

# Rhetoric and Organizational Change – Ideas and discourses in educational reforms in Sweden

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## **From optimistic tales to crisis consciousness\***

The ways in which Sweden is most commonly described have undergone dramatic changes during the two last decades. The former image of a promising welfare state, with plans for further advancement, has gradually been replaced by descriptions of a society in crisis. These crisis descriptions refer primarily to changes in industrial production, explained theoretically as a transition from *fordism* to *postfordism*, and secondarily to changes in the public sector which are of particular importance as background information to this article. The state monitored public welfare sector, which was formerly conceived as an infallible means to solve social problems, as well as an integral part of the Swedish model, is now described as the most pressing problem facing polity.

Thus, Swedish politicians emphasize that their most important task of today is that of curbing budget deficits, which is done in order to regain the confidence of financial markets. This task requires cuts in the public sector, as well as in the different systems of economic transfers which constitute the Swedish welfare state. Furthermore, this task is conveyed to the citizens as a matter requiring their undivided support.

These two crisis narratives are connected by the means of a new concept, that of the *postindustrial* society, which is pictured as a system where production is indeed more profitable, while even more elusive from the imposition of taxes. Consequently, it is said that the very groundwork for a large public sector is inevitable giving way. This development is described as being beyond the reach of national political decisions and that it instead stems from industrial development as well as globalization.

The way of describing the conditions for political decision-making has thus been changed and are today conceived within the terms of crisis. As a consequence, state efforts to manage the public sector have turned towards a new direction. Instead of, as previously, focusing upon further expansion of the welfare state, new efforts have been directed to limiting its expansion and reforming its operation. The goal of these efforts has been described as the

provision of welfare on a continuous level, but at a higher quality, and delivered in different and varying ways.

These changes in the state's strive for the provision of welfare are also, in a more concrete fashion, connected to the concept of *postindustrialism*. It is assumed that this concept refers to a development of industrial production which involves more flexibility with respect to organization, machinery and labour. In the public sector this development is corresponded by the decentralization of decision-making. This is expected to result in a higher degree of variation in the services offered, more market solutions, as well as increased possibilities for citizens to choose amongst different service alternatives. Thus, flexibility and variation are being introduced as a substitute for unified, large scale production both in the public and private sector. Hence, an era of *postfordism* is initiated. (Jessop, 1994, Williams, 1994).

### The particularity of the Swedish case

Neither of these crisis narratives, nor the theorizing about changes in the terms of postfordism and postindustrialism, are unique to the Swedish context. Instead, Sweden joins in this respect, the rhetoric currently in use throughout Western Europe, and more likely than not, elsewhere. Although the vocabulary used is similar, meanings differ not only from country to country but, although in a lesser extent, from one public sector to another within specific countries. These differing meanings are not entirely an effect of translation. Instead, words are given their specific meanings as politicians, practitioners and common citizens use them and confront them within their own specific experiences of the public sector. The organization of, as well as the scope of, the public sector differs between countries. Therefore, when politicians announce budget cuts in the public sector, they have different meanings in a country where welfare measures are mainly provided within the family as opposed to a country where welfare is mainly produced and financed publicly.

The goal of this article is to reveal what I believe to be particularly Swedish in the state's efforts to change the public sector. First, a description is given of a phenomenon which has been one of the main characteristics of the changes in the public sector during the 1990s, and which I have named *organizational turbulence*. The second characteristic to be described may well be even more conspicuous to an outside observer. I have named it *reliance on rhetoric*. The first of these characteristics seems to express a new way of relating organizational structure to the way that activities are carried out, or organizational content. Thus, a change of content is assumed to arise from a change of structure.

The second characteristic was already apparent in the first half of the 1980s. Specifically in 1982 when a Social Democratic government, replacing a conservative coalition, presented a programme for the renewal of the public sector. On that occasion, the use of rhetoric seems to have been the main instrument of implementation of this new policy, which became personified by the Minister for Civil Service Affairs (Mellbourn 1986). However, during the 1990s,

the reliance on rhetoric as an instrument for change in the public sector became increasingly prominent, particularly so in the educational sector.

### **Some remarks on theory**

This article analyses changes in the public sector during the 1990s, particularly changes referring to the organization of compulsory education. The analysis presented starts from the assumption that humans are constantly constructing meaning, as well as confronting these constructions of meaning with their everyday experiences. In this activity we are partly independent and creative beings and partly dependent upon ideas and patterns of thought which are generally accepted to be true, normal and self-evident within our social environment. Consequently, the all-encompassing question guiding my studies of education has been how people, who are involved in education in different ways, reason when they try to change the activities at school facilities.

In the analysis an attempt is made to distinguish between patterns of thinking, which may be collected within the concept of commonly held ideas, and those which instead may better be covered by the concept of discourse. The former can be more or less specific, and might best be defined as knowledge which is common to many people and which is used to interpret the surrounding world and to orientate oneself in respect to the future (Schutz [1932] 1967). In contrast, discourses are here assumed to be more elaborate systems of thought, the application of which are more limited. Furthermore, it is assumed that discourses are related to a specific professional practice. Thus, discourses consist of utterances which are more systematically composed than general ideas. They contain specific rules concerning what one is allowed to say, who is allowed to speak, and what is true (Foucault 1993). In addition, discourses are closely associated with institutions, and as institutional discourses they are used to legitimize social practice.

Another reference point of the analysis presented here is the assumption that the process of constructing meaning, in the context of compulsory education, is related to general ideas and patterns of thought which prevail in society. Discourses created in the educational context are dependent upon narratives produced in a wider social environment, where they find justification. Thus, the different descriptions about crisis are assumed to have a strong rhetorical effect on the demands for change within the public sector (cf. Edelman 1988:31, Olsen 1990:58).

The narratives which elaborate upon the crisis theme generally represent analyses made in structural terms. Changes are generally conceived of in terms of the processes of capital and social development, which are beyond the reach of human action. A prerequisite of democracy is the belief that it is possible to organize society in different ways, i.e. that politics matter. Therefore, the uncritical acceptance of structural analyses, which exclude human action, represents a development in contradiction to the democratic ideal.

In this article, I explicitly distance myself from those versions of structural analysis of social phenomena which exclude the possibility to choose alternative paths to the future. The emphasis on rhetoric makes way for human action both in the perception of problems and in the design of their solutions, as well as for alternative narratives in the description of our society and in the outline of our future.

In accordance with the theoretical approach outlined above, this article is a construct. My aim is to present tools of thinking to be reused in confrontation with other empirical contexts or reformulated in order to construct alternative narratives. The empirical base for my own analysis consists of documentary studies and interviews conducted in three of the eight school regions mentioned below, as well as in the central state agency for education. At the central level, the activities of a project group, appointed to implement new curricula, were studied in greater detail. This was accomplished by means of interviews, participation in meetings and other activities, as well as an intensive reading of the documents produced by the group. At the municipal level, politicians, administrators and school principals were interviewed.

### **Educational reform**

In 1991 the organization of compulsory education became the subject of radical reform. Probably, the most conspicuous part of this reform was the dismantling of the National Board of Education, which was until then the state agency in charge of monitoring primary and secondary education. The same minister-level decision caused the disappearance of school boards at the provincial level. A new entity, the National Agency for Education, was founded in order to replace the former. Regional and local school offices were established to represent this new agency. Thus, the formerly 24 provincial boards were replaced by 83 local offices, divided into 8 regions. To say that this change was dramatic is a definite understatement.

Quite contrary to common procedure in processes of political reform, this decision was made without preparation by a public commission, nor with a subsequent public debate, which aimed at reaching a compromise between all interested parties. Instead, a working group within the Ministry of Education, in close collaboration with the Minister at that time, designed the new organization. Protests from oppositional parties, as well as from teacher unions, were largely ignored. Equally dramatic, as well as contrary to standard Swedish public sector procedure, was the dismissal of the former agency's entire staff. In addition, an explicit announcement from the Minister stated that, in effect, no reinstatement priority within the new agency would be granted to the dismissed personnel. The Minister's ambition to replace "old" with "new" personnel did not entirely succeed. When the new agency and its local offices were staffed, it was revealed that 60% of the employees came from the former organization.

How did the Minister motivate this dramatic and far-reaching reform? In the corresponding Bill to the Swedish Riksdag the Minister wrote that the changes in the educational monitoring system were so extensive that this demanded a completely new agency. The foundation of the National Agency for Education occurred in conjunction with two other important changes, both referring to the relationship between the state and the municipalities. Thus, the entire responsibility for education was transferred from the central administrative level to the local political level. In addition an, at that time recent, decision by the Riksdag resulted in the introduction of a system of monitoring-by-objective instead of the former monitoring-by-rule.

This reform represented the culmination of a long process of change in the state's educational monitoring. This process was initiated in the 1970s, and was described at that time with the keywords *deregulation* and *decentralization*. Ambitions to change state monitoring from by-rules to by-objectives was in no way unique to the educational sector, however, the uniqueness was found in the fact that it was used to motivate the substitution of an old agency for a new one. The explanation given for this radical and unprecedented manoeuvre was the failure of previous state attempts to reform educational monitoring.

Even ambitions of decentralizing the responsibility for education were solved by radical means. This solution first resulted in the local employment of teachers, instead of their being employed by the state. Secondly, it involved the transfer of educational organizing competence from the state level to local politicians. The final portion of this solution touched upon the principles regarding the state's funding of education. Previously, each state regulation of education had been accompanied by a specific state resource. This system was, in a first phase, replaced by a general state grant to each municipality's educational sector. In 1992, the conservative-coalition government, which came into power after a decade of Social Democratic rule introduced a second phase. It resulted in the state grants to the municipalities being unspecified to definite sectors.

## Organizational turbulence

These changes had considerable implications for the economic and organizational structure of education. Inevitably, they also changed the conditions for educational activities. However, my claim is that the manner in which this reform process was designed had an even greater importance, specifically in the capacity of an institutionalized knowledge of organizational change. By being incorporated into the repertoire of techniques of change, as well as made a part of the policy for the renewal of the public sector, the dramatic shutdown of the National Board of Education became a symbol for political energy. Furthermore, this shutdown, and the decisions accompanying it, offered concrete examples of *how* to achieve change within the public sector.

In the educational sector, the ideas of change, as exhibited by the shutdown of the National Board of Education, were concretized with the implementation

of the state's many decisions of reform. This implementation comprised the previously referred to economic and organizational changes, as well as concurrent decisions on new curricula for both primary and secondary education. Thus, the decisions at the state level to reform education referred both to structure and to content. In this context, the concept of content covers the activities of the new curricula's implementation, as well as the new system of monitoring-by-objective. The idea of a strong relationship between organizational structure and the way activities are carried out, or organizational content, played a prominent role in many of the following local implementation processes.

I have distinguished three principles of organization, which characterize the changes of structure observed in my studies of reform implementation in the educational sector. In combination, these principles imply a strengthening of activities which legitimize structural change. The most outstanding of these principles is the above mentioned, and partly described, *organizational turbulence*. According to this principle, radical organizational structure changes are defined as expressions of political energy and as a positive propensity towards change. Consequently, the stability that formerly characterized the educational sector has become less prominent, and is no longer taken for granted. Reorganization has increasingly been defined as a condition for a reorientation of pedagogy and of other educational activities. Hence, the substitution of "new" for "old" personnel appears to be a more practical method of renewal than further education, training or other traditional methods.

The second principle is *rhetorical competence*. This implies that the formulation of ideas concerning the desired changes, and ideas which legitimize them, has become an important technique of change. During the first half of the 1980s, efforts made to introduce the programme for the renewal of the public sector by the means of exhibitions and conferences was a predecessor to this procedure. In education, this principle has been concretized in personnel recruitment. Thus, attitudes towards the changes of interest on each occasion, as well as the ability of conveying knowledge of these changes to others, is valued higher than educational experience.

The third principle of organization is less clear, while at the same time more noticeable when placed in contrast with previous educational practice. This implies that the recruitment of participants to an organization, or to a specific reform project, is carried out by means of *informal networks*. Thus, the building of an organization, or the reorientation of an existing one, may be more a matter of personal contacts than those of a bureaucratic order. In my empirical data, there are numerous illustrations of this type of recruitment, though it usually runs parallel to a procedure of traditional appointment. The principle of organization by means of informal networks has become increasingly important, even in other situations that aim at changing educational activities.

The newly founded National Agency for Education is itself an illustration of how these principles may be put into practice. My interviews with members of this agency show that personal contacts were crucial for the recruitment of personnel as the agency was built up. They also provide evidence of occasions

when preference was given to rhetorical competence over formal criteria. Furthermore, the interviews document an overwhelming support amongst the agency's personnel for the organizational and pedagogical changes of education, which were by then publicly announced.

The short history of the new agency additionally illustrates the principle of organizational turbulence. As soon as two years after its foundation, the regional and local representation of the agency was reorganized. The previously widely distributed local representation of the agency was concentrated to 11 localities and the regional divisions were toned down. The reorganization involved the considerable exchange of personnel, and former regional leaders of the organization were particularly subject of dismissals.

Organizational changes at the local level may also be analysed according to these three principles. Evidence of a considerable organizational turbulence is apparent at this level in my interviews. Similarly, in the sense that they are staged in order to adapt an organization into a specific conception of how educational activities should be designed, reorganizations appear to be steered by ideas. The interviews also give evidence for successive reorganizations, sometimes brought about by new ideas, sometimes by observed negative consequences of previous reorganizations. An example of such ideas concern the costs and benefits of large versus small school districts, as well as of single versus multiple principals per district. Different ideas have also been presented as to whether or not schools encompassing the first to the last year of compulsory education are preferable to schools specifically dedicated either to younger or teenaged pupils. In many municipalities the idea of integrating pre and after school care of the younger school children with other school activities has also been used to motivate reorganizations.

The prominence of new ideas in the reorganizational design makes rhetorical competence a highly desirable qualification in persons recruited to administrative positions. The frequent exchange of personnel in leading positions, highlighted in the interviews, illustrates the tendency to replace individuals with educational experience, usually former school principals, by individuals with different professional backgrounds, usually economists. This renewal of the administrative level is, by those involved, expected to provide a less rigid attitude towards change in the lower levels of educational organization.

Thus, it is obvious that organizational turbulence, the first characteristic of change in the public sector as described in this article, is intimately connected with rhetoric. However, the second characteristic of change, previously presented as reliance on rhetoric, is more complicated than it may appear from the description given above. Before continuing with a further elaboration of this characteristic, a general discussion of the concept of rhetoric is required.

### **Some points on rhetoric**

Thus, an important concept of this article is the one of rhetoric. It is generally understood as the art of speaking and convincing. It is often used with a nega-

tive connotation, associated either with empty phrases or with an ornate style of speech. When rhetoric is used to denote a scientific approach, its meaning is extended to comprise all forms of spoken and written language. The rhetorical approach becomes a platform for inquiries into how speech and text produce reality.

Inspired by rhetoric as a scientific approach, my studies of educational reform emphasize the role of speech and text in processes of change. However, in this article, rhetoric is mainly used in a more mundane sense, in connection with organizational turbulence as illustrated above, as well as to denote the specific characteristic of public sector reform during the 1990s, previously presented as reliance on rhetoric. Furthermore, I have used two concepts from classical rhetoric in my analysis of change within the public sector.

A-series of tropes are distinguished in classical rhetoric. These are linguistic tools which are used to convey understanding, by means of using a word in another sense or context than it was originally meant to be (Vossius [1652] 1990:7, Heradstveit – Bjørgo 1987:11). In my analysis I refer to two such tropes. The first and most well-known is the *metaphor*. It refers precisely to using a word in a context in which it does not generally belong. In this different context, the new word adds new meaning. The second trope is the *metonymy*. It results from exchanging one word for another, when the second word is in some way connected to the originally intended word.

It is assumed that tropes are not isolated linguistic items, but are instead parts of a continuous construction of meaning. However, in this context it is important to bear in mind that the two tropes mentioned function in different ways. Thus, a metaphor acts by means of transferring meaning from one context to the other. On the contrary, the metonymy confirms the original context of meaning by constructing combinations of words which belong to this context.

In this article, I shall use these two tropes in association with linguistic processes, which when used together result in a specific effect on the implementation of changes in the school sector (cf. Jakobson 1956, Vickers 1988). In the first of these processes, the use of metaphors introduces an economic discourse into the educational context. The second process is metonymic, in the sense that it limits the speaking of education to remain within the framework given by economics. This results in the exclusion of pedagogical discourses from the communication between school administrators and practitioners.

### Reliance on rhetoric

Based on my studies of reforms in the public sector, I have suggested that there are tendencies which lean towards a new order within the public sector. I have named this order *the rhetorical state* (Municio 1996). It consists of a new method of organizing reforms. Increasingly more time and energy are used by politicians and top administrators in order to formulate the ideas which legitimize certain activities as well as to convey these ideas to professionals, recipients and voters. The rhetorical feature of communication, the goal of which is



to monitoring the public sector, is particularly apparent in times of change. More attention is devoted to describing reforms in a convincing manner, than making sure that they are supported by those expected to implement them.

A concrete example of this new approach was shown by the Social Democratic government, when they started a new term of office in 1994. Several of the government Ministers appointed advisory groups which consisted of famous media personalities as a means to assist them in policy formulation. Some of these groups included well-known academics, as well as experts of specific policy areas. These groups were therefore quite similar to the think tanks used, for example, by Tony Blair and Bill Clinton (Hodges 1998). This resulted in a larger discussion of, and more attention being paid to, the inclusion of artists, film directors, journalists and writers. The composition of these groups was part of a Social Democratic strategy formulated in 1991 after the party's election defeat (Eriksson 1995). This strategy aimed at developing a new image for the party. However, my claim is that its ultimate purpose was to legitimize successive policy reforms in the public sector.

The concept of *reliance on rhetoric*, introduced previously in this article, is a less specific concept than the one of *the rhetorical state*. While the latter refers mainly to top-down communication, with the purpose of inducing change in the public sector, the former refers to discursive practices, related to change, at any level of this sector.

My studies of educational reform offer many illustrations of reliance on rhetoric. However, the meaning of these illustrations is not crystal clear. Instead, they seem to point to different methods of using rhetoric in implementation. One such example is the increasing emphasis upon *speaking* about education which is made apparent by the implementation measures following the educational reforms of the 1990s. As mentioned above, the National Agency for Education appointed a project group to monitor the implementation of the new curricula. This task was comprised of two main areas, firstly, information concerning the new pedagogical discourse which the changed curricula were based upon and secondly, the implications of the system of monitoring-by-objective. The successive measures taken by this group give a somewhat ambivalent picture.

In the beginning, the messages conveyed to the local levels were well defined and conceived in a matter of a hierarchical communication from the top down. Later, increasingly more time was used in the project in order to modify the content of the transmitted information and adapt it to local experiences. Parallel to this change, communication came to be conceived in terms of a two-way information transfer process, where the transmission from lower levels of the educational organization were given ever more space and importance. Numerous meetings and conferences were organized and great efforts were made to involve a considerable number of participants who were engaged in education activities all over the country.

The emphasis upon speaking about education in this specific context reveals an ambition to prioritize the development of a pedagogical discourse related to the actual experiences of teaching and learning and which mainly occurs

amongst principals and teachers actually involved in educational activities. At the end of my study of this process, this ambition seemed to have been partly realized in the sense that this development had been initiated in many of the schools studied. However, in the second area of implementation, namely the new system of monitoring, the efforts to relate the speaking about this portion of the reform to experiences at school level proved fruitless. The reason for this failure was twofold, firstly the difficulty of formulating objectives which made sense in educational practice and secondly, the methodological deficiencies and practical irrelevance of the evaluations made to assess achievements. Instead of illustrating the development of a discourse that was meaningful to educational practitioners, the speaking about the new monitoring system is an example of a phenomenon which I have named *empty rhetoric* (cf. Bourdieu 1984:30).

There are many other illustrations of *reliance on rhetoric* in the process of implementing educational reform. Some of them provide evidence of forms of speaking, which principals and teachers perceive as an inspiration for innovative work at the school level. They are recognized as being relevant for the pedagogical practice of education. Others give evidence of a speaking which is perceived to be paralysing because it hinders attempts of pedagogical change and blocks the thinking about education in frames of reference different to the pedagogical ones. Usually these frames of reference are given by an economic discourse concerning the public sector.

### **An economic framework**

Previously in this article I have mentioned the 1982 Social Democratic government's programme for the renewal of the public sector. That year represents a point of departure for the development of a specific discourse concerning the relations between state and local authorities. In a study of this development, two periods are distinguished. The first encompasses the 1980s and it is characterized by an emphasis upon *democracy* and *service*. The second period covers the years from 1989 to 1991. In this latter period, the goal of democracy had been sidestepped and the state's message to the local authorities was one of *efficiency* and *service*. The conclusion is that the language of service and efficiency, which became dominant during the second period, paved the way for "enterprising" the municipalities (Jansson – Forsell 1995:346). These changes have also been described as the institutionalization of market ideas in the public sector (see Fernler 1994, Jacobsson 1994, Lind 1994).

In the educational sector, the state message of the first period was formulated in terms of *decentralization* and *deregulation*. The decentralization of decision-making was expected to increase local power in education and the abolishment of state regulations was expected to increase educational quality. However, these terms were redefined when *efficiency* became the key word in education, as well as in the public sector as a whole.

Thus, the "enterprising" of the second period is apparent, firstly, in the increasing use of economic terms used to describe activities in education and in the entire public sector. The most extreme example is given by the municipalities which have been reorganized in purchaser-provider systems (see Blomquist 1996). In these the politicians act as purchasers, and schools, daycare centres and homes for the elderly are providers who sell services. By 1993, some 40 of the 286 Swedish municipalities had reorganized according to the principles of this model. Another, and a more modest, example of "enterprising" is given by the concept of *resultatenhet*. Here I use the Swedish concept in order to make sure that its specific connotations are not lost in the translation. However, a colleague of mine has suggested the term "profit centre" (Strygan 1998). Generally, the change associated to the use of *resultatenhet* is that each service entity has its own budget. All costs incurred due to the organization's activities are registered under each centre as opposed to being covered by a general municipal budget. This is achieved by internal debiting and other artificial means of creating an illusion of a private firm with revenues, costs and benefits. (See also Forssell 1994:33, Rombach 1994:213-217.) This is an illusion in regard to the fact that the entities providing public service are actually financed by allowances which are decided upon in a politically directed budget process. Thus, the "revenues" of these entities are not decided by market mechanism means.

The term of *resultatenhet* is widely used in a process of renaming schools and other entities which provide service in the public sector. The renaming is explicitly motivated with reference to the demands of increased efficiency in the public sector. It is conceived of as a way of introducing economic incentives, such as an increased awareness of costs, and a possibility for competition by means of increased quality and more attention being paid to demands for varying customer services. Approximately 200 municipalities have incorporated this term into their organizational vocabulary (Montin 1995).

This term inevitably receives a different meaning in the public sector than it has in the private sector. In spite of this, it has real consequences for the activities of the lowest levels of public organization. The most obvious is that those traits of public activities which may be described in economic terms are emphasized, while others are downplayed. However, my claim is that the consequences of the introduction of economic terms into the public sector are much more far-reaching and evidence of such is given in my studies of the implementation of reform within the educational sector.

Thus, in interviews with local administrators the organization of primary and secondary education was described occasionally in terms of markets, where schools compete for clients and school principals negotiate with the administration about prices for supplying different educational activities. These same terms echoed in many interviews with school principals, when asked about their plans and worries for the coming semester. Correspondingly, school principals, who tried to resist such descriptions of education activities, complained about futile efforts to put forward pupils' needs and pedagogical arguments in their demands for resources. In some of the municipalities studied the interplay

between administrators and opposing school principals had become a routine, which recurred every spring. The education budget proposed by the administrators, which generally involved cuts in comparison to previous years, was countered by school principals with descriptions of the consequences for their pupils of these financial restrictions. Generally, these negotiations were solved with reference to statements by the local council, according to which a balanced municipal budget was to be given first priority.

Many of the school principals interviewed asserted that the economic arguments spilled over into the internal planning of education activities. The first question asked was stated to be "what can we afford within the economic framework given by the administration?", when initiating planning. This stands in sharp contrast with previous planning procedures. According to my studies of compulsory education in the 1980s, calculations of the number of pupils, descriptions of pupils with special needs and pedagogical reasons for ordinary as well as special education arrangements were then the starting points for the planning of educational activities. The demands for resources, directed to the regional state authorities, were based primarily on discussions in pedagogical terms.

These changes may be analysed as the result of two linguistic processes. Thus, when a school is described as a *resultatenhet*, a metaphorical linguistic process may be initiated, the consequence of which is that school activities are conceived of within an economic frame of reference. This opens the possibility that, in a second stage, a metonymic linguistic process is created where other terms belonging to this frame of reference are introduced into the descriptions of education. In the speaking about education which then develops, the aspects of educational activities which fit into an economic system of thought will successively exclude other aspects.

The transfer of the speaking of education from a pedagogical discourse to an economic one may be analysed as a combined effect of metaphors based upon similitude and metonymies based upon closeness. If the introduction of the example used here, *resultatenhet*, results in educational activities being increasingly described in economic terms, then the thinking about education becomes limited to the framework supplied by the new discursive context. New discourses of education increasingly replace old ones and the rules of these discourses give the right of speech to actors other than those formally entitled to define what constitutes educational activities.

Thus, the introduction of economic terms into the public sector initiates a linguistic process which involves the transfer of speaking from one discursive context to another. In the educational context, the final outcome of this process is that of an economic discourse, almost exclusively based on cost analysis, replacing a pedagogical discourse that concerns teaching, learning, and educational achievements. The consequence is that the speaking about education is perceived of as irrelevant by those principals, teachers, parents and pupils involved, in other words, those that have daily experiences with school activities. The speaking about education is perceived as *empty rhetoric*.

## Rhetoric and power

In this process, rhetoric appears as an exercise of power. Indeed, even the original goal of rhetoric, to convince others, allows for exercising power. Rhetoric may be an instrument used to convince the audience to view matters in a specific way. Therefore, the mastering of rhetorical skills may be of particular importance in times of change, where alternative descriptions of the activities subject for change may be required. If the possibilities offered by a metonymic linguistic process are used to make some alternative descriptions seem irrelevant, then the advocates of these alternatives become powerless.

The transfer of the speaking about education from a pedagogical discourse to an economic one becomes particularly important in the context of organizational turbulence. This transfer becomes increasingly difficult to contest, especially in the context of the exchange of personnel in key positions and the substitution of personnel with an educational sector background by individuals with other backgrounds. Communication between the administrative levels of the educational sector and those involved in the actual activities at school tends to develop away from a two-way information towards unilateral top-down message conveyance. Such a development seems to implicate more negative conditions for the renewal of education than those following from actual cuts in school allowances. When it is no longer possible to speak about what is the proper *raison d'être* of education it will be ever more difficult to discuss the pupils and their educational needs.

The effects of the increasing dominance of an economic discourse in education seem to be perceived more negatively by women than by men. Many of the female principals interviewed manifest uneasiness about being obliged to acquaint themselves with what some of them call a "man's world" (cf. Blomquist 1996:114). In interviews, these women also generally indicate more interest in discussing pedagogical problems and solutions while many of their male colleagues seem to be more comfortable with the new economic discursive context. Because of local reorganizations of the educational sector during the 1990s the number of principals has increased. In this process the proportion of female principals in compulsory education has increased from 16,3%, during the 1990-1991 school year, to 57,5% in 1997-98 (Statistics Sweden, personal communication). With regards to the relevance of alternative discourses for educational practice, this development may well imply an even wider mismatch between the higher and lower levels of the educational structure than was observed in my study.

Similarly, the dominance of economic discourses may obstruct democratic participation in public activities. The vocabulary and the logic of these discourses are generally unfamiliar within an educational context (cf. Blomquist 1996:95, 125). This excludes not only professionals but also concerned citizens from the discussions about how to best organize educational activities. Thus, these discussions become the exclusive domain of individuals in higher positions of the school structure. This is partly due to the fact that different professions master various domains of knowledge better than others and partly

because of the rules of each specific discourse which concede the right to describe reality to certain individuals, while denying it to others.

However, politicians and administrators in individual municipalities can resist both a reorganization of the educational structure and a transfer of educational activities from one discursive context to another. In my study, key administrators in approximately one third of the municipalities explicitly reject these new ideas. Some of them speak with contempt of consultants travelling around the country in order to sell economic models to the public sector.

Resistance is also possible at lower levels of the educational structure. Professionals, as well as concerned citizens, may resist the hegemonic descriptions of educational activities which are presented by individuals at higher levels. They may find support for their resistance in their everyday experiences of a complex educational world. An increased knowledge of how rhetoric is used in the educational context may possibly empower those in lower positions to resist what they perceive as empty rhetoric. Similarly, it may encourage them to claim the privilege of describing educational activities in ways that are relevant to their experiences.

The success of such resistance is uncertain. During the period that the most important reform decisions were taken by the Riksdag teachers went on strike for a number of months as a means of mobilizing public support for their resistance to the Minister of Education's suggested changes. They also organized massive manifestations, particularly in protest of changes in their employment conditions. Their protests did not lead to any concrete results. On the contrary, the economic and organizational structure of education was changed and this consequently changed the conditions for local educational activities. However, these changes do not necessarily imply changes of a specific characteristic at local level. Reform implementation, which in this text has been characterized with the terms *organizational turbulence* and *empty rhetoric*, can equally well be carried out within a comparatively stable educational structure as well as with a goal of increasing emphasis on the pedagogical discourse. As has been mentioned before, my study also supplies evidence of these alternative developments.

### **A wider context of meaning**

The introduction of new discourses into the educational context are supported by the description of the Swedish society in terms of *crisis*. In addition, the structural explanations of the crises represented by the concepts of *postfordism* and *postindustrialism* transmit a seeming sense of inevitability towards change. The consciousness of crisis gained increasing acceptance during the 1980s and by the turn of the 1990s they formed a generally accepted idea concerning the state of the Swedish society. The acceptance and the scope of the crisis concept was manifested in the summer of 1998 pre-election campaign by the Worker's Trade Union. Posters showing anonymous persons representing workers bore the text: "We saved Sweden from the crisis".

Irrespective of whether or not the new narratives adequately explain the changing conditions in our societies, the assumption of a society in crisis has a strong rhetorical effect in connection with state demands for changes in the public sector. In this context it is less important if these demands were justified than if they could be placed into a larger context of meaning. In addition, the dominance of the descriptions of society in terms of *crisis* may be analysed in the same manner as the transfer from a pedagogic to an economic discourse within education. Thus, crisis is used as a metaphor that leads to specific associations and, by means of a metonymic process, may limit the possibilities of associating to alternative contexts of meaning.

Under these circumstances it becomes increasingly difficult to locate support for claims of resistance of an "enterprising" of the activities in the public sector. Similarly, organizational changes at both the state and local levels gain legitimacy when integrated into an overall package of apocalyptic ideas. Furthermore, reductions in public expenses may appear reasonable when the future of the nation is purported to be at stake. During this period there has actually been reductions in educational spending. Thus, the teacher to pupil ratio within compulsory education has decreased from 9.3 teachers per 100 pupils in the school year of 1990-91, to 7.5 in 1997-98 (Statistical Sweden, personal communication). In spite of this, the economic restrictions seem to have had less impact upon educational activities than the other changes analysed in this article. Other areas of the public sector such as health services, day care and care for the elderly have possibly suffered even more extensive reductions. In this context, the future development of public spending is extremely uncertain.

Before the 1998 elections the Social Democratic party manifested a retreat from the crisis theme. In spite of the increasingly positive light in which the state of the Swedish society is today described, there are no signs of the demands for change diminishing. It is therefore probable that these demands will find new impetus in the post-election strategies of the newly appointed Social Democratic Minister of Education. The issue at the local level is whether or not the instability of the educational organization, as well as the continual demands for changes within educational activities, will continue into the next century.

## Not

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