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The Relevance of Class in Education Policy and Research

The case of Sweden's Vocational Education

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, less importance has been attached to the concept of class in educational policy and educational research. Due to the continued relevance of class in many educational contexts, this article argues that this trend is unfortunate, untimely and unwarranted, and that important questions are overlooked as a result. As a case in point, the article examines contemporary policy trends in upper-secondary vocational education in Sweden. The article comprises two interrelated sections. The first discusses the more general matter of the relevance of class (and its critique) and how class can be understood in contemporary society. Following the conclusions from part one, the second section demonstrates how problems arise when vocational education is removed from its class context, illustrated by contemporary policy trends in Sweden where not only issues of class are ignored, but policies are also adopted that are likely to augment class inequalities.

Keywords: social class, education policy, vocational education, upper-secondary education, curriculum

Introduction

During the 20th century, the Swedish education system was transformed from explicitly differentiating education along social class lines to a system intent on breaking, or at least reducing, its class-bound character. Understanding education as related to a class society was thus a central perspective and policy concern in Sweden during the 20th century. This perspective has been on the retreat, however, in the last few decades within both the policy and research fields. The purpose of this article is to offer a critical review of this shift and argue for the continuing relevance of a class concept in educational inquiry. The article thus has two separate but interrelated purposes. The first is to contribute to the academic discussion of the relevance of class by putting forward the argument that class remains a fundamental structure in contemporary capitalist societies. The second purpose derives from the first in trying to illustrate the importance of relating to class when analysing and implementing education reforms, exemplified by an analysis of contemporary Swedish policy

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regarding educational content in vocational programmes. Although several reforms are discussed, the focus is on the extensive upper-secondary reform implemented in 2011, since it is of special interest in a class context.¹

The Diminishing Usage of a Class Concept

Educational research in Sweden relating to class as a problem was fairly common during the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Ball & Larsson 1989; Bernstein & Lundgren 1983; Callewaert & Nilsson 1979; Englund 1986; Arnman & Jönsson 1983; Kallós 1979). However, it is more common in contemporary educational research to view society as a pluralistic, information-technological, knowledge-driven, post-industrial, multicultural or risk society, to mention but a few popular concepts, rather than as a class society. What can be observed is a notable shift in how the basic divisions of society are understood, from a focus on circumstances based on economic and political factors to those based on culture (Bernstein 2000; Callinicos 2000:13-24). As a consequence, education is often related to questions relating to pluralism, religion, gender, ethnicity etc. and not to class, despite research showing that it can be difficult to understand the effects of ethnicity and gender for instance, if they are not related to class (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004; Andersson & Lindblad 2008; Callinicos 1998; Hill 2009). An OECD report looking at equity in education concluded that:

[I]t is surprising to see that the Swedish debate on educational equity is so overwhelmingly focused on gender issues, to the extent that it almost completely overshadows questions of social inheritance... (Nicaise et al. 2005:14).

However, this is not only a Swedish phenomenon, as Collini notes:

In the frequently incanted quartet of race, class, gender and sexual orientation, there is no doubt that class has been the least fashionable ... despite the fact that all the evidence suggests that class remains the single most powerful determinant of life-chances (Collini 1994:3).

Many of the central objections to the relevance of class are founded on challenges raised by theorists such as Ulrich Beck, Daniel Bell, Manuel Castells, Anthony Giddens and Alain Touraine, who have in different ways described how the foundation of industrial class society has changed (individualisation, service society, risk society etc.). Furåker (2005) argues that, while often illustrating important changes in society, these theories tend to draw very broad and overstated conclusions from these changes, often founded on weak empirical evidence. This is, according to Sadovnik (2008:26), also characteristic of a great deal of postmodern critical theory which has become increasingly popular in educational research over the last decades, often criticising more holistic theories (e.g. Biesta 2002; 2005), especially those that place a class concept at the centre (Berglez 2006; Dworkin 2007; Hickey 2000:162; Savage 1996:58). In contrast, there is a range of theoretically and empirically well-founded

investigations, in turn built on different class concepts, illustrating the continuing relevance of class (cf. Mayer 2005; Svallfors 2004; Wright, 1997).²

A critique often raised is that a concept such as class marginalises questions of pluralism, identity and recognition. However, different theories vary in relevance depending on the issue pursued, and the relevance of ‘identity/recognition’ by no means automatically replaces or diminishes the importance of ‘class/distribution’ (Fraser 2003).

The most prominent kinds of recognition claims in contemporary politics have been ones relating to cultural difference, including differences in sexuality, religion and lifestyle. In such cases the groups in question claim recognition for their legitimacy and value. However, the micro- and macro-politics of class are different. The poor are not clamouring for poverty to be legitimised and valued. They want to escape or abolish their class position rather than affirm it (Sayer 2005:52).

In short, over the last few decades theories adopting a class approach have been criticised for being dualistic, reductionist or deterministic, and have often been deemed irrelevant (Dworkin 2007; Kirk 2000; Savage 1996). It is reasonable to expect from a criticism of the relevance of class that it will question a particular class concept and demonstrate its weakness through solid empirical investigation. Undertakings of this kind are, unfortunately, unusual (Furåker 2005). Discussion of the relevance of class has instead been characterised by confusion over the meaning of the concept, jumbling notions of class with very different theoretical foundations and implications together (Crompton 1998:12; Sayer 2005:72; Svallfors 2004:164).

The tendencies outlined above are also characteristic of contemporary Swedish policy research, where a class concept is rarely used or discussed in any theoretical depth. This, together with the fact that there is little research on vocational education when studying policy (for exceptions, cf. Lundahl 1994; 1997; 2011; 2011b; Nilsson 1981; Olofsson 2005; 2010) and the diminished importance attached to class in research focusing on vocational education in Sweden more generally³, has led to a policy debate and a set of policy proposals that not only overlook important questions but that also risk increasing class inequalities.

If class is not irrelevant, but framed in a confusing discussion, a question that begs an answer is: how, then, can class in contemporary society be understood?

Understanding Society as a Class Society

The concept of class has different meanings in different theories. Bluntly speaking, one can discern two different basic understandings and analytical usages of class: as strata or social group, and as social relations (Hatcher 2000:185-186). Analysing class as strata implies grouping people together hierarchically in groups, defined by their access to one or many important resources (e.g. income, profession and education) (Crompton 1998). Commonly used concepts within this school of thought are “upper

class”, “middle class” and “under class” (Crompton 1998; Gilbert 2008; Kirk 2000), also referred to as social groups 1, 2 and 3 (cf. Jonsson & Arnman 1989; Svensson 2001; 2007). Such a class concept can be very informative and reveal the distribution between groups in various contexts. At the same time, this kind of understanding of class has limitations. First, this concept of class neither can nor attempts to explain the reasons behind the distribution; it is purely descriptive (Hickey 2000:163). Secondly, class tends to become something static in this reading, equated with certain income intervals, professions, educational levels etc. Further, the meaning of class, and in general how society is categorised, becomes arbitrary. This is exemplified by the common application of this type of categorisation today in the discourse of “social exclusion” (Fairclough 2000; Hickey 2000). In this categorisation wage labourers and owners of capital are recognised as one group (‘inside’), distinguished from the group of people ‘outside’, e.g. the unemployed and long-term sick (Hickey 2000:170). A common description of society within such a discourse is a “two-thirds society”, both theoretically and empirically a misleading description (Hickey 2000:170) that shifts the political ambition from increasing equality to increasing “inclusion” (Fairclough 2000:65). This ambiguous use of class illustrates additional problems with the strata perspective in being devoid of concepts of power and conflict (Crompton 1998). Without a concept of power, a theory provides little guidance for action to challenge inequalities. Another approach which overcomes most of these problems is to understand class as social relations, e.g. a Marxist concept of class.

A neo-Marxist perspective

In Marxist theory, social systems are differentiated on the basis of the organisation of production and the extraction of surplus value. In brief, every society has a material organisation that establishes the basic frames for the way in which social relations can take form. Capitalist societies are thus characterised by a specific organisation of production, one in which a small minority owns and controls the means of production and a large majority has to sell its labour in order to survive. This situation gives rise to specific relationships, and it is these core relationships – the social relations of production – that constitute the foundation of class relations. However, if a class analysis is founded on the relation to the ownership of the means of production alone, then only three (possibly four⁴) basic classes can exist:

- (i) *Capitalists* (who own the means of production – purchase labour)
- (ii) *Workers* (who do not own the means of production – sell labour)
- (iii) *Petty Bourgeoisie* (who own the means of production – do not buy labour).

In such a categorisation 85–90% of the population in developed capitalist countries belongs to the same wage labour class (Wright 1997:19). While saying something significant about capitalist society, this is too blunt to enable a nuanced understand-

ing of many phenomena as it fails to capture the class dynamics of contemporary society satisfactorily. The basic problem is that all wage labourers are understood as one category, thereby viewing professors, generals, doctors, chief executives etc. as belonging to the same class as nurses, telephone salesmen, industry workers, shop workers etc. To allow a more nuanced analysis of the class structure, Wright (1997) introduces relations to two additional factors (besides the means of production), which in combination determine the social relations of production: (i) “*Authority*” and (ii) “*Skills and expertise*”.

Wright finds that access to these factors has a significant impact on the social relations of production. Wage labour positions involving authority provide greater remuneration and power (over one’s own and other’s work), and therefore tie the interests of these positions closer to the capitalist class. Possessing skills and expertise similarly tends to impact positively on salary and autonomy over one’s work, thereby affecting interests in a similar way. In short, the more a position involves authority and/or skills and expertise, the greater the influence of capitalist interest within this class position. While still providing wage labour and consequently being tied to the working class, these positions are simultaneously tied to the capitalist class. They are, in other words, “contradictory locations within class relations” (Wright 1997; 2009; Hickey 2000). During the later stages of capitalism a growing number of wage labourers have come to occupy contradictory class positions. However, this has not meant that the relevance of class has declined or that the working class has disappeared. On the contrary, when analysing the class structure in countries as diverse as Japan, the USA and Sweden, Wright finds that:

The working class, even if defined narrowly, remains the largest class location in the class structure of developed capitalist countries, and if it is extended to include those contradictory locations closest to it, then it constitutes a substantial majority of the labor force... [I]f the working class is defined in relational terms it is hardly the case that the working class has largely disappeared, as some commentators have suggested (Wright 1997:73).

By highlighting some of the results of Wright’s analysis on the class structure in Sweden (in the early 1980s), the table below illustrates this point.

Table 1. Overarching wage labour class positions in Sweden (Wright 1997:54)⁵

Extended Expert Managers (9.6%)	Non- skilled managers (2.6%)	↑ (+) <i>Authority</i> (-)
	Skilled supervisors (5.6%)	
Experts (3.0%)	Extended Working class (79.2%)	

(+) ← *Skills and expertise* (-)

By differentiating wage labour positions depending on their relation to authority and skills and expertise, five different class positions are defined in the table. The extended working class is thus composed of positions with no, or little, access to both these resources, i.e. class positions with similar conditions and interests. The table reveals that a large majority (79.2%) of wage labourers are in the “extended working class” position. If one bundles together all the disparate positions outside the extended working class and calls them ‘middle class’, this group counts for just under 21% of the wage labourers. These findings contradict the common notion of modern society as a middle-class society, or a two-thirds society, as it is often described in contemporary politics (cf. Ball 2003; Hickey 2000). Summarising the results from almost two decades of research, Wright (1997) finds that class understood in this way plays an extremely important part in people’s lives, strongly influencing everything from social mobility and life chances to friendships and class consciousness.

The ‘new’ working class

With a relational conception of class it is only with the dissolution of the core relations that classes dissolve. From a Marxist perspective it thus takes the dissolution of the capitalist mode of production, with the ownership and power relations it entails. Rather than dissolving, the capitalist mode of production has expanded during the last century, and is today more encompassing than ever. Strong everyday notions of class exist, where working class implies white collared men in dungarees whose relative decline in the workforce suggests the disappearance of the working class. This conclusion is, however, based on a static and superficial understanding of class. The working class in Sweden today looks different from what it was only a few decades ago, but it has certainly not disappeared. Class should not be understood as a question of fixed characteristics but as social relations. If related to upper-secondary vocational education in Sweden, as below, a relational conception of class implies that not only traditionally ‘male’ programmes (e.g. industry and construction) but also ‘female’ programmes (e.g. care and support) should be viewed as primarily socialising pupils for extended working class positions, which brings us to the second section and purpose of this article.

Upper-secondary education in Sweden plays an important part in the creation of social relations. However, this is almost completely overlooked in contemporary policy where relating education to class has ceased to be common practice. What kind of problems this brings about in the context of upper-secondary vocational education is discussed below.

The Relevance of Class, the Case of Sweden’s Vocational Education

In relation to class, the purpose of the vocational programmes can, broadly speaking⁶, be considered as socialising pupils for extended working class positions, i.e. positions defined by their non-skilled and subordinate character in the social relations

of production. Taken together with the fact that about half of all pupils in upper-secondary education attend vocational programmes (Berlund & Hennig-Loeb 2012; SOU 2008:27), of which a predominant proportion have working class backgrounds (Broady & Börjesson 2006; Högberg 2009; Sandell 2007), it can be concluded that it is individuals from already subordinated class positions that tend to be trained to occupy subordinate positions. This organisation of education has prompted researchers (cf. Althusser 1971/2008; Bernstein 1981; Bourdieu & Passeron 1970) to characterise education as upholding a division between “intellectual” and “manual” labour.

In terms of content, the problem can be formulated as an uneven social distribution of knowledge. Different programmes are organised around different principles depending on what future role in the labour market the education is intended to prepare pupils for. Education for middle class positions is organised around principles of flexibility, freedom of choice, an inquisitive relation to knowledge etc., while education for working class positions is organised around principles of punctuality, orderliness, ‘good habits’ etc. (Anyon 1983; Apple 2004; Beach 1999; Marshall 2007). Thus, the education system is not only central for the selection of individuals for different class positions, but also in socialising people from different classes in different ways of relating to the world. A great deal of research on vocational education in Sweden confirms this pattern, showing how knowledge, especially of a more theoretical and critical kind, is subordinated to goals of socialisation such as learning punctuality and attendance (cf. Berner 1989; Frykholm & Nitzler 1989; Hårdig 1995; Nordlund 2011; Rosvall 2011). Hårdig, who has studied the relationship between vocational training and working life, summarises his findings as follows:

The empirical result is to a high degree in accordance with the line of reasoning of Poulantzas (1977), Grignon (1979) and Popkewitz (1987). Vocational education is by these seen as a socializing practice into an ideology that reproduces present social and economical situation (sic!) in society (Hårdig 1995:221).

Vocational education is thus intertwined in a context of class, power, conflict and control and its organisation represents a significant part of what the future working class will learn and how they will view themselves – a context, as we shall see, completely overlooked in contemporary policy. But, to be able to understand contemporary policy trends in Sweden more fully, a brief historical contextualisation is first necessary.

Class and Swedish policies – a historical perspective

During the early post-war decades, Swedish governments launched a series of fundamental educational reforms to address, inter alia, class inequalities (Gesser, 1985; Härnqvist 1989; Nicaise et.al. 2005). One central effort was to reduce the differences between educational pathways open to pupils from different social classes. At upper-secondary level, the differences between the vocational and academic pathways were reduced, mainly by broadening the educational content of the vocational routes. The

first major step in this regard was taken in 1971 (Govt. Bill 1968:140) when vocational education was integrated into the upper-secondary school, resulting in the first joint curriculum (Lgy70). Prior to this reform, the organisation of vocational education can best be described as a weakly institutionalised system, heterogeneous and with limited central control, its content generally strongly steered towards local and specific labour market contexts (Berner 1989). In contrast, what has characterised the organisation of vocational education in Sweden since then is a strongly institutionalised system where vocational education is primarily located in school settings, priority given to educational content of a less vocation-specific nature, and therefore comparatively small differences between vocational and academic routes from an international perspective (Lindberg 2003:16-17). In addition to the shift in vocational skills, the educational content was reorganised to help enhance pupils' prospects as active and independent citizens and workers who would exert influence at the workplace and e.g. "affect the hierarchies in working life" (SOU 1986:2:105, my translation). Since the upper-secondary reform of 1994 (Govt. Bill 1990/91:85), 30 percent of the time in all programmes has been allocated to general subjects⁷, offering pupils in vocational programmes eligibility for higher education.⁸ Issues such as avoiding the creation of educational 'dead ends' and offering all pupils more equal opportunities after finishing upper-secondary education (Govt. Bill 1968:140:11; SOU:1981:96; SOU:1981:97; SOU:1986:2) were central in this policy development, as expressed by the 1976 upper-secondary school committee:

We know that different kinds of upper-secondary programmes recruit pupils from different social groupings. Here we have an inbuilt conflict in the upper-secondary school that reflects nothing but the socially conditioned distribution of vocational tasks that our society is based on to a great extent. Not many would dispute that society within reasonable limits must be based on a division of labour and specialisations. Few on the other hand, if any, are likely to claim that this distribution should be as strongly linked to social background as it is today. Regardless of what one thinks about the power of the education system to break this pattern, it must be argued that it must contribute to such a development more forcefully than hitherto (SOU:1981:96:381, my translation).

Policy development since 1971 has also implied a change in control over content where initially the state, and later the local school and pupils, were granted greater control over the curriculum, with 'working life' (e.g. employers) becoming more of an indirect influence.

In conclusion, the post-war history of upper-secondary education has been one of integration between vocational and academic education, where issues of equality and class have played a central role. Policies implemented at other levels, such as the major expansion of adult education and the establishment of the 25:4-rule (see below) should also be seen in this light, and policy documents of the time explicitly stated that adult education was to stimulate and foster economic democracy and a classless society (Englund 1989). Against such a background, contemporary policies on education pose a very stark contrast.

A Policy Blind to Class

The extensive upper-secondary reform implemented in the autumn of 2011 (GY2011) is of particular interest in a class context. Partly because it represents a historical break with previous policy trends, but primarily because it is doing so by creating a new structure for upper-secondary education mainly through the reorganisation of vocational education.

It should first of all be noted that issues of social class and their relation to vocational education play no part in the reform, as evidenced by the complete absence of any mention of the concept of social class in both the inquiry (SOU 2008:27) and the resulting bill (Govt. Bill 2008/09:199). To the extent that inequalities are recognised at all, it is understood in the discourse of 'social exclusion', where groups of pupils are differentiated on the basis of their successful transition from school to work (cf. Govt. Bill 2008/09:199:121; SOU 2008:27:41-42,675). By ignoring class, vocational education is decoupled from its societal context and, as a result, issues of power, conflict and inequality are effectively omitted.

Vocational education has historically been related to both goals of efficiency and equality. In contrast, GY2011 only recognises efficiency (and a specific conception of the term), making the relation between education and the needs of the labour market the dominant organising principle for the vocational programmes, expressed as an ambition to create ready trained and employable workers (Berglund & Henning-Loeb forthcoming; Nylund 2010).

The most prominent problems identified with the vocational programmes in these policy texts are the perceived overemphasis on theoretical subjects in the curriculum, the low throughput and the mismatch between what pupils learn and employers demand (Nylund 2010). These are also seen as closely related in that pupils in vocational programmes have poor results in theoretical subjects that take up too much space in the curriculum and so throughput is low.⁹ The remedy to this situation is the introduction of a new structure for the content, with a reduction of hours devoted to the study of society, aesthetic experience and language¹⁰ to be replaced with a greater focus on more specific, specialised labour market contexts (Beach et al. 2011; Nylund & Rosvall 2011). The augmented difference between vocational and academic routes through stronger contextualisation is made explicitly in the new steering documents, e.g. the new curriculum (Lgy11), syllabuses and overarching goals (Nylund & Rosvall 2011), and is to be applied in all subjects including the general subjects. This new structure, it will be argued, is a 'solution' to problems understood in a partial and narrow way.

In the absence of class: Structures understood as intrinsic individual attributes

A dominant perspective in GY2011 is the conceptualisation of most educational phenomena as individual, demonstrated by the fact that the Swedish word for individual is used 533 times in the inquiry, while the word for collective is used only 13

times (Nylund 2010). This has a direct bearing on how problems are identified and conceptualised, e.g. the low throughput in vocational programmes.

All pupils in national and specially designed programmes are forced to study for a basic qualification for higher education, irrespective of their individual goals, talents and interests ... Many programmes in which vocationally oriented subjects are the chief concern have become all too theoretical with too little time for vocational preparation. ...Different interests and inclinations must be utilised in programmes offering preparation for higher education, vocational education and apprenticeship training... Offering a greater choice of specialisation can increase pupil motivation... New high quality vocational and apprenticeship programmes, as well as efforts to improve elementary school and relevant entry requirements for upper-secondary education, should considerably reduce the drop-out of pupils from upper-secondary schools (SOU 2008:27:675, my translation).

In short, many individuals in vocational programmes are perceived to lack the talent, inclination or interest in theoretical content¹¹, so to reduce the hours allocated to such subjects (combined with a few other measures), the thinking goes, would increase the throughput. The problem is thus conceptualised as contained within or pertaining to specific individuals (cf. Berglund & Henning-Loeb forthcoming). However, in a class society children from different classes are raised and socialised in different ways. In the work of Bourdieu (1990) this is referred to as the socialisation to different habituses, in the work of Bernstein (1973) as different codes. These orientations to meanings (habituses, codes) are each useful, and valued differently, in different contexts. In the school context, there is at a general level a devaluation of working class culture in favour of a middle class culture (Ball 2010; Bourdieu 1970; Caellewaert & Nilsson 1979; Ingram 2009). The ‘educational failure’ of the working class is thus primarily a social, not a cognitive problem, depending ultimately on power and privilege – or their absence – both in terms of class-bound out-of-school factors (Ball 2010) and the organisation of education (Bernstein 1971). By essentialising these differences as fixed characteristics and capabilities, and organising education accordingly, they tend to become self-fulfilling in terms of performance (Ball 2010; Bernstein 1990). An understanding of educational failure as primarily cognitive, or as a consequence of ‘talents’ or ‘interests’, thus neutralises and legitimises socially determined class inequalities. Problems that stem from the class structure are hence misinterpreted as intrinsic individual attributes. This is what GY2011 does, as illustrated in the above quote. The same is true for the new main stated goal of vocational education: to create employable workers.

Framing the question of (un)employment as a matter of ‘employability’ – of whether the individual is employable or not – shifts attention and responsibility away from the structure of the labour market to the individual’s ability to acquire the skills necessary to meet employer demand (Assarson 2012). Further, since unemployment is a structural phenomenon, employability can be seen as a relational attribute that conceals the fact that workers in this perspective are set against each other to compete for a

limited number of job opportunities (cf. Assarson 2012; Lundahl 2011b). By decontextualising the question of employment, underlying structures such as class and their impact on opportunities in the labour market are made invisible (Assarson 2012).

This failure to recognise properly the underlying factors implicit in education constitutes the point of departure for the GY2011 reform and nothing that is unrecognised in conception is likely to be addressed properly during implementation.

Overlooking the issue of access to education and social mobility

One important change with GY2011 is the reduction of general subjects in vocational programmes, with the result that many pupils leaving vocational programmes are no longer automatically eligible for higher education. The endeavour to acquire basic access to higher education is now the responsibility of each individual pupil, who is required to select certain subjects (Swedish, English) as elective courses. Such compliance will not suffice for pupils in all vocational programmes, however, since the entry conditions for higher education have been changed (Govt. Bill, 2006/07:107). With the revised entry requirements, many pupils will need to study an extended programme in addition to the basic subject competencies. Taken together with other institutional changes described below, these reforms can be expected to seriously limit the possibilities of those leaving vocational programmes to attend higher education.

One such change is the removal of the 25:4 rule (Govt. Bill, 2006/07:107) which provided everyone above 25 years of age and with at least 4 years of corroborated work experience with basic eligibility for higher education, even without a school-leaving certificate from upper-secondary school. Work experience was also taken into account by granting a bonus score on the national Scholastic Aptitude Test (Högskoleprovet) which offers an alternative admission route to higher education. There is a strong class factor in the failure to attain a secondary school leaving certificate (Alexanderson 2011; Svensson 2007) and to have early work experience. The 25:4 rule thus addressed the situation of mainly working class pupils, and was designed to reduce the class imbalances in enrolment in higher education. Its removal contributes still further to limiting the opportunities of students with working class backgrounds to attend higher education.

Another change is the introduction of merit points, in which the selection of certain courses (e.g. mathematics or modern languages) gives pupils a comparative advantage in access to higher education (Govt. Bill, 2006/07:107). Research tells us that such selections are more likely to be made by pupils from more privileged social classes, further accentuating class inequality (Ball 2010; Dahlstedt 2007; Härnqvist 1989; Lund 2006). Further, the introduction of merit points will result in a differentiation at an earlier age, which in turn implies a greater impact of social background on educational choices (Alexanderson 2011).

Yet another change in the same direction is the introduction of new quotas for admission to higher education (Govt. Bill, 2006/07:107), where secondary school

leavers without immediate basic access to higher education are placed in a quota with fewer places (National Agency for Higher Education 2011).

Finally, adult education has also experienced significant cutbacks (Norberg & Sedigh, 2010). This form of education has worked to reduce class inequalities by giving pupils from the working class a second chance to attend higher education (cf. Stenberg 2011).

From a class perspective, these reforms should be viewed as a whole, and as such they not only directly reduce the opportunities of pupils with working class backgrounds to attend higher education, but also prompt pupils to make decisions about their future education earlier. When analysing the class structure across different countries, not only is the distribution of the population across different positions of interest, but so too is their permeability, i.e. how strongly people's lives are bound by their class position (cf. Wright 1997). The reforms described above are likely to strengthen the class-bound character of enrolment in higher education, which would have a negative impact on social mobility and so render the working class positions less permeable.

Overlooking the issue of the social distribution of knowledge

From a Neo-Marxist perspective, these reforms are not primarily problematic in relation to social mobility but to questions of power more generally, both in terms of who acquires the power to decide what counts as important knowledge, but also the power that can be gained from knowledge itself. Let us turn to the second matter first.

In terms of school content, education systems in class societies follow certain "distributive rules" (Bernstein 2000), making different knowledge available to different classes. On a societal level, subordinated classes encounter a curriculum where knowledge is mainly organised to be meaningful in local and specific contexts, making it difficult to transfer and use its meanings in different contexts. In contrast, privileged classes encounter a curriculum where knowledge is organised to be meaningful in less context-bound systems of meanings. As Bernstein (2000) stresses, it is within fields of less context-bound knowledge, of a more theoretical orientation, that the relations between objects and events not obviously related to one another are connected. It is thus a powerful form of knowledge, which makes it possible to think about what is less apparent and what is possible, essential for educational objectives such as critical thinking (Beach 2011; Young 2008).

From a class perspective, it may well be argued that the scope for critical discussion (e.g. about the organisation of society and the workplace) is proportionately of greatest importance in the vocational programmes, for the individuals who will occupy the most subordinate and vulnerable positions in the social relations of production (cf. Englund 1981), a line of reasoning found in policy texts from the 1970s (Englund 1989). However, in the decontextualised understanding of GY2011, access to theoretical knowledge in vocational programmes is viewed instead as a problem and, as a result, knowledge is reorganised in relation to much more specific vocational

contexts. This is accomplished not only by reducing the time and space for general subjects, but also by introducing a new model for steering content in which labour market needs are placed at the centre of the organisation, evaluation and development of the vocational curriculum.

To facilitate young people's establishment in the labour market and so that the contribution of upper-secondary vocational programmes to the supply of competence will increase, closer collaboration between the National Agency for Education, the employers of upper-secondary school leavers and other relevant authorities is required... Therefore, the Government considers that national councils for the various vocational programmes should be established... [that] should have the task of providing advice and support, both in terms of developing educational content, but also concerning the objectives and study tasks... These councils may serve appropriately as a forum for continuous dialogue between the National Agency for Education and future employers. The purpose of this dialogue is to match educational supply with the demand in the labour market, in order to facilitate young people's transition from vocational education to employment (Govt. Bill 2008/09:199:46-47, my translation).

This new curriculum has implications for knowledge. Not only does historical experience suggest that employers are unlikely to give priority to knowledge of a more theoretical kind (Boreham 2002; Lundahl 1997; Olofsson 2005), but an ever-changing demand-driven curriculum implies knowledge that is time- and place-specific, i.e. with a very context-bound relevance. This organisation of knowledge, guided by the idea of "translating subjects and courses to descriptions of skills that are used by and comprehensible in the commercial world" (SOU 2008:27:241, my translation), offers pupils access to the applications of theoretical knowledge, but not to the theoretical knowledge that underpins their field of practice. Vocational education is by definition related to fields of practice, and is thus context-related. However, the relation between knowledge and context can be organised in different ways, offering different forms of knowledge and learning (cf. Gamble 2006; Young 2006). Disconnecting practice from theory in vocational programmes means depriving pupils of access to knowledge that could give them increased control over their own knowledge and learning and the opportunity to reflect critically on 'how it is' (cf. Weelahan 2007).

Taken together with the reduced access to higher education, these reforms quite explicitly lock the working class out from access to knowledge that engenders critical views of society and its organisation. Another reform strengthening this tendency is that teacher education is being reorganised to differentiate much more clearly between the vocational/academic paths, for instance by halving the initial teacher training for vocational teachers, a change that Lundahl et al. (2010:54) argues "can be regarded as a return to the previous separation of teacher categories — the 'seminar' and the 'academic'" (also see Lagström 2012).

Attempting to solve problems of throughput and unemployment by undermining critical thinking and theoretical reasoning in vocational programmes is, to say the

least, problematic as it further contributes to the unequal distribution of power and knowledge between classes. Further, this decontextualised approach also neutralises the question of who gains the power to decide on what counts as important knowledge in vocational programmes.

Overlooking the issue of the power over the curriculum

As described above, one of the main goals in GY2011 is to make vocational students more employable, a quality evaluated mainly by employers. With such a premise, the interests of employers are understood as interests common to all, hence the increased power of employers to decide on what counts as important knowledge in the vocational curriculum. Simultaneously, and for the same reason, the power of pupils and teachers over content is criticised and reduced (Nylund 2010). Steering content like this is disquieting from a class perspective that stresses the conflictive interests of employers and (future) workers (cf. Wright 1997). What employers regard as important knowledge is not likely to be learning that lays the ground for a critical discussion of power relations and the distribution of influence or wealth in the workplace. Further, employers are hardly educational theorists or particularly knowledgeable on epistemological questions. It is production and profit, rather than learning, which are the guiding principles behind the organisation of tasks in a workplace (cf. Lindberg 2003; Barnett 2006; Berner 1989). This new balance of power also implies a great class misrepresentation as it is primarily pupils with working class backgrounds who attend vocational programmes.

So, what can be concluded from these changes in policy and research?

Concluding Remarks: Reproducing Class – from a Problem to an Endeavour?

Since education systems are interwoven into the structures of the societies they form part of, and class is a fundamental structure in a capitalist society, ignoring class leads to important questions and problems being overlooked. This is exemplified by contemporary educational policy in Sweden regarding vocational education, which fails to recognise class altogether. This decontextualisation means that questions of power, conflict and control are invariably left out, and vocational education is framed instead within a pure ‘efficiency’ discourse. In this discourse, asymmetric power relations and socially determined class inequalities become invisible, neutralised and naturalised, and a policy is shaped that not only overlooks important problems relating to class but which also risks augmenting class inequalities and excluding young people with working class backgrounds from access to critical knowledge.

If contemporary policy is viewed in its historical context, the consequences of ignoring class can be seen in a shift in ambition from pursuing equality to a form of ‘inclusion’. But more importantly, it expresses itself as a shift from viewing class inequalities as a problem to assuming the appearance of an endeavour. A great deal

of the contemporary policy resembles the period before the 1970s, prior to the joint curriculum. A clear division of the upper-secondary school based on the difference between academic and vocational paths is reinstated. The different exams removed in 1968 have been restored. More direct control by employers over vocational curricula is reintroduced and the content is again to be much more context-bound and subject to the evaluation of local employers. Likewise, the ambition that pupils in vocational programmes shall be 'ready trained' for specific types of wage labour is reintroduced, while the goal of general eligibility for higher education for pupils on vocational programmes is removed. There will again be major differences in teacher education, with teachers in vocational subjects receiving much less training than their academic counterparts. When associated policies are taken into account such as the cutbacks in adult education, the removal of the 25:4 rule, the introduction of merit points and the new quotas for higher education, this tendency is further accentuated.

As the perception of society being comprised of social classes has diminished in educational research, this policy development is being implemented without being related to questions of class and power. This is somewhat ironic since modern policy is, though silent on class in its rhetoric, quite consistent in its class character. This demonstrates the fact that the relevance of class is not merely an empirical question but also a political one, as underlined by Bourdieu in the quote below that concludes this article.

The word 'class' will never be a neutral word so long as there are classes: the question of the existence or non-existence of classes is a stake in the struggle between the classes (Bourdieu 1993:21)

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Notes

- 1 In Sweden, almost all students (98%) continue from 9 years of compulsory primary school to upper-secondary school (Alexandersson 2011). Upper-secondary school in Sweden is thus central in a class context since it is where the most significant official curriculum differentiation between educational pathways takes place. It has two main routes, one preparatory for higher education, and the other vocationally oriented which mainly recruits students from the working class. In an international context, upper-secondary school in Sweden has stood out in that these pathways have been integrated to a large extent (this is elaborated in the second part of the article). The Swedish education system has also stood out as a frontrunner in addressing issues of class inequality (cf. Alexandersson 2011; Ball & Larsson 1989; Benadusi 2001; Erikson & Jonsson 1996; Nicaise et al. 2005; Shavit & Blossfeld 1993).
- 2 In a recent study on how class affects people's lives in Sweden concerning everything from work, education, social mobility and low-wage jobs to well-being, shopping patterns, alcohol consumption and ideological assumptions, it is concluded that "[O]ne thing remains clear: class matters in contemporary Sweden" (Oskarsson, et al. 2010:227).
- 3 Critical perspectives relating to class, power and control in this field of research have become less common in the last few decades. However, there are (more than in many other research areas) contributions in contemporary research on vocational education discussing different phenomena in relation to different conceptions of class (cf. Asplund 2010; Gruber 2007; Högberg 2009; Sandell 2007). Nonetheless, it is rarely in focus and is often almost entirely left out (cf. Berglund 2009; Broman 2009; Jernström 2000; Swahn 2006). Further, even when a class concept is used, it is usually not with a relational and critical understanding focusing on power, conflict and control (see the discussion below).
- 4 (iv) *Lumpen Proletariat* (who do not own the means of production – unable to sell their labour power)
- 5 This table is somewhat modified by the author, based on two tables in Wright (1997:47, 54). The data on which Wright bases his analysis, presented in the table, was collected in the early 1980s. The balance between different class positions today may therefore differ somewhat. The purpose here, however, is not to present a precise description of the contemporary class structure, but to illustrate how class can be conceptualised in contemporary society.
- 6 It should be noted that there are significant differences between different vocational programmes (cf. SOU 2000:39), both in terms of the social background of the students attending them, and concerning the outlooks after completing the education. But, on a general level, there are strong and clear class patterns with deep historical roots (Broady & Börjesson 2005; Nilsson 1981).
- 7 Swedish, English, civics, religious instruction, mathematics, natural science, physical education and art/music/drama.
- 8 It should be noted that the 1990s brought many other changes regarding Swedish education policy that in contrast broke the historical trend of integration between different parts of the education system. This development can be illustrated, for instance, by the new curriculum based on management by outcomes and goals, the establishment of independent schools and of school vouchers, a shift in governance with a stronger influence for municipalities and increasing features of individualisation. These extensive changes have been described as constituting a system shift in the politics of education in Sweden (cf. Englund 1996; Lindensjö & Lundgren 2000; Sundberg 2005; Wahlström 2002), mostly having a segregating effect, increasing class inequalities (cf. Lund 2006; Olofsson 2010; Sandell 2007; Swedish National Agency for Education 2009). However, although playing an important part in class reproduction, the processes in which pupils are sorted for different educational routes will not be dealt with in any length in this article, where the focus is on upper-secondary education and the social distribution of knowledge.
- 9 However, this is a somewhat misleading statement. With the reform initiated in 1991, the drop-out rate in upper-secondary school grew significantly, and became (in 1998) twice as high in vocational programmes compared to preparatory programmes for further studies. Since then, however, the drop-out rate has decreased in vocational programmes. The numbers from different sources vary somewhat (Berglund & Henning-Loeb forthcoming), but the trend was, as Alexandersson (2011:205-206) notes, that: "[L]eaving certificates and grades have improved, especially for those taking the vocational studies option. The completion rate is slightly below the rate for the academic track ... 67% of pupils on vocational tracks graduated from upper-secondary 2008, compared to 56% of those who graduated ten years earlier". Two points can be made here. First, the 'throughput trend' was positive in vocational programmes, making the description of this problem in the policy texts a little misleading. Secondly, the removal of more general content from all vocational programmes appears quite blunt since a great majority of students in vocational programmes were indeed completing their studies. For instance, in 2009/2010 the construction programme had the largest proportion of pupils with a leaving certificate within three years, just over 83 percent (Henning-Loeb 2012).
- 10 E.g. civics is halved, aesthetic subjects are removed from the compulsory curriculum and Swedish is (for most vocational programmes) halved.
- 11 It should be noted that this assumption is far from uncontroversial. Instead, as noted by Beach et al. (2011:149), their empirical studies indicate that "[T]here is no distinction between students of vocational programs and others in regard to interest in and desires for a good education and the value of academic/theoretical knowledge". This assumption, they claim, can instead be seen as resting "[E]ntirely on foundations that are socially constructed elements of a dominant discourse about social belonging, social origins, labor and intellectual ability". This is perhaps also illustrated by the preliminary results of the first applications for the new vocational programmes, where the number of applicants has fallen considerably (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011), by approximately 10% compared to previous years (Berglund & Henning-Loeb forthcoming).

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