

Good Intentions and Altruistic Objectives. Observing ‘Edu-preneurs’ at a School Fair.

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Background

As an answer to a discourse on a Swedish school in crisis a large edu-political apparatus has been implemented. Arguments on e.g. decreasing results, segregation, and equal opportunities has reinforced a number of actors to enter the educational field – actors here called “edu-preneurs” (Rönnerberg, 2017). The actors offer a multitude of products and services and essential parts of everyday schooling thus become outsourced on external actors using education as an arena to reach the core of the society – the children. This process, nurtured by political reforms such as the possibility to profit on public funds (Jobér, submitted) has “re-calibrated” the Swedish school – from a government-dominated and unified educational system to an unruly free market (Ball, 2009; Hamilton, 2011).

This market and its edu-preneurs will be investigated in the project ‘Education Inc.’, funded by the Swedish Research Council (Ideland, Axelsson, Jobér & Serder, 2016). The project aims to study how private actors and logics change the conditions for what counts as good education. Three forms of commodification of education, outlined by Molnar (2006), will be studied: (1) actors selling to schools; (2) actors selling in schools; and (3) actors buying for schools. In order to create a baseline for the Education Inc. project this paper describes one of the first sub studies. This sub study aims to scrutinise foremost actors *selling to school* when presenting themselves and engage with the school community at a school fair.

Research Questions

The overarching aims of the Education Inc. project is to study under what conditions, in what forms and with which consequences ‘edu-preneurial’ actors engage in Swedish schools. This particular sub study focus on *with what objectives do edu-preneurial companies, NGOs and their employees engage in Swedish school.*

Objectives

The aim of this sub study is to conceptualise and analyse processes on how good intentions and altruistic objectives are used as arguments to justify actors’ place in education. An earlier pre-study (Jobér, submitted) showed that tutoring companies, actors in the educational market, used arguments regarding children with special needs to justify their presence and actions. This pre-study raised a number of questions: Will the companies, whatever good intentions, overlook profit? Are arguments regarding children with special needs used as a lever for businesses to survive and profit rather than to help? Similar has been showed elsewhere (Dovemark & Erixon Arreman, 2017), therefore we claim there is a risk that actors in the educational market will not consider all children as profitable enough. There is therefore a need to scrutinize if money spent (through public funds) will increase profits and exclusion rather than to support inclusion, and in addition, if students with low exchange value fit into a neoliberal market.

Theoretical framework

We argue that processes in Sweden, which is a traditionally strong and well-trusted welfare state, have become entangled with neoliberal rationalities (see e.g. Dahlstedt, 2009) and that ways of imagine and practice schooling today are shaped by neoliberal logics (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The neoliberal state has opened up for a commodification of education (Steiner-Khamsi, 2016) and educational reforms become a way to make up a specific kind of subjectivity (Ong, 2007). The marketization of education is thus not only about earning money, but also about making up meanings and practices of schooling and a certain kind of ideal citizen (Olmedo, Bailey & Ball 2013). This is what Ong (2007) conceptualizes as a neoliberalism which concerns how possible and desirable subjectivities are produced. The questions are what kind of objectives the actors put forward and how this correspond with what kind of desirable subjects that are produced in this neoliberal logic.

Method

The sub study presented here will take a closer look at the actors selling to school when they attend a large school fair, SETT, which will take place in Sweden in April. In a pre-study to the larger 'Education Inc.' project this kind of educational 'trade fairs' has been identified as one of the spaces where policy becomes translated and turned into business ideas (Ideland et al, 2006). Observations will take place at this fair by four researchers. The observations will be written down using an observation scheme. The observations will also include photographs of the showcases and the messages that can be found there. In addition the research team will gather advertisement such as flyers and follow ongoing twitter flows. These data will be reflected on within the research group and finally analysed employing an analytical framework developed from the work by Callon (1986, used by, e.g., Hamilton 2011). The aim with this analysis is to more carefully explore how a problem is articulated through the actors and their relationships i.e. the problematisation moment in Callons work (1986). Callon proposes that translation of actions and actors analytically can be studied as four different moments: Problematization, Interessement, Enrolment, and Mobilization. It is the first step, the problematization moment and how a problem is articulated through the actors and their relationship that is in focus here. The problematization is the moment when actors (such as those the selling to schools at the school fair) or clusters of actors articulate a problem. It often involves a focus on a particular goal or a problem to be solved where the actors locate themselves as gatekeepers and problem solvers. Within the problematisation moment, the analysis can show what problems actors enhance (for example, in schools or in society), how do they want to solve these problems, and the argument that makes them indispensable to the problem and action. With this framework we can thus scrutinise with what kind of intentions and objectives these actors engage in Swedish school.

Expected Outcomes

The hypothesis is that the observations conducted at this school fair and its following analyses will give insights in with what objectives and intention edu-preneurial companies, NGOs and their employees engage in Swedish school. Building on a pre-study (Jobér, submitted) and earlier research (e.g. Dovemark & Erixon Arreman) the hypothesis is also that the actors will bring forward a number of altruistic arguments. These might regard supporting the society to decrease widening socioeconomic gaps, including children with

special needs, opening possibilities to equal opportunities for all, and reaching out to students living in rural areas of Sweden. However, as shown in above earlier studies, these are complicated arguments, given for example that a number of initiatives in the educational market, such as private tutoring, is not used at all by those with low incomes (Björkman, 2014, 21 November). There are reasons to believe that the expected outcomes from this pre-study not only will show what kind of altruistic objectives the actors use to justify their presence but also bring forward initial data that in forthcoming studies can be used to identify if the actors in educational market desire profits rather than inclusion and equal opportunities for all.

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