Are schools able to bring sense into pupils’ lives?

- An experiment to use Antonovsky’s concept sense of coherence from a school perspective


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Why go to school?
In a global society the competition between nations, companies and individuals is more and more heavily stressed. Pupils who fail at school risk troublesome consequences: for the individual as lost possibilities to create the life they want to lead. As a result, educational systems seem to focus on effective ways of distributing and evaluating knowledge on an instrumental level (see for example the OFSTED system in England\(^1\)). However, at the same time, what type of knowledge pupils should or ought to gain is an unanswered question. This tends to be a more and more tricky question to answer in a continuously more complex world. In Sweden, for example, this has led from a detailed, rule governed curriculum in the compulsory school system to a goal and result-oriented curriculum. Nowadays we also talk about different types of knowledge. In the national curriculum (Lpo 94), for example, a distinction is made between knowledge as facts, understanding, skills and accumulated experience. On the other hand, it would seem that the focus has been on facts, usually closely connected to a specific subject. Teachers have stressed teaching methods and testing pupils’ ability to learn new facts. These principles for organising education have had a strong impact historically and still have, at least in Sweden.

Young people now spend a longer and longer period of their lives at school than ever before. Not always because that they want to, but because society has nothing else to offer. The situation in many schools may also, in different aspects, be seen as highly problematic. Andersson (2001) has, for example, found in a large longitudinal study - The Life Project – that schools seem to be adapted to the needs of only a minority of the students - around 30%. On the other hand school is badly adjusted to the requirements of another 30 %. This group of students often find school meaningless, uninteresting and boring. For these students school is mostly a waste of time. In such circumstances, it seems natural that society has a responsibility to offer young people a meaningful time at school, both here and now and to prepare them for a future live as adults, not only as a part of the work force.

The national curriculum in Sweden also prescribes that it is the responsibility of the head of a school to create an environment and activities that the pupils experience as meaningful:

The school head is responsible for the results of the school and thus within certain limits has specific responsibility for ensuring that:

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- the working environment in the school is organised such that pupils have access to guidance, teaching material of good quality as well as other assistance in order to be able to independently search for and acquire knowledge by means of e.g. libraries, computers, and other learning aids,
- the teaching and pupil welfare is organised so that pupils receive the special support and help they need,
\[-/\ldots/\]
(Lpo 94, p. 19)

From this point of departure, how is it possible for school heads to create a learning organisation (see for example Senge, 1992) that cares not only about distributing knowledge, but also about the pupils’ situation and lives in general? One way to meet this question could be to take a similar position as Antonovsky does (1988) when he asks: What makes men healthy?

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\(^1\) The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), officially the Office of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools in England, was set up 1 September 1992. OFSTED is a non-ministerial government department, independent from the Department for Education and Skills. (www.ofsted.gov.uk).
We are coming to understand health not as the absence of disease, but rather as the process by which individuals maintain their sense of coherence (i.e. sense that life is comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful) and ability to function in the face of changes in themselves and their relationships with their environment.

In Antonovsky’s spirit, using a salutogenic perspective, instead of asking ourselves why do pupils fail or perhaps also not like being at school we have to ask, instead: What is it that makes pupils successful? From this background the purpose of this paper is to discuss some aspects of how pupils may use different strategies to handle their school situation in a proper way.

As a part of departure in the following I will briefly describe the model that Antonovsky has developed and try to use it in a school context instead. I have here, of course, no possibility to make a deeper analysis of a complex problem such as this. This paper must, instead, be seen as a first step towards outlining whether this could be a fruitful way of analysing pupils’ strategies to handle their lives at school, but also whether this knowledge might be useful as a “guideline” to heads and teachers when organising and carrying out courses.

A theoretical point of departure
Antonovsky (1991, p. 43) describes how people use different strategies of behaviour to preserve, or to retrieve their health, according to how the individual perceives his/her situation. In his analysis of peoples’ health, Antonovsky bases his discussion on three basic variables; i) comprehensibility ii) manageability and iii) meaningfulness, which together constitute the key concept: sense of coherence (table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Comprehensibility</th>
<th>Manageability</th>
<th>Meaningfulness</th>
<th>Prediction</th>
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<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Press upwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Press upwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Press downwards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variables used by Antonovsky are made up as results of interviews with persons that have had strongly traumatic experiences, but anyhow still seem to have managed well in life.

To Antonovsky, the concept of comprehensibility seems to be a phenomenon that occurs if the stimuli of the internal and external environment make sense in a cognitive way, so that they turn out to be clearly ordered and structured, and a solid ability to review reality is witnessed. The concept of manageability is about how a person’s internal and external world is represented by the measured ability to make use of the resources at his/her disposal in order to cope adequately with severe demands. The concept of meaningfulness, finally, is to under-

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2 A salutogenetic perspective is roughly speaking, as far as I have understood it, to focus on health and not on illness, or perhaps in first hand a try to place a person on a line between these two extreme points.

3 My translation.
stand in the emotional and not only in the cognitive sense of the word. Life makes sense emotionally, even more so if disastrous experiences are willingly accepted as challenges to search for sense and to overcome the disasters in dignity.

I see Antonovsky’s concepts both as strategies, not only as a way of understanding how reality may be perceived, but also as a guide to action. They are, so to say, two different sides of the same coin. The question is if a pupil chooses or is forced to use a certain strategy? I think that the concepts of comprehensibility and meaningfullnesslessness mainly have to do with the cognitive side and manageability, with the acting side of the more complex concept: sense of coherence. This may be seen as a highly complicated problem and I suppose one has to understand and analyse what is happening as a form of dynamic complexity, that according to Senge (1992:71) can be described as:

/…/ situations where cause and effect are subtle, and where the effects over time of interactions are not obvious. /…/ when the same action has dramatically different effects in the short run and in the long term, there is dynamic complexity.

Possible strategies for pupils to cope with life at school
In the following, my discussion will relate to pupils’ situation at school, how they are supposed to use different strategies in order to influence or not influence their own situation.

Perhaps it is also accurate to say that some strategies are supposed to be successful and some less successful. I will test the idea that type one strategy is the ideal one. I will make some interpretations of how a single type of strategy may affect a single pupil. Someone may say that this is speculation and of course it is. But, it also offers an opportunity to create images that can be argued for and against as a result of a person’s earlier experiences or what we know from research results. Here, however, I have to use my own, more or less limited experiences and knowledge of existing research to construct some examples. This is the result of a social constructivist way of thinking. I hope this also will help the reader to formulate his or her arguments for or against these images.

Firstly, I will discuss the two types of strategies where pupils have high and low values respectively on each of the three of Antonovsky’s variables that signify a high sense of coherence (type one and eight). Antonovsky claims that these two variants are rather stable, which at the same time may be an advantage and a disadvantage according to the situation. One hypothesis may be that type one and eight mainly correspond to Anderson’s (2001) groups of 30 percent each that “like”, respectively “hate” school. Those who have a type five or six strategy may also perceive school as less meaningful. And, as a result, the remaining 40 percent are to be found in one of the types from two to four. I will not, however, touch at all on those two combinations that Antonovsky says rarely exist, that is, type two and seven. I will then instead go on to treat strategies of type three and four, which both seem to contain possibilities to help pupils to develop new strategies to understand and act in order to cope with their situation at school in a successful way. In a similar way I will then treat strategies of type five and six, which on the other hand seem to be strategies that risk leading to a situation where pupils fail at school. Finally, I will discuss some aspects of the importance this may have for school heads and teachers in their daily work.

4 It may perhaps be possible to say that some people do not care what happens to them.

5 I am not sure that this also is Antonovskys’ opinion, but I have interpreted him in that way.
On the basis of Antonovsky’s model it seems to be possible to assume that pupils who act and perceive with a **type one** strategy find the situation in school quite positive and that they are also those who are able to handle their situation in a proper way. At the same time they may be supposed to have a feeling of meaningfulness, and as a consequence they perceive a high sense of coherence. How does it then come that they have high values in all variables? Is this something they have learned and if so, how have they done so? To me it seems that all three of Antonovsky’s basic variables that constitute a high sense of coherence are to a high degree built on meta-knowledge. Pupils who use strategy one seem to have meta-knowledge and those who use a type eight strategy have a low degree of meta-knowledge. The meta-knowledge perspective is also an aspect that, for example, is strongly stressed in Swedish syllabi. It is accordingly of great importance, both to teachers and pupils, to have an idea of what is important in a certain subject and why. At the same time it seems possible to have good knowledge of a subject, but still not to know what kind of knowledge is important: the level of comprehensibility is low, so to say. This could, for example, be the situation for pupils with a type eight strategy. Accordingly, it seems to be a question of how it is possible for heads and teachers to manage to help pupils with this type of strategy to cope with their situation. There are, for example many pedagogical methods developed to help pupils to learn new facts, but what methods are there for acquiring meta-knowledge? One way to acquire meta-knowledge may also perhaps be to use methods like problem-based learning (see for example Albanese and Mitchall, 1993), learning-by-doing (Dewey, 1998) and similar methods.

It seems reasonable to assume that if a person’s existence in a certain context cannot be understood, it is on the other hand also not possible for him or her to manage his situation in an adequate way. The pupil (**type eight**) who does not either understand the context or what is going on will probably be affected by success and failure in a random way that at the same time makes the world even more unintelligible? In that case there is a risk of a double failure: even with help the pupils could not understand the coherence, which, as a result, at the same time confirms their suspicion that they are stupid. If a person is not able to handle a situation it gives rise, of course, to both frustration and fear. This causes, as a result, a feeling of meaningless and this probably explains in part of why pupils behave in what is seen as a not proper way. The individual pupil must, therefore, get help in such a way that he or she is able to create structure in their way of thinking and understanding of reality. Teachers have, accordingly, to face the problem that some of their pupils probably do not understand the structure of the subject they try to impart while, to other pupils, this is highly understandable and useful. The differences between pupils tend to increase over time as a result of the simple fact that pupils spend their time at school. It seems to be a very important question how it might be possible to help this groups of pupils, as they tend to take a lot of the resources available, not least teachers’ time. If we cannot solve this problem our schools will always be short of resources.

To pupils (**type three**) who have a high degree of consciousness about the school context and who also perceive this as something meaningful, but who at the same time have small possibilities to handle the situation may usually be supposed to co-operate willingly in order to change their situation. Here, as Antonovsky says, a probable press upwards exists for these pupils. School heads seem here to have an important role in order to create good opportunities for these pupils to have a possibility to influence their life in school in general, to create a democratic school, so to speak. The possibility pupils have to influence is not only a question

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6 “Problem-based instruction, on the other hand, starts with meaningful, real-life problems that students have a hand in selecting and proceeds with whatever in-school and out-of-school investigations are needed to solve a problem.” (Arends, 1999, p. 354)
of pupils’ comfort and the environment they are in; it is also a question of using proper learning methods. Pupils of type three seem to be “easy to handle”, heads and teachers, nevertheless, probably have to be attentive in order to give these pupils opportunities to become more involved in their school activities, so that they do not run the risk of perceiving the school as meaningless, with drastically changed conditions. These pupils probably belong to the 40 percent (Andersson, 2001) of the pupils who either “love” or “hate” school, depending on the situation for the moment.

Pupils (type four) who perhaps accept, but do not understand, why they have to spend their time at school and are not able to influence or handle their situation either, but for some reason anyhow find school meaningful seem to be open to changing their strategy to a more effective one if they only know how. This is important if we believe that a specific type of strategies also leads to different degrees of success. In this case, also, it is a matter of creating a democratic school with significant possibilities for pupils to influence their own situation. The problem seems, in the type four strategy, to be more complicated to deal with: as the pupils do not understand the context, neither do they comprehend the situation. How is it then possible to develop pupils’ ability to understand what schooling is about? This type of meta-knowledge seems to be complicated to impart. Is it, for example, possible to develop meta-knowledge before you have learned facts? What school heads and teachers accordingly have to think about is how they can help the pupils to get structure in their thinking in order to make it easier to understand what situation they are in. This is, however, problematic for different reasons. One is that the structure that is “forced” on pupils from school may not be possible to understand, which there is good reason to believe as there are so many pupils who seem to perceive school as incomprehensible. They cannot see that the activities in school have any meaning for their present lives or for their future lives. Their motivation to study is accordingly probably very low.

To pupils (type five and six) who understand the situation in general, but cannot see any reason for being at school anyhow, risk becoming totally indifferent to what is happening at school. Pupils with these types of strategy probably belong to the 30 percent that Andersson (2001) says perceive their situation in school as more or less meaningless. Eventually they will also create a life outside school that breaks many of the conceptions held by school representatives. It seems that pupils who use strategy five or six make things hard both for themselves and for the school staff to handle. It seems reasonable that it is for those pupils that schools have to re-define their role and ways of organising their activities, if not, one may expect problems both here and now and for the future.

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7 I think it is of great importance here to distinguish between the terms: teach and learn as is done in the English language.
Some concluding reflections?

Education systems generally seem to be looked upon as being built on a conception that schools fit all types of pupils. There is however good reason to suppose that this is not the case. What is it, for example, that makes pupils in the same school and even in the same class perceive similar situations so differently and use different strategies to handle their situation? Is it sociological factors like social class, gender, age, etcetera that can explain these differences, or must the causes be sought on an individual level, as psychological phenomena? What happens may also, of course, be understood as depending on how life in school is organised and what pedagogical methods are used. Accordingly it seems reasonable to believe that one has to see the situation as a problem with a high degree of dynamic complexity. One way of achieving better understanding could be to use Antonovsky’s concept: sense of coherence. What responsibilities and possibilities do then heads and teachers have to develop schools to be a place that is comprehensible to pupils? This is, of course, a very complicated question and I am not able to give any direct answers. But, for example one theme that seems to be important is how could it be possible to help a pupil to build up a structure of thinking that may help him or her to make reality more understandable. From a social constructivist perspective, a pupil’s learning process may be seen as a continuous interaction and one solution to the problem could in practice be to organise education in such a way that the pupils are able to understand that they both have to build and are continuously building up their own images of reality. Reality cannot, however, be made understandable through single facts, no matter how many facts there are, only when these may be seen in relation to each other in such a way that they make patterns that are understandable and meaningful. The school personnel accordingly ought to know more about what it is that pupils perceive that makes a context understandable, which for some heads and teachers is a challenging task. The next question is how is it possible for heads and teachers to make the pupils’ school day more manageable? It seems that a democratic school form that deeply involves the pupils is of great importance. In order to be able to do this schools heads and teachers must perhaps widen the scope of their task far beyond that of imparting knowledge. And finally; how is it possible to make pupils’ time at school more meaningful? Perhaps this is primarily a question of attitudes, how one looks upon other people, so to speak.

Although I have not been able to give any direct answers it seem to me that it could be fruitful to develop an analysis of the pupils’ situation in school by using Antonovsky’s concept: sense of coherence, both to give a better understanding as guidance to heads and teachers on how to act in their profession.
References
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