EDUCATION, ASSESSMENT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW SWEDISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

Nils Vasara-Hammare, Eva Alerby and Krister Hertting

Luleå University of Technology, Sweden

In October 2006 Sweden changed governments. A twelve-year period of Social-Democratic governments was over, and a coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, Christian Democrats, and Centre Party politicians came into power. The new government started to reform the educational policy in Sweden. These reforms had capability to know facts, and assessment, as central tasks in schools. But why was this discursive turn taken place in Swedish Schools? From my point of view, the process realizing in Swedish schools during the last 6 years is a discursive change from a poststructuralist and a social-cultural viewpoint to a more realistic ontology, but not Realism as it is understood according to the positivistic view. Instead, I will release Discourse Analysis from the rest of Post-structuralism and guide it to the same ontology and epistemology where we find Critical Realism.

Keywords: Educational politics, Knowledge, Assessment, Epistemology, Ontology.

Introduction

After the election in September 2006, a new government came into power in Sweden. This new coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, Christian democrats, and Centre Party started directly after the installation to reform the Swedish school politics. These new reforms in Swedish educational politics had very much the perspectives of knowledge and measurement in focus. To know facts, and to be assessed, were central tasks again in knowledge, learning and education. This new educational policy was a discursive change, more radical than it is regarded as. In this paper, I argue that this is an ontological and epistemological change. I will therefore separate Discourse analysis from the rest of Post-structuralism and lead it, together with examples from the Swedish educational policy, to the same ontology and epistemology as Critical Realism. This is a process which will give new influences to this epistemology and to the ontology of realism, and by that even to the educational research and educational politics.

The process that Discourse analysis will take, in accordance to my argumentation, could be described in a model with four boxes. Box number 1 and number 2 belongs in this model to the ontology of Realism, and box number 3 and number 4 are arranged in the ontology of Constructivism. The epistemological views are divided in two parts, namely explaining and understanding. According to this, box number 1 and number 3 are organized under the epistemology of explaining, and box number 2 and number 4 are under the epistemology of understanding (see figure 1).
Traditionally, in the Philosophy of Science, the contents of these four boxes could be described as follow (see figure 2).

Before the governmental change in Sweden, in October 2006, the Swedish School Politics was very much concerned in the Constructivist ontology. Mostly, the practical work on schools was placed in box number 4, but the political guideline was placed in box number 3. From the middle of 1990’s to the change of government in October 2006, the direction in Swedish school-politics has been box number 3. In other words: meta-cognition was the goal-line, in accordance to this policy. All students in Swedish schools should in agreement to this goal-directed policy become view-finder of knowledge with responsibility to their own education, learning and assessment.

Aim and Method

According to the Swedish law, the principals are responsible to implement reforms in school politics as, for instance, the written assessments in their schools. Therefore, the aim of our study is to examine and discuss opinions and experiences principals put forward about written assessments, and why this reform failure. To find out this, we have interviewed compulsory school-principals from two municipalities in Northern Sweden. These interviews have been analyzed by critical discourse analysis (CDA) in accordance to Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (see figure 3).
Figure 3. Fairclough’s three-dimensional model.

Focus in this model is the text. Texts represent always something that we can connect to social or cultural view to the world around us. The text and its contents conduce to construct a discourse. Practically, the researcher tries to find out symbols, metaphors, synonyms, and other distinguishing qualities in the text. By that the researcher tries to identify the texts design, and to ascertain a more general intention of the text through a detailed analysis of the factual content. (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001:240-242).

The second dimension in CDA according to Fairclough is the discursive practice.

The third dimension is social practice.

After this methodological overview, we will introduce our theoretical perspective used in this article. Our theoretical starting point is Post-Structural Theory, and our theoretical ground is discourse analysis.

Post-Structural Theory

The Aristotelian realism is a central part of the modern scientific tradition. With Aristotelian realism, we mean the comprehension that it exist a natural order in the reality with clearly defined categories.

Another central element in the modern tradition of science is the assumption that it exist universal conformities to law whose can appear and in many ways even be used. During the history of science, many research concepts have been focused on causal connections (Gilje & Grimen, 1993). In subjects as, for instance, Education and Psychology many causal connections have been compiled. By way of example, it is described in these subjects that maladjustment in young age is a result of lacking sensitivity by care persons (Silk mfl., 2003), and vehemence is described as a result of subject to violence during the growth (Anderson mfl., 2003), and cognitive deprivation is described as a result of lacking language stimulation (Whitehurst mfl., 1988). With this basis, psychologists and educators put forwards predications how it will become for persons growing up under such conditions. These predications are also used to set up attempts to prevent deprivation or psycho-pathology, or as a primary condition to treatment. To sum up, the predications launched in this tradition of science have contributed to delineate an illustration where the empirical reality of humans and social systems are described as a connected order conformable to law. Also the idea of a united science is a central point in the modern tradition of science.

When we put focus on collecting empirical data, the modern tradition of science is based on a consideration that we observe these conformities to law in a neutral way and not in beforehand comprehensible interpretation. In that tradition, the language has been seen as a neutral tool to register and stock observations. For that reason, empirical inquiries are seen as a trustworthy method to show how reality, at least partly, in fact is. Using words as “evidence”, “empirical proof” and “verification” reflects to this perspective on research.
The scientific optimism was widespread during the years after World War II. It was a strong belief that researchers should find constantly new explanation and methods. But there was also a reaction against this optimism. From the middle of last century many philosophers of science came with critique against the modern tradition of science. Thomas Kuhn (1970) argued that science is ruled by paradigms, and that many researchers, with regard to their own career, neglect to register empirical data whose are not proper to the current paradigm. After a time, there is accumulated so many neglected anomalies that it will extend doubts at the researchers. The old paradigm will then replaced by a new paradigm, and this paradigm will after a time be replaced in the same way by a new paradigm. According to Kuhn, the aim of social sciences research is not to give the definite answer to a research problem. Instead, the main focus in social sciences is to let the research move from one paradigm to another.

One of the most influential theoretical ideas in education during the last 20 years has been the Post-structural Theory. Post-structural Theory started in the 1960’s, even if its historical roots can be found earlier. For instance, we can see how Derrida has been influenced by Marx argument that the history is a result of a materialistic process and not by metaphysical concepts. We can also find, in Post Structural Theory, an aim to analyze language as a tool to describe the reality with clearly connections to Nietzsche’s theories of conventions in language (Nietzsche, 1992).

The theory of paradigms in science was one of the starting points to one of the most influential theoretical ideas in education during the last 20 years, namely the Post-structural Theory. Post-structural Theory started in the 1960’s, even if its historical roots can be found earlier. For instance, we can see how Derrida has been influenced by Marx argument that the history is a result of a materialistic process and not by metaphysical concepts. We can also find, in Post Structural Theory, an aim to analyze language as a tool to describe the reality with clearly connections to Nietzsche’s theories of conventions in language (Nietzsche, 1992).

The Post-Structural Theory is above all a theoretical concept, and not a theory with a frame or a program. One way to define this theoretical concept is to do it in relation to the ideas and movements it criticize. I will therefore draw up some points where Post-Structural Theory criticizes other theories and philosophies, and in this way give a sketch of this theoretical concept.

Many theorists inside this concept assert that the western philosophy ever since Plato has been influenced by the idea to search after a real reality, which is a kind of a metaphysical presence that we can reach by our mind or reason. Therefore, the western philosophy often has been called the western metaphysics. However, it is according to Post-structural Theory not possible to know if an objective reality is existing at all, and therefore there is no meaning to try to find it. The western metaphysics has been criticized by post-structural theorists because the ambition to find an objective reality and a truth which is for all has during the history developed lot of structures to dominate others, as for instance colonialism, racism, and oppression of women (Taylor, 1987, p. 25-29).

If we are not capable to know anything about an objective reality, we are forced to put the idea of objectivism in question, and by that even the idea of a positivistic and empirical science. Even if this is a very central idea in Post-structural theory, the post-structural theorists are not rejecting the possibilities of science. According to them, there are dimensions which cannot be handled by empirical tools. As a consequence of the rejection of objectivity, Post-structural Theory is distinguished by plurality and

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), for instance, pointed out that there is a common narrative in the western world how scientific discoveries contribute to welfare society. In this narrative, the researchers are heroes. According to Lyotard, we must be skeptic this explanation. He also stressed that the writing of non-fiction literature is a kind of social practice which contribute to preserve the difference between the learned and the layman. Through complicated modes of expression and continual references to literature, the researcher will claim his position as the person who possess knowledge and therefore must be listened to.

Another poststructuralist thinker, Richard Rorty, means that inventions are truth but not discoveries. The researcher is therefore not a discoverer but rather an inventor or a constructer. Moreover, Rorty argued that reality is not outside us that could be reproduced through language. The reality is something
we envisage through conventions in language. According to Rorty, the shift from a geocentric viewpoint to a heliocentric viewpoint could be explained in this way:

“We did not decide on the basis of some telescopic observations, or on the basis of anything else, that the earth was not the center of the universe (...). Rather, after a hundred years of inconclusive muddle, the Europeans found themselves speaking in a way which took these interlocked thesis for granted. Cultural change of this magnitude does not result from applying criteria.” (Rorty, 1989:6)

Post-structural theories are close related to the theory of social construction. The theory of social construction assumes from the statement that we construct our reality from cultural and historical conditions. Our knowledge is created in social processes. In those processes, we learn to categorize not only humans but even phenomenon and conceptions in the society. Therefore, the picture of reality is not objective but a result of our categorizations. The ways we construct the reality have consequences to our way of acting. Our acts depend on how we construct our reality.

**Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis has been criticized because it will not give answers what is “right” or “wrong”. If you, for instance, will have an answer if formative assessment is to prefer before summative assessment, the discourse analysis is not much to help. The focus of discourse analysis is to discuss and criticize the different ways to present arguments, and which consequences these arguments have. According to discourse analysis, it is up to the reader to form an opinion of the text.

Discourse analysis is a convenient method to put in question and to pay attention to things and moments which are seen as natural or obvious.

In discourse analysis, expressions and concepts in the text material are interpreted. A moment in the method is also to identify words which are in use to make a frame to the discourse. One of the tasks of the discourse analysis is to interpret what the originator implicate and intimate. Also the context where the discourse is part of should be scrutinized.

The meaning of the concept “discourse” is not clearly defined, and it is constantly under debate. Winter Jørgensen & Phillips (2000) explain discourse as a decidedly way to understand the reality. The purpose is therefore not to understand the true meaning of the text as it is in the hermeneutics for instance. Instead, the purpose in discourse analysis is to understand the meaning of a text from different perspectives and arguments. Thereby, the focus in discourse analysis is not to give an answer to the question of what is right or wrong. The focus in discourse analysis is to study the consequences of the construction of reality.

Another often quoted definition of the term discourse analysis is given by James Gee. According to him, “discourse is an association of socially accepted ways of using language, other symbolic expressions and artifacts of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can used to identify yourself as a member of a socially meaningful group.” (Gee, 1996: 144)

To be more specific, and to understand more deeply why written assessments are not implemented in all schools I used critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is a problem-oriented and transdisciplinary set of theories and methods. Power is a central concept in CDA. In CDA, power is defined in negative terms. Power is articulated through and within discourses and resulting in domination and oppression.

Blommeart writes, “the deepest impact of power everywhere is inequality, as power differentiates and selects, includes and excludes” (Blommeart 2005:2). According to Blommeart, CDA should offer an analysis of the effects of power, the outcomes of power, of what power does to people/groups/societies and how this impact comes about.

According to Foucault, every society feels fear to discourses. Foucault calls this fear logofobi, and it is founded on the longing and thought that there is a united eternal truth. Some discourse could go against this thinking, if we allow free production of discourses in our societies. Every society has therefore built up shelters to these kind potential threats. The aim of these shelters in our societies is to control the
production of discourses. In his literary production, Foucault, is very much focused on these shelters, and in which way societies control the production of discourses through these shelters.

Our societies have in purpose to control the production of discourses constructed lot of shelters. One way to control the production of discourses is through institutions which exclude other discourses, as for instance the Police, the Kingdom and the Church. The aim of these institutions is, according to Foucault, to prevent that production of undesirable discourses will take place at all. Another way to a society to control the production of discourses is the power over the definition of a discipline or a domain. A third method to control the production of discourses is the way how persons sorts out before they can take place in the process to make discourses.

Fairclough urges us to consider power as “the power to”, “power over”, and “power behind”. These ways to see power are very central to understand Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010). In his critical discourse analysis, Fairclugh argue that the purpose is to join theories in linguistics with theories in social sciences. According to Fairclough, the use of language is a kind of social practice which is in use to change and reproduce social relations, knowledge and identities. The language is a very important component when we create opinions about society. Therefore, our way to speak is part of our social acting.

To his analyze, Fairclough have composed a three-dimensional frame. The dimensions are discourse as a text, discourse as discursive practice and discourse as social practice. All three dimensions have to be included in empirical research, according to Fairclough.

In analysis at the first dimension, the formal text is in focus. At this level, the researchers must go more closely to the matter and search how the grammar and vocabulary of the text is build up. On the second level, the researcher is obliged to study production, distribution and consumption of the text. The focus at the third level is directed to the question of how ideological and hegemonic structures maintain and change relations, identities and different knowledge systems.

These premises involve that everything cannot be defined as a discourse. The social practice can, according to Fairclough, function with other logics than the discursive. It is important to emphasize that the discursive practice is in dialectic relation to the social practice. A change in the way of speaking about assessment in the discursive level will led to change even in the social level, and of course vice versa. The discursive practice and the social practice constitute thus the world around us.

Individual Development Plans and Written Assessments in Swedish Schools

In the traditional way, the learning of students was evaluated by written tests. Thus, more right answer in the written test give better grades (Lindström, 2011:22). This is an example of summative assessment, i.e. the teacher will do a summation of what the student have learned right up to now. On the other side, the formative assessment should look forward and follow the teaching process and stimulate learning. In other words, the formative assessment can be described as “assessment to learn” and the summative assessment can be considered as “assessment of learning” (Pettersson, 2011:32; Björklund Boistrup, 2011:109).

According to the new learning discourse which was impregnated in the curriculum Lpo 94, students should create consciousness to their own learning. In accordance with this, the students should reflect over their own learning, and estimate their own development. The students should also formulate aims, and plan their work to achieve these aims. Furthermore, the students should develop their own capacity to assess their own results. The new learning discourse stated also that the students must be trained to put their own, and other students, assessment in relation to the performance and the conditions.

This new discourse will take it for granted that the student is assessed in a formative way. From this point of view, the assessment will be seen as a part of the teaching process, and as a support to the teacher to get a comprehensive picture how the students are learning. Therefore, the formative assessment must be done by the teacher in close relation with parents and students. In this process, students have to get continuous response, confirmation and possibilities to reflect over their learning. (Skolverket, 2005)
The formative discourse was dominant until the shift of government in 2006. With the new government, a new discourse about assessment and grades in the schools was brought up. The new discourse in school politics tries to combine both the formative assessment and summative assessment. When the government decided that all student in Swedish school should have a written assessment as a part to their IDP’s from fall semester 2008, the first step in the new discourse was fulfilled (Skolverket 2008). As a demonstration of that the Swedish National Agency for Education divide the IDP:s in two parts, namely the written assessments and the plan forward.

According to the Swedish National Agency for Education, the written assessment should, firstly, be drawn up to give the parents clear information about the students learning in relation to the national targets, and to bring up development possibilities in purpose to stimulate learning. Secondly, it should give a clear statement if the student risks to do not achieve the targets reached in the end of the third, fifth and ninth class. Finally, the written assessment should be formulated in such way so sensitive information and secrecy is not mentioned (Skolverket, 2008).

The starting point of the plan forward is the student’s capacity, interests and strong subjects. The plan forward ought to conclude which capabilities students should develop, and what the school should do to give support and stimulate students learning in the future. An important task of the plan forward is to give positive response to students.

Concluding Analysis

Foucault put the focus to the issue of how institutions and other actors govern the individual. He called it governmentality. One of the main points of the state, is according to the theoretical frame of governmentality, is to produce good democratic citizens. According to Foucault, the corporal punishment has been changed by the state to the power by law. This power is, in contrast to corporal punishment, hidden. The school is, in accordance to governmentality, a part of the exercise and control over the individual. Furthermore, Foucault asserts that the relation between knowledge and power is integrated. In other words: the actor with power could regulate and put a frame to the dominant discourse.

From the interviews, we have two main conclusions. Firstly, almost all of the interviewed principals had changed their mind about assessment in the lower school-years, during the last 5 years period. Before the shift of government 2006, many of these principals were against assessment of students in school-year 1 to school-year 6. From the principal’s point of view, the change of mind is a natural process. As a principal you have to follow and to implement decisions from the government. If your opinion as a principal is opposite to the governments, you only have two alternatives. You can change your mind and follow the dominant discourse, or leave your job.

Another reason, which was pointed out by the principals, why so many schools have not written assessments to all students in all subjects is the lack of a central national-wide model how to do an IDP with written assessment. According to the interviewed principals, this lack of model indicates a lack of priority from the government.

The power to form the IDP-document with the written evaluation is given to the principal in every school. From the principal’s point of view, this could give an assumption that this issue has not high priority at the governmental level. In other words, the principals mean that the discourse to implement written assessment is not yet the dominant discourse.

CDA, according to Fairclough, have as its main task to illuminate texts power of portrayal characters to construct discourses, and how the constructed discourses by turns influence the social practices of humans in form of their actual behavior.

Eliasson and Klasson describe Fairclough’s CDA as a set of philosophical premises, theoretical methods, methodological guidelines and specific techniques to analyze language (p. 303). Different objects of research allow, according to Fairclough (1995: 5), to tackle a problem with different points of entry. According to him, discourse analyst will focus on discourse, but never in isolation, always in its relations with other elements.
The conception of hegemony is in the core of Faircoughs philosophy. From his point of view, “hegemony cuts across and integrates economy, politics and ideology, yet ascribes an authentic place to each of them within an overall focus upon politics and power, and upon the dialectical relations between classes and class fragments” (Fairclough, 1995:61).

Fairclough consider hegemony as a way to analyze how discursive practice become part of social practice, where also relations of power are included. Gustafsson (2009) put forward that Fairclough consider the state and all public activities as school and school research as an arena of political and ideological struggle of hegemony.

According to Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis, we can thus conclude that the problem with the new discourse on IDP with written assessment in Swedish schools is the problems that this reform face to be the dominant discourse in social practice, i.e. in the classrooms at the schools. The IDP with written assessment is decided by politicians in the Swedish Parliament (Riksdagen), and the text where this decision is written is part of the Swedish Law. From the principals’ point of view, there is a distinguishing quality in the political decision and in the Law-text. The political decision and the Law-text do not content a national-wide model how an IDP with written assessment should be done. According to the interviewed principals, this lack of a model disclose that this reform have not high priority by the politicians in the state level. Therefore, the principals don’t exert much time and a greater effort to implement it on the operative level.

This situation could be explained perspicaciously with a model were we separate two types of leadership, namely chief and leader. In the model, this is shown vertically. Horizontally in the model, we divide the discursive practice from social practice in accordance to Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis.

![Figure 4. Leadership discourses.](image.png)

School leadership is a sort of leadership where you as a principal in a school have to put forward decisions and policies taken by politicians on the state level and on the local community (kommun) level. To realize these political decisions and policies, the principal in the school level have to be a governing chief and a visionary leader. This sounds to be easier, according to our interviews, than to be an operative coach and a fellow creature. An interpretation we do from our interviews with school-principals is that this step from the discursive practice-level to the level of social practice is even more difficult to a school leader because as a principal you lead well educated personnel with their own views on how the social practice in the classroom should be formed.

Therefore, even if you have the power over school politics, as the government has, you could not be sure that the discourse you advocate will be the dominant discourse in the social practice. It is also a question of the power behind, and how this power act when decisions are made at the political level. The power behind can regard the decisions and policies, taken on the political level, with contempt.

We can accordingly ask who have the power to define the valid discourse in the Swedish schools when so many schools not bother about the decisions made by government, and what will this ambivalence bring about to the Swedish schools.
In fact, the results of Swedish students in compulsory schools have decreased during the period from the middle of 1990’s to 2006. This is very clearly stated in international comparisons Sweden participated in (e.g. PISA). To improve the results in schools, a paradigmatic change was taken place in Swedish schools after the change of government in October 2006. The basis of the new politics is Realism and Understanding. By that there is a reality of facts, even if we are not capable to understand it at the whole today. Therefore, knowledge is a process. We know facts today, but tomorrow we could have new knowledge and facts that can explain reality better. Even in society, the new politics presuppose that there is something behind the discursive texts, which is hiding the reality. This viewpoint is taken from Critical Discourse Analysis, and therefore I will put this traditionally considered poststructuralist view to, a realistic ontology and an explaining epistemology; to the same scientific perspective as Critical Realism. This epistemological change is shown in figure 3.

![Figure 5. Discourse analysis in a new scientific box.](image)

In my article, I will argue with examples from Swedish school politics that Discourse Analysis belongs to the ontology of Realism and to the epistemology of explaining. In other words: Discourse Analysis is not together with Post-structuralism. This is a controversial standpoint, and stir up peoples mind. I think many researchers on Focault and Discourse Analysis will be upset to the conclusion emphasized in this article.

References


