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Parents, a Swedish problem: on the marginalisation of democratic parental involvement in Swedish school policy

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ABSTRACT
This article proposes that the scope for parental involvement is limited in the current Swedish school system, despite its claim to the highest level of democracy and its extensive marketisation and juridification. In order to define this deficit, we introduce the notion of democratic parental involvement. We further trace the history of the pronounced reluctance towards parents seeking to influence the education of their children in Swedish education policy since the 1940s. Three characteristic ideas in this policy are highlighted: (1) its concept of 'democratic education', (2) the idea of 'the best interest of the child' and (3) the concept of 'the professional teacher'. We argue that these strands together make the idea of democratic parental involvement being a positive force in education virtually inconceivable.

KEYWORDS
Education; parental involvement; democracy; children’s rights; professionalism; Sweden

Introduction
This article emanates from our observations as parents trying to influence the education of our children in the Swedish school system. In Sweden, school attendance is compulsory for children aged 6–15 and cannot be replaced by other forms of education, e.g. homeschooling. In other words, parents are prohibited from taking overall responsibility for the education of their children. In view of the fact that Sweden is a democracy, stressing the importance of active citizen participation, this school system of coercion might be expected to be offset by comprehensive forms of parental involvement. Accordingly, we expected to be involved in discussions on, and even to define strategies for educational questions concerning, learning targets, teaching methods, classroom climate, homework rules, the use of mobile phones and excursions. However, our requests to have a say in the education of our children were routinely overruled. Instead of being accepted as competent collaborators, we were told about fixed rules at parents’ evenings, and were expected to comply with them.

Our experiences inspired us to investigate what is meant by having responsibilities as a guardian of a child subject to compulsory schooling in Sweden. The aim of this article is to
identify the background to what we experienced as an attitude of ignorance and occasionally distrust of parental involvement in Swedish school policy.

The sceptical attitude towards parental involvement that we experienced is not unique to Sweden. While parental involvement in early education seems to be welcomed more in other countries (Janssen & Vandenbroeck 2018, 821), other school jurisdictions concerning older children also seem reluctant about parental involvement (e.g. Breidenstein, Krüger & Roch forthcoming; Bendixsen & Danielsen forthcoming). With reference to the Anglo-American world, sociologist Frank Furedi identified the idea of ‘the best interest of the child’ and teachers’ expertise as central arguments to exclude parents from decisions concerning the education of their children (Furedi 2009). Similar arguments are mobilised by opponents of home-schooling in many countries (Myers & Bhopal 2018; Pearlman-Avnion & Grayevsky 2017; Torres 2016; Barbosa 2016). We, therefore, expect our analysis of the Swedish case to be germane to understanding the limitations of parental involvement in other countries too.

Democratic parental involvement – a blind spot in earlier research

The form of parental involvement that we found lacking in Sweden differs from the concepts usually referred to in research about parents and schools. Current research on the influence of Swedish parents typically frames parental involvement in relation to the school reforms that have transformed the Swedish school system since the 1990s (Dahlstedt 2009; Englund 2011b; Novak 2017). Particular emphasis has been put on two shifts in school policy. Firstly, marketisation is said to have given increased power to individual parents by choosing a school for their children. Since the 1990s the formerly state-governed Swedish education system, has been transformed in a neo-liberal direction, including decentralisation, the introduction of free school choice, school vouchers and publicly funded private schools (Lundahl, Arreman, Holm and Lundström 2013). Englund describes this trend in terms of ‘the increased impact of the rights of parents’ (Englund 2011b, 8).

Increased power of parents is also identified with reference to juridification, viz. the increasingly formal regulation of what schools must and must not do, combined with equally formal procedures for ‘reporting’ schools and teachers that fail to comply with policy (Arneback and Bergh 2016). One obvious object of study regarding this trend is the Swedish Education Act (2010:800), which was gradually transformed from detailed regulation of schools’ obligations to more indirect (but no less constraining) framework legislation, specifying children’s right to education (Novak 2017). As a consequence, a rapidly growing number of parents report schools and teachers to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, a governmental agency founded in 2008 to monitor schools and to hold them accountable for their failings.

While some researchers interpret parents’ discretionary powers with regard to their children as a too far-reaching shift in the relationship between the family and schools, and as a danger to educational equity (Englund 2011b), others describe parents’ influence as ultimately decided by economic and legal rationalities and thus as limited (Novak 2017). In line with recent international research on the responsibilisation of parents (Halse, Hartung and Wright 2017), Dahlstedt interprets the increasing emphasis on parental involvement in Swedish education policy as a strategy to turn parents into ideal partnering subjects, ‘willing to engage in partnering on the conditions that
apply for the partnership in question’ (Dahlstedt 2009, 799). According to this interpretation, parents are not encouraged to introduce their own thoughts about the aims and practice of schooling, but to comply with current education policy and its paradigm of success and achievement.

Even though earlier research differs in its judgement regarding whether parents have received too much, or merely a limited amount of influence, researchers relating parents’ activism to marketisation, juridification and responsibilisation portray parental activities as generally complying with policy makers’ intentions. They tell the story of parents who are encouraged or even manipulated into realising a policy that supports the logic of New Public Management. Parents are thus assigned the role of agents of economic and legal regimes not only by policy makers but also by educational research. Parents trying to influence the education of their children irrespective of the logics of marketisation, juridification and responsibilisation risk being marginalised. This is true not only for the Swedish examples referred to above, but also for the view of parents as resources for increased goal achievement gaining prominence in policy (Helgøy & Homme 2017; Oelkers 2018) and research (Hornby and Blackwell 2018, 2011; Wilder 2014; Hill & Taylor 2004) elsewhere.

The form of parental involvement that we found lacking as parents of children in the Swedish school system, and that we also find underrepresented in research on parent-school relationships, differs from the ideas of compliance and effective parental involvement. Our expectations concerning our role as parents were not limited to being used as tools to fulfil official school policies. Instead, we expected to be involved in discussions about how to plug the gaps that these policies leave. We expected our ideas and objections to be considered, and to thus be taken seriously as competent, collaborative partners in the education of our children. We wanted to identify shortcomings in existing policies and thus to contribute to better solutions for the future. We could also imagine participating in or even organising protests against existing school policies in order to improve the working conditions of our children and their teachers. Gofen and Blomqvist call the more extreme form of this type of parenthood ‘proactive’. Proactive parenthood ‘embodies a refusal to take familiar arrangements for granted and questions fundamental assumptions about what is considered to be possible’ (Gofen and Blomqvist 2014, 548). Proactive parents wish to take responsibility for the educational system, and to thus ‘act as a social force which promotes the public good’ (Gofen and Blomqvist 2014, 548). The question we aim to answer in this article is why these forms of democratic parental involvement were neither expected from us nor welcomed.

**Material and approach**

Sweden has an exceptionally well-developed culture of public inquiry, and even after the decentralisation reforms of the 1990s a proliferation of governmental policy documents. It is on this set of documents, e.g. government inquiries, government bills and school regulations, that we built our analysis. These documents do not just regulate the day-to-day activity of schools, we read them as representations of prevalent attitudes and mind-sets that underscore the passive role of parents with respect to school matters.

Approaching our question, we collected both official policy documents regulating parental involvement and documents in which decisive arguments in more or less direct support of parental involvement are articulated. An example of such documents are the
Swedish government bills to implement the UN Convention of the Right of the Child, in which it is clearly stated that the interest of the child takes precedence over the interests of parents (Govt Bill 2009/10:165; Govt Bill 2017/18:186).

In an initial stage of our analysis of these documents, we formed the idea of three strands in the history of the Swedish education system, which together make it difficult to conceive of democratic parental involvement as a positive and constructive force in education. These three strands are: (1) the idea of ‘education for democracy’, (2) the concept of ‘the best interest of the child’ and (3) the idea of ‘professionalism and science-based teaching’. These three strands guided our research from that point on.

We start our presentation with a short overview of the historical roots of our themes, before we outline them one by one and discuss their impact on the scope for parents’ involvement with schools.

The margins of parental involvement

In Sweden, the state’s influence over the education and upbringing of children increased steadily in the twentieth century. This trend was nurtured by the breakthrough of the Social Democrats in 1932, and the 44 years of Social Democratic government that followed, but it has been continued by other political groupings up to the present day. The process of educational reform that was initiated in the 1940s and led to the Swedish model of a nine-year compulsory comprehensive school was shaped by the perception that the family lacks the capacity to shape the democratic, collectively well-functioning citizen that could guarantee peace and welfare in the future. The family was further depicted as weakened by societal developments following industrialisation and disoriented in a world characterised by constant change (SOU 1946:31, 23f). In the 1960s policy-makers stated that the family ‘no longer occupies the central position of earlier times, in the upbringing of children and youth’ (SOU 1961:30, 104). It appeared necessary for the state to step in and take increased responsibility.

Through an extension of compulsory school, where children from all parts of society should meet to be raised together, policy makers aimed to guarantee the democratic education of all children. On the one hand, the school should be coherent and convey a common base for all. At the same time, post-war education policy was characterised by a high degree of confidence in scientific progressive education and pragmatic thinking that put the individual at the centre. The school should, on the other hand, be differentiated and individualised. The individual child, ‘the perception of the student’s human worth, his personality and self-esteem’, should be at the heart of the educational system (SOU 1961:30, 145). The idea of public responsibility for the education of each individual child became a central argument to expand the access of the education system to apply to the whole child, including the social environments in which children spend time. For example, schools were encouraged to collect information on children’s private life and family conditions in order to ensure individual child support.

Scientific paedagogy has also paved the way for the professionalisation of education. In Sweden, teachers have been assigned the role of ‘social engineers’ who, with the help of science, were expected to realise the vision of school policy. In this regard, parents appear as laymen in need of help. The emphasis on science and rationality further conveys the vision of Sweden as a modern country without ideological contradictions, like in the
following quote from the government inquiry that led to the introduction of the Swedish model of a school for all in the 1960s.

In our country, where class contradictions are levelled out and where ideological contradictions exist in an atmosphere of objectivity and tolerance, one does not need to cope with the difficulties that, for example, certain other countries face, where the struggle between the confessions constitutes obstacles for agreement on the norms of education. (SOU 1961: 30, 239)

In this context parents who did not cooperate with the school system as intended, but had a negative or indifferent attitude towards this educational project, appeared to be in need of consciousness-raising (SOU 1961: 30).

The Swedish concept of education for democracy

Swedish compulsory school aims to provide democratic education to all children. There are at least two ways to perceive of this aim, which can both be found in the history behind the K-9 Swedish compulsory school. Firstly, education for democracy can be understood as a project aiming to shape enlightened individuals able to take responsibility for and shape their still unknown future. Secondly, it can be understood as a social project, shaping citizens of a predefined ‘democratic society’. In Swedish education policy, the first of these concepts has gradually been sacrificed to the benefit of the second (Dodillet 2019). As we will argue, the idea of education as a means to shape a specific ‘democratic society’ claims parents’ compliance with this policy and prevents them from formulating alternative teaching methods and targets.

Crucially for the introduction of the Swedish model of a school for all in the 1960s, schooling was described both as a social and as an individual project. Public education is ‘an important instrument for the nation: by means of education, a nation seeks to clarify and determine the kind of knowledge and the ideals that are to be instilled in young people’, a school commission emphasised in 1946, but not without adding:

However, it should not be forgotten that people do not only live for society and the state, but also for themselves, for their own personal development, for their relatives, for their home. (SOU 1946: 31, 21)

The School Commission emphasised that the individual could have different interests than society and the state. People were not defined as one collective unity, but through their individual personalities and capacities as creating and entering into different social contexts and relationships worth upholding. The school should not ‘take a particular, set organisation of society as its point of departure’, but ‘create conditions for social development based on the insights and will of the citizens’ (SOU 1946:31, 17-18). As these quotes show, Swedish school policy aimed at the enlightenment and development of individuals to become independent adults rather than members of a specific model of society, in the years after the Second World War.

In the 1960s policy makers were no longer satisfied with democracy and ethics being taught about in school, and demanded that pupils actually embrace and act out these norms. In the first curriculum for the comprehensive school from 1962, this was expressed in formulations such as the responsibility of the school to ‘build a foundation for, and develop such capacities in the children that […] can carry and strengthen the democratic
principles of tolerance, cooperation and equality between the sexes, nations and ethnicities’ (Lgr62, 18). By instructing the school to not only inform about, but also influence students to embrace, these democratic principles, decision makers disregarded the warnings that Swedish policy makers had expressed in the 1940s when they emphasised that: ‘Teaching must not be authoritarian, which it would be if it was put in the service of a particular political doctrine, even if this doctrine was that of democracy’ (SOU 1948: 27, 3). Individual freedom and enlightenment were now subordinated to collective values, as can be read in the 1969 curriculum:

Collective life in the democratic society must be shaped by free and independent individuals. But liberty and independence must not be ends in themselves. They must be the basis for collaboration and cooperation. […] It is of importance that pupils become accustomed to helpfulness towards and collaboration with all people. (Lgr 69, 14)

Here, liberty is conditioned by the readiness to cooperate, not only with friends or colleagues but ‘with all people’. Cooperativeness and solidarity with the whole community, not the individual’s right to represent her convictions, even when they contain particular self-interests, thus became two of the most important features of democracy.

The norm of cooperation does not only apply to pupils but is regarded as a pillar of Swedish society at large, and thus also concerns adults. According to the curriculum from 1980, schools can ‘expect […] that even parents accept and seek to promote the principles and rules of democracy.’ (Lgr 80, 19) If parents shared the same view of democracy as the school, students could ‘experience that the home and the school are part of the same world’ (Lgr 80, 19). A common value base or consensus regarding core norms appears here as the hallmark of the societal vision of education policy. The educationalist Tomas Englund thus characterised the curriculum Lgr 80 through its view of the school as ‘an active institutional force in a collective will formation’ (Englund 1999, 26).

The idea of schooling as a common national interest has also been highlighted in policy documents on the role of parents in the education system. School for Participation is a government inquiry that forms part of the so-called Democracy Committee, which in the mid-1980s was commissioned to develop a system for citizen participation and influence. There, it is described as self-evident that parents should be excluded from decisions concerning school:

School is a matter for the whole of society and should be governed in the same way as other societal operations, viz. through politically elected bodies. (SOU 1985: 30, 28)

A clear boundary between citizen influence and political democracy is needed. (SOU 1985: 30, 31)

Although the Swedish Parliament regularly emphasised the value of increased citizen influence, parents did not gain any significant influence on public education (see Lindbom 1995, 143; Erikson 2004, 296-299; Börjesson 2016, 122). In the 1980s the most radical provision regarding parental involvement was the introduction of a consultation obligation for head teachers, who were instructed to continuously inform and consult parents on ‘certain issues’ at school conferences (Govt Bill 1979/80:182). Even after this reform, however, parents remained excluded from decision-making. School was not considered an institution in the service of parents, and school policy was not considered a concern primarily for those directly involved, but the responsibility of the whole of
society. In the late 80s, the Social Democratic education minister Bengt Göransson stressed that parents’ interests were personal in character and ‘should not be represented in bodies representing general citizens’ interests’ (Govt Bill 1988/89:4). Parents were expected to embrace policy objectives, determined by the collective will as represented by the Parliament. In connection with the decentralisation of school responsibility during the 1990s, the compulsory school conferences were also deregulated. Parental involvement in the school now again lacked support in the Education Act (Börjesson 2016, 151; Lindbom 1995, 139 f.).

The idea of the school as an institution for the realisation of a common social vision continued to constitute the base line of Swedish educational policies after the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. Between 1997 and 2000, a government inquiry on democracy chaired by Bengt Göransson gathered 45 reports that formed the basis for the continued dialogue on forms of citizen representation in Sweden. The societal ideal presented in these reports is, in many ways, similar to the vision of solidarity and cooperation already expressed in the 1960s curricula. In the inquiry’s main report, this ideal is refined as a ‘participatory democracy with deliberative qualities’ (SOU 2000:1, 23). Accordingly, parents’ involvement in school activities should take the form of deliberative conversations, i.e. conversations where different arguments are weighed against each other with ‘an ambition that the individual takes a stand him-/herself by listening, considering, seeking arguments and evaluating them, at the same time as there is a collective ambition to find values and norms that everyone can agree on’ (Skolverket 2000, 6; Englund 2000a).

The deliberative approach became prevalent both as a didactic concept in school education and as a strategy for citizen participation in the late 1990s. The main aim of this approach was not to meet the individual’s right to represent and even adhere to her beliefs, but rather to improve the individual’s understanding for and compliance with collective decision-making (Englund 2000b, 2011a). The Swedish version of participatory democracy can be understood as an educational project aimed at increasing the citizens’ spirit of compromise and cooperation. In this context, people who hold on to their individual convictions and represent different values than the collective appear as undemocratic and primitive. In the inquiry on democracy mentioned above, this was expressed as follows:

Through participation, citizens develop fundamental qualities in society. Citizens who mutually respect each other generate great human and social capital that all spheres in society benefit from. Those who do not receive comparable training in creating trust by being tolerant towards dissidents miss out on the schooling and refinement of their more primitive instincts. Those who practise cooperation, criticism and tolerance become an asset both for themselves and for society, both the private and the public sphere. (SOU 2000:1, 33)

Swedish policy equates schooling with learning to tolerate the beliefs of others and developing a readiness to subordinate individual interests to the collective with the aim of finding a common solution for the best interests of society. Not only passive parents, but also parents who defend their interests as parents rather than citizens, threaten this idea of common social interest.

**Children’s versus Parents’ rights**

Besides the notion of school as a societal affair, the idea of public education as a concern for children rather than families is a factor behind the marginalisation of parents in the
Swedish school system. One example of this perspective is Sweden’s handling of the UN Declaration of Human Rights from 1948. This agreement aims at ensuring parents ‘a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children’ (Article 26(3)). In a similar way, Article 2 of the Additional Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights states that the state shall ‘respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions’. In the discussion that preceded the European Convention, parents were described as children’s ‘natural protectors’ (Wahlström 2011, 37). The Swedish government had reservations about these formulations of parental rights. While these conventions were devised as a means of protecting the individual from state abuse, they were perceived as a threat to the right to equal education for all children in Sweden (Quennerstedt 2011, 192). It was not until 1995 that the European Convention was incorporated into Swedish education policy. At that time Sweden had reformed its formerly centralised public school system and introduced state-funded private schools. Now parents had the opportunity to choose between public and private school options for their children. This reform became the Swedish way of meeting parents’ right to decide on their children’s education (Wahlström 2011). However, this reform did not mean a revaluation of parental involvement.

Parents continued to be viewed as a latent threat to the interest of the child, while the state was regarded as protecting children’s rights and interests. This order was motivated with reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child that Sweden ratified in 1990. This was the starting point for a long series of reforms that step by step capacitated children at the expense of their parents.

One first result of the ratification was the creation of a new authority: the Children’s Ombudsman, which was established in 1993 with the task of representing children and young people’s rights and interests vis-à-vis legislators, other authorities and in public debate. In other words, the state created an agency that competed against the family as an interpreter and administrator of the interest of the child (Quennerstedt 2011, 171ff).

Sweden’s work on implementing the convention was intensified in 1997, following the ‘Child Committee’, an inquiry commissioned by the government to ensure that Swedish law and government practices were in accordance with the Children’s Rights Convention. The report published by this committee was entitled The best of the child comes first (SOU 1997:116), and criticised the emphasis on parents’ rights in earlier policies.

Although the right to education has a long history in international documents, it is only in the Children’s Rights Convention that the child itself is given the right to its own education. The child has been seen as a passive recipient of education and, according to the previous conventions, the true right to the child’s education was granted to the parents. (SOU 1997:116, 280)

The Children’s Rights Convention was interpreted as a request to the state to distinguish between children’s rights and parents’ views on their children’s education, and as a call to engage directly with the children. In its report, the Child Committee declared that the older parent-centred conventions had been drawn up against the background of the abuse of the German education system by the Nazis: ‘By giving parents the right to influence education, a counterweight to the power of the state over the content of education should be created.’ (SOU 1997:116, 280) The Swedish Child Committee did not dwell on this problem, but maintained that the welfare state should function as the
provider of an educational system that guarantees equality, democracy, prosperity and thus is also in the best interest of the child.

In the 2000s the children’s rights perspective was further extended. In the 1990s, policymakers had assumed that it was possible to implement the policy of children’s rights by means of information campaigns for children and adults. The Children’s Committee had devoted several pages of its report to telling the story of teachers who, after a 5-week course on the Children’s Rights Convention, had succeeded in transforming a school with severe problems into a pleasant and successful knowledge environment with the child at the centre (SOU 1997:116, 308-311). Ten years later, however, this policy seemed powerless and confidence in legal tools grew. The Swedish ‘Child Policy’, which was introduced in 2002 as its own policy area (Skr 2001/02:166) was replaced by a more explicit ‘Children’s Rights Policy’ in 2008 (Govt Bill 2017/18:186).

In 2010, the government bill Strategy for Strengthening the Rights of the Child in Sweden clarified that all legislation relating to children should be designed in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Govt Bill 2009/10:232). The appropriate changes in the Swedish Education Act were implemented in 2011. Since then, the concept of ‘The best interests of the child’ has been introduced as a thread in all Swedish education policy. This concept is clarified in the following way:

In order to take the best interests of the child into account, the child must be able to speak and express his or her opinions on all matters concerning him or her. This right applies regardless of the age or maturity of the child. The child’s opinions shall be taken into account in relation to his or her age or maturity. (Govt Bill 2009/10:165, 231)

As explained below, the influence of the child is explicitly given priority over the view of the parents:

For children and pupils, influence is a part of their right to influence the organisation where they live and act every day. This is important in order to anchor decisions and actions in the organisation. Therefore, it is reasonable to formulate the regulations on children’s and pupils’ influence in a stronger way than concerning the parents. (Govt Bill 2009/10:165, 638)

In her study of policy documents concerning the relationship between parents and school, Ann Quennerstedt stated that ‘references to parental rights [are] very sparse’ (Quennerstedt 2011, 179).

The downgrading of parents’ influence is also reflected in the fact that schools are depicted as institutions in the service of children, not parents, by Swedish policymakers. Accordingly, the government explained in its bill for a new Education Act in 2010:

Children and students are the actual users, and with increasing age and maturity, they should have influence over both the structure of the daily activities and their own learning. (Govt Bill 2009/2010:165)

In Sweden, it is not the parents or the family who use the services of the education system. Instead, school policy is aimed directly at the child. It could also be said that it is the child, rather than the parent, who is subject to responsibilisation in the Swedish education system. New legislative proposals to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Swedish law indicate that the child’s perspective will remain central to Swedish education policy in the future. According to the incorporation of the UN Convention into Swedish law, the Swedish Government clarified in 2018:
that the child’s right to express his/her views and have them taken into account is an essential part of the assessment of the best interests of the child. Another important issue to note is the question of how the decision-making rights of the guardian relate to the right of the child to make himself/herself heard. Regulations containing restrictions or reservations regarding the right of the child to express his/her views should be reviewed. (Prop 2017/18:186)

As long ago as 2011 Quennerstedt stated that the Swedish policy has ‘a more powerful language and concretisation of content’ and thus goes beyond the Convention’s original requirements (Quennerstedt 2011, 188). Her assessment also seems valid today.

**Science-based professionals versus laypeople**

A third way to understand the resistance against parents’ involvement in the educational system is through the strong belief in objectivity and rational planning that is characteristic of Swedish education policy. The introduction of the comprehensive school system in the 1960s was closely connected to the belief that it is possible to control the development of the society by means of science.

In the first post-war decades, the idea of a science-based education policy concerned the educational system at large, as a tool for social development. By means of research, Swedish policy makers tried to achieve ‘a rational allocation of students’ (SOU 1948:27, 69). The scientific base for this policy included Torsten Husén’s theory of the ‘talent pool’, the then new research field of *economics of education*, and human capital theory (e.g. SOU 1963:42, 74f & 169).

Due to the disappointing results of these post-war policies Swedish policy makers shifted their focus from the general structure of the educational system and students’ career paths to the paedagogical activities in the classrooms in the mid-1970s. Now, policy makers came up with precise, science-based instructions concerning teachers’ working methods (Govt Bill 1975/76:39). The rationalist and technocratic ambitions of that time were connected to a strong state and central governance. In this conceptual world, private and local initiatives such as single or groups of parents lacked the overview necessary for rational decision-making (Lindbom 1995, 62f).

The belief in predicting and planning the economic and social development of the society by means of state regulations weakened during the second half of the 1970s. The system was not only expensive, it also failed to realise the policy goals of social justice and knowledge development. Decentralisation should become the proposed solution to these problems.

In Sweden, decentralisation did not mean that the state retreated from its position as provider of quality guidelines for the education system, defining both its objectives and scope. What happened, however, was that municipalities became responsible for the implementation of these provisions. For those municipalities that lacked own school authorities and experiences concerning school development, decentralisation in practice meant a responsibilisation of individual schools and teachers with regard to the realisation of the political intentions of the state. In 1992, a centre-right government summed up this situation with the following words:

> The political governance of the school is focused on decisions on goals and resources. However, the executive responsibility for achieving these goals lies with the professional staff at the school. (Govt Bill 1991/92:75, 6)
The government bill for a teacher education reform, from which this quote is taken, is an example of the idea of teaching as a profession, which became of increasing importance for Swedish education policy in the 1990s. According to this idea, inspired by sociological theory, professions distinguish themselves from other occupations through their scientific knowledge base. Thomas Brante, probably the most influential Swedish theorist concerning professionalism, describes professionals as ‘heroes’, who with the aid of their expert knowledge and a mixture between technology and routine can in principle solve any societal problem (Brante 2009, 27).

In order to shape such heroes, able to guarantee high educational standards, Swedish policy makers started to focus on teachers’ education. Between 1988 and 2011 they launched three large teacher education reforms, in order to equip teachers with an adequate scientific base (Govt Bill 1984/85:122; Govt Bill 1999/2000:135; Govt Bill 2009/10:89). In order to improve the scientific base of teachers who have already qualified, two new school authorities were installed, the purpose of which was to provide research reviews, evidence-based guidelines and examples of best practices: the Agency for School Development (Myndigheten för skolutveckling) in 2003 and in 2015, the Swedish Institute for Educational Research (Skolforskningsinstitutet). As well as considering the recommendations of these agencies, Swedish teachers are encouraged to conduct their own practice-centred research (praktiknära forskning) and to thus contribute actively to the scientific knowledge base that education is supposed to be built on in Sweden (SOU 2018:19, 24f).

We share the assessment of educational researcher Lars Erikson who argues that the idea of teachers’ professionalism has widened the distance between teachers and parents in the Swedish educational system. According to him, the shift in responsibility from the state to individual teachers can ‘be interpreted as a mark of a fundamental difference between home and school, a difference that highlights the professional teacher as an expert in school knowledge and learning.’ (Erikson 2011, 213) At the same time as parents are considered capable of improving the educational system by identifying the best school for their children and to thus oust the inferior or force them to improve, their influence on the individual school is limited by a professional discourse where they are represented as laymen. This marginalisation is also expressed in the proposal for the latest revision of the Education Act, where a centre-right government explained under the heading ‘Parents’ Influence’:

In relation to the parents too, it is further self-evident that it is the educational staff who, on the basis of their profession, are responsible for how the teaching is planned, realised and evaluated together with the children and pupils. (Govt Bill 2009/2010:165, 313)

In 2010, the idea of science-based professionalism, and thus the dividing line between teachers and parents, was formalised in a new provision in the Education Act according to which school must ‘rest on a scientific base and on approved experience’ (Chapter 1, Section 5, 2010:800). The legislators explained that this provision should apply to both the content and methods of teaching (Govt Bill 2009/2010:165, 224). Almost 10 years after its introduction, policy makers still describe this regulation as ‘unique, in an international perspective’ as it shows that ‘the Swedish educational system […] is to be developed through the application of relevant research results and approved experience’ (SOU 2018:19, 21).
The Education Act does not define in detail what should be meant by ‘a scientific base’. The authorities commissioned to support teachers’ professionalism, however, do provide such a definition. According to the Swedish Institute for Educational Research, which is quoted by the government inquiry Research together – collaboration for learning and improvement that was set up to propose measures to improve the cooperation between universities and schools, the concept of teachers’ scientific base must not be confused with a general scientific approach or critical way of thinking. While a general scientific or critical approach is described as a way of thinking that people develop by themselves (SOU 2018:19, 25), teachers’ scientific base stands for ‘teaching that is based on the results of scientific studies, both concerning contents and how someone teaches’ (SOU 2018:19, 25). According to this idea of a science-based professionalism, even well-informed and reasoning parents are not qualified to influence school work as they lack access to teachers’ professional knowledge base.

Concluding remarks
The aim of this article was to identify the background of what we experienced as an attitude of ignorance of, and occasionally distrust of, parental involvement in Swedish school policy. Analysing policy documents as representations of prevalent attitudes and mind-sets, we have shown how this scepticism can be explained by patterns of thought concerning the appropriate relationship between parents and schools. Firstly, these patterns concern how the education system is supposed to be governed democratically in Sweden. In contrast to conceiving democracy as the possibility for teachers and parents, as citizens, to influence their own educational activities directly and locally, democracy in Sweden is interpreted as the central governance, by elected officials, of education as a national project. This idea prevents teachers and parents from promoting what in this perspective appear to be their idiosyncratic agendas. Secondly, we have discussed the special importance that is assigned in Sweden to the rights of children. In contrast to an understanding of education as a concern for adult citizens, it is characteristic of Swedish policy to conceive it as a concern for the individual children. Given the conception of democracy just described, this means that school, with its teachers, is positioned as a mediator, between the state and the child, leaving the parents with little or no positive role to play, except as a supporting character. The third component of our story, concerns how teachers, as instruments for the realisation of state policy, have been conceptualised as strengthened by science. The teaching profession is basically conceived of as a scientific instrument, a means, for effective realisation of policy. It is not difficult to see how this attempted elevation of the status of the professional teacher further works for the exclusion of parents from democratic involvement in the education of their children.

Notes
1. In 2018, compulsory school was extended to 10 years.
2. The Agency for School Development was closed and its tasks were integrated into the National Agency for Education in 2008.

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