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## Visions and Resistance

### The Establishment of a New School in a Marketized Educational Landscape

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## **Visions and Resistance. The Establishment of a New School in a Marketized Educational Landscape.**

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During the last few decades, education globally has been marked by being closely related to the economy. It always was, but today's commodification and marketization reach into any aspect of the educational system (Ball, 2012; Bartlett et al., 2002). Sweden is a specific case at hand, since privatization and competition between schools have taken especially sinister forms, and have far-reaching effects not only on the free school market but also on public education (Lundahl, et al., 2013).

This paper draws on an ongoing study, where we investigate the processes that are set in motion at the establishment of a strongly profiled municipal upper secondary school in a middle range Swedish university town. From the start, the school had a clear vision of being a school for the future. Its entrepreneurial approach and "challenge-driven" pedagogy resonate well with ideas of transnational organizations, such as OECD (21st Century Skills and Competencies, Ananiadou & Claro, 2009) and the EU, whose eight key competences include entrepreneurship competence (Halász & Michael, 2011). When the school was established, the newly recruited staff were lined up for the vision and keen on making it reality. The students arriving – a much more diversified group than expected – it became evident that the utopian vision had cracks. A group of students refused to take part in the challenge-driven education and collaboration with peers and over subject borders. The staff had to re-evaluate their pedagogical plans.

In this light we pose the following questions:

- 1) How can the profile of the school and the imagined students be understood in relation to the marketized educational landscape in the municipality?
- 2) How is the vision of the school played out between different actors and in the school activities, and how are discrepancies and dissent processed?

As a central part of this study, using 1) discourse analysis and 2) ethnographic methods, we follow and try to understand the clash between the pedagogical vision, teachers and students, as well as the formation of the school and its emerging school culture. So far, this is a case of power relations and unintended consequences, where it obviously has been much more complicated to implement the vision, than the policy makers initially thought. There are numerous studies on marketization of education in Sweden. Previous research has shown how competing schools at the upper secondary school market influence both what happens on the market and in the school (Holm & Lundahl, 2018), and how schools' marketing material is targeted at a specific kind of student (Dovemark, 2017; Dovemark & Holm, 2017; Malmström, 2019). Our research design admits studying the synergetic contribution of all these aspects.

Barbara Adam's (1998, 2010) conceptualization of time is generative for grasping the relation between the present and the future in the process of turning the vision into practice. Adam highlights a multidirectional temporal perspective where the past, present and future are not chronologically ordered but interrelated and sometimes messed up and interrelated. Tools from sociology of expectation contributes to analyzing the expectations of different actors (Borup et al 2006).

These perspectives are combined with a focus on social interaction. To analyze how discrepancies and dissent are processed we deploy social interactionist theory (Goffman 1959, Scheff, 1994, Hochschild 2012, Blennow 2019).

### **Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used**

For the first part of the project – the growth of the vision of the school, and its relation to the community and society at large – different kinds of documents, such as protocols from the City Council, local documents, information booklets, media texts, and marketing material will be studied. Using critical discourse analytical methods (Fairclough, 1992), the texts are related to local and global contexts. This way, we can study the rhetoric before, and in the midst of the founding of the school as well as the continuing rhetoric about the activities. Using CDA, the texts and activities of the school need to be related to national and global trends in education. In the case of Sweden, marketization is important to consider, since reforms in the nineties have made privatization, commodification and competition commonplace. Not only have these processes an effect on “free schools”, but also on the public schools that have to adapt to the system.

In the second part of the project, social interactions are analysed, focussing on power and resistance, conflicts and conflict management, the school as a physical meeting-place, emotions and emotional labour. For this part, ethnography is used. Much time is spent in the environment during approximately two years, in order to get as wide a perspective as possible, collaborate with the staff, and get behind the scenes. We conduct observations of both planned and formal activities, such as instruction and meetings, and we “shadow” whole work/school days focusing on informal processes and unforeseen events (Czarniawska, 2007). Observations and shadowing are alternated with semi-structured interviews, to better understand the participants’ interactions, feelings and thoughts, as well as widening and controlling the interpretations of the observations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

### **Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings**

We expect that the outcomes of the study will show the processes set in motion when a strong municipal vision does not turn out as expected. The study may contribute to an understanding of how school competition and marketization have a bearing on the inner workings of a school and its place in the community. The study is currently underway and some preliminary findings are discernible:

Goals at the supranational level are influencing the local construction of the vision of a newly established school. The local vision for the school rhymes well with ideas of transnational organizations such as the OECD, and the EU.

Temporal aspects are important in the school practitioners’ managing of hinderances in turning the vision into practice. They describe two parallel schools: 1) A present school where they need to deal with resistance from the students as well as a student body in need of much more pedagogical support than they expected, and 2) a future school, which is the school they ‘are supposed to be’ related to the municipality’s vision. Some teachers report that they do not have time or energy to create the future school because they have to deal with the present. The headmaster reports that political decisions and budget issues sometimes close the future. The school’s vision seems to be “closed” – the teachers do not negotiate it or discuss its meaning. The vision does not alter over the first three years regardless of the resistance of the students.

Part of the experienced problems at the school seem to be due to the municipality’s planning of the school as if the future is open. The involved actors, on the contrary, encounter a contextualized future where the student body and the position in the educational landscape in the city predetermine the future.

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