Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Discourses of education and constitutions of class: public discourses on education in Swedish PBS television

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Drawing on post-structural perspectives and analysis of television programs on education, the article investigates the public educational discourse in Sweden. It shows how a dominant neoliberal educational discourse is articulated together with a discourse of equal education, where the two discourses influence and subvert each other so that neither becomes totally hegemonic. Taking as its point of departure the neoliberal emphasis on the individual, especially as it relates to school choice and to the significance of class for educational success, the analysis focuses on the constitution of classed positions. The study reveals constitutions of class in which race, place, gender, economy and agency are intertwined, such that the schools and the students are attributed both different statuses and different subject positions in terms of future economic trajectories. The conclusions drawn are that, in the public conversation about the organization and goal of compulsory education, it is important to be aware of the discursive and political contexts in which the discussions take place. It is also important to realize that class matters in the educational assemblage in the form of economic subjectivities constituted in a web of intersecting notions about differing preconditions and outcomes of education.

Keywords: education in the media; educational discourses; education and class

Introduction

The Swedish welfare society has been renowned as an example of social engineering designed to create an equal society (see e.g., Ball & Larsson, 1989). This is also the case within public education. From the 1940s onward, public education has been seen as a means to compensate for differing class-based prerequisites (Lundahl, 2002). This is the reason why Sweden has had a nine-year comprehensive primary school since the 1960s. However, since the beginning of the 1990s, the school system has experienced major changes. The former catchphrase 'equal education for everyone' has been replaced by 'free choice', and the notion that difference and competition between schools and between students − will generate better educational results (Lundahl, 2002). This shift in focus and aim can be seen as a result of the hegemony of a neoliberal educational discourse (see e.g., Bunar, 2009), with a shift from education as a common good to education as a private good (Englund, 1996, 2005). The question asked here concerns how this is articulated in a public discourse, and how it affects constitutions of class as categories and subject positions. How is the hegemony of the neoliberal educational discourse articulated? What happens to representations of inequalities in education when the dominant discourse abandons the focus on equal education for everyone in favor of meeting the needs and

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wishes of individuals? What happens to representations of classed positions when education policies change from focusing on advancing the common good to focusing on creating a competitive market?

The significance of class in education

The notion that class plays a significant role in education is by no means a new insight. A wealth of studies point to schools and education as classed contexts in which socio-economic background is of considerable importance for how individuals succeed within the educational system (see e.g., Caldas, Bernier, & Marceau, 2009; Carey, 2008; Croll, 2008; Willis, 1977). This research indicates that schools, rather than neutralizing social differences, serve as tools for dividing and sorting subjects. In discussing and researching class, I partly align with the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu, which employs a multi-dimensional concept of class in which phenomena, institutions, social groups and individuals are attributed different statuses based on recognition of different forms of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Olssen, 2004). Although I employ a similar perspective, I am critical of how, on the one hand, Bourdieu's theory tends to result in stable conceptions of class (see cf. Ambjörnsson, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) and, on the other hand, runs the risk of obfuscating the economic consequences − for collectives and individuals − of attributions of class.

I therefore propose a conception of class that allows us to question and criticize how classed positions are interpellated and made meaningful (Butler, 1992; Youdell, 2011). My perspective is similar to that of Gillborn (2010). In a study of representations of the white working class in Britain, Gillborn treats 'working class' as a 'shifting signifier', a concept akin to the discourse theory concept of 'floating signifier' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Class is hereby understood as an open concept rather than as a defined category. The difference between my perspective and that of Gillborn is that I do not presume the existence of a 'working class' that can be represented in different or shifting ways. The point of departure for the present study is instead that definitions of class, and the significance of being positioned as belonging to a specific class, are part of a construction of class contingent on the context in which class is constituted and made meaningful. Class is thus not seen as an essential trait of individuals or as definite social categories defined by their position, role and function within the economy. Class is instead regarded as possible subject positions embedded in different discourses and discursive fields. This does not mean that economy is insignificant. Different positions entail orientations, or flight lines, which construct expectations as to what the individual or the group can or ought to be able to do (Ahmed, 2006). The consequences of how individuals and groups become classed are serious, as the discourses in which they become embedded circumscribe roles, possibilities and limitations within the economy. In this way, class delineates what it is possible to think and do within the boundaries of an assigned economic subject position. Furthermore, class is a relational category. Constitutions of class not only establish social distinctions, but they also hierarchize them (Fiske, 1996, p. 65). In order to explore how class is constituted in public educational discourses, I have asked questions such as: What signifies practices, places, categories, groups and individuals that are positioned as 'problems'? What are the characteristics of 'success' and 'failure'?

Consequences of the neoliberal educational discourse in Swedish education

There is a large body of research showing that neoliberal ideology and discourses have permeated educational policies, reforms and practices in most parts of the world (see, e.g., Ball, Goodson, & Maguire, 2007; Bunar, 2009; Buras & Apple, 2005; Forsey, 2009; Giroux, 2003; Hartley, 2008; Harvey, 2005; Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004). This is also the case in Sweden. Three reforms in 1991–1992 have been major measures in this direction. The first reform decentralized responsibility for the schools from the state to the municipalities (Proposition 1990/91:18). This was followed by the reforms allowing free school choice and independent schools (Proposition 1991/92:95), including the decision on school vouchers, stipulating that 85% of the average cost to the municipality for each student should follow the students to their school of choice. This created a quasi-market in which schools have to compete for resources in the form of students and the ensuing vouchers (Lundahl, 2002).

In discussing education and class, Ball (2006, pp. 34–35) has pointed to how the notion of school choices as choices made by rational and informed subjects simultaneously totalizes and individualizes the parents and the students. Regardless of educational background, income and social position, all parents are presumed to have the same prerequisites to make the best educational choices for their children. In this way, the neoliberal educational discourse tends to obfuscate and disregard the significance of both social categories and different social and material possibilities and prerequisites. Differences between schools and differences in how individual students perform on comparative tests are represented as the outcome of poor practices or bad choices, not as the consequences of differing contexts and preconditions.

This neglect of differing prerequisites has increased social differentiation and segregation. A research review of the consequences of the recent Swedish educational reforms asserts that school results have declined and that the social background and social context of the individual student have become more significant than they previously were (Skolverket, 2009). Although debated, this critique has not influenced the reforms of the government or how public education is addressed in the media. The neoliberal educational discourses continue to be used, and thereby affirmed, as a foundation for public debates about the state of the Swedish schools.

Constructions of hegemony – a post-structural perspective

Although I, like many others (e.g., Benveniste, Carnoy, & Rothstein, 2003; Plank & Sykes, 2003), am critical of the neoliberal education reforms, I do not agree with the slightly conspiratorial explanation of the neoliberal hegemony offered by Hursh and Henderson (2011). In line with post-Marxist (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005) and post-humanist (Barad, 2007; Sellers & Gough, 2010) theories, I propose a more complex understanding of how hegemonies are constructed and maintained. In line with these theories, hegemonies are regarded as relational and open. They are never fixed but constantly simultaneously stabilized and subverted. Even if public articulations of problems, remedies, results, aims and reforms with, for and in compulsory education partake in the formation of a hegemonic discourse in education, public discourses of education are not solely reproducing dominant norms and ideologies. Each articulation of topics concerning education is made within a specific context, as a response to previous articulations and together with other discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Fiske, 1996). The

different combination of discourses and their intertextuality, that is, where one discourse alludes to or repeats articulations of previous discourses (Fairclough, 1995; Matheson, 2005), shifts, subverts and changes the possible meanings and effects of the educational discourse. Using the terminology of post-humanist methodology, an educational 'assemblage' is constituted by articulations concerning education 'plugging into' other discourses and materialities (cf. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012), forming relations of norms, notions, practices and materialities that together constitute the phenomenon of public education (Barad, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). One aim of this article is therefore to explore the effects the educational assemblage has in relation to class.

Media discourses on education

The data on which the present study is based consist of television programs. By addressing a broad public and using both images and speech, television has a pivotal position in the public conversation concerning shared values and the common good. This makes television a fruitful arena for studies of taken-for-granted and contested values and norms, available subject positions, and the means by which possibilities and limitations for agency and power are constituted in the public. The study differs in this respect from most studies of hegemonic discourses on education, which employ policy documents, bills and legislation as data. Education has become a prevalent topic in the media, especially in connection with elections or press conferences that present new policy measures (Franklin, 2004; Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004; MacMillan, 2002).

   The body of studies on education in the media is, however, conspicuously small. Most of the studies in the field consider press media (see e.g., Franklin, 2004; MacMillan, 2002; Thomas, 2003; Wiklund, 2006), although there are few studies that also include broadcasted media (Warmington & Murphy, 2004), or that look at 'popular media' in press, broadcast, literature and movies (Meskill, 2007; Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Most of the studies on education and media claim that the media influence education policies. There is, however, a slight disagreement in the direction of influence. Franklin (2004) and Gewirtz et al. (2004) claim that politics influence the media in order to set the agenda and gather support for changes in education policies, whereas Thomas (2003), for example, takes the opposite position, claiming that media representation of education influences politics. The common denominator for these opposing positions is the pivotal position of the media in the creation of hegemony. I agree that media do have a role in constituting public notions on education; however, I am less certain about the causes and effects of media representations. Media discourses, as part of the educational assemblage delineated above, do not solely reflect and reproduce dominant norms. Articulations in different media are always contextual and responsive, in the sense that they point to previous articulations, discussions and initiatives at the same time as they instigate future responses (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Fiske, 1996). Because of the conversational character of media discourses, it is not possible to determine clear-cut intentions behind most media initiatives. In drawing on and responding to previous initiatives, at the same time as topics and assertions are constituted in new contexts together with other aims and discourses, subjects and intentions become diffused.

   Furthermore, differing from the aforementioned studies, the present article is based on data from a continuous and regular Public Broadcast Service (PBS) television program on education. The study can hereby be seen as a study of a continuous public conversation

about education in which the political aims and interests are less clear-cut, or are made deliberately more salient, than in most previous media studies of education.

Method

The study looks at how issues connected to education are represented in television programs, not at the issues as such. The main questions pertain to how different norms and discourses are assembled and articulated so as to represent specific issues in specific ways. The analysis is methodologically inspired by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Matheson, 2005) in the sense that it is focused on how images, sound and talk articulate and thereby construct issues, actors and social categories in terms of hierarchies and power, and in relation to each other. Another source of inspiration is post-humanist theory, which prompts the analysis to focus on how discourses work rather than on intentions from specific actors or what the discourses mean (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). The interest is in detailing intersecting representations of domination and subordination, and in how categorizations of different subject positions intersect, and to what effect (cf. Gillborn, 2010). The results of the analysis are not considered as 'the truth' about the neoliberal educational discourse and class in Sweden, or in the data investigated. Other readings are possible. The fact that others may perceive these programs differently does not, however, preclude the existence of the discursive constitutions that I point to, though different views may perhaps partly question their significance.

The data are 26 episodes from 2008–2010 of the Swedish PBS television program *Skolfront*, which presents itself as a show that carries out investigative reporting and airs exciting debates about 'the largest workplace in Sweden, the schools' (Utbildningsradion, 2011a). *Skolfront* is produced by 'Utbildnings radion' (UR) [Eng. Radio for Education], which is a subdivision of the national PBS company. The mission of UR is to strengthen citizen participation by providing popular education. It produces educational programs for both schools and the general public. *Skolfront* is aired in prime time at 8 pm, with several reruns, and is also accessible on the web. It has approximately 12 episodes every year. In UR's annual report for 2010, *Skolfront* is presented as a success in terms of viewership; some episodes had 700,000 viewers, figures that come close to some of the most popular sporting events or entertainment programs (Utbildningsradion, 2011b). This makes *Skolfront* a significant arena for the public conversation and debate about education. The most common format for the program is to address two topics in each episode. These are elaborated and illustrated by reports, each one followed by a debate or discussion.

Results

The analysis shows that the neoliberal educational discourse and the discourse of equal education are intertwined rather than constituted as oppositions in the programs, and that this evokes shifts and subversions of both these discourses. It furthermore suggests that the focus on individual choice, which is a signifier of neoliberalism, opens the door to a constitution of class where race, place, gender, socioeconomic position and agency work together with concepts such as school performance, achievement, rowdy students and truancy.

Two contesting educational discourses

The way in which the neoliberal education discourse is articulated in the framing (Entman, 1993) of public discourses about education can be illustrated by the topics chosen for four political debates in *Skolfront* prior to the 2010 election. These were: lack of discipline in the Swedish schools (11 April 2010), the free school choice (15 April 2010), grades and assessments (22 April 2010) and why Swedish students are falling behind in the rankings in international league tables (2 May 2010). All of these topics originate from the neoliberal educational discourse (Ball, 2006; Buras & Apple, 2005). The hegemony is ambiguous, however, because the topics are constituted together with and in opposition to the discourse about a comprehensive school and equal education.

How to make sense of social mobility and education?

The opposition between the two discourses is a connecting thought throughout the *Skolfront* programs. One program employs a research review on the consequences of the reforms of the 1990s as its point of departure to discuss the gradual dismantling of the comprehensive school (22 March 2009). In another program, the host refers to ranking figures from international league tables asking 'Why do Swedish students do worse?' (6 October 2009). One of the discussants in the studio argues that low results and increased segregation are consequences of the neoliberal school reforms, claiming that these reforms have made the social background of the student more important than it used to be. The right-wing discussant states that free choice is always a good thing and declares that 'we should not go back to the old comprehensive school where a clever student could get stuck in a bad school' (6 October 2009). The debaters can be seen as articulating two different conceptions of equal education. The social democrat bases his arguments on the notion that the schools should be a means to decrease social and economic differences in society at large. The right-wing politician focuses on the right for everyone to transgress social boundaries through individual choice. Her conception of equal education was the topic of a report in a program the following season (4 March 2010). This report follows two teenagers − a girl and a boy − from a suburb of Stockholm with low average salaries and a high percentage of immigrants. In contrast to most of their peers, we are told by the voice-over, these students have made use of the free school choice and are attending a private independent school in the center of the city, where the majority of students define themselves as 'Swedish' and come from middle- or high-income families. The report shows how the two students on their daily commute pass by their local school. The contrast between the two schools is enhanced by images of an inner city school with newly furnished rooms in an office building, and images of a rundown gray concrete school building in the suburb. The principal of the latter says that loss of high-achieving and motivated students is having negative effects on the students who remain. This is affirmed by former classmates who state that they miss the students who left, because they encouraged others to study. The report turns to a researcher who claims that multicultural schools do not lose students because of bad results or poor pedagogy, but because of how society values and assesses the students in these schools. This is affirmed by the boy in the report, who states that a major reason for changing schools was that there were so many immigrants in his former school that his mother was worried he would not learn 'proper Swedish'. The researcher recognizes that free choice has facilitated 'individual integration' for those who have the cultural resources to choose

a school other than the local one, but that it has also increased segregation between schools on a structural level. The report does not only reveal the opposition between neoliberal educational discourses and discourses about equal education. It also elucidates how social mobility for some entails getting stuck in subordinated social and economic positions for others. From the perspective of the neoliberal educational discourse, this is not a problem, because every student has the option to leave for another school. From the perspective of equal education, it is problematic because it stabilizes and increases social and economic inequalities. At the same time as some individuals can use free school choice to transgress classed positions, the same classed positions are enforced both in the sense that they serve as a foundation for the choices (both what to leave behind and what to choose instead), and in the sense that the gap between different classed positions is increased.

Winners, losers and class

The increased social differentiation between schools subverts the former ideal of a comprehensive school. This is an obvious challenge to the notion of equal education for everyone. The frequent reports in *Skolfront* about students whose prospects are limited rather than enhanced by the neoliberal reforms can thus be understood as resistance to and arguments against the neoliberal school reforms. This is not equivocal, however, as some reports point to students who are given better prospects to develop, thanks to the recent reforms. One of these reports tells the story of an 11-year-old boy (21 March 2010). At the beginning of the film, we see a white blond boy playing with a dog outside a large house. Later, we see the boy and his mother sitting in a spacious kitchen recounting how he learned to read at the age of three and a half, how he was far ahead of his peers already in kindergarten, and how he lost interest in school because he found the assignments trivial. The mother recounts that the boy eventually was found to have an exceptionally high IQ. The voice-over constitutes the local public school as incapable or unwilling to adapt its practices to accommodate the individual needs of the hyper-intelligent student by recounting that the family eventually 'had enough'. When the boy was to begin fourth grade, they enrolled him in a commercial independent school that could meet his needs. He started in the sixth grade, taking classes in English at the eighth grade level and Spanish at the nineth grade level. The report consequently demonstrates how an exceptionally talented student benefits from a differential school system.

The representation of the 'hyper-intelligent' student is in stark contrast to the representation of a truant student in a report in the same program (21 March 2010). At the center of this report is a teenage girl who is seen blowing out cigarette smoke through her pierced lips. She is walking outside dressed in black tights, a black top with a plunging neckline, a black leather jacket and long henna-dyed hair. This is in line with similar other representations of students who illustrate 'problems', such as in a report about a school that has launched a program directed at getting truants back to school (24 February 2008), and in a program with two reports on rowdy students (15 February 2009). The visual representation of the truant girl can therefore be seen as signaling 'youth in trouble'. The report shifts to a photo of her when she was around 8 years old. This is followed by three more photos that construct her gradual decline. In the second, she has heavy makeup, and in the final photo she is wearing heavy metal apparel including a dog collar with rivets, a net undershirt and a white painted face. Together with her account of drinking, smoking, stealing and cutting school, the images construct the girl as being at risk, or in the

position of 'asocial'. At the end of the report, we are informed that she is now doing fine and has continued to upper secondary school.

Although both the truant girl and the hyper-intelligent boy are constituted as 'deviant' or 'problematic', their juxtaposition reveals the classed aspect of the reports. The problem of the truant girl is what she might be doing when she is not in class, while the problem of the hyper-intelligent boy is that he finds school too easy. In the first case the problem is primarily the truant girl, and in the second case the problem is the inadequate school system. Although both students recount that they have found school boring, they are constituted as different in terms of their resources, status and prospects. There is no mention of the possibility that the girl might cut school because of a high IQ. Instead, she is represented as depressed and at risk of becoming asocial, and thereby constitutes a possible burden on society. In the case of the hyper-intelligent student, the risk is losing a possible asset for society.

Gender, class and place

Even if the neoliberal educational discourse is focused on individuals and rarely points out categories of students, it is a common phenomenon in most countries that boys are increasingly represented as losers in the school system (see, e.g., Hinnerich, Höglin, & Johannesson, 2011; Lam et al., 2012; Lucey & Walkerdine, 1999; Watson, 2011; Younger & Warrington, 2008). This is the topic of three programs (30 March 2008, 22 November 2009, 25 March 2010). In two of these, the problem is elucidated by examples from places that can be seen as obsolete or the homes of losers in modernity (30 March 2008, 22 November 2009). The first report is about boys in a small rural municipality in the north of Sweden. The school is introduced as the school with the largest difference in Sweden between boys' and girls' school performance. Although not explicitly articulated, the report contributes to the construction of problematic and low-performing boys, not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of place (cf. Gulson, 2008; Massey, 2005). The boys are represented as taciturn, and as prioritizing their snow-scooters and other leisure-time activities. This can be seen as typical of how the working class − or under-class − is often characterized as choosing the 'here and now' in favor of actions directed at the future (Ball, 2003; Oria et al., 2007).

The similarity between this construction and the aforementioned portrayal of the truant girl is disinterest both in school work and in investing in one's own future. This is salient in terms of how the voice-over and images work together in the report. When the voice-over speaks about low-achieving boys, the image is of boys in a classroom, dressed in baggy sweatpants, hoodies and big baseball caps, who are playing around and not paying attention to the teacher. In the report, these indifferent boys are contrasted with ambitious and attentive girls. Their teacher states that, in the past, the boys in the area did not need an education because they went directly from school to work in the mines. Now the mines are closed and the attitude is that education is useless because there are no jobs to go to anyway.

This construction of boys in the northern and rural part of Sweden not only reiterates and draws on gender norms, but also on norms about unskilled manual labor in contrast to skilled non-manual work, and the rural in opposition to the urban. In this report, the construction of the initial 'problem', explaining why boys generally show poorer school achievement than girls do, intersects with class and place. This not only shifts the notion of low-performing boys from boys in general to rural working-class boys, but also creates

a classed division between boys and girls, where girls in general are constituted as hierarchically above boys. This hegemonization of boys and girls can be seen in relation to the program on truants, which was focused on a girl, as well as the report on the hyper-intelligent, where the example was a boy. In this report, there is no room for truant girls or ambitious boys. All girls are represented as ambitious and all boys as disinterested. The difference in focus between a less valued 'here and now' and a more valued orientation toward the future is made manifest by talk about the girls, who are expected to move south after graduation. Class-mobility is thus equated with spatial mobility, such that social and geographical spaces intersect.

Race, class and place

In the programs, losers in the educational game are not situated only in rural areas. Other places that are repeatedly constructed as problematic and as inhabited by low-achieving students are the deprived urban neighborhoods with significant numbers of low-paid, unemployed and minority residents. One example is the report referred to above that portrayed two students who had used free school choice to create better conditions for their future (4 March 2010). Another example is a report about a municipality in which students are bussed from a district characterized by a high percentage of inhabitants with a non-Swedish background to a school situated in an area characterized by a homogeneous Swedish population (28 October 2010). The report is based on the presumption that students from the 'Swedish' area achieve better in school than students with 'foreign backgrounds'. The latter are hereby represented as a threat to the status and good assessment of the school. According to the voice-over, the reason for the bussing was that the school in the ethnically diverse area was in need of restoration. Because there were not enough students to fill the places at the ethnically homogeneous school, the authorities found it convenient to send the students with non-Swedish background there. The report constructs an opposition between 'immigrant-dense' and 'affluent', which simultaneously equates immigrants with 'poor' and the affluent with 'Swedish'. The images of the two districts, which are said to be only a six-minute bus ride apart, construct difference in terms of housing, population density, race and economic resources. This is underscored by the description of the districts as 'different worlds'. The district of the students who are bussed is designated as a 'problem area' where 'half of the population has a foreign background'.

The articulation of 'problems' together with 'foreign background' implies causality. The other district is described as affluent and with '… few inhabitants with a foreign background'. Here there is no mention of 'problems'. The two places are depicted as opposites, where economy, race, place and school achievements together construct hierarchically dichotomous categories. A major difference between how the students in the two areas are represented concerns agency. The voice-over describes the students from the affluent area as 'choosing to leave' or 'choosing to remain'. The students from the ethnically diverse area are said to be 'bussed', 'assigned' and 'moved'. The affluent, 'Swedish', and fair-skinned students who live in private homes are thus constructed as agents who make choices, whereas the impoverished, 'immigrant' and dark-skinned students who live in apartment houses are represented as being subjected to measures imposed by authorities. In this way, the report constitutes a hierarchical difference between those in a position to make use of their free choice and those who are not in a position to choose.

Discussion

The present study reveals that although the recent educational reforms in Sweden reiterate a neoliberal educational discourse, this discourse is not as hegemonic as one might expect. Like all hegemonies, the neoliberal educational discourse is constituted by counter-hegemonies, in this case primarily by a discourse on equal education for everyone. In the television programs about education that form the data for the article, these two discourses delineate each other's boundaries, and each new articulation changes the discourse somewhat. It is, for example, the discourse of equal education that enables the repeated critique that neoliberal education reforms have increased the differences between both students and schools.

Furthermore, when this critique is articulated, there are no denials of the legitimacy of the claim that the schools ought to give equal prerequisites for everybody. Instead, the proponents of the neoliberal ideology claim that if students and parents made the right choices and if the schools worked differently, the aim would be fulfilled. In this way, the neoliberal discourse in some instances incorporates, and changes, the notion of equal education.

There is correspondingly no, or very little, critique of using league tables and national tests to assess the quality of a school voiced by those who advocate equal education. Although there are differences concerning the causes of and remedies for schools that are constituted as low performing, there seems to be no disagreement as to how to assess whether or not a student or a school is successful (cf. Benjamin, 2003). Thus, the neoliberal educational discourse comes to harbor and includes the notion of equal education, and the discourse of equal education comes to harbor and includes the notion of learning in terms of measurable 'facts', and the significance of comparing test results from different countries. The significance of equal education is simultaneously articulated and displaced when it is recontextualized within the neoliberal discourse (cf. Englund, 2005). Instead of establishing that the task of the schools is to give all students the prerequisites to accomplish a good education, the meaning shifts to offering all individual students the possibility to choose an education that will create prerequisites for them as individuals to get a good education and achieve social mobility. It is a matter of equal rights, not being offered equal prerequisites.

The study indicates that the entanglement of the two educational discourses contributes to differing understandings of classed positions. The deconstruction of how losers and winners, in terms of schools, categories and individuals, are constituted in the programs disrupts the neoliberal contention of equal possibilities to make informed choices. Not all schools, categories or individuals are constituted as being endowed with equal possibilities to choose. In the data presented here, different conditions for schools, categories and individuals are rarely constituted in terms of upper-, middle- and working-class. By deconstructing how some schools, categories and individuals are represented as winners, losers or problems, the study reveals constructions of class in which race, place, gender and socio-economic conditions are intertwined, such that the schools and the students are − despite the neoliberal emphasis on the individual − attributed not only different status but also different subject positions in terms of future prospects and trajectories (cf. Bunar, 2009). These attributions are based on students' position in relation to 'the Swedish', where and how they live, their gender and their socio-economic situation. Although some individuals are represented as using free school choice to transgress class, this does not subvert social hierarchies because stereotypical notions of class (race, place, gender and

class) serve as a foundation for choices concerning both what to leave behind and what to choose instead.

Representations of schools and students in stereotypical and hierarchical ways can be seen as not only enforcing classed subject positions, but also as potential subversion of the neoliberal emphasis on the individual and the notion of equal opportunities to make informed choices. In addition to race, place, gender and socio-economic position, agency comes forward as a signifier of class. In several programs, schools and individual students who are represented as evidence of the value of neoliberal education reforms are depicted as agents who choose something other than the expected or the mainstream, and these choices are constituted as the basis of their success. Correspondingly, schools and students who are represented as not performing are often constituted as passive, and as subjects of the actions of others rather than as agents. In this way, agency becomes intertwined with race, place, gender and socio-economic positions in a way that reveals that not all students, not even within the neoliberal education discourse, have the same prerequisites to make choices that will ensure them a successful future. This is not, however, unequivocal; their subordinated future prospects are simultaneously constituted as of their own choosing, as a consequence of their individual lack of (or bad) choice.

Although the data for the present study are situated and limited, it is important to point out that descriptions and debates on education are not innocent. Accounts of goals, achievements, problems, crises and necessary measures to improve education interpellate subjects and groups into different positions, or as different economic subjectivities, where they are assigned different roles within the economy (Martinsson, 2006). Although these positions are to some extent open and not totally determined, they nonetheless delimit and point to very different life trajectories for different students, both as individuals and as categories.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the ambiguity and openness of concepts and notions within the public discourse of education. For example, the meaning of the concept of equal education shifts due to its positions within what is here called the educational assemblage. When equal education is plugged into the neoliberal educational discourse, it is constituted as the right of all individuals to make informed educational choices. When equal education is plugged into the discourse of equal education, the emphasis is on the right of all students to receive an education with the same quality and value, regardless of social background or individual school (cf. Englund, 2005). In a public conversation about the organization and goal of compulsory education, it is therefore crucial to be aware of the discursive and political contexts in which these discussions take place. The neoliberal educational discourse shifts the meaning of education, at the same time as it is possible to contest and subvert the hegemony of the neoliberal educational discourse by consciously plugging into other discourses of education.

One significant trait of neoliberal educational ideology is the shift of the responsibility for school results from society to individual students and parents. This shift is based on the presumption that all students have equal prerequisites to succeed in school regardless of class, education of parents, first language, gender and so forth. The argument of this article is not only that social, economic and cultural background matter in schools, but that the educational assemblage makes use of and articulates a web of intersecting notions of class as a precondition to and an outcome of education. These articulations employ

notions of place, economy, race, gender and agency in differing configurations as predictors of likely economic trajectories of individual and categories of students. This means that not only does class matter in the neoliberal educational assemblage, but class is constituted and made to matter as intersections of divergent categorizations and subjectivations.

Acknowledgments

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