



UPPSALA  
UNIVERSITET

***Department of Government***

Working Paper 2013:7

An upper secondary school for everyone —Analyzing problem framings and conflicts in Swedish educational policy

Josefina Erikson

Department of Government

Uppsala University

P.O. Box 514

SE-751 20 Uppsala

Sweden

An upper secondary school for everyone —Analyzing problem  
framings and conflicts in Swedish educational policy

JOSEFINA ERIKSON

**An upper secondary school for everyone —Analyzing problem framings and conflicts in Swedish educational policy**

Josefina Erikson

*Department of Government, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden*

Box 514

751 20 Uppsala

[Josefina.erikson@statsvet.uu.se](mailto:Josefina.erikson@statsvet.uu.se)

Josefina Erikson has recently completed her PhD in the Department of Government at Uppsala University, Sweden. Her dissertation focused on Swedish policymaking, and she developed a dynamic frame analysis to conceptualize this process of policy formation. She has thenceforth worked with educational policymaking, both in a governmental inquiry and in different research projects.

# **An upper secondary school for everyone —Analyzing problem framings and conflicts in Swedish educational policy**

## Abstract

The image of Swedish educational policy is intimately connecting a comprehensive and inclusive school system with equality and Social democracy. This article problematizes this equality image through an analysis of the ideas and notions of education expressed in a massive egalitarian reform of the Swedish upper secondary school in 1991 with the purpose of creating “an upper secondary school for everyone”. The article contributes a comprehensive analysis of the different problems addressed in the bill and how the tensions between different understandings of education are handled. In addition, implications of the way the problem is framed, on the character of the policy debate, are discussed. The main finding of the analysis is that an economic problem framing was the most prominent in the policy proposal. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the economic understanding of education tends to downplay value conflicts in the policy debate and that such value conflicts are also neglected in the reform proposal.

Keywords: Upper secondary school, Sweden, problem framing, educational ideals, conflicts

## **Introduction**

The image of Swedish educational policy is intimately connecting a comprehensive and inclusive school system with equality and Social democracy (Bergström 1993, 32; Rothstein 1996, 64). Along with the emergence of the Swedish welfare state, the educational system has expanded and gradually become more and more comprehensive. The social democratic party has been influential in this endeavor and the right of education regardless of socio economic status can be described as one of the cornerstones of social democratic education policy (Bergström 1993, 32; Rothstein 1996, 55, 64). The equalizing effects of the school system have, however, been limited (for an overview see Rothstein 1996, 72). The Swedish equality image has thereby been questioned; the comprehensive school system in practice has not lived up to the equity demands (e.g. Haug 1999). The aim of this article is to problematize the image of Swedish educational policy through an analysis of the ideas and notions of education expressed in education policy.

In 1991, a substantial reform of the upper secondary school was introduced by the Social Democrats with the purpose of creating “an upper secondary school for everyone” (prop. 1990/91:85). This reform can be regarded as the last massive equality reform in a progressive tradition aimed at expanding the educational system and achieving greater social equality in society as a whole (cf Bergström 1993, 32, 94). Through the reform, vocational programs were made more similar to academic ones in length and content, so that students from the new vocational programs met the basic requirements for higher education. Such unifications of academic and vocational programs are unusual in an international comparison (Lindberg 2003, 3).

The reform is associated with the aim of increased social and political equality. Previous research has described the reform as “a massive egalitarian reform” (Persson

& Oscarsson 2009, 136). This aim has also been the starting point for evaluation studies concerned with the effects of the reform on democratic citizenship and equality in society (Persson & Oscarsson 2009) as well as on students' level of education, dropouts from school and future income (Hall 2009). Yet, no positive effects on the measured variables have been found.

However, the ideas and notions that motivated the new upper secondary school have not been exhaustively analyzed in previous research. The aim of this article is to analyze the official arguments and motives expressed by the government for a unified upper secondary school and thereby problematize the image of Swedish educational policy. A critical review of the notions and assumptions implicit in a policy proposal is also an important aspect for policy evaluations on proper grounds (Vedung 2009).

Three questions will guide the empirical analysis:

- (1) What problem(s) was the new upper secondary school supposed to solve?
- (2) How are conflicting problem framings handled in the reform proposal?
- (3) How is the character of the policy debate affected by the way the problem is framed?

The article will analyze the problems addressed in the reform proposal and the role assigned to education. The article claims that different understandings of education might be in conflict, and the second part of the analysis sheds light on how potential conflicts between a social and an economic understanding of education are handled in the reform proposal. Implications of the findings on the character of the policy debate will be discussed in the last section of the paper.

## **Swedish educational policy**

Swedish educational policy has been characterized by a pronounced social understanding of education. Enhancing equality across socioeconomic groups has been essential in the role assigned to education, both in terms of equal access to education and in terms of providing equal opportunities later on in life (Rothstein 1996, 64; Lindensjö & Lundgren 2010 (2000), 118). Within social democracy equality has been interpreted in slightly different ways over time, but the argument that no one should be denied education because of socioeconomic factors has been essential throughout the last century (Bergström 1993, 32). In this endeavor has the question of making the school system more comprehensive been a central component (Bergström 1993, 32). Yet, at the same time as a social understanding of education has dominated the Swedish educational policy, the growth of the labor market has also been essential in social democratic policy (Hinnfors 2009). According to previous research, the Swedish school has been assigned two contradictory commitments, which creates a dilemma: both to adapt to the requirements of knowledge in society and the labor market and thus be “useful”, and at the same time to create equal opportunities for individuals and thereby create enhanced equality (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2010 (2000), 58)—in other words, to both promote knowledge and skills derived from an economic understanding of education and at the same time foster knowledge in accordance with a social understanding of education.

This dilemma that seems to be ever present in Swedish educational policy is symptomatic of educational policy in general which is a policy area characterized by latent conflicts between the different functions of education. Apart from the conflict between social and economic functions of education, there is also a potential conflict between the individual and the societal level, since education inevitably is related both

to the individual and to society at large at the same time. The conflicts in educational policy represent a challenge to politicians, who need to acknowledge these conflicts and handle them in policy design. I argue that in order to fully understand the consequences of educational policy an analysis is required of the tensions between different functions of education and of how those are handled by politicians.

### **The contribution of the article**

Previous research has noted a tendency of a shift towards more economic considerations in Swedish school debates after the 1990s (Englund 1999, 15), and in the 2000s the trend is significant (Unemar Öst 2010, 236f; Carlbaum 2012, 220). The social understanding of education seems to become less influential than before. In her study of the discursive struggle of the aim and purpose of higher education in Sweden between 1992 and 2007 Unemar Öst concluded that at the end of the period the globalization discourse in which the purpose of education is described in terms of competitiveness and economic growth is hegemonic. Quality is equated to employability according to the criteria of the labor market. She remarked that even the language used by scholars within the academy is substantially affected by an economic discourse, for example, by words such as “utility, production, profiling and excellence”.<sup>1</sup> In the political debate she noted that the previous struggle between various understandings of higher education has ceased, and the globalization discourse is in complete hegemony. She argued that political agency is threatened by the globalization discourse, since it claims objectivity and truth. Politics becomes a question of administration and management in the aftermath of globalization (Unemar Öst 2010, 233ff). The trend in the discourse of

---

<sup>1</sup> Nytt, avkastning, profilering och excellens

Swedish higher education has also been noted in the discourse of the upper secondary school.

Sara Carlbaum has analyzed the constructions of ideal future citizens represented in Swedish upper secondary school reform texts during 1971–2011. Carlbaum concluded that a shift has taken place from a discourse of *a school for all* in the beginning of the period to a discourse of *a school for the labor market* in the end of the period. During the period 1990–2005, which includes the reform of 1991, her analysis shows that the vision of a school for all was still present, but in an extended way, expressed in terms of lifelong learning. The construction of citizenship changed during this period, and instead of promoting a collective and active citizenship for developing a more democratic society, citizenship was articulated in terms of individual adaptability and flexibility in a changing society (Carlbaum 2012, 259ff).

Lundahl et al. noted the same trends as Unemar Öst and Carlbaum in their analysis of all upper secondary reforms in 1968 to 2009. Their analysis focuses on the reform of 2009 and relates it to previous reforms with regard to major functions of the reforms and the structuring and control of educational content. They show that to a varying degree an economic function of education has been stressed as important throughout the entire period, although there has been a shift in how this function is expressed, towards more focus on the needs of private firms and sectors and towards students' employability (Lundahl et al. 2010, 49, 54). With regard to the reform of 1991, Lundahl et al. concluded that the reform "was initiated to solve similar problems to those addressed in the previous reform cycle: that upper secondary education did not meet the demands for flexibility and lifelong learning". Furthermore, the importance of providing students with *Bildung*, defined as a person's cultivation and empowerment to

live and develop freely, was emphasized in the governmental commission that preceded the reform proposal (Lundahl et al. 2010, 49).

The contribution of this article is to analyze the official arguments and motives expressed in the last equality reforms in a progressive tradition, namely the 1991 reform of the upper secondary school. Lundahl et al. have contributed with some interesting insights into the 1991 reform, but there is still a need for a comprehensive analysis of the objectives and motives of this particular reform, which was not their primary purpose. The article will analyze the problems addressed in the reform proposal and the role assigned to education. The analysis will also focus on the handling of different (conflicting) understandings of education in the reform proposal. In this way, the article contributes with new knowledge of the tensions between different understandings of education expressed in the reform proposal and how these are handled. This is an aspect that has not been acknowledged in previous research, which has mainly been interested in discursive changes and shifts *over time* (cf. Lundahl et al. 2010; Carlbaum 2012). To fully understand the consequences and effects of a reform requires such an analysis of (conflicting) objectives and motives behind the reform. In addition the article provides insights into the policy debate of this important reform. The analysis problematizes the image of Swedish education policy and contributes to the wider educational debate in Sweden on how to understand the role of education and knowledge in society and how to handle conflicting objectives in policy debate.

### **Understandings of the role of education in society**

In order to analyze the role assigned to education, two aspects need to be acknowledged. The first aspect relates to the function assigned to education and can be expressed as a social or an economic function. The second aspect relates to whether the

function relates to the individual or to society at large (Bergström 1993, 225; Lundahl et al. 2010; Unemar Öst 2010, 15f).

Lundahl et al. elaborated on what they called “four different functions in upper secondary reforms”, distinguishing between the economic and social functions of education and the individual and societal level (Lundahl et al. 2010, 47). These functions are summarized in figure 1.

<b>The Function of Education</b>		
<b>Level</b>	<b>Social</b>	<b>Economic</b>
Individual	Foster the individual to acquire autonomy or responsibility	Provide individuals with competence; facilitate individuals' mobility
Societal	Foster citizenship; contribute to development or change of society	Economic growth; provide the labor market with competent workers

Figure 1. Four different functions of education

The economic function of education can be thought of in terms of the societal level (economic growth, provide the labor market with competent workers) or the individual level (provide individuals with competence, facilitate individuals' mobility). The same holds for the social function of education, which also can be expressed on a societal level (foster citizenship, contribute to development and change of society) and on an individual level (foster the individual to acquire autonomy and responsibility).

Lundahl et al. related these functions to different kinds of welfare state systems and concluded that the social democratic and the conservative welfare states tend to

focus mainly on the social and economic functions on the societal level, whereas liberal welfare states tend to emphasize the individual level of both functions (Lundahl et al. 2010, 47).

I argue that these four functions also represent four different understandings of education. Each understanding expresses different ideas about the role and function of education, in other words why education is seen as desirable. These four positions can be used to conceptualize immanent conflicts in educational policy between different understandings, conflicts with regard both to the social and economic function of education and to the societal and the individual level.

### **Conflicts in educational policy**

Depending on the function that education is assigned, different skills and knowledge are promoted (Bergström 1993, 225; Lundahl et al. 2010, 47). For example, the economic position on both levels, but particularly on the societal level, tends to favor applicable knowledge and skills demanded by working life and the market. The social position, on the contrary, is related to other conceptualizations of knowledge; on the individual level it relates to the classical *bildung*, commonly understood as knowledge that favors a person's cultivation and empowerment to live and develop freely, while on a societal level the social position might adhere to knowledge and skills of practical use to hold together a community, such as responsibility, respect, and communication. While various functions might be emphasized at the same time, there are potential conflicts between them with regard to which skills and knowledge education should foster. The applicable skills and knowledge advocated in the economic societal understanding of education are, for example, difficult to reconcile to the *bildung* ideal of knowledge related to the social individual understanding of education emphasizing the individual's

development and cultivation.

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum has concerned herself with the conflict between an economic function of education and a social function. She claimed that the economic understanding of education is even a threat to democracy, as a result of the kind of knowledge that this ideal promotes (Nussbaum 2010, 7). According to Nussbaum, there is a global trend of “education for profit” in educational systems worldwide, in which the purpose of education is reduced to mere profit and economic growth, that is, an economic understanding of education on the societal level (Nussbaum 2010, 7).

Nussbaum described the purpose of education in the economic understanding as “short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making” (Nussbaum 2010, 2). The knowledge appraised in this understanding includes abilities such as scientific and technical proficiencies, and thus not the kind of knowledge that is important to sustain a vital democracy. According to Nussbaum, the purpose of education should be social, to foster citizens as “active, critical, reflective, and empathetic members of a community of equals, capable of exchanging ideas on the basis of respect and understanding with people from many different backgrounds” (Nussbaum 2010, 141). The kind of knowledge she mentions is closely related to a humanistic educational ideal and opposed to the knowledge favored by the economic understanding of education for profit (cf Nussbaum 1997; Nussbaum 2010, 95ff). Nussbaum claimed that the proponents of “education for profit” have been too shortsighted to see the advantages of a more humanistic education on a societal level (Nussbaum 2010, 10).

The conflict acknowledged by Nussbaum between social and economic functions of education will be of particular interest for this article. However,

theoretically, there are also potential conflicts between the individual and the societal level with regard to the social and the economic functions, respectively.

In summary, there are potential conflicts between different understandings of the role of education with regard to how and which knowledge is valued. In practice these conflicts are complex, since education often is simultaneously assigned different roles in society. Nevertheless, in policymaking such conflicts are a reality and must be handled when educational policy is designed.

### **Problem framing—analyzing understandings of education**

A number of scholars within the field of public policy have pointed out that problems and objectives are not pre-established in policymaking (Rochefort & Cobb 1994; Scheurich 1994; Schön & Rein 1994; Bacchi 1999; Mehta 2011). On the contrary, an essential part of policy making is a struggle about how to frame the “problem”. The construction of the problem is a result of historical and social processes, and it affects policy design, in educational policy for example, the kinds of skills and knowledge promoted. All policy proposals contain in themselves a diagnosis of the problem in which underlying assumptions are invoked. The diagnosis is sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit (Bacchi 2009, 1). In this article I refer to this diagnosis as *problem framing*. Education can, for example, be framed as the solution to different problems such as a weak national economy, social inequality, or youth unemployment.

Depending of how the problem is framed education is assigned different roles. A problem framing in thus related to the different understandings of education presented above. Through an analysis of the problem framing(s) in a policy proposal one can also say something about the underlying understanding of education expressed in that proposal. Educational policy scholars have underlined the importance of taking the

construction of the problem as a starting point when analyzing educational policy (Scheurich 1994; Winter 2012; Webb 2013). In addition, problem framing might also have more far-reaching consequences for the role assigned to education in a broader social context than that.

An important part of problem framing is the causal story (Stone 1989), that is, how the cause of the problem is expressed. Deborah Stone rightly pointed out that a causal story can locate the burden of responsibility and blame in different ways, and thus is essential for the formulation of policy solutions. When situations come to be seen as caused by human action, they become amenable to human intervention (Stone 1989, 281). Choice is a central aspect of a causal story. Are actions and consequences intended or not? When there is choice and purpose, there is also responsibility, and the other way around; causal stories that don't express purpose or intention entail the burden of responsibility being more difficult to distribute. Stone creates a typology in which actions and consequences can be framed as intended or unintended, respectively (Stone 1989, 285). In addition to Stone's reasoning, I suggest that problem framing has implications for the way policy is discussed—for *the character of policy debate* and for the perceived political maneuverability. For example, policymaking in Sweden is nowadays often motivated by the fact that Sweden has to adopt or change a policy in a certain area to meet requirements of the European Union. When the cause of a policy proposal is framed in that way, an illusion of inevitability is created. Politicians seem to have no choice but to react, and thereby is the political maneuverability limited. When the cause is framed in less deterministic terms, the political maneuverability is widened and choices increase. In line with this argument Unemar Öst claimed that political agency is affected negatively by the so-called globalization discourse in which the purpose of education is described in terms of competitiveness and economic growth.

When external forces such as globalization are allowed to demand policy changes, politics becomes a question of administration and management, and political agency is hampered (Unemar Öst 2010, 244).

The first part of this analysis will explore how the problem(s) is framed in the new upper secondary reform of 1991 and how the cause is expressed. These problem framings will be related to the four understandings of education presented in figure 1 and potential conflicts between them will be highlighted. In addition, implications of the problem framing for the character of the policy debate will be discussed.

### **Acknowledgment or dismissal—analyzing the handling of conflicting understandings**

A policy proposal is often a product of many compromises and interests. It might thus contain many different problem frames that sometimes are in conflict with one another. Educational policy is no exception; on the contrary, it can be expected or even inevitable that education is seen as the solution to various problems at the same time. However, an essential part of politics is indeed about handling diverse interests and prioritizing them. Politicians can use different strategies in these situations, and those will be analyzed in the second part of the empirical study. First of all, conflicting understandings can be either acknowledged or ignored. Second, if the conflicting understandings are acknowledged, politicians can either discuss them, or dismiss them as not problematic. Finally, if the conflict is discussed, politicians might outline a plan for how to handle it. The second part of the analysis will assess how different problem framings are handled in the policy proposal.

### **The empirical analysis**

Three questions will guide the empirical analysis:

- (1) What problem(s) was the new upper secondary school supposed to solve?
- (2) How are conflicting problem framings handled in the reform proposal?
- (3) How is the character of the policy debate affected by the way the problem is framed?

The analysis has been conducted through a descriptive text analysis of the governmental bill of the 1991 reform. I have also analyzed the protocol from the parliamentary debate (RP) in which the proposal was defended, the report from the standing committee of education in the parliament and the official party- motions from the other political parties. The focus for the analysis is the problem framings and conflicts expressed in this particular reform proposal and the material is therefore limited to the proposal and the surrounding debate. I have excluded the wider educational debate, which is a limitation in scope, but enables the analysis to go more in-depth.

In the first step, the overarching problem framings in the bill were extracted, the problems which the new upper secondary school was supposed to solve. Three problem framings were discerned, and each was analyzed in greater detail to reveal how the problem and the cause were constructed.

In a second step I related the problem framings to the four different understandings of education presented on page 2, in order to shed light on potential conflicts between different problem framings. Concluding that there are potential conflicts between the problem framings in the bill, I continued the analysis with regard to how these conflicts were handled by the government. Finally, the policy debate was put in focus to see if the way the problem was framed tended to affect the character of the policy debate.

Before the analysis starts, I will describe the content of the reform and give a brief overview to situate the reform in a historical and political context.

### **An upper secondary school for all—the last egalitarian reform**

The Social Democratic Party has been the driving force in the expansion of the public school system in Sweden, which, as mentioned above, is a political endeavor closely related to the question of socio economic equality (Bergström 1993, 32). Important milestones in the expansion are the reforms of the elementary school system in 1962, when the parallel school system was abandoned, and the integration of the upper secondary school system in the 1970s, when vocational schools and the academic schools preparatory to university entrance were integrated into one comprehensive “gymnasium” (Richardson 2004; Larsson 2011). The reform of 1991, whereby the programs of the upper secondary school system were made more similar in length and content, is the last reform in this tradition. Educational reforms thereafter have been about realizing other objectives, such as student’s choice, more diversity in the school system through independent schools, and measures to improve the quality and results (Larsson 2011). In an analysis of recent upper secondary reforms, Stefan Lund concluded that “the development of local quasi-markets overrides the Swedish policy tradition of enabling a coherent and equivalent upper secondary education for all pupils” (Lund 2008, 646).

The reform process of the 1991 reform was initiated in the 1970’s when youth unemployment became a political problem due to the recession (Larsson 2011, 80). The governmental inquiry of 1976 (SOU 1981:96) proposed a new structure for the upper secondary school aimed to make theoretical and academic programs more similar through a radical reorganization into three sectors comprised by students from both academic and vocational programs that gradually should become more specialized (Carlbaum 2012, 61). Concerned parties criticized the proposal and it was never implemented (Larsson 2011, 80). A new governmental inquiry of the vocational

programs was appointed in 1984 and their report resulted in a pilot-scheme in which three-year vocational tracks were tried out in some municipalities (SOU 1986:2; Prop. 1987/88:102). The pilot-scheme had not been fully evaluated before the Social democratic government decided to reorganize the upper secondary school in 1991.

The educational reform of 1991 addressed both the content and structure of the upper secondary school and proposed wide-ranging changes. The bill was a result of the many inquiries and pilot-schemes of the 1980's but contrary to Swedish practice the proposal was not preceded by a governmental inquiry and concerned parties in the school sector did not get the opportunity to comment upon the proposal of an entirely reorganized upper secondary school (prop 1990/91:85, 40, appendix 2).

The reform replaced and changed the previous structure; new timetables for all programs were introduced and the number of programs was reduced. The most substantial aspects of the proposal concerned the vocational programs, though. First, the curriculum of theoretical courses such as mathematics, English, and social science was increased and equalized to the content of the academic programs. Thus, all students, regardless of program, were to study a core of common theoretical topics. Second, the lengths of the vocational programs were extended from two to three years in parity with the academic programs, and thereby all programs were of the same length. As a consequence of these changes, all students who graduated in the new upper secondary schools met the basic requirements for higher education. In the previous system, exclusively students from the academic programs met the requirements. The changes of the vocational programs were partially financed by a restructuring of the academic programs (Prop. 1990/91:85).

The bill was introduced in a transformative period when the steering of the Swedish school system underwent substantial changes towards decentralized targets and

performance management (prop. 1988/89:4, prop. 1989/90:41, prop. 1990/91:18). The municipalities became principal organizer of the school and got more autonomy. At the time the financial and political situation was unstable in Sweden, due to economic crisis and change of governments. The bill, called “Grow through increased knowledge”<sup>2</sup> (Prop. 1990/91:85), caused an intense debate, both in the parliament and in society at large. The main objections to the proposal concerned aspects such as the number of guaranteed theoretical lesson hours in the academic programs, which many interpreted as a decrease, and the distribution of lesson hours to different topics. The financing of the reform, which included rationalizations and restructurings of the existing upper secondary schools and to a large extent burdened the municipalities, was also criticized (1990/91:UbU16).

Finally, two party coalitions were formed around the proposal: the Social Democrats, the Left Party, and the Center Party in support of the reform, and the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party against it. The Green Party voted against the reform, but did not take part in any coalition. The reform was passed in parliament in the spring of 1991, and by 1994 the reform was fully implemented.

It is now time to turn to the content of this controversial reform and to the policy debate.

***What problem(s) is the new upper secondary school supposed to solve?***

One of the initial paragraphs in the bill stresses the following:

*After a period of quantitative reforms comes a period when the ambitions should be more directed towards the kind of qualitative reforms that make welfare more fair and better meet*

---

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from the bill are originally in Swedish and they have been translated by the author.

*not only the needs of citizens and individuals, but also the requirements of the national economy for efficiency and productivity.(prop. 1990/91: 85, p.42)*

This quote is characteristic for the proposal in which two overarching problem framings are salient: the inequality problem and the national economic problem. Both are touched upon in the quote: fairer welfare for individuals and the national economy. The inequality problem and the national economic framing will be analyzed more in detail below.

### *A problem framing of Inequality*

Based on the reform having been conceived of as an equality reform, one could expect that an equality line of argument should be prominent in the bill. This is, however, not the case, even if a problem framing of inequality can be found. Interestingly, the concept “equality” is not explicitly mentioned at all in the bill.

Instead, the question of “equivalence”<sup>3</sup> is raised, and highlighted as an important principle. According to previous educational research in Sweden, the understanding of equality has successively shifted throughout the past century, and the use of equivalence instead of equality marks a shift towards a focus on quality instead of social equality.

The former equality ambitions have, along with the use of equivalence, been replaced by the fulfillment of quality criteria to ensure everyone the same standard, according to Lindensjö and Lundgren (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2010 (2000), 118).

In line with the discussion above, it is stressed in the bill that

*...it is an important question of equivalence that all young people are offered a three-year upper secondary education, regardless of the orientation they choose. The aim for the upper*

---

<sup>3</sup> likvärdighet

*secondary school must be to offer all young people a qualified education that provides the basis for both professional activities and continued education. (Prop. 1990/91:85)*

Equality thus becomes a question of a qualified education as a right of individuals.

In the bill there is an explicit problematization of the biased recruitment to the programs of the upper secondary school and by extension to higher education. This is also described as a question of equivalence. The bill stresses that the reform of the comprehensive gymnasium, which was suppose to eliminate recruitment biases based on gender or social background, has not fulfilled these intentions (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 48f). For example, it is declared that

*Children of academics and civil servants are still highly over-represented in the academic programs. Girls still chose vocational programs within limited sectors, usually the caring sector and the office sector. (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 48f)*

The new upper secondary school is described as better equipped to deal with these problems: “This is an additional step in the endeavor to ensure the equivalence” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 50).

The problem framing in these lines of arguments can be described as *a problem of unequal opportunities for individuals*. Due to social background and gender, students do not have the same opportunities in life according to the bill. The present upper secondary school has failed to equalize these differences, and the new upper secondary school is thus needed to remedy this problem of equivalence. The problem is framed from the individual’s point of view. Equivalence in the educational system, that is, the new upper secondary school, is discussed foremost as a means to enhance individuals’ possibilities in life. A more societal focus would be for example to discuss a biased recruitment as a democratic problem in line with Nussbaum.

So how is the cause of this problem of unequal opportunities framed? The causal story is described in terms of historical socioeconomic injustices of class and gender. Yet, there is also another, frequently expressed, causal story in the bill of new developments in society that cause a need for more education. This is a causal story of “forces in our surroundings”, which is used even more in relation to the economic problem framing (this will be further analyzed below). However, new challenges in the world around us are also related to the need for more education from an individual perspective and as a cause of the inability of the present upper secondary school to deal with the situation of unequal opportunities: “The present structure hardly corresponds to the requirements set by the world around us, anymore” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 49).

#### *The problem of the national economy*

The problem framing discerned in the policy proposal of an economic problem is the most prominent one.

The analysis reveals that the reformation and expansion of upper secondary education was not solely to remedy unequal opportunities for individuals’ self-realization and development but also, or even primarily, to meet demands in a society characterized by “knowledge and technology development” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 44).

In the bill it is established that:

*The relationship between knowledge growth and economic growth is strengthening. To an increasing extent a nation’s prosperity and its competitiveness depend on the contribution of human labor, on people’s education and knowledge, competence and ability to take advantage of and develop new knowledge and technology. Human labor becomes the strategic capital in a knowledge-intensive business. (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 43)*

Furthermore, it is stressed that

*The most important driving force for further development of business and a sustained high employment rate is, as stressed before, citizens' knowledge and competence. The labor market requires to a larger extent than ever before good basic knowledge both in general subjects and in vocational subjects. (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 50)*

The prosperity and competitiveness of nations are seen as dependent on knowledge and new technology in this line of argument. The knowledge and competence of the citizens are described as the most important factors for the development of business and a continued high employment rate (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 50). The problems addressed seem to a large extent to be problems related to the economic growth of society. The reform is essentially motivated as a tool to solve problems of economic growth, unemployment, and declining prosperity. These lines of arguments describe *a problem of the national economy*.

The report from the standing committee of Education in the parliament supports the framing of the bill. The committee stresses that changes in the educational system must “satisfy requirements from the national economy of efficiency and productivity” (1990/91:UbU16, p. 30).

The cause of this problem is found mainly in “external forces in our surroundings”. According to the policy proposal, there are various changes going on nationally and internationally to which the educational system unconditionally has to adapt. These developments in society seem to be causing a situation that demands more education in general, and in particular more comprehensive vocational programs, in order to achieve prosperity, economic growth, and welfare in society. Some examples from the bill can be used to illustrate this causal story. In one of the first paragraphs of the bill it is established that education in the upper secondary school shall be determined by “requirements set by an internationally influenced society” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 3).

Further, it is highlighted that “the current structure of the upper secondary school hardly meets the demands set by the world around us, anymore” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 49).

There is also a change towards a “knowledge society”, according to the bill, in which the growth of knowledge in quantity and complexity is more comprehensive and diversified than ever (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 43). It is stressed that “the general level of knowledge must constantly adapt to the emergence of the knowledge society” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 44).

In summary, analysis of the arguments in the bill suggests that the problem of the national economy is the pervading problem framing in the bill. Education and the new upper secondary school are seen as a tool or capital to remedy economic setbacks and increase prosperity. Closely related to this understanding is a causal story frequently presented throughout the bill, in which driving forces in the surrounding world create the need for a restructuring of the upper secondary school system, in order to achieve economic growth. In other words, education does not keep up with developments in the world around us and thus cannot promote economic growth until it is adjusted to the new situation.

In relation to this, it can also be noted that the terminology used in the bill is in part influenced by an economic vocabulary. To talk about human labor as strategic capital is such an example. There is another passage in the bill where the structure of the upper secondary school is described in terms of “supply” (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 49). This trend of a changed vocabulary when talking about education in terms of an economic market is noted by historian Stefan Collini (Collini 2009).

### ***Different understandings of education***

The analysis of the bill has discerned two prominent problems that the new secondary

school is supposed to solve: the problem of unequal opportunities for individuals and the problem of the national economy. The problem framings implicitly ascribe different roles to education. In figure 2 are the problem framings related to the different functions assigned to education, presented in the beginning of the article.

	<b>The Function of Education</b>	
<b>Level</b>	Social	Economic
Individual	The problem of inequality of opportunity	
Societal	The problem of inequality of opportunity	The problem of the national economy

Figure 2. The problem framings in the bill “Grow through increased knowledge” related to different understandings of education.

The problem of inequality is an example of a social understanding of education. The purpose of education is seen foremost as social, to give individuals equal opportunities to develop and participate in social life, and also, even if less expressed, to achieve social equality on a societal level. Individuals’ possibilities for development and self-realization stand out as the most important purposes of education in the problem framing of inequality of opportunities. However, the discussion of a biased recruitment based on class and gender indicates a more societal perspective of the need for social equality between different groups in society, even if this perspective is not explicitly developed in the proposal. An example of a more explicit societal perspective would be to relate equality of opportunities to democracy in general and discuss biased recruitment from a democratic perspective or a class perspective. In summary, the

individual perspective dominates, whereas the societal level is only implicitly discussed.

The other problem framing of the national economy is obviously an example of an economic understanding of education. The purpose of education is, according to this problem framing, to promote economic growth and national competitiveness. The societal level dominates, since mostly working life, the national economy, and the like are mentioned, as opposed to individuals' economic strength and possibilities.

Are these different understandings complementary? I have argued above that different understandings of the purpose of education tend to promote different kinds of knowledge. I have also argued that, because of that, there is an immanent conflict between a social and an economic understanding of education and between a societal and an individual perspective. On the basis of these arguments I conclude that there is a potential conflict between the different problem framings expressed in the bill; the kind of knowledge needed to give all students the possibilities of self-realization and self-determination might be very different from the ones required by labor markets and business. For example business might require low qualified workers with applicable skills, which are difficult to reconcile with knowledges needed for self-realization.

In next section the analysis will proceed with regard to how potential conflicts were handled in the policy debate.

### ***The new upper secondary school—the solution to various problems***

The analysis above thus sheds light on different problem framings expressed in the government's bill that are potentially contradictory. The new upper secondary school is, in other words, the solution to various different problems. The first aspect to scrutinize is whether or not the potential conflicts between these problem framings were acknowledged by the government. The analysis shows that there was in fact a

discussion about the different aims that the reform was intended to fulfill, which can be interpreted as an acknowledgment. In the last section of the general introduction of the government's proposal, there is a comment on different interests that might be in conflict. The reasoning does not explicitly refer to a social and an economic function of education, but based on the reading of the entire line of argument the government seemed to refer to the afore-mentioned aims that the reform is supposed to solve.

*In my proposal the national interests are not in opposition to local or individual interests or needs. On the contrary, they precondition each other in a development strategy. Without the tension that exists through them, every system runs the risk of stagnating and of becoming rigid. (Prop. 1990/91:85, p. 53)*

The government thus acknowledged that there is a potential conflict between national, local, and individual interests and needs. Interestingly, this conflict is turned into something beneficial. The next step of the analysis, of how potential conflicts are handled, concludes that the conflict is dismissed as being not problematic and is even seen as an asset, thus not discussed further. The so-called "development strategy" mentioned in the quote was not elaborated on in the bill, at all. We do not get to know how this so-called strategy is supposed to work. Nor were implications of potential conflicts concerning the purpose of education and required knowledge and skills discussed further. The conflict was thus acknowledged, but rapidly dismissed as unproblematic. There is consequently no plan for how to handle potential conflicts in policy design. Conflicting aims might be inevitable in policy design, but should preferably be acknowledged and handled explicitly.

### ***What the labor market wants—implications for the policy debate***

The analysis has revealed that an economic problem framing was the most prominent. I have also concluded that the government handled the potential conflict between different problem framings by acknowledging a potential conflict and dismissing it as being not problematic. In this section we will take a closer look at the implications of the dominant economic problem framing on the policy debate.

A close reading of the policy debate indicates first a tendency of an economic problem framing of education also among the opposition parties. Even if the opposition opposes the government's reform proposal and clearly does not agree with the solution, they still take the overarching economic problem framing as a starting point.

The major parties in opposition, the Conservative Party (M) and the Liberal Party (FP) both expressed understandings of education that are strongly related to economic growth. Some examples can be drawn. The Conservatives stressed that "Education is a key to the re-establishment of the economic strength of Sweden" (motion 1990/91:Ub126, p. 1). Thereby, the problem is framed in terms of Sweden's weak national economy. The Liberal Party highlighted as a top priority the importance of an improved upper secondary school system for Sweden's competitiveness during the 1990s, in a similar problem framing from an economic perspective. "In a number of analyses of Sweden's competitiveness, now and in the future, the significance of knowledge is emphasized" (motion 1990/91:Ub127).

However, despite similar problem framings in economic terms and agreement that education is the solution, the design of education is still a matter of disagreement in the policy debate. To a substantial part, the dispute between the political parties over the best solution is discussed in terms of what the labor market *actually* requires. On the

basis of different interpretations, the parties promoted different solutions. I will give a few examples of the character of the policy debate with regard to this aspect.

The government argued that the labor market requires a more comprehensive education for everyone, and thus that the proposed uniform three-year upper secondary school with increased theoretical content for vocational programs in fact is required by labor market (Prop. 1990/91:85). The Social Democratic spokesperson in parliament declared:

*The parties of the labor market applaud the proposal put forward, but from the Conservatives, you remain outside. You have no contact with the reality outside this building. (RP 1990/91:126)*

The Conservative Party claimed, contrary to the government, that the labor market demands a more flexible and specialized education system in which the programs are more diversified. The party opposed the proposed uniformity of the new reform, which according to them is contradictory to this aim (motion 1990/91:Ub126). A central aim and purpose of the Conservative Party's educational policy is that education should be more specialized and adapted either to higher education or to a profession, as in this example:

*The length and content of education should obviously be adapted to the diversified demands set by higher education or the professional labor market. (motion 1990/91:Ub126, p. 1; reservation 1990/91:UbU16)*

The Left Party gave yet another interpretation of what the labor market requires. According to the Left Party there is a dramatic change going on in the labor market that is transforming professions, and in many sectors even blurring the distinction between workers and civil servants. As a consequence the Left Party claimed that the gymnasium should ideally be designed to keep up with this development and thus be subdivided into sectors in which the division between academic and vocational

programs is abolished (motion 1990/91:Ub149, p. 1). Yet, the Left Party supported the reform proposal as a first step.

The disagreement in these examples between the government, the Left Party, and the Conservative Party is about what “the labor market wants and requires”. On the basis of different interpretations different policy solutions are justified. When the political debate is discussed in these terms of what the labor market requires, or similarly, an illusion of an objective, a neutral way to design policy is created. Deceptively, there seems to be an objective way to decide what education is really required by the labor market. This illusion is underpinned by the causal story commonly expressed, in which external forces such as globalization and the international economy require changes.

However, what is clear in this debate is that there are many interpretations of what this external actor, “the labor market”, actually requires. The interpretation is determined by implicit values, and since neither labor market nor globalization are a unified actor, there is no such thing as a neutral understanding of what the labor market requires. The same thing holds true when it comes to the best way to design policy to promote economic growth and prosperity.

The economic problem framing tends to influence the policy debate in a way that diminishes political agency. Policy design becomes a question of management and adaptation to external forces, and the political maneuverability is thereby limited.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article on the Swedish educational reform of 1991 revises the previous understanding of the new upper secondary school as foremost an equality reform and problematizes the image of Swedish educational policy as intimately connected to

equality.

The practice and outcomes of the Swedish system have been questioned before but this analysis contributes to problematize the foundation of the Swedish educational image. The new comprehensive upper secondary school was foremost based on an economic problem framing. The findings are also important in the light of evaluation studies, which have mainly focused on effects of the reform from an equality perspective.

Furthermore is the economization of education present in the reform proposal worrisome per se. An economic understanding of education has far-reaching implications for the future role of education in society. The trend Nussbaum exposes in today's educational systems did not appear from nowhere. This trend of actual changes in the educational system, to meet demands of business and labor market at the expense of subjects and abilities that favor democratic thinking, is the result of a new way of understanding education and the role of education in society from an economic perspective of mere profit generating. A discursive change in the way education is talked about and understood makes actual changes possible in the design of education. Further research is needed to explore how these changes relate to changes in the design of the educational system.

Moreover, I suggest that a particularly problematic implication of an economic framing of education is that it tends to diminish the political dimension of education in the policy debate. When education becomes a tool or an instrument that can be judged on the basis of how well it accomplishes economic growth and competitiveness, the political discussion of how to design educational policy becomes a matter of how to best achieve these measurable ends. Implicit conflicts of values in these discussions are thereby downplayed, and value conflicts with regard to power relations in society are

not acknowledged. In the policy debate, such a tendency can be noted; implicit values at conflict in the debate are concealed by a discussion of what the labor market requires. Closely related to the understanding of education as a tool to achieve economic growth is a causal story in which international trends and changes in the labor market and business are seen as the driving forces of change in the educational system. These forces are described as inevitable, and politicians seem to have no choice but to adjust education accordingly. This causal story is very much shared by a majority of the political parties from both coalitions. However, even if this fundamental understanding is shared, there are different interpretations among the political parties of what the labor market actually requires. In other words, the value conflict is not eliminated, but the discussion is limited to being a discussion of how to interpret what the labor market requires, instead of an explicit discussion of the values that education is supposed to promote and foster. Political agency and maneuverability is thereby threatened.

The tendency to downplay value conflicts is also evident in the reform proposal. There are immanent conflicts between an economic understanding of education and a social equality understanding, which need to be acknowledged and thoroughly discussed. What is troubling about the government's way of handling the conflict is not that one cannot have conflicting aims within a policy proposal. On the contrary, Swedish educational policy has been characterized by the ever-present dilemma of handling both a social and an economic dimension. The problem is the lack of a discussion and preferably a plan of how to address and handle potential conflicts, for example, with regard to what knowledge should be promoted: applicable skills or social abilities.

I argue that it is of great importance that potentially conflicting understandings of education and knowledge are discussed explicitly both in the policy debate and in

policy proposals. This is a prerequisite for citizens to evaluate policy solutions and their implications on proper grounds.

## References

### *Parliamentary sources*

Governmental inquiry, SOU 1981:96

Governmental inquiry, SOU 1986:2

Government's bill 1987/88:102 (Prop.)

Government's bill 1988/89:4 (Prop.)

Government's bill 1989/90:41 (Prop.)

Government's bill 1990/91:18 (Prop.)

Government's bill 1990/91:85 (Prop.)

Protocol of the debate in parliament 1990/91:126 (RP)

Member's bill 1990/91:Ub126 of the Conservative Party (Motion)

Member's bill 1990/91:Ub127 of the Liberal Party (Motion)

Member's bill 1990/91:Ub132 of the Green Party (Motion)

Member's bill 1990/91:Ub149 of the Left Party (Motion)

Committee report from the Committee on Education 1990/91:UbU16

(Utbildningsutskottets betänkande)

### *Literature*

Bacchi, C. L. (1999) *Women, Policy and Politics. The Construction of Policy Problems*, London: SAGE.

Bacchi, C. L. (2009) *Analysing Policy. What's the Problem (represented to be)?*, Frenschs Forest: Pearson.

Bergström, G. (1993) *Jämlikhet och kunskap. Debatter och reformstrategier i socialdemokratisk skolpolitik 1975-1990*, Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion Graduale.

Carlbaum, S. (2012) *Blir du anställningsbar lille/a vän? Diskursiva konstruktioner av framtida medborgare i gymnasiereformerna 1971-2011*, Umeå: Umeå universitet.

Collini, S. (2009) Impact on Humanities: Researchers Must Take a Stand Now or Be Judged and Rewarded as Salesman. *The Times Literary Supplement*.

- Englund, T. (1999) Den svenska skolan och demokratin. IN Amnå, E. (eds.) *SOU 1999:93 Det unga folkstyret Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym VI*.
- Hall, C. (2009) Working paper IFAU 2009:9 Does making upper secondary school more comprehensive affect dropout rates, educational attainment and earnings? Uppsala.
- Haug, P. (1999) Formulation and realization of social justice: the compulsory school for all in Sweden and Norway. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 14, 231-239.
- Hinnfors, J. (2009) "le consentement à l'économie de marché, une constante social-démocrate en Suède et au Royaume-Uni" engelsk version: "Market-Friendly Social Democracy". *Critique Internationale*, 43, 17-35.
- Larsson, H. A. (2011) *Mot bättre vetande. En svensk skolhistoria*, Stockholm: SNS förlag.
- Lindberg, V. (2003) Swedish Vocational Education and Research in an International Context. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Lindensjö, B. & Lundgren, U. P. (2010 (2000)) *Utbildningsreformer och politisk styrning*, Stockholm: Stockholms universitetsförlag.
- Lund, S. (2008) Choice paths in the Swedish upper secondary education- a critical discourse analysis of recent reforms. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 23, 633-648.
- Lundahl, L., Erixon Arreman, I., Lundström, U. & Rönnberg, L. (2010) Setting Things Right? Swedish Upper Secondary School Reform in a 40-Year Perspective. *European Journal of Education*, 45.
- Mehta, J. (2011) The Varied Roles of Ideas in Politics. From "Whether" to "How". IN Béland, D. & Cox, R. H. (eds.) *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997) *Cultivating Humanity: a Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010) *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Persson, M. & Oscarsson, H. (2009) Did the Egalitarian Reforms of the Swedish Educational System Equalise Levels of Democratic Citizenship? *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 33, 135-163.
- Richardson, G. (2004) *Svensk Utbildningshistoria. Skola och samhälle förr och nu*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Rocheftort, D. A. & Cobb, R. W. (1994) *The Politics of Problem Definition: Shaping the Policy Agenda*, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
- Rothstein, B. (1996) *The Social Democratic State: the Swedish Model and the Bureaucratic Problem of Social Reform*, Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Scheurich, J. J. (1994) Policy archaeology: A new policy studies methodology. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 9, 297-316.
- Schön, D. A. & Rein, M. (1994) *Frame Reflection. Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*, New York: Basic Books.
- Stone, D. A. (1989) Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas. *Political Science Quarterly*, 104, 281-300.
- Unemar Öst, I. (2010) *Kampen om den högre utbildningens syften och mål. En studie av svensk utbildningspolitik*, Örebro: Örebro Universitet.
- Webb, T. P. (2013) Policy problematizations. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.

- Vedung, E. (2009) *Utvärdering i politik och förvaltning*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Winter, C. (2012) School curriculum, globalisation and the construction of policy problems and solutions. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 27, 295-314.