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Creating Policy from Discursive Exchanges on Compulsory Education and Schooling in Sweden

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The paper first introduces the national and local framework for compulsory-level 'undervisning på annat sätt' [teaching/education otherwise than in school] education in Sweden. According to national statistics in Sweden, every year an average of 100 children are registered as receiving their education at home, arranged in some cases by school officials or by parents themselves. That this figure seems small causes most local school officials to view this form of education as 'very rare' and, consequently, 'there is no need for special legislation or policy'. Many of the 290 municipalities, however, have been exposed to parent-arranged home education in their local areas, either through activation of a working arrangement with parents, sometimes resulting in a local policy, or via an often drawn-out legal struggle involving state, child and parental rights. Using material from a doctoral study, examples are presented in order to illustrate how, in one country, requests for home education are both negotiated and denied.

Keywords: local education policy, compulsory education, home education, parental choice in education, Sweden

Introduction¹

In his book on the development of mass schooling in Sweden, Boli (1989: 225) argues that the mission of the primary school has, since the 19th century, expanded enormously:

[T]he curriculum is supposed to consider and develop all aspects of the child's being, and the schools regularly assume much responsibility for students' health and dental care, psychological and social problems, and leisure activities.

The school, according to Gatto (2002), is becoming a 'synthetic' or 'institutional' family.

The opening chapter of the Education Act, considered one of the several steering tools used for governing basic education in Sweden, makes reference to this ever-expanding 'upbringing' function of the modern Swedish school, which should be shared with the home. The school's authority in the child's life is so powerful that although parents or guardians must be consulted prior to major decision-making by schooling officials, their objections can be overruled (Erdis, 2003: 18).

Despite this gradual transfer of upbringing tasks from the family to the school (or other societal institutions for that matter), Sverne (1992: 19) argues that within the framework of school education in Sweden, tensions continue to

exist concerning the boundaries of decision-making power accorded to the student, parent and the school. These tensions are even more apparent when parents want to claim their right to decide upon the dominant influences in their children's lives, prioritising family and the greater community (local, national and international alike) above the school.

In this way, the issue under study is the demand for basic education, rather than its supply or provision by the state or other organisers, a point that is rarely taken up in studies made on developed industrialised societies. People take for granted that once a society reaches nearly full enrolment of the school-aged population in compulsory-level school, the demands for additional forms of education will be redirected to the available supply. It is hard to believe that this will always be the case given that throughout the history of mass schooling there have always been demands for alternative forms of education.

Other than the Swedish Education Act (*skollag*), which can be described as the most important steering instrument in society's control over the school system (Fredriksson, 1987: 5), various tools created by the central government are used to steer and govern the education system, such as the national curriculum (*läroplan*), and syllabi (*kursplaner*). The National Agency for Education (NAE) refers to these policy documents and legislation as 'steering instruments', which are to contain as little detail as possible so as to allow the schools and municipalities the greatest freedom possible (National Agency for Education, August 2004). There are also other instruments used to steer or govern education at the local level, such as school plans, which will be referred to below.

Swedish legislation on compulsory education is often applied or adapted to cases where children engage in formal education outside of the school system, either on a temporary or longer-term basis, as in the case of home-based education. The part of the Act that deals directly with exemptions from school-based education (SFS 1985: 1100, 10:4–6) stipulates that it is possible to engage in out-of-school education instead of school education, but:

out-of-school education must be an approved and equitable alternative; monitoring (*insyn*) by authorities must be arranged; approved applications are valid for only one year; and, official permission can be withdrawn on short notice. (Vynnycky, 2004: 83)

According to section 10:6, requests for alternative forms of compulsory-level education should be addressed to the decision-making body in charge of the school where the child would have enrolled, in this case the municipal education committee (MEC). The MECs are composed of lay politicians.

Practices such as home-based education are considered *exemptions* from conventional schooling, which is otherwise treated as obligatory in Sweden. The average person on the street would probably not know that it is possible to register for compulsory education outside of school, nor that there are hundreds of children doing so at present. As Ingrid Nilsson remarks in her report on independent schools for the NAE, although home education is becoming well known in other parts of the world, it is 'foreign to the Swedish tradition of education' (Nilsson, 2000: 54). Given the historical shifts in education, however, it 'may not remain that way forever' (p. 54).

Of course, on the other hand, if one refers back far enough to previous generations throughout Europe, it was only in the 19th century with the introduction of mass schooling that some governments in Europe sought to limit education based at home and in the community (Taylor & Petrie, 2000: 50), and Sweden is no exception. Prior to this time, noninstitutional forms of organised education in the region were in many respects considered quite natural (p. 50). According to one historical study of a Swedish municipality, for instance, older forms of 'home education' were dominant prior to 1842, when the law on compulsory school education became a reality. By 1880, what was referred to as home education had tapered off to 6.7% of all school-aged children (Litsgård, 1995: 19).

Today, the official number of children approved for basic education outside of the school is usually around 100 of the school-aged population. During one point in the 2002/2003 school year the figure was 124, and for 2003/2004 there were 91 children registered in this category (NAE, 2004).

From the experience gained from the present study, however, these statistics, gathered each year by the national bureau of statistics and published by the NAE, are rather unreliable as they refer to all categories of *approved* out-of-school education. This includes not only children engaged in traditional home-based education organised by parents or families themselves, but children in distance education programmes, children who refuse to attend school, children in the care of the state, and so on. As explained below, requests for home education are received and approved/denied at any time throughout the year, and committee decisions sometimes take time or are brought to higher appeals courts by parents, and many families move between municipalities or travel. Furthermore, in many cases, before or after an official request is made by families, home education is in progress and there are apparently no central records on the number of cases pending at any given time. Some cases are tied up in court for years. A few municipalities I contacted were not able to explain why their municipality was registered as having a case or cases of out-of-school education. Therefore, in this context, the true number of families engaged in traditional home-based education, or even home education with support from distance or correspondence programmes, cannot be estimated at this time.

The Paper and the Study

Documentary materials from four applications to one municipality in Sweden have been chosen from the larger pool of primary sources collected for an ongoing doctoral study on local-level home education policy in Sweden. Through their discourse, local governments 'appropriate' material for 'authorised policy' on compulsory education, the latter defined by Levinson and Sutton (2001: 2) as a 'discursive mode of governance absolutely central to the administration of modern societies'. This policy serves as

a legitimating charter for the techniques of administration and (sic) an operating manual for everyday conduct; it is the symbolic expression of normative claims worked into a potentially viable institutional blueprint.

The paper presents a brief qualitative content analysis and discussion of municipality (local authority) responses to requests for an alternative to compulsory schooling. Policies that did not exist prior to these events are developed throughout the process of discursive exchanges. The article presents certain themes found in the documents, for use in further theoretical elaboration once an analysis of all primary source materials collected for the dissertation has been conducted.

Some comparisons are made from the general study of documentary and interview data in 33 municipalities to this particular case selected for more intensive study. The case is thus restricted to the world portrayed inside documents by certain actors, or the 'documentary reality', and further investigation and checking of facts and information via interviews and other methods needs to be presented for a full picture of the municipality. For example, many legal and scientific claims to truth are made by local officials and parents and at this point these claims have not been given a fair critical review. An additional restriction is that the documents sampled are further broken down into textual excerpts, which are removed from their original contexts.

The Application Process

As mentioned in the introduction, families who want to pursue home-based education, i.e. to withdraw their children from school, or not to enrol them, must, by law (SFS 1985:1100 amended 1995:1248,10:5), apply to the appropriate MEC for permission. There are no set rules for the content of the application, nor the criteria to be used by the MEC in considering it. Parents can appeal against the decision to the relevant county appeals court.

Most of the documents reviewed here deal with the application to the MEC. They include the parents' initial communication with the MEC and discussion with its representatives. The latter include local politicians, school heads, administrators and home education 'contact persons' appointed by the municipality. However, it should be noted that appeals to the judicial system following the MEC's rejection of an application can lead to a great deal of back-and-forth communication, sometimes lasting more than a year, during which the child is often engaged in home education.

The Four Applications and the Case Municipality

The municipality contains fewer than 50,000 people and is in the south of Sweden. While the research was in progress it received four separate applications from parents wishing to home educate. Only one of these was approved by the MEC. As often happens in relation to home education in Sweden, this featured in the local press. It was the first recorded case in the municipality and was presented in a favourable light. Two cases were rejected quite quickly, reportedly on the basis of selected legal and steering documents such as the Education Act, foundational bills leading to the Act and 'relevant legal praxis' (MEC Minutes). Both children were in grades 7–9, and the committee cited documentary material supporting its view that home education should only be approved for children in the first three years of

compulsory education. Age was also a factor in the rejection of the fourth family's application, even though the application stemmed from problems the child had been experiencing at school, culminating in various health problems and school refusal.

Family Documents

Because the main focus of this paper is on the municipality's responses, only a summary is presented of the documents submitted by parents. The documents made available to the author included: (a) the family's application to the MEC, with covering letter, education plans, photographs of the home setting, excerpts from the legislation, letters and examples of work from the children, attachments from distance education programmes and *résumés* of parents; (b) written correspondence to the education administration office, school officials and other contact persons.

Key themes discussed here are: (1) views of school education and home education as a solution and the role of the family in education; (2) how the authorities and schools should be involved in cases of home education in terms of governance, monitoring and support; and finally, (3) how Sweden should behave in an international context in respect to compulsory education (especially educational choice, school laws, international instruments, etc.). These themes overlap and deal with both the political and practical issues related to compulsory education, such as who should organise education and make major decisions, and the perceived negative effects of modern schooling, which is based on the paradigm created during the industrial revolution (see Albert, 1999 and Gatto, 2002 for views on the latter point).

The negative effects of schooling and troubled school environments feature in parents' letters. According to one family their daughter

couldn't concentrate on her schoolwork and she was disturbed by the chaotic environment ... because of many teacher changes, incompetent teachers, (and) bad discipline ...

Her situation was apparently well understood by sympathetic teachers. She refused to attend school due to her distress over foul and sexually loaded language, lack of respect for adults and violence (Family Four, letter to county appeals court).

All of the applications focused on the nature of a parent's 'responsibility' for their children's education:

Teaching (our son) is a great responsibility in respect to guaranteeing a good education for him. (Family Three, application)

According to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, that Sweden has signed, it is the parents who choose the type of education for their children. The municipality has a great responsibility for all children's education and social development and we agree naturally to assure that our daughter receives this necessary development. (Family Four, application letter)

Most families also had clear ideas about their desired relationship with the municipality and its contact persons, and they demonstrated an awareness of the government’s likely demands. Family Three set very specific boundaries as to how the authority should be monitoring or ‘looking into’ (*insyn*²) its homeschooling. The Swedish concept of ‘insyn’ is very widely used in all of the authority and family documents, perhaps indicating on the part of the latter that they are aware of the state’s concern with transparency in respect to education outside of school:

We would like the municipality/school to review or look into (our home programme) at least once per term, if you can organise it, and we hope to get an evaluation of our work, including good advice. In the main all will be presented by K himself, but we also keep a detailed diary of our work and what we have gone through. (Family Three, application letter)

They also hoped to have good but infrequent contact with the school, and requested materials, along with financial support if possible. Their experience was perhaps based on the good relations they had enjoyed with their former municipality, where several home-educating families with children of various ages were registered. Family Two also wished to have ‘relevant instructions and guidance from (the local school)’, and also requested materials so that they themselves could ‘provide the knowledge needed’ at home (Family Two, second application letter). The same points were made by Family One, who had already met with the school head, who had promised them the materials they requested (Family One, application).

Municipality Documents and Decision Making

Five general types of documents, out of the seven types found in all documents from all municipalities, were available for analysis (see bold type in Table 1). These documents are produced by (or on behalf of) administrative heads, assistants or others employed in the education administration, or by the politicians in the local committees, such as in the case of minutes from MEC

Table 1 Documents from local authorities, regional or higher courts and the NAE

Minutes from local education committee meetings and working committees
Written correspondence from office of educational administration to parents; school officials; social services
Internal correspondence within administrative office and MEC [e.g. from or to contact person for home education]
Notes on case, including excerpts from relevant legislation
Decisions from county and higher courts
Official decisions from NAE regarding local case and other cases
Related documents from NAE and local authorities, such as applications from parents for independent schools

meetings. Some documents in this group are produced by (central) state or regional authorities such as the NAE or the judiciary authorities; however, documents from the last two groups are not included as sources here.

A small sample of documents was selected based on their illustrative value. As mentioned above, 14 documents of various types comprise the sample from the municipality, relating to the same family documents.

Textual analysis has tentatively identified two areas in which the MEC seeks: (1) to outline the 'right' ways to think about schooling and, to a lesser degree, education and society in Sweden (in effect, to communicate its vision of education and schooling); (2) to attempt a diagnosis of various types of 'problems' and solutions including the perceived role of nonexperts/families in respect to authorities and the law; and (3) ultimately, to set boundaries, reconstruct its identity and responsibilities, and create a plan of desirable action for determining and justifying success or failure in its mission. Below are some excerpts from the documents to illustrate these points.

(1) When a municipal education authority or school is presented with a request by parents to home educate their child/children, or when there is a problem at school that leads to school refusal or where alternative education is organised for some reason, the school officials and educators are suddenly confronted with a set of value-related questions. A local authority in charge of education is of course expected to have a vision of education and its system, not least because arguments addressed to the surrounding community can be made based on this vision.

(a) Throughout the selected accounts it becomes apparent that in this particular Swedish municipality, basic school and schooling are constructed as essential and ideal institutions for the modern Swedish child or children being raised (or residing) in Swedish society. Above all, what is repeatedly referred to as 'social training' is seen as 'one of the school's main tasks'. For the child, this process is said to take on more importance as the child grows older, and it is school attendance that 'provides' this experience, which is also essential for the child's development. No doubts are raised as to the success of the school in providing this training for all students (Internal background letter for MEC regarding Families One and Two). School attendance, rather than 'individual instruction' can 'guarantee' subject-specific knowledge goals as well as social training (Minutes of MEC meeting regarding Family Four).

With the background that school is depicted as the ideal place for the child to be exposed to the *right* social environment, the local authority argues that the school plan outlines the correct route to democracy, through 'unorganised play' as one method. The correct adult role models, who mediate the testing of differences in opinion, are also present in this 'democratic' environment. Within one school, moreover, different 'social contexts' are provided (Background report for MEC regarding Family Three). One author asserts that school is now seen as good for development through its collective organisation, whereby individual independence can be fostered within a peer group:

In this way learning research is coming closer to the school situation, in which the individual learning process occurs in a collective situation. (ibid.)

From this we might conclude that the MEC regards children's development as dependent upon the school experience.

(b) Several points are made regarding home-based versus school education, the first using a citation from a legal praxis handbook (UFB) often referred to in MEC decisions. Firstly, school-type knowledge can only be found in school so it is nearly impossible for parents to provide it, which is why legislation makes school attendance necessary (Background report for MEC regarding Families One and Two). Home cannot replace school, so there is seen to be no real alternative to institutionalised education:

It would be difficult for guardians through individual education to give children the knowledge ... that can compare to that which she or he would receive in the basic or independent school. Therefore children, for their development especially, not least for social training, almost always can be taken to need the experience that school attendance provides. (Background report for MEC regarding Family Three, referring to UFB 6)

Furthermore, compulsory attendance should be applied uniformly in the negative sense that 'every other child' goes to school:

It is an important principle that this child participate for his social training in the ordinary school education in the same way every other child does. (Minutes from MEC meeting regarding Family Three)

(c) For MEC in this municipality, obligatory school attendance is in principle 'non-negotiable' (Background report for MEC regarding Family Three), even if the Act does give room for alternatives. When an exception is made, exemption from school is 'not an alternative for all compulsory school years' (ibid.). The child's age is labelled as a 'basic issue' (Internal memo regarding Family Four) in the case of Family Four, an issue which overshadows other dimensions of the case, such as the family's/child's right to choose correspondence school or other flexible alternatives. In response to this request, the MEC couldn't find any mention of distance education in the Act³ (MEC statement to the county appeals court regarding Family Four) and thus reason that school attendance is the only way to 'rehabilitate' the child:

... we think that from the student's perspective the need for rehabilitation will be met with a phasing into school's everyday life, if our decision is implemented. (ibid.)

(d) Another issue often raised, perhaps overemphasised, in respect to home education in Sweden, is the official attitude towards religion in education in contemporary Swedish society. Religious motives were mentioned in respect to one application, that of Family Three, and indirectly through association with the relatives of Family Four, who unsuccessfully applied to the NAE to

start a Christian independent school. Family Three pre-empts any inquiries about religious motives in their application, stating that

our home education will definitely not have a religious or special ethical profile, only be effective, exciting and broad. (Family Three, application letter)

One MEC politician makes accusations to the contrary:

My opinion is that the real reason is their religious beliefs whereby they want to raise their child in a special religious atmosphere that comes into conflict with today's society and school. (Minutes from MEC meeting regarding Family Three)

(2) Quite likely due to the fact that cases of home education per municipality are in the context of school education, rather few and far between, such requests are often initially approached as a problem, and *diagnoses* and solutions are sought. This is perhaps the case even in municipalities where good relations have developed with the home-educating families over a number of years.

(a) In this way a psychological point of view is often adopted at the municipal or school level. In the case municipality, psychological or moral arguments are made in respect to 'social training', where a MEC politician requested an evaluation by a school psychologist before deciding on the family's application (Minutes from MEC meeting regarding Family Three).

The expression '*helhetsbedömning*', interpreted as 'holistic judgement', is found throughout the municipal documents, in court documents and in the Act. This key expression depicts the desired method of conceptualising the approach to evaluation of home education activities and applications, and the MEC locates its use in the foundational bills preceding the Education Act. In view of this approach, again, it is 'social training' that is given the most attention, and in order to facilitate it, 'special measures' would have to be designed for promoting social contacts in cases of individual education (Background report for MEC regarding Families One and Two).

(b) Aside from the political and legal issue as to whether the authority believes the family has a right to choose the form of education for their child, the family's motives for home education are of interest:

It is difficult to decide which is the motivation for the parent's decision ... sickness [of the child] or the general school situation. (Internal administration memo regarding Family Four)

These parents haven't given any reason for their wanting to home educate their children. (Background report for MEC on Families One and Two)

In the end, however, it appears that family motivation for home education does not feature as a significant factor in decision making for MEC.

(c) When granting permission to Family Three in the case municipality, some committee members reasoned that it is better to accommodate the family rather than risk damaging the child:

I am in principle against that children may be exempted from the chance to receive the social milieu that the school stands for. I see yet in any case a risk that if we turn down the application we will come into conflict with the family, which could damage the child. (Minutes of MEC meeting regarding Family Three)

Rather than potentially driving the family from the area, which is the case in several more conservative municipalities in Sweden, the officials elected to accommodate the family. Many municipalities have also taken this stance.

On the other hand, one politician who voted against approving Family Three's application argued that the parent's complaints about the local school were not reason enough to justify 'individual education', even if it is allowed by law:

That the parents in their earlier application claim that [the school] is untidy, they do not like age-mixed classes or think that their own child doesn't get enough stimulation in school, are in my opinion not reason enough to motivate individual home education. (Minutes of MEC board meeting regarding Family Three)

Thus, some representing the local authority would opt not to accommodate the parents, and would instead be forced to deal with the consequences, as mentioned above.

(3) As official documents are produced and arguments made for consumption by state actors, families and the interested public, the education authority, including the administrative and political units, defines itself and its mission in respect to both the child's right to basic education and school/public resources and that education is according to the state law, compulsory. In home-based education, the most contested aspect of this dual imperative is whether in a contemporary democracy, institutional schooling can itself be compulsory.

In the process of defining itself, the local authority delineates its boundaries and responsibilities, and it sets in writing how to judge if its mission was a success or failure. One manifestation of these activities, as well as a 'legitimizing charter' for its daily conduct, is an 'authorised policy'.⁴

(a) The question of financing home education, unsurprisingly, appears throughout documents collected from almost all municipalities, though there is definitely no consensus as to the solutions. Some municipalities provide various kinds of financial support, such as for distance programmes, and some only provide school books and/or loan computers. In the case municipality, MEC argues that vouchers⁵ do not extend beyond school education, although books and other similar materials can be loaned to children at home:

We support that the school supply those books that other students have access to, partly due to 'rights' and partly to ease the pupil's return to the classroom. We deny on the other hand the proposal on [school vouchers] since parents who are ready to wholly take over responsibility for their children's schooling must also be prepared to take economic responsibility. (Minutes from MEC meeting regarding Family Three)

MEC will not approve financing for those who do not carry out education according to the Education Act. (Background report for MEC regarding Family Three)

A major share of 'economic responsibility' is thus shifted to parents, and compulsory education is consequently no longer free of charge as for school pupils. In contrast, some politicians proposed, without success, that MEC pay for 'school meals' and that families be reimbursed for average costs of teaching based on the per-head cost for pupils (Minutes from MEC meeting regarding Family Three). The municipality finally argues that its refusal to offer financial support to the family is warranted as it 'bears some costs for monitoring' and cannot on the basis of one child 'make any savings to speak of' (ibid.)

(b) As the independent school is mentioned in the Education Act, and it is subject to approval by the NAE, it is constructed as the 'right' alternative to public education. MEC makes this point when it suggests that the same requirements should be applied to home education (Minutes from MEC board meeting regarding Family Three). Other legal experts make the same point:

In the same way as in private/individualized teaching at home, permission to operate an independent school may be revoked by the NAE if the school no longer satisfies the necessary requirements. (Erdis, 2003: 18)

As will be discussed in forthcoming articles, appeals court judges have also referred to independent school regulations in relation to home education.

(c) Actors' roles and the functioning of 'teams' are tested in the course of considering proposals from parents and in creating policies on home education. A follow-up document by the municipal administration, a good example of its attempt to demonstrate accountability for its actions and learning from the experiences with Family Three, included in its summary that visits to the home were made by both the class contact teacher and the development leader. Positive relations with the administration and the school were documented, as well as good achievement by the pupil and that the goals of the National Curriculum were met. Good 'social teamwork' was also demonstrated (Minutes from MEC board meeting regarding Family Three).

One actor's role that is defined more clearly in the course of home education is that of the 'responsible head', who is delegated certain decisions in respect to carrying out the law:

MEC's decision is based in all respects on the basic views of the Act, that the social context is a key aspect of which learning and development have everything to do, and in turn are grounds for the responsible head's mission. (MEC statement for the county appeals court regarding Family Four)

In many municipalities, perhaps including the present case, the number of responsible actors directly involved in a case of home education often increases following acceptance of an application, but tapers off if the child is engaged long-term. Some municipalities, for example, delegated monitoring to one contact person and MEC decisions for extensions were made each year,

with little debate. Some municipalities delegate responsibility for *insyn* to the school and some to the municipal administration, both of whom normally serve as contacts between MEC and the family.

Summary and Conclusions

Parents appropriate the Education Act and the legal and practical framework existing in Sweden, presumably in order to arrange a family-governed and child-focused education on the basis that it is their natural right (and responsibility) to choose a suitable form of education for their children.

Themes in parents' documents from the case municipality deal with views of school and home education, and how to solve problems and increase learning time and pleasure in learning through noninstitutional education. Part of their role as parents is in taking what they see as their responsibility for their children's education.

Family plans for contact and involvement with the school and the municipal authorities illustrate their views as to how home-based activities should be monitored and what public support they may need. At the very least, parents' documents demonstrate an awareness of the public authority's concerns.

We can approach the processes of responses to parent initiatives as instances of policymaking in progress, of 'appropriating' material for a legitimate policy of governance, either purely discursively or through policy documents. Below are examples of policy materials that emerged from municipalities following exposure to home-based education and the subsequent process of debate among politicians.

In a summary written by the administration following their particular experiences, foundations for a policy emerged. Their understanding of the role of the steering instruments in home education become apparent here, where MEC finds

- that individual education can be permitted even if special reasons do not exist, other than the parent's wishes;
 - that the requirement for teaching must be tested and shall be judged in every special case;
 - that the pupil's age is of decisive importance;
 - that religious beliefs are not of importance;
 - that the possibility of *insyn* is of decisive importance; and
 - that the need for social contacts is of decisive importance.
- (Supplementary document from the municipal administration)

In reference to *insyn*, the documents imply that it may be satisfied in a number of ways: visits to the home a certain number of times per term; children's activities with others in school, where he or she may be seen and so on.

Municipalities may differ in their view of the concept of *insyn* and thus the child's and the parent's rights with respect to compulsory education, illustrated below using excerpts adapted from a more detailed home-based education policy in another municipality.

The school shall have *insyn*. *Insyn* means that:

- Information on the steering documents is given to the home (nine local and national-level documents are mentioned here, for example the National Curriculum; grading criteria; school plan; local working plan; term plan for the local school/class; and school healthcare services).
- The pupil participates in national and local assessments (seven tests and evaluations are mentioned, for example, national exams in the 5th and 9th grades; reading tests in Grade 3; mathematics in grade 6).
- The school: conducts home visits every quarter or more as needed; loans teaching and other materials decided upon by school head; invites children to social activities; cooperates with the home regarding individual development plans and goals; and offers access to school facilities.
- If home-based education is conducted in the 9th grade, applications for secondary education are taken according to the regulation GyF (Secondary school regulations) 6:3, which states that admission places are available to those children who because of special circumstances should be given access to secondary schools and/or who come from schools where grading is not equivalent to that for ordinary compulsory-level schools.

After some exposure to several cases of home education requests, the case municipality constructed a general approach to how parents who are approved for home education need to behave, and what they need to comply with, if their programmes are to be extended. This approach was created from the more specific case of Family Three. The points made by MEC appear more or less as an interpretation of legislation, along with an extracting of particular ideas from court documents reflecting what the members see as the 'spirit' of legal praxis in Sweden:

Conditions for a trial term for Family Three (with author's comments in italics):

- National steering documents and the School Plan should guide teaching. (*Parents must agree to use the steering tools.*)
- The municipality should have full view and control of the family's activities. (*Parents must agree to surveillance of the activities.*)
- The child's results and development can be followed. (*Parents must agree to a particular kind of evaluation and assessment that officials understand and accept.*)
- The child's social development must enable a transfer to school without trouble. (*The child must be socialisable in a future school environment; parents must facilitate school-type socialisation.*)
- Parents must be aware that permission to home educate will not be given for a whole 9-year period. (*Parents must acknowledge the local policy despite their own interpretation of the national legislation.*)
- An agreement plan must be made for contact, follow-up and evaluation. (*Parents must be prepared to sign a contract with the authorities.*)

- An extension application should be made only after evaluation of the trial term. (*Parents must apply again after the end of the term, and be aware that it hinges on evaluation of activities.*)

Using the document excerpts discussed above, a variety of evidence has been presented concerning the discursive struggle for primary influence over school-aged children in Sweden. Practical-pedagogical-cognitive versus political-social-moral elements are predominant in the discourse between the family and the education authorities in the municipality. The first set would include issues on the school environment, age of the pupil, teaching methods and monitoring methods, whereas the second contains more value-oriented items such as 'social training', equity and equality, and the concept of compulsory education itself.

Understandably, the family and local authority discuss these issues from different points-of-view, according to their particular interests or roles. It remains to be seen if parents will engage in contestation of official views if municipalities continue to create policies on home-based education, and if all interests will be taken into account in the process.

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Notes

1. All translations from Swedish were made by the author.
2. *Insyn*, with respect to the administration and governance of education, denotes the control, surveillance and presence of the authorities in education at home.
3. The correspondence programme requested by the parents was Sofia Distance (www.sofiadistans.nu), a Swedish programme offering basic education for years 6–9, roughly mirroring its school-based courses offered in Stockholm. If the municipality agrees to the programme, it implies costs of somewhere between 30,000 and 90,000 per student per year, which are often borne by the municipality or district (email correspondence with Sofia, February 13, 2004). This was not mentioned by MEC, only that they could find no legal basis in the Education Act for granting the use of a distance programme (MEC statement for the county appeals court regarding Family Four). MEC added that Sofia is, according to their brochure, aware of the Swedish education system and have clear instructions, and the school is only responsible for '*kunskapsförmedlingen*', or knowledge-related services.
4. When the municipalities included in data collection, who had registered pupils in home education, were asked if they had a policy on home education, most replied that they did not and that these applications had to be dealt with on an individual basis due to the nature of their requests.
5. In Sweden, tuition for all compulsory education is to be free of charge for the user and is financed through local and national taxes. Money calculated per pupil follows the pupil regardless of whether s/he attends a public or independent school; parents and children can select a school of their choice but are naturally restricted by the schools in their area and available places. In several of the relatively rural municipalities interviewed there were few schools or no independent schools from which home-educating parents could have chosen.

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