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Problem solved! How eduprenuers enact a school crisis as business possibilities

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Abstract

This article explores how a growing apparatus of edupreneurial actors offers solutions for the current 'school crisis' and how these commercial actors become taken for granted in the public school system. The Swedish case is interesting, as it involves a once-strong welfare state that is now associated with both the neoliberal discourse of competition and the outsourcing of policy work. Two examples – research-based education and the digitalization of education – serve to illustrate how a crisis narrative is translated into edupreneurial business ideas and how companies become established in the edupreneurial market through 'public/private statework'. Bacchi's notion of problematization is used to analyse processes through which the crisis has become a hegemonic truth and thus an obvious object for (business) intervention. In addition, this study shows how the commodification of school limits what becomes the 'research base' for schooling. The results point to the importance of how the problem is constructed and what is represented (or not) in this problematization process, for example, how critical research is left out. Another important conclusion is that the crisis narrative and policy reforms nurture the existence of these private companies.

Keywords

Problematization, Bacchi, policy processes, edupreneurs, school crisis, Sweden

Introduction: A school in crisis

According to the current public and political debate, Swedish schools are experiencing severe problems. For decades, the media has reported decreasing results in international large-scale assessments while highlighting how schools, municipalities and students have become increasingly segregated along the lines of ethnicity and social class. Furthermore, the media report on poor

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and inefficient learning environments with a shortage of qualified teachers. Some describe teachers as incompetent and schools as not adequately preparing students for either future roles in society or the job market. In the public debate, it has also been argued that educational research does not provide the right tools to improve teaching and learning. The overall picture shows schools in crisis, with a call for problems to be solved (e.g. Hultén, 2019).

Over recent decades in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe, this call for help and the need for solutions have been answered in many ways. Rönnberg (2015) claims that schools have undergone a process of 'marketization, including the implementation of business-like conditions and ideals in the public sector, expressed by terms such as new public management (NPM)' (Rönnberg, 2015: 549). This neoliberal logic is one of several components to make Swedish schools, similarly to other European welfare states, more effective. This modernization process has invited a number of different actors beyond educational researchers and the public authorities responsible for education: non-governmental organizations, philanthropic organizations and, particularly – what this article aims to illuminate and discuss – business actors offering products and services to schools (e.g. Ball, 2012a, 2016; Ball and Olmedo, 2011). This kind of actor we conceptualize as 'edupreneurs' (also known as 'policy retailers', Rönnberg, 2017). The edupreneurs come in different forms and have different agendas. Some work internationally, like *McKinsey & Co* and *Pearson Education*, which are two examples of big edu-businesses that simultaneously define problems and provide solutions on transnational and national levels (Pereyra et al., 2013). Others work on the national level, for example software developers, school developers and many others that sell the promise of better education. In addition, Sweden has mobilized a large edu-political apparatus offering help in the form of, for example, teacher certification, school inspections and new curricula. The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE), one of the authorities responsible for implementing governmental reforms, advocates strategies such as evidence-based teaching and increasing the use of digital media to both improve current teaching and prepare students for the future. Thus, both public and private actors have stepped in to help schools in need of assistance, providing solutions, and in some cases, quick remedies often hidden in, as Peck (2010) states, neoliberal logics. These logics have become dominant and common in a way that we think *with* them rather than *about* them. This perspective produced and promoted a discourse of crisis and solutions, creating needs for remedies that, so to speak, 'really work' in reality.

We will argue that the result of this may be that schools end up with superficial cures to complex problems: 'a kind of "magic bullet" notion of causality which, if possible at all in the social domain, actually only exists under very special conditions' (Biesta, 2010: 496). When studying private actors in Australia, Loughland and Thompson (2016) found that these actors have a preference for commonsense interventions and cost-effective responses to complex problems. They state that on the market 'solutions are designed to be easily digested, simply actioned and provide reassurance that there is an answer, if only individuals, institutions and systems would follow a simple, prescribed recipe' (Loughland and Thompson, 2016: 113). In other words, we stress that the recurrent narrative of failure opens for actors – often in the shape of 'ready-made or bespoke "solutions" to the problems of policy – helping schools in "raising achievement" and to "transform" themselves and contributing to the raising of national standards' (Ball, 2009: 86). This provides edupreneurs with opportunities not only for interventions but also for resetting the terms of, as we will see, epistemology, practices and policy.

The picture of a school in crisis and the various solutions that are offered have been well researched from both national and international perspectives (see e.g. Dovemark and Erixon Arreman, 2017; Hallsén and Karlsson, 2019; Hursh, 2016; Player-Koro and Beach, 2017; Reimers and Martinsson, 2017; Rönnberg, 2017; Verger et al., 2016). However, less focus has been on what happens beyond politically organized school reforms and what it means when private business

actors offer commercial solutions to complex educational problems. The aim of this article is to analyse *how* edupreneurial companies answer to the represented school problems and *how* their offered solutions produce a certain discourse about what Swedish schools supposedly need. We are therefore not interested in what kind of policy travels from the companies to the state, nor the production of policy related texts by private actors (see e.g. Souto-Otero, 2019). Rather we are interested in *how* actors operate inside and within a Swedish edupreneurial community (Ball, 2009), assembled and constructed by public authorities and private companies. In other words, we scrutinize *how* companies enact spaces of business possibilities made up through discourses of 'schools in crisis' and policy reforms.

These educational processes in Sweden are similar to and concern the international educational landscape, regarding, e.g. the processes of policy borrowing (Rönnberg, 2015), interplays between governing and evaluation (Segerholm and Hult, 2019), and education as central to the welfare state (Arnesen et al., 2010). The processes seen in Sweden as well as in Europe are also backed by, for example, the European Commission, which in the early 2000s advocated a 'stronger connection between schools, commerce and industry, as well as the development of "the enterprising spirit" with regard to the education system as a whole' (Leffler, 2009: 104). Similar processes have been seen elsewhere (see e.g. Olmedo, 2013; Verger et al., 2016). This study can thus be useful for understanding a marketized landscape on the national as well as the international arena. However, there are, as Souto-Otero (2019: 35) puts forward, 'various ways in which education has become commoditised and subject to liberalisation and trade in itself, in the EU and globally'. Thus, following Peck et al. (2012: 269), 'rather than expecting some pure, prototypical form of neoliberalization to obtain across divergent contexts', we believe that different contexts, countries, etc. produce a variety of neoliberal arguments. This becomes apparent in the case of Sweden where the intertwined processes of the public and private have gone to unprecedented lengths (see e.g. Lundahl, 2016). The next section will provide the background and context for the analysis of the Sweden case.

Swedish education: From state to market

In the early 1900s in Sweden, the state was given a new role vis-à-vis welfare. When describing the characteristics of the early welfare state, two aspects are usually pointed out. First, that all citizens in society were assured of certain basic rights and social welfare. Second, it was the state that stood as the guarantor of the security (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The Swedish welfare state was also characterized by the strive for collaboration among political parties as well as employers, the workforce and the state. Since the 1930s, reciprocal understanding and consensus built on trust between the state, its citizens and the business sector have been prioritized over disagreement and conflict, and this has come to be known as the 'Swedish model' (Dahlstedt, 2009).

The influence of a strong state has traditionally characterized the Swedish educational system: national rules and regulations, a normative national curriculum, and its main source of funding all originating from the state. This, combined with a strong exercise of authority, created a robust unit within the educational system and in educational policy. In practice, public schooling was the only alternative, as private schools neither existed nor were requested by the public.

However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the 'Swedish model' became the focus of growing criticism. It was said to be inefficient due to centralized micromanagement, and this stood in the way of entrepreneurial initiatives and the idea of free choice. Gradually, the contours of the 'new Swedish model' vanished and were replaced by a growing emphasis on citizen participation and the right to choose schools (Skolverket, 2014).

In the 1990s, three decentralization reforms fundamentally changed the foundation for educational statework in Sweden: the shift in school governance from the state to the municipalities, the

school choice reform and independent school reform. In addition, the curricula changed from stating content to stating learning outcomes, providing more autonomy in how to teach and even 'brand' certain schools (Hultén, 2019). As a result, the state distributed the responsibility for education to hundreds of local authorities and actors.

Private schools benefit from the same 'voucher system' as public schools. The system allows a fixed sum of tax money to follow each student in the school system, and this has created competition among municipalities and between public and private schools that want to attract the 'right' students (Bunar and Ambrose, 2016). In addition to many other effects, new and unequal conditions for education have emerged in the wake of these reforms (Segerholm et al., 2019).

This study does not focus on private school actors, but rather other business solutions that we claim have been made possible through a more general marketization of education. However, like Robertson et al. (2012: 5), we do not suggest 'that [the] private sector has historically played a minor role in education. Far from it!' There have been a number of private actors involved in education (Magnusson, 2018), particularly when it comes to material, equipment and books. However, through the aforementioned processes, we can see how marketization has become more aggressive.

Sweden went from having one of the world's most government-dominated and unified educational systems to a free market-type system which includes competition, much freedom of choice and a celebration of the market (Landahl and Lundahl, 2017), offering an illustrative case in need of scrutiny. The next section provides a theoretical background for the analysis of the Sweden case.

Public/private statework in a neoliberal rationality

Like many countries, the aforementioned educational changes have been, as many researchers state, influenced by neoliberal rationalities and a set of neoliberal logics that shape the way we imagine and practise schooling (see e.g. Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). At the core of neoliberal governing lies what Ball (2009) calls a 'recalibration of the state' through which the organization of public institutions has changed and where 'solutions are based on facilitating the creation of markets in education (driven by the principles of choice and competition) and the introduction of a culture of new managerialism and performativity' (Olmedo and Ball, 2015: 26). Regarding the Swedish education system, one observed change and nowadays a feature of the welfare sector in Sweden is that public and private are fundamentally intertwined (Garsten and Sörbom, 2017; Svallfors and Tyllström, 2019) influencing problem definitions as well as policy initiatives. The notion of Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) describes this assemblage. Building on Robertson et al. (2012) and Ball (2012b), we define PPPs as a cooperative arrangement and understanding between public and private sector actors in a specific field, such as education, in which actors cooperatively develop not only services and products but also discourses and activities. Earlier studies show how these partnerships are developed in and through networks involving a number of actors who share an interest in a policy field. They could be linked together directly or indirectly in fluid and flexible contacts or in deeper relationships or movements (see e.g. Ball, 2012a; Hogan, 2016; Menashy, 2016; Shiroma, 2014). One consequence is that they collaboratively work and push for solutions to policy problems and/or create new nodes or boundaries of power and influence (Player-Koro et al., 2019). Policy networks are therefore characterized by shared ideas around problems and a conception of their role as offering solutions to these problems with the risk of a catch-22 argument.

While at first glance, the aforementioned processes could be seen as dynamic, creative, flexible and fluid, Ball (2009: 97) reminds us that the development of a marketized educational system is 'not a spontaneous neo-liberal free market, its dynamics must be understood alongside the dynamics of and changes in the state itself', much like a welfare system that is organized by a competition

discourse and private actors to which the statework is outsourced. Ball (2016: 54) further states that 'policies are mobile not in distinct and compact forms or "bundles" but rather in a piecemeal fashion. They are (re)assembled in particular ways, in particular places and for particular purposes' and as the distribution of statework changes we argue that there is a need to scrutinize how the problems are formulated and how policy initiatives are proposed or created at this particular point in time. The distribution of the interpretation and implementation of Swedish education policy provides an interesting case to explore how 'bits of the state, bits of statework, are now owned by the private sector' (Ball, 2012b: 24; see also Simons et al., 2013).

We describe this ongoing fundamental disruption in the traditional welfare state through the notion of *public/private statework* (rather than *partnership*) where '"Statework" is done through multiple relationships and responsibilities in and in relation to educational governance' (Ball, 2009: 89). In this article, the notion of statework refers to the governance, organization, implementation and practice of compulsory education (as well as other matters that traditionally have been in the hands of the public sector). But it also operates discursively, producing taken-for-granted understandings of public affairs, such as what is good education and how it should be organized (e.g. in terms of what research should guide the teaching and if and how it should be digitalized).

The first reason why we refer to it as statework rather than partnership is to illustrate and deconstruct an ongoing process in which policies and problems but also partnerships and actors become redefined and constructed (Bletsas, 2012). The result is that these actors become unavoidable participants in these relations (Bacchi, 2012; Jobér, 2020) and hidden not only in a hegemonic neoliberal discourse (Peck, 2010) but also 'firmly embedded in the complex, intersecting networks of policy-making and policy delivery and various kinds of transaction work' (Ball, 2009: 89). The second reason is that, even if we acknowledge that PPPs consist of performative elements, we would like to highlight the ongoing work – strategies, activities and epistemic values that are produced through these processes (see e.g. Simons and Masschelein, 2008). The business companies contribute to 'reconfigure and shape the objectives of the curriculum' (Andreasson and Dovemark, 2013: 488), where certain forms of knowledge and practices become possible while others are left out or left unproblematized.

Thus, the marketization of the educational system is not only about making and transferring money but also discourses and narratives, as in, it concerns the very core of education – the meanings, practices and the statework of education. Therefore, we claim that a set of neoliberal logics shapes the way we imagine and practise schooling in Sweden, and these logics influence not only what the problem of Swedish school is represented to be but also the consequences of understandings of schooling and knowledge. This study takes its starting point from these theoretical understandings and the aforementioned context in order to focus on what happens beyond politically organized school reforms and their entanglement with private actors as well as on how the public/private statework takes place. For example, how do the edupreneurs enact the spaces of possibility created by different narratives and by educational reforms in the existing PPPs? What kind of assumptions of schooling are represented in the statework, in the processes, and how are the effects of these processes – these forms of statework – exacted in narratives, discourses and activities in how we think about and do schooling?

Methodology

To achieve the aims of the study, we worked in several phases with subsequent steps. All the phases and steps were carried out by three researchers, meaning that the production, selection and the analysis were performed and interpreted in joint discussion framed within the larger research project Education Inc.[1]

Phase 1: Production, selection and initial analysis of data

Like Shiroma's (2014) work on policy networks, the empirical data analysed in this article was collected from websites (for the final websites used in the Results section, see the reference list). Using websites as our main source of data, the survey was inspired by *netnography* – ethnographic research which is adapted to the study of online communities (Kozinets, 2002). The first step in the production of data was to map the actors (organizations, enterprises and companies) that operate, at a first glance, 'outside' or alongside the formal education system. As mentioned, these actors are what we conceptualize as edupreneurs – commercial businesses directed at schools (Rönnberg, 2017). The data, which consists of websites accessible online during 2016–2019, was collected by (a) internet searches through (Swedish) words related to edu-business, such as 'teacher's room', 'teaching material', 'educational company', 'school coach', 'school assessment', 'school development' and the 'digitalization of school'; and (b) searches departing from programmes and schedules for national and local education 'trade fairs'. The first stage of analysis therefore consisted of identifying and mapping this complex edupreneurial landscape and the main actors in the public/private statework at that time (although we do not claim to have identified or analysed all actors). The map that emerged showed the routes and directions of business influence and 'the multiple links and interests connecting the actors' and 'the complex relationships between government, civil society and business' (Shiroma, 2014: 341). However, it mainly helped us to gain an overview of what narratives the actors brought forward, as in, what problems did they address? What solutions did they offer? And what outcomes did they trade in? We also found that the edupreneurs' aims overlapped, which illustrates the complexity of the field.

The third step in this analysis phase aimed to analyse links between public and private actors. We identified themes recurrent in the business profile of the companies, the public debate and recent directions from policy bodies (such as SNAE). Two areas – research-based education and digitalization – were featured in the narratives and directions of the ongoing public/private statework, and they will serve as examples of entanglements within the statework. However, it is important to note that we are not particularly interested in research-based education and digitalization in statework per se, but rather in how the companies are positioned and how they operate and enact themselves as actors 'helping' schools.

The netnographic mapping showed hundreds of companies in the Swedish edupreneurial market that could be used in the analysis. In order not to drown in the complex and continuously growing field, we have chosen what were at the time two large and well-established companies to serve as the main illustrative cases, Arete Meritering (Arete Qualification) and Lin Education.

Phase two: Analysing 'WPR' in the public/private statework

Given that the first phase of the production of data and the initial steps of the analysis were of a more descriptive nature, the last step aimed to 'read' the policy, the policy process (Bletsas and Beasley, 2012) and the public/private statework in order to scrutinize *how* the links take place. For example, *how* did the edupreneurs enact the spaces of possibility created by different narratives of a school in crisis and by educational reforms? What kind of underlying assumptions of schooling are represented in the public/private statework, and what are the consequences of how we think about and do schooling?

For the final analysis, we employed an analytical framework inspired by Carol Bacchi's (2009) framework on policy analysis: *What's the Problem Represented to be?* (WPR). In short, the WPR analysis focuses on the discourses that address not only the changes but also how a 'need' for change is produced. As Bacchi (2012: 21) states, the WPR approach starts 'from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change)'.

Employing this framework made it possible to not only study how issues become named and shaped as problems but also consider what assumptions are entailed in the problematizing as well as the impact of this process (Bletsas and Beasley, 2012). The WPR approach is often analytically employed through a set of questions posed. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016: 20) suggest using a chart with six questions around which the analysis can be structured:

Q1: What's the problem (e.g. of a school in crisis) represented to be in policies (e.g. in policy documents and edupreneur web content)?

Q2: What presuppositions or assumptions (e.g. about the school in crisis) underlie this representation of the problem?

Q3: How has this representation of the problem come about (historically)?

Q4: What remains unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?

Q5: What effects (e.g. in terms of organizing school and knowledge) are produced by this representation of the problem?

Q6: How and where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been, and/or how can it be, disrupted and replaced?

We started by analysing what the problem is represented to be on the edupreneurs' websites (Q1). This analysis was conducted with help from the first part of question Q6: 'How is the problem produced and disseminated?' Here, we focused on analysing what kind of language is used in the making of a problem, how materialities are used as means to represent the problem, and how actors are enrolled into the edupreneurial policy work. Simultaneously, we related the web content to the crisis narratives about Swedish education, as told in the public and political debate and materialized by policy reforms. Each of the two Results sections therefore start with revisiting the crisis narrative before giving a short overview of the growing market to help schools solve a particular problem and how edupreneurial companies are part of the processes of problematization as well as problem-solving.

From the analysis of how the problem is produced (Q1 and Q6), each of the two sections end with an analysis from Q2 and Q4: 'What are the assumptions in this problematization?' (Q2), and 'What is left out of the description, the silences?' (Q4). Carter (2006: 223 ff.) suggests that we try to 'listen to silences' by reading 'against the grain' in order to see what is there and what is not. With help from literature on the neoliberal governing of education, we point to what some of the problems are *not* represented to be in the policy work of edupreneurs.

Based on the first steps of the production of data and the analysis, the subsequent two Results sections describe the final outcomes of, foremost, the WPR analysis. The Results sections are followed by a final concluding discussion where we employ Q5 to discuss the governing effects of the problematization represented on the edupreneurs' web content. Here, we relate the study to literature on the neoliberal governing of education from an international perspective. In addition, the discussion briefly highlights Q3, namely, 'How has the problem come about?' and, more specifically, we discuss how the phenomenon of outsourcing educational tasks to the private sector became naturalized inside the national context of Sweden and what the discursive effects are for how we think about and do school within public/private statework.

Methodological concerns

As mentioned, the marketized educational landscape in Sweden is extremely vast, complex, fluctuating and growing. It is hard to grasp and systematically scrutinize. As researchers, we have

encountered a field with no boundaries or clear definitions. Nevertheless, we were persistent in addressing the issue from a qualitative perspective in order to 'capture the practices and relationships arising from attempts to integrate their [the actors'] actions and explain their influence on policy-making process' (Shiroma, 2014: 329). The WPR analysis was one way to undertake this research in a coherent manner. However, we do acknowledge that the mapping, the analysis and its results mirror this complexity, and the WPR questions need to be kept in mind when reading the following Results section.

It is important to recognize that we, the authors, are part of a Swedish research community that is involved in both policy and practice regarding the improvement of schools. This means – of course – that our analyses are not neutral in an 'objective' sense, especially regarding the analysis of what a 'research-based education' becomes within a commercial logic. We have approached the field with the aim to disrupt what becomes 'useful' and 'practical' research (Popkewitz, 2020) within and through the edupreneurial sector. Thus we take part in a problematization of schooling as well, defining problems (rather than solutions) from a critical perspective.

Results

Research-based teaching in the market

In the media spotlight, Swedish educational research has often been accused of being too theoretical and distanced from teaching and learning practices (Hultén, 2019), with the claim that it does not deal enough with how to make teaching and learning more efficient. The deficits of educational research seem to be common knowledge among editorial journalists as well as politicians and scholars from fields outside education. This Results subsection starts in the public sphere. Political answers to this particular problem have come in the shape of, for example, a revised Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800), stating that educational practice must be 'based on scientific evidence and proven experience'. Following this is a description of how the website for SNAE presents two interpretations, which, from Bacchi's point of view, are two presuppositions of how to solve the problem of what they call 'research-based teaching': (a) practising teaching methods that have been proven to 'work', and (b) having the competence to analyse one's own (and colleagues') teaching along with the ability to change practices and ways of working according to the results (Skolverket, 2015, 16 December).

Another policy solution to the lack of research-based teaching was to implement career steps in the teaching profession, most significantly the so-called lead teacher reform in 2013 (SFS 2013:70). The creation of the lead teacher position was put in place to create career tracks for teachers and included a substantial pay rise. The regulation (SFS 2013:70) states that the minimum standards for the lead teacher was that she or he is a certified teacher, can show documentation of at least four years of well-assessed work within schools, has shown particularly good skills in improving students' performance and has developed teaching. However, when the reform was implemented, there was uncertainty about what these teachers should do and what their new responsibilities should mean. Principals struggled to select who to appoint to this attractive position. The articulated problems were several: lead teachers needed to be 'better' than their colleagues (to earn a salary rise and the title as 'lead'), and they should be role models for the research-based movement of Swedish education by employing useful research in classroom settings.[2] The risk of nepotism in the principals' appointing of the candidates was also discussed.

The problem was to define what the lead teacher reform actually meant, partly because of suspicions of arbitrary appointments of lead teachers (e.g. Skolvärlden, 2018, 8 January) and the experienced lack of organization, and that the existing research as well as organization did not fulfil the goals of providing efficient and good education to Swedish students. Useless, arbitrary,

theoretical, etc. were important words describing the problem, and in line with Bacchi, were also presuppositions underlying the representation of the problem. Following the problematization as well as the state solutions in the shape of reforms, a number of commercial actors appeared in the market to, for example, help teachers to become more research-based in their work and to use research to make teaching more efficient. In other words, they take part in the problematization process, foremost through offering a solution to problems represented to be in the public debate. Tänk Om (double meaning in Swedish: Re-think/What if?) offers a wide range of services such as tailor-made development programmes for schools and web-based training for teachers. Skolcoacherna's ('The School Coaches') main service is coaching, but it also offers in-service training in coaching as a method for teachers. Our main case is Arete Meritering (Arete Qualification), a company that offers solutions to both the aforementioned problems (namely, who the lead teachers are and what they should do in a research-based manner) through in-service teacher training and the certification of who they deem particularly competent teachers, i.e. the lead teachers as described. We will now illustrate how this is done in order to offer something other than, for example, pedagogical research. By what means are problems and solutions produced and disseminated, and what presuppositions underpin the statements?

From the analysis of the web content, we see how Arete Meritering becomes part of the problematization through different means – organization, 'reality' and research. We start with organization, as it is the most obvious. The website clearly states that 'Arete Meritering offers a structured and independent method of developing skilled teachers' (Arete Meritering, 2017, 3 January). Furthermore, they connect to the reform:

> Arete Meritering offers a range of services that facilitate the implementation of the lead teacher reform and strengthen the legitimacy of future lead teachers. In Arete lead teacher-qualification, teachers who have been selected by the principal are offered the opportunity to work with proven tools to produce a credit file that clearly shows the teacher's qualifications. (Arete Meritering, 2017, 3 January)

This is materialized through a schematic picture of how a teacher can build a credit file, which will be assessed by a group of experienced teachers (coming from the school sector, not university) and end up with a certificate reflecting that they are a particularly competent teacher. This doesn't necessarily mean that assessment by peers is always bad quality and assessment by university teachers is good quality, but the latter maybe would be more logical considering that it is universities that train teachers. Nonetheless, the focus is completely on individual teachers, not on teacher teams or the school organization or policy directions – Arete Meritering sells the idea of the importance of individual teacher skills. In addition, they sell the definition of what a particularly competent teacher is, summarized in what they call their seven aspects. She or he: 1) achieves excellent results with all students; 2) plans for cohesion and understanding; 3) leads learning unwaveringly forward; 4) makes learning visible; 5) gives every student a voice; 6) creates a classroom atmosphere for hard work; and 7) cherishes all students' rights to a good education (Arete Meritering, 2017, 3 January). Three perspectives are said to imbue all these aspects: knowledge, engagement and reflection.

All these statements seem reasonable. It is hard to resist the idea that a competent teacher should plan for understanding and create a classroom atmosphere for hard work and so on. However, taking a step back, we can see how this is a business materialization of the policy reform, directly answering what the problems are represented to be in policy documents and in the media debate. Reforms are opening up for solutions. In addition, we need to read between the lines to see what is not there – the silence, for example, regarding whether or not a teacher's subject knowledge should be part of the assessment. Interestingly, this is explicitly stated as a non-issue in the research report that is also published on the website (Robertson, 2013). The report claims to summarize and discuss research

studies that form the basis for Arete's seven aspects, that is to say studies on 'efficient teachers' (Robertson, 2013: 5). Efficiency is about how to teach, not the subject knowledge itself. Departing from studies made by Hattie and others (see e.g. Hattie 2009), the report states quite subtly that 'Neither does it seem as teachers' general academic skill or depth when it comes to subject knowledge work as a stringent explanation' (Robertson, 2013: 6). On the other hand, a recurrent theme in the report is, as mentioned, the elevation of the individual teacher. In line with this, they quote the Swedish scholar, Mikael Alexandersson:

> We need to get away from the idea that students' school performance mainly is connected to external factors. School changes of organizational or administrative character don't have to lead to improved learning for children and youngsters. I am convinced that research can provide guidance so they can improve their professional skills. (Robertson, 2013: 12)

The useful, guiding research reported focuses on visible learning and assessment for learning, which build on studies by education 'superstars' like Helen Timperley, John Hattie and Dylan William (see Robertson, 2013 for references):

> Research on formative assessment or assessment for learning show that feedback to students – if it is done in the right way – might be one of the most efficient ways of supporting their learning. This feedback can also be successfully used to improve teachers' own teaching. (Robertson, 2013: 31)

Turning back to what the problems are represented to be, in terms of the claims that pedagogical research is useless, too theoretical and too far from practice, we can see how Arete Meritering underpins the assumption that the lack of competent teachers is part of the crisis. However, they do not actually talk about problems, but rather employ optimistic language that emphasizes the solutions rather than the problems. First, they offer an assessment of skills by peers. By this, they position themselves in 'reality'. Second, by emphasizing each student and a good classroom climate, they answer commonsense problem formulations about Swedish schools as becoming more and more segregated, characterized by messy classrooms and with decreasing results in the large-scale assessment of student performance. In addition, famous scholars have been enrolled to make this evident. As mentioned, this is not bad in itself but illustrates how problem formulations are turned into business ideas. Third, through the business solutions, Arete Meritering produces what useful educational research 'is' and what kind of research should work as a base for research-based education – through emphasizing studies on individual teacher effectiveness, in which the discourse of visible learning is central, and by downplaying other kinds of educational research. One silence already mentioned is studies on the need for teachers' subject knowledge. But omissions from the problematization process are areas such as policy studies, educational philosophy, critical theory and sociology. The focus on usefulness and effectiveness reflects the good intention to emphasize teachers' professional competence and the need for research-based teaching. However, it also tends to lack critique because critique is accused of being 'from above' and thus not helpful. What this specific kind of solution means for the governing and practice of schooling (e.g. a school based on certain research) will be discussed in the following and the final sections.

Digitalization and the modern school

The digitalization of schools is an evergreen mantra in the Swedish public debate as well as in European policy,[3] which means that it is often described as a necessary activity in the modernization of an outdated school.[4] When the website analysis was conducted in 2016, SNAE was still

promoting the possibility of raising students' 'digital competence'. According to SNAE's website, this means everything from developing competence in programming to understanding the possibilities and problems that come with the digitalization of society (Skolverket, 2016, 18 March). Moreover, the national curriculum for preschool (children 1–5 years old) was revised to develop young children's digital competence and innovation ability (Skolverket, 2016, 20 June). In 2018, after the main part of the empirical study was performed, the curriculum for compulsory school was revised. SNAE summarizes the revision:

> The new writings will contribute to children and students developing an understanding for how digitalization affects the individual and society. They will strengthen students' ability to use and understand digital systems and services, and relate to media and information in a critically and responsible way. It is also about strengthening the ability to solve problems and putting ideas into action in a creative way with the help of digital tools. (Skolverket, 2019, 25 September)[5]

In other words, what the problem is represented to be is that Swedish students are in need of better and deeper digital literacy. Buzzwords in this discourse are 'modernization', 'flexible', 'creative', 'informed', 'connection to reality'. However, often it is not the students, but rather the teachers who are targeted as the problem – namely, that they are not prepared to teach in a modern digitalized classroom (Ideland, 2020). One policy solution is to address the necessity of digitalization in the curricula, another is to provide support material for teachers on SNAE's website (Skolverket, 2019, 2 October).

In the wake of a changing curriculum, and of course, a changing society where digitalization is an urgent issue, a range of companies have been established on the market to provide hardware, software and professional development concerning the digitalization of teaching and learning. This development is certainly not unique for either Sweden or education, but rather is a general societal change, especially in the welfare sector (Van Dijck et al., 2018). The business landscape is wide, unruly and includes 'ordinary' computer companies such as Apple, Google and Microsoft targeting schools as a small (growing?) part of their business. Some of the companies studied are also authorized, or even certified, retailers of the big companies' products. Further, the business market for 'digital portals' for schools, such as SchoolSoft and Unikum, are important actors alongside new and old publishers of teaching materials, such as Sanoma and Gleerups. Particularly interesting, in addition to the tools themselves, is the offer of professional development through ICT pedagogues. Some examples of influential and successful companies that offer this are Lin Education, Atea, Caperio and Tänk Om. These companies sell digital packages including the in-service training of teachers.

In this article, Lin Education is the company which serves as the main case for the analysis of what the problem is represented to be and by what means it is produced within a public/private statework. Lin Education sells hardware (the leasing of student computers), software (both their own pedagogical programs, e.g. Loops, and platforms from big tech companies such as G Suite for Education and Microsoft 365), and in-service training for working with digital tools (Lin Education, 2017, 3 January). The following analysis mainly serves to illustrate how Lin Education is part of the problematization process, where schools are represented as old-fashioned and teachers are described as not up-to-date. By what means are problems and solutions produced and disseminated, and what are the presuppositions that underpin the statements?

From the analysis of the web content, we can see how Lin Education becomes part of the problematization through different means: engagement, experience, technology and research. Starting with engagement, the website is characterized by happy, optimistic language: 'We are passionate about making a difference for Swedish schools' (Lin Education, 2018, 20 February) or 'Lin

Education is Sweden's, probably the world's, only company with only one mission: to help Swedish schools become even better!' (Lin Education, 2017, 3 January). Also, in the presentation of Lin Education's intention to work collaboratively with school leaders and teachers, the company provides an external perspective with the aim of making learning more effective:

> We are with you throughout the whole process and ensure that the strategy that is set is also lived and implemented in the classroom. We help you with the educational efforts you need to move forward with your school development and your digital journey. (Lin Education, 2019, 1 October)

Lin Education aims to create deep partnerships with municipalities and corporate school organizations as well as individual teachers and school leaders. Through emphasizing their professionalism and experience, the website reinforces the commonsense discourse of the digitalization of education. The message is also that digitalization is unavoidable, but schools can adapt with their help:

> We have provided computers and tablets to Swedish schools for more than 10 years. Thereby we aren't just one of the largest suppliers in the Nordic countries, but also one of the most experienced in the market. As society is digitized, we see the need to make a difference for Swedish schools and, above all, younger generations. To simply ensure that the school is not neglected but goes hand in hand with contemporary developments. (Lin Education, 2019, 1 October)

Despite the new curricula calling for 'all' school requirements to be updated, customization is an important part of the solutions provided by Lin Education. Customization is offered both in relation to the school's needs and to the digital brands that are offered. They make a point about being independent from the big companies, positioning themselves as links between the IT giants and schools with claims that their pedagogical solutions work well in Swedish schools: 'With good partners and collaborations we can offer smart overall solutions that allow the customer to focus on teaching instead of technology' (Lin Education, 2017, 13 June). But at the same time, the company enrols both specific materialities and big business into the educational space, leaving other actors or discourses unproblematized or silenced. On the one hand, we could claim that perhaps this is not their responsibility. However, on the other, companies like Lin Education contribute to the accelerating 'Googlification' of Swedish schools through the procurement of complete digital solutions for schools, for example, Google Classroom and other pedagogical tools like Google Apps for Education (GAFE, 2017, 3 January)[6] (Ideland, 2020). Google algorithms contribute to what is seen as important knowledge, and Google's organization of a digital 'classroom' inculcates how to organize education. Moreover, the modern digital classroom is built upon learning platforms that collecting data from student work. Without digging deeper into this field of problems (see instead Williamson, 2017), we can state that issues around algorithmic learning trajectories, data mining and data security are silenced, as they are never addressed as part of the business solution. Instead, with happy, optimistic language, the focus is on the possibilities. To be able to enact the spaces of learning, Lin Education, like Arete Meritering, refer to their connections to 'reality' (i.e. 'practising teachers'):

> With a strong foundation in the activities of school and preschool, in collaboration with practicing educators, we develop digital platforms, devices, documentation tools and learning environments that help create meaningful learning processes. (Lin Education, 2018, 20 February)

In addition, and also similar to the edupreneurs working with research-based education, a certain kind of research is presented on Lin Education's website. It draws upon similar educational scholars not through research reports, but rather in the shape of selling 'hip' trips to the international

BETT fair in London and through offering expensive lectures with authors who focus on visible learning (e.g. John Hattie and Dylan William). In a video clip on the website describing the company, we can also see snippets from a lecture by Dylan William about assessment for learning – a line of research that seems feasible to translate into business in relation to digitalized teaching:

> We help you with education in computer programming, AFL [Assessment For Learning], gamified learning or creative apps and cloud services such as G-Suite and O365. We start from where you are and what needs the school has. (Lin Education 2019, 1 October)

Turning back to the problems represented in public and political spheres, we can first see how Lin Education's solutions assume that schools are in need of help by engaged business employees. They rely on assumptions of the Swedish school as old-fashioned and not ready to evolve into the digital society on its own. In addition, they emphasize the need for partnerships between the schools and the company, thus emphasizing long-time pedagogical development over quick fixes – particularly regarding the training of teachers assumed to be in need of improved digital literacy and to ensure the customization of school development and teacher training. Second, and closely related to this assumption, is the idea that certain pedagogical research in the field of visible learning and assessment for learning goes hand in hand with digitalization. By arranging seminars and trips with figures such as Dylan William, the company legitimates itself as not only an ed-tech business but also as a pedagogical player working nationally and internationally. However, the theoretical aspect of research is downplayed by either communicating it through events such as BETT or 'experienced teachers' who know what schools need. Third, by emphasizing that the company is not just an intermediary between buyers and specific big tech companies, but rather a knowledgeable partner with customizing solutions, it also enacts the space of solving schools' problems in a serious way. However, looking at discursive silences, Lin Education does not address the problems with digital learning as stated in the literature, such as the personalization involved in learning processes, data mining and data protection, the changing ecology of the classroom, or the profession of the teacher (e.g., Andreasson and Dovemark, 2013; Ideland, 2020; Roberts-Mahoney et al., 2016; Williamson, 2017). No problems seem to exist, only solutions.

A dangerous solutionism?

As stated above, during the recent decade external actors have been increasingly engaged in the organization and problematization of Swedish education. We set out to study the growing apparatus of edupreneurial actors that offer solutions for the supposed Swedish school crisis. We point out how the 'Swedish case' is particularly interesting because it involves a formerly strong welfare state that is now associated with the neoliberal discourse of competition and the outsourcing of policy work. This was analysed through two different fields, research-based education and digitalization. The aim was not to understand these fields per se, but rather to understand how it contributes to the crisis narratives, and examine how policy reforms are enacted as business ideas. In some respects, one can argue that it is sensible that someone, in this case, private enterprise, makes sense of directives from national policy bodies and provides solutions. Principals and teachers must deal with the policy directives as well as public understandings in their daily work. In this respect, we do not question that there are problems that must be solved by someone, perhaps even edupreneurial companies. However, to cite Michel Foucault, our 'point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad' (Foucault, 1984: 343). The danger lies in the risk of avoiding any discussion of how the assembled public/private statework operates within education.

Through our analysis, we have widened the perspectives on how the narratives of a school crisis and national policies are translated into products and services and we see a complex landscape of edu-business that is hard to grasp. We have encountered a growing field with blurry boundaries and no clear-cut distinctions between knowledge-production, digital products, money, certification and reforms. Nevertheless, certain conclusions can be drawn and in the following section, we relate our results to the literature on the neoliberal governing of education. Thereafter, we focus on how edupreneurs enact spaces with and within possibilities made by a deficit perspective of Swedish schools and how the edupreneurs produce discourses of how one can think and do school inside public/private statework.

Netnographic mapping and Bacchi's framework on problematization helped us deconstruct how commercial companies become taken for granted as actors through processes of problematization. Bacchi asks, 'What is the problem represented to be?' (Bacchi, 2009, 2012). But perhaps a more appropriate question to ask when studying private companies with and within policy work is 'What is the solution represented to be?' The edupreneurs do not adapt the crisis discourse explicitly; for example, the websites do not actually refer to teaching as outdated and boring, educational research as 'useless' and unpractical, or the classroom as messy. On the contrary, the websites articulate the problems in terms of possibilities – in optimistic language that shows engagement, structure and possibilities. Through this articulation the crisis is translated into a commodity of 'solutionism'.

Despite the optimistic tone, we argue that the commodification, expressed and produced through the articulation, limits and excludes, for instance, what are seen as useful practices and research for school development. The edupreneurs use a specific kind of research that fits well with the commodification of a crisis, with featured scholars like John Hattie and Dylan William and their work on visible learning. Visibility is also an important feature of the commodities sold – as shown by the clear structure provided by Arete Meritering and the platform systems sold by Lin Education. Visibility is closely related to the emphasis on transparency and performativity – as in, the importance of showing (off) what is done, learned and tested. This results in an auditable education, which is a driving force in neoliberal logic (Lingard et al., 2013). However, the idea of visibility and audibility is also easy to make a saleable product from, similar to the other line of research that is promoted by the companies – individual teacher efficiency. Also, this theme of individual teacher efficiency seems easier to make into a commodity compared to school development at the organization level. As Ball (2009: 93) notes, regardless of its intentions, some research seems to 'privilege further privatizations or "business-like" methods'. The research features and justifies not only specific skills and epistemologies for school development but also the company's very existence. Connell (2013: 109) describes this as a neoliberal policy regime that 'produces its own knowledge base, in a closed loop that does not allow other kinds of knowledge to enter [the] policy debate'.

As briefly mentioned, emphasizing certain research studies also means the locking out of other fields, for example critical studies on capitalist and neoliberal governing modes of education. Sitomaniemi-San (2015) has explored this through studying the history of Finnish teacher education. She states that, since the 1980s, educational perspectives on social transformation, social critique, and issues of democracy and social justice have been marginalized in the Finnish discourse of research-based teacher education (Sitomaniemi-San, 2015: 88). Similarly, the edupreneurial companies do not explicitly define critical perspectives as unnecessary, but rather they are silenced through the emphasis of other lines of research. Moreover, according to Sitomaniemi-San, the 'useful' research is often dressed in terms such as 'democratization' and the 'de-mystification of science', which they claim should not be solely performed by universities. Just as the happy language offers solutions rather than dwells on problems, so too is the line of research referred to

on the edupreneurs' websites optimistic. The dream of finding teaching models and knowledge requirements that can be implemented is an old dream (Popkewitz, 2020), and from the results of this article we claim that we need to ask what these solutions exclude and silence, and what research is *not* present in the edupreneurial discourse.

Another question that needs to be posed is whether and how the market is nurtured by political and media engagement in education. We claim that the success of the business sector(s) and its (their) involvement is dependent on a chorus of voices regarding a school in crisis. Without a problem to solve, the market would collapse, and this is at the very core of the neoliberal discourse as it has developed in Sweden: 'There need to be known losers, if people are to be required to pay to become winners' (Connell, 2013: 105). As Olmedo and Ball (2015) argue, the new solutions are based not only on facilitating the creation of markets in education but also on fabricating a crisis (e.g. supporting the media image of a school in crisis). Edupreneurial actors become indispensable in alliance with policy bodies and public debates where problems and solutions nurture each other. However, we substantiate the need to ask questions about how these companies contribute to the making of the problem they offer to solve and thus also to the ongoing private/public statework regarding how a school should be 'developed'. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this is not the sole result of a free capitalist market, neither is it the state renouncing its responsibilities, but rather it happens through a changing state and a changing market. The state has outsourced central areas of its responsibility, while at the same time, the market in Sweden has gone from being concentrated with a few large industries to myriad companies offering services alongside their products. In this competitive market, the offering of welfare services to the state and municipalities is a stable business. Historically, the public/private assemblage must be understood from the recent (i.e. the last 25 years) modifications of 'the Swedish model' from a state-based welfare system to a system built on consumerism and 'free choice'. To understand the complexities of neoliberal governing, further research must focus on contextualizing the phenomenon from both historical and national points of view.

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Notes

1. A three-year research project at Malmö University funded by The Swedish Research Council with the aim to study how private actors and logics change the conditions for what counts as good education.
2. For studies on the lead teacher reform, see e.g. Bergh et al. (2019).
3. See for example EU's digitalization plan (EU, 2019).
4. However, during later years, there has been criticism against digitalization in the public debate – namely, that it has gone 'too far' (Hultén and Ideland, 2020).

5. Besides new demands on general digital literacy, computer programming has become a central part of mathematics. How this curricula change was performed within a public/private statework has been analysed in Williamson et al. (2018).
6. Today under the name, *G Suite for Education*.

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