

The Hidden Ideology in Objective Measurements – an Example from a Specific Tool for Quality Assurance in Schools

Ricardo Kaminski

There is an inherent ideological discrepancy in the idea and practice of Quality Assurance (QA) within the welfare sector. While QA sails under the objective, instrumental and apolitical flag of strictly measuring the quality of the entity to which it is applied¹, the entity itself – the specific school unit, municipality or even whole country – is expected to adapt to the parameters imposed upon it. This in turn governs the direction taken in work, activities, and discourse, which should per se be understood as highly political (Agevall, 2005, p. 21; Forsell & Ivarsson Westberg, 2014, p. 222).

QA thus intrudes deep into the professional domain. For the profession to which it is applied, QA has been linked to a phenomenon called “the performance paradox” within administrative research, namely the expectation that more and more time will be spent on documenting for the external audit, thus reducing the time devoted to practising the profession itself

¹Often with claims to “[...]provide measurable results” and a “clear image” regarding the quality of the unit to which it is applied.

(Rönnerberg, Strandberg, Wihlborg & Winblad, 2013, pp 145) In his dissertation, Andreas Bergh (2010, pp. 181-189) argues that schools in Sweden have undergone a transition in the 21st century, moving away from a focus on teaching in favour of modelled systems that challenge the autonomy of the teaching profession by prioritizing administrative and instrumental matters rather than educational ones. Bergh describes this as *teaching quality* being overshadowed by *result quality*, *market quality* and *system quality*. Within the field of education, the above-mentioned transition has been linked to a process of *deprofessionalization* of teachers (Bergh, 2010; Ozga, Larsen, Segerholm & Simola, 2011, p. 126; Liedman, 2013, p. 60). Instead of making their own qualified assessments, teachers are expected to adopt the definitions, language, visions and goals formulated by QA. Philosopher Jonna Bornemark (2018, p. 20) describes this transition as being experienced by a vast variety of professions within the public domain in Sweden. In Bornemark's words: "Complex processes that require discerning professionals are transformed into numbers, and ideas that cannot be measured are avoided". This transition can be linked to the spread of New Public Management (NPM), which can be described as the organization of governing techniques within public management, consisting of explicit results and quality goals, measurable standards as well as measurement of performance and accomplishment of specific goals, within which QA is a governing technique (Agevall, 2005, p. 21; Forsell & Ivarsson Westberg, 2014, p. 222).

In this article I will present an example from a tool for measuring quality and awarding quality certificates widely used for schools in Sweden.² The objective is to make visible the initially described discrepancy in instrumental reasoning by applying the concept of *pseudo quantities* (Liedman, 2011) in the analysis of a QA tool. According to Liedman (2011, p. 64), a pseudo-quantity is the phenomenon where something takes the *form* of a quantity, such as a number. However, when looking closely at how this number

² Due to the nondisclosure agreement, the name of the tool has been concealed.

is constructed, it completely lacks the attributes of an actual quantity. Instead, such quantities should be understood as part of a social process that legitimizes a specific way of talking about and establishing the epistemic object and as such – the ideological subject – of *quality* for the entity being measured.

Hallmark of our times

The genealogy of QA can be traced back to 16th. century manufacturing and trading practices in the Netherlands. These practices involved systematization of meticulous and detailed regulations, inspections, stamping and sealing procedures in the Dutch "measuring houses" where manufacturers marketed their products and met merchants (Nyström, 1955). Goods were carried to a "hall" and inspected, whereupon those that met a certain standard received a so-called hallmark; a certificate showing that they were of an adequate standard for sale (Nyström, 1955). Liedman (2011, pp. 50-66) compares this hallmark with the certificates of today. What determined quality in the manufacturing industry was the characteristics of the product and whether it fulfilled its intended function. For example, a good quality characteristic of a chair would be not breaking when sat upon and a piece of fabric should not fray or be full of holes, while a nail should be straight. However, Liedman asks what function schools should fulfil and, more importantly, who should have the power to decide? Merely by formulating criteria for measuring school quality, the very question of how future society is envisioned becomes relevant, because the question "what is a good school?" implicitly encompasses the question "what is our vision for the future of society?" (Martinsson, 2012, pp. 151-176).

Market creation and governing framework

What we today recognize as QA within NPM derive from economic auditing concepts and practices that were transferred to a wider range of fields by the end of the 1980s (Power, 1999, p. 42). They must be understood through the global social, political and economic development which at that time was characterized by aggressive neoliberalism with rapid liberalization, privatization

and decentralization of previously state-provided social sectors (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). QA and NPM can thus be understood as the governing framework applied to previously state-ruled fields within the process of market creation through privatization (Rose, 1995, p. 40-59). In this global process, the Swedish school market was created in the 1990s (Swedish Government Official Reports, 2014:12, p. 135), specifically linked to the municipality reform of 1989 (Prop. 1989/90:41) and the private school reform in 1992 (Prop. 1992/93:230). Until the late 1970s governance mainly took the form of formulating rules, based on the concept of a hierarchical model. Goals, rules and guidelines such as the curriculum, city grant rules and central detailed requirements were formulated centrally to ensure that the targets maintained a high level of quality. This perspective was challenged in the 1980s by calls for more qualitative assessments of the specific programmes and measures evaluated (Karlsson, 1997, pp. 113 - 128). By the late 1990s, the Swedish government introduced quality audit requirements labelled “Ordinance (1997:702) on quality audit within school etc, 2 §”. This was preceded by the signing of the Bologna declaration the previous year, which is important for this particular context. The Bologna declaration was signed by the ministers of education from twenty-nine European countries, with the goal of making Europe a world leader in the area of higher education (Pettersson, Olsson & Krejsler, 2012, p. 204).

Although the field of education has traditionally been considered a national rather than a transnational issue, the European Commission’s White Papers, where the Commission formulates propositions for the EU, exhibited a growing interest in a more coherent governance of education across Europe (Pettersson, Olsson & Krejsler, 2014 p. 150). Specifically, the question of youth and education can be said to have taken a prominent place on the political agenda within the European objective to ensure competitive, knowledge-based economies (Pettersson, Olsson & Krejsler, 2011 p. 1). The incentive is the concern that competition from emerging economic superpowers would lead to Europe losing its current position in the global arena. The field of education and the concept of lifelong learning are considered crucial factors for a bright European future (Pettersson, Olsson & Krejsler, 2014, p.

151). In 2015 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report on the Swedish school system, proposing that the Swedish authorities adopt external QA to a higher extent to improve the results of the PISA study (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015, p. 166). The PISA tests themselves can be said to have served as a measure of the national education system, where the results are presented in such a way that they appear to reflect the quality of the national educational system in each EU member state. The proposal to adopt QA to a greater extent can thus be viewed in the context of European governance.

Locally, competitiveness on the school market has become an area for which teachers are accountable (Lundhal, Erixon Arreman & Holm, 2014, p. 255). The QA and certification practices are based on the market rationality that the quality of the school is a commodity worth buying. On a local level, certification constitutes a commercial practice that helps the school to survive on the market. However, on the European governance level, certification serves as a tool for creating a specific type of youth and a deprofessionalized teacher-subject. The market demand for flexibility is common ground for both.

Ideology and interpellation

The theoretical point of departure in our analysis is a critique of ideology and Critical Theory inspired by the eclectic mesh of ideas sometimes gathered under the umbrella term The Frankfurt school (Žižek, 2008, pp. 24-25). In a very basic sense, this perspective impels us to acknowledge that some claims of validity are determined by power relations (Habermas, 1996, p. 64), where both these claims and the power relations take the form of goal rationality (Horkheimer, 1987, p. 350). When the internal distinction between meaning and causality and the external power relation commingles (Habermas, 1996, p. 64), the ideological nature of language or knowledge is merely experienced as objective and neutral (Liedman & Ingemar, 1989, p. 25). The individual who finds him-, her- or itself in relation to a context, for example, a society, group or institution, will be interpellated

(Althusser, 1971, p. 170) or addressed as a subject who is supposed to know this information, these objective and practical goals and orient accordingly (Horkheimer, 1987, p. 350).

The QA tool is here presented as a social form that appeals to individuals to affirm themselves and each other as subjects within the epistemology created by the “objective” claims of validity. From this perspective, a tool that merely describes a school can be seen as engaging in ideological subject creation for the individuals within the school.

Pseudo quantities and measurement scales

To examine and understand the QA certificate and the system of measurement itself, the analytical tool of pseudo quantities developed by Sven-Erik Liedman (2011) is operationalized by Stanley Smith Stevens’ theory of scales and measurements (Stevens, 1946, p. 679). For Liedman, a pseudo quantity describes a phenomenon where something takes the form of a quantity but totally lacks the actual properties of a quantity (Liedman, 2011, p. 64). Liedman argues that the phenomenon of pseudo quantities has become an established form of discussing quality through the spread of New Public Management in the welfare sector. All quantification of qualitative values builds upon the creation of pseudo quantities. Based on Aristotle, a quality denotes the descriptive question “what is?”, whereas a quantity indicates “how many?” (Liedman, 2013, pp. 45-66). Liedman argues that the idea of refracting a quality into a multitude of quantifiable aspects draws its conceptual representation from the Newtonian notion of prismatic refraction of light into a multitude of colours.

in the woods, the order in which I present my sticks, stones and blueberries is irrelevant. They might as well be presented as blueberries, stones and sticks without the order itself affecting the categories. In addition, nominal categories cannot be added together in a logarithmic way. If A, B and C are presented as 1, 2 and 3, we cannot add the numbers 1 and 2 together to result in the number 3, nor can you make blueberries out of sticks and stones. In other words, they are nominally different categories. The ordinal scale represents variables where the order in which they are presented is important. Stairs are good examples. The second step of the stairs must come between the first and the third one. Here, the distance is not important. The steps can be of a different height, length or even material, but what is important is the order in which they come. The interval scale is the first scale we can really call quantitative in a traditional sense. In the interval scale there is not only an order between the variables but also a distance. The distance between five and ten degrees Celsius is the same as between ten and fifteen. Finally, the ratio scale has the same principles as the interval scale, the only difference being that we can determine an absolute zero value. The zero in Celsius just happens to be where water freezes, so we cannot really say that ten degrees is twice as warm as five. However, with a ratio scale such as height or weight, it is meaningful to talk about the absolute relationship between the variables. Ten meters is indeed twice the length of five. The ratio scale can undergo all types of logarithmic transformation.

How do these measurement scales help us to understand the creation of pseudo quantities within QA and NPM in the welfare sector? Let us have a look at a specific tool for QA and the issue of certificates.

A Quality Assurance tool for schools in Sweden

The main empirical material consists of documents pertaining to the composition of a QA tool for schools in Sweden. Access to the material was made possible through investigative work ordered by a medium-sized municipality in Sweden. The articulated goal of the municipality was to have all their schools and pre-schools

certified by the company selling the QA tool. Due to a non-disclosure agreement, the identity of the municipality and company will not be revealed. It should be noted that the teachers' professional experience of working with the tool is not included in the empirical material for this article. The vast body of news articles reporting on schools with certificates and information about how parents de facto take the certificate into account when choosing a school or preschool are also excluded. In addition, the phenomenon of QA and certification as a form of goal management is a practice that operates in fields beyond the world of education. In this sense, the empirical material can be understood as no more than a minor part of the phenomenon. The aim of the analysis of the material can therefore be said to be two-fold. The content of the tool is specific to the context of education, while the analysis of the form focuses on the quantification of qualitative values per se. With the latter, it is hoped that the analysis can be transferred to other fields where QA tools are utilized.

The empirical basis of this article consists of the following documents, with the actual municipality and tool de-identified:

- Audit reports for the school units within the municipality (35 documents)
- Quality criteria for compulsory education including preschool class and leisure time centre, school year 2014/2015
- Quality criteria for preschool, school year 2014/2015
- Quality Certification, Quality assurance system, Personnel presentation
- Quality Certification, self-assessment template for staff
- Quality Certification, Written Accounting (HOW – questions)³
- Quality Certification, Self-evaluation for the head/preschool manager
- Quality Certification, Surveys for students, parents and staff
- Quality Certification, Membership [BUN-2011.xxxx]

³Author's translation of the Swedish "Hur-frågorna".

- Quality Assurance System [BUN 2014 / xxxx-X]
- School Inspectorate, "Collaboration for an Equal Assessment/Reassessment of National Exams 2015, Accounting for Government Assignments", Diary No. U2014 / 7535 / GV, (2016-11-16)
- <https://www.skolverket.se/skolutveckling/inspiration-och-stod-i-arbetet/stod-i-arbetet/arbete-med-skolans-vardegrund> (20-11-2018)
- School Act (2010: 800)

As can be seen from the material, the tool contains documents addressing and calling upon not only the teaching profession, but students, parents, heads and other personnel. In addition to the tool itself, texts from the Swedish National Agency for Education, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate and the School Act are included as empirical material for the purpose of contrasting and contextualizing the language of the tool in focus.

The implosion of scales

In the following I describe the process in which the nominal categories are quantified within the framework of the tool, italicizing the different scale levels within brackets. The transition from one scale to another is further discussed in light of the concept of pseudo-quantities (Liedman, 2011) and a qualitative counterpart, pseudo qualities, is suggested, which is produced as a bi-product of quantification.

The tool divides school quality into eleven "domains" (nominal). Each domain is in turn divided into seven "steps" (ordinal). Within each step a number of statements, or criteria, are formulated (nominal). All the criteria are formulated in such a way that it is possible to agree or disagree with the statements. For example, the first step of the "Image" domain contains the criterion "The school attempts to improve its image". If the school is considered to live up to the statements listed under the given step, the step is deemed to have been achieved. In order to reach a step, the previous steps must also be fulfilled (ordinal). Each domain is weighted with one to three points, called the "factor" of the

domain (ratio). The factor for the “Image” domain is one, so if the school is considered to attempt to improve its image, it would gain one point. When the points are counted, a graph is printed out to visualize the result of the “objective” measurement. The tool in question hands out a quality certificate if sixty points are scored.

Domain	Factor	Steps							Points	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
A	Knowledge and Skills			X						9
B	Security and Well-being				X					8
C	Students' Responsibility for their own Learning					X				8
D	Method and Teaching Role						X			4
E	Participation	X								4
F	Organization				X					3
G	Governance and Leadership					X				6
H	Communication						X			4
I	Competence					X				3
J	Resource Utilization	X								2
K	Image				X					3

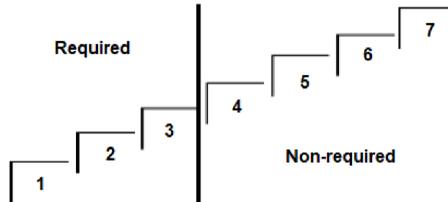
*Fig. 2. A spreadsheet with graph showing the steps acquired by the school, and the points scored thereby. As presented by the external QA.*⁴

The domains themselves constitute a nominal scale. Just like the sticks and stones, the A, B and C of the instrument are mutually exclusive categories and merely names for classification, i.e., the order in which they are presented is irrelevant. What comes after A could just as well come after B. Within each domain the steps are presented in the form of an ordinal scale; the order in which they come is of importance: To reach the second step, the first must be achieved and so on. The tool illustrates the form of the ordinal scale in its educational material, where the steps are presented with the illustration of stairs leading from the first step to the seventh, called The Stairs of Quality.

⁴ Due to non disclosure agreement and copyrighted material, this is only a representation of the actual tool made by the author.

The Stairs of Quality

Quality is not something that happens by itself – quality must be conquered step by step



*Fig. 3. Presentation material distributed to the teachers when they are introduced to the QA tool at the school, illustrating the seven steps divided into required and non-required criteria for certification.*⁵

The criteria within the steps themselves are, however, of a nominal character. Let us take two criteria from the “Security and well-being” domain as an example. On the third step we find the criterion “The school measures and follows up on study satisfaction and well-being”. On the fourth step we find the criterion “The students have a physical study environment that creates well-being”. These criteria are of a nominal character. The first criterion refers to the monitoring work conducted by the school and the second to the school’s physical study environment. They describe nominally and qualitatively different, mutually exclusive categories and there is no actual order between them. You can make efforts to monitor well-being without having a pleasant study environment, just as you can have a neat and tidy study environment without anybody trying to monitor satisfaction. Within the tool, however, there is an ordinal order between the nominal criteria. The characteristics and topology of one scale are thus collapsed onto another scale; the nominal scale is collapsed into the form of an ordinal scale.

⁵ Due to non-disclosure agreement and copyright material, this is a representation of the actual tool made by the author.

Yet another, and arguably more irremediable, implosion of scales occurs when adding the “Factors”, making it possible to not only decide the supposed order between nominally different categories but also the very distance between them. As the tool has a fixed absolute zero value of zero points, we know that it is a ratio scale ranging between zero and, when counting the domains and their factors multiplied by seven, one hundred and twenty-six points. Five points is, so to speak, half of ten points. The question then becomes: five and ten of what? As Liedman (2011, p. 64) points out, five and ten are actually not real quantities in this case. There is no real measurable distance between efforts to “improve the image of the school” and whether the school “actively works to influence and stimulate students to embrace basic democratic values”. A point can be scored by either of the two, or neither: it is a pseudo quantity. Within statistics one would say that the measurement is ascribed a higher scale level than is actually appropriate and therefore lacking in transitivity (Hellevik, 1996, pp. 132-133).

In the very same way, even the criteria are not really qualitatively descriptive. As the criteria are transformed into pseudo quantities, they merely give the measurement the illusive backdrop of a qualitative assessment. In other words, the process that creates pseudo quantities also transforms the very nominal categories and criteria into pseudo qualities. The criteria may have the form of descriptive qualities, but when the final “quality score” is allocated, these scores fully lack the properties of a qualitative assessment. The “quality score” of one school is not comparable with the score of another. We do not know if the points scored come from, for example, criteria pertaining to teachers engaging in marketing, from measuring job satisfaction, working with democratic values etc. The quantification process has depleted the qualitative descriptions of meaning and left us with a dead number and a certificate. So, if the QA tool is neither quantitative nor qualitative, what is it? The argument put forth is: it is ideological.

The goal rationality of a descriptive question

We can decode the empirical material through a “symptomatic reading”, where the negative space of the text is identified as a kind of inner connective tissue between what is visible and what is hidden and latent in the text (Rehmann, 2013, p. 197). For the tool in question, the empirical material contains documents and questionnaires for the professional categories within the school to fill in, called “The How Questions”. These questions cover all the criteria for the various steps for all the domains, allowing the teachers to describe how they work to promote, for example, the image of the school or how they measure the students’ knowledge, and so on. The symptomatic reading of the innocent question asking the teachers “How do you do this?” is thus understood as conveying the latent imperative “Do this!”, acknowledging the ideological nature of the seemingly descriptive information within goal rationality. The idea of the 'individual' interpellated as a certain kind of subject is used here to interpret the question “How do you promote the image of the school?” as the latent expectation to “Include in your work the promotion of the image of the school!”. Thus, Quality Certification becomes a goal rationality that imposes upon the teacher a set of expectations based on the very question of what a teacher is supposed to do in order to be a good teacher.

The prism metaphor

The concept of “quality” serves the function of what Žižek (2008, p. 112) calls a master-signifier, which is the point through which the subject is 'sewn' to the signifier. When the tool is directed to the teachers, it “hails” the profession: “Hey teachers! Quality!”. The answer to the “hail” is already designated by the very content of the epistemic object of quality created within the tool. Conversely, how we speak about school “quality” is funnelled through the practical goal of being certified by the tool, thus commingling the epistemology of the school with the external power relations. This is a vital part of the argument for how the analytical concept of pseudo-quantities can be fruitful for recognising the ideology hidden within objective measurements. The diagram in Fig. 2 is a good example of visualization, as it

illustrates how the tool makes use of the Newtonian conceptual structure; note the red line that runs through the diagram. What does it imply? The choice of a "line diagram" is indicative in this context. This type of chart is commonly used to show how the value of one variable changes over time, often to illustrate trends in relation to other variables. In contrast, bar graphs are used to visualize the values of several factors of variables of a nominal nature, such as in the case of the eleven domains, from each of which stacks will rise. The line chart might be misused, but it is nevertheless illustrative; after all, the choice of the "line diagram" conveys that we are dealing with a single variable: "quality". The line curve in the diagram is no less than a metaphor for the school's measured wavelength movement across a spectrum of frequencies: the pure light made visible through the tool's prism.

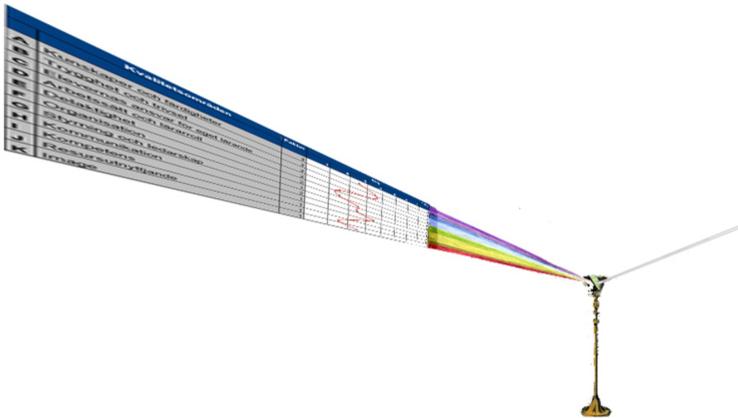


Fig. 4. The author's illustration of the metaphor of the prism. The "objective" white light refracted through the tool projecting the "truth" of the school's quality over a spectrum.

The metaphor of the prism illustrates how the ideological subjects, or master-signifiers, produce and organize discursive structures. The prism, i.e. the QA tool, refracts the school's epistemology into

a structure of discourses, which are then reflected back into the ideological subject “quality”. The projection is thereby imagined to be equivalent to the possible epistemology of the school: The objective is the ideology and the ideology is the objective. The school is what the tool says it is. Naming it a “tool” suggests that something instrumental is happening, as in Newton's prism, where it is presented as a matter of simply refracting “the quality”, measuring it and projecting the result onto a sheet of paper. Or as the tool states, “[...] to make the quality of the school visible” (Marketing material for the tool, 2011).

Required and non-required criteria

Leaving the form of the tool and moving to the second layer of the argument, we shall examine the criteria as they are presented in the documents constituting the tool. The tool sorts the criteria into those required for certification and those that are not – and so will we. While the different factors of the domain imply assigning prominence to criteria pertaining to traditional school values such as knowledge, well-being and participation rather than economic values of image, resource utilization and organization, the division of the tool into required and non-required criteria for certification suggests a different weighting than that implied by the factors. If the factors led us to believe that each step of the “Knowledge and Skills” domain is worth three times more than each step of the “Image” domain, the division into required and non-required criteria suggests another interpretation. To become “Quality Certified”, schools must fulfil all the criteria for the first three steps of each domain. This means that the nine points obtained by the first three steps of the “Knowledge and Skills” domain are equally important as the three points for the first three steps of the “Image” domain. At the same time, the three points obtained from the fourth step of the “Knowledge and Skills” domain is worth nothing in comparison to the one point for the first step of the “Image” domain. Instead, what matters more than these pseudo quantities is not in which domain a specific criterion is formulated, but on which side of the division between required and non-required criteria it is placed; is the criterion on a step below or

equal to three, or is it placed on a higher step as a non-requirement?

For the Critical Theoretical examination, the dividing line between required and non-required criteria is an obvious methodological focal point. The perspective raises questions about what is being presented and what is being repressed in a given context as well as what is taken for granted (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2008, p. 348). In the field under investigation, where quality and measurability take the form of a hub for the conversation concerning the school, I believe that it is justifiable to explore what is being presented and what is being excluded with regard to the “measured quality” within the tool, but also as a result of the phenomenon of QA practice. The idea is to “break up the petrified social reality and make it available for new political considerations and decisions” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008, p. 348). Instead of focusing on goal achievement, i.e., “how should we reach the set goals?”, the critical researcher must ask how the goals themselves impact on the entity (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008, p. 328). To achieve a “critical understanding”, sociologist Johan Asplund (1979) argues that we must place the study object in a context that allows comparisons. Asplund holds that it is important to go beyond the phenomenon itself. This can be done by situating research objects in a wider cultural, economic and political context (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p 16). An example of going outside the phenomenon itself is recognizing the influence that history, culture and social positions have on knowledge, as well as identifying and questioning the assumptions underlying common ways of perceiving, understanding and acting (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008, p. 348). To discuss the issue, I use the Swedish curriculum, Swedish School Law and research material for the purpose of contrasting. That is not to say that these are unproblematic or unworthy of critical scrutiny. On the contrary, they too are impregnated with ideology. One could even argue it is the very purpose of law and curriculum to reflect a set of ideological visions and values. The use of contrast is meant to make visible the change of emphasis within the field of education in Sweden in terms of the mission and expectations set for the professional

categories in this area. I argue that change can be made visible by contrasting the different sets of discourse against each other.

Domain criteria

Let us delve into the required and non-required criteria and how they relate to the second layer of the argument, where the actual content addresses a specific type of flexible teacher-subject as an arena for political governance. I will here focus on the domains A-E, which are called “main processes” in the tool. The domains examined here are:

- A. Knowledge and Skills
- B. Security and Well-being
- C. Students' Responsibility for their own Learning
- D. Method and Teaching Role
- E. Participation

If the dividing line between required and non-required criteria within each domain can tell us something about the visions and implications that they evoke in the schools and teachers, what would those visions and implications be?

A. Knowledge and Skills

Within the required criteria for “Knowledge and Skills”, there is a clear focus on the students' results and the capacity of schools to measure and document them. We are informed that it is of importance for the school to have “[...] routines to follow up on the knowledge results at an individual level” and that “different methods are used to monitor, measure and document students' knowledge and skills”. When we consider these criteria in relation to the non-required criterion within the same domain, i.e. “The school has developed methods to ensure equivalent assessment of knowledge and skills on the basis of the national governance documents”, the contour of a specific governance is made visible. With this division between required and non-required criteria, we can understand that the design of the tool places greater importance on the school documenting student results than on

methods to ensure an equivalent assessment of said results. The placement of these specific criteria on each side of the requirement division raises the question of what function student results are supposed to fulfil in relation to school objectives. What cohesive framework of ideas is at work here?

In a report from 2015, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate concluded that schools that apply methods to ensure equivalent assessment are generally more restrictive in their assessments than schools that do not do so. In other words, efforts to ensure equivalent assessment tend to lower the average grades (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2015, p. 5). A dissonance is discernible in the context of school marketization and QA as a competitive practice. The pressure on schools to prove themselves competitive on the school market has been linked to such phenomena as “teaching for the test”, where teachers are encouraged to focus on ensuring that the students perform well in specific tests, in order to enhance the measured test results (Lundahl & Erixon Arreman, 2014, p. 255). Schools with a higher average grade are considered more attractive on the market than schools with a lower average. The dissonance between the goals of market competitiveness on the one hand, and equality in education on the other, can be seen in the line separating required and non-required criteria in the epistemic object of quality created by the external QA actor. The latent cohesive framework conveyed through the dividing line is that “quality” is not achieved by ensuring that all schools assess students and grades in the same manner, but rather through a focus on handing out high grades. For the teacher interpellated by the tool, ensuring quality implies focusing on measurable and marketable results such as high grades, rather than non-market oriented values such as equivalent assessment.

B. Security and Well-being

The theme of schools' measurement ability reappears in the “Security and Well-being” domain and can be seen in the required criterion to “[...] measure and monitor job satisfaction and well-being”. Within the same domain we find the non-required criteria “students have a physical environment that creates well-being”,

“the school creates a social environment promoting safety and community” and “the school works actively and consciously to influence and stimulate students to embrace our society's basic democratic values”. I will highlight two main themes located on the dividing line between the required and the non-required criteria for this domain.

The first theme within “Security and Well-being” is the emphasis on measuring and monitoring well-being. What matters is that safety and satisfaction are measured, rather than the actual provision of a safe and pleasant working environment. When seeing a school certified as fulfilling the criteria required for “Security and Well-being”, one might gain the impression that it is a safe and pleasant school. However, this is not necessary for certification. What is certified is that the school measures well-being, which is ensured by the very fact that the school employs the QA surveys. Thus, by employing the QA tool, the required “Security and Well-being” criteria are automatically met. What is certified is merely the use of certification practices and thus the tool itself. This might not be the first thing that comes to mind when choosing a school certified for ensuring “Security and Well-being”. Nevertheless, as a marketing strategy it serves its purpose.

The second theme covers the non-required criterion of influencing students to embrace basic democratic values. This “democracy work” is one of the main missions of a school as described in the Swedish school law and curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011; *The Swedish Education Act*, 2010:800, 1 ch. 4§). Even when the Swedish National Agency for Education discusses the topic of security and well-being, it does so in relation to this democratic mission. It is through the educational work carried out by schools with values such as human rights and democracy that security and well-being are to be ensured (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). The actual question of what kind of work is necessary to ensure security and well-being at a school is ignored, as the answer given by the external QA is subtle but clear: forget about democracy and human rights, security means ensuring a competitive advantage on the school market. When adding the latent implications of the ordinal scale,

conveyed by the metaphor of the stairs, there is another, perhaps deeper message to be interpreted: we can only reach (the step of) democracy and human rights through (the steps of) competitive practices.

C. Students' Responsibility for their own Learning

This domain pertains to the creation of a specific youth-subject. As the name of the domain implies, an emphasis on student responsibility is written into the tool itself. The students are to be trained to take the initiative and develop their ability to “[...] take a personal responsibility for their own learning”. We can contextualize this with what Petersson and colleagues describe as the creation of a specific type of youth-subject where “life-long learning” and values such as “initiative for learning” are seen as central (Petersson, Olsson & Krejsler, 2012, p. 204). The European Commission elevates the idea of personal responsibility for learning as a more or less decisive factor for a bright European future on the competitive global market (Petersson, Olsson & Krejsler, 2014, p. 151). The desirable youth-subject should constantly be ready to re-evaluate knowledge and to adapt to the ever changing market. I argue that we can here discern the neoliberal political-economic theory of extensive individualization serving as a guiding rationale behind the idea of individualized responsibility. QA and NPM are presented as governing frameworks applied on previous government-ruled fields within the process of market creation through privatization (Rose, 1995, pp. 40-59). When QA promotes a specific youth-subject that fits the neoliberal social form for which NPM was established, may we dare to say that the desirable youth-subject in question is a neoliberal dream?

Within this domain the tool makes reference to striving to meet the goals of the national curriculum but does so only as a non-required criterion. By promoting an individualized responsibility, the placement of the curriculum as a non-required criterion indicates a shift. Within the Swedish curriculum, the term “responsibility” is now used in relation to the school's responsibility for teaching: “The school shall take responsibility

for ensuring that each student acquires and develops the knowledge that is necessary for each individual and member of society” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011, p 11). The curriculum highlights schools’ responsibility for teaching with reference to Swedish school law in that students “shall be given the guidance and stimulation they need in their learning” (*The Swedish Education Act*, 2010:800, 3 ch. 2§) When addressing the students’ responsibility, the curriculum does so in terms of their “possibility and conditions”, an addition that is not made by the tool. The tool can thus be said to impose a shift from the schools’ responsibility to that of the students, i.e. from society to the individual.

D. Method and teaching role

The “Method and Teaching Role” domain concerns the very creation of the teacher-subject and what role teachers are supposed to internalize to be considered quality teachers, worthy of scoring points and being awarded certificates. A criterion for this domain is that “[...] the teacher role is characterized by variation and flexibility”. The fact that the role of teacher is mentioned can be interpreted to mean that the criterion is directed towards the teaching profession; teacher-subjects “characterized by variation and flexibility” are considered valuable. There is an interconnection between QA within NPM and the ideal of flexibility that drives the deprofessionalization process. The sociologist Michael Allvin highlights how the ideals of flexibility have spread and become manifested in a variety of ways since the early 1980s, such as flexible working hours, flexible work tasks, attitudes etc. (Allvin, 2008, p. 19). According to Allvin, flexibility in terms of work is an idea that emerged in relation to customer-oriented areas of work in decentralized organizations with a high degree of goal management. While flexibility and goal management are closely linked to decentralized organizations, deregulation and the idea of the individual's own agency (Allvin, 2008, p. 42), Allvin argues that there is an inherent contradiction in the idea of flexibility. While flexibility is promoted as leading to a higher degree of individual freedom and agency, at the same time it requires a higher degree of participation, self-awareness and

activity in new and ever-changing goals (Allvin, 2008, p. 34). Goal management therefore requires control technologies that promote a subject who is active of her/his own volition; technologies that, in turn, operate by means of knowledge, rationality and subject creation (Allvin, 2008, p. 42). While flexibility indeed promotes the individual's own agency, it is an agency defined and restricted by external goals. When the criterion addresses the teacher-subject with the latent imperative to embrace a "flexible teaching role", the question arises: flexible with regard to what? Flexible in relation to their own professional assessments, pedagogical research, market demand, school law or in terms of the goals defined by external actors such as the tool itself? If, for example, teachers were not aware of the fact that their role includes marketing work and promoting the image of the school before encountering the tool, they will most definitely be aware of it afterwards – it is a criterion for certification. A flexible teacher-subject should then be able to easily adapt.

E. Participation

The "Participation" domain operates on the very concept of participation itself. If a school scores highly in the area of student participation, what would we believe the participation consisted of? A required criterion for certification is that the "students participate in the quality assurance" and another that "parents are given the opportunity to participate in the quality assurance". We can see in the required criteria for "Participation" how the very idea of participation is defined by the QA work itself. In other words, the required criteria for the participation of students and their parents are defined as the school prompting them to respond to the self-assessment questionnaires in the tool. This is formulated in the required criterion "the school measures and monitors the participation of students and parents" by means of the surveys in the QA tool. Thus, by employing the QA tool, which includes surveys addressing students and parents, the school (self)fulfils the requirements for "Participation". The traditional concept of "participation in the learning process" is also considered, but is a non-required criterion formulated as "the school works actively to continuously increase the students' participation in the learning

processes”. The concept of participation can be said to be operationalized through the placement of criteria on either side of the requirements and non-requirements for certification. The tool defines participation as using the tool, so if the tool is used the school scores highly in terms of participation, while what would traditionally be associated with participation in the learning process is defined as unnecessary for certification.

There is another usage of the concept of participation in the Swedish national curriculum that links it to the mission of all schools to ensure democratic values. The curriculum uses the term participation in the context of preparing “students for participation and co-responsibility and for the rights and obligations that characterize a democratic society” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). Thus, the curriculum relates the concept of participation to democratic principles rather than QA practice. The tool, however, does not mention “democracy work” under the domain of Participation.

The clandestine shift of values

New forms of control are being adopted in the decentralized schools. However, at a time when goal management has become a priority, the question of which goals are set will be crucial for how society will be shaped. The QA mythology of objectively “measuring quality” through the creation of pseudo quantities and leaning against a positivistic Newtonian conceptual legitimization conceals the fact that the measure itself imposes goals and values on schools. In the empirical example analysed for this article, these goals and values differ from the national curriculum and Swedish school law and can be said to short-circuit the ideological governance of the schools. Words are given new meanings and connotations. Responsibility is shifted from the schools to the students. Participation for both students and teachers now includes taking part in marketing rather than pedagogical practices. Security and well-being are defined as gaining a competitive advantage through working to achieve certification rather than educational work with values such as “human rights” and “democracy”. Knowledge and skills should be measurable,

promoting summative over formative assessments and deprioritizing equivalent assessment in favour of higher grades.

The tool can thus be said to impose ideological values, goals and governance rationales on the education system without prior public discussion and scrutiny by government institutions. Driven by the need to survive in the market, the certification process becomes a self-fulfilling end in itself. By looking more closely at what is presented and what is excluded in the specific QA tool, we have seen that values such as school image, marketing and flexibility with regard to the ever changing market take precedence over democratic values, equivalent assessment and the national curriculum.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Lina Rahm, post doc at Linköping University, for her encouragement and guidance in transforming the findings from my masters thesis into a short article version for Confero. I would also like to thank my peers Mikael Riikonen and Gustav Lindstedt for their valuable and extensive proofreading. Thanks also to Dr. David J. Poxson, Principal Research Engineer at Linköping University and Mathias Martinsson, Senior Lecturer at Linköping University, for reading and sharing your thoughts and ideas on the first draft of the paper.

References

- Agevall, L. (2005). *Välfärdens organisering och demokratin – en analys av New Public management*. Växjö: Växjö Universitet.
- Allvin, M. New rules of work: exploring the boundaryless job. In Näswall, K., Hellgren, J., & Sverke, M. (2008). *The Individual in the Changing Working Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*. London: New Left Books.
- Alvesson, M. & Deetz, S. (2000). *Kritisk samhällsvetenskaplig metod*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2008). *Tolkning och reflektion: vetenskapsfilosofi och kvalitativ metod*, 2:nd, (ed.). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Bergh, A. (2010). *Vad gör kvalitet med utbildning? Om kvalitetsbegreppets skilda innebörder och dess konsekvenser för utbildning*. Örebro: Örebro Universitet
- Bornemark, J. (2008). *Det omätbaras renässans – En uppgörelse med pedanternas världsherravälde*. Stockholm: Volante.
- Forsell A., & Ivarsson Westberg A. (2014). *Administrationssamhället*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Kommunikativt handlande: texter om språk, rationalitet och samhälle*. (2. uppl.) Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hellevik, O. (1996). *Forskningsmetoder i sociologi och statsvetenskap*. Stockholm: Natur och kultur.
- Horkheimer, M. (1987). Förnuftets slut, In Burrill, J. & Adorno, T.W. (ed.) (1987). *Kritisk teori – en introduktion*. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T.W. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: philosophical fragments*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press.
- Karlsson, O. (1997). Från utvärdering till kvalitetssäkring. En kritisk granskning av utvecklingen inom utvärderingsfältet. In SoS-rapport 1997:23, *Röster om den svenska*

- barnomsorgen*. Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen och Liber Förlag.
- Liedman S.E., & Nilsson, I. (ed.) (1989). *Om ideologi och ideologianalys: uppsatser och texter*, (2:nd ed.). Göteborg: Institutionen för idé- och lärdomshistoria, Univ.
- Liedman S.E. (2011). *Hets! : En bok om skolan*. Stockholm: Albert Boniers förlag.
- Liedman, S.E. (2013), 'Pseudo-quantities, new public management and human judgement'. *Confero*, Vol. 1, no. 1
- Lundahl, L., Erixon Arreman, I., Holm, A. S., & Lundström, U. (2014). *Gymnasiet som marknad*. Umeå: Boréa Bokförlag.
- Martinsson, M. (2012). Skolans ideologiska spänningar. In Petersson, K. Dahlstedt, M. & Plymoth, P. (ed.). *Fostran av framtidens medborgare: normer och praktiker bortom välfärdsstaten*. Lund: Sekel förlag.
- Newton, I. (1704). *Opticks or, a treatise of the reflexions, refractions, inflexions and colours of light. Also two treatises of the species and magnitude of curvilinear figures*. London: printed for Sam. Smith, & Benj. Walford.
- Nyström, P. (1955). *Stadsindustriens arbetare före 1800-talet: [bidrag till kännedom om den svenska manufakturindustrien och dess sociala förhållanden]*. Stockholm: Tiden.
- OECD (2015). *Improving schools in Sweden: An OECD Perspective*, Paris: OECD.
- Ordinance (1997:702), on quality audit within school etc, 2 §
- Ozga, J., Larsen, D., Segerholm, C., & Simola, H. (2011). *Fabricating Quality in Education - Data and governance in Europe*. New York: Routledge.
- Petersson, K., Olsson, U., & Krejsler, J. B. (2012). Europa som fostran – exempen lärarutbildning och ungdomspolitik. In Petersson, K., Dahlstedt, M., & Plymoth, B. (ed.). *Fostran av framtidens medborgare: normer och praktiker bortom välfärdsstaten*. Lund: Sekel förlag.
- Petersson, K., Olsson, U., & Krejsler, J. B. (2014). Den sociala frågans återkomst. In Axelsson, T., Balldin, J., & Qvarsebo, J. (ed.). *Styrningskonst på utbildningsarenan:*

- upphöjda begrepp i svensk utbildningsdiskurs*, (1 ed.).
Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Rehmann, J. (2013). *Theories of ideology [Electronic resource] the powers of alienation and subjection*. Leiden: Brill.
- Rose, N. (1995). Politisk styrning, auktoritet och expertis i den avancerade liberalismen. In Hultqvist, K., & Petersson, K. (ed.). *Foucault: namnet på en modern vetenskaplig och filosofisk problematik: texter om maktens mentaliteter, pedagogik, psykologi, medicinsk sociologi, feminism och bio-politik*. Stockholm: HLS Förlag.
- Rönnerberg, L., Strandberg, U., Wihlborg E., & Winblad, U. (2013). *När förvaltning blir business marknadsieringens utmaningar för demokratin och välfärdsstaten*. Linköping: Linköpings University.
- Power, M. (1999). *The Audit Society, Rituals of verification*. New York: Oxford press
- Prop. (1989/90:41) om kommunalt huvudmannaskap för lärare, skollidare, biträdande skollidare och syofunktinärer. Regeringens proposition.
- Prop. (1992/93:230) Valfrihet i skolan. Regeringens proposition.
- Stevens, S. S. (1946). On the Theory of Scales of Measurement. *Science, New Series*, Vol. 103, No. 2684.
- Sweden (1998), *The swedish education act*. (2010:800). Stockholm: Norstedts juridik
- Swedish Government Official Reports, (SOU 2014:12),
“Utvärdera för utveckling – om utvärdering av skolpolitiska reformer”
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2011). *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 2011*. Revised 2018. ISBN: 978913832733-3
- Swedish National Agency for Education (2011). *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre 2011*. Revised 2018. ISBN: 978913832733-3
- Swedish Schools Inspectorate. (2016). *Samverkan för en likvärdig bedömning Ombedömning av nationella prov 2015. Redovisning av regeringsuppdrag*. Diarienummer U2014/7535/GV, (2016-11-16)
- Zižek, S. (2008). *The Sublime Object of Ideology [Electronic resource]*. Verso Books.

Ricardo Kaminski is a Master of Social Science in Social and Culture Analysis at Linköpings University, Master´s Programme in Social and Welfare Studies, Sweden. He is currently a doctoral student of social work at Stockholm University, Sweden.
E-mail: ricardo.fiallo.kaminski@socarb.su.se

The terms and conditions of use are related to Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY) 