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The Individual Development Plan: supportive tool or mission impossible? Swedish teachers’ experiences of dilemmas in IDP practice

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Abstract
The present study explores the dilemmas and related coping strategies teachers experience as part of their work with individual development plans (IDPs) in Sweden. Through qualitative content analysis of 15 interviews with Swedish elementary school teachers, the dilemmas and coping strategies were identified and analysed. From an activity theory point of view, dilemmas are seen as discursive manifestations of contradictions that exist within the activity system of instruction. The IDP dilemmas are interpreted as emerging from a central contradiction between trust in teachers’ professionalism vis-à-vis external steering and control. The three defined dilemmas are identified as involving time use (documentation vs. instruction), communication (officially correct language vs. pupil-friendly language) and type of assessment (summative vs. formative). Moreover, three qualitatively different dilemma management strategies were discerned.

Keywords: individual development plans, activity theory, teacher’s assessment, school documentation

Introduction
During the past two decades, the system of regulating teaching and learning in the Swedish school has undergone major changes. Since the early 1990s, the system has been one of management by objectives and results, on one hand creating more flexibility and allowing for local, situation-specific solutions and, on the other hand, controlling the outputs (results). Recent years have seen a growing emphasis on central monitoring, evaluation and inspection. Increasingly extensive documentation has come to be viewed as quality assurance and a means for holding schools accountable for their results (Forsberg and Lindberg 2010, 32–36). The Swedish Individual Development Plan (IDP) exists within this context, as part of teachers’ assessment practices. With a short history dating back only to 2006, the IDP has undergone major changes that have come to profoundly affect teachers’ working conditions and professional identity: Teachers speak of a lack of time for reflecting on and planning instruction due to a dramatically increased workload in terms of
documentation (Hirsh, 2013). The issue is gaining attention in the current policy debate: with an election approaching, political promises are being made about doing away with some of the IDP documentation. It is important, however, that the discussion does not simply stop at issues dealing with removing or retaining the IDP (cf. Helte 2012), but that it also addresses questions of what – in relation to IDP – is problematic and what is beneficial. The current study contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

According to the latest reform from 2008, the official purpose of the Swedish IDP is twofold: to give summative information about a student’s present level of knowledge and to function as a formative tool in the student’s learning process (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2008; 2012). The ways teachers write and work with IDPs – that is, their IDP practices – are affected and partly shaped by a larger context involving, for instance, the Educational Act, guidance from the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE), local municipal guidance, and software solutions for IDP documentation from companies. Thus, when IDP reaches the level of the school it is already inscribed (Akrish and Latour 1992) with a certain programme of action. Users – school principals and teachers – may translate (renegotiate and reconstruct) it to fit their local context (cf. Habib and Wittek 2007; Latour 1987). A previous study (Hirsh, 2013) showed that for some teachers in some contexts, IDP rested quite heavily on inscription while the process of translation was limited, whereas for other teachers in other contexts, the opposite was true. Either case appears to entail dilemmas for teachers, in that they experience contradictory goals and values embedded in IDP practice.

Based on interviews with 15 teachers of different stages of Swedish compulsory school, the present study aims to explore the dilemmas and the coping strategies for handling those dilemmas that can be discerned in the teachers’ descriptions of IDP practices. How dilemmas are defined and framed in relation to theory will be presented below.

Framework

In this study, central concepts from activity theory are used, the most important of which are contradictions and dilemmas. The IDP is understood as a mediating artifact in teachers’ work with IDPs, and the teachers writing and implementing IDPs are those whose perspective is taken. Thus, the teachers are the subjects in an object-oriented activity. Their work with IDPs is seen as actions within the activity system of instruction, where the object (that which the activity is directed towards) is primarily understood as students’ learning. Thus, this study foregrounds actions in terms of teachers’ work with IDPs, and there is no attempt to provide a full activity theoretical analysis of the activity as a whole. The IDP actions are, however, seen as
taking place within the wider activity system of instruction and, ultimately, as directed towards the same general object, i.e. students’ learning (cf. Leontiev 1978).

The first generation of activity theory created the idea of the mediation of actions, which often is expressed as a triad of subject, object and mediating artifact (Vygotsky 1978; Engeström 2001). A basic assumption is that the subject (in this case the teachers) does not act directly on an object; rather, mediating artifacts shaped by the sociocultural historical context in which they develop provide the reciprocal link between the two. While subjects may be empowered by artifacts, they may also be limited to interacting with the object according to the perspective of the artifacts (Kuutti 1996). In this study, the documentation templates teachers are required to use – tools imposed on the teachers by national and local authorities – play an important role as mediating artifacts in that they present opportunities and limitations that, to a certain extent, determine IDP practice.

The subjects’ experiences of dilemmas relate to surrounding structures. An activity system focuses not only on the relation between subject, object and mediating artifacts; it also takes into account the complex interrelations between the individual subject and his or her community, the division of labour within the community, and the rules that constrain the goal-directed actions/interactions (Engeström 1999, 2001). In a collective activity system many actors and interests are involved and different motives may be related to the same object (Nardi 2005, 40). Considering the different and sometimes contradictory motives driving various actors in an activity system is central to understanding the dilemmas teachers experience within IDP practice. What is also key to the present study is the concept of contradictions, which Engeström (2001) defines as “historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” (137). In activity theory, the idea of internal contradictions as the driving force for change and development in activities is central. Activities are open systems and when a new element comes in from the outside it may collide with old elements, generating internal contradictions. This can be a driving force for innovation and change: “As the contradictions of an activity are aggravated, some individual participants begin to question and deviate from its established norms. In some cases, this escalates into collaborative envisioning and a deliberate collective change effort” (Engeström 2001, 137). Engeström and Sannino (2011, 371) argue that internal contradictions cannot be handled by merely combining and balancing competing values, but must be creatively resolved by working out a qualitatively new “thirdness”. They define the concept of thirdness as “the generation of novel mediating models, concepts and patterns of activity that go beyond and transcend the available opposing forces or options, pushing the system into a new phase of development” (371).
Engeström and Sannino (2011, 370–371) describe contradictions as historically emergent and systemic phenomena that cannot be observed directly in empirical studies, but can be identified and approached, for instance, through dilemmas articulated by “insiders” (e.g., subjects). Honig (1996) describes dilemmas as “situations in which two values, obligations, or commitments conflict and there seems to be no right thing to do” (258), beyond attempting to act for the best. Höijer, Lindskog and Uggla (2005, 356) see dilemmas as situations of difficult choice in which all available alternatives have undesirable consequences or in which incompatible demands have to be fulfilled. In the present study, the term dilemma refers to situations in which two partly contradictory goals/purposes both need to be somehow fulfilled. Because neither can be deselected, ways of balancing dilemmas must be sought. Handling dilemmas is thus more about positioning than problem-solving.

Context and regulation of the Swedish IDP over time

As mentioned, the subjects’ experiences of dilemmas relate to surrounding structures, such as rules that constrain the actions taking place within the activity system. The following section aims to give a brief contextualisation of the regulative framework of the Swedish IDP.

Since the early 1980s, students in need of special support (SEN) have had the statutory right to what the SNAE (2009) terms an action plan which states individual targets and the kind of support required for individual/curricular targets to be reached, and describes how the school is to implement the support. In 2001 (Ds 2001:19), a governmental expert committee suggested that the purpose behind the action plan – “optimally planning the individual’s conditions for learning” (30) – should be valid for all students and that every individual should have the right to an educational planning document guiding towards optimal learning performance. This was subsequently prescribed by law in 2006 and termed IDP (SFS 1994:1194). The original IDP was exclusively prospective; a document describing targets and strategies for the near future was to be prepared at the parent-pupil-teacher-meeting once a semester throughout compulsory school as a trilateral agreement between the parties involved. However, after a change of government the conditions for teachers’ IDP work changed. A 2008 Ministry of Education memorandum stated that the information given by teachers at the parent-pupil-teacher meeting often lacked clarity, and teachers thus ought to be given the opportunity to express themselves in “grade-like forms” (Ministry of Education 2008, 4) in the IDP. The law was amended and, since 2008, it prescribes an IDP containing written, summative assessments for all subjects, while it also maintains the original IDP purpose as a forward-aiming formative tool.

Behind the 2008 reform is an undertone of a belief that the clarity offered by grades would ultimately help raise students’ results. Instead of introducing actual
grades from early school years – which some regard as too harsh – ‘grade-like’ symbols were established as a way of measuring and describing students’ knowledge throughout compulsory school.

The SNAE issued guidance on how to understand and implement the IDP in 2005, 2008 and 2012. The 2012 version states that the purpose of the IDP is to give information on students’ present levels of knowledge and to function as a formative tool in guiding students’ learning processes and developing their metacognitive understanding, as well as a basis for teachers’ evaluation of instruction. Teachers are to depart from the grading criteria of each school subject and describe students’ knowledge ‘professionally’, in a language adapted to the age of the pupil. Grade-like symbols may be used to complement the descriptive texts, but may not replace them. Whereas politicians and policymakers often speak of the summative and grade-like aspects of the IDP (e.g., Helte 2012), the SNAE emphasises the formative functions. Thus, teachers and principals are exposed to different bids from different influential stakeholders.

Officially, decisions regarding the design and implementation of the IDP lie with local school principals (SNAE 2012) but, despite this, they are sometimes made at the municipal level (Hirsh, 2013). Early IDP evaluations (SNAE 2007; 2010) indicated that the content of IDPs was often insufficiently connected to the curriculum and syllabuses and to a relatively high extent concerned students’ personalities and behaviour. A way of dealing with this problem on the municipal level is to guide teachers more specifically towards particular ways of expressing themselves in IDP documents, as a result of which the evaluations can be said to have contributed to strengthening the external regulation of teachers’ IDP work (cf. Krantz 2009). Often, municipalities purchase documentation software from companies that specialise in the design of such solutions (Mårell-Olsson 2012). Other municipal-level decisions may also contribute to shaping the IDP. For instance, the municipality may decide that all schools must report results by submitting a summary of the grade-like part of IDPs for the purpose of central review and analysis. This makes it virtually impossible for local schools to deselect the use of the grade-like symbols.

Encouraging all schools in a municipality to use the same system and format for documentation is problematic in the sense that SNAE guidance (2012) states that decisions regarding the design and implementation of IDP are to be made at school level, by the local principal (cf. Mårell-Olsson 2012). Instead, when the IDP reaches the level of the local school, it may well be quite heavily inscribed with a certain programme of action that contributes to shaping teachers’ understandings and ways of putting IDP into practice.

**Brief international outlook**

A direct comparison between the Swedish IDP and its international counterparts is problematic due to varying terminology for similar types of documents, as well
as differing national contexts (Hirsh 2011; 2012). Given the problem area of the present study (documentation for educational planning and assessment in compulsory school) as well as the fact that the IDP stems from the ideas behind the action plan (Individualised Education Plan: IEP), comparisons with international research into IEPs have been found to be most relevant. Although IEPs are prepared by specially trained personnel and given to a limited number of pupils with identified special needs, there is nonetheless a large degree of commonality between the IEP and the Swedish IDP: for instance, documentation as a phenomenon in the elementary school context, tools and forms for such documentation, and communication with and involvement of pupils and parents in the process.

In a review of 319 international references bearing on IEPs, Mitchell, Morton and Hornby (2010) conclude that it is common for IEPs to have multiple purposes ascribed to them; the same document is frequently expected to serve educational, legal, accountability, placement and resource allocation purposes. They argue that a challenge for educational policymakers will be to consider how all of these objectives can be fulfilled without the IEP losing its primary purpose of acting as an educational planning document. Similarly, Shaddock et al. (2009) argue that the original concept of the IEP as an instructional framework has been lost to a greater need to document procedural and legal compliance. Similar issues are discussed in Swedish research (e.g. Krantz 2009; Vallberg Roth and Månsson 2006) and can also be compared to the results of this study.

Further, Mitchell, Morton and Hornby (2010) highlight the issue of equity and reciprocity concerning parent involvement: Even though IEPs are meant to involve parents, it appears problematic for educators to develop collaborative relationships with parents. The authors trace social and cultural barriers to parents’ participation in IEP meetings, where communication is often hampered by language, cultural differences and educational jargon. Such aspects are described by teachers in this study as well as in a previous study of teachers’ IDP practices (Hirsh, 2013).

Insufficient time and excessive paperwork are also recurring themes in studies of IEPs worldwide. A common approach to reducing the time demanded by IEP preparation is to use software created to help manage documentation.

**Method**

The empirical material consists of 15 interviews with teachers representing the primary (5), intermediate (5) and secondary (5) levels of Swedish compulsory school. As there are no national standards for IDP documentation or IDP work, municipalities or local schools may use different formats for documentation and have different guidelines concerning IDP work. In order to ensure variation, I sought to include teachers from different municipalities as well as independent schools. The teachers brought examples of their IDP documentation to the interviews.
**Participants and data collection**

A request was sent out to development managers of local school administrations in five Swedish municipalities in September 2011. The request presented the aim of the study and asked the managers to provide contact details for a number of principals. Two principals of independent schools were contacted directly. All principals received a description of the study and were asked to send in a few names of teachers willing to participate in interviews concerning IDP. The criteria for teachers to be eligible to take part in the study were established as follows: Each teacher must;

- have a teaching degree and at least two years of teaching experience;
- be a current teacher of a class; and
- be able to bring copies of two IDP documents that he/she had participated in writing some time during 2011.

Five teachers from each school stage were contacted and consented to participate in the study. They were informed that anonymity was guaranteed, that the interviews were to be recorded, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time (RESPECT 2004). They were also asked to remove all names in the IDP documents they were to bring to the interviews.

The semi-structured interviews lasted 50–70 minutes and followed a guide of question areas to be covered (Kvale 1997). The interviews were contextual- or material-based in the sense that the content of the documents provided the basis for talking about practice (Orrell 1996). The subsequent transcription was verbatim.

Below is a table presenting information on the informants (Table 1).

**Analysis**

In analysing the material, I turned to qualitative content analysis as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). Because the material had been processed for a previous study of teachers’ IDP practices, I was already well acquainted with the dataset as a whole. The interview guide had been designed to induce nuanced descriptions of IDP practice in terms of strengths as well as weaknesses, and the new reading focused on highlighting meaning units (sequences of text) (Table 2) representing what teachers perceive as difficult/problematic/conflictory in relation to IDP.

Long units were condensed into shorter texts revealing the core meaning, and sorted on the basis of the content area they expressed. These content areas were found to be aspects that could be related either to the categories of *time* (workload in relation to working hours), *communication* (language and formulation in documents), or *assessment* (the relation between summative and formative)
Figure 1). The categories are seen as expressions of the manifest content of the text (i.e., the descriptive level). Since dilemmas are defined as situations in which teachers perceive that partly contradictory purposes/goals must be met, I went through the contents of each category to identify any contradictory purposes/goals. This led to the formulation of the three dilemmas that will be the main focus of the results.

A tentative categorisation of the teachers’ ways of handling dilemmas – conscious or unconscious – was also made on the basis of the manifest content (teachers’ concrete descriptions of what they do) as well as interpretations of how teachers depict IDP work as a whole. This categorisation should be seen as possible approaches that can be understood from teachers’ descriptions.

| Teacher and (municipality) | School stage and (form) | Age and (sex) | Number of years in the profession | Public/independent school | School size and (number of students for whom teacher was responsible) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| T1 (A)                    | Secondary (8)          | 41-50 (F)     | 16                               | Public                   | 450 (15)                                                      |
| T2 (A)                    | Secondary (8)          | 31-40 (F)     | 6                                | Public                   | 380 (9)                                                       |
| T3 (B)                    | Primary (3)            | 41-50 (F)     | 20                               | Public                   | 200 (15)                                                      |
| T4 (B)                    | Intermediate (4)       | 51-60 (F)     | 17                               | Public                   | 110 (17)                                                      |
| T5 (C)                    | Primary (2)            | 31-40 (M)     | 8                                | Public                   | 350 (17)                                                      |
| T6 (A)                    | Primary (2)            | 31-40 (M)     | 10                               | Independent             | 200 (18)                                                      |
| T7 (B)                    | Secondary (9)          | 31-40 (F)     | 9                                | Independent             | 92 (7)                                                        |
| T8 (B)                    | Primary (3)            | 51-60 (F)     | 38                               | Public                   | 200 (27)                                                      |
| T9 (B)                    | Intermediate (6)       | 51-60 (F)     | 38                               | Public                   | 250 (18)                                                      |
| T10 (D)                   | Intermediate (4)       | 51-50 (F)     | 13                               | Public                   | 225 (10)                                                      |
| T11 (D)                   | Intermediate (6)       | 41-50 (F)     | 17                               | Public                   | 225 (12)                                                      |
| T12 (D)                   | Secondary (8)          | 31-40 (M)     | 4                                | Public                   | 280 (12)                                                      |
| T13 (A)                   | Primary (3)            | 31-40 (F)     | 11                               | Public                   | 140 (19)                                                      |
| T14 (A)                   | Secondary (9)          | 41-50 (F)     | 17                               | Public                   | 370 (10)                                                      |
| T15 (E)                   | Intermediate (4)       | 41-50 (F)     | 18                               | Public                   | 220 (9)                                                       |

Table 2. Number of meaning units in each transcript (ranging in length from a couple of lines to a full page of printed text)

| T1: 15 | T2: 20 | T3: 17 | T4: 7 | T5: 19 |
|--------|--------|--------|-------|--------|
| T6: 2  | T7: 8  | T8: 12 | T9: 7 | T10: 5 |
| T11: 11| T12: 10| T13: 12| T14: 14| T15: 19|
Total: 178 meaning units
Results

Dilemmas concern difficult situations. Many of the interview excerpts that follow can be read as containing both criticism of and resistance to IDP, and one would perhaps assume that the teachers do not see any benefits of the process whatsoever. In the interviews, however, the teachers were asked to describe their ‘dream scenario’ with respect to IDP and documentation. All 15 teachers described the need for and benefits of documentation, and claimed they would continue to record even if the IDP law did not exist. Thus, their critique is not aimed at the documentation as such, but the fact that the circumstances often make it difficult for them to find a balance. Situations where the teachers find balancing difficult concern how instruction is perceived to suffer at the expense of documentation, and how students’/parents’ understanding of the content of the document is perceived to suffer at the expense of a demand for official correctness. As for assessment, the dilemma concerns how summative information should be provided and how it should be balanced against the formative elements. All teachers but one (T6) articulate aspects of all three dilemmas. However, some describe dilemmas as something they previously experienced to a great extent, but have gradually been able to balance.

In the following part, each of the three dilemmas identified will be illustrated by excerpts which mirror teachers’ attitudes to how dilemmas – bearing on IDP – arise in their daily practice.
Dilemma 1: Documentation versus instruction

Almost all the teachers describe that the workload in terms of time spent on documentation has increased remarkably since the 2008 IDP reform, and that the reform was introduced without any changes being made to the organisation of their working hours. Some statements indicate that this prevents teachers from seeing the positive sides of the IDP and from seeing that the IDP is part of practice rather than something that goes on alongside regular practice:

I think that most teachers think of it as an added burden on us, without getting more time or money for it. That’s what makes it feel like a pain in the neck … Maybe they should have given us time so that it doesn’t become yet another thing to do during our planning time. And a lot of people actually work more than that, during their free time. So it’s really an irritation /…/ At the same time, it helps when you’ve done it, but it does take time from everything else we do (T7).

How extensive the documents are depends on which documentation solution is used. The IDPs collected during the interviews in this study range from 3 to 45 pages for each student. It is obvious that many of the teachers think that the time equation does not add up, and that the quality of instruction suffers as a result:

We don’t really have time to prepare good lessons. And then the fact that the children are not meeting goals is much discussed. And I then think that … someone might realise sometime that if we teachers had a little more time to put some effort into preparing good lessons, then the children would reach the goals better. We do a bunch of other things … like documentation … and then I feel that it takes a little more effort than it’s worth in the end. First and foremost, I think it’s most effective to be a present and well-prepared teacher in the classroom … /…/ Because in the classroom we can really give ongoing formative feedback every day. And it is that which … I believe … in the long run gives results. So I think it’s kind of sad that we don’t have time to prepare good lessons (T8).

Regardless of the documentation solution, many teachers claim that it is not only the writing itself that takes time. Even solutions that may be considered simplistic, with already fully formulated boxes that are to be marked with a cross or a certain colour, take time. Teachers report that careful considerations have to be made before marking each box. Reducing the scope of the document by writing shorter texts is also perceived as difficult since teachers feel that everything must be linked to the assessment criteria in the syllabuses.

Dilemma 2: Officially correct versus pupil-friendly

The second dilemma is closely related to the first and concerns the scope and complexity of formulations within the document. The fact that the written assessments are to describe students’ present knowledge and future targets in relation to curricular criteria has often come to mean using the exact wording of the steering
documents. Teachers describe that they feel pressured to express themselves in a bureaucratic and curriculum-similar way:

And it’s that, too … that we have been given directives about what kind of language we should use. And sometimes I feel it’s a little too professional. You have to have a pretty good insight into the world of education and into the syllabus to understand the meaning of the language /…/ There’s a vocabulary … there are terms or expressions you’re supposed to use to make it professional in a certain way … And these are often taken from the syllabus directly … and they’re not exactly obvious to understand (T13).

Another aspect of the bureaucratic language and the extensive documentation is the issue of equity. The IDP can be seen as an affordance (a perceived possibility for action) for those who have the capacity to transform it into action and take advantage of what is offered (Gee 2008, 81). In the case of IDP, it is relevant to consider whether it can be assumed that everyone has this capacity, especially if the IDP is handed over to students and parents as information they are expected to take in and act upon. It is reasonable to suppose that for some parents and students this will be more difficult than for others:

This is very difficult to read even for me who knows how it should be read. And then I think about a parent … they of course find it very difficult to read. They might not understand it at all … Unless you have parents that are … well-educated and have a good insight into policy documents and such documents as these … (T12).

The high achievers are very conscious of the goals … But others aren’t /…/ So much responsibility is placed on the pupils, that they themselves should take the steps. They are expected to do it, and then they don’t /…/ But who helps the child with what is written then? If they have problems? No one. It just stands there next time as ‘You still have a problem’ … I mean, the school has to work on what the child is expected to work on. Then I think it becomes a living document – only then (T15).

Extensive documentation entails the considerable consumption of paper if all documents are to be printed out. Some schools therefore choose to deliver them digitally. In order to use web systems with this type of information, parents must actively apply for credentials. A problem some teachers describe is that it cannot be assumed that everyone has access to the technology needed, or that everyone understands the system:

Often it works very well, but sometimes it seems that the parents don’t understand … and especially at schools like this with such a high percentage of immigrant parents / …/ We have it web-based so that the parents can go in and look at it. That’s the thought. But it’s a fact that the majority of parents have not applied for log-in details … But other than that, it’s very convenient for many parents that it’s web-based (T13).

Dilemma 3: Summative versus formative

In a newspaper interview (Helte 2012, September 7), the Swedish Education Minister comments on teachers’ increased documentation workload as follows: “Now that we
are introducing official grades earlier than before, the evaluation systems that were introduced in the absence of official grades – such as the IDP – can be questioned”. The statement reflects a view of IDP as being a summative evaluation that can be equated with grades. The SNAE (2012), on the other hand, states that the content of an IDP document cannot be equated with grades, and emphasises the formative tool aspects. All 15 teachers interviewed for this study state that they consider the formative and forward-aiming aspects to be the most important. However, this does not mean they think of summative evaluation as something negative, they believe it provides a basis for the forward-aiming part. Once again, it seems to be the form of the summative evaluation – making it difficult to find a balance – that many of the teachers are critical of, rather than the evaluation as such. Combining ‘grades’ and formative assessment in the same document is perceived as dilemmatic for many of the teachers; they feel that all attention is drawn to the ‘grades’:

You’re supposed to make an ‘x’ at different levels in all the subjects. Then the pupils just look at where the marks are and don’t look at the forward-aiming part of it. So I’m not happy about that /.../ I would rather have everything in a continuous text. I think that would be enough ... The pupils get so hung up on the marks ... and they ask each other ‘How many marks did you have to the right or the left?’ (T4).

They (the pupils and parents) only look at the matrix with the x’s. That’s the only thing they look at ... and say, ‘That’s good, I’m meeting the goals in all subjects’. ‘Have you read the forward-aiming text, though?’, I ask. ‘No ...’, they say. You want them to see the IDP as an aid for improvement ... But now they just look at the ‘grades’ (T12).

Moreover, the teachers of primary and intermediate stages worry that already from the first grade the children are constantly measured and assessed in such an instrumental and, according to them, unnecessarily hard way. Thirteen out of the 15 teachers in this study use document solutions in which grade-like symbols are a standardised part. This involves ‘grading’ student performance by ticking boxes in different columns for each school subject. Sometimes the different levels have the same designations as the national rating scale and sometimes other designations are used.

You feel very conflicted when working with small children ... They are so little and sort of blank slates, and many of the children here at the school have a different native language. Then it isn’t so simple or easy to pass social studies and science when you’re in third grade. And so does it help to be judged with these x’s? /.../ It’s so easy to discourage them when you stick to these kinds of x’s and grades. There can be kids that have 20 things they actually need to work on, but it’s unreasonable to write it all down, for then, what they can’t do becomes overwhelming. They become broken ... they have such a huge load to carry (T3).

Children need to be lifted. You can convey that it’s hard in some other way, I think. We have children whose marks fall below ‘uncertain’ for most subjects ... when it shows so clearly, even the pupils understand very early that they aren’t good. I feel that is negative (T13).
Some template solutions also involve the use of colours and diagrams. Each school subject is broken down into a number of abilities where each ability is to be designated with a grade symbol and given a certain colour. The sum of this generates a pie chart that becomes the overall picture of the student in that particular subject. The redder the circle becomes, the greater the indication that the student has problems in the subject. Instead of inspiring the students to want to learn more, the teachers feel that this contributes to discouraging their motivation:

It boggles the parents’ minds when they receive an IDP that is 42 pages long ... And our dilemma is to communicate this to a 10-year-old in a simple and encouraging way. How do you do that? For this is how formal it’s supposed to be / ... / There are also circle diagrams ... But if the circle gets very red ... Ugh ... Look here under social studies, there we have 22 different abilities that we are supposed to fill in that we have observed and judged on different levels. There are this many for each subject ... / ... / I’ll show you a student that doesn’t meet all the criteria. She has red warning triangles in pretty much every subject ... It becomes so tough for these kids who have to struggle to reach the simplest goals ... You see how much red there is! Then it feels like I can’t go marking with red in technology also, you simply don’t have the heart ... So then we decided to just write forward-aiming text there ... and then you are not professional, I know, but ... we chose to do so, my colleague and I. Because it’s not possible, you just can’t ... Imagine receiving it as a pupil or a parent ... / ... / But I know that it has to look this way, it’s a system that our municipality has chosen ... (T15).

Some teachers also describe that recording students’ knowledge as accurately as the documentation templates require has affected their classroom practice in a certain direction:

I feel that I have become more stressed because of this and have felt that I have to give the pupils more written tests and quizzes ... And I think that’s a little sad, actually ... But otherwise it would be hard, I think, because I have to have it in black and white to be able to see ... / ... / Of course you have to have tests, but I think there are more now than before (T4).

According to the law and the SNAE guidance, schools are free to express the summative information without using grade-like symbols. However, for 13 teachers in this study – all working in public schools – the municipalities have purchased document solutions from different companies and given all schools guidelines to use the grade-like symbols. Therefore, teachers report that it is practically impossible for them to do otherwise. Many of them claim they would have preferred to express themselves only in running text. As things stand, however, they have to find other ways of balancing their concerns for student motivation and their will to emphasise the formative part of the IDP.

**Handling the dilemmas**

A central principle in activity theory is that contradictions are understood as a driving force for change and innovation. From that point of view, teachers’ ways of handling
the perceived dilemmas are of interest. When the teachers articulate dilemmas and describe how they work with IDPs, it is possible to talk about different ways of relating to the dilemmas they experience.

Procedural display: Teachers display to pupils/parents and principals procedures that count as accomplishments of IDP documents/practice, but not necessarily with much attention being paid to what an IDP actually is or ought to be. Teachers’ descriptions point to a ritualised performance in a ‘it has to be done twice a year and soon it is over’-manner. IDP practice is ‘reduced to’ the writing of the document:

It can feel contrived, you just get it done ... and it isn’t something that is used later, either. You write it because you have to write it (T2).

For many of us it is ‘cut-and-paste’, you write the same for most students ... /.../ and afterwards you feel ‘Great, I’m done, now it’s half a year until next time’ (T12).

According to all the recognised rules: Everything has to be done and all purposes need to be fulfilled. The dilemmas are most evident here since teachers have no real strategy to deal with them. This, in turn, leads to great frustration. Teachers try to cope and find their own ways of adjusting by slowly changing small parts of their IDP practice. The change effort is more individual than collective, however (partly illustrated by teacher T15 in the results section, under Dilemma 3).

Towards a new thirdness: These teachers have been acting According to all the recognised rules, but experienced it as impracticable. The dilemma-management strategies they describe involve a collective and more profound change effort; an emphasis on the instructional consequences of the content of the document, easier language, and a balance in favour of the formative tool aspects of IDP:

We started out ambitiously at this school. There were looooon formulations, and we put all of the targets into nice documents and cut and paste until we broke out in a sweat. The teachers sat there with a whole bible that the parents maybe read a quarter of. Their eyes turned glassy and they became just like the students. So we’ve gotten away from that, because we feel it’s not what we want (T11).

These three should not be seen as categories with absolute definitional boundaries, but more as a basis for discussing possible ways of dealing with dilemmatic situations which have a profound impact on one’s work situation and professional identity. The way I see it, the contradictory values embedded in the different purposes of IDP, in combination with the imposed document templates taking a tremendous amount of time to administer, is a mission impossible within the scope of teachers’ regular working hours. Hypothetically, it is possible to assume that teachers who fall within According to all the recognised rules will – in order to cope with the situation – end up in either Procedural display or Towards a new thirdness. Which one it will be is not just up to the individual teacher or even
teachers working together in a team: rather, the context and rules (e.g., municipal
guidelines, the principal’s knowledge and ways of organising work, school stage,
which documentation template is used, and teachers’ possibilities to influence) are
also determining factors.

Discussion
The creation of the typologies concerning dilemmas and dilemma-management
strategies should be seen as a conceptual tool for understanding and discussing how
a phenomenon such as the IDP affects teachers’ practice and, in a sense, teachers’
professional identity. The dilemmas experienced are seen as manifestations of
contradictions that exist within the activity system of instruction and have escalated
in line with regulatory changes that have altered certain rules in the activity system
and kept others.

In my view, a fundamental contradiction underlying the articulated dilemmas in
this study is the balance between trust in teachers’ professionalism, and external
steering and control. This concerns the degree of autonomy that teachers are given.
Autonomy can be restricted by the introduction of standards/routines, but standards/
routines can also be perceived as professional tools. Thus, it is not standards/routines
per se that affect the degree of autonomy, but who creates them, the purpose for which
they are created, and how they affect the possibility to make professional judgments in
relation to the ‘clients’ in question (Jonnergård, Funck and Wolmesjö 2008, 179).

The dilemmas should not be seen as existing in some objective sense, but as arising
in relation to people’s different contexts as well as their different values, knowledge
and priorities. This study does not attempt to answer questions about how dilemmas
are experienced by teachers in general, and it is possible that additional empirical
material would have challenged or changed the typology. However, the fact that
teachers from different municipalities, schools and school stages describe relatively
similar experiences indicates a certain generality. Moreover, there seems to be some
kind of universality in the questions concerned. International research bearing on
IEPs shows that, above all, issues having to with the time-consuming aspects of IEP
are frequently raised (e.g., Tennant 2007; Mitchell, Morton and Hornby 2010). The
increased marketisation of the school in recent decades has shifted the focus towards
evaluation and the administering of results, and a growing proportion of teachers’
time is therefore devoted to meeting the administrative apparatus’ needs for quality
presentation (Fransson and Grannäs 2012, 6). The dilemma for teachers is to manage
the available – often scarce – resources so that administrative requirements and
students’ needs are met. The IDP can be regarded as an element entering the activity
system from the outside, a tool for assessment that was imposed on teachers ‘on top of’
everything else they need to do. Inner contradictions are aggravated partly because
the rules that constrain the actions within the activity system have been changed in
terms of new tasks being added, at the same time as other rules – regarding teachers’ working hours and number of lessons taught each week – have remained the same. Other rules concern the formulation of the documents in terms of language as well as forms for expressing assessment. The contradiction in this case is between the formal climate and the caring climate (Fransson and Grannäs 2012, 10) that seem to be valued highly by many teachers (articulated in relation to dilemmas 2 and 3). Teachers experience the IDP as sometimes being a far too formal tool for an evaluative, summative assessment, and they express that this contributes to de-motivating children rather than inspiring them and strengthening their self-image. Agevall and Jenner (2008, 105) argue that a market-oriented educational paradigm – characterised by competition, cost effectiveness and performance measuring – involves an intrinsic risk of teachers’ developing an instrumental and alienated relation to students. In order to deal with various dilemmas, teachers’ actions must be based on a certain degree of autonomy: otherwise, their actions may be manifested as mere technical rule-following which would ultimately be counterproductive.

**Emerging IDP practices**

The teachers in this study experience dilemmas related to aspects of time, communication and assessment, but not all teachers articulate dilemmas to the same extent. It is therefore of particular interest to discuss that which characterises those teachers experiencing dilemmas to a smaller extent.

In activity theory, contradictions within systems are described as a driving force for change and development. As Engeström (2001, 137) argues, when contradictions are aggravated, individuals may begin to deviate from established norms. If this escalates into collaborative envisioning, it might lead to collective change efforts. It is possible to argue that this is what has happened to the teachers in *Towards a new thirdness*. It is important to note the ‘towards’, however. When Engeström and Sannino (2011, 371) talk about creating a new thirdness, they claim that contradictions cannot be handled by merely balancing competing values; a new thirdness goes beyond the available opposing forces. In the case of teachers falling within *Towards a new thirdness*, balancing is necessary because legal requirements are involved. The thirdness in this case is, in a sense, about balancing, but at the same time, also about new mediating models that point towards a new phase of development.

So, what characterises the IDP practice of teachers experiencing dilemmas to a smaller extent? Can the IDP be seen as a kind of boundary object (cf. Leigh Star and Griesemer 1989; Wenger 1998), i.e., something that meets the needs and perspectives of various actors in a way that is satisfactory to everyone? It is possible to sketch two models (Figure 2) that relate to the degree of professional autonomy, the balancing of dilemmas, and emerging IDP practices. The models are based on teachers’ descriptions, and ought to be understood as a tentative basis for discussion at this stage.
Model 1 tentatively shows how IDP practice emerges for those describing dilemmas to smaller lesser extent. One teacher in this study (T6) hardly described any dilemmas at all. He described a situation in which no template or additional guidelines from the facilitator had been imposed on the teachers from the beginning: instead, the teachers had a great influence over developing and creating documentation as well as practice in collaboration with the school principal. The teachers formulated the written assessments in running text under a heading which only contained the name of the school subject, using a language that was deemed appropriate to the student’s age. The grading of students’ knowledge in the form of checking boxes at different levels was not included. However, if the student’s knowledge was considered insufficient for a minimum acceptable level in the subject, and the situation therefore required the establishment of an action plan, a box was crossed to indicate this. Practice was arranged for students to continuously work with the learning targets of their IDPs, and targets were evaluated and updated every two weeks.
A similar situation was described by the teachers falling within towards a new thirdness, but with the biggest difference that they had started with a template developed by a company and municipal guidelines on how to use it. They felt that neither the template nor the municipal guidelines responded to the way in which they interpreted the purpose of the IDP so they adapted the template (e.g., in terms of the scope and accessibility of language) and balanced their IDP practice to focus mainly on the formative tool aspect. Two teachers described that they had wanted to remove the ‘grade-like’ checking of boxes, but were not allowed to do so. Since they felt that the ‘grades’ took the focus away from the forward-aiming parts, they solved this by splitting the document into two parts that were given to the students on different occasions (grades by the end of each semester and the forward-aiming document at the start of the next semester). By continuously working with, evaluating and updating the targets of the IDP in scheduled IDP lessons every week, in combination with collecting examples of student performances in personal folders, their IDP practice appears to combine elements of IDP and portfolio. The IDP has in that sense been developed into a new mediating model, and it is therefore possible to speak of it as being more than a combination of competing values. It is turning into a ‘new thirdness’.

Whereas Model 1 is characterised by a relatively high degree of teacher autonomy, Model 2 is characterised by a higher degree of control and steering in that it imposes certain templates and guidelines that the teachers and principals have not participated in developing and to a large degree feel they cannot adapt. The tentative Model 2 is questionable in relation to what the law and SNAE guidance state: both place the responsibility for the design and implementation of IDPs directly with the principal and the local school unit. The SNAE guidance also states that IDP information can never be a basis for comparison between schools precisely because it is supposed to be shaped locally and is therefore, by definition, not comparable. Nevertheless, it seems to be a common way to go, perhaps because it is seen as a way of evaluating students’ results and/or teachers’ work. It is also possible to assume that Model 1 requires a competent principal who is aware of the purposes of IDP and reflects with the teachers on what the IDP can/should mean in practice, a principal who can also organise teachers’ work situation so that IDP work is made possible. This is not easy so in this way municipal guidance and ready-made templates can also be seen as a service to principals and teachers, and as a ‘guarantee’ that the work gets done properly and equitably.

Studying teacher dilemmas is one way of visualising the challenges of the teaching profession. The fact that IDP practice entails the balancing of dilemmas may be regarded as problematic, but also as stimulating and developing. Without the professional and – to a certain extent – autonomous balancing of dilemmas, you risk ending up in unfortunate extremes that are counterproductive (Agevall and Jenner 2008). On one hand, there is the risk of documentation becoming extremely
extensive, where teachers develop an alienated and instrumental relation to their students. On the other hand, current policy proposals – concerning the removal of documentation requirements – may cause a fall into the opposite ditch, where students’ right to clarity and optimal development is no longer in focus. Many teachers and school leaders feel that they have developed fruitful ways of working with IDP as an integrated tool for learning and assessment (i.e., Hirsh, 2013). Describing and discussing how this might be done within the scope of teachers’ working hours would be a reasonable way forward at this point.

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Notes

1 Generally, in activity theoretical studies, the object is the most central concept as it indicates the rationale for why people do what they do in particular ways. Indirectly – and on a general level – the object is also essential in this study. The main focus of this particular study is, however, IDP actions.

2 That which the SNAE terms an action plan can be described as being equivalent to what is referred to as an individual education plan (IEP) internationally; children who have been identified as special needs students due to some kind of difficulty related to learning and/or functioning constitute the target group for action plans/IEPs.

3 Swedish students receive formal grades in years 6–9 of compulsory school, at the end of the autumn and spring semesters. In addition, oral and written information about pupils’ schooling is provided at parent-pupil-teacher meetings once a semester throughout compulsory school.

4 Procedural display is a concept originally developed in relation to learning in a classroom situation. In procedural display, “teachers and students are displaying to each other that they are getting the lesson done, constructing a cultural event within a cultural institution – which is not at all the same thing as substantive engagement in some academic content” (Bloome et al., 1989, p. 272).
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