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## Private actors in policy processes. entrepreneurs, edupreneurs and policyneurs

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### ABSTRACT

As the privatisation of the public sector has grown rapidly in Sweden in the last decade, private companies have become an imperative part of education. Private companies sell and deliver consultancy, hardware, software, services, etc. to schools and municipalities. This study examines a growing rate of activities from companies and businesses working within public sectors. It also examines consequences of cooperation between private and public actors. Findings show that multiple actors meet in different forms and with different functions, in multiple ways and with diverse agendas. What can be discerned is strong Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), where actors and networks are linked together, directly or indirectly, in fluid and flexible relations and partnerships. Private actors on educational markets not only becomes edupreneurs but policyneurs, a new concept introduced. As private actors engage in the policy making and the public sphere, a complex and disorganised landscape with new formations of strong actors emerge, entailing a number of consequences. One implication is the establishment of lobbyism in the Swedish educational landscape, with potentially negative consequences for democracy. One conclusion is that new formations of power dissolve the roles and functions of private and public actors within education, with implications on decision-making, transparency, and democracy.

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## Introduction

As the privatisation of the public sector has developed and grown rapidly in Sweden as well as elsewhere, private companies have become an indispensable part of education. Private companies sell and deliver education, consultancy, hardware, software, services, etc., to schools and municipalities on a large scale. Implementations of reforms in the middle of the 1990s opened the Swedish school sector for private actors pushing marketisation into education, and since 2006 the amount spent on purchases from non-governmental actors has almost doubled. Approximately 25,000 private companies now operate within education (broadly defined) (Rönneberg et al. 2021).

Private companies operating within and influencing the public field is not a new phenomenon. This trend can be seen in many countries, even though the privatisation of education develops differently with national tendencies (Maroy, Pons, and Dupuy 2017;

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Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012). As one consequence, corporate activities have increased, aiming not only to influence policymakers' perceptions of certain problems but also to shape the institutional arrangements in which they conduct their business (Tarlau & Moeller 2020). An illustrative example would be Spain, where the state now 'assumes a secondary role in relation to the provision of public services, which are now being delivered by new actors from the private sector with particular financial interests' (Olmedo 2013, 72). The consequences are private actors now in a position to negotiate political openings and alliances.

Even though many of the above-mentioned processes are global trends, Sweden has formed a unique case with no counterpart in other coordinated market economies (Svallfors 2016). This is not only due to many reforms nurtured by neoliberal agendas but also that education and all its actors, private and public, are predominantly based on public fundings from taxation. In many other countries, the United States is just one example (Moeller 2020; Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange 2018), philanthropic foundations and private funded schools are taken for granted parts of education. This stands in stark contrast to Sweden where for example philanthropic foundations and private funded schools still are rare. Nonetheless, and as stated above, there are many private companies in Sweden, but they operate with and can profit on public funds. This makes Sweden a most unique case. What also makes the Swedish case exceptional is its historically tradition with a strong public welfare system, 'the Swedish model', and a robust Social democratic agenda (Westberg and Larsson 2022). Sweden could therefore in many aspects be framed as a most unlikely case for the rise of strong influence of private sector actors in public education. In countries such as the United States, Brazil, Spain, etc., the influence of private actors could be more expected. Adding to this, making the Swedish case even more exceptional, is that the lion's share of the public is negative to the for-profit system, in contrast to most of the politicians and political parties. The public opinion therefore lacks political representation in the matter (Svallfors and Tyllström 2019). How Swedish welfare in many aspects came to be, as Svallfors and Tyllström states a sector with tempting business opportunities is therefore remarkable.

Regulations from Swedish authorities stipulate that governmental structures should cooperate with private companies and stakeholders. However, the growing rate of political activities from companies and businesses working within the public sectors, is something new (Garsten and Sörbom 2017). My argument is that a significantly changed education system with a growing rate of private companies and businesses working in and with public actors, entails a series of consequences regarding policy and policy processes. However, there is a lack of basic knowledge regarding private companies and businesses and their cooperation in and with public actors. Subsequently, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the consequences. These knowledge gaps are in focus in this article.

My aim is not to uncover if the private companies' involvement is inevitable good or bad, or as Ball (2009) argues; 'some things change for the better in all of this; some schools do become better places to learn, more inclusive, thoughtfully innovative, relevantly and authentically creative and healthily reflexive.' (p. 88). My aim is rather to contribute with knowledge, descriptive as well as analytical, on the processes and as Moeller (2020) states, the intended as well as unintended consequences of private companies within education.

This study is part of the research project Education Inc, which aims to explore how private actors and logics change the conditions for education. The project contributes with knowledge about the consequences of the outsourcing of essential parts of Swedish education to a private market. Both the Project Education Inc and this study belong to the field of critical studies of education markets (Burch 2006), consequences of the effects of neoliberal governing (Rizvi and Lingard 2010), and the ongoing blurring of boundaries between public and private sectors (Ball 2009).

## Private and public actors within Swedish education

This section aims to briefly describe private companies and public actors in Swedish education. As a starting point private companies and businesses and public actors are described separately. However, in reality the distinction is not clear-cut. For example, is a private school funded by public taxes a public or a private actor? As in the case of the Dominican education sector ‘engagement between governmental and non-governmental actors have given way to hybrid structures . . . it should be noted that they are all part of the same field of activity and that, as explained, each is facilitated by the overlapping and flexible networks and interdependencies’ (Edwards, Alejandro, and Moschetti 2021, 1215). Some actors may therefore be seen as both public and private in varying degrees and on a continuum, depending on national tendencies and legislations (also see Rowe, Hogan, and Thompson 2021), or theoretical understandings, elaborated on in next chapter.

### *Private companies - edupreneurs in the education landscape*

Building on earlier research, this paper uses the concept of so-called ‘edupreneurs’ (see e.g. Ideland, Jobér, and Axelsson 2021) when describing the private companies. These edupreneurs are often identified as private actors outside the public sphere. Some are companies that work with teaching materials, such as books or tools, while others work with teacher supplies, such as desks and whiteboards. Many of the private companies can be found within the digitalisation businesses, selling digital solutions, hardware and/or software. Examples of the companies<sup>1</sup> focusing on the education market can be seen at large trade fairs such as Scandinavian Education Technology Transformation or British Educational Training and Technology Show (Player-Koro, Jobér, and Bergviken Rensfeldt 2022), or in different marketing channels directed towards schools.

There are wide variety of actors outside what has traditionally been seen as the public sphere. There could be corporations, think tanks, philanthropy, religious organisations, non-governmental organisations, private foundations. But there are corporate networks and groups comprised of multiples corporations (Moeller 2020). Dominating the education field in Sweden is the Swedish Ed-tech Industry and, on a more general level, The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. Consequently, parts of the Swedish business community within education are highly organised (Svallfors and Tyllström 2019). Building on Lévi-Strauss (1966), Garsten and Sörbom (2017) use the term *policy bricoleur* to describe these kinds of organisations. They see these ‘corporate actors as policy bricoleurs, as organizations with the capacity to act both as market actors and political actors putting together different recourses in heterogenous forms’ (p. 12). Moreover, Garsten

and Sörbom argue that these bricoleurs are ‘agile enough to manoeuvre actors and combine market and political interests’ (p.12). In short, they can become market actors or political actors depending on context and interest.

These forms of organisations in education are sparsely investigated and little is known on forms, functions and consequences within education. An example could however be found in a study by Williamson et al. (2019) reporting that ‘computing and coding have been introduced into school curricula in a remarkably compressed period, through the involvement of loosely connected assemblages of organizations, interests, events, material objects and activities that crisscross the governmental, commercial and civic sectors’ (p.719). They assert that the result ‘has been the production of composite policy assemblages, with various actors, organizations, discourses and materials forged through hard work into relatively stable working arrangements’, (p. 720). According to the authors, one consequence is creations of ‘new power centres and democratic possibilities for different actors to influence education, but potentially also new power asymmetries that are distinct from formerly nation-based state policy processes’ (p.722).

I.e., private companies in the form and function of edupreneurs do not only act on their own but earlier research also indicates a new layer of actors within the welfare sector, assemblages of various actors formed into composite organisations with large possibilities to influence policy. Consequently, the entrepreneurs not only become edupreneurs, but also what I label, *policyneurs*. They become actors within welfare markets with the interest and the possibility not only to do business but policy. This is further on discussed in the final section.

### **Public actors - governmental actors in the education landscape**

As already mentioned, there are a vast number of private actors in the Swedish education landscape, and they differ in form and functions (Ideland, Jobér, and Axelsson 2021; Rönnerberg et al. 2021). And as some information is hidden behind trade secrets, investigating them is difficult. In contrast, the roles and positions of public actors in Sweden are, more easily accessible.

The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) is the largest central administrative authority developing steering documents, e.g. syllabuses, grading criteria and national tests. It allocates funds to universities and university colleges for research on the school system, for the training programme for school heads, and for competence development of teachers and personnel within the school. It oversees Sweden’s participation in international education surveys, such as PISA and TIMSS (European Commission, SNAE 2020a). Another important public actor is The Ministry of Education and Research, and the central authorities connected to it. These have the overall responsibility for the central administration of the Swedish educational system and set the frames for the system (European Commission 2019; Regeringen 2019; SNAE 2020a).

In addition, two other public actors are worth mentioning: The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SSI) (SSI 2020) and The National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools (SPSM in Swedish). The SSI ensures that local authorities and independent schools follow existing laws and regulations. It conducts regular supervision of all schools and is also responsible for granting licenses to new independent schools (SSI 2020). The

SPSM is responsible for guaranteeing that children, regardless of functional ability, have the necessary conditions to fulfil educational goals (SPSM 2020). Although there are other public actors, the above-mentioned are the largest actors, with immense and far-reaching political and financial power in the education landscape.

As indicated above, private companies and organisation are deeply involved in education, public and private actors work alongside and cooperate. The next section focuses on these corporations and how they can be understood.

### **Collaborative policy work**

Whilst there are many levels that could be in focus when researching private companies' involvement in education, e.g. classrooms, learning, textbooks, etc., this article focus on the policy levels, pinpointed by earlier research on education and welfare systems as crucial to further understand and analyse (Ball 2016; Åström Rudberg 2022). Acknowledging the complexity of the notion policy, policy in this paper is theoretically understood as a set of ideas or a plan that has been agreed upon officially by, for example, a group of people, a business organisation, a government and/or a political party. Policy, as a set of ideas or a plan, can therefore be seen as societal conversations, discourses, that are interwoven like networks on different levels throughout society. Policy is further understood as something that can be negotiated, transported, or geographically relocated. What becomes stipulated in a policy document can therefore be both an officially agreed plan or instruction *and* societal discourses that create, inspire, or underpin the content of the document (Peters and Pierre 2006; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Building on Garsten and Sörbom (2017), the study also adopts a processual view on policy, thereby implying policy as a continuous construction of interest and priorities, negotiations and struggles taking place in networks and relations. From this theoretical perspective, networks and relations thus become highly important because they become powerful in the construction of policy (Ball 2009).

### **Private and public actors in cooperation**

Public actors in Sweden have cooperated with private actors outside the formal public governmental structure for a long time and in various forms. For example, Magnusson (2018) shows that from 2010 to 2014 the internal culture at the most important public actor in this study, SNAE, was characterized by loyalty to the professional norms and to external networks. Moreover, Magnusson states that between 2011 and 2015 SNAE and its activities were built on projects, ad hoc planning, and external and internal networks. The authority was formed with unclear boundaries and strongly influenced by external stakeholders Magnusson (2018). A contemporary example of public and private actors in close cooperation are the recent transformations of the curriculum. SNAE states:

We have also met with researchers, interest groups, trade unions, industry representatives and other authorities. Through these collaborations and consultations, we have broadened and deepened our image of how the syllabuses work in practice, discussed proposals for guidelines for a future revision and obtained views on syllabuses drafts. (SNAE 2019)

A recent example of close collaboration between public and private companies or in this case organised private companies is #skolDigiplan (SALAR 2020; SNAE 2020b). This is a year-long collaboration on the digitalisation of the Swedish school system and comprises the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and SNAE, as well as many other actors and representatives within the educational field. The digitalisation project concerns one of the major changes in curricula and overall practices in the schooling system in recent years, and it is driven by and established through an extensive collaboration between private and public actors (SNAE 2020b; Williamson et al. 2019).

Other countries report on extended collaborations between private and public actors. Regarding the process in Spain, Olmedo (2013) argues that, on the one hand, ‘opening and widening participation of civil society could be claimed as part of a movement towards the democratisation of the political sphere’ (p. 60). On the other hand, and seen from a neoliberal agenda, Olmedo asserts that this form of participation is rather ‘a strategy to introduce new techniques of exerting power and indirect ways of achieving individual and social control’ (p. 60). Research from Brazil shows that companies, foundations, philanthropic organizations, politicians and scholars, supported by the Inter-American Development Bank, meet extensively and ‘exchange visions, diagnosis, and education policy solutions’ (Moschetti et al. 2020, 370). According to Moschetti et al., these spaces play an important role in strengthening the links between the private sector and governments. They also claim that lobbying practices conducted by interest groups are one of the most recurrent strategies to influence policymaking.

### **Public-private partnerships (PPP)**

In attempting to capture and theoretically understand developments within welfare system, different terms and notions have emerged in the international research field, of which one common notion is Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). At its broadest level, a PPP can be defined as a cooperative institutional arrangement between public and private sector and actors, often with some sort of durability between public and private actors, in which they jointly develop products and services and share risks, costs and resources related to these products. These partnerships can be developed with and through networks involving several actors and can be linked directly or indirectly in fluid and flexible contacts, or in deeper relationships or movements (Hogan, 2016; Menashy 2016; Robertson et al. 2012; Shiroma, 2014). A PPP is therefore not only an arrangement between public and private actors in a specific field producing services and products but also contains discourses and activities.

One consequence of a PPP in a specific field such as education can be that it collaboratively works and pushes for solutions to policy problems and/or creates new nodes of power and influence (Williamson et al. 2019). As an arrangement of several actors, a PPP can be powerful and change policy practices and discourses and ways

Another consequence is proposed by Anna Hogan (2016), who states that relational assets are created as a result of public/private partnerships (PPPs). This makes “the dividing lines between state institutions and institutions of civil society are harder to draw”(p.97). According to Hogan, the state still has an important role to play, but policy networks can ensure that political decision-making is flexible, dynamic and efficient, with governments becoming more like facilitators.



One could argue that people moving in and out of the public and private spheres is an example of such a consequence, where relational assets make the line harder to draw. In a critical report from one of the largest teacher unions in Sweden, it is shown that a number of prominent politicians have moved from the public to the private sphere. Sixteen persons are mentioned who are or have been deeply involved in free school businesses, e.g. CEOs or owners. Furthermore, they all have had strong positions in governmental structures, such as political experts at the Ministry of Education, Director at the SSI, Minister of Finance, and Minister of Education, to mention a few (Bergling 2022). The union argues that many companies, not least in the school sector, are directly dependent on political decisions. It is therefore inevitable that knowledge about political processes and good relations has become increasingly important, as has the ability to formulate the interests of private actors so that they become public concerns.

According to Robertson et al. (2012), a wider literature suggests that there are benefits to PPPs – they can ‘pro-poor, harness new forms of innovation, tap into community preferences and needs, and (especially when structured as philanthropies) offer new source of financial support for education’ (p. 14). Robertson et al., also add that many researchers are sceptical of the equity impacts of private sector participation. There are contesting points of view, and little attention has been paid to policymaking process pushed forward by the PPP. Robertson et al. (2012) argue:

there is an urgent need for both more empirical research, and more open-ended debate engaging advocates and opponents of PPPs as a new arena of educational governance. At every scale, public private partnership arrangements need greater scrutiny and understanding, because they are certainly with us to stay . . . . Defining and unpacking the distinction between public and private roles in education is an indispensable starting point for any conversation about PPPs. (p. 2)

In line with Robertson et al. (2012), this paper focuses on the need to understand more about these arrangements through empirical research. PPP, is in this context used as one form analytical lens helping to understand a rather, as we will see in the result chapter, messy field. The following section describes the method used to capture at least parts of the field and bridging identified knowledge gaps in focus.

## Method

Most of the data used in this study come from the Education Inc. project. This data corpus is derived from 23 interviews with a total of 30 interviewees from 16 different companies, organisations or institutes, all operating in the Swedish market within the production and retailing of digital products, teaching material, in-service teacher-training and consulting services. The companies are of different sizes, ranging from a handful of employees to hundreds. The interviewees have different backgrounds, e.g. some have previously worked as teachers or school leaders, while others come from the area of business/management. A number are CEOs or head of staff, while others are coders, or in close relation with schools through providing help and advice on digitalisation regarding both hardware and software. These persons provided first-hand accounts from their business or organisation. Even though most of them work in the



digitalisation field, tightly connected to the ed tech field, there is a complexity to the data given that the interviewees have different positions and that their companies or organisations have different positions in Sweden. This provides a broad perspective, but also something that needs to be brought into mind when reading the results section. In addition, and foremost in the latter stage of the analysis, existing literature, research, but also press coverage, and governmental reports are consulted.

The interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019 by five researchers, all of whom were working with the Education Inc. project. They were made by phone or visits to the companies in question. Some interviews were individual, while others were conducted in focus groups. The interviews typically lasted for one hour to two hours and thirty minutes, using a semi-structured guide covering different themes regarding edupreneurial work, the companies' relations to schools, their views, and visions on schooling, etc. Moreover, the interviewees were asked about their job descriptions and reasons for choosing their occupation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thereafter uploaded into a software program, enabling different kinds of analysis and sub-studies.

When working with the data in this study, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Maguire and Delahunt 2017) was used. This included the following six-phase working pattern:

- (1) Familiarization with the data, e.g. transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data set, noting down initial ideas. Cutting out vital data sets with the overarching aims as a guide. The data set was collected in a specific document (approx. 35,000 words), thus enabling a more focused analysis.
- (2) Generating initial codes from the document, gathered in a second document (approx. 28,000 words)
- (3) Organising codes into potential themes, gathering specific, relevant data to each potential theme guided by the research questions. These themes were gathered in a third document (approx. 1,500 words).
- (4) Reviewing themes, e.g. checking if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Revisiting theoretical perspectives, thereby securing theoretical constancy.
- (5) Defining and naming themes, refining the specifics of each theme, generating clear definitions and names for each theme whilst working with the overall story of the analysis. Single out illuminating excerpts. The themes were labelled as follows: the actors, the meetings, and the agendas.
- (6) Re-visiting the overarching aim of the paper, consulting existing literature, and research, governmental reports, and press coverage. Producing and writing the full story, where the results were presented in themes with the excerpts from the interview included to provide illustrative examples.

Throughout the research process, reflections have been made regarding ethical considerations. The study follows the Swedish Research Council (Codex 2020), which entails, among many things, that all the respondents are anonymous.

## Results

As one aim of this study was to gain knowledge regarding companies and businesses cooperation with public actors, this section starts with a description on public actors that are relevant for the interviewees. Next, I give an account of how they say they meet, that is, in which context it can be assumed that questions, problems, policy issues are discussed. Thereafter I described which questions etc. that arise and which issues that becomes part of the agenda in the different meetings. Throughout this section, I analyse the consequences of meetings, relationships and issues involved aiming to shed light on the consequences of a changed educational landscape.

### *A new infrastructure*

One of the first steps in the analysis was to ascertain what kind of public actors that, according to the interviewees, were involved in different meetings, partnerships and cooperation. Those frequently mentioned are the obvious governmental actors and authorities such as SNAE, SPSM, and The Swedish Institute for Educational Research. The data show that the private actors meet and cooperate with public actors in different arrangements, many of which can be labelled as PPPs. This result is unsurprising; it is aligned with earlier research, national and international, but also because the Swedish public actors are mandated to cooperate with private actors (Magnusson 2018).

However, a number of other forms of organisations were also referred to in the interviews, actors that could not be labelled as public, but not strictly speaking private actors either. The most common were the following: the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR); The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO); Almega – the Employers’ Organisation for the Swedish Service Sector; Swedish IT and Telecom Industries; Swedish Ed-tech Industry; The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise; WorldSkills Sweden; The Association of Swedish Engineering Industries (Teknikföretagen); The Swedish Internet Foundation (Internetstiftelsen); and Research Institutes of Sweden (RISE). Except from the unions (which are not focus in this study), the most proper definition of these formations might be policy bricoleurs, i.e. actors or organisations formed into composite constructions (Garsten and Sörbom 2017; Maroy, Pons, and Dupuy 2017).

Earlier research indicates that these constructions can be loosely connected (Williamson et al. 2019) or amorphous (Svallfors 2016), but this seems not be the case in Sweden at the moment. Rather they are, according to their own websites or reports, stable and long-term formations and arrangements with boards, websites, reports and newsletters, working closely with other actors in the field. The Swedish Ed-tech has more than 80 members (often companies and businesses) covering more than 60 % of the companies in this market (Swedish Ed tech Industries, 2020).

The data do not indicate why these arrangements exist, and it seems that they have become more and more manifested. One clue, however, can be found in a quote from one organisation representative. Madeleine, head of Organisation C states, ‘They (SNAE) are not allowed to talk to individual companies in certain situations’. And Oscar, head of school affairs, Company B, maintains, ‘Because then we can become a referral organization because we are an organization, not an individual company.’ Some of the

interviewees viewed cooperation with governmental actors as not legitimate without being a group of businesses, i.e. being assembled into a larger actor that forms them into a proper actor in the relations.

Conversely, my interpretation of the governmental documents is that there are no hinders for public actors to cooperation and interact with private actors in any form. Regarding educational partnerships, however, there seems to be a discourse in the field that is more hesitant. When comparing the educational sector and the Swedish weapon industry, Michael, deputy CEO of Company A asserts:

But, when we say that we should produce knowledge, then people think it is very scary with collaborations between commercial interests, academia and, in this case, the municipality. And the municipality or the school principal often says that it is better to cooperate with the academy than with the commercial interest. And when you ask why, they cannot really tell it . . . .  
(Excerpt Michael, deputy CEO of Company A)

Several interviewees consider the framework of the partnership to be somewhat contradictory to the public actors' mandate to actually cooperate with private actors. One analysis is that the private companies strive to become more legitimate in relation with the public actors. One interpretation is that the formation of organisations is one way forward, becoming one voice pushing forward certain messages, and generate possibilities to create strong PPPs. This enhance business to be heard in a field where they historically have had little chance to be heard. However, the risk with this process is that some actors are left out, so their needs. What is unquestionable though is that a new infrastructure of actors has emerged in Sweden with larger possibility to fundamentally influence education.

The next section shows how the actors meet and gives one account on how this infrastructure is work and how it is manifested.

### **Networks and relations**

According to the interviewed edupreneurs, there are a number of meetings between public actors, private companies and organisation. Such meetings can be pre-arranged with purposive communications openly advertised and prepared.

The data imply one important result: there are a lot of meetings, with numerous possibilities to gather and have conversations, discussions, etc. The following excerpt from a very short sequence in one interview shows the complex landscape and different meeting arrangements:

M: The action plan, I work with that. I spend quite a lot of time on the action plan . . . . It's a big area. They have a steering group consisting of the director-general, the State Secretary and a manager at SALAR.

I: At the National Agency for Education?

M: No, the action plan has a steering committee. Then there is a project management group, and it is NN, one from the National Agency for Education, MM, is in it . . . . And Organisation C. Yeah, I don't think NN is in it now; it's someone from Organisation C. It

is Organisation C who is involved, so they have been given that assignment. So, it's probably Olof [in Organisation C], I would say. Then it is SALAR's project manager . . . . Then there is the National Agency for Education. I do not know what her name is; she is responsible for digital skills, so she projects that part. Then it's professor PP . . . That's where I join one of those working groups then. [ . . . ] We [Organisation A] sit and discuss strategic choices . . . . We have done that and then the National Agency for Education owned that question. They called on SALAR and to us, . . . And it all seemed like a good idea, so then we [Organisation A] put together a working group, and then it was we [Organisation A], SALAR and the National Agency for Education who were in and from a criteria perspective had control of all the wording . . . . We [Organisation A] are on referral on certain issues. Not all. There is the IT and Telecom industry, the Technology companies, so we have the Swedish Enterprise, the Entrepreneurs, there are all these industry organizations . . . (Excerpt Madeleine, head of Organisation C, NN, MM, PP are anonymised).

In other words, how the infrastructure work when it comes to meetings are not only hard to understand, the data indicates numerous actors, meetings and groups, i.e. a messy infrastructure of meetings.

Some meeting though could be categorised as more formal and/or pre-arranged. This regards, for example, reference meetings or working with referrals. Michael, deputy CEO of Company A, a company that offers both software and hardware solutions, explains:

Yes, we are in different reference groups, and so on. Now, for example, I sit in a reference group around the digital national tests. There they [a public actor] are good to invite to it . . .  
(Excerpt Michael, deputy CEO of company A)

Some pre-arranged meetings involve actors that travel together abroad. The data show that at least two significant trips have been undertaken, involving many public actors and private companies and organisations. Olof, from Organisation C, remarks:

Last year we did, together with the Ed-tech industry organization, we led a delegation to Hong Kong and Shenzhen, . . . And then we took with us a delegation that consisted of schools, SALAR, Vinnova, school principals, and companies and researchers. We were about 50 people who went. Now in May . . . now we are going to the US this time . . . . And there are decision makers in the National Agency for Education, from SALAR, Vinnova, unions, student organizations, school boards, companies and researchers.  
(Excerpt, Olof, Organisation C)

Even though this is a prepared, openly advertised trip it can be assumed that the different actors, public as well as private have possibilities for both formal and informal chats, conversations and discussion during the trip. And many meetings between actors are exactly this, they are informal and spontaneous. One employee from an ed tech company informed, 'Oscar [their CEO] has his gateways' (Jonas, Company B), thereby indicating that some meetings are not necessarily formal and visual. The CEO himself confirms:

We meet at seminars and conferences. I have a relationship with them. I can discuss when the Swedish National Agency for Education releases its report every three years, what IT in the school looks like; so I can give my perspective on the report.  
(Oscar, Head of school affairs, Company B)

The informal meetings also happen because many representatives have worked in the field for some time. One interviewee affirms that ‘. . . if you have been going on as long as we have done with these questions, then you know many people’ (Petra, Company B). Another adds:

Yes, I don’t work with, but we have, we know them and meet them. And if you take SPSM, they have been positive to us. We meet them out and such. We have run seminars with them as well . . . , but we have done seminars together because they think what we do is good.

*(John, founder and former CEO, Company E)*

To conclude, the data show many different meetings, both formal and informal and in complex and disorganised arrangements with possibilities for discussions and conversation on various topics. The analysis also shows the importance of network and relationships. This makes the landscape agile and it opens up for many actors to be involved, which can be assumed strengthen business possibilities. However, the consequences are also that it is hard to understand the meeting structures both when it comes actors involved but also where important issues are raised and discussed. Building on Steiner-Khamsi, Karseth, and Baek (2020) and Williamson et al. (2019), I therefore claim that one consequence of the changed education landscape is that the bureaucracy as we know it – a pyramid structure with the ministry at the top, the people at the base, and its appointed commissions somewhere in the middle – no longer exists. In contrast, the current picture is much more vivid with new consequences regarding issues and topics, which will be described and analysed in the next section.

### **Digitalisation, competence development and lobbyism**

Many different topics appear in the interviews. However, digitalisation is, unsurprisingly, a featured theme. One of the interviewees boasts about their work: ‘We have even digitized the entire curriculum, which the National Agency for Education should have done . . . . Now we must do the same in Norway, in Finland’ (Martin, founder and former CEO, Company A). Another interviewee refers to more formal work with SNAE: ‘I sit in a reference group around the digital national tests. There they are good at inviting to it. We sit in another reference group around digitalising the steering document so that we get a common language for them. . . .’ (Robin, head of sales for digital platforms, Company A). Others talk about meetings where technical issues such as standards are discussed.

Another topic regards knowledge levels in the Swedish educational landscape. Several of the interviewees want to meet governmental actors to help and raise knowledge on ed tech issues. One interviewee communicates, ‘It was mainly about getting politicians to understand what reality looks like in relation to learning and . . . . But also, as we experience, help them understand where the school is and where it is heading’ (Michael, deputy CEO of company A). Olof, Organisation C, remarks:

They have very few places to meet to discuss these types of issues. But then we can offer a joint travel experience where you get many days to actually marinate on these issues, lift and discuss them back and forth; then we can increase the general level of knowledge . . . . That becomes an outstanding way of doing competence development . . . . We believe that

this will be very knowledgeable for the entire Swedish ecosystem when it comes to educational issues in a digital age . . . .  
(*Olof, Organisation C*)

It was not difficult to get Olof to speak about this topic. Indeed, it was evident from the interviews with all the private actors in the Project XX that they were happy to freely speak about their ways of working, their beliefs, and the Swedish school. But in the midst of two interviews, issues were raised regarding things that they want to stay clear of. Oscar, head of school affairs, Company B, talks about the Swedish curriculum:

I: Not the content itself, no?

O: Absolutely nothing (Oscar, Head of school affairs, Company B).

O: We did not have any comments on the curriculum descriptions. Not at all, even though we have been a referral body . . . . But yes, yes, exactly. I added. I think I was part of writing about collaboration and so on.

Another interviewee adds:

I: . . . But do you also have the opportunity to influence the overall national school policy? Do you have a voice that means something when school politicians?

B: No, they bloody don't care about us. No, but there are people who know each other . . . . Remember that we are a private company; and when it is a public inquiry, you get a subordinate clause . . . . But normally, a private company is not allowed to enter. . . .

(*Bo, founder and CEO, Company G*)

What is surprising from the first results, where the actors seems to meet with everyone and in and in different assemblages, is that there are, according to two prominent figures in the field, areas they do *not* want to interfere with – the curriculum and the school content itself. This raises questions since it contradicts many of the actors' work with the #Skoldigiplan, mentioned above, and earlier research on digitalization, and the speedy implementation of digitalization in the Swedish curriculum (Williamson et al. 2019). Why there seems to be two contradicting discourses raises further questions in need of scrutiny.

When analysing what kind of topics and issues raised by the actors, it also becomes clear that there are different ways of putting forward topics and issues. Many of the private actors uses straightforward approaches and talk openly about the meetings, partnerships, and outcomes. However, several of the interviewees also speak about lobbying even though lobbying is highly controversial in Sweden, as in many countries. It is seen as lawful attempts to influence government and/or their officials, and it is often connected to bribery, corruption, and a lack of transparency. There are only few examples in the literature of lobbying in Swedish education; these regard foremost school shutdowns (Tagihizadeh, 2015). Nevertheless, several representatives of the private actors in the data refer to lobbying. One of the interviewees relates, 'Otherwise, we have definitely tried to be part of the National Agency for Education every time we are invited or we invite ourselves. We've been doing a lot of political lobbying, clearly' (Michael, deputy CEO of company A). Another further comments:

I: How have you been working on it? Have you done some lobbying, and what does it mean?

M: We have to some extent. We had in our business plan that we would really lobby and drive this change processes. And we have done that, in our own way, by influencing a lot of people around us, in some form. [...] It's principals, school people, politicians, whatever that may be. Then we could have done it even more from my perspective. There have been a bunch of politicians that we have really influenced. A little high and low and a little different levels. And lots of wine . . . . We did what we could. But if we had unlimited resources, I would have hired two people who did just that [lobbying]. (Martin, founder and former CEO of company A)

A third interviewee adds:

. . . what we did before, especially via the IT companies, we did a lot of lobbying and attended Fridolin [former Ministry of Education] to get . . . Especially in this era and this industry we are in now, where so much is happening, we know more than the school knows. And I would say that I think it is a result of the lobbying that we got two sentences [into the text] actually. (Oscar, Head of school affairs, Company B)

Lobbying is clearly used, with some of the interviewees wishing they could do more lobbying. Others see it as ordinary everyday work: 'Yes, but oh my God. And there is no difference from anything else. It is more like the word has some kind of special meaning maybe, otherwise it is very much everyday work' (Christina & Hugo, Organization B).

i.e., both the results and earlier research indicates a growing rate of lobbyism. On a more general note, Elin Helgesson and Kajsa Falasca (2017) states: "Swedish politics are in a process of transformation, moving from corporatism toward a more pluralistic character. Changing political prerequisites have opened up new ways and channels to exert political influence, creating the foundation for a unique lobbying arena . . . (p. 276). The process of creating arenas within education that opens up for lobbying is indicated in this study, for example, the new infrastructures created entail private organisation to talk with one strong voice. I.e. new ways and channels to exert political influence, creates the foundation for a unique lobbying arena, the business entrepreneurs becomes not only edupreneurs but what I label policyneurs.

It should be noted that there are no indications in the data that the interviewees have used bribery or were corrupted, and how the interviewed interpreted lobbying remains unclear. Nevertheless, at least Oscar acknowledges the controversiality:

. . . a referral organization, because we are an organization, not an individual company . . . . And that's what appeals to me there, to be an official part in this debate. We do not have to lobby in the same way, but we are housetrained in these matters . . . .

(Oscar, Head of school affairs, Company B)

In Oscar's way of speaking, there is a nuance to his words – housetrained (Swedish: *rumsrent*, literally meaning clean room), thus showing that lobbying is seen as something politically incorrect. It indicates, as researcher Helgesson and Falasca (2017) states that 'lobbyists was seen as an alien intrusion that does not belong in political life by the Swedish public, and only one-tenth of the population express that they find lobbyists trustworthy' (p. 276). My analysis is that that the way Oscar's company and how it is together with other companies are organised into strong private organisation - this new



infrastructure in the Swedish educational landscape – makes his work more appropriate because such companies and organisation can be seen as an official and legitimate part of proceedings and PPPs.

This study does not show to which extent lobbyism is used and little could be said from the data regarding far-reaching consequences. Nonetheless, we do know from earlier research on lobbyism in Sweden that when it comes to representation by interest groups, that ‘relatively high levels of equality would be expected, but striking levels of inequality based on socio-economic status are instead found’ (Boräng and Naurin 2022, 1447). Boräng and Naurin conclude that “Swedish lobbyists allocate more resources towards policy problems that are perceived to be more important by citizens with a high income and high level of education compared to those with a lower socio-economic status. (1452). Boräng & Naurin’s research alongside the results from this study stress that more research on the matter is needed.

### **Becoming policyneurs**

My argument is that a significantly changed education system with a growing rate of private companies and businesses working in and with public actors, entails a series of consequences. This paper has shed light not only on the ongoing cooperation and partnership between public actors and companies and organisations but on some of the effects. In short, private actors in Sweden have become more than economic actors, they are now strong political actors that engage in the policy making with effects on transparency and democracy overturning traditional business logics.

The findings show that multiple actors meet in different forms and with different functions, and that they do so in multiple ways and with diverse agendas. This creates a complex and disorganised landscape with new formations of strong actors, entailing a number of consequences, one of which is the establishment of lobbyism. What can be discerned is strong Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), where actors and networks are linked together, directly or indirectly, in fluid and flexible relations and partnerships. These fluid and disorganised relations and partnerships have become powerful forces in Sweden, a country recognised for at least an imagined clear distinction between private and public, thus effecting, for example, mandates, roles and accountability. This section discusses these findings.

If seeing educational policy as something that in relations are officially agreed upon in education and/or in societal discourses, this then entails that all meetings, actors, the new infrastructure and lobbyism influence policy and decision-making. The private actors become more than business actors: they become policy actors. This is aligned with Garsten and Sörbom (2017), who argue that there is a ‘political turn of corporations’ (p. 2), which means that private actors in the public field not only concern economic interests but also political interests. Therefore, I claim that the entrepreneurs within education can not only be called edupreneurs; they have also become *policyneurs*, that is, actors mixing business and political interests. This constitutes a change in their roles. And questions remain, question that needs to be scrutinised, how this will change mandate and accountability, and, ultimately, decision making.

The companies in this data set very much act according to business rules, with some acting very well. It would be difficult for them to survive if government decisions go in

the wrong direction. Michael, deputy CEO of Company A, states, ‘If there were government initiatives that were directly business-critical for what we do, then we would of course have a challenge in that we only work with Swedish schools as the majority of our business.’ The companies act according to business logics and to market principles because they are businesses that aim not only to survive but also to flourish on the market. Consequently, I argue the following can be expected to happen:

Firstly, and shown in the results, many private actors in Sweden have formed themselves into policy bricoleurs in order to influence. This makes them, as Garsten and Sörbom (2017) assert:

agile enough to manoeuvre actors and combine market and political interests . . . . They can become important for markets, but they are also important for politics and the certainly active in combining both types of activities. Depending on the context and the interest pursued, they perform as primarily market actors or political actors. (p.12)

The private actors thus become more than economic actors – they become strong political actors. And through the formations of policy bricoleurs, they advocate for certain causes or seek to promote policy innovations. Michael, deputy CEO of Company A, when talking about a large organisation, the Swedish Edtech Industry, states, ‘It’s the same as all other industry organisations, a club for those who have roughly the same interests to pursue a particular issue or issues and gather those forces and instead make it a common name.’ Robin, head of sales for digital platforms, Company A, affirms that the Swedish Edtech Industry are very important when protecting interests and that ‘The policy work that is about digitizing the curricula is also part of Edtech, or Swedish Edtech Industry’s work as well.’ Furthermore, he argues that this process is ‘a very good way to discuss the issue, and lobby for it and the interests that exist in the Swedish market linked to it.’ Yes, from a business logic it is indeed a good way to discuss issues. But representation is a problem. We already know that the public opinion lacks political representation when it comes to for-profit system (Svallfors and Tyllström 2019) and research on lobbyism indicates striking levels of inequality (Boräng and Naurin 2022). In other words, becoming policyneurs entails a great responsibility when it comes to representation and equal distribution of power.

Secondly, seeing the processes within PPP from a business logic, issues on transparency becomes complex. For a company to ensure future profit possibilities requires certain levels of integrity and secrecy. As a company, you need to hold some cards close to your chest; there are trade secrets to keep in order to survive. At the same time, education and schooling constitute democratic, open institutions, traditionally transparent regarding results, grades and how the money (i.e. the public tax funds) has been spent (or not). However, Garsten and Sörbom (2017) ask the following regarding the Swedish welfare system:

The question is whether and to what extent corporations will take on the rights and the social obligations that accrue to them as legal entities whose activities have far-ranging implication for social lives. Furthermore, we may ask how these activities will be rendered transparency and accountability. (p. 8)

This issue came into focus when the question of what is confidential within free schools became a legal issue after Statistics Sweden changed its policy in 2020. When SKR (Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions), requested, as per usual, statistics from Statistics Sweden, the statistics authority refused to disclose certain information

about these independent schools. The motivation was that a free school's student composition, student completion and grade results can affect or reveal the school's financial conditions. In other words, these elements are something the independent schools compete with. The issue received a lot of attention throughout the school sector and was heavily criticised, resulting in swift changes that opened up for more transparency (Läraren 2020).

Thirdly, I claim that the disorganised landscape of PPPs in a system where you can profit from public tax funds and which sometimes lacks transparency creates a perfect breeding ground for lobbyism. Tyllström claims, 'fuzziness is not external to lobbying practices, it is at the heart of it' (p. 97). As Ball (2012) describes, policy networks involve 'particular kinds of social relationships, flows and movements' (p.5); and through these social relationships, they endorse particular agendas where they share ideas around problems and share a conception of their role, offering innovative solutions to these policy problems (also see Menashy 2016).

From a democratic perspective, these consequences become deeply problematic not only regarding unequal distribution of power, transparency, lobbyism and fuzziness. A watered-down system also makes it hard to hold someone accountable when necessary. Private actors, whatever relations, resources, or networks that are at play are free from the limitations and responsibilities of being a governmental actor (Reckhow and Tompkins-Stange 2018). The system therefore risks, as Moeller (2020) put forward to, 'obscures the inverse relationship between the increasingly disproportionate nature of corporate power and prerogative in education and decreasing funding for and commitment to public education.' (p. 233).

The consequences can indeed be construed as problematic, or even corrupt or bad. However, the aim of this paper was not to find out whether actors or their actions are good or bad. Neither was the aim to point the finger at the private actors in the education field. They act upon and respond to business rules and market principles. However, when analysing the consequences questions arise; and problematic concerns become evident regarding business rules and market principles meeting educational rules and schooling principles. Sweden is the only country worldwide that allows profit on public funds. Sweden has built a system where private education companies can profit from public tax funds, which has created a system with no counterpart elsewhere. In this system it becomes from several aspect important (for the private companies) to build relations and partnerships, create strong organisation and systems where you can work with lobbyism.

Should we ask more of the private actors? Should we ask more of government and authorities? These questions might be irrelevant since this is not a simple story of companies versus government, business interests versus educational core values, private versus public actors. Therefore, the only relevant question might be: Should ask more of the partnership? Actors are so immersed with each other that the partnerships have become entities in their own right, and '[p]rivation and the state need to be thought together' (Ball 2009, 97). Returning to the title of this paper, it is not about private actors *in* policy process. They are policy, they are the process, they are policyneurs. The implications regarding, for example, mandates and accountability in relation to democracy, decision making, and transparency have yet to be investigated.

## Note

1. Examples can be found at the Ed tech map ([www.edtechkartan.se](http://www.edtechkartan.se)) provided by the organisation Swedish Ed tech Industry.

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