Jurisdiction in school social workers’ and teachers’ work for pupils’ well-being

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ABSTRACT
This article describes how school social workers and teachers perceive their cooperation with each other with regard to pupils’ well-being in Swedish schools. A total of 23 qualitative interviews were conducted with a strategic sample of teachers and school social workers. The analysis of the interview data was based on Andrew Abbott’s theory of the system of professions, and the cooperation and boundary work of the two professional groups are discussed in terms of jurisdictional conflicts and “cultural machinery”. The analysis shows that on a general level both school social workers and teachers seem to agree about the need for school social work, but tensions and diverging views were uncovered when investigating the cultural machinery in their daily work. This study shows how both of these professional groups protect the boundaries of their own jurisdictions, but also how these boundaries are relaxed when social workers and teachers jointly try to solve everyday problems.

KEYWORDS
Cultural machinery; school social work; workplace assimilation; pupil health care

Introduction
Since the end of the Second World War, growing attention has been paid in the Western world to the well-being of children at school (Andresen, Gardarsdóttir, Janfelt, Lindgren, Markkola, & Söderlind, 2011). As Western welfare states have developed, schools have not only been concerned with pupils’ physical health, but also with their psychosocial health (Graham, Phelps, Maddison & Fitzgerald, 2011; Weare, 2010). One indication of this concern with psychosocial health is that teachers have been given an increased responsibility for pupils’ well-being. The role of the teacher has become much more far-reaching than simply communicating knowledge, and it now also involves fostering and caring for the pupils’ welfare (Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly & Montgomery, 2012; Ekornes, Hauge & Lund, 2012; Stormont, Reinke & Herman, 2010). Another indication of this concern is that schools now employ school social workers, and together with other professional groups – such as school doctors, nurses, psychologists, and special needs teachers – school social workers are now included in pupil healthcare organisations.
In Sweden, the pupil healthcare organization within schools includes medical, psychological, psychosocial, and special needs teachers. The aim of this staff is to promote pupil health by cooperating internally with each other and with ordinary teachers and by cooperating externally with parents and with public social and medical services (Thornberg, 2008; Prop. 2009/10:165, p. 276). Pupil healthcare initiatives are organized in accordance with local conditions and the needs of each municipality, and therefore there are significant differences across the country ranging from highly centralized to fully decentralized organisations (Höög, 2013; Socialstyrelsen, 2014). General and individually targeted efforts in health promotion, prevention, and treatment have taken a salutogenic (Antonovsky, 1996) and ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1996) with the aim of creating environments that promote pupils’ learning, development, and health. For example, by acting against bullying and other mistreatments of pupils, the goal is to promote health and to prevent or manage problems that arise at the organizational, group, and individual levels (Gutkin, 2012; Guvå & Hylander, 2012). The school nurse, the school psychologist, and the school social worker can also work with acute crises and apply various conflict resolution methods, and they can have different types of supportive conversations with individual students (Höög, 2013).

In Sweden, the school social worker sector has grown significantly since the 1940s when there were only a few posts, and today the profession is mandated in the Education Act (SFS 2010: 800, Chap. 2 § 25) and there are about 1,700 posts, which equates to one school social worker for every 800 pupils (Isaksson & Larsson, 2012; SKL, 2015). There is a similar trend in other countries, with an estimated 50,000 school social workers in some 50 different countries (Huxtable & Blyth, 2002).

The professional responsibility for Swedish pupils’ well-being is shared by several professional groups in a school. However, research has shown that there are no fixed boundaries between the different professional groups’ areas of responsibility, and it has been pointed out that domain conflicts and problems with the establishment of boundaries are common (SOU 2000:19, p. 47, Backlund, 2007, p. 290; Hylander, 2011). The guidance given in the Education Act concerning the responsibility for the well-being of pupils is formulated in general terms and applies to all staff who work in schools (SFS 2010:800, 5§). Significant effort has been put into studying how the different professional groups who work in schools use, or do not use, their professional skills. When it comes to dealing with pupil-welfare issues, criticism has been directed at both the teachers (Ahlstrand, 1995; Thornberg, 2008, 2014) and the pupil-welfare teams (Guvå, 2009; Hjörne & Säljö, 2013; Höög, 2013; Koskela, Määttä & Uusiautti, 2013). Using different normative starting points, there have been discussions about the need for the specific skills that a school social worker can apply when interacting with pupils in contrast to the value of the overall, holistic view that can be attained if the teacher handles all contacts with the pupil through, for example, a mentorship system. Moreover, the school as a professional arena has been discussed more generally from a number of different viewpoints, for example, using the terms “professionalism” (Krantz, 2009; Gewirtz, 2009), “work ethics” (Fjellström, 2006; Carr, 2000), and “deprofessionalisation” (Stenlås, 2009). The work done by the teacher is the starting point or focus of most Swedish studies of the school as a professional arena, and there is little research-based knowledge about school social workers as a professional group.
Generally speaking, school social work in Sweden can be described as work with pupils at different levels and as collaborative work within and outside the school. Common work tasks for school social workers include counselling with individual pupils and groups of pupils, interventions in different age groups, e.g. to counteract bullying or the use of drugs, and supervision of pupils and consultations with teachers (Sveriges skolkuratorers förening, 2012). A pupil case can be initiated in different ways. One report stated that it is equally common for the school social worker to be contacted by teachers or other members of staff as it is to be contacted by the pupils themselves (Skolkuratorsenheten, 2004, pp. 8-12). The most common reasons found for school social workers to intervene were high absenteeism, pupil problems with peers, bullying, exhaustion with school, and disruptive behaviour. School social workers also addressed problems linked to pupils’ relationships outside of school, and they also became involved with problems concerning pupil unhappiness/depression, anxiety/worry, identity crisis, risk of suicide/attempted suicide, and substance abuse (ibid.).

In Backlund’s (2007) thesis, the work of school social workers was investigated in terms of how pupil-welfare work is organised and structured in Swedish municipalities. For example, Backlund (2007, pp. 241-242) pointed out that unlike school psychologists, school social workers do not have any special technologies or methods that give them a professional basis and legitimacy. Backlund claimed that this explains why the school social workers do not automatically “own” the social aspects of school life, which leads to an unclear division of work tasks in relation to psychologists, school nurses, and teachers. Backlund (2007, p. 67) suggested that school social workers can be likened to “anxiety-reducing specialists to whom teachers can hand over problems that disrupt the existing order and thereby be helped to handle deviant cases so that the prevailing procedures can be preserved” (cf. Lipsky, 1980). Spratt, Shucksmith, Philip, and Watson (2006) observed similar patterns. In addition, international research has shown that school social workers often lack a clear role in the school (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Anand, 2010; Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders & Allen, 2012).

It is clear from previous research (Isaksson & Larsson, 2012; Hjörne & Säljö, 2013) that the professional areas of responsibility of school social workers and teachers overlap at least in part, and that there exist conflicting views regarding pupils’ needs, suitable interventions, and expected outcomes (Isaksson, 2014). One can expect that significant jurisdictional problems can arise out of this, but there is no research on how teachers and social workers in Swedish schools handle issues of this kind in their daily professional practice. This article offers a contribution to a better understanding of these issues.

**Aim**

The aim of this article is to analyse the complex and dynamic relationship between teachers and school social workers in their work with pupils’ well-being, and the analysis is based on interviews with teachers and school social workers about their professional work and inter-professional cooperation. This study thus contributes knowledge both about the school as a professional arena and about the specific role that school social workers have in that arena. The aim is concretised in the following research questions:
How do teachers and school social workers describe the need for school social workers and the special skills they possess?
How do teachers and school social workers describe the cultural machinery, i.e. the professional practice, in their school?
How can this relationship between the two professions be understood in terms of jurisdiction?

Theory

Jurisdiction has been discussed in the sociology of professions by Andrew Abbott (1988), who has pointed out that professional practice is the “cultural machinery” of jurisdiction. Starting from Abbott’s theory, we will here view the school as an arena for a system of professions. Studies of professions have traditionally taken a static view of the occupational system and have mainly focused on identifying the characteristics that distinguish professions from other occupational groups and how these characteristics relate to the economic and social power of professional groups. Based on cross-cultural knowledge of the histories of a variety of occupational groups, Abbott provides a more complex analysis of the relationships among professional occupations and the forces that shape these relationships over time. In addition to this, Abbott’s approach assumes that the analysis of the tasks or work activities of occupations is the key to understanding changes in professionalization (Tolbert, 1990). Although his theory has been criticized for overemphasizing its global generality, the theory has had a huge scholarly impact in many academic fields (Brante, 2014).

In his book The System of Professions, Abbott presented his theory based on the term “jurisdiction”. Abbott (1988, p. 59) defines jurisdiction as an acknowledgement by society that a profession has the right to make decisions regarding an area of work, for example, how and when that work should be performed. Abbott sees professions as being part of a relatively autonomous system where they compete for the jurisdiction of areas of work, and one of Abbott’s main points is that professions that are closely linked actually compete with each other when it comes to areas of work.

Jurisdiction therefore means legitimacy for a profession’s claim to decide how the work content is to be interpreted and how the work should be done. According to Abbott, professions must continually defend the rights that they have attained, and at the same time they also tend to try to expand by laying claim to adjacent areas. The work associated with jurisdiction among different professions takes place in three different arenas: the legal arena, the public arena, and the workplace. Abbott claims that there are not always clear boundaries between these three arenas when it comes to jurisdiction, and instead workplace assimilation often occurs. Workplace assimilation means that the boundaries between the professionals’ jurisdiction in legal or public terms are redefined through the practical and organisational circumstances of each workplace. Formal jurisdiction is replaced by a division of labour based on an organisational logic, which in turn is based on the concrete needs, resources, and other contextual circumstances of the workplace.

Abbott (1988) describes six different types of jurisdiction, each of which implies different degrees of control over a specific area of knowledge and activity. Full jurisdiction means a profession has established control over its area within all three arenas
described above. However, one profession can be formally subordinated to another profession (e.g. doctors – nurses), which is the second type of jurisdiction. The third type of jurisdiction is division of labour, which means that there is a clear division of areas of responsibility between different professions even though one profession might have overall responsibility (e.g. architects leading a building project). Intellectual jurisdiction is the fourth type where one profession has control over the cognitive part of an area of knowledge and other professions are allowed to apply that knowledge in practice. The fifth type is advisory jurisdiction in which a profession has the right to interpret, modify, and guide another professional group in their work. Abbott’s sixth type of jurisdiction is client differentiation, which means that different groups of clients are divided up between or within the professions. This type of jurisdiction is normally found in the workplace arena and is often in conflict with the officially established jurisdiction (Abbott 1988, p. 77).

According to Abbott (1988), the logic of professional practice is embodied in three acts – diagnosis, inference, and treatment. These three acts comprise the cultural machinery of jurisdiction, and it is through this cultural machinery that a professional group’s jurisdiction can be challenged by other professions and can be subjected to competition. Abbott (1988) claims that peripheral problems, which are often unspecified and vaguely formulated, are the ones that are primarily at risk of being subjected to competition. The act of diagnosis entails two processes. The first is to acquire an overall picture of the client’s problem (colligation) and to determine if it is a legitimate problem for the profession (classification). When it comes to treatment, having control over treatment decisions is a central part of jurisdiction, and the assessment of the expected outcomes of treatment is often associated with measurement problems and uncertainty. The route from diagnosis to treatment is not always one-way, and in some contexts treatment is given before diagnosis. Inference is the professional assessment that links diagnosis with treatment. This is of greatest significance when the link between diagnosis and treatment is unclear and the problem is difficult to assess.

In this study of social workers and teachers in Swedish schools and their work to promote pupils’ well-being, the school is regarded as an arena for professional competition for jurisdiction over areas of work. The cultural machinery of jurisdiction is analysed, i.e. school social workers’ and teachers’ professional practices are interpreted in terms of diagnosis, inference, and treatment. We focus mainly on diagnosis and treatment because these were the most clearly revealed processes in the empirical material.

Method

This qualitative study was based on interviews with 12 school social workers and 11 teachers from schools of different sizes and in different socio-economic areas in Sweden. The interviewees were selected strategically to achieve variation in experiences and contexts of practice (cf. Creswell, 2009). Professional networks and school principals assisted with contacting and selecting the interviewees. The school social workers were interviewed during the autumn of 2011, and the interviews lasted between 1.5 and 4 hours. To be included in the study, the school social workers were required at the time of the interview to have a social work degree, to have at least 6 months’ experience
in school social work, and to be employed as a school social worker in a compulsory school (ages 7–15) operated by a municipality. The interviewees were aged between 31 and 55 years (mean: 43 years), they had between 2.5 and 30 years of experience in school social work (mean: 11 years), and 5 interviewees had no experience of social work outside of school settings.

The teacher interviews were conducted during the spring of 2014 and lasted 30–60 minutes. The teachers were required to have taught pupils aged 12–15 years and to have had at least a few years of experience within the profession. Only “ordinary” class-room teachers were included in the study, not those who worked as special needs teachers because such teachers have a special role with regard to pupil welfare. The mean age of the interviewed teachers was 47 years, and the oldest was 64 while the youngest was 36. The interviewees had extensive professional experience. On average, they had worked as teachers for 22 years with a range of 8 to 40 years. All were qualified teachers, and they taught different subjects such as language, mathematics, science, physical education, and crafts.

The material was gathered through somewhat different means. The semi-structured school social worker interviews were based on a thematic interview guide with several areas of questions that were informed by concepts in Abbott’s (1988) theory. These questions asked about everyday practice, tasks, methods, professional competence, and relations with other professionals. In the structured telephone interviews with the teachers, the interview guide was restricted to the areas of professional boundaries, professional work, and professional skills. Thus, the design of the teacher interview was determined in part by the results from earlier studies (Isaksson & Larsson, 2012; Isaksson, 2014; Isaksson & Sjöström, 2016) so as to gain additional information and to supplement earlier findings.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were analysed by directed qualitative content analysis with a deductive approach based on Abbott’s theory (cf. Miles & Huberman, 1994; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). The material from the two sets of interviews was first sorted according to each interview question. The responses to the common questions posed in both interview surveys were then compared and analysed through the lens of cultural machinery and in relation to the concept of jurisdiction.

Quotations have been selected to exemplify key aspects from the interviews. The quotations have been slightly modified to written standards of language so as to facilitate reading, and, for this article, they have been translated into English. Because the study focused on professional activities, it was not judged to concern issues of personal sensitivity to the interviewees, but we still followed established ethical standards (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011). The interviewees were informed that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time and that the information they provided would be handled confidentially so that there would no risk that the respondents or the schools and pupils involved could be identified when the results of the study were published and disseminated.

The analysis presented below is structured by the research questions. After a description of how teachers and school social workers regard the need for school social work, their views on their professional practice are analysed in the light of cultural machinery. This is followed by a discussion of the data in relation to the different aspects of jurisdiction.
The need for school social workers and their special skills

The school social workers were asked why they are needed as a profession. The question posed to the teachers was formulated somewhat differently: “Is the work done by school social workers needed in school? Why or why not?” All interviewees said that school social workers as a profession are needed in school. All the teachers expressed this emphatically in their responses: “Yes, a school social worker is definitely needed in every school or unit”, said Teacher 5. Several teachers said quite simply, “Absolutely!” Some added extra emphasis to their response, e.g., “Yes, very much so. Very, very much. Yes, exactly. I definitely think they are needed. Very, very important” (Teacher 4).

The reasons given differed somewhat, but in general they were quite similar between teachers and school social workers. Several of the school social workers claimed that they have an overall, holistic view, which they find to be important. For example, School social worker 6 said, “The children are not only pupils, they are whole persons.” The teachers did not use the term ‘holistic’, but they seemed to mean something similar when they responded to the need for the school social workers by saying: “A pupil’s life is so much more than just the subjects we teach” (Teacher 2).

Both the school social workers and the teachers pointed out the positive aspect of the school social worker being a person whom the pupils can turn to and talk to: “The pupils are different and they have different needs, and it is very, very important that there is a school social worker whom they can go to if they want to, to get advice, or to talk to” (Teacher 10). Many interviewees pointed out the importance of that person being “another adult” or a “detached adult”, a “neutral zone” (Teacher 9, School social worker 1), or “a different person whom they can go to, someone they are not dependent on” (School social worker 11). Several teachers pointed out that this is especially important because the teachers as graders represent both authority and power: “We set the grades so we do represent a special type of person for them from that point of view; that is our role” (Teacher 9). The teachers often depicted the school social worker as being the person whom the pupils can talk to about things that they would not discuss with the teacher, while the social workers often seemed to view their role as being an adult who is detached from the parents rather than from the teachers.

Many interviewees commented that the school social worker is especially important in conjunction with different types of crises or when the child is feeling bad. The teachers also expressed a view that the role of the school social worker is to support the teachers, both in practical terms – so the teachers can focus on their teaching – and in emotional terms when they are worried about a pupil. Moreover, both the school social workers and the teachers mentioned the demanding situation that children and young people have in today’s society as another reason why school social workers are needed in school.

Accordingly, at this general level, both social workers and teachers seemed content with their roles in the system of professions, and no direct conflicts in the division of jurisdiction were revealed in the data. However, when one looks more closely at the cultural machinery, i.e. the professional practice on the level where the professional cooperation in practice takes place, a different picture emerges. It will now be shown how teachers and school social workers described their work and the “pupil-related”
problems (problem of any kind related to individual school children), how they commented on who is responsible for what, and how they discussed interventions and results. It then becomes apparent that the issue of jurisdiction is much more complex than the teachers’ and school social workers’ general statements seemed to imply.

**The cultural machinery**

Most of the teachers said that they contact the school social worker when they perceive that a pupil is not feeling well or is not learning due to problems of a social nature, things that the teachers related to “problems linked to the pupil’s surroundings” (Teacher 3) such as home and family circumstances or other things outside of school. It could also be a matter of individual or personal circumstances that were deemed to require psychotherapeutic interventions, such that “someone must work on those thoughts that are so deeply embedded” (Teacher 8). However, the school social worker did not get involved in problems related to “the teaching” or “the learning” in the classroom or to “purely medical issues” (Teachers 3, 10, and 7). If there are problems in the classroom, most of the teachers said that they do not contact the school social worker; instead, they discuss the problem with their colleagues and school principals. One teacher described such problems as being “usually a matter for the school management, a pupil that needs a little telling-off” (Teacher 5), and another said, “I have gone to the school head in the first instance. And generally, it’s been to do with learning objectives and that sort of thing” (Teacher 1). Communication problems between the teacher and pupil were not regarded by the teachers as being a matter for the school social worker. Instead, all the interviewed teachers said that in such cases they first turn to the school head, their colleagues, or their work team. Thus, it seems that the teachers thought that problems in the classroom or communication problems between the teacher and pupil came under the teacher’s jurisdiction, not the school social worker’s. This division of jurisdiction is, according to one teacher, so distinct that even the pupils are aware of it:

> We have so many pupil cases that our school social worker takes on, and they are really serious things and our pupils know that. They see her as being the link to some other sphere of activity. However, the person linked to learning in the classroom is the school head, not the school social worker (Teacher 1).

Judging from the following statement made by a school social worker, different teachers seemed to allow the school social workers to engage in classroom practice to different degrees:

> But sometimes the teachers take the view that the classroom is theirs. It’s their domain and I’m not allowed to say what I want there. I think they work very independently, they don’t contact me. I just know that I never go into those classrooms. And I don’t know if that is because they have dream pupils all the time or what it is, but I spend much more time in some of the other classes (School social worker 9).

Here we can see how the teachers in the diagnosis process classify issues as being a problem for themselves, for other pedagogical personnel, or for the school social worker to handle. These classifications are made on the basis of some colligation, i.e. after
having acquired an overall picture of a problem. The second quotation above implies that school social workers might colligate and classify issues differently, and the interviewee described how some teachers seem to shut the school social worker out from the classroom.

The setting of boundaries and the degree of cooperation between teachers and school social workers regarding a pupil case can, of course, differ. Cooperation is generally preceded by quite a lot of involvement and measures on the part of the teachers themselves. For example, all the teachers said that if a problem arises, they first talk to the pupil in question and to his or her parents. Some also talk to their colleagues, while a few said that they might talk to the school nurse before they contact the school social worker.

The interviews with the teachers revealed that it was the teachers who contacted the school social worker, and it was rarely the other way around. The interviewed teachers felt, and appreciated, that the school social worker was accessible. Several of the teachers said that they regularly ask the school social worker for help by asking for advice and hints in order to be able to communicate more easily with “difficult parents” (Teacher 1), “to challenge their own ideas” (Teacher 7), or “to try to make some progress with a pupil” (Teacher 10). A couple of teachers said that they “didn’t bother with advice or support” or that they “had never needed it” (Teachers 5 and 9). Most of the interviewed teachers did not seem to perceive advice and hints as being a formal school social work task; it was more something everyday and self-evident. Surprisingly, the interviews with the school social workers revealed that they also did not perceive the advice or consultations they give as being a formal work duty; instead, they called it “bouncing ideas”. For example, School social worker 10 said, “Yes, we’ll see each other in the corridor and then bounce some thoughts between us”. However, this kind of consultation is an acknowledged social work method (Sabatino, 2006) and can, using Abbott’s terminology, be regarded as an advisory jurisdiction, but it seems in this case to be hidden behind the everyday nature of the communication.

The school social workers and teachers were aware that the teachers work differently and have different approaches to problems that they deem to be of a social nature and that they differ in the extent to which they cooperate with school social workers about such matters. Some school social workers commented that certain teachers will not pass on any cases; instead, they “think they possess the pupil’s entire life /…/and they dabble in everything, things that they might not really have the competence to do” (School social worker 11). According to School social worker 9, “The teachers work a bit too much like social workers in the school”. According to these ideas, if teachers do not hand over a pupil case there can be serious negative consequences, such as a pupil not getting the help he or she needs in time, for instance, if a pupil is having suicidal thoughts. It is noticeable that here the school social workers consider the teachers to be operating within the sphere of school social work.

Other responses showed examples of teachers regarding other teachers as not caring enough about the social aspects of the pupils’ lives. According to one teacher, some teachers do not care “whether pupils play truant, don’t sleep well, cut themselves, or are listless; instead, they say, ‘You know, I’m a teacher. I’m not a school social worker or a nurse’” (Teacher 4). Some of the teachers thought that their teaching colleagues’ resistance to cooperating with the school social worker could impede the school social
worker’s job by saying, “They have a condescending attitude towards the school social worker... and they refuse to cooperate” (Teacher 7). Teacher 8 described the teachers’ attitudes as “you are either open and say, ‘My door’s open, do come in and see how we work and whether we can find any opportunities for improvement’, or else you keep things quiet, close your door, and avoid contact with the school social worker.” It seems, therefore, that some teachers wanted to avoid having to concern themselves with certain social aspects of the pupils’ lives and did not want to cooperate with the school social worker. This seems paradoxical considering the consensus described above regarding the need for school social work.

After the teachers have diagnosed what the problem is, a process that can vary in scope, the pupil case might be handed over to the school social worker. Handing over a pupil case to the school social worker was something that all the interviewed teachers had experienced. One of the teachers said that they simply handed it over, “Once you’ve contacted the school social worker, you hand it over, because I don’t believe in this advice and support stuff, I don’t do that anyway” (Teacher 5). “I hand over cases that I’m not qualified to handle, you know, emotional issues and individual psychology are not my fields” (Teacher 10). Another said: “Well, hand it over, it’s always a joint case, but you get to the point where you feel, this isn’t my field, I don’t have the know-how” (Teacher 8). In these examples, the teachers have, after their colligation, classified the problem as belonging to the school social worker’s field of competence instead of their own.

The handing over of cases was often commented upon in detail in the interviews. Teachers hand over “responsibility for a particular problem but not for the teaching” (Teacher 1) or they hand over “the responsibility for some aspect of the child’s well-being” (Teacher 8). Or as Teacher 1 put it:

I feel like I’m handing over responsibility in a way, I sort of relieve myself of it. I feel as if now I’ve done everything I can and I know that this will be taken care of. That’s how I feel when I have handed over a case; I’ve given the documentation and I have sat down and discussed the issues with her and she has said, “Now I will take care of this”. So I feel that she has told me this verbally. I don’t have it in writing that she has taken over the case; it’s done orally (Teacher 1).

Feelings of relief in conjunction with the handing over of a pupil case to the school social worker seemed common among teachers, and they described it as “a relief”, they felt “calmer”, and it made them “feel less guilt” and to feel confident that they could devote themselves to their teaching. One teacher said: “Oh God, now I can let go and do what I know how to do, what I’m good at” (Teacher 8).

However, a significant issue with handing over cases was problematized by School social worker 1:

Everything is linked to the classroom situation because when they (the pupils) are with me, there are never any problems. That is exactly what people don’t seem to understand; I’m not the person who’s the teacher, I’m not the one who’s going to be in the classroom, it’s not a question of things working between me and the pupil; it has to work between the teacher and the pupil (School social worker 1).

This school social worker felt that it was essential to make the teachers see their own role in what was going on in the classroom and to understand the importance of their
own relationship with the pupils. Thus, a certain diagnosis process of colligation and classification could be found to be relevant and relieving to the teacher, but in the eyes of the school social worker such a solution could be seen as creating a situation where the actual problem could not be solved. In other words, this shows a conflict in the cultural machinery.

There were numerous examples of other such conflicts in the cultural machinery in the interview data. Some school social workers thought that the teachers sometimes see the pupil as the bearer of a problem and in need of diagnosis, and they felt that the teachers expect the social workers to perceive the problem in the same way. Several school social workers described problems that they colligated as “in the classroom” or as “communication between teachers and pupils”, but which the teachers defined as an individual pupil’s problem. Many teachers said that when they see pupil-related problems, they ask the school social worker to diagnose and “fix” them. Several school social workers were critical of this focus on a diagnosis, as School social worker 2 said, “We must help the child in his or her situation no matter whether it’s ADHD or Asperger’s or a problem of a social nature”. School social worker 6 said that other measures must be considered first instead of “the first intervention being that we must investigate the child”. Thus, the discrepancy between the two professions also concerned opinions with regard to treatment.

Another area of conflicting opinions had to do with what to expect from pupils in problematic situations. School social worker 4 found that her suggestion to be content with a certain pupil simply coming to school, and not to expect any learning results, was not approved of by the teachers:

We can see that the situation some pupils are in will mean that they will not be able to do great school work straight away; you know, you can’t hope for top grades; maybe it’s a great achievement for them simply to come to school. School is a safe place for them and so they must be here. I think that this clash of expectations is sometimes very difficult! The teachers are very heated, especially at this time before they have to give grades and stuff, they’re so stressed/…/just let the boy be here and give him some encouragement every time you see him here. Yes, I might suggest that, and then they might say, no, he has to learn this and this and take a test and so on (School social worker 4).

One of the teachers formulated why other demands should be raised:

For example, if a pupil has a tough situation at home or has been absent from school a lot, then the issue is how to get the pupil to come to school and be here. It’s not as easy as simply saying, “They don’t have to do certain subjects”. It’s not the school social worker who can decide that; it has to go via the person who works under the Education Act. They work under the Social Services Act; we work under the Education Act (Teacher 1).

Thus there are examples in the data of conflicting areas concerning both diagnosis and treatment in professional practice. The inferences, i.e. the decisions made by teachers and school social workers, were often regarded by the other profession as biased or inadequate and not showing enough consideration for certain needs. This phenomenon has been called “professional ethnocentrism” (Blomqvist, 2004, p. 9) or “professional egocentrism” (Thornberg, 2008, p. 14). However, many teachers also described how the cooperation between them and the school social workers worked well. They said there was no rivalry or competition between them and the school social workers. Teacher 6...
said, “We don’t compete at all, we help each other”, Teacher 8 said, “We get the help we need and I think we cooperate well”, and Teacher 10 said, “I have never felt that there have been different views about an incident”.

Jurisdiction in the system of professions in school

After having dealt with the first two research questions, we now turn to the third, where the findings and the analysis of the cultural machinery will be discussed in terms of jurisdiction. As we have seen, cooperation between school social workers and teachers can work smoothly, but it can also be problematic. At a general level, there was consensus among the teachers and school social workers that the school social workers are needed in school, thus there was a legitimacy for school social work. However, when the teachers and school social workers described their professional practice, there were conflicting views regarding how problems linked to pupils should be handled. Some teachers wanted to hand over a pupil case to the school social worker and to have the pupil returned as soon as possible in a “teachable state”. This desire can be seen as a claim on extra resources in the form of measures taken by the school social worker (cf. Hjelte, 2005). The picture given by Backlund (2007, p. 67) of school social workers as “anxiety-reducing specialists” also comes forth in this study. Some school social workers, however, objected to this role as they claimed that not only pupils but also teachers have an essential role in many problems.

Although there were conflicts in the cultural machinery, it did not generally seem that the teachers or school social workers sought to expand their jurisdiction in disfavour of the other. However, we have seen examples in which both groups seemed to defend the boundaries between their areas of work. Through this, both groups displayed some examples of tendencies to try to control the other group’s work. This was especially apparent when the teachers handed over pupil-related problems to the school social workers and when the school social workers included the teacher and the classroom situation in the pupil-related problem and in the process of solving the problem.

In order to handle conflicts and solve problems, there were implicit or explicit negotiations between the teachers and school social worker in the workplace that gave rise to different types of settlements of jurisdiction. Even if there is no regulated superiority and subordination in the legal and public arenas between teachers and school social workers, as there is between, for example, doctors and nurses, in the cases investigated in this study the teachers have priority in the workplace arena when it comes to deciding the nature of pupil-related problems. This indicates a workplace assimilation where the school social workers’ jurisdiction is subordinate to the teachers’. To some extent, this is self-evident because the problems arise in the teaching/learning situation where the teachers are present. But it could also be linked to the fact that the teachers represent the school’s core activities even though they are dependent, to some extent, on the school social worker’s interventions in order to be able to do their job, which implies a division of labour.

There were also examples of agreements that are similar to advisory jurisdiction, that is, that one profession is allowed to interpret, modify, and supervise another profession’s work through guidance and supervision. This type of jurisdiction is regulated in
the legal and public arenas, primarily in preparatory documents for changes in legislation and in policy programs from school social workers’ interest groups. However, at the workplace level, this sort of activity does not seem to be organised; instead, it occurs in the form of “hints and advice” and “the bouncing of ideas”, terms that are less challenging and that probably generate less conflict. This also indicates workplace assimilation and can be seen as an expression of cooperation where both groups are dependent on each other’s knowledge and experience.

Occasions where a pupil case is handed over from a teacher to a school social worker could be seen as displaying a sort of client differentiation insofar as the teachers and the school social workers indirectly divide different types of pupils between them. Pupils with social problems are handled by the school social worker while other pupils come under the responsibility of the teacher. This would occur to a lesser degree if school social workers’ daily work was more focussed on preventive and health-promoting interventions aimed at all pupils.

The analysis presented here shows that there are workplace-assimilated agreements between teachers and school social workers that can be related to different types of jurisdiction. The subordination of school social workers in relation to teachers can be seen as an assimilation to the host organisation. Through the advisory jurisdiction, denoted as “the bouncing of ideas”, the school social worker can nevertheless gain influence and have an opportunity to implement his or her view and suggest solutions to pupil-related problems.

**Discussion and conclusion**

It is generally concluded among researchers (Guvå, 2009; Hjörne & Säljö, 2013; Klingner & Harry, 2006) that differences in professional perspectives on pupil-related problems and how to solve them might cause tensions in the collaboration between teachers and other professionals with a more peripheral position in relation to the core activity of the school. This is in line with the results in this study. In accordance with recent research, an individualistic perspective on pupil-related problems is prevalent and deeply consolidated in schools, but as seen in this study this is not encompassed by all teachers. In contrast to this individualistic view, school social workers are assumed to represent a more holistic perspective (Thornberg, 2014).

Our study shows that on a general level there is consensus among teachers and school social workers about the need for school social work. However, when it comes to professional practice the issue of jurisdiction appears to be much more complex (Guvå & Hylander, 2012). For instance, not only differences in perspectives but also divergent expectations about the role of the school social worker seem to make cooperation difficult (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Anand, 2010; Backlund, 2007; Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housten, Saunders & Allen, 2012). In most human service organizations, there is a need for a function that takes care of “atypical” cases in order to allow the core activities to proceed without disruption (Hasenfeld, 1983; Lipsky, 1980). In schools, the pupil healthcare organisation seems to have this function with the aim of creating an environment that promotes pupils’ learning, development, and health (Socialstyrelsen, 2014). Nonetheless, this study shows that tensions can emerge between teachers’ expectations to be able to hand over problems and to get emotional support from the
school social worker and school social workers’ desire to first of all represent and support the child (Hjelte, 2005; Spratt, Shucksmith, Philip, and Watson, 2006). A general pattern is that teachers feel that school social workers do not adequately take organisational needs into account while school social workers feel that teachers do not give enough attention to individual pupils’ needs. In the effort to support the school and to avoid challenging the hierarchy in the host organization, the school social worker seems to use a consultative approach (Sabatino, 2006), which means that the school social worker offers complementary skills and emotional support. This study shows that to overcome obstacles and to develop a common ground (Bolin, 2011) to improve collaborative practice, both school social workers and teachers engaged in the practice of “bouncing ideas” (Isaksson, 2014).

By analysing the two professions’ descriptions of the interface between them, conflicts became visible and implicit agreements could be identified in the jurisdiction-related cultural machinery that exists in the school as a professional arena. All in all, the professional boundaries are both maintained and crossed in order to solve problems in practice. The results of this study seem to some extent to complicate the assumption in Abbott’s theory that the professions compete with each other in a relatively autonomous system to extend their jurisdictions over areas of work. As shown in this study, closely-linked professions do not necessarily strive to increase their jurisdiction; instead, they might be content with protecting the existing boundaries of their areas of work and might even actively try to divest themselves of certain work tasks (Abbott, 1981).

This study highlights the challenges of inter-professional work between teachers and school social workers and how different professional assumptions and expectations can both impede and enrich the work with pupils’ well-being. The findings presented here stress the need for both parties to make it part of their ordinary work to discuss their different perspectives on pupil-related problems and to regard these professional perspectives as valuable contributions (Blomqvist, 2004; Thornberg, 2014). Such a situation would seem best for ensuring that inter-professional work avoids the risk of getting stuck in jurisdictional conflicts and instead can focus on enhancing pupils’ well-being.

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