has to follow on behind (Rancière, 1991). Teaching in this respect confirms an unequal distribution of talents and abilities which are reflective of a certain already established power structure within that society. According to this principle, being before the other is suppressed, since the public here is considered more as a source for workings of the economy, or rather the market, than as a condition for a democracy to be meaningfully democratic (Biesta, 2010). This reasoning also feeds into the idea of learning. Specifically, if education is reduced to learning, it becomes quite straightforward what the individual needs to do to be confirmed as being ahead already, thereby diminishing concerns over how the individual ethically relates to others (Todd, 2003). Rather, comparisons and competitions become the very driving force of schooling (Rancière, 1991). The problem, when living for the other is suppressed, not only affects the school, since living for the other is a necessary condition for the forming of a democratic public (Masschelein and Simons, 2015). And, as the consequences of the latest Swedish school reforms show, it is increasingly difficult to educate or promote democratic forms of life if we neglect those skills that are essential to keeping public life alive (Säfström and Månsson, 2015).

From the public domain into the private sphere

A sign of the shift in logic through which the school in Sweden is to take its place in society is the revised privacy policy (valid from 2020, September 1) in which data concerning schools, such as the number of staff members, statistics on the students and their grades, has moved from the public sphere to being protected by corporate law (Skolverket, 2020). That is, schools are being moved from the public domain into a private sphere of business laws, principles and norms. This presents a problem that goes beyond researchers' capacity to gather data or for parents' ability to choose a school. It is fundamentally a sign of a new reality in which individualism, comparisons and competition are defining features. It is a sign that the ideologies fundamental to neo-liberalism have reached a state of hegemony in school policies in Sweden. The neo-liberal worldview is no longer only a political-ideological and economical context in which different approaches to the reality of schooling can be decided upon by democratic order, but rather that which defines that very reality in the first place and how such reality is governed (Dahlstedt and Fejes, 2019; Rönnerberg et al., 2019). Therefore, the role of education to foster living for the other (and not before) tends to be less important than to win over the other in competition and comparisons.

When that happens, we can also see signs of the social fabric unravelling. As Butler (2015: 162) has pointed out: 'The conditions of democratic rule depend . . . on an exercise of popular sovereignty that is never fully contained or expressed by any democratic order, but which is the

condition of its democratic character.’ That is, living for the other can be understood as essential for providing the democratic conditions required for democratic rule. In other words, for Butler, democracy cannot possibly be defined exclusively in terms of political organisation and institutions as such, but largely has to be understood in relation to its conditioning, that a democratic order has different meanings and ‘effects’ depending on its popular sovereignty, depending on the ‘publicness of the public’. In other words, to challenge the role of education to expand the publicness of the public (the living for) is to challenge democracy itself, it is to contribute to the erosion of the public sovereignty necessary for democracy to be democratic. The fundamental problem of requiring the individual to constantly compare themselves with the other – to find ways of being before and always ahead of the other, rather than understanding one’s sensibilities as extensions of all others’ sensibilities – comes at the very cost of the neo-liberal hegemony (Berardi, 2017).

The shift towards a neo-liberal hegemony described in this article is not only concerning Sweden but seems to be the driver in all and any challenge to state financed education systems today. If one looks closer, the same types of strategies of destroying the publicness of education are being used in several countries (Benn, 2012; Elstad, 2009; Whitty and Power, 2000). This doesn’t mean that state funded education historically hasn’t had its problems, but it is rather to point out that if the public is taken out of education, there is no longer any ‘arena’ in which the struggles of defining who and what belongs to that public can legitimately take place. As a result, schooling would, as the Swedish example shows, no longer properly belong to such a sphere (Rönnerberg et al., 2019). Critically, however, there is much more at stake here than just state funded education as such. What is at stake is the very possibility of plural democracy altogether, since how education and schooling are understood promotes democracy or hinders it from taking place. A denial of pluralism and of what Bauman (1999) called ‘polyculture’, within the very formation of schooling, and a failure to verify what Arendt (2006: 370) called ‘the plurality of the human condition’ in such schooling, is what drives the destruction of the publicness of the public and therefore functions as a mechanism for excluding a large part of the population from a liveable life (Butler, 2015; Säfström, 2018).

The forming of democratic publics

If we look upon teaching or teaching activities or processes that shape the human being into a social being, who, together with others form, preserve and re-form a common understanding of what it means to live together in a shared world (Dewey, 1897, 1927), education and teaching become more than an act of transmission, where societies’, and especially the markets’, needs are reflected in the school curricula as learning outcomes. A substantial part of education and teaching does, indeed, consist of providing the upcoming generation with the necessary skills to prevail in society, professionally as well as socially, according to societies’ needs and demands (c.f. Biesta, 2010). This process is intimately linked to an institutionalised and political purpose that cannot prevail without control and some form of coercive power.

Another part of education and teaching is, however, to educate the sole individual to reach their full potential (Dewey, 1902). This part is to be considered as the antithesis of the institutionalised purpose of education, by emancipating the pupil from being incorporated into a given socio-economic order, but rather enabling them to develop a certain kind of independence and resistance to this order (Biesta, 2010). Hence, education and teaching processes are pendulums between an ethical spectrum – being for the other – and a socio-economical spectrum – being before the other (Månsson, 2014). Considering the shift in Swedish educational reforms in the last decades, where the shift from emphasising democracy to stressing the needs and demands of the market economy is apparent, the spectrum of being for is vital in keeping the public in public education, and for public life as such, even if it cannot replace the spectra of being before. The latter does not imply

though that the only way of being before is defined by the neo-liberal agenda of winners and losers. Rather it is important to see that 'being before' works differently within different contexts.

The aim of democracy, as the political expression of equality, and of education and teaching as inherently linked to such an aim, is not, and cannot be, to enhance inequality. The aim of education and teaching within democracy is to extend the publicness of the public to not only guarantee popular sovereignty, to guarantee that which is the condition of the democratic character of the public, but also to extend the scope of the public in responding to the plurality of the human condition, as Arendt (2006) called it.

Concluding remarks

In our search for an answer to the question of whatever happened to 'the public' in public education in the Swedish educational system, especially in elementary and upper secondary school, we have illuminated and discussed how the process of marketisation, together with the individualisation and learnification of education, is replacing 'the public' in public education with the logic of the market place. It is, however, important to stress that the school is still public but has replaced public values (such as democracy, solidarity, equality and equity) with individualisation, learnification and competition, and by so doing redefining the very meaning of public education. The purpose of education and teaching has become a question of making a living or being before everyone else at the expense of the other pendulum on the same spectrum, namely making life or being for the other. 'The public' in public education is in other words at stake and has been side-lined in favour of the needs and demands of the market.

To shed some further light on the current discourse on Swedish education, we contrasted two principles in education and teaching, the aristocratic principle and the democratic principle. According to an aristocratic principle in education and teaching, being before the other is a way to fixate and reproduce existing power relations as the cornerstone of a well-ordered society, where certain people will always be before the other. Being for, on the other hand, is repressed since 'the public' is considered as a foundation for the market, rather than a place and space for a vital democracy. According to a democratic principle of education, being for the other and being before the other are negotiated at the backdrop of equality as a cornerstone of a well-ordered democratic society. It is true that a considerable part of education in a democratic society is also about teaching the upcoming generation how to make a living, economically speaking, and hence to be (competitively) before the other, but not to the exclusion of living together. Rather, being before, according to a democratic principle of education, means to face the other over differences such that the context for social interactions is understood through the ethics of being for the other. Being before then can never be about standing apart from the responsibilities towards the other with whom one interacts in a public sphere. The education of democratic beings demands skills and resources for the upcoming generation to reach their full potential as well as to be able to extend the sensibilities of living well together with others.

Considering the shift in the very infrastructure of the Swedish educational system, it is fair to say that the principles in education and teaching are characterised by the principles we described as aristocratic principles, rather than those we have characterised as democratic principles. The educational message is clear: the upcoming generations are to accept the rules of the market economy and play the game accordingly. However, the problem that occurs when living for is subordinated by being before, is that the 'public' in public education tends to wither away since living for is a necessary condition for a democratic public.

The successively increasing diversification of Swedish society, driven by a marketised schooling and the subsequent replacement of public life with individualism and competition, is a particularly dangerous move for the democratic order of society. That is, if making life precarious for a

large part of the population is no longer considered to be driven by contextual circumstances to be negotiated within a public sphere, but as the very way reality takes place as such, then the exclusion of people from ‘the public’ can no longer be thought of as arbitrary but as necessary, natural and therefore profoundly legitimised. The emerging society is a society in which the popular sovereignty of a democratic order is eroded or blocked altogether. If and when that happens, all we can do is compete in a by definition unequal society of winners and losers, to be before everyone else, but in a context in which being before is already established for certain people as a condition of the game. When the aristocratic principle takes hold of education as schooling, it not only profoundly challenges the conditions for the intimate link between education and democracy but also the conditions for a democratic pluralistic society, as well as limits the very possibility of the publicness of the public.

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