Must teachers be social workers, as well …?

– Reflections on the current teacher role in the Swedish upper secondary school and how it affects teacher training

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New times and the same problems

In their book from 1928: *The Child in America*, William I Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas describe how the industrial revolution brought about big changes in the social life of the time. These changes caused the expanding school system successively to take more and more responsibility for the education of young people. The family’s role of socialization, however, was not so clearly transferred to the school system. Important aspects of ordinary life: "have fallen, quite planlessly, to agencies variously adapted to perform them", say Thomas and Swaine Thomas (1928:221). In some regions of the US, so-called, visiting teachers were hired because of the problems that were created. These teachers were usually persons with professional experience of both teaching and of social work. Their task was also to act as a link between school and the home. The purpose was to create a bridge of understanding with the social life existing outside school.¹

The problems in the US in the 1920s, described by Thomas and Swaine Thomas, seem to us not to be much different from what we can observe in Sweden at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A series of reforms during the latter part of the twentieth century have changed the upper secondary school system from being a “selection school” into a school for everybody.² This influences also, to a great extent, the type of pupils now attending. A new decentralized goal and result system have deeply changed the teachers’ working conditions. In the early 1990s, a three-year upper secondary school program was implemented and influenced strongly the working conditions of teachers. Previously, the curriculum gave detailed instructions, now it is written in comprehensive terms and is meant to be interpreted by teachers in order to make it possible to make local and individual variants of the task entrusted to schools. In our meetings with upper secondary school teachers, we have noticed a growing frustration concerning their possibilities to practice their occupation in the way

¹ Thomas and Swaine Thomas were also critical of the dominating behaviourist¹ approach and they considered it lacked the social dimensions that influence peoples’ way of thinking and acting. They represent what today is called social-constructivism, an approach we find fruitful to use as a way of interpreting people’s actions, for example what happens in schools. They express this, later known as the Thomas theorem, as follows:

   If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. (Thomas and Swaine Thomas, 1928:572)

² For example, in 1997, 98 percent of the pupils were enrolled in upper secondary school. (Pressmeddelande, Skolverket 1998-02-04)
they used to. It seems fair to ask why there are so many pupils who are uninterested in what goes on at school? Among the “uninterested pupils” we have talked to none of them is able to give concrete examples of what would make him or her more motivated. Some of them have problems foreseeing what their education will mean to them in the future, sometimes because they have difficulties in reading and writing correctly. At the same time these aspects are important parts of the problem. Many say, however, what they learn has to be useful in everyday life. This rather diffuse understanding of what knowledge they need, now and in the future, and of what it is like to be a grown-up constitutes a big challenge to the entire education system.

From these points of view, we will discuss some aspects of the following questions:

- **What opportunities do upper secondary teachers have to handle their work situation within and beyond the teaching role?**
- **What possible consequences are there for teacher training?**

Due to the limited space available, we will, of course, only have a very superficial opportunity to elaborate on these questions.
The upper secondary school in a new role

In a changing world, demands on the young people who will to be active in the middle of the 21st century increase. Research results on factors such as class, gender and ethnicity show a more and more complex pattern and differentiation of the youth culture. (Government bill 2003/04:140:84) The uninterested pupils become still more uninterested and there is a dearth of ideas on how to change their education in a way that suits them. The results of the reforms during the 1990s caused fragmentation and stressful working conditions. Together these factors constitute incentives to change the structure of the upper secondary school.

The biggest challenge probably is to change the ideas of what role school plays in society. The time spent at school is a big and important part of the pupil’s life. They have justified demands on quality of life and personal development at school. /…/ Social change leading to a less predictable society gives the upper secondary school an increasingly important role as something coherent, a social meeting-place and a common frame of reference. (Government bill 2003/04:140:86). (Note: Our translation)

The current Swedish curriculum gives teachers a dual task; one is to impart knowledge and the other to socialize the pupils. When the pupils reach upper secondary school, the question is most acute. Young people are about to emancipate themselves from their parents and to take on an adult identity. For quite a lot, this is a more or less problematic journey and, when almost every youngster in Sweden chooses to go on to the upper secondary school, as expected, problems arise.

The idea of lifelong learning is only achievable if pupils choose to go to upper secondary school out of interest. (Government bill 2003:04:140:60) (Note: Our translation)

About one third of the pupils seem to enjoy school, one third are ambivalent and the remaining third find school a place they do not like very much. (Andersson, 1999; 2001) If their friends had not been at school, many of the pupils would also probably not be there. The pupils get a study grant, which gives a certain support, but they would have great difficulty in finding a job. The pupils have shifting ideas of what school has to offer them and also shifting ambitions with their studies. There are accordingly good reasons to suppose that teachers on the upper

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3 See also Lundahl & Öquist, 1999 and Cederblad, 2003.
secondary level need to be able to meet the pupils in their ambitions to develop their role as future adults.

When speaking about the upper secondary school, it seems to be a homogenous system, but in practice, it is often deeply divided, or balkanized as Hargreavs (1998) expresses it. Pupils who have chosen a theoretical program come together with those who previously enrolled on vocationally oriented programs. Roughly, the dividing line still goes between those two groups. In the national programs, with about 75 percent of all pupils, there are almost the same numbers on vocational as on theoretical programs. A third category consists of pupils that have not been admitted to a national or a local special program\(^4\) because they have not passed in the so-called “core-subjects”\(^5\). They are on the Individual program and in the year 2003, about 15 percent of all pupils in the first grade were studying here in order to qualify for a place on a national or special program.

The individual program is getting larger and we get more pupils from the nine-year compulsory school every year, but their problems are much more serious. We cannot solve this in one single year. We have them here for two or three years. For every year that passes, we get more pupils. The group on the individual program gets larger. In addition, the individual program has to take pupils that drop out of a national program. (Teacher)
(Note: Our translation)

The remaining 25 percent of the pupils are on locally arranged special programs\(^6\) or at independent schools. (Skolverket, 2003, Rapport 236)

There is a risk that the group of pupils that need extra support will continuously become bigger and their problems more and more complicated. Unfortunately, many are not especially motivated for study, or they lack the necessary qualifications but they would, nevertheless, like to make sense of their lives. There are reasons to believe that a lot of them come from homes lacking a tradition of study. The heterogeneous groups of pupils may accordingly be seen as a logical result of an educational policy in Sweden, reformed from two different perspectives. In

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\(^4\) As from the year 2000, there are 17 national programs, all of them of three years duration. They give a broad basic education and eligibility for university studies. (http://www.skolverket.se/fakta/faktablad/gymnasie.shtml)

\(^5\) The”core-subjects” consist of Swedish, English and Maths.

\(^6\) A special program is not one of the national programs, but is nevertheless equivalent in status.
one of the perspectives the stress is on education for all, oriented towards fellowship and solidarity and including both theoretical and practical subjects. Competition, examination and degrees are meant to have a subordinate function. In the other perspective, the stress is on theoretical studies and the various subjects. Differentiation with opportunities for choice between and within schools is an important factor. The two policies compete with each other to be the most influential.

Towards a new teaching situation

Every pupil in the upper secondary school is supposed to achieve a pass grade and many teachers describe their mission as almost impossible. What they meet is a growing number of pupils who are late to their lessons. They cut classes, but come to school to meet their friends. Some of them consistently forget to bring pencils and notebooks. A number of pupils work so much in their leisure-time that their schoolwork suffers. Others go to parties and they come late for lessons, sometimes not at all. These problems are usually subject matter for “pupils conferences”, where the teacher, the pupil, the headmaster, the welfare officer, and sometimes the parents meet to discuss how to improve the situation. One of the teachers we met says, for example, that he has participated in 67 pupil conferences during one school year. These meetings are about solving the problems of pupils who do not fulfil the demands. The teachers of theoretical subjects meet categories of pupils they have not met before and they are also the ones who usually experience most frustration. The vocational teachers’ problems are, as we understand it, partly different. They have already met unmotivated pupils, especially in theoretical subjects, pupils, who would like to finish their vocational training as fast as possible.

One important question is how to get these pupils to regard school as a place where they can influence their lives in a positive way instead of a place where they are, more or less, forced to be. Recently qualified teachers, with a burning interest for their subject, feel a growing frustration, as they experience that they are not able to work with what they thought would be their main task. If we consider that society still suffers from social problems, we must ask ourselves if it is possible to change teacher training in a way that will better meet the reality they are going to meet in their teaching role.
Are teachers trained to help pupils in the socialization process?

Pupils bring their social situation with them to school and this influences their chances of success in their studies. The emphasis on the pupils’ social problems is not only due to a negative situation in society in general. One, perhaps also the most important factor, is that more pupils spend more time at school. Teachers experience their role as being more and more similar to that of the social worker. Tackling the socialization problem is accordingly an important task of a well-functioning school. “Problematic pupils”, who previously left school are nowadays still there. Teachers accordingly meet complex problems and in some aspects, contradictory tasks built on different traditions regarding knowledge. A changed assignment demands a new teacher role, a role where the socialization process of the pupils has a central position. Today the specific content of the subject they teach influences the role very much, but education must be connected to a context. What knowledge would be more important than that concerning conditions in social life? We think Czarniawska-Jorges (1992:117-188) expresses this well when she says:

"Social life consists of accounting for what one does in the presence of other people, imagined or real, who serve as auditors. /…/ Only children and the insane are not under such obligation, but children’s socialization is actually a training in such accounting. Accountability is a sign of social competence."

Has this any influence on teacher training? The Swedish government says (1999/2000:135) there must be greater respect for social aspects in connection with education.

"The concept of lifelong learning indicates a new way of relating to education. Among other things, it is a matter of being able to work in a learning society where the citizens have different background knowledge and choose different ways to educate themselves. Learning becomes central both as a social and a pedagogical process. When education is to be organized in new and shifting connections and shifting settings, it means new and different tasks for the teachers of the future." (Government bill 1999/2000:135:8) (Note: Our translation)

There is reason to believe that many upper secondary teachers are among those who adapted well to the school setting and, in addition, usually have a specific subject interest. Ziehe (1975, in Broady, 1996) says if there is a one-sided emphasis on subject content, this may
create a growing gap between the life situation of the pupils and the goals of their education. As one of the teachers we met says:

I got my degree two and a half years ago; the goals were only based on subject knowledge These other things came as a big shock to me when I left university /…/ (Teacher) (Note. Our translation)

Universities are built up on and organized on academic subjects; it is obvious that their representatives also strongly defend these subjects as bearers of important values. Current teacher training in Sweden is also, as we understand it, able to give the students good knowledge of their subject, as well as teaching on the didactics aspects. Our impression is that since the Swedish upper secondary school was transformed into a school for everyone, special pedagogical aspects have also been given more space. That seems to be a natural consequence and the subject is established as a compulsory part of teacher training. It is, for example, emphasized that every teacher ought to have this type of knowledge in order to ensure that pupils in need of special support get that support. The emphasis, however, is still on the subject knowledge aspects.

As far as we have been able to ascertain, there are few aspects of Swedish teacher training that can be identified as social pedagogy, a pedagogy that takes its point of departure in the pupils’ social situation. It may be reasonable to suppose the social situation influences the pupils’ motivation to do their schoolwork, for example, how they regard themselves as teenagers and their role as future adults. If pupils see themselves as marginalized or excluded from the labour market, and accept this as a reality, there is, of course, no reason to expend energy on schoolwork.

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7 Didactics, the theory and practice of teaching, is a very complex problem that has occupied educationalists for centuries, for example, Johan Amos Comenius who wrote his famous; Didactica Magna, 1630 – 1632.
Are teachers prepared to broaden their role to include social work?

The newly reformed teacher-training program in Sweden is one of the answers to the increasing problems. Its basic point of departure is to:

...be a vocationally oriented education program at university level and at the same time act as a way of changing the intentions of society for education at every level.

(SOU:199:63:12) (Note; Our translation)

Three central fields are emphasized. One is about learning processes, teaching and special pedagogy; another concerns socialization, culture and society and a third is about the teacher assignment, democracy and values. One question is, however, if this also will influence the teacher role in the future. Historically, the teacher’s role has been to teach and to be the one who controls the activities that take place. Today, the teacher role is to focus on the learning process and to involve the pupils in their own learning process. The teacher is supposed to create an environment and an organization that support these processes, as an important prerequisite for pupils to experience their learning as something meaningful. In Sweden, the new teacher-training program is intended to give teachers on different levels in the school system common, shared, basic qualifications. These qualifications are meant to include cognitive, cultural, communicative and social competence as well as studies in the theory and practice of teaching. (Government bill 1999/2000:135) The teacher role and the teacher’s personality are meant to be more closely connected. The teacher’s activities are also described as more personal than defined by a role. The teacher role is no longer about adopting a role, or a tradition, every teacher must instead:

...conquer and deserve their own role – and with that their own authority. (Government bill 1999/2000:135:8). (Note: our translation)

We, however, strongly question whether teachers are able to create their own role beyond the commonly accepted ideas about what the role consists of. Instead, we claim it is these expectations that create the boundaries within which the individual teacher is able to develop her individual way of playing the role. We agree that the teacher is more dependent on her ability to create personal encounters and to build relations and to be responsible for creating environments that develop mutual respect between teachers and pupils.
Some conclusions

The social aspects of everyday life seem traditionally to be outside the sphere of responsibility of upper secondary school teachers. The pupils lacking motivation, sometimes also with social problems, seem to be seen as a burden by many teachers, a fact which influences the possibilities to run well functioning activities in a negative way. If, instead, teachers had to take the social situation of their pupils as starting point for their teaching much would be won. From this perspective, problems connected with the pupils’ social situation have hitherto not received enough attention in the Swedish teacher-training programs. Instead, upper secondary schools and ultimately every single teacher have to balance between more or less utopian political visions and the hardship of the day-to-day activities.

If social problems are to be possible to handle at school, it seems to be necessary also to make significant changes to teacher training. One suggestion might be to combine elements of the training of recreation leaders and of social workers and psychologists. At the same time, it is not plausible to expect teacher-training programs, which are already long, to be even longer, at least not if one considers the relatively low level of Swedish teachers’ salaries, even though there have been improvements during recent years. If new elements are added to the teacher-training program, what then can be removed? Many teacher trainers would for sure claim that it is not possible to take anything away from the present teacher-training programs.

We think that the answer to the question we raised at the beginning of this paper is that teachers have to be social workers as well, because it seems to be impossible to separate teaching from socialization. The problem is still there and awaits a solution, both of how to organize the activities at school, but also of how teachers are trained for their task.
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