Individualized teaching practices in the Swedish comprehensive school from 1980 to 2014 in relation to education reforms and curricula goals

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**ABSTRACT**

The study investigated changes in teaching practices and classroom processes, seen from a student perspective, before and after the education reforms of the 1990s, and the introduction of the Swedish 1994 National Curriculum for comprehensive school. The total time pass stretches from 1980 to 2014.

The focus is on comparisons of results based on identical statements in questionnaires, given to six nationally representative student cohorts within the ongoing Evaluation Through Follow-up project, who attended grade 6 or grade 9.

The findings show the working atmosphere in the Swedish grade-6 schools to have improved during the 1980s, pointing also to changes in the teacher role. Teacher-led class teaching was in less use than in previous decades, but still the most dominating teaching condition, with an increase from 2005 to 2011. In grade 9, the changes are reverse, with a tendency for reduced time for teacher-led class teaching from 2003 onwards, and the use of less group work and fewer tests. From the mid-1990s onwards an explosive spread of individual work was identified in both grade 6 and grade 9.

The changes in teaching practices and classroom processes are discussed in the light of individualization, curricula goals and education reforms.

**Introduction**

In the Nordic countries, a comprehensive school system refers to a unified, unsreamed school system where all students, despite academic and economic background, are enrolled in the same age-based school (Carlgren, Klette, Myrđal, Schnack, & Simola, 2006). The main purpose of the first Swedish comprehensive and democratic school introduced in the early 1960s was that of equity (Lundahl, 2005). Following extensive post–World War II education reforms, Sweden designed 'a school for all' in order to provide an optimal education of equal value for all its students as a means to fostering democratically minded citizens (Åstrand, 2016; Giota & Emanuelsson, 2016).

The national curriculum for the 9-year comprehensive school of 1962 (Lgr62) was decided upon by parliament. In this curriculum, individualization as a concept was introduced, and the term was also written out. The importance of using individualized teaching practices was emphasized as a means to accomplish pedagogical differentiation within more mixed ability classes (SOU, 1961, p. 30; Carlgren, 2009). The central idea in the reconstruction and modernization of the 'old-fashioned' Swedish schools was to build upon teachers' capacity to individualize teaching within the regular classroom.

Interesting enough, individualization in the 1962 curriculum was not seen as a teaching method, but both as a goal and a means, or a view (Giota, 2013). This view incorporated ideas as putting the child in the centre that have been essential to the educational progressive movements in the United States and Europe in the early 1900s (Lundgren, 2009). The idea that school work should be more individualized and active meant then that all teaching practices should be adapted to each child's individual prerequisites and needs, at the same time as values of group work and practical exercises were stressed (Giota, 2013).

In the early 1990s, a series of education reforms were introduced in Sweden. The rapid implementation of these reforms turned the Swedish education system within a few years from being one of the most government-dominated and unified educational systems in the world to become one of the most decentralized (OECD, 2011). By eased regulations, school choice and privatization became allowable. The introduction of a voucher system and the possibilities for establishing independent schools opened up for market mechanisms and a completion orientation within the schools (Carlgren, 2009; Holmlund et al., 2014). At the same time a new goal-oriented national curriculum for comprehensive school was introduced.
(Lpo94) along with a new criterion-referenced grading system. In a national evaluation, the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2009) concluded that after the implementation of the education reforms in 1996 not only independent schools had increased significantly, but also the inner work of schools (ways of working and methods) had changed (cf. Giota, 2013; Giota, Bergh, & Emanuelsson, 2018; Gustafsson, Sörlin, & Vlachos, 2016; Vinterek, 2006).

Thus, there are indications that during the last two decades, new ways of working in school and methods have appeared in Sweden. According to Carlgren et al. (2006), 'traditional class teaching now is challenged by new ways of organizing school work, such as work plans and project work. The changes are not just about new ways of working and methods; they are also framed within a new language of schooling' (p. 303). While teachers in Sweden, and also Norway, seem to have emphasized self-regulatory individualized ways of working in the comprehensive school, this is not as obvious in the other Nordic countries such as Finland (Carlgren et al. (2006)). Self-regulating ways of working are though in accordance with the global discourse on flexible learning (OECD, 2001).

These new ways of organizing school work have been interpreted by some scholars (Heller Sahlgren, 2016; cf. Linderoth, 2016) as an effect of the introduction of this new curriculum. In contrast to the previous curricula of 1962, 1969 and 1980 (Lgr62, Lgr69 and Lgr80) the curriculum of 1994 (Lpo94) did not recommend any direct instructions for how teachers should individualize their teaching. Thus, it has been up to the teachers themselves to decide which teaching practices that could be used to best achieve the learning objectives. The absence of concrete curriculum instructions provides a large space for teachers’ own interpretations (cf. Carlgren, 2009). Other factors than curriculum intentions are thus assumed to have also influenced teachers’ teaching practices (Gustafsson et al., 2016; Skolverket, 2009). Interesting enough, changes in teaching practices, such as less teacher-led instructions for the whole class (class teaching) and more use of individual work, have been highlighted by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2009) as one of the main explanations for the observed Swedish schools’ results decline in national and international knowledge evaluations such as PISA (The OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment survey in mathematics, reading comprehension and natural sciences) from 1994 onwards (cf. Astrand, 2016; Gustafsson et al., 2016).

In Sweden, there is very little information about teaching practices that can be compared over time and only two data sources by which teaching practices can be related to student achievement on a national level (Gustafsson et al., 2016). These are the national evaluation of the Swedish comprehensive school, where data have been collected on three occasions in year 9 (1992, 1995 and 2003), and data collected on several occasions within the Swedish longitudinal Evaluation Through Follow-up project (see below).

**Aims of the study**

The present study is based on observed changes in student opinions at different time periods within the Swedish comprehensive school system. This system is characterized by an unchanged goal orientation on equity and democracy since the 1960s. Through such opinions and a student perspective the study aims to discuss changes in teaching practices and classroom processes before and after the introduction of the Swedish 1994 national curriculum (Lpo94) of comprehensive school and the education reforms of the early 1990s. The total time period stretches from 1980 to 2014. The focus is on comparisons of results based on identical statements in questionnaires, given to six nationally representative student cohorts (born in 1967, 1972, 1982, 1987, 1992 and 1998) within the ongoing Evaluation Through Follow-up project (Härnqvist, 2000; Svensson, 2011). The questionnaires were collected in 1980, 1985, 1995, 2005 and 2011 (when the students were 13 years old and attended year 6) and in 2003, 2008 and 2014 (at the age of 16, when the students attended year 9), covering a time span of 35 years.

Even though a description of students’ experiences of teaching practices and classroom processes only captures part of the teaching and learning phenomenon occurring in school, this is assumed to be the most central source of evidence if one wishes to understand the relation between teaching affordances and student learning (Svensson, 2016). The findings will be related to the small number of other statistically comparable findings available on such practices and processes in Sweden, or elsewhere, and to relevant curriculum goals and policies during this time span.

**Individualization in the Swedish curricula**

Individualization as a concept is rooted in a long tradition of comprehensive schooling in Sweden. It is important to note that the purpose of individualization has varied within curricula and over time according to changes in the conditions of schooling and the Swedish society (Giota, 2013; cf. Carlgren, 2009). In the curricula of 1962 and 1969 (Lgr62 and Lgr69) for the 9-year comprehensive school, the quest for strong individualization supported the development of a variety of teaching approaches and forms of work as well as democratic classroom environments
that were expected to be adapted to each individual student’s abilities and needs (Lgr62, p. 31). Teaching practices adapted to a mean level of ability were assumed to cause problems and lead to insufficient achievements for both the weakest and the most talented students. School should in addition help all learners to become independent members of the Swedish society, with the motivation and readiness to take active and social responsibility for its ongoing democratization (Lgr69, p. 15).

New approaches to understanding the learning process brake through internationally during the 1970s (such as the Vygotskian constructivism) (for a discussion see SOU, 1992, p. 94). With these new approaches, which changed the agenda for practice, the role of the teacher (and the student role) came also to change in the Swedish 1980 curriculum (Lgr80) (Lundgren, 1979, 1999). From being a mediator of knowledge the teacher became a supervisor who helped students to reach a deep and broad understanding of learning, in the new investigative and problem-solving oriented school work. In this curriculum, group work was seen as a prerequisite for developing students’ democratic competence. To actively build democratic environments, where students felt respected and encouraged to take part in dialogues in order to develop their critical thinking, was also seen as a crucial part of the democratic teacher role (Giota, 2013).

Compared to the 1980 curriculum, the 1994 curriculum (Lpo94) advocated even more that students shall be given opportunities to develop their ability to work individually and to take even more responsibility for their own learning. Taking responsibility was seen as a goal in itself and a prerequisite for lifelong learning (Giota, 2013). The demand on the teacher to communicate with students about their progress in reaching the curriculum goals (formative assessment) was also highly emphasized in this curriculum. This is understandable given the fact that grades were not awarded until year 8 of compulsory school (Lundahl, 2005). From 2012 onwards grades are awarded starting in year 6, according to a new grading system and the new 2011 curriculum (Lgr11). The latest curriculum puts a strong emphasis on summative assessment and students’ individual test scores, despite the strong discourse of the importance of formative evaluation of students’ learning. A shift has also occurred when it comes to teaching, where class teaching is emphasized, while individual and group work is less highlighted (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2015).

Note in addition that students’ right to have influence on working methods and the content of their schooling was strongly emphasized in the 1994 curriculum (SOU, 1992, p. 94). This and the right to choose school and education programmes or participatory government, was one of the prominent features of the education reforms of the 1990s (Lundahl, Erixo Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013).

**Individualization in practice**

A difficulty with individualization lays also in the fact that the concept refers to various things in the Swedish national curricula. Most typically it refers to how teachers can adapt the learning content, materials or the degree of difficulty in the school tasks. It includes also questions about the amount of responsibility that teachers may demand from students concerning their own learning. Individualization has also to do with students’ possibilities to make choices in school and influence matters that concern them (Giota, 2013; Vinterek, 2006). In Sweden, students’ right of influence and participation in the decision-making in school were established as early as 1979 by the government (SFS, 1979, p. 717) and included in the 1980, 1994 and 2011 curricula.

A research review (Giota, 2013) based on studies published between 2000 and 2010 in the field of education, showed that the old problem in Sweden to differentiate or individualize the school work according to all students’ prerequisites and needs, and that gave rise to the reform of School’s Inner Work (the SIA-reform) in the mid-1970s (SOU, 1974, p. 53) and the 1980 curriculum, is far from being solved. The SIA-reform aimed to solve some of the problems that low achievers faced at school and make the school environment more child-oriented and democratic. Individualized work in school seems to have taken forms other than those intended in policy and curricula. Already vulnerable student groups, such as those from homes with low parental educational level (e.g. Giota et al., 2018) or those in need of special education support (Giota & Emanuelsson, 2011, 2016; Giota, Lundborg, & Emanuelsson, 2009), and students who are unwilling or unable to engage in school learning conditions (Bergh & Giota, 2018; Giota, 2001) appear to become ‘the losers’ (Giota, 2013; Skolverket, 2009; Vinterek, 2006). Student influence as one of the main aspects of individualization in the Swedish curricula has among other things to be improved. Interesting enough, already in 1992, in an interim report ‘About students’ right to influence, participation and responsibility’ (SOU, 1996, p. 22), a school committee noted that student influence doesn’t work in practice.

Besides student influence and individual work, where the later has been pointed out as a teaching practice that redefined the roles of students as well as teachers from the 1980s onwards (Carlgren, 2009; Carlgren et al., 2006; Granström, 2003), two other types of teaching practices are common to all Swedish curricula of comprehensive school: group
work and teacher-led class teaching, which this study will mainly focus on.

**Changes in teaching practices from the 1960s onwards**

In Sweden, few studies have investigated teaching practices in a way that allows comparisons over time. Ekholm (1999) followed the pedagogical work of nine comprehensive schools during 25 years by repeating the same survey on three occasions (1969, 1979 and 1994). He found no major changes in the inner working of school. Although three different curricula had been introduced (Lgr62, Lgr69 and Lgr80) it was still the teacher who talked for most of the lesson. The students responded to closed questions, whose answers the teacher already knew, and then they continued the lesson with individual work which was often teacher-led. The persistence of the ‘initiation-response-evaluation/follow-up’ (IRE/F) pattern for classroom communication (Cazden, 1988; Mehan, 1979) during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, where the teacher was talking two-thirds of the time, has been observed internationally as well (Goodlad, 1984; Lundgren, 1979).

Granström (2003) has compared the appearance of different teaching practices from the mid-1960s to 1980s and 2000s. On the basis of classroom observations of 58 teachers’ behaviour in studies conducted by Stukát in the 1960s (Stukát & Engström, 1966), Granström and Einarsson (1995) concluded that class teaching was the dominant teaching practice in the mid-1960s. 60% of the teachers, were during 90% of the lesson time behind (41%) or in front of their desk (32%), went back and forth in front of the class (10%) and held lectures, cross-examined the whole class, read loudly, or showed pictures and films for the students (p. 11). Granström and Einarsson (1995) have also studied 800 protocols or evaluations of lessons, distributed equally over year 1–year 9 (when students are 7 years old to 16 years old). These analyses showed that class teaching had diminished from 60% in the mid-1960s to 50% in the late 1980s. By contrast, group work had increased from 18% in the mid-1960s to 24% in the late 1980s. The proportion of time that students were spending on individual work during a lesson had also increased, from 22% to 26%. This picture changed radically from the mid-1990s, or the time period when the decentralized school system and the new 1994 curriculum were introduced (Granström, 2003). Between 1980 and 2000 had not only class teaching diminished from 50% to 44%, so had group work (from 24% to 12%), while between the mid-1960s and 2000 individual work increased from 22% to 41%.

The results of the national evaluations in year 9 (Skolverket, 2003) showed that the trend towards more individual work has continued from the mid-1990s onwards. In particular, the proportion of students in year 9 who reported working individually several times per day had increased from just over 25% in 1992 to 50% between 1995 and 2003, particularly in mathematics. In 2003, about 80% of the students reported that they worked individually in most school subjects. The corresponding figures for teacher-led class teaching are 43% (1992) and 28% (Skolverket, 2003).

**Traditional class teaching vs progressive education and achievement**

In international comparisons, Sweden is still regarded as among the most equal OECD-countries (OECD, 2011). In the OECD’s PISA education ranking, Sweden has regressed quite radically. Between 2000 and 2012, Sweden’s average performance in PISA fell by 31 points (NCES, 2015). In PISA 2012, in all subject areas, Sweden is the country whose performance has declined the most and was ranked below the OECD average (Skolverket, 2013a, p. 8), while in PISA 2015, Sweden performed on an average level again. The results of the national evaluations showed dramatically drops in achievement in almost all school subjects for year 9, 15-year-old students, from 1992 to 2003 (Skolverket, 2003).

In the late 2000s, the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2009) concluded that the increasing differences in student achievement in Sweden and the larger drops for some student groups coincides with the emergence of the restructured Swedish school system. Individualization, defined as an increased proportion of individual work, where students had been left to take responsibility for their own learning, was highlighted as one of the four main reasons for these declines. From the early 1990s onwards, individualization has thus increasingly come to be interpreted and implemented not as a view (Giota, 2013), but as a teaching method, where individual work has come to dominate (Gustafsson et al., 2016; Vinterek, 2006).

In an ongoing vivid public debate in Sweden, objections against the progressive ideals are raised. Heller Sahlgren (2016) claims that individualized and unstructured teaching methods are bad for cognitive achievement, and vice versa, that structured teacher methods are to be preferred (cf. Linderoth, 2016). The rise of progressive pedagogical methods during the 1990s, such as individual work and student influence, in particular, are said to have harmed students’ non-cognitive skills and behaviour. This may in turn be linked to the lower achievements among students in Sweden. That progressive education appears harmful for student achievement is claimed to be unsurprising when considering evidence in psychology and brain research on how children’s brains and minds function (Heller Sahlgren, 2016).
Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that research efforts in the 1950s and 1960s have failed to demonstrate the superiority of any certain teaching methods regarding student learning in the Nordic countries (Kállos, 1971). Analyzing the results of a meta-study, and seen from an international perspective, Walberg (1984) concluded that the traditional mediational pedagogical teaching practices of the 1960s and 1970s have not been more successful than student-centred approaches. Students who take greater responsibility for their own learning in schools, where student active forms of work are practiced, seem to do equally well on conventional tests as students who participate in more traditional teacher-led classes. More recent research reviews (Boekaerts, Pintrich, & Zeidner, 2000; Meyer, Haywood, Sachder, & Faraday, 2008) suggest that self-regulated learning is actually beneficial for all students and in particular for ‘weaker’ learners. Self-regulated learning requires however active teachers with knowledge of how students learn, because not all students know how to learn (Cuban, 2016). In line with international research (Seidel & Shavelson, 2007) in a previous nationally representative study (Giota et al., 2018) we found that child-centred problem-solving oriented forms of work, such as working with larger assignments/projects and student influence, appear to be as beneficial for student achievement as more conventional tests in both municipal and independent schools.

Expressed differently, while school reformers or scientists may put a premium on uniformity of teaching practices and outcomes, teachers embrace the ambiguity of classroom processes and practices. Given that students vary in motivation, aptitudes and background, teachers make continuously adjustments, so creating hybrids of teacher- and child-centred pedagogics and instruction in the complex environment of the classroom, suggesting that no single way of teaching will ever suffice (Cuban, 2016). It can then be counterproductive to suggest that students in general learn more through teacher-led class teaching, as direct instruction does not exist on its own (Maynes, 2012).

The present study

While the importance of teaching practices for student outcomes is undisputable (Seidel & Shavelson, 2007) the evidence on the link between teaching practices (traditional/teacher-centred vs progressive/child-centred) and student achievement is complex and can be diverse. In Sweden, studies on teaching practices per se are very rare and almost non-existing when it comes to changes of teaching practices over time (Ekholm & Kull, 1996; Giota et al., 2018; Granström, 2003; Granström & Einarsson, 1995; Holfve-Sabels, 2006).

The present study is based on the assumption that in order to understand the consequences of changed conditions of schooling for students’ learning and overall development, their perspectives of classroom processes – especially how they experience and understand teaching practices and social relations during different time periods – are of interest (cf. Gustafsson et al., 2016). Research findings show in addition that student assessments of teaching quality provide more valid and reliable measures than teachers’ self-ratings (Scherer & Gustafsson, 2015).

Method

In order to investigate students’ experiences and understanding of teaching practices at different time periods, questionnaire data from three nationally representative Swedish samples in year 6 (13-year-old students born in 1967, 1972 and 1982) and three samples in year 9 (16-year-old students born in 1987, 1992 and 1998) were used. Students born in 1992 and 1998 have been followed up from year 6 to year 9. The time periods for the different data collections are displayed in Table 1–3. The samples are student cohorts participating in the ongoing Swedish longitudinal Evaluation Through Follow-up project (ETF; Svensson, 2011).

In collaboration with Statistics Sweden, ETF has since its start in 1961 collected data in the Swedish comprehensive school (in year 6 and for some cohorts in year 3 and 9) and upper secondary school (mostly in year 12) from 10 nationally representative student cohorts (the oldest born in 1948 and the youngest in 2004). All students are sampled by Statistics Sweden when they attend year 3. The sample size of each student cohort is about 10 per cent of the total age cohort. First a stratified sample of municipalities is drawn and then a sample of classes within the selected municipalities is drawn. The surveys in year 6 include all students in the selected classes. In addition to survey data, test and administrative data, and register data are collected and added throughout the life span.

Measures

The year 6 questionnaires were administrated by the classroom teachers in accordance with detailed written instructions. The year 9 surveys took the form of postal surveys, administrated by Statistics Sweden to the students’ home address. These questionnaires covered several different aspects of schooling and life out of school. Here items mainly concerning teaching practices and classroom processes are used. The participants born in 1982, 1987, 1992 and 1998 responded to questionnaire statements on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) Never to (5) Very often. The participants born in 1967 and 1977
responded to questionnaire statements with only two response alternatives (Yes or No). The opinions of the two older cohorts are analyzed here also to investigate the assumption that the teacher role and the teaching practices changed during the 1980s as an effect of, among other things, the school reforms during the 1970s and 1980s (among them the reform of School’s Inner Work, SIA, and the 1980 curriculum; Lundgren, 1999).

**Results**

**Changes in teaching practices in year 6 between 1980 and 1985**

As can be seen in Table 1, one of the largest opinion changes over time has to do with whether the individual student believes the teacher cares about him or her. In the 1985 investigation 92% of the students believed teachers to care about them, compared to 82% in 1980. Whether other students had noticed that he or she was liked by the teacher displays the same pattern (an opinion change of 16%). These results indicate more positive relationships between teachers and students and among students or a more open and secure class relation climate in 1985 compared to 1980.

In both investigations, about 80% of the students state that they had no difficulties to understand when the teacher was instructing or explained things to the whole class. Almost all students stated that they asked for help from the teacher when they didn’t understand. Moreover, 9 out of 10 students liked working together in groups and also believed that the classmates liked working together with them. An increase of 10% indicates that more students in 1985 would like to be better in working together. In the mid-1980s, students seemed also to be more content with their achievements in school, wishing not to do better.

**Changes in teaching practices in year 6 between 1995, 2005 and 2011**

As can be seen in Table 2, 30% of the students attending year 6 in 1995 and 2005 were of the opinion that the teacher was the one who talked most part of the lessons. Even more students state that in 2011 (40%). At the same time, in the 2005 and 2011 investigations, the frequency of students stating that teachers and students have been discussing together is about 13% higher than the frequency of those stating that the teacher has been talking most part of the lesson. Then while class teaching increased

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**Table 1. Appearance of beliefs and teaching practices in year 6 of the Swedish comprehensive school – student judgements. % of students in the response categories Yes/No. In parenthesis total number of responders.**

| ETF-cohorts born in | 1967 | 1972 | 1980 | 1985 |
|---------------------|------|------|------|------|
| N                   | 9104 | 9504 |      |      |

| Beliefs and teaching practices in year 6 in | 1980 | 1985 |
|---------------------------------------------|------|------|
| Do you like working together with classmates? | 89/10 (8353) | 88/12 (8853) |
| Do you think classmates like working together with you? | 81/16 (8006) | 82/18 (8863) |
| Do you usually think you would like to be better at working together with other children? | 38/62 (8091) | 48/52 (8720) |
| Do you think your teacher cares about you? | 82/17 (8036) | 92/8 (8800) |
| Do you think the classmates think the teacher cares about you? | 51/46 (7936) | 67/32 (8634) |
| Do you think you can always get help when you need it? | 11/88 (8036) | 16/84 (8722) |
| Do you think you can get help when you need it? | 95/4 (8361) | 98/2 (8848) |
| Do you think your teacher thinks you often ask for help? | 18/81 (8121) | 20/80 (8697) |
| Would you like to ask the teacher for help more often when you do not understand? | 35/65 (8107) | 11/89 (8692) |
| Do you think it is hard to understand when the teacher explains things for the whole class? | 16/82 (8299) | 18/82 (8815) |
| Do you think your teacher thinks you understand when he/she explains things to the whole class? | 83/15 (8070) | 90/10 (8685) |
| Do you often think you would like to understand things at once when the teacher explains things? | 46/54 (8039) | 50/50 (8639) |
| Do you think you do well in school? | 65/32 (8134) | 78/20 (8743) |
| Do you think your parents think you do well in school? | 86/12 (8126) | 90/9 (8739) |
| Do you often think you would like to do better in school? | 63/36 (8202) | 55/45 (8739) |
| Do you think you have to learn lots of pointless stuff in school? | 37/62 (8347) | 39/60 (8038) |

**Table 2. Appearance of specific teaching practices in year 6 of the Swedish comprehensive school – student judgements. % of students in the response categories Very often/Often and Almost never/Neve. In parenthesis total number of responders.**

| ETF-cohorts born in | 1982 | 1992 | 1998 |
|---------------------|------|------|------|
| N                   | 8805 | 10 147 | 9671 |

| Teaching practices, year 6 in | 1995 | 2005 | 2011 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------|
| The teacher is talking most part of the lesson | 30 (7524) | 31 (8089) | 40 (7785) |
| Teachers and students discussing together | 15 | 19 | 14 |
| The students are working in groups | 0 | 42 (8066) | 53 (7774) |
| The students are working by their own | 55 (7474) | 70 (8028) | 74 (7745) |
| The students are working with bigger tasks/projects | 12 | 4 | 3 |
| The students have tests | 0 | 31 (7997) | 35 (7701) |
| The students participate in the planning of the school work | 61 (7524) | 38 (8056) | 49 (7740) |

Note: When marked 0, the question was not stated to this student cohort.
between 2005 and 2011, so did the discussions between teachers and students.

The largest change in opinions has to do with individual work, which shows an increase of 15% between 1995 and 2005 or 20% from 2005 onwards. Far fewer students state that they have been working together in groups during these time periods compared to those stating that they have been working on their own (about 30% as compared to about 70% respectively). In addition, an increase with 11% implies that students in year 6 had to deal with more tests in 2011 as compared to 2005.

Changes in teaching practices in year 9 between 2003, 2008 and 2014

As can be seen in Table 3, stating that the teacher is very often/often the one who talks most part of the lesson decreased by 8% between 2003 and 2008. During this time an increase of 5% in the extent to which teachers and students discuss together can be noted. These findings show a tendency for reduced time for class teaching between 2003 and 2008, alongside an increase in discussions between teachers and students. These tendencies persist from 2008 to 2014. The frequency of students stating that they very often/often worked on their own increased by 7% between 2003 and 2014. Group work displays no change over time. The largest opinion change has to do with having tests, which shows a decrease by 13% between 2003 and 2014.

Discussion

Changes in teaching practices and classroom relations in year 6 between 1980 and 1985

The findings of our study show students in year 6 in the 1980s to be satisfied with the opportunities they had to work together with classmates and also with their relationships with the teacher. Nevertheless, given that two students out of five found it hard to understand when the teacher explained things to the whole class, the question is whether the learning opportunities of some students were inhibited during this type of instruction. Students seem though to be satisfied with the help they received from the teacher and their achievements in school.

We may thus conclude that in line with the reform of School’s Inner Work (SIA) from 1975, embedded in the recommendations of the 1980 curriculum, the working and classroom atmosphere in the Swedish schools seem to have improved in the 1980s, pointing also to changes in the teacher role (Lundgren, 1999). In particular, teachers seem to have moved from a more traditional or authoritarian role (where teachers may have used their power to control student behaviour and dictate classroom participation) to a more democratic approach. That is, the teaching role has become more caring and empathetic in the 1980s, with teachers perhaps more actively helping students in managing their own behaviours and classroom participation. In the literature, interactions that nurture students trust and emotional security with classmates and teachers predict patterns of actions, such as inner determination to work towards goals and engage authentically in school tasks, which in turn predict academic performance (Adams, Ware, Miskell, & Forsyth, 2016).

The power of class teaching even during the 1980s, as noted by Ekholm and Kull (1996) and revealed also by our findings, may not be that surprising, though. As stated by Åstrand (2016), the reform of School’s Inner Work (SIA) was not completely implemented until the early 1980s.

Changes in teaching practices in year 6 between 1995, 2005 and 2011

Our findings show class teaching in year 6 to be evident also in the early 1990s and increase from 2005 to 2011 at the same time as discussions between teachers and students increased. According to Granström and Einarsson (1995), class teaching in the middle stage (year 4 to 6) of the Swedish comprehensive schools in the early 1990s took place during
55% of the lesson time (compared to 30% in grade 6 in our study). In 2000 class teaching changed to 45%. Consequently, in the early 2000s, there were teachers who still practiced ‘knowledge mediation’ and cross-examination of school work that reminded of traditional class teaching. As Granström (2003) noted, the largest part of the lesson time was not primarily devoted to teaching, however, but rather to administrating teaching. That is, grouping students, preparing for students’ individual work or giving work instructions. Thus, in line with Granström (2003) and other studies (Lindblad & Sahlström, 2001) we may expect our increase in class teaching between 2005 and 2011 to be even more about instructing students on how to deal with individual work and supervising group work, than about lecturing in the traditional meaning.

The question is also whether the increased discussions mirror an increased formative assessment of students learning, where teachers provided feedback to students’ questions and other tasks in class, emphasized in the 1994 curriculum. Such feedback then together with an increase in summative assessment (testing) from 2005 onwards would also be in agreement with extensive research findings advocating a balance between formative and summative assessment as crucial for promoting learning (Hattie, 2008).

Our finding of increased testing in grade 6 may also be seen in the light of studies by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2012) showing the free school choice to have led to increased competition between schools. As noted, between 2005 and 2009 a substantial increase of independent schools took place. Such changes led schools to have to prove that they were good schools in order to attract or keep students, most often by pointing to the proportion of students that had attained the curriculum goals, as measured by tests and grades (Giota et al., 2018; Holmlund et al., 2014).

Changes in teaching practices in year 9 between 2003, 2008 and 2014

In year 9, the changes in teaching practices are inverse to those in year 6, with a tendency for reduced time for class teaching from 2003 onwards, and the use of less group work and fewer tests. Given the strong emphasis on group work by the Swedish curricula, our finding of a weak use of group work in year 9 may seem surprising. As noted by the 1962 curriculum (Giota, 2013), group work is though not easy to administer or implement. According to Granström (2003), group work is more demanding than holding traditional lectures or assigning students individual tasks. Well-functioning group work requires clear instructions, clear objectives and time frames as well as a clear structure (p. 234). Granström and Einarsson (1995) found in addition that unlike students, teachers are often also sceptic towards group work as a pedagogical method, viewing it not as an easy or obvious way for children to work in school, despite curricula intentions, which may also explain our finding. The weak use of testing on the other hand is in line with research showing testing in the higher years of the Swedish comprehensive school to be lower compared to other countries (Gustafsson et al., 2016).

The increase of individual work from 2003 to 2014 indicates that this teaching practice has been increasing even after the last national evaluation in grade 9 in 2003 (Skolverket, 2003). That is, from about 50% in 2003 according to the evaluation, to 75% in 2014 according to our finding. Consequently, although individual work has been a teaching condition since the 1960s and was developed even more in the 1980s (Carlgren, 2009; Carlgren et al., 2006), it is not until the mid-1990s that an explosive spread of individual work seems to take place in year 9 and 6 of the Swedish comprehensive school (Carlgren, 2005; Granström, 2003; Granström & Einarsson, 1995; Gustafsson et al., 2016).

The trend toward more and more individual work is not compatible with the purpose of individualization in neither the 1994 nor the 1980 curriculum, and their Vygotskian constructivism notion to learning as a social interaction process (Giota, 2013; SOU, 1992, p. 94; Lundahl, 2005). We believe that this trend may be more of a teacher response to changed conditions of teaching (cf. Carlgren, 2009) than a misinterpretation of curricula intentions and ambitions of individualization. According to Carlgren, education reforms since the 1990s made the teachers responsible for each individual’s learning, which created a stronger pressure to develop tools for keeping track of every student; thereby the use of more individualistic forms of work and individual work in particular (Carlgren et al., 2006, p. 307). By individual work students can progress at their own pace, releasing teachers from having to monitor the student work all the time, and instead help those in need of help (p. 306).

This trend is also in opposition to students’ legal right to exert influence, which was emphasized in the 1994 curriculum as a social act that requires collective conversations (Giota, 2013; SOU, 1992, p. 94). The findings of our study show students to have a say in school, but in reality their influence is rather limited (Giota, 2013). Most of the time students may choose among a limited number of tasks or tasks that the teacher have chosen (Vinterek, 2006), which is true even when it comes to individual work (Carlgren, 2005). As Österlind (1998) expressed it: ‘this freedom is not that overwhelming, but most students do experience the freedom to choose as a great advantage and a real influence’ (p. 82). Our findings with regard to individual work
and student influence, which are in line with previous research (Giota, 2013; Granström, 2003; SOU, 1996, p. 22; Vinterek, 2006) are something of a concern, since they indicate that school’s democratic mission has not developed significantly and should be further strengthened.

**Considerations**

Survey studies have been criticized for limited validity of their measures of teaching variables, which although conceptually proximal, are according to Seidel and Shavelson (2007) measured distally to executive learning processes. In meta-analyses, these researchers found the effect of certain teaching acts or teaching patterns to vary systematically with the data source. That is, depending on how they have been measured (by observations/video analysis, teacher or student questionnaires). While the ‘naturalness’ of a field or an observational and video study can shed light on the ways in which individual work and class teaching are practiced in classrooms, in meta-analyses, such data sources show no effects when it comes for example to student motivation for learning. The effect size found when teacher questionnaires were used was low (.02) compared to .06 found when student questionnaires were used.

That students and teachers evaluate the same teaching practices and classroom processes in different ways – regardless of data source – is shown also in Swedish research (e.g. Holke-Sabels, 2006; Österlind, 1998). By analyzing responses to the same survey questions stated in 1969, 1979 and 1994, Ekholm and Kull (1996) found teachers to report the occurrence of group work to a much larger extent than students, which was true even for discussions between teachers and students. Half as many teachers were of the opinion that traditional class teaching occurred daily and during the largest part of the lesson.

By relating survey data to observations of teaching practices in more than 300 lessons in the mid-1970s and late 1980s, Ekholm and Kull (1996) concluded that student statements are more consistent with classroom realities and thus more valid than teacher statements. In general, teachers want to make more use and be more aware of curricula guidelines on more individualized teaching methods, and in particular to use more discussions and group work.

In a survey study by Granström and Einarsson (1995), students reported that their highest retention of lessons was when they had the opportunity to work and learn together with classmates (in pairs or groups and group discussions) followed by the opportunity to work individually. The least retention was reported to take place during the teacher’s lectures and instructions for the whole class. The teachers did not share their students’ opinion (Granström, 2003, p. 231).

A concern of the present and other studies in the field (e.g. Granström, 2003) lays in that not only the frequency of teaching practices, but also their actual characteristics or meaning may change over time. For example, individual work in Sweden seems to have turned from individual implementation of specific teacher-directed tasks for the whole class in the 1960s and 1970s to ‘own work’ in the 1980s. In the later, the student was expected to individually plan and carry out the tasks selected by the teacher, at his or her own pace and in a self-chosen order, within timeframes indicated by the teacher (Granström, 2003). Individual work today may be seen as an intermediate form (in Swedish ‘beting’, Carlsgren, 2005). Here the teacher is expected to leave a large part of responsibility to the students for carrying out a number of given tasks independently and also to monitor and evaluate their progress, but the timeframes are still to a large extent given by the teacher (Granström, 2003, p. 237). This concern is of importance especially when findings are to be interpreted on the school level.

Among the strengths of repeated cross-sectional student surveys with exactly the same statements over time as the present one, is yet that they can be used to test causal hypotheses in a number of ways with control of individual differences or social background status. Given the wide-ranging methodological approaches to studying teaching practices and classroom processes in the field (Seidel & Shavelson, 2008; see also Ekholm & Kull, 1996; Granström, 2003; Stukát & Engström, 1966) we believe that there is a need to recognize and discuss the limitations and strengths of each approach; and also how they can be combined.

**Conclusions**

National as international achievement tests show that there has been a decline in Sweden’s results from the mid-1990s and especially after 2000. Changes in teaching practices and especially more use of independent work has been put forward as one of the main reasons for the decline (Skolverket, 2009). Still, very little information about these processes is available in Sweden. In the present study, the repeated cross-sectional survey design of the longitudinal ETF-project with nationally representative samples of students was used to assess the prevalence of particular teaching practices and classroom processes at the national level during different periods of time. In line with national evaluations in year 9 (1992, 1995 and 2003) (Skolverket, 2003), our results show major changes in teaching practices, as seen from a student perspective, from the early 1990s onwards. The most
notable change concerns individual work, which shows an explosive increase from 2003 onwards at the same time as the use of teacher-led class teaching and testing are diminishing. Major changes are evident also in year 6, with individual work once again showing an explosive increase between 1995 and 2011 (cf. Granström, 2003; Granström & Einarsson, 1995), but also in class teaching and testing. These changes may indicate that school has changed its mission from fostering commonality, as reflected in the more limited training students now get in group work, in favour of preparing students for individual future projects.

Changes in schools’ inner work from this time period onwards cannot be explained merely as a consequence of misconceptions of central pedagogical ideas in the Swedish curricula, and the decentralized 1994 national curriculum, in particular (cf. Heller Sahlgren, 2016; Linderoth, 2016). There is a risk in drawing too far-reaching conclusions (cf. Carlgren, 2009). Instead, it should be seen as related to more global economic seeds of change in recent decades (Adamson, Åstrand & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Beach & Dyson, 2016) and new governmental strategies as well as unequal distributions of resources between municipalities and schools from the early 1990s onwards (Åstrand, 2016; Gustafsson et al., 2016; Lundahl et al., 2013), resulting in changing teaching conditions in schools (Carlgren, 2009; Skolverket, 2009).

Another explanation to changed teaching practices may be that teachers have not been equipped with the right teaching tools during their teacher education (Gustafsson et al., 2016). Concerning individual work, the OECD (2014) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013, shows that it is more common in Sweden than in other countries for teachers to leave students to practice tasks for themselves. According to the School Inspectorate (2009), teachers who lack teacher training or are teaching a subject they lack skills in, tend to make greater use of trivialized forms of individualization, such as letting students work with textbooks, than teachers with adequate training for their position.

Education reforms in the Nordic countries have often been discussed and legitimated in terms of whether they promote or hinder educational equity (Lundahl, 2007). The systematic educational changes that took place from the early 1990s were underpinned not only by deteriorating results but also by decreasing levels of equity (Skolverket, 2012, 2013b; cf. Yang Hansen, Rosén, & Gustafsson, 2011). The relation between structural inequalities and education reforms aiming to reduce such inequalities is complex. Although reforms are not a completely traversable part of practice, they do structure, constrain and regulate teaching and teachers’ capacity to meet the prerequisites and needs of all students in school. We do believe that changes in teaching practices may be teachers’ response to a social situation with among other things increasing segregation and competition between schools that teachers have to deal with.

We also believe that discussing consequences of different ways of organizing teaching and carrying out school work as well as how teaching can be developed and improved is crucial in order to change the unequal opportunities for students to make an optimal use of their schooling (Giota et al., 2018).

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