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Swedish Education Policy on Active Citizenship: Fulfilment of self

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Abstract

'Active citizenship' is a concept currently used in the supranational educational policy of the European Union. While alluding to a potential to promote democracy and human rights this policy seems to be increasingly influenced by neo liberal tendencies. In this article Swedish education policy is taken as a case in order to highlight how the concept of active citizenship education is handled in this 'local' national policy setting in Europe. It is argued that Swedish education policy on citizenship is marked out by a neo liberal orientation as regards the depiction of citizenship, where the envisioned 'active' citizen can be described as one marked out by a consuming attitude for self-making. To this end, Sweden appears to respond to supranational EU demands quite well as regards its education policy on citizenship. Nevertheless the 'neo' in Swedish education policy on citizenship is unsatisfactory, I argue, as it tends to gloss over important notions of citizenship and citizenship education necessary to consider in our times.

'Active citizenship' – a travelling neo liberal educational policy

Since the 1990s increased attention is paid in the European Union to the role of education in the forming of 'active citizenship' (Birzea, 2005; Johansson, 2007). Not only has the concept come to be stressed in relation to international law, but also to issues of more subjective character like identity creating in social, political, cultural and economical registers (Biesta, 2009). In a EU European perspective this transnational policy can be traced back to the 1980s when nation transcending educational policies circulate in Europe, with varying impact in the nation states. These educational policies were developed in a time of international organisations like OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development), IMF (International Monetary Fund), WTO (World Trade Organisation), the World Bank and the EU, in the aim of remodelling national school system and -cultures from mainly neo liberal, economical, market related needs (Johansson, 2007; Lundahl, 2005). In the light of this historical framing educating for 'active citizenship' stands out as a vital part of a supranational neo liberally tangled knowledge based economy, which today is faced in an accentuated attention to and investment in comparisons of performance and policy learning like QAE (Quality Assurance in Education) and transnational testing scales such as PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS throughout Europe.

The pressing issue for 'local' national education policy makers in Europe thus is to provide for a policy response to these supranational "travelling educational policies" (Alexiadou, 2005 p 5) on active citizenship. According to Zambeta (2005) these responses are important to illuminate. Not only because national education policy arenas are receivers of such travelling polices, but also as they have an impact on them, by the

way in which these policies are embedded and acted upon in national educational contexts, which brings us over to Sweden as an education policy context.

The Swedish education policy context

In Swedish education policy at least two major strands of educational policies can be identified, which are both contrary and intertwined in complex ways. On the one hand, contemporary Swedish education policy and reforms are well in line with international and European trends of decentralisation, deregulation and expansion of choice opportunities (Arnman et al., 2004; Lundahl, 2005). It is maybe the state that has had the most rapid and far-going development of school markets and new public management, after the so-called freedom of choice reforms in the early 1990s Lindblad and Lundahl, 2001; Olson, 2006).

On the other hand the heritage from a traditional Social democratic welfare state is still visible in Sweden and in the Nordic countries. The comprehensive education system has survived by large, and there is little of tracking and division of pupils at lower secondary level (but increasingly so in post 16-education). The variations between schools are relatively small and social segregation is low in an international comparison. From the mid-90s, inclusion has been a central concept in education and welfare policies, reflecting a broader vision and a higher level of ambition than the older integration strategy (Boman, 2002). The double ideological directions in Swedish education, where current market oriented reforms co-exist with the Swedish ideological heritage from the era of Social Democratic welfare state constitutes a specific environment for the ways of handling the concept of active citizenship in current Swedish education policy.

Whereas educational ideas in Swedish education policy have been mapped out in relation to current neo liberal educational trends in various studies (Boman, 2002; Englund and Quennerstedt, 2008; Olson, 2008a, Lundahl, 2005, 2007; Telhaug et al., 2006; Unemar Öst, 2009; Wahlström, 2002), comparatively few of these have enquired Swedish education policy in terms of citizenship (see c.f. Englund, 1985/2005; Niklasson, 2007; Olson, 2008b). To this aim this article seeks to, firstly, highlight the ways in which neo liberally oriented demands on education as regards the fostering of 'active' citizens are embedded in Swedish education policy, and secondly to shed light on what stands out as worrisome in this embeddedness.

Swedish education policy on Active Citizenship – Consumption for Self fulfilment

In the light of previous research (Olson, 2008b)¹ Swedish education policy seems to testify to a neo liberally tangled citizen fostering agenda quite well: it points to the role

¹ This account for Swedish education policy on citizenship is based on my doctoral thesis (Olson, 2008b), which involves a mapping and analysis of objectives and descriptions of children, young and other subjects for education in Swedish education policy for compulsory school in the 1990s. The analytic target of the analysis is to scrutinize different depictions of citizenship in this policy setting, in order to investigate and discuss how Swedish education policy responds to the urging question of how to create an education for a democratic citizenship. The theoretical framework is mainly sociological (Bauman, 1996, 2000, 2007) and the method used is text- and discourse analysis. The material analysed are national policy documents such as national curricula, government commissions, government bills and directives.

of education as to provide children and other subjects for education with a consuming attitude presumed to serve as a means for individual self fulfilment. Even though fostering for 'active citizenship' is not addressed explicitly in this 'local' national policy context, its depiction of citizenship and citizen formation, through education, both mirrors and contributes to supranational, neo liberal demands on education for 'active citizenship'. It does so, I argue, by centring on the individual and her opportunity to 'be some one' through strategic choice making that is entwined with economical and working life oriented demands related to market logics of competition and transactional assessment.

Education as an offer of space for choice

One central point of departure in Swedish education policy on citizenship is taken in the individual. More precisely in the ability to 'cope' with individual development in education:

The educational system can, at best, achieve that each individual is given an opportunity to continuous development of qualifications and of personality adapted to his or hers individual conditions (SOU 1990:14, app 22, p 53, my translation)

This stress on the relationship between education and the individual is far from new in Swedish education policy making. It can be traced back to the aftermath of World War II when this assignment was politically formalised (Boman, 2002; Olson, 2008b; Richardson, 1983). What seems new is the emphasis, scope and course given to it: it is entangled with an increased stress on and confidence in choice. The choice in question not only involves the students' decision making as regards their school progression, course attendance and ways of learning. It is juxtaposed with far more basic issues, like "identity" matters and "life projects":

One can no longer take over a role, a tradition. One must create one self; even one's own identity must be produced and created/.../Life projects can be chosen; they must not be inherited (SOU 1997:121, p 37, my translation)

Identity and way of life are portrayed as issues open for free choice, i.e. as matters that can be chosen, created and held in accordance with one's own will and wishes. The individual hence tends to be inscribed both as a creator and target in her own 'actively choosing' life.

Choice as Working life choice

Hence, the stress of choice is related to the question of 'being some one', through education. Furthermore, it appears to be intimately entwined with rationales of working life:

The main goal of education is to make possible for the student to successively find her own comparative advantages and to find her real direction of interest and to offer her or him the chance to develop her or his individual creative potential as much as possible. The target for public education should be to contribute to the individual's personal

development. This is being done through individual building-up of competence/.../It also takes place by offering incitement and found a self-trust for acting autonomously and for further development as a worker, as a member of a social and political network and as a private person (SOU 1990:14, app 22, p 53, my translation)

The role of education, it seems, is not only limited to offering space for individual development through choice of life project and identity. In addition, educating for individual development also entails the “mak[ing] possible” for children and other subjects for education to “find [their] own comparative advantages”. Together with the use of concepts like “competence” and “incitement”, and with the underlining of the role of education for the individual's making of “well grounded choices concerning education and work” (SOU 1992:94, p 109, my translation), this language use points at working life as a central hub as regards the life choices necessary to make, through education, according to Swedish education policy. Moreover, these strategic (working) life choices tend to indicate certain logics, market logics.

The 'Neo' in Swedish education policy on 'active' citizenship

What stands out as central in Swedish education policy is that the presumably 'active' choice making for identity and course of (working) life centres on values like competition, efficiency and transactional assessment. This centredness does not only seem to involve a general stress on the educational task to provide for individuals' opportunities to choose “life projects”: is also lends itself to the educational assignment to foster 'active' citizens:

An increased and constantly changeable supply of goods, services, study combinations and possible professions, raises increased demands on the citizens as consumers. The rapid pace of change as well as the preferences of young people also stress the notion that many will not choose one course of life, but will change profession, professional knowledge and competence one or several times during their active time (Prop 1992/93: 220, p 7, my translation and italics)

In terms of 'today's situation' the educational formation of active citizenship is depicted as a matter of formation for 'active' step taking within the discourse of consumption.

Taken together, Swedish education policy on citizenship testify, I argue, to a neo liberally tangled depiction of what is means to be an active citizen, as it nurtures the promise to ‘become some one’ by attaining a consumer’s attitude, through education. More precisely, the educational assignment can be depicted as to provide young and other subjects for education with opportunities to learn how to be active as concerns their choice making in relation to private, working life oriented objectives. The market orientedness hence, tends to be embraced as a vital hub for self-making: it is stressed as an activity with potential to offer individual self-fulfilment. Seemingly, this self-fulfilment involves a 'proper' self-navigating among various offers of identities, attitudes, “life projects” and competences in, mainly, economic and working life-oriented registers, marked out by competition and transactional assessment. To this end educating for active citizenship stands out as a matter of cultivating children and other subjects for education for a specific ‘knowability’ of themselves in order to meet with these market

oriented demands, which, I argue, point at a neo liberal orientation in current Swedish education policy on citizenship.

‘Unsatisfactories’ in Consuming for Self-making as a target in Active Citizenship Education

I will here touch upon what can be seen as worrisome as regards the neo liberally oriented education policy on active citizenship in Sweden. The first unsatisfactory can be described in terms of a ‘worrying cavity’ between the student's opportunity and her responsibility to undertake individual development and choice making. The second unsatisfactory has to do with the capability of education to face plurality and to change. Together these worrying features point at a problem in the Swedish, as well as other national neo liberally tangled education policy settings as regards citizenship: it stands out as being monolingual.

The first unsatisfactory, I suggest, is that there seems to be a worrying gap between, on the one hand the opportunity for individual development and choice making and on the other the undertaking or obligation to such development and choice making. As the educational task to provide for active citizenship, through education, almost entirely is stressed within the discourse of market logics, the freedom to choose identity and life project according to one's will and wishes seems delimited. As there tend to be few 'real choices' to make as regards the course of life offered in education, it almost appears to be one's responsibility to choose strategically within working life oriented life scopes characterised by market logics. This, I suggest, undermines not only the students' possibilities to choose course of life within the realm of education. It might also have implications for their motivational basis to educate themselves (Biesta, 2006).²

If we assume that a transformation is implied in Swedish education policy on citizenship – from opportunity to obligation as regards the 'freedom to choose' in and throughout education – we might raise some questions of concern for children, young and other subjects for education. Will they be motivated and willing to take on the responsibility involved in a ‘proper’ citizenship (education), where the target is acquisition of a consuming attitude for self-making? What if they don't agree on the assigned conditions and orientation of education and of 'active' citizenship fostering imposed by the national education policy agenda? With Biesta (2006) we can ask: why should one enter the field of education if one does not consider economic growth and skilling-up for what is presumed as a ‘free’ market of identities and labour to be of central value or interest for one self? Whether students agree or not on the content and meaning of educational citizen fostering is of course an empirical question. Nevertheless it may be of urge for parents and adults involved in education to go into the question. Not least as education is stressed as an individual 'business', it tends too centre on “private good” rather than on “public good” (Englund, 1996; Labaree, 1997).

² In terms of 'fluid modernity' Bauman (2001) highlights this cavity by making a distinction between the conditions of individuals *de jure*, i.e. of their obliged or duty-bound choice making as regards their lives, and their chances to gain 'real' control over their destiny (p 39).

The second unsatisfactory touches on the future for education itself. The critical question that can be raised here is whether a neo liberal educational policy on citizenship is open for plurality and change as regards the meaning and content of 'active citizenship'? The unease involved is that there doesn't seem to exist any regulating mechanisms within this policy that can handle homogenisation and ideational mainstreaming as regards the course of citizenship and citizenship education. This, in turn jeopardises its capability to involve all individuals with their different ways of living and acting upon citizenship, which in turn raises questions related to exclusion and social injustice (Arnot and Dillabough, 2000). The worry hence, is that a neo liberally oriented education policy on citizenship might be a hazard for education in the sense that it becomes difficult to contribute to societal change in other directions that those predicated by individualism and market orientatedness, through education. This, I argue, puts education itself at risk, if we consider education to be part of an envisioning of plurality and inclusion in society.

The two unsatisfactories touched upon point at a common problem within a neo liberally tangled education for active citizenship: it seems to be encumbered with a monolingual depiction of citizenship. What is at stake is that it tends to fail to embrace conditions and considerations necessary for a depiction of active citizenship beyond consumerism for self-making. Instead, this policy might lead to an undermining of both educational motivation and of societal change, as it imposes a certain direction for choice on people, and as homogenisation and detainment of what is seen as a 'proper' active citizenship scarcely can be called into question as there seems to be few mechanisms embedded in this policy that can provide for openness towards plurality, difference and change.

Feasible openings

Where to go then, in order to come to terms with the two worrisome notions mentioned above? One way to begin is to seek for is an altered way of depicting 'active' citizenship in Swedish, as well as other 'local' national educational settings in Europe. If point of departure is taken in citizenship as something contextual and relational the character of citizenship education would closure for any prescribed, universalising claims on what constitutes a 'properly educated citizenry'. Instead it opens for an active citizenship education where practices of affirmation of difference as regards ways of speaking and acting on 'active' citizenship are at the heart of the educational task. With Mouffe (2005) it opens for an education that 'make[s] room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens' (p 7) in both individual and collective registers. Such an education calls for the need to consider active citizenship as something that does not have a fixed direction and target. Instead, it calls us to see active citizenship as something that is already lived and acted upon (Biesta and Lawy, 2006; Olson, 2009), which has the potential to open up for a multilingual depiction of active citizenship in education. What is at stake, I suggest, is that we should seek for plurality of voice instead of homogeneous choice making in relation to the concept of active citizenship and its educational extensions: one that faces humanity rather than aims at cultivating it (Todd, 2009).

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