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# Rescaling education policy:

## Central-local relations and the politics of scale in England and Sweden

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### Abstract:

Governments worldwide have sought to introduce greater choice and competition as mechanisms to improve the quality of education provision and outcomes. There is, however, considerable cross-national variation in education policy, particularly regarding the role of local government. To explain such differences, this article focuses on recent reforms in compulsory education in England and Sweden. It shows that although governments in both countries have advocated choice, competition and participation, education reform has led to centralisation of school governance in England, but decentralisation in Sweden. Drawing on the concept of 'scalecraft' as a specific form of 'statecraft', it argues that these differences in the rescaling of education policy reflect different conceptions of central-local relations and the role of local government. More broadly, the article shows how national governments strategically use scalar reorganisation (scalecraft) to support broader political goals (statecraft), contributing to a better understanding of the spatial dimensions of public policy reform.

**Keywords:** education policy; education governance; central-local relations; local government; scalecraft; statecraft; marketisation; participation

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## Introduction

Governments worldwide have sought to introduce new governance mechanisms into national education systems to improve the quality of education provision and outcomes. While the themes of more choice and marketisation, parental (and sometimes pupil) participation, and accountability through inspection and student assessment (OECD 2001; 2004; Daun 2007) are widely shared between countries and part of an overall process of public service modernisation, there is considerable cross-national diversity in the form taken by policy responses and governance systems. In particular, we see differences in the re-arrangement of the relationship between central and local government as part of these reform processes. We here consider the underlying dynamics that produce such diversity with reference to two key cases: England and Sweden. In both countries education reforms included all the themes identified above and were guided by concerns over educational standards, performance and equality, and yet, the organisational consequences for the two national education systems have been quite different: over the last thirty years, English compulsory school education transformed from being one of the most decentralised to one of the most centralised education systems in the OECD, with Local Education Authorities (LEAs) losing most of their traditional roles and responsibilities. In Sweden, the move was in the opposite direction, from a centralised education system to a highly decentralised one that strengthened the role of municipalities.

Nation-specific political configurations might lead us to expect social democratic Sweden to lean more towards increased participatory education governance, while the traditional strength of centre-right parties in Westminster would suggest stronger marketisation in England (Gingrich 2011).<sup>1</sup> However, centre-left as much as centre-right governments in both countries have introduced marketisation mechanisms, as well as increased the range of actors participating in the governance of school education – albeit the latter with lesser emphasis and with sometimes differing labels. In many respects Swedish school education is

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas education policy in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is a devolved matter, English education is governed directly by the central UK government.

even more strongly marketised than is that in England, as Sweden allows schools to run on a for-profit basis. Neither can party-political cleavages explain the diverging de-/centralisation trends in the two education systems.

To explain national policy variation in the context of global trends we develop a novel analytical perspective in this article: party-political and ideological differences are important for shaping reform dynamics of education policy in recent decades, but need to be understood in the context of central-local government relations and the spatial dimension of policy reform. When governments promise the electorate more say over children's education and create local school markets or allow parents and other community members onto local school boards, they alter the power balance between central and local actors. Territorial scale is thus a key aspect of education governance, but one that to date has received scant attention in comparative research (but see Papanastasiou 2017; Wilkinson 2017). Taking inspiration from human geography (Brenner 2009; MacKinnon 2011), we make use of the concept of 'scalecraft' – means whereby states rescale relations between different geographical levels as part of their strategies of educational reform – to analyse changes to national education systems comparatively. Furthermore, drawing on Pemberton's work (2016), we conceptualise 'scalecraft' as a specific form of 'statecraft': we suggest that education policy, due to its pivotal role in modern welfare states, plays a particular role for contemporary politics by lending legitimacy to wider public policy reform projects; the scalar reorganization of education governance thus becomes a central instrument for governments to pursue broader political goals. Finally, we demonstrate how the contrasting directions in the rescaling of education policy in England and Sweden can be linked to different conceptions of statecraft and to the different relationship between national and local politics in the two countries.

The paper makes several contributions to current debates on education policy, and on policy reform more broadly: whereas recent education research has paid particular attention to global trends, such as marketisation and new assessment regimes (see e.g. Daun 2007; Ball 2007; Lundahl et al. 2013; West & Nikolai 2017; Ozga & Lawn 2014; Rönnerberg 2017), our focus on the scalar reorganisation of

education governance in Sweden and England helps identify nation-specific differences in policy trajectories that tend to be overlooked (but see Hudson 2007; Hudson & Lidström 2002). Secondly, by linking the ‘scalecraft’ concept with a perspective on ‘statecraft’, we suggest a more extensive analytical scenario that links education reform to broader questions about the restructuring of mature welfare states and the reconfiguration of their scalar architectures. We thus contribute to the emerging comparative literature on the political economy of education and the welfare state (see e.g. Busemeyer 2016; Hicks 2015). Lastly by using comparison systematically as an heuristic tool we test the potential and limits of our analytical concepts across national contexts (Sartori 1994).<sup>2</sup> The findings in this paper highlight how key institutional legacies of the respective welfare states shape nation-specific approaches to education scalecraft. Further we demonstrate how key features of national politico-administrative systems - such as legal frameworks for central-local government relations - structure the opportunities for scalar reorganisation and the organisational points at which these take place. For this latter point we draw on public management and local government literature that has to date been neglected in comparative welfare state analysis (see e.g. Pollitt & Boueckaert 2011; Wollmann 2012).

The next section presents our argument, drawing out tensions between the statecraft-function of education reform in mature welfare states and the scalar dimension of education governance, and discussing the strategic use of scalar reorganisation (scalecraft) by political actors. We then outline key changes in the governance of school education in England and Sweden since the late 1980s. This considers the shifts in power relations between central and local government alongside the more familiar themes of recent education reform discourse: ‘marketisation’ and ‘participation’. Finally, we explain the differences in the rescaling of English and Swedish education governance in light of successive

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<sup>2</sup> Methodologically, our analysis is based on a qualitative case comparison of policy changes in the English and Swedish compulsory school systems since the 1980s, and draws on information from official policy documents, government and public agency reports, national statistics and a wide range of academic literature. The aim was not to produce a comprehensive overview of all policy developments in school education in recent decades, but to trace the scalar reorganization and respective de-/centralization trends in education governance in the two countries.

governments' perceptions of and strategic responses to the political and structural context of central-local relations in the two countries.

## **Education policy in wider perspective**

### Education reform as statecraft

Some thirty years ago, Jim Bulpitt suggested that the politics and policy reforms pursued by national governments could be better understood when we focus less on the political ideology of the leading party, and more on 'statecraft', that is 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary semblance of governing competence in office' (1986, 21). We suggest education policy plays a particular role for the statecraft of governments by lending legitimacy to wider public policy reform projects. We ground this argument in an understanding of the pivotal position of public education in modern welfare states. It functions simultaneously as a public good and a private market good, and as such it contains contradictory goals. Education is widely viewed as public good firstly for economic reasons, as productivity and prosperity levels of a society are closely linked with education levels. But democratically constituted societies also attach an intrinsic (not merely employment-related) value to education: the emergence of mass democracy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries produced the view that there was a public good in raising the general educational and cultural level of the whole population, enabling citizens to fully participate in social and public life. On the other hand, education is an intensely private market good to the extent that it is about qualification for competing in the labour market. Paradoxically, public education is a public good that comprises a mass of competing private goods, giving rise to ambivalent political dynamics.

In the post-war decades governments could derive legitimacy for the expanding welfare state – promising equality and prosperity in exchange of taxes and the acceptance of a (near) state monopoly over the organisation of central aspects of life – by extending and equalizing access to education to more groups in society

(see e.g. Marshall 1964). From the 1980s onwards pressure on public education systems grew. Firstly, the more that governments moved to universalise educational access, the more competitive the situation became, making it more important for parents that their children received a better schooling than others. Improving educational outcomes thus became a central political issue and a matter for party competition.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, as mature welfare states moved into a phase of retrenchment and restructuring to align with economic shifts towards a global knowledge-economy, 'investing' in children's education, as a means to turning them into productive and self-reliant citizen-workers of the future, became a key justification for general public policy reforms (Lister 2003; Taylor-Gooby 2008; Hemerijck 2018).

Today, the success of national governments is measured against the performance of the national public education systems, often presented in terms of international league tables, such as PISA. At the same time, the inbuilt contradictions of education described above make it difficult to achieve positive-sum results in education outcomes, triggering widely shared perceptions of failing education systems across countries. Governments have responded to this dilemma with a raft of education reforms that on the one hand strengthen the market aspect of education – the introduction of choice and competition principles, and the reorganisation of schools according to corporate models of governance – and on the other resonate with ideas of participatory democracy and open up education governance to a wider range of actors, including parents, 'communities', charities and businesses (OECD 2001; Ball 2007; Ranson 2008).

These new governance mechanisms of 'marketisation' and 'participation' that have increasingly been introduced to education systems since the 1980s correspond with what Fritz Scharpf has coined the 'input' and the 'output'-side of legitimacy (Scharpf 1997). The input side is concerned with representation and the need for governments to create confidence that the preferences of citizens are

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<sup>3</sup> There is always an ambiguity in this political articulation, because, again, parents are seeking an advantage for their children while public policy has to offer general improvements. No-one can have as an election slogan: 'We shall ensure that every child is helped to do better than all other children'. Education policy is therefore a strongly contested and conflictual arena.

sufficiently incorporated in education policy. The output side concerns performance, and a need to demonstrate effectiveness in the achieving of goals (Scharpf 1997, 19; see also Woods & Simkins 2014), or ‘governance competence’ (Bulpitt 1986). In a context where broad consensus is difficult to achieve, state monopoly over education is risky, thus delegating responsibility for education to markets and wider networks of actors becomes a central strategy of statecraft. Conceptualising recent trends in education reform this way helps overcome the puzzle that left and right parties alike have championed the introduction of new governance mechanisms around ‘market’ and ‘participation’, despite a lack of conclusive evidence regarding their effectiveness to improve education outcomes (see e.g. Vlachos 2011; Böhlmark & Lindahl 2008).

### Education reform as scalecraft

So education reform is a matter for national governments and citizens or, more specifically, parents. However, school education is also an intensely local matter. Children tend to go to school in close proximity to where they live, and this is also the case in education systems where free school choice exists (Burgess et al. 2015). For some this may reflect parental preferences, as local schools usually engage in and contribute to local cultural practices and events and thus serve an important function of integrating children in their local communities (Bruner 1996, 66ff.); on the other hand local schooling reflects issues of ‘space-time-fixity’ – the fact that this kind of service requires the child’s presence at a specific place and time; the ensuing coordination logistics between school times, parents’ work times and other activities tend to limit the scope for families to accommodate long school journeys (McLean et al 2017).

So when national governments engage in ‘education as statecraft’ by promising parents more say over their children’s schooling, they create *local* participatory opportunities and *local* school markets, and by doing so alter the power balance between central and local actors in the education system. It is in these shifts in central-local relations in education governance we are interested here.



Historically municipalities were the key players in education at local level, planning and organising schooling in line with national education policy (Whitty 1990; Richardson 2004). Central-local tensions may arise when the national government allocates competencies to other actors, 'sideways' or 'below' local government, e.g. to individual schools or school chains. Tensions are also possible where local partisan constellations do not align with national politics. The resistance to or reinterpretation of national policy by local governments may lead to territorial variation: for example, whereas traditionally conservative municipalities in Sweden welcomed the 'free school' policy in the 1990s, socialist strongholds were more reluctant to implement it, leading to an uneven spread of the 'education market' in the country (Skolverket 2005; Lindh & Johansson Sevä 2018). Lastly, local governments may face issues of legitimacy where they are not seen to be adequately responding to local groups or communities, which may prompt intervention by national government.

Territorial scale is thus a key aspect of education governance. Nevertheless, the scalar dimension of policy reform has to date not received much attention in education research (but see Papanastasiou 2017; Wilkinson 2017), nor other areas of social policy (but see Kazepov 2010). We draw here on the growing scholarship on the political economy of scale in human geography (MacKinnon 2011; Brenner 2009; Keil & Mahon 2009). This approach questions the traditional conception of scales as fixed and external to social processes (MacKinnon 2011, 22) and instead examines how 'state rescaling' processes form part of broader political dynamics under contemporary capitalism. As Brenner notes (2009, 126), the scales of statehood are not simply fixed institutional structures that form the *sites* of political strategies, but may themselves become the *mechanisms* and *outcomes* of political action. This literature emphasizes the wide range of political, economic and social actors involved in 'scalar practices' or 'scalecraft' (Fraser 2010). We adapt the term 'scalecraft' here for a more narrow analytic focus on the ways national governments strategically use rescaling practices as political means. We draw inspiration particularly from Pemberton (2016), who suggests a link between 'scalecraft' and Bulpitt's concept of 'statecraft' in his study on the reorganisation of local government in Wales. According to Pemberton, 'it is often

through scalecraft that states seek to practice statecraft, and particularly in cases where the rescaling of governance is explicitly used as part of a broader political strategy' (Pemberton 2016, 1309).

Bulpitt himself, in his historical studies on British territorial politics, was interested in the scalar shifts in governance, without however explicitly conceptualising this aspect: Bulpitt suggested that the statecraft of post-war governments involved a strategic understanding of central-local relations as a 'Dual Polity', where central government was concerned with 'high politics' and the running of the country, and local government with 'low politics' of everyday life, and both with relative autonomy from each other – a statecraft approach he then saw challenged by the Thatcher (and successive) governments (Bulpitt 1983; 1986). We shall here conceptualise 'scalecraft' as a specific statecraft function (see also Pemberton 2016).<sup>4</sup> We define the 'scalecraft of education reform' as the purposeful and strategic scalar reorganisation of roles and responsibilities in education governance by national government in order to construct governing competence and garner electoral support as part of wider public policy reforms and welfare state restructuring. In the following, we illustrate our argument by examining the scalar dimension of key trends in education policy in England and Sweden over the course of the last three decades.

## **The rescaling of education governance in England and Sweden**

### The post-war settlement (1950s-1970s)

In the post-war decades, school education developed rather differently in England and Sweden. In England, a state-funded school system was established that in important ways maintained selective features and included different school types

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<sup>4</sup> Bulpitt (1986) referred to four dimensions of statecraft - i) governing competence; ii) party management; iii) political argument hegemony and iv) developing a winning electoral strategy – none of which however capture the shifts in central-local relations he observed in his studies of British politics. Here, the scalecraft concept provides a missing link.

on secondary level. A comprehensive school was introduced under Labour in the mid-1970s, but was never rolled out universally, as grammar schools were allowed to continue to exist. A private fee-paying school sector also remained in place. The framework for the English school system was set by the 1944 Education Act, which gave local education authorities (LEAs) – committees of municipalities – the central role in organising school education, within broad education policies provided by the national education ministry (UK Government 1944). The LEAs entrusted curricular aspects and pedagogy largely to individual schools and professionals on the ground (Hudson & Lidström 2002, 32; Whitty 1990).

In Sweden, the reorganisation of primary and secondary education in the post-war years was more strongly oriented towards creating equal educational opportunities and a 'school for all', as part of broader goals around the democratisation of society and the creation of a universalist welfare state. In 1962 a comprehensive 9-year school was introduced (*grundskolan*), followed by the integration of vocational and academic programmes at upper-secondary level into one school in 1970 (*gymnasiet*). Private schools did not exist bar a handful of exceptions with historical origin (e.g. the English school in Stockholm) (Richardson 2004). Strong central state control of the system was to ensure equal access and equivalent schooling across the country (Montin 2016). Local authorities were an important intermediate administrative level, but without much autonomy. Explicit school laws, detailed curricula, national timetables and earmarked school budgets were in place to ensure a unitary public education system across the country (Lundahl 2002).

During the 1970s and 1980s there was growing discontent with the quality of school education in both countries. In England a sense of hierarchy between the different school types fuelled a continuous focus on children's performance in comprehensive schools. Raising standards became central to the political agendas of successive governments. Concern was also raised over parents' lack of say in their children's schooling (Hudson & Lidström 2002). In Sweden the unitary and centralised school system came under critique for not reaching its equality goals on the one hand, while also being criticised for focusing too much on children's

well-being at the expense of their knowledge acquisition and performance. It was also perceived as unresponsive to the interests of parents and other local actors (Lundahl 2002). In both countries governments responded to the educational challenges with a series of structural reforms aimed at improving school quality, parental voice (via greater influence on decision-making) and parental choice (via market mechanisms); and eventually, with a stronger emphasis on the latter.

The new directions of education policy meant a fundamental shift in the relationship between central and local government, schools and parents, but the scalar reorganisation this entailed was of a very different kind in the two countries. In England there was a move towards greater central government control over education to raise standards, and the removal of many policy-making, management and supervisory functions previously held by the LEAs. In Sweden the direction of change was one of strong decentralisation of education governance, with central government devolving many areas of responsibility to local government.

### Education reforms in England (1980s-2010s)

In England the most fundamental changes came with the Education Act 1986 and the Education Reform Act 1988 (UK Government 1986; 1988; Whitty 1990; West & Bailey 2013). The primary concern of these and successive Acts was educational standards. The Labour government elected in 1997 added an additional concern that children from various disadvantaged backgrounds were not receiving high-quality education. The issue became an intensely political one with variations in pupils' examination performances becoming key statistics in the struggle for electoral success of the political parties. This produced what Ranson (2008) has called the 'performativity' agenda, a preoccupation with measured performance as the main goal of school education. The education reforms of the 1980s and 1990s in various ways strengthened the role of parents, schools and central

government in education, but all at the expense of LEAs. Some of the key changes were:

1. Parents were given increasing opportunities to choose their schools aided by a national system of indicators and 'league tables' of schools' performances drawn from national test score results and grades. These assessment indicators gave national government additional control over schools and strengthened the marketisation process providing parents with criteria by which to choose schools.

2. The autonomy of schools was strengthened vis-à-vis local authorities: on the one hand by devolving financial management to individual schools, strengthening the role of head teachers as managers (UK Government 1986), on the other by transferring responsibilities from LEAs to school governing bodies which now were to comprise not only teachers and LEA nominees, but also parents and 'community' representatives (UK Government 1986). Parents' role in education was thus further strengthened. Schools were now increasingly modelled on the concept of the firm with a board of directors with financial responsibilities, and a chief executive (the head). However the role of parents and other community representatives in this governance structure is ambivalent as customers (here parents) generally have no place in corporate governance.

3. A formal national curriculum was introduced under the 1988 Act, followed, a few years later, by an intensified inspection regime via the newly established Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). So while schools gained managerial powers, they lost influence over curricular matters due to a strong centralisation of control.

The Labour government encouraged a wider range of providers within the state system, so-called academies, partly by enabling groups or individuals willing to make a minority contribution to funding to establish and control schools; partly by encouraging LEAs to sub-contract school management to private firms (UK Government 2001; 2003; West & Bailey 2013). The Conservative-Liberal coalition greatly expanded the academy programme in the Academies Act 2010. The

emphasis under Labour that this would be used mainly to address issues with 'failing schools' in areas with social difficulties was abandoned; instead the academies programme was presented as an instrument to facilitate a 'school-led system' (DfE 2016). Now also well performing secondary schools were officially encouraged to convert to academies. In addition new academies or so-called 'free schools' could be set up by parents, teachers, charities, religious and voluntary groups (DfE 2015a; Wilkins 2017).<sup>5</sup> Primary academies were also introduced. An important difference between academies and local authority-maintained schools is that for the latter school governing bodies are accountable to the local authority (Papanastasiou 2017, 1064) while academies are contracted directly by the central state; they are publicly funded but operate outside of local authority control.

The 'academisation' of the English school system has continued under the post-2015 Conservative government, including now a new 'free school presumption' meaning that for the creation of any new state-funded school, local authorities must seek proposals for the establishment of an academy (DfE 2015b; West & Nikolai 2017). Today almost 30% of all primary school children are at academies, and 74% of secondary school children (DfE 2018).

### Education reforms in Sweden (1980s-2010s)

In Sweden too fundamental changes took place in the 1980s and 1990s. The first wave of reforms involved a strong shift of power from central to local government (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2006; Lundahl 2002); while also strengthening the role of school leadership and individual schools:

1. The responsibility for school planning and management was devolved from central to local government. Municipalities also gained autonomy over resource

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<sup>5</sup> 'Free schools' are legally established as academies. The difference is that the free school programme gave parents and teachers the opportunity to initiate the creation of a new school where there was dissatisfaction with council-run schools in a specific local area.

allocation, teacher employment and training (Reg. 1990; 1991a; SOU 1988). The national ministry abolished its own administrative structure and established instead an independent public body (*skolverket*) for inspecting, monitoring, and reporting on individual school performance.

2. Detailed regulations were replaced by guidelines and the national curriculum was loosened to establish overall objectives, with local authorities and individual schools given more autonomy over teaching methods and content, subject to the constraints of the national inspection and monitoring service (Reg. 1990; 1991a; SOU 1988).

These policies were introduced under the Social Democratic party's (SAP) rule, but with widespread political consensus. The decentralisation of responsibility within the education system was part of broader processes that took place in the public service sector (Montin 2016). Meanwhile the strengthening of the political right opened the way for ideas about commercial solutions in the public sector (Blomqvist 2004). In 1991 a centre-right coalition implemented a second wave of reforms, now with the aim to introduce market forces to the public education system (Lundahl et al. 2013), thereby giving parents and other groups a greater role in education:

1. A general right to establish independent schools within the national system was extended to parents, teachers, firms, various groups and organisations. These 'free schools' were removed from local authority control, though the municipality retained full financial responsibility. Independent education providers were allowed to make profits so long as they adhered to national quality standards.

2. Parents were granted the right to choose any school for their children, free of charge, within a municipality, public or independent thus creating a new competition and incentive structure between schools (Reg. 1992; Skolverket 2005). This marked a shift of power from local governments towards parents and the various new providers. At the same time municipalities were strengthened by being granted full financial control over school education via block grants from

the State (Reg 1991b). There was also an experiment with school governing councils comprising majorities of parents on primary school level, and including secondary school pupils, but these were never rolled out across the country (Almgren 2000; Brännström 2000; Skolverket 2001).

Despite its pronounced market-orientation, the 'free school' policy was not reversed by SAP once back in power in 1994. It is important to note however, that in contrast to their symbolic significance, free schools remained a marginal phenomenon in the 1990s, concentrated mainly in urban centres (Skolverket 2006), where the option of choice and educational diversification appealed to strong segments of middle-class voters. Swedish education also enjoyed high international reputation with Swedish students having preformed well in the first sweeps of the PISA study. This created confidence in the effectiveness of the decentralised, deregulated quasi-market of schooling. From 2006, the Conservative Reinfeldt-government incentivised the establishment of free schools by increasing state funding.<sup>6</sup> There has since been a steady growth of independent schools, albeit not as rapidly as in England: today 15% of children in compulsory school and 25% of children in upper secondary receive their education in an independent school (Skolverket 2018).

At the same time however, a growing number of studies pointed to rising segregation in schools, growing attainment-gaps between pupils and increased diversity between municipalities and individual schools as a result of the decentralisation and marketisation of school governance (Skolverket 2005; 2009; 2012; Bunar 2010; Vlachos 2011). In consecutive PISA studies, results of Swedish students were slipping fast in international comparison; by 2009 Swedish standards had fallen below the OECD average (Skolverket 2009; OECD 2009;

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<sup>6</sup> It is somewhat ironic that the Swedish free school system, now imported to England (Rönneberg 2015), resulted from new public management ideas that Sweden had originally adopted by looking for inspiration within English-speaking nations. The privatisation and competition elements of free schools in Sweden could thus be seen as 'English' themes that entered the Swedish school system in the 1990s.



OECD 2017). In a climate of national education crisis, the government took back control (see also Hudson 2007): the 2010 School Act introduced a new grading system and national tests to allow better assessment of educational standards, while the newly established national inspection agency (*skolinspektionen*) received sanctioning powers over 'failing' schools (Reg 2010). In 2011 a new national curriculum was implemented giving stricter guidance on school subjects and educational contents than had been the case with the previous goals and objectives-oriented curriculum.

Under the new School Act the autonomy of free schools was reigned in as they were pulled under the same legislative and curricular framework as state-run schools; in addition municipalities were given the power to veto the establishment of independent schools if it was deemed they would have negative consequences on the running of locally existing schools (West & Nikolai 2017). These developments point towards stronger regulation of the 'school market' and a new re-centralisation of education governance that was continued by consecutive governments. In 2015, under the next centre-left government (SAP/Greens coalition), a national Education Commission was set up to investigate how school performance and results could be improved. Its recommendations were a further rescaling of education towards central control, with a view of equalizing conditions and regulations for schooling in municipal and independent settings (SOU 2017:35).

### Discussion: de-/centralisation trends in the rescaling of education in England and Sweden

Our examination of the scalar reorganisation of education governance in England and Sweden since the 1980s reveals a complex picture: changes have not always been unidirectional, and key actors may have gained autonomy in some areas, but lost control in others. Nevertheless, clear differences emerge between the English and the Swedish cases, most notably the very different position of local government in the course of structural reform. In England local government bureaucracies have been scaled back in favour of greater legal and financial

freedoms for schools to govern themselves (Wilkins 2017). Schools remain, however, tightly controlled by the national curriculum, and the national regulations and inspections framework. This upward and downward scaling of education governance has all been at the expense of LEAs, who have lost most of their traditional educational responsibilities. In contrast Swedish municipalities have gained considerably in power, playing a key role in devising education policy and managing schooling at the local level. While there have been some recent 'upscaling' trends with the national government taking back some control, there are no indications of such radical disempowerment of local government as we have seen in England. Similarly as in England, in Sweden there has been a drive to increase participation of parents and other social groups in education via the creation of local school markets. However, the Swedish education system does not go as far as the English school in giving parents and other community members access to formal governance participation.

It is important to note that neither the application of market principles nor the participatory agenda can be attributed to the education debate around school quality and children's performance itself, but were the results of new public management approaches and discussions about greater user involvement taking place throughout the public sector (see e.g. Montin 2016; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011; Flynn 2012). Both developments led, in the English case, to the hollowing out of the role of local government in school governance. On the one hand local government has been depicted as standing in the way of the market (Papanastasiou 2017; Wilkins 2017). Drawing control over education to the central state, whilst giving individual schools more autonomy under competitive conditions, was thus a strategy to promote marketisation. On the other, local governments were criticised for lacking responsive and accountable practices towards the local citizenry (Flynn 2012 35ff; Wilson & Game 2011) – a gap that was to be filled by the delegation of responsibilities below or beyond the local authority level; to individual citizens, 'local communities', and agencies, expressed in particular through the encouragement of academies and free schools (Woods & Simkins 2014).

Also in Sweden, changes to school governance were part of general trends across the public sector from the 1980s that placed greater emphasis on citizens' choice and voice in the organisation and delivery of education (Lindensjö & Lundgren 2006). This included, as in England, the incorporation of market mechanisms into the school system. However, in Sweden marketisation of education was not associated with centralisation, but with a pronounced strengthening of the role of local government. On the one hand, no political party thought it possible in Sweden successfully to implement school reform without local authorities' collaboration. On the other, increasing citizens' (parents') influence in school education was not mainly understood in terms of direct participation of (individual) parents on school boards, instead the focus was on strengthening 'local self-administration' – with an understanding of local government as the legitimate representative for local communities. Contrary to the English case, school politics in Sweden was rescaled to become more strongly 'localised' with elected local municipal representatives being attributed increasing responsibility for the success or failure of local schools' outcomes.

### **Education policy, scalecraft and statecraft: towards an explanation**

At the heart of the differences in central-local relations in English and Swedish school governance lies a historical paradox: while English LAs played a central role in school education in the post-war decades - fitting Bulpitt's depiction of a 'Dual Polity' (1983) – structurally their position vis-à-vis central government was, in fact, weak (Wilson & Gaeme 2011). Their autonomy and role in public service delivery was not constitutionally protected as in many other European countries, nor did they have much control and flexibility over resources. In England there is no system of local income tax and LAs receive most of their budget directly from central government (HoCom 2009; UK Government 2007). When, starting in the 1970s, local governments came under criticism with respect to public services delivery, the British government had a relatively free hand to rescale and cut back the role of LAs in public policy, including the merging and restructuring of LAs themselves.

In Sweden in the post-war decades the role of municipalities in public policy was limited to implementing central state regulations and to delivering services accordingly. However, in the complex scalecraft of Swedish government, local authorities' autonomy vis-à-vis central government was legally guaranteed with the Swedish constitution recognizing central and local government as equal partners in government. In addition, Swedish municipalities have considerable tax raising powers, with the majority of Swedes paying most of their income tax directly to the local authority (Seller & Lidström 2007; Montin & Elander 1995). On average three quarters of municipal funds are raised by local taxes with accordingly only a small share made up by central state grants; in England the proportion is the reverse (HoCom 2009, 16).

Swedish municipalities enjoy strong legitimacy as representing the interests of the local community as well as being key players in ensuring and providing public goods, as indicated by the comparatively high voter turnout at local elections. Conducive to the strong link between local government and local community may be that Swedish municipalities tend to be relatively small – with 16,000 inhabitants on average they are around eight times smaller than English LAs (Montin 2016; Sellers & Lidström 2007; Montin & Elander 1995; Wilson 2003). Also, Swedish political culture, minted by the long legacy of the social democratic welfare state, makes no clear distinction between 'state' and 'society'. Strong public involvement in social services is generally welcomed by the majority of Swedes, and corporatist structures in public policy-making, involving a wide range of organised interests both on central and local level, further add to the integration of state and society. The position of municipalities in the Swedish politico-administrative system has thus, on both constitutional and cultural grounds, been fairly secure (Montin 2016; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011).

By contrast, the cutting back of responsibilities of English LAs in public policy took place before the backdrop of a general British political culture that distinctly separates 'the state' from society and accepts state intervention only to a limited extent (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004, 53). The fact that the reduction of local government control over education became a dominant strategy of national

governments of every hue also reveals another historic ambivalence in British scalecraft: For many years, parties had their roots in local government, where politicians learned their craft. However, Conservatives traditionally distinguished between 'high' politics (running the empire, waging wars and managing public finances) and 'low' politics (social policy and local government) (Bulpitt 1983; 1986), while Labour was suspicious of local government as something controlled by old elites. When in opposition, both Conservatives and Labour would support local government, but as local authorities became less and less important to party organisation, they were viewed negatively by both major parties. Ultimately, when in government, both parties have continuously engaged in a 'scalecraft as statecraft' approach that has blurred the boundaries between 'high' and 'low politics' by withdrawing power and autonomy from local government, for power-political and programmatic reasons. In the face of public criticism at the performance of public services, Conservatives and Labour alike have targeted local government – by subjecting it to market forces, making it 'share the turf' with other local actors, and having to respond to increased central government control. National governments thus purported themselves to be 'people's champions' siding with citizens against the old 'state machinery' (Clarke 2005, 449; Flynn 2012). Reducing the role of local government was also a means to minimise the influence of the political opposition (Wilson & Game 2011, 61ff.)

A certain ambivalence between central and local government has historically also been present in Swedish scalecraft, but arguably to a lesser degree than in England. For SAP, the party that dominated the national political scene for most of the post-war era, a division between 'high politics' and 'low politics' did not exist to the same extent as in England: social policy, and particularly a focus on public social services, was always at the heart of the social democratic agenda. With this political orientation, SAP depended on local governments for implementing its welfare state agenda and delivering public services (Montin 2016). However, power constellations on municipal level did not always and everywhere reflect the rule of SAP on the national level. Strong centralisation during the first post-war decades, in the school system as much as in public governance in general, ensured

that the national government's policies were implemented also in municipalities that otherwise were reluctant to adopt a social democratic agenda.

It was this SAP dominance that bourgeois parties wanted to break by advocating a shift of responsibility for public services to local governments, where some of them, particularly the Centre party (former Agrarian party), saw their political power base (Elander & Molin 1990, 175). While opening the public sector to private providers and market mechanisms was also on the bourgeois parties' agenda, this came later and was secondary to the drive for decentralisation (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004, 286). But SAP also supported devolution of power to local government during the 1980s and 1990s, albeit with different objectives in mind: a revival of the political community and the strengthening of 'local democracy' was a means to re-legitimise the Social Democratic welfare state with extensive public service provision. Interestingly, it was the bourgeois government in the 2000s that took the lead in re-centralising the governance of school education. As in England, these central-local dynamics, while becoming particularly clear in education governance, have affected the administration and delivery of public policies in general.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has dealt with the question of how better to understand cross-national variation in structural changes to education systems despite similar trends in education reform between countries. Using the concepts of 'scalecraft' and 'statecraft' as analytical lenses, we demonstrated how successive governments in England and Sweden made use of 'scalecraft' politics to increase local participation and market competition in education governance, but in very different ways and with different understandings of these themes.

In England, governments of all political hues perceived local governments as obstacles to the implementation of market forces and continuously reduced local governments' power and responsibility: on the one hand by centralising control

over schools; on the other by handing down responsibilities to individual schools and other organisations. Successive UK governments re-interpreted and actively reshaped central-local relations as a means to bolster credibility of broader public policy reforms – and they did so because central-local relations in the UK national system are based on tradition rather than constitutional law. In Sweden, to the contrary, local governments' role in education governance was strengthened considerably, both by SAP and bourgeois governments as a means to improve schooling and to re-legitimise public service provision. In the Swedish context, decentralising power to local government became a means to strengthening legitimacy for the national welfare state. The comparison of the two cases reveals that different conceptions of central-local relations by British and Swedish governments have led to contrary strategies to create legitimacy of public policy reform: increased local autonomy in Sweden on the one hand, creating stronger distinction between central and local politics in education policy; increased central control in England on the other, leading to a blurring of traditional lines between 'high politics' and 'low politics'.

For clarity and space limitations our analysis of education reform has focused specifically on the shifting relationship between central and local government as part of scalecraft politics. This is not to deny the complexity of scalar practices and the wide range of other actors involved, as emphasised by the human geography literature (MacKinnon 2011; Brenner 2009; Fraser 2010). Nevertheless, power asymmetries and scalar hierarchies remain important, as national governments may be able to use scalar practices more effectively than actors 'lower down' the vertical scale (Mahon 2009). Further research is needed to better understand how non-state actors engage with and are implicated in rescaling processes and scalar power relations. In particular the changing role of schools in education governance deserves fuller attention: schools often do not operate as individual entities on local level any more, but increasingly form part of larger school clusters, school chains (as is the case of academies in England) or even international corporations (in both countries) (see e.g. Lundahl et al 2013; Wilkins 2017; Rönnberg 2017).

The politics of scale are particularly pertinent in education reform due to its key position in providing a sense of 'governing competence'. But our scalecraft concept is also applicable to other policy fields: all public services that require interaction between service users, providers and administrators, are strongly embedded in spatial dimensions. Applying 'scalecraft' as an analytical lens may for example help identify variations in elderly care and early childhood education and care policy across welfare states and regions. Many studies deal with territorial scale as part of broader shifts in spatial configurations of political authority and rights – on European integration, multilevel governance, local government reorganisation and regional studies for example – without however conceptualising 'scale' as such (Brenner 2009). By bringing in 'scalecraft' we make a distinct contribution to the political economy of education and welfare state reform more broadly, that helps examine politico-institutional changes as part of wider restructuring processes in welfare states. At the same time our study also shows the limits of state rescaling in different national contexts: the virtual absence of constitutional protection for local government in England has made it highly vulnerable as a target for scapegoating in national government's blame avoidance game. Where, as in Sweden, levels of government and institutions are constitutionally protected from radical rescaling, governments need to seek other means of achieving their goals.

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